Influencing the Decision Makers: The Vietnam Experience*

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Although much has been written about foreign policy dissent in the United States, little is known about the relative effectiveness of dissenting tactics. Using evidence from the author’s larger study of the impact of the anti-Vietnam War movement on Johnson and Nixon, this paper describes how dissenting opinion reached the Oval Office and those activities that were most likely to attract serious attention from the presidents and their advisors. During the Vietnam War period, mass demonstrations, letter writing, public petitioning, and face-to-face meetings with officials all captured administration attention. At times, dissenting activities, especially several large demonstrations, played a central role in the formulation of American foreign policy. In general, however, decision makers reacted unpredictably and sometimes irrationally to criticism. Consequently, foreign policy protesters were wise in employing all of the traditional forms of dissenting activities since all, at one time or another, reached their targets.

1. Introduction
What can American citizens do, either individually or organized into groups, to influence their nation’s foreign policies? Surprisingly, even after historians and other observers have analyzed such nationwide protest movements as America First in 1940–41, SANE in the fifties and sixties, the antiwar movement in the sixties and seventies, and the Freeze in the current period, we still know little about how to attract the attention and sympathies of the president and his or her advisors on major foreign policy issues.1

Obviously, the ultimate way to attract their attention is to turn them out of office. For the most part, however, foreign affairs have played a minor role in presidential and congressional elections (Small 1978, p. 845). Further, those fixed quadrennial and biennial elections have rarely occurred during periods in which presidents were pursuing controversial foreign policies. In the American political system, no Anthony Edens were ever forced to leave office precipitously because of a failed foreign policy.

Reward or punishment at the polls has not proven to be an effective means of altering the nation’s foreign policies. Instead, citizens have written letters and telegrams, convened meetings, demonstrations, and marches, published petitions, broadsides, and manifestos, and formed organizations to do all of the above in an attempt to influence their government. They have had to adopt an unscientific, scatter-shot approach, in part, because knowledge of the components of an effective protest campaign is so sketchy.

For the past several years, I have been working on a book on the impact of the antiwar movement on policy making from 1965 through 1971. I am trying to determine how the many collective and individual acts of protest and dissent affected the Johnson and Nixon administrations as they decided how and when to escalate, deescalate, and negotiate. 2 It has not been an easy task. For one thing, American politicians claim that they construct their programs irrespective of public pressures. ‘Politics stops at the water’s edge’, ‘a foreign policy cannot be constructed by plebiscite’, ‘the president alone interprets and protects national security’. And so on. Thus, no presidents and few of their advisors have admitted to having been swayed by demonstrators, petitioners, or editorial writers. 3 The British also adhere to such an ethic (Cohen 1986, p. 60).

Given the officials’ proud tradition of refusing to admit that they might bow to the caprices of an uninformed public, those interested in the impact of dissenters on them must use a variety of sources and methods

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that may lead to what are, at best, educated guesses about their problem. To reach that point, I employed the rich archival materials in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, published documentary collections, memoir and secondary books and articles, and, above all, over forty interviews with major actors during the period. On the last-named source, I encountered problems with hazy memories as well as the natural disinclination of my informants to admit that they or their bosses ever took notice of the hippies and yuppies who marched up and down in front of the White House, the Pentagon, and anywhere else they ventured throughout the country.

Consequently, I generally backed off from the direct question of influence and satisfied myself with trying to discover what drew their attention — what impressed them among the welter of dissenting activities of the period. Such information was easier to elicit than anything dealing with direct impact on policy.4 From that point, I could examine the policy-making process during periods of protest and evaluate how I thought officials were affected by dissenting activities as they selected from among their policy options, irrespective of public and private pronouncements of how they bravely ignored noisy protestors and unfair media critics.

After 1965, the general public opinion variable began to intrude directly more and more in the accounts of deliberations over Vietnam policy. Thus, one might interpret its presence partly as a reflection of antiwar movement activities. It might be true, however, as Dean Rusk suggests, that while he worried about opinion, he did not worry about antiwar protests. The former secretary of state claims that the public turned against the war virtually independent of anything going on in the movement or the New York Times (Rusk 1984).

Rusk’s view is supported by the fact that many Americans who were distressed by the war were more distressed by the antiwar movement and what they perceived to be its rowdy and unpatriotic activities (Clotfelter 1986, p. 98; Robinson 1972, p. 353; Skolnick 1969, p. 23). Richard Nixon’s generally successful appeal to the Silent Majority played to that perception. On the other hand, while the well-publicized antics of uncivil youth may have retarded the development of antiwar sentiment among some citizens, others were affected by its messages, not only in turbulent demonstrations but in newspapers, magazines, television, and their churches.

Rather than discuss this thorny issue here, let us assume that there was some relationship between the development of concern about the war among the general population and the rise of dissent on the campuses and streets and in the media.5 At the least, antiwar dissenters kept the war on the front burners in the United States from 1965 through 1972 and thus made it difficult for the administrations to conduct their operations by stealth (Harlow 1984). We also know that antiwar leaders developed their protests with an eye to influencing both the White House directly and the public indirectly through the media. As the size of the antiwar movement and the number of critical newspapers and magazines increased, so too did the antiwar attitudes of the public.

Rusk’s disclaimer is not the only problem encountered as one tries to learn from the activities of the anti-Vietnam War movement. Is it possible to generalize from Johnson and Nixon’s responses to dissent in the late sixties and early seventies to other presidents and administrations in the present and future? Both men were unusually sensitive to criticism (Reedy 1984; Valenti 1984; Harlow 1984; Price 1984). They frequently became incensed over isolated attacks on them during periods when they enjoyed overwhelming support in the polls. Indeed, both men were so distressed about antiwar criticism that it may have stiffened their resolve to do everything possible to avoid appearing to truckle to the mobs in the streets. Part of this reaction was personal but part of it reflected Realpolitik considerations. They wanted to show the communists, Vietnamese as well as Russian and Chinese, that American dissenters would not be able to affect American foreign policy. They did, of course, even if only in the calculus of American decision makers who were convinced that Viet-
nameses decision makers were factoring the antiwar movement into their policy-making processes.

Given this idiosyncratic consideration, what then can one learn from Johnson and Nixon’s responses to dissenters? One might compare, for example, the apparent lack of concern displayed by Ronald Reagan for criticism in elite media and from placard carriers with comparable reactions from Johnson and Nixon. It may well be that Johnson and Nixon, who have been accused of betraying pathological traits in many other respects, were not ‘normal’ presidents and that since 1945, they cannot be compared to Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Ford, Carter, Reagan, or anyone in the wings for 1988. Moreover, even if Johnson and Nixon were not personally abnormal, they did govern during an unusual and perhaps unique period in American history. I will, nonetheless, assume that there is something to be learned from their presidencies applicable to current and future situations.

To some degree, this paper is an exercise in applied history. I am less interested here in the question I address in the longer work — how antiwar dissent affected specific policies during the Vietnam War — than in the relative effectiveness of the various tactics employed by dissenters. The first step toward evaluating effectiveness is to determine what sorts of tactics are most likely to capture the attention of an administration. Capturing attention is no guarantee that the president will alter a foreign policy in the direction demanded by the dissenters, but it represents a foot in the door.

Certain elements of the opinion-presenting process are common to modern presidencies. In order to gauge the effectiveness of protesting activities, one must first understand how opinion arrives in the Oval Office — how the president comes to learn about dissent and its assumed relationship to general public opinion.

2. How Opinion Reaches the Oval Office

Presidents Johnson and Nixon received opinions from the polls, correspondence, friends and acquaintances, Congress, and the media. Each day they were exposed to a plethora of formal reports and informal observations concerning polls, mail flows, print and electronic journalism, congressional activities, and comments from intimates, all of which constituted the flow of perceived public opinion into the Oval Office. Clearly, in a conventional sense, only the polls and the mail flow are sources of public opinion. Yet, presidents tend to see public opinion reflected in the other sources as well.

In both presidencies, no systematic attempt was made to coordinate the flow of information about dissent, nor were any specific aides responsible for its monitoring.7 Further, when Jack Valenti or H. R. Haldeman told the president what the Times editors had to say that morning, they did not inform him that theirs was not public opinion but only opinion expressed publicly in a newspaper. On any day, the president and his advisors might be impressed by a poll result, or a comment by a television anchorperson, or a phone call from Clark Clifford or Thomas Dewey, or an idea from a Georgetown professor in an undersecretary’s carpool, or a letter selected at random from the mail sack, or any combination of the above. What was noted and taken seriously as meaningful public opinion depended upon the mood in the Oval Office and the sort of opinion for which the president was looking.8 Sometimes a ‘scientifically’ sound datum became important; most of the time the public opinion that counted would not impress an academic analyst.

Presented schematically in Fig. 1, in its simplest form, is the flow of perceived public opinion on foreign policy to the president. If only the real world were so simple and uncluttered as depicted in the Figure, with the five main sources directly conveying public opinions to the White House.

Fig. 2, a decidedly cluttered diagram, represents more accurately the ways alleged public opinion comes to the president. In the first place, presidents do not passively receive spontaneously developed public opinion. They play a part in molding that opinion through their public and private statements to the media, to friends, and to Congress, as well as in their role as national...
agenda setter. After all, there was little expressed opinion on the decision to bomb North Vietnam until that bombing started.

Moreover, almost all of the sources for opinion influence one another. Thus, congressional opinion influences the opinions of presidential family and friends, the media, the mail flow, and the polls, while it is influenced by the media and the polls. Presidential family and friends are influenced by opinions picked up in the polls, the media, and Congress. The media influence the other four sources and are influenced by Congress and the polls. Public opinions in the polls influence the opinions of the other sources and are influenced by the media and Congress.

During times of public debate, such as the Vietnam period, a sixth source for opinion may emerge as depicted in Fig. 3. The opinions expressed by the antiwar movement, among other pressure groups, influenced opinions reflected by all of the other sources and were influenced, in turn, by the media, the president, and Congress. To place the ideas represented in Figs. 2 and 3 in another perspective, public opinions directly presented by one of the six sources may appear to the president filtered through almost any of the other sources. Thus, the president might learn about congressional reflections of public opinion from the media, from the antiwar movement, from friends and family, or from the New York Times.

Figs. 2 and 3 suggest the chaotic nature of the way putatively public opinion on foreign policy is perceived by presidents in the modern era. It is irrelevant to point out that some of the data that they consider to be public opinion are not, or that we have mixed opinion-reporting sources with opinion-creating sources. For groups interested in influencing the president, this is an important issue. Among other things, it makes any attempt to reach the Oval Office with a dissenting view subject to caprice and luck.

2.1 The Media
Presidents do not have to be social scientists to appreciate the central role of the media in the opinion-presenting and shaping process. In many ways, the sound-of-the-tree-falling-in-the-forest metaphor can be applied to the success of political activism in a modern democracy. If the media did not cover it, it might as well not have happened as far as the impact on the president, his
advisors, the general public, and even other nations is concerned.

The media, especially television, are always looking for new sensations. This factor colors much of their treatment of foreign policy dissent. When the teach-ins appeared almost meteorically in the spring of 1965, they received a much larger play than they probably deserved in terms of their relation to all colleges and college-age youth nationwide (Rusk 1984). Conversely, after several years of spectacular and unprecedented mass marches and demonstrations, the media became bored. Media inattention was one of the reasons why the antiwar movement came to an apparent halt in 1971. Yet, according to several leaders of the movement, 1971 and 1972 were very active years for anti-Nixon demonstrators. To judge by their declining appearances in the media, they were like that proverbial falling tree in the forest (Lens 1980, pp. 367–68; Dellinger 1975, p. 60). Similarly, on a different though related issue, when television networks decided in 1968 that the story of the war should shift from the jungles of Vietnam to the peace table in Paris, they helped convince subliminally many Americans that the war was winding down in Southeast Asia, even as fatalities rose (Westin 1982, pp. 96–97; Knightley 1975, p. 398).

Because the media are easily bored, demonstrators and others who want to catch their attention must continually do something different. Moreover, whatever one does, journalists and television reporters tend to stress activity on the fringes, the peculiar clothing of some dissenters and, especially, the incidents of violence that usually involve a very small number of those assembled (Gitlin 1980). In the main, protesting activities are put together with the media in mind, even down to questions of timing for print deadlines and the evening network newscasts.

The media are not always friendly to dissenters, in part, because they fear the president. Lyndon Johnson called network presidents and made foul-mouthed threats to them demanding better treatment for his policies. Richard Nixon orchestrated a more formal attack of intimidation that was responsible in good measure for declining coverage of antiwar activities in 1971 and 1972. Even without overt intimidation, the people who own the media are businesspeople, members of a generally conservative establishment, who are supportive of the
status quo. Although supporters of Johnson and Nixon claim that the war might have been won had it not been for liberal media biases against them and their policies (Efron 1971), the most sophisticated work on the subject has demonstrated that they enjoyed more favorable press treatment during much of their tenure than the news from the field merited (Hallin 1986).

Further, because of the office, the president generally dominates the media, setting the news agenda, and invariably, at least early in his administration, is given the benefit of the doubt on the credibility issue. Most presidents seem to enjoy a honeymoon period during which their opponents encounter difficulties making their criticism heard (Kern et al. 1983). In addition, reporters and television journalists who need access to the White House are reluctant to offend their leakers and unnamed sources.

Although the presidents enjoy enormous advantages when it comes to the control and manipulation of the media, the media popularize major dissenting movements, no matter how skimpy or skewed their reportage (Gitlin 1980, pp. 242–43). Any media coverage of dissidence is recognized by officials as important, not only because it might lead to the contagion of others but also because they fear that the ‘enemy’ does not understand the American system and sometimes misinterprets the comments of one senator or the activities of 100,000 marchers in New York as reflecting general lack of support for the president’s policies (Johnson 1970, p. 360; Kissinger 1979, pp. 254–55). Thus, when the media cover the movement or otherwise serve as a platform for protest, they undoubtedly affect foreign policy indirectly since the American government constructs its own policies convinced that the enemy is influenced by what it picks up on nightly television newscasts.

3. Demonstrations

Acknowledging the centrality of the media for opinion influencing in the United States, what then were the most effective tactics employed by antiwar protestors and critics? For many looking back at the turbulent sixties, the periodic mass gatherings in Washington, New York, San Francisco, and other major cities were the major events of the period. Indeed, for most of those who were involved in antiwar activities, the demonstrations were The Movement. They were usually held in the spring and the fall, rarely in the winter when weather was unpredictable or in the summer when students were dispersed from campuses or otherwise on vacation. Whenever and wherever they were held, the main marches, rallies, and demonstrations were monitored carefully by the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

Time and again, officials told journalists that they did not worry about the crowds of people who showed up on their doorsteps to chant and march, that people have a right to demonstrate in a democracy, and that more people showed up for football games on Sundays than appeared at many of the vaunted rallies. Yet, as noted, they worried aloud that the enemy might get the wrong idea from seeing the television films of thousands of young Americans carrying Viet Cong flags or exorcising their leaders. In addition, they worried privately that successful mass demonstrations might attract new supporters among a wavering public.

Many in both administrations expressed surprise about the size of some of the rallies and the vehemence of the attacks against them. On several celebrated occasions, notably the October, 1967 March on the Pentagon, and the May, 1970 post-Kent State demonstration also in Washington, presidents and their entourages feared for their safety or, at the least, feared the spectre of American soldiers and police having to rough up, tear gas, or even shoot young people trying to invade the executive mansion (Christian 1983; Haldeman 1985; Ehrlichman 1984).

During the aforementioned major demonstrations, as well as several others, many officials felt besieged and had to alter their normal daily routines in order to defend the government in a literal sense and in the media. The government never came to a complete halt but it came close, despite the attempt to demonstrate the opposite by such acts as holding an unscheduled, well-publicized meeting of the joint chiefs at the Pen-
tagon while the building was surrounded (Henkin 1984).

More personally, the presidents and their people could not afford many such traumatic weekends. These confrontations took an incalculable physical and emotional toll on them, irrespective of their brave fronts. No matter how well one might prepare for large demonstrations, no matter what sort of rationalizing one might do (the crowds are small, the protestors are communists, the hippies came for the music), presidents and their advisors are ultimately human beings who do not relish being the targets of hostile citizens. Former deputy press secretary Tom Johnson describes Lyndon Johnson, sitting up in his living quarters, the windows shut, the shades drawn, still able to hear the raucous chants from protestors across the street, ‘Hey, Hey, LBJ, How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?’ And it pained him (Johnson 1985).

Several demonstrations can be linked to major turning points in the war. General William Westmoreland was brought home in November of 1967 after the March on the Pentagon to shore up domestic opinion with the message that there was light at the end of the proverbial tunnel (Warnke 1984). Only three months later, his over-selling of American progress had much to do with the public opinion backlash during the first weeks after the Tet Offensive. It is also likely that the unique October, 1969 Moratorium, a nationwide, middle-class demonstration that involved millions of citizens, influenced Nixon’s decision not to hold Hanoi to the November 1 deadline he had given them to become conciliatory or face American escalation.\(^\text{12}\)

Clearly, the major demonstrations of the period in Washington and New York captured the attention of the decision makers and their intelligence services.\(^\text{13}\) The more participants they drew or threatened to draw, the more the attention, although the size factor once a 25- or 50,000 threshold was reached, was not as important as one might have expected. For example, the October, 1967 Washington protest, the most significant event of its kind during the Johnson presidency, attracted ‘only’ 50,000 people according to the government or ‘over’ 100,000 according to march organizers. Nevertheless, whichever numbers are used, the crowds of people in front of the Lincoln Memorial and the smaller crowd that besieged the Pentagon impressed Washington officials who should have known better. According to one knowledgeable observer, it is not hard to mass 50,000 people on any given Sunday in Washington, considering the number of tourists milling about, good weather, and maybe some music (Henkin 1984).\(^\text{14}\) It is almost as if one knows that 50,000 is not many people in a nation of 200,000,000, but when one looks out the window and sees them marching by, the 50,000 look very impressive.

The size and the venue of the marches appeared to have been the most important factors contributing to success or failure in attracting the attention of the decision makers, the media, and the public. The theme or activities of each of the demonstrations was also important. Here we encounter a problem, for the larger the march, the more likely the participants were less unified in purpose and philosophy. The less unified in purpose, the more profanity, enemy flags, violent activity, and Marxist sloganeering. Those were the activities the media tended to focus upon, activities that alienated some middle-class Americans watching their evening newscasts. On the other hand, such coverage disturbed parents, fearful that their own children would become radical protestors. Some parents then blamed the war for the rise of the counterculture that threatened to snatch their children from their middle-class bosoms.\(^\text{15}\) End the war and save the home. There is no doubt that many in the establishment who saw their own children adopting the dress and behavior of the radicals feared for the future of the republic.

Large demonstrations in major cities were also important for the participants themselves. Again, as with those in the White House or Pentagon peering out around drawn window shades, it is difficult to appreciate how impressive only 25,000 can be to those standing in a park, body upon body as far as the eye can see. Surrounded by
25,000 chanting, emotional demonstrators, participants felt that many more were with them. Although they read the next day that official crowd estimators counted only 10,000 people in the park, suspicious activists knew the media and the Park Service were biased in favor of the president and his news manipulators. Marches and rallies energized antiwar citizens. Many considered them to be the highlight of their political lives, exciting moments when they knew their side was powerful. Confident and rejuvenated, footsoldiers returned to their homes to continue work on the less glamorous aspects of the movement of leafletting, petition writing, talking to small groups, and, of course, working on the next big demonstration, perhaps six months hence.

Part of the excitement of the demonstration was its entertainment component, a component that was guaranteed to draw in the crowds in large population areas (Hayden 1985). Of course, as with large crowds, the more rock music, the more the event could be dismissed as another Woodstock. Interestingly, Lyndon Johnson referred to the October, 1967 marchers as ‘hippies’, a derisive term generally applied to apolitical and ineffective drug users and wastrels (Johnson 1967). Similarly, the more rock music was featured, the more some members of the crowd ignored the all-important political messages. 16 If movement leaders hoped that demonstrations might inspire some young people into joining grassroots political organizations, they were disappointed by the many who came primarily to hear Joan Baez or The Grateful Dead.

The spacing of the events throughout the year was as important as the proper mix between entertainment and politics. For both logistic and tactical reasons, large demonstrations in the same city could not occur too frequently. Impressive crowds could not be brought out every weekend or even every month, no matter how attractive the free concert or serious the crisis in Vietnam. Moreover, the media could not be counted upon to cover demonstrations if they became too common. Beginning in 1971, both young people and the media started to become bored with mass demonstrations. Their use as a political tool had run its course; millions had turned out for the rallies time and again and just about every sort of tactic had been tried from raising the Pentagon to the turning-in of draft cards (Hayden 1985).

Contributing to the ennui was the fact that the period from 1963 to 1971 was an unusual one, chock full of marches, demonstrations, and urban rebellions. One wonders about the impact of a demonstration in today’s less turbulent times. Most likely, a mass march in Washington would attract more media attention than a comparable march in 1972, in part because it would be an extraordinary event. On the other hand, as noted, Ronald Reagan does not seem to react to popular manifestations of dissent or criticism in the media in the same way that Johnson and Nixon, two of his more thin-skinned predecessors, did.

4. White House mail
Another tool for foreign policy dissenters is the protesting letter or telegram to the White House or other agency of government. Johnson and Nixon maintained careful records of the flow and direction of mail to them, and the State and Defense Departments, on the Vietnam issue. Any significant change in the number of letters sent or in opinions expressed were carefully analyzed. As with demonstrations, on occasion, rational scientific approaches to this opinion source were ignored. In a country of 200,000,000, one thousand adverse letters could turn heads in the White House, especially if those letters bore no evidence of being part of a mass campaign. 17

This is surprising since letter writers do not represent a random sample of the electorate. Moreover, the significance of letter writing is colored by the likelihood that people tend to write to friends and not enemies, and during the Vietnam War, letter writers tended to be hawkish (Bogart 1972, pp. 53–54; Frantzich 1986, p. 81; Rosenberg et al. 1970, pp. 31, 33–34). Letters and telegrams, nevertheless, received a surprising amount of attention in the Oval Office during the period.

Lyndon Johnson, for one, periodically asked his aides for ‘representative’ letters
that he answered himself. From his reactions to such letters, one might surmise that he attributed a significance to that form of expression of opinion out of proportion to its ‘scientific’ import.

At the same time, letters, phone calls, and telegrams to the White House are sometimes used by the president to demonstrate the support he enjoys in the population. Richard Nixon carried this practice beyond the bounds of propriety when he and his aides surreptitiously organized campaigns from loyal Republicans that produced outpourings of favorable telegrams that he then used to create genuine favorable opinion (Bogart 1972, p. 53).

In terms of the effort and cost involved then, a letter to the White House following a presidential speech would seem to be a potentially useful weapon for foreign policy dissenters. It does not take much time to send one off and one never knows when the president will decide that the shift in the mail flow of a relative handful of letters might mean something. The value of letter writing rises and falls with the sophistication of the president and his advisors in their analyses of public opinion. H. R. Haldeman, for example, Nixon’s chief in this area, probably exercised a more rational and social-scientific influence on Nixon than anyone in Johnson’s entourage. Of course, an extraordinary outpouring of mail and telegrams, let us say in the many thousands, may indeed reflect something going on in the electorate, even if it does not represent a random sample.

On some issues, protesters may be more effective writing to senators and representatives. Prominent congressional leaders, especially in the Senate, can play significant roles in affecting foreign policy. Best of all for the protesters, they often receive relatively few letters on that subject. Richard Russell, one of the deans of the Senate during the Vietnam period, generally received fewer than 30 letters a month on the war even during crises. H. R. Haldeman lamented about how few constituents were able to get under a senator’s skin and cause him or her to move on a matter (Haldeman 1985). The problem is that congressional elections rarely turn on foreign policy issues. Consequently, senators and representatives feel freer to vote according to their consciences on those issues than to respond to what they perceive is foreign policy opinion in their districts.

5. Published Petitions

Governmental officials are also the targets of petitions. During the Vietnam War, many petitions of protest were not only sent to the White House but were published in major, and sometimes local, newspapers in the form of paid advertisements. The New York Times was the favorite outlet, with Sunday’s ‘News of the Week in Review’ section the usual spot for such manifestations of opposition. Organizing a petition drive was a complicated and costly operation. Depending upon the size of the advertisement, people were generally asked to donate from $10 to as much as $100 to place their name alongside hundreds or even thousands of others in an advertisement aimed at impressing Washington as well as other readers of the Times. If the ads were long or star-studded enough, they were also likely to be discussed in the news or editorial columns of the newspapers themselves.

Almost all of the officials to whom I spoke reported that they did notice the petitions. Some remembered being impressed with the multi-page ads with thousands of single-spaced, small-typed names. The Johnson archives bear evidence that White House operatives clipped and filed major advertisements and underscored the names of prominent people. By themselves, petitions were not a very important influencer of opinion but they contributed to the overall impression of some decision makers that their policies were in trouble (Christian 1983).

Many of the Times’ advertisements were dominated by the names of college professors, often from elite eastern colleges. At first glance, college professors would appear to be a relatively unimportant and politically impotent part of the electorate. One might imagine government officials dispassionately scoffing at their feeble attempts to influence policy, considering their marginal role in middle-class America and their lack
of relevant expertise (Rusk 1984). Nevertheless, when many a Johnson or Nixon aide read the petitions as they sipped their Sunday coffee, they became disturbed because professors from the better colleges, in particular, enjoyed a disproportionate influence in the nation as a whole.

In the first place, many White House advisors attended those colleges or had family, friends, and acquaintances among their students and professors. They wanted very much to gain the respect of the intellectual elite at Yale and Stanford, especially considering the disdain that most professors had for both of their bosses. The petitions were thus disappointing to them.

All through the war, a majority of students and professors throughout the United State supported the presidents. But the ones who counted with many in the White House, scholars from the prestige universities, exercised an influence far beyond their numbers — they were the educators and influencers of the establishment’s children, the next establishment.

The irrational comes into play here again with some aides being impressed by several pages of advertisements, without stopping to ask how many thousands of other east-coast professors had not signed the petitions (Christian 1983; Harlow 1984; Reedy 1984). Administration forces often counterattacked in a battle of advertisements. A Freedom House, pro-Johnson advertisement produced a note from national security advisor McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, that said in part, that ‘any knowledgeable academic men would know that this list of supporters is a whole lot more distinguished and knowledgeable than any list of critics yet published’.21

What Bundy was concerned about, along with other officials in both administrations, was the fact that the New York Times was read by influential people outside of government as well as by informed members of the attentive public who were opinion leaders in their own circles. The published petition-advertisement, a dignified, democratic, traditional form of protest, impressed readers in the all-important eastern corridor of the United States. As time went on, a bandwagon effect was created as first one famous professor, then a famous politician, followed by a famous playwright turned against the war in the pages of the New York Times.

The main problem had to do with the point at which advertisements became so commonplace that no one looked at them. As with demonstrations, they were more effective when they appeared sporadically. Naturally, the length of the petition and the number of luminaries in bold type as sponsors or organizers were important factors as well.

6. Meeting the Decision Makers
A final tactic used by opponents of the war was the attempt to reason with their adversaries in face-to-face meetings. Kissinger, Rusk, McNamara, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Rostow, Humphrey, and scores of other presidential advisors met with hundreds of groups representing, among others, demonstration organizers, Clergy and Laymen Concerned, SANE, college editors, student council presidents, and quakers. Meetings ranged from the perfunctory 15 minutes to a day at the White House involving long sessions with several administration teams. During those meetings, protestors presented their arguments, asked questions, and urged or demanded change, and government officials explained their positions. In general, such meetings were a waste of time for both sides. They were pro-forma set pieces with the dumb listening to the deaf and vice versa.22 If anything, such publicized meetings helped the administrations by permitting them to maintain that they were open-minded and prepared to reason seriously with critics.

Only in an indirect way did such encounters impact policy. When people like Henry Kissinger experienced firsthand the intense feelings of his old colleagues from Harvard, he did not change his mind about the wisdom of the Cambodian invasion but he may have become more concerned about the alienation of influential moderate opinion leaders.

On the other hand, these personal exchanges could be counterproductive for dissenters if they really thought their arguments
were given fair consideration. If the professors, priests, and mothers left such meetings convinced that they had made effective presentations to the decision makers, and that the long trip from New York or Chicago or even Los Angeles was worth it, then they might have been neutralized as active dissenters for a while. Certainly the administration hoped that this would be the case. One can only imagine the cynical remarks passed between staffers as they prepared to meet their tenth group of do-gooding doves or peaceniks that week. On one well-documented occasion, the leaking of cynical remarks made by Johnson after a meeting with doves from the Americans for Democratic Action in 1965 caused a political flap (Evans & Novak 1966, pp. 541–43).

In limited cases, meetings with officials were useful for the movement cause when they involved professional colleagues or personal and family friends. Whatever was said about bombing or negotiating, when intimates of policy makers began to desert the ship, some of the presidents' people began to question their policies. The aforementioned Harvard professors were more important to Kissinger than a comparable group of professors from Princeton, as were members of the Americans for Democratic Action more important to Hubert Humphrey than a group of quakers.

Few public figures relish the prospect of leaving their close friends and reference groups behind on the major policy issue of the day. Even those with strong egos in the White House knew that they one day might return to the place from which they came. Kissinger joked about being exiled to Arizona State University, as his predecessor Walt W. Rostow was apparently 'exiled' to the University of Texas (Landau 1972, pp. 98–101, 256, n.13; Kissinger 1979, pp. 294–95). 23

Face-to-face contacts between critics and officials took place in venues other than government buildings. As feelings about the war intensified, presidential aides confronted genteel and not so genteel critics in church, at parties, and sometimes around their own dinner tables as their children and wives became doves. 24 Even if members of their immediate families supported government policy, they themselves became targets of abuse from friends and classmates. Pressures on decision makers thus increased as they worried about the impact of criticism on their innocent and apolitical families. Sometimes this criticism involved shouting at dinner parties. 25 There were even cases of picketing and rude treatment for family members outside their family homes. Some of this must have disheartened officials who had not bargained for such extracurricular harassment. 26

7. Conclusion The emphasis in the preceding discussion has been on tactics that protestors can employ to influence the president and his advisors directly. 27 One should not lose sight of the earlier schematic description of how opinion comes to the Oval Office. Marching, leafleting, petitioning, and generally demonstrating dissent in public also affect decision makers indirectly by affecting opinion leaders in the media, Congress, and the public at large.

For example the reciprocal and even symbiotic relationship between the movement and dissident senators was an important one during the Vietnam War period. Senator Wayne Morse's spirited dissent during the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in 1964 encouraged antiwar students whose activities over the next year encouraged other dissidents and potential dissidents on Capitol Hill. Senator J. William Fulbright's hearings on the war in January and February of 1966, some of which were covered live by the television networks, served as a needed shot in the arm to a then dispirited movement and also had an impact on members of the attentive public. 28 The New York Times' slow editorial drift against Johnson's policies through 1966 and 1967 was itself affected by the growth of dovish sentiment in the Senate and the alienation of eastern intellectuals and college students and professors at elite colleges. The Times' dovish positions in turn encouraged others in the media to question administration policy and helped to convince new petition signers to place advertisements in its August pages.

In addition, one cannot ignore the role
played by individuals such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. Benjamin Spock who, by lending their names to the movement, encouraged masses to turn out for demonstrations. According to North Vietnamese analyses, a handful of prominent peace leaders were more important for their cause than the mass demonstrations of the period (Bui 1983).

As one can see, any evaluation of the relative effectiveness of dissenting tactics on foreign policy issues in the United States is confounded not only by the tenuous nature of the evidence but also by the complexity of the problem. Nevertheless, there are some lessons to be learned from this exercise.

In the first place, almost any form of protest can reach the Oval Office. Johnson and Nixon, at least, behaved in irrational and unscientific ways when it came to interpreting the drift of opinion in the country. One day they might be impressed with a demonstration, another day they might dismiss it as meaningless or communist-organized. They paid careful attention to particular columnists not just because the columnists were supposedly influential but also because they wanted to read nice things about themselves. Unruly picketers were used by officials to tarnish the movement in the eyes of the Silent Majority, but they also threw off a president's timing and contributed to his sense of depression and fatigue.

All methods of protest attracted the attention of important officials at some time during the period. Although attracting attention did not result in immediate policy changes, it did contribute to the overall official perception of growing dissatisfaction with administration programs.

Marching, signing petitions, writing letters, and meeting with government officials, especially those known to the protestors, are all useful means of affecting American foreign policy. When dissenters are trying to build a viable movement among a large minority of the population, everything must be tried for one never knows for certain what will capture the attention and maybe even the sympathies of people in the White House. Above all, imaginative use of the traditional channels of protest must be continually developed to guarantee media coverage. Although all of this sounds like a prescription for chaos, it does allow people to exert their creative energies and work hardest on those aspects of the dissenting movement with which they are most comfortable. Such was the case during the Vietnam War period and such will most likely be the case in the future.

NOTES
1. On minor foreign policy issues, especially those dealing with aspects of trade policy, professional and business organizations know very well how to influence the White House and Congress.
3. The closest a president came to admitting such influences may have been William McKinley who allegedly made up his mind to keep the Philippines after he heard the voice of the people on a speaking tour in 1898. In this case, as in several others, critics suggest presidents may have used popular will as a cloak for other motives.
4. Similarly, printed sources and archival materials rarely revealed the role of dissenters and the movement in policy-making. For a discussion of the interviewing, see Small 1985.
5. That is a conclusion one can draw from Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and their two-step flow of information theory.
6. Some of the following discussion appeared in Small 1984b.
7. Former Johnson aide, and also a former journalist, Douglass Cater suggests that if an apparatus were set up to handle opinion, and especially, dissent in a sophisticated manner, it might look to outsiders like a counter-propaganda agency (Cater 1984). Johnson's people did maintain a coordinating Public Affairs Policy for Vietnam Committee (later, the Vietnam Information Group) but it dealt with all aspects of opinion and public relations. See Presidential Document Series 1986, reel 5.
8. Johnson, for example, convinced that early mass demonstrations were organized non-spontaneous actions of subversives, could easily ignore that type of manifestation of opinion (Christian 1983). Bernard C. Cohen found intuition more important than social science in the determination of public opinion in the State Department (Cohen 1973, p. 65).
9. Other reflections of public opinion might come from lobbies and interest groups and the official bureaucracies. Dean Rusk, for example, paid attention to resolutions that emanated from national organizations that reflected accurately the sentiments of the organizations' memberships (Rusk 1984).
10. The problem persists today as can be seen in Loeb 1986, p. 214.
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11. Much of the extraordinary advance preparation for the Pentagon March can be seen in material in boxes 59 and 60, HU 4 Freedoms of the White House Central Files. For the feeling of being besieged in the White House during the Kent State protest, see Kissinger 1979, p. 511, and Colson 1976, pp. 36–37. For every major demonstration, I could list 7–10 officials who either wrote or told me that they were unaffected by the event and 7–10 who expressed the opposite sentiments. My general conclusion, based on evidence in the printed record and interviews, is that most of the tough-talking officials now, shared the concern of their colleagues earlier.

12. Two valiant attempts to link demonstrations to policy are Schreiber 1976 and Berkowitz 1973.

13. One important indicator of the seriousness with which Johnson and Nixon viewed the demonstrations is the person-hours spent by their operatives, and especially the FBI and CIA, in monitoring antiwar activities and even in harassing leaders and their organizations (Donner 1980; Theoharis 1978).

14. On the other hand, veteran political organizer and then White House aide, John P. Roche, who himself claimed not to be affected by the Pentagon weekend, did admire the ability of the marchers to organize even their 50,000 so well (Roche 1984).

15. Some antiwar leaders took this into their calculations, hoping that the more outrageous the behavior of their followers, the more parents would be moved to pressure Washington to end the war that had brought their community so much disruption (Hoffman 1985).

16. In the fall of 1969, I attended a large demonstration in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and was struck by how few in my area seemed to be paying attention to the speeches that followed each Bay Area rock group.

17. For example, in early April of 1965, the receipt of 580 letters against Vietnam policy and only 96 for that policy bothered a prominent National Security Council aide. Chester Cooper to McGeorge Bundy, April 6, 1965, box 15, United States National Security Council Files, Country File, Vietnam. Similarly, Johnson’s important speech of October 10, 1968, in which he declared a bombing halt, produced fewer than 1,000 telegrams and 600 letters to the White House over a three day period. Walt Rostow to Johnson, November 2, 4, 1968, Presidential Document Series, reel 3. Over 10,000 Americans wrote to NBC in 1986 protesting the cancellation of ‘Remington Steele’, a television program.

18. Haldeman, who did not trust the national polls to gauge public opinion, commissioned his own (Haldeman 1985).

19. Figure based on an analysis of Richard Russell’s correspondence in his Library in Athens, Georgia.

20. Of course, ordinary dissenters are rarely the match for lobbyists from the military-industrial complex (Loeb 1986, p. 20).


22. See, for example, the comments of White House aide Don Ropa after a meeting with leaders of Women Strike for Peace. Ropa to Bill Moyers, April 7, 1966, Presidential Document Series, reel 5.

23. Rostow himself expresses pleasure at the positions he and his wife found at the University of Texas (Rostow 1983).

24. One study of scientists (Schevitz 1979) suggested that personal friends and family exercised the most influence in the development of their antiwar feelings.

25. Hostesses often protected their guests. John Ehrlichman found himself usually sitting next to the wife of the director of the CIA at such parties (Ehrlichman 1984).

26. One anonymous source reports that his mother-in-law received a telephoned death threat meant for him.

27. Any complete survey of techniques used by dissenters to shape policy during the Vietnam period would have to include the many successful attempts to spread antiwar propaganda in the military sector. The coffee-house and draft-resistance movements made Johnson and Nixon very nervous as they contemplated their options on the ground in Vietnam. Less successful were the several organized attempts to influence the electoral process as was the case in the congressional elections of 1966 and the presidential election of 1968.


29. This is the conclusion of Loeb (1986) for the 1980s.

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