

Section 6. Political science

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By Taoxi Xie,

MANDELBAUM, THE TET OFFENSIVE AND MEDIA REPORTING

Abstract. Johns Hopkins University Professor, Michael Mandelbaum underestimated the effect of the reporting of Tet. Tet reporting should be regarded as a significant factor that contributed to the disastrous political optics of President Johnson.

Keywords: Tet Offensive, Lyndon B. Johnson, Michael Mandelbaum, Vietnam War, media.

The Tet Offensive, an intensive attack orchestrated by the North Vietnamese government to overthrow the South Vietnamese government, was one of the most dramatic events of the Vietnam War. Many considered this event a turning point in the war. Conventional historical records of the war have long maintained that this moment was responsible for the shift in public attitude towards Vietnam. Historians have vigorously examined the Tet Offensive as the primary reason for the U.S. withdrawal. Many have presented theories regarding the impact of Tet reporting. Michael Mandelbaum, the Christian A. Herter Professor of Johns Hopkins University, conceived a compelling theory of Tet reporting. Mandelbaum's theory is that televised reporting of Tet did not alter the mind of the American public; according to him, the public shifted its position due to the immense loss of American life [1, 167]. Mandelbaum believed there was "little empirical evidence" to show how people reacted to the reporting of Tet [1, 161]. Although the media did not diminish public support, it might have exercised an indirect influence that allowed anti-war factions to express their sentiment through protest [3, 164]. Furthermore, Mandelbaum insisted that anti-war protests did not diminish public support for the war [1, 167]. Mandelbaum underestimated the effect of the reporting of Tet. Tet reporting should be re-

garded as a significant factor that contributed to the disastrous political optics of President Johnson.

American media coverage falsely characterized the Tet Offensive as a military and political catastrophe and attributed the unfavorable image of failure to the Johnson administration. The fact that CBS anchor Walter Cronkite claimed that the Vietnam War was "mired in stalemate" and that the United States should "negotiate as an honorable people" harmed Johnson's own narrative, which projected Tet as a paramount strategic success for the United States [2]. Rejecting this position, Cronkite argued for a peace negotiation between North Vietnam and the United States [2]. Other prevalent news organizations, such as the *New York Times*, reflected similar views. After Tet, a *New York Times* article argued that the confidence of the Johnson Administration was "ill-founded" [3]. Furthermore, this reporting highlights what it saw as economic and political failures following Tet, including a diminished Redevelopment Plan and a dysfunctional Saigon government. In addition, the article believed Tet induced significant psychological damage and that the majority of the Vietnamese population grew weary of the Vietnam War. Because of this, the *New York Times* maintained that the most reasonable solution was to engage in political settlement rather than waste resources battling an unwinnable war [3]. Seemingly,

the Johnson administration failed to react to Tet. This political implication of incompetence further cast doubt on President Johnson's leadership during crises.

Public opinion regarding the Vietnam War shifted due to the media's portrayal of Tet as a political and military failure. Hence, this reporting perpetuated the unpalatable reputation of the Johnson Administration. The polling data affirmed the overwhelmingly unwillingness of the American public to engage in the Vietnam War. Polling data shows the percentage of people who thought the U.S. did not make a mistake sending troops to Vietnam. During the Tet Offensive, that percentage dropped from 46% to 37%, which indicates a dramatic change in public opinion [4, 25]. By comparison, another research establishes that 34% of people favored escalation in November 1968 (after Tet), whereas 55% favored escalation in November 1967. In one year, the roughly 20% drop in preference for withdrawal could possibly have been due to the disinterestedness of the American public in a prolonged war and the Tet Offensive [4, 27]. Gallup Polls from 1965 to 1968 indicates a gradual decrease in popularity of Johnson's Vietnam policy. Approval rating surged when the conflict was most severe, except after the Tet Offensive [4, 26]. Taken together, this data reveals the peculiarity of the Tet Offensive and suggests that it potentially played some measurable role in shifting public opinion. The public polling data also reveals that the younger generation was more supportive of the war after reporting about the Tet Offensive. This finding vindicated the anti-Vietnam War faction as a minority of the younger generation. In 1968, 38% of people under 35 supported escalation, and 33% of people older than 35 preferred escalation. The younger generation (age younger than 35) favored increased war effort compared to the older generations (age older than 35) by a margin of five percent [4, 33]. Furthermore, the unpopularity of the anti-Vietnam War faction rose from their dissenting views, rather than their opposition to the Vietnam War [5, 230]. To conclude, polling data not only il-

lustrated the success of Tet reporting in plummeting support for the Johnson administration, but also shattered the myth that the Vietnam War protest was an effective tool in public discourse. Mandelbaum's theory is reasonable in noticing the ineffectiveness of anti-war protest. However, he overlooked the effect of Tet reporting.

Additionally, the U. S. Congress and Democratic Party realigned themselves with public opinion. The political realignment commenced in the reversal of political rhetoric. During Congressional hearings, congressional members and eminent elected officials (from both the Republican and Democratic parties) adopted the language of the Tet reporting to critically examine the Johnson's administration's war policy. Prominent politicians, including Senator Edward Kennedy (from Massachusetts), Richard Nixon (former Vice-President), and George Romney (Governor of Michigan), all criticized the ineffectiveness of Johnson's war policy using reporting from the media [6, 627-629]. Moreover, Congress and the Senate even acted to oppose the continuation of the war in Vietnam. After the pessimistic assessment of the press, Johnson conducted clandestine polling. Out of 137 congressmen and 32 senators, 104 were negative on the subject of the war. Twenty-five members were noncommittal, and 18 expressed reservations. Only 22 were outright positive on a commitment to the Vietnam efforts [7, 13]. Senator Pastore of Rhode Island, initially a staunch supporter of the war, eventually turned against it. Pastore's reaction and the reaction from both houses of Congress indicate the unpopularity of Johnson's policy [7, 13]. Essentially, Congress repositioned its political rhetoric and policy to concur with the ambivalent public sentiment toward the prolongation of the war. The alteration in public opinion fundamentally curtailed Johnson's political power.

In addition, Johnson encountered even more internal political challenges from his Democratic Party. Senator Robert Kennedy zealously opposed Johnson in his vision of foreign policy by echoing and repeat-

ing the narrative of the press, which possibly harmed the public image of President Johnson. Robert Kennedy further impugned the integrity of the Johnson administration; he chided the credibility gap, the progress campaign of 1967, and the corruption of the South Vietnamese government [6, 642–648]. He contended that South Vietnamese troops performed with capable strength, but he rejected the idea that South Vietnamese troops were motivated to battle Communist North Vietnam [6, 642–648]. Although the media was significant in revising public opinion, it was merely one of the factors that induced widespread disapproval of the Johnson administration. The disintegration of his Democratic Party as well as other domestic issues contributed to his catastrophic political image and political debacle [6, 672].

President Johnson's personal recollection of the Tet reporting further substantiates the political damage this reporting did to the Vietnam War efforts. In his personal recollection of the Tet reporting, Johnson maintained that the media had been "exaggerated" and "emotional." Undoubtedly, President Johnson distrusted the integrity of the press, especially the *New York Times*. Johnson accused the media of focusing only on the most "depressing" and "lurid" accounts of the Vietnam War [8, 384]. For one, news reports from the *New York Times* indicated to the American people and politicians that Johnson might send another two hundred thousand men to Vietnam two days before the New Hampshire Primary, which Johnson claimed sabotaged him politically. This report caused concerns for many prominent figures, including a senator who served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. President Johnson criticized whistleblowers for their lack of understanding of his decision-making process, and

this insinuation of sending more troops further debilitated his political optics [8, 402–403].

President Johnson's last interview with Walter Cronkite further affirmed his ambivalence toward Tet. Before his last interview, Johnson suffered two heart attacks, alcoholism and chest pains. It is presumed that Johnson's interview with Cronkite is to establish his legacy. During the interview, he spoke about civil rights and avoided the Vietnam War [8]. Evidently, Johnson did not consider the Vietnam War his legacy. Johnson's choice to evade and not defend his Vietnam policy revealed the Vietnam War as a political failure (for Johnson personally). Notably, Johnson died in his ranch ten days later after he finished the interview with Cronkite.

In the final analysis, the media served as a secondary factor in shifting public opinion. Other domestic factors, including Johnson neglecting his own party organization as well as other domestic issues, challenged the credibility of the Johnson administration. The combination of these factors possibly "drove Johnson out of office" and led to his decision not to run for reelection [6, 672]. Mandelbaum's assessment presented a narrow argument that is extremely fundamental to prove; public polls and the fact that polls can be used indicate a drastic change of popularity, regardless of their initial reaction to the reporting of the Tet Offensive. Mandelbaum considered Tet reporting as a minor influence, but the shifting of congressional rhetoric along with President Johnson narrative further viciated the significance of Tet reporting. The misunderstanding of Tet, fundamentally diminished President Johnson's political career and tainted his legislative success. Admittedly, Mandelbaum's analysis of the inability of the anti-Vietnam War movement to alter American public discourse is accurate and legitimate.

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