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On Message: US Military Strategy, Groupthink, and Media Coverage in Vietnam and
Iraq

by

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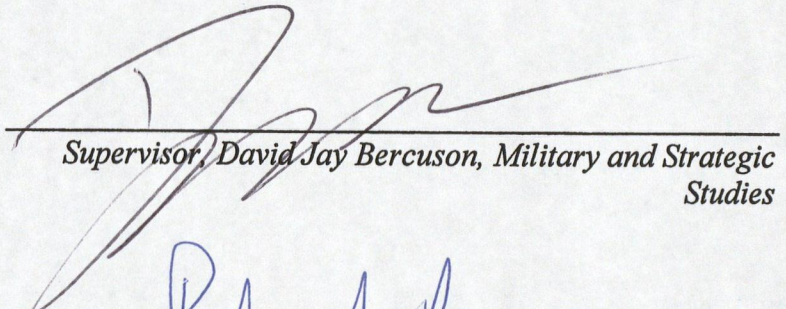
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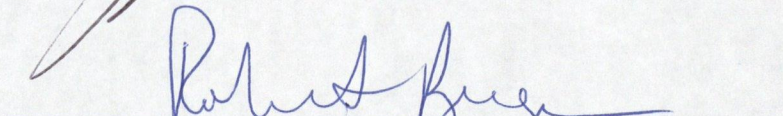
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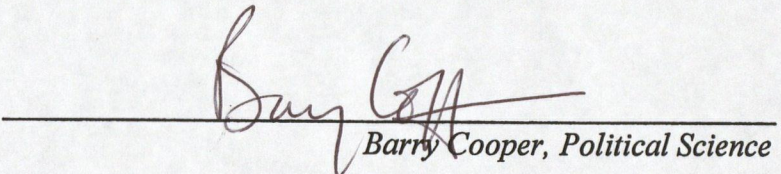
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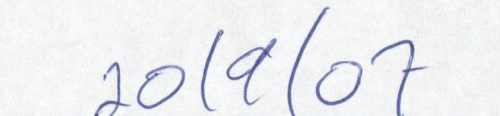
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Abstract

This thesis provides an analysis of the influence of the news media on American military strategy during the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. It argues that, during the Iraq War, American policy-makers fell victim to groupthink and, as a result, they were comparatively resistant to external calls to change their preferred strategy. Conversely, during the Vietnam War, groupthink was not present in the US executive branch and, as a result, policy-makers responded to critical coverage of the war effort by repeatedly altering US strategy. It concludes that decision-makers' susceptibility to outside influences is a primary determinant on the new media's capacity to affect the course of US military strategy during wartime.

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CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

From the outset of the American military intervention in Vietnam in 1964, the United States news media has had the capacity to report military engagements from around the world in real time.¹ Instantaneous and pervasive news coverage has helped to inform the American public and politicians of ongoing military operations, which has led to obvious questions about the possible influence of news on military strategy.² This assumption has only gained popularity following studies of news media influence in Vietnam, which has prompted further investigation of the possible links between US military strategy and the media.³ The proponents of this termed “CNN effect,” which hypothesizes a causal link between media reporting and politico-military decisions, include Steven Livingston of George Washington University who proposes that the viewing of images on television “undeniably influences the evolution of events.”⁴

However, proponents of the CNN effect have frequently failed to take into account the important role of strategic decision-making in setting the course of international conflicts.⁵ This failing may be particularly evident in the cases of the Vietnam and 2003 Iraq Wars. Indeed, despite extensive negative media coverage of US military strategy since the onset of hostilities in both conflicts, negative media pressure

¹ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk?* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2001), 1.

² Ingrid A. Lehmann, "Exploring the Transatlantic Media Divide over Iraq: How and Why U.S. And German Media Differed in Reporting on U.N. Weapons Inspections in Iraq: 2002-2003," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 10, no. 1 (2005): 3.

³ Eytan Gilboa, "The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations," *Political Communication* 22, no. 1 (January-March 2005).

⁴ Steven Livingston, "Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention," (Cambridge, MA: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, 1997), 14.

seemingly has had little effect on US military strategy in the Iraq War, but appears to have had a significant effect on the direction of US strategy in Vietnam.⁶ Examining this contrast is particularly important in light of a similar strategic situation in both cases, which required a constant US security presence to combat hostile local forces, develop and train local military forces, and ensure long term stability before American withdrawal.⁷ In addition, the news media has made frequent and pointed comparisons of these two conflicts as American “quagmires” resulting from poor strategic decisions.⁸ Despite this, media criticism levied at President George W. Bush and his chosen military strategy in Iraq has not motivated the president to radically modify his strategy, as occurred during heightened periods of negative media coverage during the Vietnam War.⁹

In light of this, this paper assesses the explanatory utility of the CNN effect by examining how the degree of consensus behind a particular strategy, what I label the “strategic certainty” on the part of decision-makers, conditions decision-makers’ receptiveness to outside criticism or alternative points of view. Specifically, I propose to examine how the relatively high degree of strategic certainty present among the US executive during the Iraq War, and the relatively low degree of strategic certainty present

⁵ Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 30.

⁶ Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 470-471.

⁷ Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War:” The Media and Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 182, Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982), 105.

⁸ Vernon Loeb, “No Iraq ‘Quagmire,’ Rumsfeld Asserts: Secretary Disputes Vietnam Comparison,” *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2003, A1, Jennifer Loven, “Bush Vietnam Trip Revives Iraq ‘Quagmire,’” *The Associated Press*, November 15, 2006, A1.

among the US executive during the Vietnam War, conditioned the causal influence of the CNN effect on the course of American military strategy during these conflicts.

This paper, therefore, examines the following questions: how, and to what extent, does the degree of strategic certainty present among the core strategic decision-makers in the executive branch of the US government condition their receptiveness to outside criticism and alternative points of view on their preferred strategy? Moreover, to what extent has news media reporting of the Vietnam and Iraq War influenced the course of American military strategy during these conflicts? In response, I hypothesized that, despite extensive negative reporting on American military strategy in Iraq, the high degree of strategic certainty among the US executive over the proper direction of US military strategy in the conflict has largely precluded the media from influencing the course of US strategy. In contrast, the negative coverage of the Vietnam War began to influence the US executive as the conflict progressed due to the relatively low degree of certainty over the direction of US strategy. Therefore, I hypothesized that the news media can influence the course of military strategy in conflicts where a general consensus does not exist among the US executive over the proper course of military strategy but that its influence will be severely curtailed when strategic decision-makers are in general agreement over their preferred strategy.

⁹ Clarence Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Norton, 1993), 153-154.

Preliminary Theoretical Approach

This expands upon the policy media interaction model developed by Piers Robinson. Robinson suggests that, in situations of “policy certainty” among US officials, the news media has little influence on foreign policy, regardless of the level of media attention devoted to the crisis.¹⁰ The central tenet of this model is that, once a consensus has been reached among policy actors on a policy or course of action, the resolve to carry out objectives constitutes “policy certainty,” wherein decision-makers are extremely resistant to contrary outside influences.¹¹ Conversely, a situation where no direct consensus exists among the US executive over the direction of policy constitutes “policy uncertainty.”¹²

In contrast to Robinson’s near exclusive focus on foreign policy decision-making by political elites, the Media-Strategy Interaction Model proposed here focuses on the direction of military strategy set by the executive branch of the US government. Robinson’s core concept of policy certainty is supplanted in this modified model by the concept of “strategic certainty;” however, the basic logic of the original concept remains. Therefore, the first core preposition of the Media-Strategy Interaction Model proposed here is that, in situations of “strategic certainty,” which is a consensus on the proper direction of military strategy among the executive, the news media will have little

¹⁰ Robinson, 30.

¹¹ Piers Robinson, “Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics: Models of Media Influence on Foreign Policy,” *European Journal of Communication* 16, no. 4 (December 2001): 534.

¹² Robinson, “Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics,” 535.

influence on the course of strategy, regardless of the level of media attention devoted to it.¹³

This core preposition of the Media-Strategy Interaction Model contrast markedly with the “manufacturing consent” approach to the news media’s influence on decision-making developed by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. These scholars argue that, in cases of highly negative media reporting, democratic states will take powerful responsive action to address the issues raised by the media.¹⁴ The authors illustrate their argument through analysis of the Vietnam War. They argue plainly that, when the media became highly critical of US foreign policy, the ideas, opinions, and policies expressed by the Johnson and Nixon administrations began to reflect the tone and substance of media reports.¹⁵

Many studies of the news media in international conflict lack a theoretical understanding of how core decision-makers come to decide on a particular course of action, which predisposes many studies to overemphasize the influence of external actors by default. This is a failing I redress through incorporating elements of the groupthink model, developed by Irving Janis, into the Media-Strategy Interaction Model. Groupthink refers to a set of decision-making problems that can afflict policy-makers during periods of crisis, which collectively deteriorate critical thinking, mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment.¹⁶ Groupthink, an extremely rigid consensus, results when a group of

¹³ Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention*, 30.

¹⁴ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2002), xli.

¹⁵ Ibid., 227.

¹⁶ Greg Cashman, *What Causes War? An Introduction to Theories of International Conflict* (New York, NY: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), 112.

decision-makers seek complete conformity and agreement on a policy solution, thereby avoiding alternative points of view that are critical of the consensus position.¹⁷ As a result, in situations where groupthink is present, majority consensus limits the potential influence that external actors, such as the news media, can impart on the core decision-making group.

Incorporating elements of the groupthink model into this study goes a particularly long way toward explaining the direction of US strategy during the Iraq War given the high degree of strategic certainty evident in George W. Bush's administration.¹⁸ Conversely, I show that a groupthink-like degree of strategic certainty behind any particular strategy did not develop among Presidents Johnson and Nixon and their cadres of core decision-makers, which made them much more open to the opinions expressed in critical news reports when deciding the course of US strategy in Vietnam. With this in mind, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature on media-state relations by closely examining the internal workings of the US executive and determining how the degree of consensus among core decision-makers conditions the impact, if any, the news media can have on strategic decision-making.

¹⁷ Irving Lester Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1982) 1, Mark Schafer and Scott Crichtlow, "Antecedents of Groupthink: A Quantitative Study," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 3 (September 1996): 417-419.

¹⁸ Pamela Hess, "Iraqi Security Forces Developing – Slowly," *The Washington Times*, August 5, 2004, A1, Donald Rumsfeld, "Secretary Rumsfeld's Speech at the National Press Club," (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), September 7, 2004), 1.

Methodology

The cases of the Vietnam War and the ongoing Iraq War are used to test the hypotheses outlined above. These cases were selected for several reasons. First, they have intrinsic importance. Indeed, these conflicts are broadly considered quagmires and two of the worst military blunders in modern US history.¹⁹ It is, therefore, very important to uncover the factors that shaped the direction of the military strategies guiding these conflicts. Second, these cases have been under-examined in at least two crucial respects. Indeed, previous media research has largely focused on media induced course corrections in Vietnam; however, these studies have exclusively focused on the foreign policy realm and on whether news was instrumental in getting American forces out of the conflict. Comparatively few works, including ones focusing on Vietnam and the Iraq War, have examined the effects of media reporting on the direction of US strategy during these conflicts.²⁰ Moreover, few, if any, media studies have examined the influence of groupthink on decision-makers' receptiveness to contrary opinions.

Finally, these cases are ripe for comparison along the strategic decision-making dimension. Crucially, both cases are reasonably lengthy conflicts that were subject to extensive, consistently negative media reporting on the direction of US strategy. Indeed, in both of these conflicts major negative coverage appeared over a four year period, in

¹⁹ Michael R. Gordon, "Break Point? Iraq and America's Military Forces," *Survival* 48, no. 4 (December 2006): 70, Melvin R. Laird, "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November-December 2005): 24, Helmut Norpoth and Andrew H. Sidman, "Pain or Glory? The Iraq War and Presidential Support," in *The Wartime Election of 2004* (Mershon Center, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH), 1, William J. Perry, "Testimony to the House Armed Services Committee," (United States Department of State, January 17, 2006), 1, Howard Tumber and Jerry Palmer, *Media at War: The Iraq Crisis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 124.

²⁰ William M. Darley, "War Policy, Public Support, and the Media," XXXVI, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 122.

Vietnam 1967 to 1971, and in Iraq 2003 to 2007. Moreover, the disparity between US forces in Iraq and Vietnam did not appear to influence negative coverage. For example, in Iraq negative coverage began to appear after the first week of the invasion, compared with Vietnam where negative coverage only appeared in large numbers in 1967, and became sustained following the Tet Offensive in early 1968. As a result, these are particularly appropriate cases for comparison. Yet, despite these important similarities, they are crucially different in that US strategy varied considerably over the course of the Vietnam War and has varied very little over the course of the Iraq War. Their similarities and differences make these cases particularly appropriate for testing the Media-Strategy Interaction Model for it permits an analysis of the effect that the degree of strategic certainty present in the Johnson, Nixon, and Bush administrations had on the direction of military strategy in these highly critical media environments.

Negative Tone of Media Coverage in Vietnam and the Iraq War

As this study is chiefly concerned with a possible connection between negative media coverage on the US executive, this section will briefly outline what is implied by negative coverage in these two conflicts. Often media reporting of any given topic can be gauged as positive or negative coverage depending on the perception the media takes on events. In both the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, the tone of coverage during major setbacks in military operations was directed in opposition to the actions of the US executive or the armed forces. Television and print media coverage that highlights the

mistakes or failures of US forces would be considered to have a negative focus.²¹ Conversely, coverage that focused on the positive aspects of both operations, such as military or political successes, and discussed the actions of the armed forces and US executive favourably would be considered positive coverage.²² In addition, coverage which simply reported the events of a military operation and did not impose any overtly subjective wording or images to present the story as positive or negative towards the US executive or armed forces could be considered neutral. However, it is important to note that media organizations are interested in business returns from their information. In both these conflicts, reporters made stories that were appealing to their business interests and would be watched and read by the public. Robert Entman argues this point in his concept of news framing. He asserts that certain criteria are selected in the formation of a newscast, and some information is almost certainly left out.²³ Perhaps then, the information being presented by news organizations cannot be entirely neutral, and can present a positive or negative slant depending on the images, wording and event being presented. With this said, media coverage during both these conflicts has been focused on largely negative presentations of US officials, which will be made clear in subsequent sections.

²¹ S. Aday, S. Livingston, and M. Hebert, "Embedding the Truth: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Objectivity and Television Coverage of the Iraq War," *Press/Politics* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 10.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 11.

US Strategy in Vietnam and Iraq

In order to determine the impact of the news media on US strategy during the two conflicts, we must briefly outline the military strategies of both here. For Vietnam, US strategy was originally outlined as a three-phase strategy to defeat the North Vietnam and Vietcong armies. In Phase I, the US and South Vietnamese forces would basically prevent further communist victories through the capture and securing of cities and major bases. Phase II would require a massive infusion of American troops to seek-and-destroy Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces.²⁴ In addition, South Vietnamese units would be tasked with pacification duties, clearing enemy troops from villages, and winning the support of the local population. Finally, Phase III would concentrate on defeating the remaining enemy units in remote bases in advance of turning over responsibility for protection to the South Vietnamese army.²⁵ Moreover, Operation Rolling Thunder would continue to put pressure on the North's supply lines through a coordinated bombing campaign which began in 1964.²⁶ Therefore, General William Westmoreland had developed a strategy of attrition to seek out and destroy Vietcong and North Vietnamese units that had crossed into South Vietnam, which would keep the war both limited and hopefully acceptable to the American public as more units were needed to fight a seemingly relentless enemy.²⁷ However, as the war progressed US strategy was changed frequently first to end the attrition strategy, second to adopt close-support operations

²⁴ Anthony O. Edmonds, *The War in Vietnam, Greenwood Press Guides to Historic Events of the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 50.

²⁵ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 142-143.

²⁶ Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Times Books, 1995), 209.

²⁷ McNamara and VanDeMark, 211.

around South Vietnamese villages, and third to project US forces into the neighbouring state of Cambodia, and following this, end further US troop support for operations outside the limited range of South Vietnam's borders. The strategic uncertainty shown by both presidents, coupled with the failure of the groupthink model, presented in the next chapter, made the strategy vulnerable to change, and as the war progressed became increasingly susceptible to media influence as more organizations became negative towards US strategy.

From the outset of military operations in Iraq, the strategy for rebuilding post-Saddam Iraq was based on two primary goals. First, the US military was tasked with defeating the insurgency and terrorist threats against US and Iraqi forces.²⁸ Second, the US would train and build the Iraqi forces for eventual turnover of security to those forces.²⁹ Strategy certainty in this case has been further enhanced by the US executive groupthink mentality, relying on mutual support from members of the Bush cabinet in private and especially public statements since before the war began. Indeed, the US strategy for the stabilization and then rebuilding of Iraq has been reported since 2003, and has been repeated frequently by senior US officials to support the course of operations there. Perhaps the best example of the reinforcement of this strategy has come from recent statements by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who describes the strategy in

²⁸ George W. Bush, President Bush Discusses Early Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty: Remarks by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair on Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty, Hilton Istanbul, Istanbul, Turkey, (cited November 20, 2005), available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/print/20040628-9.html>, 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

Iraq using simple key words, “clear, hold, and build.”³⁰ The use of simple terminology to describe US strategy has been part of the Bush Administration’s plan to get its message to the public and media throughout the conflict.³¹ Similar wording and phrases have appeared throughout the Iraqi operation to describe the US strategy.³² The reinforcement of basic tenets of the US strategy by officials during strategic operations constitutes strategic certainty in this case.³³ Efforts by US officials to reinforce the basic tenets of securing Iraq from the insurgent threat, to the building and transferring of authority to Iraqi Security Forces has, thus far, been frequently reinforced even following a major election defeat for the Republican Party in late-2006 that resulted in Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld being forced to resign. Yet, despite this event and the subsequent release of the “New Way Forward” strategy in January 2007, US strategy has continued to emphasize the building and transferring of authority to Iraqi Forces as its primary objective.³⁴ Moreover, despite critical reporting of the results of the US strategy to defeat the insurgency, the strategy has remained in place and been reinforced through briefings, statements, and speeches by senior US officials.

³⁰ Rice, Condoleezza. “Iraq and U.S. Policy: Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Opening Remarks before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.” United States Department of State, October 19, 2005, 1.

³¹ Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer, and Brendan Nyhan, *All the President’s Spin* (New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 2004), 152-153.

³² Bush, President Addresses the Nation, 2.

³³ Bush, President Bush Discusses Early Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty, 1.

³⁴ George W. Bush, “Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq,” (Washington, D.C.: The White House, January 2007), 1.

Outline of Thesis

This thesis is made up of four major elements. First, it outlines the hypotheses being tested in more detail and the major media research supporting this study. Second, it outlines the theoretical assumptions underpinning the hypotheses. Third, it tests the hypotheses in the context of Vietnam and the Iraq War, placing particular emphasis on the tone and direction of the news media's reporting, the degree of strategic certainty present among core US decision-makers, and also strategic realities around the points when major shifts in US military strategy occurred. Finally, it concludes with a summary of findings and identifies avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2 : THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter lays out the major theories used in this study: the groupthink model and the Media-Strategy Interaction Model. It begins by discussing the central concept of the CNN effect, and follows with a review of the concept of military strategy and how it will be used for the purpose of this study. It then turns to the core theoretical underpinnings of the groupthink model, outlining how cohesive groups gather and process information. Determining how these groups use information will be crucial to proving the ability, or inability, of the news media to influence decision-makers. Following this section, the paper's secondary theory the Media-Strategy Interaction Model, which assesses the potential influence of the news media on the creation and modification of strategy, will be examined. It concludes with a discussion of competing media theories and measures why they were deemed inappropriate for examining the chosen cases.

History of news media influence: The CNN effect

In order to determine the impact of the "CNN effect" on US decision-makers, it will need to be properly defined. The term was originally created to deal with the absorbing coverage of the CNN cable news channel during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.³⁵ Advances in communications technology allowed the network to cover the conflict in real time, and its reports were used as a primary information resource by the major broadcast

³⁵ Robinson, *The CNN Effect*, 2.

networks.³⁶ CNN's success in covering the conflict for the first time as a 24 hour news cycle inspired other news organizations to establish similar global networks.³⁷ In the current context, this term has come to signify the ability of real-time communications technology, in the form of the news media, to provoke major responses from political and military elites to national and international events. In this respect, the concept has been used to characterize the role of the general news media in foreign policy making and world politics.³⁸

Despite the appearance of the concept in the early 1990s, early media conflicts, including the Vietnam War, should be considered in this definition. Although newspaper and news magazines were not published in real time, stories were filed from Saigon to US offices multiple times per day and printed daily. This allowed the print media to remain competitive and kept the news cycle short, thus putting sufficient pressure on politicians to react quickly to news coverage. Moreover, the introduction of satellites for transmission in the late 1960s enabled television reporters to file stories immediately.³⁹ These stories, the first of their kind to be transmitted and broadcast the same day, subjected Presidents Johnson and Nixon to the same pressures found in modern conflicts.⁴⁰ Therefore, the debate that has centered on the concept of the CNN effect does not concern one specific network or source, but the whole of the news media, including

³⁶ Ibid., 2.

³⁷ Eytan Gilboa, "Global Television News and Foreign Policy: Debating the CNN Effect," *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (August 2005): 325.

³⁸ Robinson, *The CNN Effect*, 2.

³⁹ Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2000), 147.

⁴⁰ Melvin Small, "Influencing the Decision-makers: The Vietnam Experience*," *Journal of Peace Research* 24, no. 2 (1987): 9.

such television networks as NBC, CBS, and ABC and print media such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*.⁴¹

Senior officials in post-Gulf War conflicts have acknowledged the increasing presence of the international news media. Indeed, the “CNN effect” was first termed by US Ambassador to the United Nations Madeline Albright. Referring to the images of starving Somalis being broadcast on television in mid-1993, Albright described the images as “horrid acts” and declared that civilized human beings cannot help but be influenced by them.⁴² In addition, speaking on the power of the news media in world politics, former Secretary of State James Baker III wrote in 1995 that “In Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, and Chechnya, among others, the real-time coverage by the electronic media has served to create a powerful new imperative for prompt action that was not present in less frenetic [times].”⁴³ Similar statements have been made by international actors, including former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who once remarked that, “CNN is the sixteenth member of the security council.”⁴⁴ These compelling observations of media power in modern conflict have led to an active debate between scholars and policy-makers on the actual influence of the news on world affairs.

Traditionally the impact of media reporting on decision-making has been attributed to humanitarian intervention scenarios including Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo,

⁴¹ Robinson, *The CNN Effect*, 2.

⁴² Gilboa, “Global Television News and Foreign Policy,” 328.

⁴³ Gilboa, “The CNN Effect,” 28.

⁴⁴ Larry Minear, Colin Scott, and Thomas G. Weiss, *The News Media, Civil War, and Humanitarian Action* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1996), 4.

East Timor, Sudan, and Bosnia.⁴⁵ Some humanitarian crises which received large amounts of media attention, such as Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo, also received a US military response. Similarly, some conflicts that allegedly did not receive media coverage, such as those in Sudan and Rwanda, did not receive a US military response. However, basing political and military action simply on levels of media reporting is only one small element that is required to explain why a state engages in military action.⁴⁶ Many of these theories assume a causal connection that is never demonstrated. Politico-military elites must weigh important considerations before engaging in any military actions, and to assume that the media played an important role just because of their reporting, or lack of reporting, overstates their power. Indeed, in operations that did not receive the attention of decision-makers, such as Rwanda, the CNN effect does not adequately explain the fact that this conflict received highly empathetic, though limited, coverage clearly outlining the extent of the ongoing genocide in 1994, but no US military action was taken to resolve the situation.⁴⁷ Therefore, the use of the CNN effect to explain the power of news on decision-makers remains hotly contested as an important agenda-setting device.

Strategy

A term often used in conflict analysis, strategy refers to the design and implementation of a plan for the coordination of the state's resources in the pursuit of

⁴⁵ Peter Viggo Jakobsen, "Focus on the CNN Effect Misses the Point: The Real Media Impact on Conflict Management is Invisible and Indirect*," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 2 (2000): 132.

⁴⁶ Susan L Carruthers, *The Media at War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2000), 205.

achieving a set of objectives.⁴⁸ Although seemingly a straight forward concept, different authors have come to define strategy in unique ways. Historically the term was conceived to describe military leadership, but came to encompass statecraft in the context of the use of military force to achieve ones goals.⁴⁹ A modern interpretation from scholar Colin Gray, conceives of strategy as “the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy.”⁵⁰ J.C. Wylie, proposed strategy differently saying that “strategy was a plan of action designed in order to achieve some end; a purpose together with a system of measure for its accomplishment.”⁵¹ With this said, because scholars define this term differently, they often reach vastly different conclusions on what defines strategy and, as a result, it must be clearly defined for the purpose of this study.

Before presenting an analysis of strategy, the too often confused levels of military doctrine, tactics and operations, will have to be defined in order to clarify the differences between them, and the subject of this paper, military strategy. The term tactics concerns the use of small military forces for the achievement of specific battlefield goals.⁵² Carl von Clausewitz’s may have put it best in his seminal work *On War* when he defined tactics as “the theory of the use of military force in combat.”⁵³ Tactics then would refer to the use of military forces to accomplish a specific objective, such as taking and

⁴⁷ Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 238-239.

⁴⁸ Franklin D. Margiotta, *Brassey's Encyclopedia of Land Forces and Warfare* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc., 2000), 1003-1004.

⁴⁹ Hew Strachan, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," *Survival* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 35.

⁵⁰ Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

⁵¹ J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, ed. John B. Hattendorf (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 14.

⁵² Dan Reiter and Curtis Meek, "Determinants of Military Strategy, 1903-1994: A Quantitative Empirical Test," *International Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1999): 364-365.

occupying a town. Therefore, tactics occupies the lowest level of the three levels of military doctrine.

Conversely, the operational level refers to the analysis, selection, and development of military planning for the employment of major military forces in a theatre of war.⁵⁴ Put simply, the operational level acts as a gateway between the strategic and tactical level, in that it is used to implement the strategy handed down by senior politico-military elites into an organized plan for using force on a battlefield.⁵⁵ Within this framework are important concerns including logistics, available forces, and mission planning.⁵⁶ While the operational level is important to applying military strategy, it is only concerned with medium term goals and omits potential long term political changes that are important in developing a strategy. As this study's focuses on political decision-making in conflict, limiting the study to the planning and implementation of military orders is inadequate to the requirements of this research.

The conceptualization of strategy can be traced back thousands of years to Sun Tzu's *the Art of War*. Although the term is not clearly defined in his work, in several statements he expressed his view of war as a means and ends calculation.⁵⁷ Sun Tzu argues this point in his statement that, "the element of the art of war are first, measurement of space; second estimation of quantities; third, calculations; fourth,

⁵³ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), xvii.

⁵⁴ Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," *International Security* 11, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 50.

⁵⁵ Weigley, xviii.

⁵⁶ Millett, et al: 50.

comparisons; and fifth, chances of victory.”⁵⁸ Likewise, he posits the importance of determining ones military objectives and the means to achieve them through observation and careful consideration of alternatives. In this way, Sun Tzu views strategy as a rational calculation by decision-makers, wherein considerations such as objectives, relative strength, and comparisons of one’s forces with those of their opponent are important considerations when determining the means to end a conflict.⁵⁹ However, Sun Tzu provides little more than conclusions on how decision-makers should conduct a war and therefore his interpretation of strategy is far too limited for this study.

Similarly, Clausewitz defined war as an “act of force to compel the enemy to do our will,” and that no one should engage in conflict “without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”⁶⁰ These often quoted maxims display his understanding of warfare as an ends-means calculation that must be carefully considered before a state engages in hostilities. In his view, at the highest level war is simply the use of military means to come to a political end through conflict. Building on this Clausewitz defines strategy as the “theory for the use of combats for the object of the War.”⁶¹ Taken together with the political objective of a state, military forces provide the method for coming to an end considered appropriate to political leadership and the goals of the state.

⁵⁷ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: Frank Cass, 2001), 77-78, Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963), 88, 106.

⁵⁸ Paul K. Van Riper, "Planning for and Applying Military Force and Examination of Terms," (Strategic Studies Institute, March 2006), 4.

⁵⁹ Handel, 18.

⁶⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 579, Van Riper, 3.

Conceptualized in this way by classical scholars, modern interpretations of strategy have expanded the narrow definition of strategy as a military calculation to include additional considerations unique to modern society. For example, British military writer Sir Basil Liddell Hart provides a broader interpretation of strategy in his term “grand strategy.” In his view, it is the purpose of grand strategy to guide and coordinate the resources of a nation or an alliance to achieve an objective defined by policy.⁶² Specifically, Liddell Hart considers war not only in its military form, but also its economic and foreign policy considerations. Barry Posen also supports this inclusive definition of strategy for he saw it as necessary for a state to consider a range of political and military factors when defining strategy.⁶³ Grand strategy, therefore, is practically synonymous with the policy determining the conduct of war, differing only from policy in that it is responsible for setting the goals to be achieved by strategy.⁶⁴

While this concept has important implications for a broad study of the multitude of factors affecting a state during war, the definition grand strategy is too broad for this study. Conversely, the definitions put forward by Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are insufficient for the purposes of a modern study of military affairs in the age of real time news coverage. Instead, this study will use Liddell Hart’s definition of “military strategy,” hereafter referred to as strategy, which he defines as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.”⁶⁵ Put simply, this study will define strategy

⁶¹ Weigley, xvii.

⁶² Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Classic Book on Military Strategy, Second Revised Edition* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1991), 321-322, Margiotta, 1006.

⁶³ Reiter and Meek: 564.

⁶⁴ Margiotta, 1006.

⁶⁵ Reiter and Meek: 364.

as a guidance plan to achieve particular ends.⁶⁶ Conceived this way, strategy can be defined as being created by a complex decision-making process of ideas, expectations, and goals, which result in a plan for achieving stated goals through military action. Therefore, this definition should be appropriate for determining if critical media reports can influence the US executive branch's employment of strategy and their choices to change strategy at certain points during a conflict.

Theoretical Framework

Groupthink Model

As stated in the CNN effect section, previous studies of the news media as an influential force in decision-making have lacked a theoretical understanding of how decision-makers come to decide on a particular course of action. As a result, the literature on the news media as an agenda-setting device has largely overemphasized the power of external actors to influence the course of military conflict. This is a failing I redress through incorporating elements of the groupthink model, developed by Irving Janis, into the Media-Strategy Interaction Model. Groupthink is a concurrence seeking tendency that develops particularly at the early stages of decision-making. Janis posits that in small groups social pressures on members can cause a breakdown in cognitive efficiency and moral judgment.⁶⁷ To put it another way, groupthink occurs when members strive to

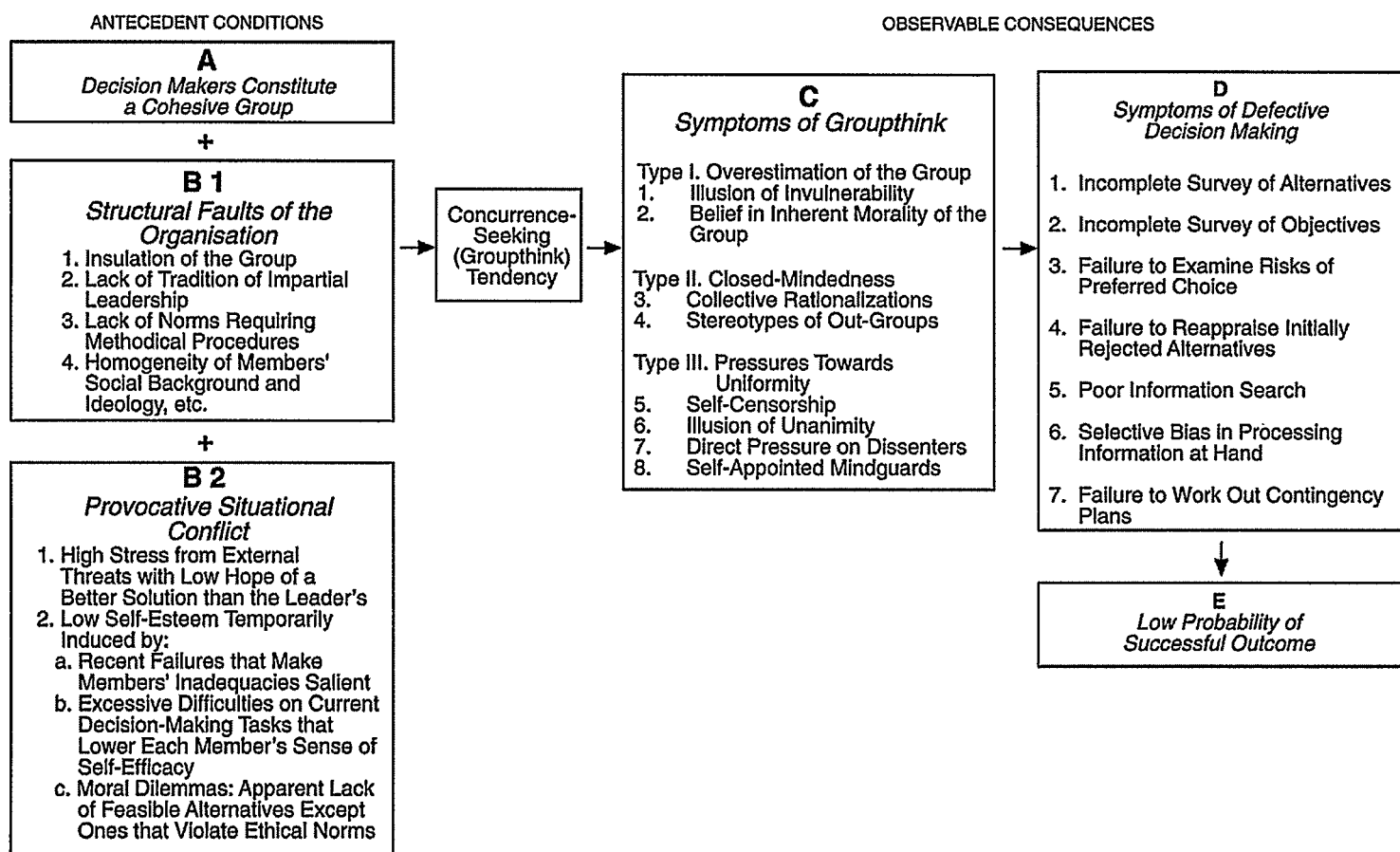
⁶⁶ David H. McIntyre, Statement of Dr. David H. McIntyre (COL, USA, Ret): February 3, 2004 House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations (cited November 17, 2005); available from <http://www.iwar.org.uk/homesec/resources/counterterrorism/McIntyre.pdf>, 2.

⁶⁷ Thomas R. Hensley and Glen W. Griffin, "Victims of Groupthink: The Kent State University Board of Trustees and the 1977 Gymnasium Controversy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 3 (1986): 499.

achieve unanimity in their decisions, overriding motivations to appraise alternative solutions so as to avoid conflict within the group. As a result, members avoid expressing unpopular opinions and doubts about a policy decision, limiting the range of alternatives a group has when deciding on a course of action. This theory serves to account for how the personalities of individual group members are susceptible either to influence from the group and its members, or from outside sources of information such as the news media.

Central to determining the presence of the theory is that the group must be cohesive and demonstrate one or more antecedent conditions.⁶⁸ These conditions, caused by structural faults of the organization, promote observable defects in the decision-making process which result in poor quality decisions. As the majority of policy decisions are made through a group effort, understanding the tendency towards concurrence seeking in groups is particularly important. While, Janis contends that a group showing signs of a faulty decision-making process can be successful, the possibility of the groupthink model being present and a successful outcome resulting is highly unlikely.

⁶⁸ Phillip M. Johnson, "Effects of Groupthink on Tactical Decision-Making," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff, 2001), 6.



Groupthink Model Based on *Groupthink* by Irving Janis (Figure 1)

Once more, the core logic of the groupthink theory is that cohesiveness will occur in groups where members put agreement ahead of rational decision-making. However, Janis argues that high group cohesiveness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for groupthink to occur.⁶⁹ Rather, four structural conditions also play an important role in determining the presence of groupthink. First, the group will lack norms for requiring methodological procedures, a condition that occurs when a group refrains from searching

⁶⁹ Hensley and Griffin: 508, Janis, 249.

for complete and reliable information.⁷⁰ Second, groups should exhibit signs of insulation from outside sources of information and opinion that could challenge group beliefs. Third, the group will lack the tradition of impartial leadership, wherein a group leader uses their influence to control the group's agenda and restricts searches for alternate solutions. Finally, groups that show signs of groupthink often share similar backgrounds and ideology.⁷¹ Taken together, these conditions increase the potential that groupthink will result because they predispose members to ignore other potential solutions in favour of supporting the group. In addition to the structural conditions of groupthink, a provocative situational context can contribute to groupthink. High stress, although not required for groupthink to occur can unify members and enhance group cohesiveness.⁷² Consequently, groups demonstrating some or all of these conditions should prove how the personality of individual members can be influenced by group norms.⁷³

This is not to suggest that by simply avoiding these conditions that poor decisions can be avoided. Groupthink simply suggests that poor decision outcomes are more likely when its symptoms are present. As a result, the groupthink theory cannot predict every variable which could influence a bad decision in a group. Indeed, many factors can affect an outcome including a lack of necessary information, inadequate time for decision-making, poor judgment, pure luck, and unexpected actions by adversaries. With this in mind, some major failures of foreign policy decision-making cannot be explained by

⁷⁰ Hensley and Griffin: 509.

⁷¹ Ibid., 508-510.

⁷² Janis, 427, Steve A. Yetiv, "Groupthink and the Gulf Crisis," *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 3 (2003): 250.

⁷³ Yetiv: 421.

groupthink. The real value of the theory is that it is a concise and simply stated theory for explaining one factor that could lower the possibility of a successful outcome.

Moreover, the groupthink model can be further refined to a series of symptoms one would expect to find in a highly cohesive group. These symptoms reflect the group's avoidance of alternative opinions that may affect its consensus. For the purposes of this study the eight symptoms will be refined into the three major types identified by Janis in his model: illusion of invulnerability (type 1), closed-mindedness (type 2), and pressures toward uniformity (type 3).

Symptoms of Groupthink

Type 1: Illusion of Invulnerability and Excessive Optimism of the Group

The groupthink theory predicts that the greater the level of conformity in a group will result in increased confidence that the group will be able to reach their goals, regardless of the level of criticism coming from outside groups. This will result in an *illusion of invulnerability*, which has shown to encourage group members to take significant risks.⁷⁴ Recent examples of groupthink, including the Challenger Shuttle Disaster, suggest that despite concerns from junior members of NASA over safety standards, high unit cohesion among senior members of the organization resulted in poor choices being made because of time constraints and changes to operational procedure.⁷⁵ Indeed, NASA representatives were unwilling to delay the shuttle launch, relying on the solid rocket booster design and the potential that if a primary system failed that a

⁷⁴ Paul't Hart, "Irving L. Janis' Victims of Groupthink," *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (June 1991): 255.

secondary could take over. Psychologically, then, these members were predisposed to believe that the group was correct, regardless of the concerns of junior scientists, a personality fault frequently observed in groupthink. Thus, in this case, by ignoring warnings that the shuttle should not be launched in bad weather because of the affect it could have on seals between the booster joints, the shuttle tragically exploded after liftoff.⁷⁶ From this, we should expect to see in cases where group members display the illusion of invulnerability criticism from outside groups will be ineffective in modifying the group's goals once they are determined to meet them.

A central assumption of groupthink is that under stress individuals will adopt collective defence mechanisms to cope with rising anxiety. Specifically, supporters of groupthink suggest that even if a group fails to achieve its stated goal or objective, its cohesiveness may remain unchecked and, in many cases, has shown to grow as a result of emotional consolidation in the group. For example, the conclusions of a study on stress in small combat groups in World War II stated that soldiers showed "complete denial of impending danger, implicit trust in the protectiveness of the authorities, revision to an infantile belief in personal omnipotence... the net effect may be an illusion of personal invulnerability."⁷⁷ In this case, the communal hardship these groups experienced appeared to increase combat efficiency and resistance to enemy propaganda. Thus, we should see that when small groups work under excessive stress they are prone to take risks and will rarely take the advice of outside experts or critics. Consequently, such

⁷⁵ Kirby Timmons, "Groupthink: Leaders Guide," in *Groupthink* (ABC, 1989), 16.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁷ Hart: 254.

forces are unlikely to be affected by outside groups, including the news media, regardless of the level or pervasiveness of critical reporting.

Conversely, the theory predicts that when the group does not exhibit this condition the group will be more concerned about finding alternative solutions and reducing potential risks. Janis' demonstrates this best in his analysis of the Cuban Missile Crises, wherein members of the US executive examined a wide range of alternative courses of action, surveyed objectives and the values implicated, carefully weighed the costs of their decisions, constantly searched for relevant information, evaluated the information they were given, and carefully re-examined the positive and negative consequences of all their decisions, including ones made at the beginning of the crisis to be sure they were still the best options.⁷⁸ This seven stage decision process, which still could have resulted in a negative outcome, would still be considered a good process because alternative courses of action and risks were considered. Therefore, this would make a potential illusion of invulnerability invalid in this case. Moreover, the theory predicts that, even if Soviet leaders had chosen to respond with force to the US decision, one examining the same options available to the US executive would likely come to the same conclusion.

Type 2: Closed-Mindedness

In addition, another major point influencing the effectiveness of a group involves the *closed-mindedness* of the group towards outsiders. According to Janis, one aspect of

⁷⁸ Janis, 134.

closed-mindedness is a “collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings or other information that might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they commit themselves to their past policy decisions.”⁷⁹ Groups which lack the appreciation of the importance of considering criticism from outside sources are likely to exhibit the symptoms of groupthink. Under these conditions group members should, as Steve Yetiv puts it, “discount any warning or information that might question or destroy group consensus on decision.”⁸⁰ Therefore, even reputable military and civilian assessments or accurate media reports would be ineffective in challenging the group. As a result, members will accept supportive information and reject any information the does not conform to their view.

For example, in the Korean War, the US administration received abundant evidence about China’s strength and plans, but the information was never adequately incorporated into the group decision process.⁸¹ Instead, following General McArthur’s successful landing at Inchon, the group members refrained from publicly raising concerns about the possible threat from China that caused other members of the group to feel more comfortable about the decision to move into North Korea. The perceived support of group members made many reluctant to bring their concerns to the president.⁸² Conversely, a group whose members take into account new evidence should be better equipped to meet the possibility of an external threat, and give greater confidence to group members that their opinions had been considered and evaluated rather than

⁷⁹ Hensley and Griffin: 516, Janis, 174.

⁸⁰ Yetiv: 429.

⁸¹ Tobias Van Assche, "Wedded to Groupthink: Why and to What Extent Do Groups Continue Concurrence Seeking in Foreign Policy Crises?" (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2006), 23.

silenced by group conformity. Therefore, even when concerns are present, the closed mindedness condition of the groupthink model can greatly affect the decision process by members' tendency to promote cohesiveness ahead of coming to the best possible solution.

A second condition of closed mindedness is for group members to believe that their opponents are weak or foolish. As Phillip Johnson suggests, "this results in an underestimation of their opponents ability to counter or interfere with the group's plan," resulting in valid alternatives being ignored.⁸³ This dynamic has played out in many conflicts over the last half century, including the Persian Gulf War, wherein the US executive did not view Saddam Hussein as willing to negotiate, based on his occupation of Kuwait and reports of his treatment of the Iraqi people.⁸⁴ President George Bush, therefore, viewed Saddam, according to his advisers, as evil and unwilling to negotiate, motivating the quick movement of US forces into the Persian Gulf as he expected sanctions to fail.⁸⁵ Similar but less extreme views are expected to be held toward outside groups, such as the news media, which should result in them being ignored by cohesive groups. Taken together, stereotyping of the opponents and outside groups can potentially limit the alternatives a group has when determining the proper course of action in a conflict.⁸⁶ Consequently, members should feel better equipped to take risks when they feel secure within a group despite the potential miscalculations which could result from

⁸² Van Assche, 23.

⁸³ Johnson, 8.

⁸⁴ Yetiv: 429.

⁸⁵ Alex Roberto Hybel and Justin Matthew Kaufman, *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein: Deciding on Conflict*, 1st ed., *Advances in Foreign Policy Analysis* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 70.

ignoring and stereotyping belligerents and other potential sources of valuable information.

Conversely, this theory predicts that, when groups consider alternative options and criticism, they should not exhibit the decision-making problems inherent in groupthink. As discussed above, these groups should be expected to take considerably more time to determine a course of action, and should be considerate of the consequences of the chosen strategy. In general, these groups should be more susceptible to alternative options which should translate into different opinions being expressed on military matters and any risks being evaluated carefully before action is taken.

Type 3: Pressure Toward Uniformity including Direct and Self-Censorship

A critical component of the groupthink theory is that pressure is put on dissenting members of the group to accept the majority's decision. As Janis put it, when members feel pressure from the group they are likely to impose "self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments."⁸⁷ Because of this tendency, group members are rarely able to voice opposition on a chosen decision because they feel an obligation to the group to remain silent.⁸⁸ These individuals should state their concerns either in personal writings or to members of their staff, but should rarely, if ever, report them publicly among the group. Conversely, individuals working in an open group

⁸⁶ Hensley and Griffin: 517.

⁸⁷ Janis, 175.

⁸⁸ Johnson, 8.

structure, and not constrained by the groupthink norms of behaviour, should express their concerns openly and pointedly as an alternative for the group to consider. Consequently, by remaining silent individuals will foster an environment of unanimity and create a false assumption that silence means consent.

This is not to suggest that dissent in groupthink is rare, however, group norms put immense pressure on individual members to keep concerns private. Yetiv, for example, found that self-censorship is a common occurrence in international conflict, noting in the case of the Gulf War that president Bush wanted to avoid friction and was “very bothered” by any report of his staff being in disagreement.⁸⁹ Thus, many in Bush’s cabinet must have felt pressure to censor their views. The same set of circumstances pervades many studies of groupthink including the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Korean War, and the Columbia Shuttle disaster investigation.⁹⁰ Consequently, as the theory predicts, we should not expect to see strategic changes under these conditions not necessarily because opposition did not exist, but because group members chose not to voice concerns publicly over the direction of strategy.

To counter the threat of individual members and negative information damaging the cohesiveness of the group the final symptom of groupthink predicts that some members will act as “mind guards” to prevent division in the group.⁹¹ Members adopting this position should generally attempt to prevent any information that could adversely affect cohesion from reaching group members, which could include concerns from

⁸⁹ Yetiv: 430.

⁹⁰ Janis, v.

subordinates, group members, intelligence information, and the news media. Returning to the example above, Bush's dislike for debate in his cabinet led many powerful members such as Dick Cheney to "screen the debate" before it reached the president.⁹² Colin Powell in particular argued whether going to war over Kuwait was the best option available, which resulted in Cheney reprimanding him for overstepping his role, suggesting that direct pressure was used to prevent changes to group consensus.⁹³ As a result, regardless of the successful outcome of this conflict direct pressure reduced the range of opinions Bush could receive from his advisers. Within this framework, despite fundamental personality differences existing within the group, any member would have a very difficult time breaking consensus because information was often filtered by very powerful members of the group.

In sum, groupthink is a useful method for explaining how groups make decisions. The research presented here will use this model, and its anecdotal conditions, to determine the presence of groupthink in one, or both, of these cases. This will be crucial to demonstrating if either of the decision-making groups being studied were open to internal debate among members or from external sources. In addition, as mentioned above, groupthink will be used to determine how the personalities of either similar or diverse groups of decision-makers influence group cohesiveness. Following this, we can determine if the news media could be influential on the strategic direction of a conflict

⁹¹ David Dryden Henningsen, Mary Lynn Miller, Jennifer Eden Henningsen, and Michael G. Cruz, "Examining the Symptoms of Groupthink and Retrospective Sensemaking," *Small Group Research* 37, no. 1 (2006): 48.

⁹² Yetiv: 430.

⁹³ Ibid.

when groupthink is not present and members of the decision-making group are open to debate from an outside group - the news media.

Media-Strategy Interaction Model

To reiterate, this research expands upon the policy media interaction model developed by Piers Robinson.⁹⁴ The central tenet of this model is that, once a consensus has been reached among policy actors, the resolve to achieve them is termed “policy certainty,” wherein elites are extremely resistant to contrary outside influences.⁹⁵ Conversely, a situation where no consensus exists among elites over the direction of policy exists constitutes “policy uncertainty.”⁹⁶ With this said, in cases of high policy certainty, decision-makers have the resolve to drive policy action despite the tone and intensity of media coverage.⁹⁷ For the purposes of this study, Robinson’s core concept of policy certainty is supplanted by the concept of “strategic certainty;” and re-termed the Media-Strategy Interaction model, however, the basic logic of the original concept remains. This model is used to illustrate how both firm and weak strategic policy networks, and their relationship to the news media, determines strategic decision-making in wartime.

Competing Research Designs

In addition to the Media-Strategy Interaction Model introduced above, it is important to note the reasons this model was chosen over better known and tested

⁹⁴ Robinson, *The CNN Effect*, 30.

⁹⁵ Robinson, "Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics": 534.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 535.

⁹⁷ Robinson, *The CNN Effect*, 30.

theories of media performance in conflict. Primarily, this theory was chosen for expansion over the two other competing models of media influence put forward by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, and by Gadi Wolfsfeld. As this research is designed to examine the influence of news on military strategy, a model was chosen that could account for this possible connection when it was observed. Using this criterion, both competing models of media-state behaviour are critiqued in turn.

A wealth of critical literature has been developed against Chomsky and Herman's "Manufacturing Consent", or "Propaganda Model."⁹⁸ According to this model, the executive branch of government and the news media have a high degree of conformity during times of crisis.⁹⁹ This model argues that government elites control the media through economic power and, consequently, are able to mobilize the media to gather public support for government policy. In this analysis, the news media views information through the same political or social constructions of their society that are accepted by political elites.¹⁰⁰ While this theory is capable of explaining the connection between the executive branch of government and news media it does this in a highly circumstantial way.¹⁰¹

For example, a study conducted using this model to explain the Kosovo crises was adept at characterizing the tone of American media coverage of the conflict, but it did not draw causal connections between government and media action to demonstrate

⁹⁸ Robinson, "Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics:" 525, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the News Media*, (Toronto: Random House Canada Inc, 2002), 1-2.

⁹⁹ Robinson, "Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics:" 526.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 525.

¹⁰¹ Gilboa, "The CNN Effect:" 32.

economic control of media coverage.¹⁰² Indeed, Operation Allied Force can be cited as a prime example of media coverage sharing the attitudes of US ruling elites, but this does not directly imply that news was tailored due to economic interests. In fact, during early stages of the operation, newspapers reporting on North Atlantic Treaty Organization operations were critical of the decision against employing ground troops to end the operation quickly.¹⁰³ However, due to the beliefs of certain US and NATO leaders that the air superiority operation would succeed, the plan was not modified to correspond to media criticisms. In this way, media coverage did not conform to the expectations of the model that the media would take on the same views held by the US executive; rather, the media did exhibit some negative coverage of US planning that was ignored by elite planners.

In addition, as this study focuses on negative reporting of media organizations during international conflict, a model must be adopted that can account for the presence of negative media coverage. Although supporters of the manufacturing consent model are correct that the news media often receives the majority of information from official sources, including press briefings, speeches, and official documents, the information being provided can and often does get interpreted negatively.¹⁰⁴ For the role of negative coverage on the US executive to be tested, this study will need a theory that can account for an independent media that is not directly controlled by powerful elites, but in some cases can conform to their viewpoint through deliberate action. In this way, the theory

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Robinson, *The CNN Effect*, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Narasimhan Ravi, "Looking Beyond Flawed Journalism: How National Interests, Patriotism, and Cultural Values Shaped the Coverage of the Iraq War," *Press/Politics* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 47-48.

adopted in this study will account for the news media as being a tool of debate during conflict, and that alternative viewpoints exist in media coverage.

Beyond the model of manufacturing consent, Wolfsfeld's political contest model provides another method to discern causal links between news and policy.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to the other models presented here, Wolfsfeld's focuses on how small groups gather media attention to their cause(s) and influence policy outcomes.¹⁰⁶ The model refers to marginalized groups as "challengers," that have to overcome "the authority's" degree of control over the political environment to get the attention of the news media. The model reasons that only when the authorities' control is reduced can the news media play an independent role in a political conflict.

However, this model's causal framework is weak when explaining direct connections between coverage and outcomes.¹⁰⁷ For example, this model has been used to study the Palestinian Intifada in Israel, and how the resulting media coverage caused American diplomatic intervention.¹⁰⁸ The model does not explain the resulting impact on Israeli policy apart from a short section implying a causal connection that was never fully constructed.¹⁰⁹ As this model does not adequately explain a theoretical link between the news media and political and military elites that is essential to this research, it is inadequate for the study of the media's relationship with military strategy.

¹⁰⁵ Gadi Wolfsfeld, *Media and Political Conflict: News from the Middle East* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, "Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics:" 539.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 540.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the background to the concept of the CNN effect, defined the term strategy, outlined the theoretical core of groupthink and the Media-Strategy Interaction Model, and debated alternative and more common models of media influence. Following this, chapter 3 provides an analysis of Vietnam as a case of groupthink and determines how the news media influenced decision-makers to modify strategy during the course of the war.

CHAPTER 3 : THE VIETNAM WAR

The failure of the United States to achieve its goal of securing an independent South Vietnam is perhaps its worst military failure. Planned and initiated in the early 1960s, the United States was committed to defeating the communist threat in Asia, eventually falling on President Lyndon Johnson to escalate US ground forces into the hundreds of thousands in 1965.¹¹⁰ Scholars generally agree that the Vietnam War was a major failure of foreign policy decision-making resulting from policy-makers having a limited understanding of the military, societal, and cultural situation they faced.¹¹¹ As a result, many studies of the decision process during the initial escalation phase and the resulting major combat period of the war suggest that Johnson, and later Nixon, displayed clear signs of groupthink.¹¹² Yet, these studies appear to discount the repeated warnings, alternatives solutions sought, and the concerns of Johnson, Nixon, and their staffs throughout the course of the war.

This chapter presents the influential power of the news media during the Vietnam War by way of an analysis of the presence of groupthink in this case. Evaluating this case is particularly important due to Janis' assertion in his major work *Groupthink* that the

¹¹⁰ Edmonds, 15, James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: The United States and Vietnam, 1945-1995*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 86.

¹¹¹ David M. Barrett, "The Mythology Surrounding Lyndon Johnson, His Advisors, and the 1965 Decision to Escalate the Vietnam War," *Political Science Quarterly* 103, no. 4 (Winter 1988-1989): 639-640, Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979), 125, 128, Paul Kattenburg, *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1948-1975* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1980), 130, John G. Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2000), 99, 102.

¹¹² Mark Amidon, "Groupthink, Politics, and the Decision to Attempt the Son Tay Rescue," *Parameters* XXXV, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 124-128, Janis, 97-130.

Vietnam escalation decision in 1965 showed clear signs of groupthink.¹¹³ Countering this and assumptions that the same anecdotal conditions were present throughout this case will be crucial to supporting hypotheses H1 and H2. Following this, the chapter will employ the Media-Strategy Interaction model to determine if the news media was influential in convincing decision-makers to maintain or change the current US strategy. Therefore, this chapter will show that groupthink was not present in Vietnam, leaving decision-makers open to criticism from the news media and, as this chapter will demonstrate, this influence proved to change the course of military strategy throughout the conflict.

Applying the groupthink hypothesis

To determine if groupthink was present in Vietnam, the decision-making group must be shown as cohesive and demonstrate at least one of the four structural conditions outlined in the previous section. From this, we can determine if the Johnson and Nixon administrations meet the basic conditions for the presence of groupthink. Following this, if the structural conditions are met the symptoms of groupthink will be briefly examined.

Group Cohesiveness

During the Johnson administration major strategic decisions were made by a small decision-making group of close advisers and cabinet members who met regularly to discuss major strategic and operational issues surrounding the war. Indeed, the group

¹¹³ Janis, 97-130.

trusted and co-operated with each other on difficult decisions; however, significant division existed within the group at major points in the war. Records of meetings around the time of the 1965 escalation decision reveal that Undersecretary of State George Ball, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and many advisers disagreed strongly with the majority decision to send a large contingent of soldiers to support South Vietnam.¹¹⁴ In contrast to the central tenets of the theory, these men were remained an important part of these meetings so the president could hear alternatives on the important issue.¹¹⁵ Moreover, during the Tet Offensive, President Johnson invited current and previous members of the administration to meet with him to discuss the US strategy and encouraged debate and alternatives to be presented regardless of his support for a particular course of action.¹¹⁶

Likewise, in the later years of the war, Richard Nixon received conflicting advice from his Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird both of whom would often question strategies proposed by the president and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. In October 1969, for example, both Laird and Rogers learned of plans for Operation Duck Hook, a proposal for the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons against North Vietnam. The two men strongly opposed the plan, noting that the strongly mobilized anti-war movement, driven by the news media, coupled with the potential use of nuclear weapons was too big a risk for the administration to take and

¹¹⁴ Barrett: 642, 646.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 237-239.

was detrimental to the administrations' long term goals.¹¹⁷ Acknowledging the pair's concerns Nixon aborted plans for the operation, stating to his Chief of Staff just before his decision that the "Laird-Rogers plan is a possibility, when he did not think so a month ago."¹¹⁸ Therefore, the evidence suggests that, in both administrations, that the presentation of alternative views and disagreements on major policy was common. As a result, the group cohesiveness condition for groupthink cannot be found in this case. However, it is important to examine the process further to determine if the structural conditions support Janis's argument for the presence of groupthink, regardless of cohesiveness being an important factor in supporting the theory.

Structural Faults of Groupthink

Lack of Norms Requiring Methodical Procedures

Historical analysis of the Vietnam escalation decision has largely singled out Undersecretary of State George Ball as being the only person close to the president to advise against sending troops to Vietnam.¹¹⁹ By drawing on the Pentagon Papers, a series of Johnson administration documents published by *The New York Times* in the 1970s, the Johnson administration appears to be a highly-cohesive group and that his advisers failed to explore the full range of options available. Among the revealing information provided,

¹¹⁷ David Mitchell, "Centralizing Advisory Systems: Presidential Influence and the U.S. Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1, no. 2 (2005): 195, David L. Anderson, *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975*, *Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 139, 162.

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, *Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 170.

¹¹⁹ Barrett: 638, Janis, 97-130, Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 28-30, Stoessinger, 99-102.

the papers emphasize that the group failed to examine the full range of alternatives available apart from Ball's concern that the mission was a mistake. Neil Sheehan, in his book on the Pentagon Papers, argues that the President and the majority of his advisers displayed no effort to "reshape their policy along the lines of... [the] analysis," that a bombing effort and limited war aims could not achieve the military goals deemed necessary for victory in South Vietnam.¹²⁰ The resulting plan to bomb North Vietnam and escalate troop numbers in 1965 appears, from this analysis, to have resulted from the group being highly-cohesive and mutually-supportive and, thus, this reduced the number of alternative proposals being considered that could have avoided the conflict.

However, the analysis presented on the escalation decision ignores several members of the US executive who frequently gave alternative advice to the president. As mentioned above, Undersecretary of State Ball's views were heard frequently by the president and his advisers due to his access to the president by way of Secretary of State Dean Rusk. For example, after receiving Ball's first comprehensive memo on Vietnam the president reported to Ball that he was shaken by his concerns that an escalation could require up to 500,000 troops and could still end in defeat.¹²¹ Moreover, according to Ball, when he presented his views to the president he would ask many questions, at times with National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy present.¹²² In addition, vice president Hubert Humphrey also made his views clear in a memo sent to Johnson in February 1965, arguing that "if we find ourselves leading from frustration to escalation and end up short

¹²⁰ Janis, 98.

¹²¹ Barrett: 641.

¹²² Ibid., 642.

of a war with China but embroiled deeper in fighting in Vietnam over the next few months, political opposition will steadily mount.”¹²³ Humphrey, like Ball, voiced his opposition throughout 1965 in private conversations with Johnson and publicly with the core advisory group. Similarly, for President Nixon’s staff, Rogers and Laird secretly spoke to the North Vietnamese and used their respective staffs in an attempt to gather additional information to deliver to the group, which, as the war progressed often opposed the proposals of Nixon and Kissinger.¹²⁴ These examples contrast well with the central assumptions of groupthink that any dissenting opinions will be rejected and ignored in favour of preserving the majority at all costs. Thus, while the majority of Johnson’s staff and Nixon’s staffs agreed on major strategic decisions, it is clear that both presidents heard and encouraged discussing alternate proposals and hearing the diverse opinions from members of their core group of advisers.

Group Insulation

As a policy making body, the US executive is by design somewhat insulated from outside sources of information. However, for the majority of decisions both administrations and Johnson’s, in particular, were intentionally made open to outside sources of information in an effort to get a full range of opinions on critical decisions.

Following the Tet Offensive and the psychological defeat the US faced, Johnson frequently requested advice from political advisers outside the executive including UN Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, Mike Mansfield a democratic senator, and Harry

¹²³ Hubert Humphrey, *The Education Of a Public Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 321.

McPherson, special counsel to the president to discuss and present proposals on developing a post-Tet strategy.¹²⁵ In early 1968, Goldberg was given direct access to the president and his memoranda, recommending a complete bombing halt as a path to negotiation with North Vietnam it was circulated widely and he attended nearly every meeting in the latter days of March.¹²⁶ Likewise, Mike Mansfield, a long time friend of Johnson, was brought to the White House to advise the president on a moderate approach to the war. In addition, McPherson was included in top level meetings for two months and was considered to be instrumental in convincing former hawks to consider a full halt to the bombing campaign in March 1968.¹²⁷

Nixon's personality and his lack of trust in the American bureaucracy made his contact with advisers much more limited than Johnson's. Concerning military operations in Cambodia and Laos, he based his decision largely on the advice of Kissinger, Laird, and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his own convictions. Moreover, he recruited John Mitchell as an adviser on foreign policy as a "stabilizing personal influence" to assist in mediating the range of opinions and the personal issues between Kissinger and Rogers.¹²⁸ However, Nixon also relied heavily on polling data for information on public acceptance of troop levels and escalation measures during the war. In this way, Nixon could both interpret the opinions of the average American while still appearing confident and independent in his conduct of the war. According to his chief of staff H.R.

¹²⁴ Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 433.

¹²⁵ Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 241.

¹²⁶ David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisers, Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 158.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Haldeman, he discussed polling and public opinion research approximately once a week, growing steadily after 1969.¹²⁹ Moreover, as Nixon relied increasingly on polling data, he recruited John Ehrlichman, assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, Charles Colson, Nixon's chief counsel, and other lower level White House staff to interpret polling data which played an important part in the decisions of the US executive.¹³⁰

Taken together, the Johnson and Nixon administrations had shown to be sufficiently open to outside advising from senior political advisers and from public opinion data that this major structural condition could not be considered present in this case. Moreover, by considering the relevance of outside sources in decision-making, the news media should prove to be influential in this case and should be in line with hypotheses H1 and H2.

Impartial Leadership

In John Stoessinger's *Why Nations go to War*, he describes Johnson as a man of "ego, stubbornness, and pride" who stressed that, with few exceptions, his advisers accepted and supported his decision to launch a land war in Asia.¹³¹ However, from the outset of the conflict, Johnson made his decision process deliberately open by holding a series of meetings before any final measure was taken on the war. For example, prior to the commencement of bombing of North Vietnamese targets in Operation Rolling Thunder in 1964, Johnson formed a "Working Group" consisting of senior political and

¹²⁸ Nixon, 434.

¹²⁹ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, "The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 166.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

military leaders, intentionally omitting himself, to discuss US options including the bombing campaign, a process that lasted for weeks.¹³² According to Robert McNamara, an important member of the group, it conducted “an exhaustive review” of alternatives to the bombing effort in early December; however, a decision was not made by Johnson to begin bombing until March 2.¹³³ With this said, while Johnson had strong opinions on the use of military force and felt for a long period that it would be inevitable, his ego, as put by Stoessinger, did not prevent him from seeking a wide range of information before making a decision, a process which often took days, weeks or even months.

Likewise, President Nixon was unlikely to make major decisions concerning the war without first hearing the advice of his closest advisers. Nixon’s approach to decision-making was meeting individually with his staff or in small groups to give his closest advisers a direct outlet to express doubts about the conduct of the war. Although Nixon was difficult to sway once a decision had been made, and he personally felt convinced that he could achieve his plan of “peace with honor” in Vietnam, he frequently sought the advice of his divided cabinet to find the best solution to the changing realities of the long war.¹³⁴ Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird frequently took these opportunities to express his doubts over the influence that Nixon’s phased-withdrawal plan would have on the domestic news media. As American troops withdrew, he feared that the flexibility Nixon had to end the war on American terms, through the use of strategic attacks on Communist forces in neighbouring states, would be reduced by public outrage to any perception of an

¹³¹ Stoessinger, 99.

¹³² McNamara and VanDeMark, 160, 174.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company, 1979), 497.

escalation of the conflict.¹³⁵ Conversely, Kissinger supported Nixon's troop reductions to stabilize public support as negotiations with North Vietnam continued. Kissinger and Laird put their views on record through a series of memos and face-to-face discussions with the president during the summer of 1969.¹³⁶ Ultimately, Nixon went through with his commitment to reducing troops, due in large part to domestic pressure, but the diverse and well supported arguments of his closest advisers weighted heavily on his decision process despite their often contrasting views.¹³⁷

Homogeneity of Members' Social Background and Ideology

In general, the Johnson and Nixon cabinets shared a common social background being well educated and successful members of the private or public service before becoming members of their respective cabinets, and had common ideological traits such as opposition to the spread of communism in Asia. The process of selecting members of a president's cabinet assures this homogeneity, for the president chooses the best person available for the job which requires finding a person who can be a close friend and trusted adviser in times of crisis. However, as discussed above, members of the US cabinet commonly did not share the same views over strategy in Vietnam, shown by Robert McNamara's leaving his position as Secretary of Defense in 1968 over his concerns, and his replacement Clark Clifford's persistent questioning of force numbers

¹³⁵ Ibid., 479-481.

¹³⁶ J. Edward Lee and Toby Haynsworth, *Nixon, Ford and the Abandonment of South Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), 22.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

from 1965 onward.¹³⁸ Consequently, Johnson's advisers were considered to have had such differing opinions on the course of the war that the president's requests for more advisers to find a consensus began to get out of hand.¹³⁹

Similarly, Nixon's cabinet is often viewed historically as highly cohesive due to the rare ideological differences between Nixon, Kissinger, Laird, and Secretary of State William Rogers. Yet, in his memoirs Kissinger took additional credit for many of the foreign policy victories of the administration and cited Nixon's dark psyche as an inherent flaw of his personality that had constant consequences on his policies and presidency.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, as the war progressed Laird and Rogers became more oppositional to Kissinger and Nixon's strong arm tactics in Vietnam.¹⁴¹ For example, during the Spring Offensive the two secretaries rejected a suggested bombing campaign in the far north of Vietnam causing Nixon to consider replacing Laird in favour of someone more supportive of his efforts to achieve his plan of "peace with honor."¹⁴² The relationship between Kissinger, Rogers, and Nixon in particular was described as difficult as these men rarely shared a "common world view" and disagreed openly about policy.¹⁴³ As a result, the similarities in social background which did exist were far less important than their ideological differences.

¹³⁸ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 33.

¹³⁹ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 158.

¹⁴⁰ Walter Issacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 164; Jeffrey P. Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy, Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 19.

¹⁴¹ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 116.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 154.

Provocative Situational Context

Having established that the Johnson and Nixon administrations' were not cohesive groups, the central structural tenets of groupthink have failed in this case. Nevertheless, this case could still prove to have a provocative-situational context caused by stress by external sources or the presence of low self-esteem among group members.

High Stress from External Sources

The Vietnam War was undoubtedly a stressful period and it is clear from the historical record of the conflict that the US government's executive was subjected to unprecedented external stresses. Following early talk of successful operations in 1967, the post-Tet Johnson cabinet was described as being "embattled," by the news media especially due to the subsequent rise in public protests and congressional opposition to the war.¹⁴⁴ Walt W. Rostow, the President's Assistant for National Security, described the anti-war movement as "putting an extra dimension of strain" on the president, which the president himself revealed in his lambaste of the media stating that "NBC and *The New York Times* are committed to a policy of making us surrender."¹⁴⁵ Likewise, Nixon's use of polling numbers to determine bombing targets acceptable to the public reveal the stress external sources had on his presidency.¹⁴⁶

Despite this, the presence and intensity of external stresses did not prove to limit the group seeking alternative courses of action. From the outset, President Johnson

¹⁴³ Yetiv: 426.

¹⁴⁴ Small: 9.

¹⁴⁵ Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Norton, 1989) 183, Small: 9.

requested the advice of trusted friends in Congress and the Senate, members of his junior staff, and members of his White House staff to find alternatives for a month before the escalation decision was made; and again following the media's criticism of US strategy during the Tet Offensive.¹⁴⁷ Even during relative lulls in the war, the president and his staff would meet weekly - and at greater frequency when required - to discuss strategic alternatives such as bombing halts. He increasingly requested the presence of "doves" opposed to the war such as Mike Mansfield, Harry McPherson, and later Clark Clifford. In addition, between 1965 and 1968, Johnson met with major news organizations thirty-eight times to discuss media coverage and their concerns over the progress of the war.¹⁴⁸

While commonly more confident in foreign policy, Nixon used polling data as a form of advice responding in May 1970 to the dominantly-negative reaction to operations in Cambodia by meeting with anti-war critics, and later ending the operation on May 8.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Nixon continued to meet with the dovish Rogers to discuss solutions to a further escalation of the conflict in Laos despite the growing separation and personal disagreements between the two men in the later stages of the war. In sum, the Johnson and Nixon cabinets clearly were under considerable stress from external sources; however, both presidents attempted to find multiple solutions to problems and in Nixon's case, met directly with his critics to try and find solutions.

¹⁴⁶ Jacobs and Shapiro: 189, 191.

¹⁴⁷ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 141-159, James Landers, *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 67, 189.

¹⁴⁸ Landers, 67.

¹⁴⁹ Anderson, 143.

Low Self-Esteem

This condition is difficult to test due to the widely-different interpretations of the psychology of the decision-makers involved in various sources. What is known is that Johnson had difficulty making a final decision and often took considerable time to deliberate among his cabinet and advisers, but he was capable of making a difficult decision when needed.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, as the group's military strategy showed signs of failure, they pursued more solutions and brought in fresh advisers to generate new ideas.¹⁵¹ Nixon, who was prone to quick decisions and had a closer cabinet did not appear to have difficulties with decision-making or moral concerns over his actions. In addition, the group did face moral concerns before going to war, as each member opposed the spread of communism in Asia, and for some, a possible long-term and costly war. Nevertheless, they were not notably forced to make decisions during the war that violated their sense of ethics.¹⁵²

Evidence of Groupthink in Vietnam

As this section proves, there is little support for groupthink during any period of this conflict. In particular, the Johnson administration, which had been cited as a case of groupthink during the escalation phase of the war, but has proven to be extraordinarily open to debate, as many cabinet members and advisers openly challenged the president and the group. In keeping with the flow of the model, further exploration of the

¹⁵⁰ David M. Barrett, "Doing 'Tuesday Lunch' at Lyndon Johnson's White House: New Archival Evidence on Vietnam Decisionmaking," *Political Science and Politics* 24, no. 4 (December 1991): 678.

¹⁵¹ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 158.

¹⁵² Yetiv: 428.

symptoms of groupthink, discussed in detail in the previous chapter, could not prove the existence of the theory without one or more structural conditions being present or the group being cohesive. We will now turn to an analysis of the news media's role in the war.

The News Media in Vietnam

Escalation, Cam Ne, and the Beginnings of Negative Reporting

The early positive coverage of the Vietnam War is an important contrast to the sharp-negative turn that occurred in the American press in 1967. Indeed, the initial escalation of troops in July 1965 was hailed in the news media as a major and positive step to prevent the spread of communism in Asia. Early polling data revealed that 62 percent of the American people supported the mission and a significant majority, 79 percent, believed that without US assistance South Vietnam would be defeated.¹⁵³ These positive polls and the generally positive reporting on Operation Rolling Thunder the previous year helped to solidify support among the majority of Johnson's advisers to deploy large numbers of ground troops in the hope that it could lead to a quick resolution to the growing conflict. The decision to deploy troops, although divisive, was made after an exhaustive search for alternatives to a US escalation in Vietnam, a process countering groupthink's assumption of Johnson's cabinet making quick decisions on the important strategic issues.¹⁵⁴ As a matter of policy a political objective became clear: keep South

¹⁵³ William M. Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, ed. David F. Trask (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 181.

¹⁵⁴ McNamara and VanDeMark, 191-206.

Vietnam non-communist through the use of American military power.¹⁵⁵ Thus during this period press reports, particularly in newspapers, simply reproduced official statements with little or no analysis, and television reports presented a dramatic contrast of good America versus evil Hanoi.¹⁵⁶

However, one week after US forces arrived in large numbers, a reporter observing a marine unit on the outskirts of Cam Ne captured dramatic images of a soldier setting fire to a thatched roof home.¹⁵⁷ On August 3, 1965, Marines came under fire by Vietcong soldiers concealed in the village resulting in heavy fire from the marines to neutralize a series of trenches, concealed firing positions and connected tunnels.¹⁵⁸ Regardless of the presence of Vietcong soldiers in the village, the film of an American soldier burning a civilian home grabbed the attention of the Saigon press and, as one scholar argues, “appeared to dispute the official contention that the marines had faced heavy opposition in the village.”¹⁵⁹ Similarly over the following days the television and print media carried this and other stories of civilian casualties caused by American soldiers, collectively questioning the ruthlessness and apparent brutality being shown by American soldiers in the opening days of the war.

While the incident did not influence a strategic change, President Johnson became directly involved in disputing the portrayal of the United States by CBS. Indeed, the next day, he called CBS News President Frank Stanton to lambaste him and his decision to air

¹⁵⁵ Edmonds, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Hallin, 118.

¹⁵⁷ Wyatt, 145.

¹⁵⁸ Hammond, 186.

¹⁵⁹ Hammond, 188.

the story.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, Johnson and Westmoreland attempted to have the reporter fired, labelling him a communist, and for a short period seriously considered censoring media reports. Following this, the Department of Defense began to monitor nightly news broadcasts for content and Johnson, for his part, paid close attention to the news watching three televisions simultaneously.¹⁶¹ Although scholar Daniel Hallin is correct in stating that this report is not indicative of reporting during this period, the direct response to this story by Johnson and senior military commanders demonstrates the lack of strategic certainty of US decision-makers and the developing link between the news media and US decision-making.¹⁶²

1967 and the Growth of the Credibility Gap

In 1966, reports on incremental troop increases and the unsupported successes of military efforts in the war began to take their toll on the national press corps and many began to openly question the US military strategy. This questioning began to be referred to as a “credibility gap.”¹⁶³ Referring to the gap, the American Society of Newspaper Editors criticized Johnson for “constantly trying to make the news sound or seem better than it is,” and the newsmagazine *Time* commented that “as the size and cost of the U.S. commitment grows, Americans will understandably expect forces to go beyond

¹⁶⁰ Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977), 130.

¹⁶¹ David Culbert, “Johnson and the Media,” in *The Johnson Years*, ed. Robert A. Divine (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 218-219, Wyatt, 145.

¹⁶² Hallin, 132-133.

¹⁶³ James P. Lienhard, “The Influence of the Anti-War Movement Upon U.S. Policy and Military Strategy in the Vietnam War” (Masters, California State University Dominguez Hills, 1999), 30.

containment and start reclaiming territory.”¹⁶⁴ Moreover, following efforts to demonstrate progress in the war, Westmoreland once again requested a minimum of 80,500 additional troops to meet current operational requirements and a further request for 200,000 more soldiers to expand operations. Faced with the prospect of an expanded operation that already appeared to have failed, members of Johnson’s staff could not support the General’s proposal to expand the war into Laos and Cambodia.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, this request appeared to discredit the General’s assurances that the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam was carrying its share of combat operations. Consequently, Johnson authorized only 47,000 additional soldiers for 1967, agreeing with his National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy that, “as a matter of high national policy there should be a publicly stated ceiling to the level of American participation in Vietnam,” and that “uncertainty about the future size of the war is having destructive effects on the national will.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, pressure from the news media and, as an extension, public opinion of the war, were both noticed and acted on in the executive branch to prevent changes to the strategy that would have caused more opposition to the war. This decision then restricted future troop increases to maintain the limited war strategy.

Moreover, as early as April 1966, the major newsmagazines printed stories of a possible stalemate, amplifying doubts within the administration of the apparent ineffectiveness of the attrition strategy. Attempts to justify the strategy had failed to dispel concerns as more troops continued to be requested and deployed in 1967. Indeed,

¹⁶⁴ Landers, 167.

¹⁶⁵ Explained in Westmoreland’s meetings with the senior General staff and Johnson in his book *Westmoreland*, 142-143.

¹⁶⁶ Sorley, 12, Turner, 183, *Westmoreland*, 230.

the progressively expanding number of American troops in Vietnam so concerned Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk that, in spring 1967, McNamara began to urge President Johnson to change the ground strategy as a method of checking dissent at home. At the same time, military reports coming from Vietnam began to suppress Vietcong troop strength from the news media by reporting 120-130,000 fewer soldiers to the press than were actually available over concerns this would further damage the administration's credibility.¹⁶⁷ The decline in public support so seriously weighed on McNamara that he approached Johnson about resigning, "in part because of the newspaper reports, and because I believe the president might benefit politically by replacing Dean and me... to meet the charge that Washington is tired and Washington is stale."¹⁶⁸ Consequently, while the strategic objectives of the conflict did not change in 1967, reporting was an obvious concern among Johnson's staff and the military, wherein it directly influenced considerations to suppress troop strength and senior cabinet members considered resigning their posts in the face of public scrutiny.

The Turning Point – 1968 and the Tet Offensive

Prior to the Tet Offensive, television reporting of the war had mostly consisted of shots of American soldiers, some gunfire, but rarely would the reporter be near the scene of a major battle. Tet battles, for the first time, took place in major cities, including Saigon, allowing reporters to write and broadcast stories about the offensive as it was

¹⁶⁷ Jake Blood, *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 128-129.

¹⁶⁸ Robert S. McNamara, "Draft Memorandum for the President," (May 19, 1967), 19, McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 260.

occurring. Referring to the images of the attacks, one television commentator noted that they appeared to be “part of a nationwide campaign of terrorism and guerrilla warfare and that the price that almost certainly will be paid may be very, very high.”¹⁶⁹ Sustained coverage of an attack on the US Embassy, and the execution of a Vietcong officer by South Vietnamese police were among the most dramatic and violent images of the war. This proved to counter Johnson’s attempts to convince the news media that US efforts were successful.¹⁷⁰ Commitment to the operation was inevitably weakened as major news figures, including Walter Cronkite, referred to the war, once again, as a stalemate and advocated opening negotiations in lieu of de-escalation.¹⁷¹ This theme was echoed in both television and print reports in the following days and weeks. According to one Johnson staffer “editorial criticism, not only of the President’s policies but of his personality... had swelled to a crescendo. The ‘credibility gap’ was no longer an issue but a factor taken for granted by most of the public.”¹⁷² According to a report of data compiled on Tet coverage, a viewer watching network news five times a week “would have seen film of civilian casualties 3.9 times a week... more than four times the overall average of 0.85 times a week... film of military casualties jumped from 2.4 to 6.8 times a week.”¹⁷³

As the offensive continued in South Vietnam, the negativity of the coverage appears to have had an immediate effect on members of the Johnson administration and

¹⁶⁹ Robert E. Loew, "The Impact of Television Viewing on Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Vietnam War" (Masters, California State University Dominguez Hills, 2001), 44.

¹⁷⁰ Peter C. Rollins, "Television's Vietnam: The Visual Language of Television News," *The Journal of American Culture* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 115-117.

¹⁷¹ Culbert, 223-227, Marc D. Felman, "The Military/Media Clash and the New Principle of War: Media Spin" (Masters, Air University, United States Air Force, 1992), 10-11.

¹⁷² George E. Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency* (New York, NY: World Pub. Co, 1970), 68.

US strategy. Whereas members of the Johnson administration were meeting with the press to prove that the Communist attacks had failed, Johnson himself was afraid to speak openly about the offensive.¹⁷⁴ Johnson, a consensus decision maker, felt that he needed considerable time to make a decision that would appease the psychologically damaged public and show that US strategy was making some progress in ending the conflict. As a result, the president cabled US Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker on February 3 to lean on the South Vietnamese government to take a bigger share of combat operations.¹⁷⁵ US troops were intended to be used as a temporary measure to strengthen South Vietnam's defenses before turning over operations to their authority. Indeed, US forces remained in the lead of operations with the ARVN being used for less risky support operations, which had been noted increasingly in media reports of this period.¹⁷⁶ He hoped a shift of US commitments to the ARVN would halt rising critical coverage.¹⁷⁷ In addition, the attrition strategy had also proved to be a failure due to the large numbers of Communist forces still being employed, which forced Johnson to begin to impose plans to increase ARVN operations and decrease the US role, a process that became known as Vietnamization under Nixon. Thus, due in part to the Tet Offensive and Johnson's cable a general mobilization was imposed in South Vietnam making all men between 18 and 38 years old eligible for military service, adding an additional 400,000

¹⁷³ Philip M. Seib, *Headline Diplomacy: How News Coverage Affects Foreign Policy*, Praeger Series in Political Communication (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 17.

¹⁷⁴ David Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact on Decision-Making in the USA, 1968: The Tet Offensive and Chicago's Democratic National Convention," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 3 (1998): 434.

¹⁷⁵ David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 101.

¹⁷⁶ Sorley, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 101.

soldiers to the armed forces by the end of 1970.¹⁷⁸ In sum, despite the successful operations of US and ARVN soldiers in the Tet Offensive, Johnson changed US strategy to move the emphasis of the war to the South Vietnamese and reduced US responsibility in a war that the majority of the public no longer supported.

The inability of the Johnson administration to advance the US strategy and the heavy criticism from the news media was exacerbated by a major request for additional US troops in late-February. The request for 206,000 more soldiers was made to capitalize on Tet dealing a major blow to Communist forces and that a surge of fresh troops would allow Westmoreland to replace losses and perhaps expand his operations.¹⁷⁹ The news media became critical of the decision when it was revealed in *The New York Times* in surprising detail on March 10. This article appearing following Johnson's statements of success in the Tet battles, an event that seriously damaged his credibility and increased public scepticism of the war's progress, resulting in the president's advisers supporting plans to deescalate the war and shift away from the failing attrition strategy.¹⁸⁰

For example, Johnson requested incoming Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford conduct a reassessment of US strategy to find alternatives that could solve the domestic political problems the administration faced following Tet. The report concluded that, due in large part to the public debate on the war, the attrition strategy needed to be re-examined or abandoned.¹⁸¹ Clifford's concerns over media reports influencing the public

¹⁷⁸ Andrew Buttles, "The Effect of the 1968 Tet Offensive on the Vietnam War" (Masters, California State University Dominguez Hills, 1998), 50.

¹⁷⁹ Westmoreland, 357.

¹⁸⁰ Carlos D'Costa, "Media Coverage of the Tet Offensive 1968" (Masters, Florida Atlantic University, 1981), 8.

¹⁸¹ Schmitz, 117, 143.

and the US cabinet were generally felt across the executive, as previous supporters of the war began to agree that another troop increase would not be supported in domestic polls. Moreover, two more stories appearing late in March disputing the claims made by Westmoreland that major gains were made in 1967 fuelling critical coverage and concern in the White House.¹⁸² Johnson lamented in his memoirs that these “leaks to *The New York Times* really hurt us. The country is demoralized.”¹⁸³ Thus, press reaction to the article, and the previous media reports of Tet, restricted the administration’s ability to make a decision that would escalate the war or even maintain the strategy. With this said, although a debate had begun days before the article appeared, the public knowledge of the troop increase proposal restricted the range of options available that could be acceptable to the majority of the US population. This proved to fuel uncertainty over US strategy already existing in the administration to the shift to majority opposition to the current course of the war.

Equally important, negative reaction to the proposal proved to influence decision-makers to reject the plan. Prior to Tet, the Johnson’s senior cabinet and advisers had been almost unanimous in support of US strategy in Vietnam, but in response to public outcry over the troop request many members of the cabinet began to feel that the footage of Tet had a real effect on their support for the mission.¹⁸⁴ Acknowledging this, on March 26, the group met to discuss the troop request, but many concluded that the war was a stalemate and that the increase should be rejected and no more than 13,000 troops should

¹⁸² Hammond, 382.

¹⁸³ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 147.

¹⁸⁴ Schmitz, 143.

be deployed. According to one US official present at this meeting, “we are limited by reactions in this country. We cannot build an independent South Vietnam.”¹⁸⁵ Indeed, the entire meetings rested on concerns that domestic reaction to a troop increase could severely restrict the current strategy. As a result, Johnson agreed to send only 13,500 additional troops to Vietnam and went further to remove his authority to call reserve forces to active duty on June 30.¹⁸⁶ As Vietnam researcher Herbert Schandler notes, decisions in the administration were “based on what was the minimum additional support that could be done while maintaining remaining public support for the war,” and as this eroded quickly, critical news reports ensured that the attrition strategy could not be continued.¹⁸⁷

Despite this, some members of the cabinet attribute their change in attitude to an intelligence briefing in March, 1968, which detailed the pessimistic accounts of Communist strength following the Tet Offensive. Yet, as Johnson observed at the same briefing, the information provided could not have been revealing for senior cabinet members and would have only supported to those members pre-existing views. Indeed, Johnson who had been hearing about public concerns over news coverage of the period, and this same coverage had been a point raised in meetings during the previous few weeks by various different advisers, he felt convinced that the news media had been the deciding factor in changing the opinion of these men.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, as senior cabinet officials Dean Rusk and junior adviser Harry McPherson each suggest their support for

¹⁸⁵ Schmitz, 145.

¹⁸⁶ Buttlers, 43.

¹⁸⁷ Loew, 49, Schandler, 337.

¹⁸⁸ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 152.

the mission changed soon after critical coverage appeared.¹⁸⁹ As the group was increasingly open to outside advisers, press reports of such images as South Vietnam's police chief executing a Vietcong officer on the streets of Saigon were noted by these men as being particularly influential on their views of the war.¹⁹⁰ Thus, despite the potential for this meeting to have been important to changing the opinions of some members of the cabinet, Rusk, McPherson and Johnson if not truly influenced by the news media *believed* they had been effective in influencing the personalities of these decision-makers as they searched for an alternative to the problems being faced during this period of the conflict. As a result, the news media can be seen having impacted these men due to their encompassing search for outside opinions and alternatives to the war and decided after the psychologically-damaging effect that Tet had on the public, and it would appear members of the administration, to change US strategy.

This was the backdrop to Johnson's decision in late March to replace Westmoreland with his deputy Creighton Abrams. Despite Johnson's public and private support for Westmoreland, his closest advisers believed that the public would not support his strategy and that transferring in Abrams would give the government more flexibility and time to devise a new strategy. This assessment is supported by Kathleen Turner who argues that William Bundy, James Rowe and McPherson concluded that "the home front, never especially united, have crumbled in the face of Tet, with potentially dangerous consequences," and that promoting Abrams "was to minimize the move as a change in

¹⁸⁹ Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact on Decision-Making in the USA, 1968:" 435.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

policy, casting it instead as a bureaucratic shift.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, Abrams advocated changing US strategy through the adoption of a “one war” concept which puts “equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of RVNAF and pacification.”¹⁹² Consequently, while US ground strategy took time to change, news reporting was certainly influential in the decision to remove Westmoreland to calm criticism and allow changes to be made to US strategy.

In contrast to Iraq, the promotion of Westmoreland reflected domestic pressure in the United States to change US strategy, rather than a personal conflict within the administration. Johnson, a long time supporter of Westmoreland and US strategy in Vietnam, frequently supported him as criticism of US strategy increased, arguing simply at a cabinet meeting in late-December 1967 that he had “great confidence in General Westmoreland.”¹⁹³ In addition, during the previous month had brought the General back to the United States to express his confidence in the strategy to the US press corps in Washington and the successes being made on the ground. Conversely, in Iraq, changes in the top military command have often been the result of conflicts between members of the Bush administration, namely Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, and members of the US military who have frequently been concerned over the number of troops deployed to achieve US goals. For example, Chief of Staff of the US Army, Eric Shinseki, had advocated before the war a troop level approaching 500,000 a number deemed unacceptable to Rumsfeld

¹⁹¹ Turner, 243.

¹⁹² Sorley, 19.

¹⁹³ William Conrad Gibbons, United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, and Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 938, Landers, 145.

and his deputy who believed that smaller more mobile forces could achieve US objectives more quickly.¹⁹⁴ Rumsfeld and other US politico-military officials made this clear in public statements that contradicted Shinseki in the months leading up to the war. Frequent conflicts between Shinseki and DoD resulted in his replacement being named nearly fourteen months before his retirement.¹⁹⁵ Thus, during the Iraq War military officials that have made statements against the administration have often been discredited or dismissed, whereas in Vietnam, despite acknowledging problems with US progress in the war, Johnson remained supportive of the General in the months leading up to Tet.

Moreover, the bombing halt imposed by the Johnson administration in late-March appears to support the trend of media coverage appearing during this phase of the war. Indeed, prior to the March 10th *The New York Times* story, Rusk requested, on March 4, a temporary halt to the bombing, but the plan was rejected due to President Johnson's concern that previous halts had yielded little reaction from Hanoi. Following the troop story, more advisers were called in to discuss a partial or full bombing halt stressing in particular the influence of negative reports, as one adviser argued "recent developments had proved deep concern on the part of the public... if public support is permanently and substantially eroded, we will not be able to maintain let alone intensify the level of our military efforts in Vietnam."¹⁹⁶ Although it is unknown when Johnson made his decision to halt bombing, his advisers began to support a bombing halt as Johnson brought in more advisers that emphasized the heightened news media criticism of US strategy above

¹⁹⁴ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2006), 3.

¹⁹⁵ Thomas E. Ricks, "Bush Backs Overhaul of Military's Top Ranks," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2002.

concerns for remaining strong on the bombing. Moreover, even those in the administration opposed to a bombing halt grudgingly conceded that the public would not support the war much longer without a positive step to end the war.¹⁹⁷ As a result, Johnson ordered an indefinite end to the bombing and announced plans to not run in the upcoming election. Therefore, the pressure on Johnson and his cabinet to modify the US strategy in response to heightened media criticism suggests that the news media had significant influence over the decision-making process in this conflict.

Historian Daniel Hallin takes exception with the conclusion that the Tet offensive was a major turning point for the news media arguing instead that “Tet was less a turning point than a crossover point, a moment when trends that had been in motion for some time reached balance and began to tip the other way.”¹⁹⁸ He asserts that the news media largely reflecting divisions that had already appeared in the US cabinet such as McNamara had made efforts in 1967 to end bombing operations in North Vietnam citing its ineffectiveness in destroying the North’s offensive capabilities.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, he points to continued public support for the war appearing in the weeks after the Tet Offensive, particularly for the president. However, as this section has shown, Hallin’s thesis that elite media opinion tended to follow policy-makers runs counter to the statements of Johnson’s cabinet and advisers that the Tet footage and articles did affect them.

For example, presidential adviser Harry McPherson argues that “it is particularly interesting that people like me—people who had some responsibility for expressing the

¹⁹⁶ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 140.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁹⁸ Hallin, 168.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

Presidential point of view-could be so affected by the media as everyone else was.”²⁰⁰ Likewise, members of the State Department Dean Rusk and this Assistant Secretary William Bundy considered the news coverage a major blow to the government position.²⁰¹ Taking this into account, members of the administration, even if they had prior reservations on the war, were influenced by the news media reporting in the months following the Tet Offensive and that critical coverage, appears to have weighed heavily on Johnson and his advisers who were searching for alternatives as public support for the war declined.²⁰² Moreover, the media’s coverage of attacks on US forces, and limited coverage of engagements involving ARVN troops, influenced decision-makers to give these forces a greater proportion of the combat role. Therefore, Hallin’s research, along with other Manufacturing Consent scholars, fails to explain how media reporting could influence decision-makers by focusing on media reporting on US foreign policy and its inability to force decision-makers to end the war which has never been sufficiently proven in media studies of any post-Vietnam conflict. Taking this into account, the direction of US military strategy in Vietnam strongly supports hypotheses H1 and H2.

Hamburger Hill, the End of Attrition, and the Final Battles of the Long War

Following Tet, US strategy shifted from the use of large numbers of troops to a search for enemy forces using smaller, more agile, units tasked with protecting the

²⁰⁰ Braestrup, 470.

²⁰¹ Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact on Decision-Making in the USA, 1968:" 435.

²⁰² Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 415.

population allowing for a fuller area of coverage.²⁰³ Termed the “one war” strategy the plan called for equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of the South Vietnamese army, and pacification.²⁰⁴ Although the strategy had largely changed, some units still conducted search-and-destroy operations in an attempt to disrupt North Vietnamese logistics operations near the border with Laos. Therefore, similar to the problems faced by the Johnson administration during the Tet Offensive, the Nixon administration received high levels of negative reporting in the battle for Ap Bia, better known as Hamburger Hill, in 1969.

For example, an article appearing on March 24 in *The Associated Press* remarked that, “many [soldiers] cursed their hard-nosed Battalion commander LTC Honeycutt, who sent three companies Sunday to take the 3,000 ft mountain just over a mile east of Laos,” adding that “the mountain isn’t worth much strategically[.]”²⁰⁵ Similar to Tet, reporting of the battle lasted for weeks, and in that time was able to capture dramatic images of groups of dead American soldiers that were shown in major newspapers and on television. Reports questioned the use of large groups of soldiers, instead of bomber aircraft, to attack a well fortified mountain base, a theme that appears to have influenced US strategy. Indeed, although senior US commanders described the battle as being difficult, they were very concerned with the high level of media interest in the operation and requested Abrams to “detail the measure that had been employed to minimize casualties.”²⁰⁶ Faced with news media pressure from all sides, US strategic planners

²⁰³ Sorley, 20.

²⁰⁴ Creighton Abrams, "Message to Admiral John S. McCain," (July 1969).

²⁰⁵ Jay Scharbutt, "Ap Account of Hill 937 Battle," *The Associated Press*, May 24, 1969, 1.

²⁰⁶ Sorley, 141.

abandoned plans to establish a base camp in the area.²⁰⁷ This would have been consistent with orders by the US military to keep pressure on North Vietnamese forces while peace negotiations continued in Paris; however, again reaction to press photos by the public and congressional leaders changed the US strategy. Following the battle for Ap Bia, US troops could now only engage a threatening enemy. As a result, this effectively ended the US attrition strategy and Abrams' ability to conduct any large scale operations beyond the fringes of populated areas.²⁰⁸

The news media's sustained focus on this issue for weeks also appears to have influenced members of the US executive to put an end to large scale operations. Indeed, Henry Kissinger and Melvin Laird stressed that negative media reports appearing so soon after Nixon had taken office would undermine his campaign promise to end the war. Moreover, as peace talks were progressing slowly, any indication that the US would further escalate the conflict would seriously impact public opinion; an issue Nixon monitored closely, conducting private polls and receiving daily media summaries from more than fifty newspapers and all major television sources.²⁰⁹ Although Nixon stated publically, and privately, that the media did not affect his decisions, he appeared to other members of his staff as being interested in this data perhaps to a fault, a symptom of the paranoia suggested later by Kissinger.²¹⁰ As a result, Abrams was ordered to prevent further large unit operations and to increase his efforts to transfer authority to the

²⁰⁷ Samuel Zaffiri, *Hamburger Hill, May 11-20, 1969* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 280.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 279-280.

²⁰⁹ Mortimer P. Ames, "Presidential Communications Management in the Nixon Administration" (PhD, The University of Chicago, 2002) 150, Jacobs and Shapiro: 163.

²¹⁰ Issacson, 164, Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 19.

ARVN.²¹¹ In addition, President Nixon ordered that 25,000 troops be to withdrawn by July 8, and set plans to withdraw a further 35,000 by December as an official first step towards reducing casualties and, under pressure from Kissinger, Laird, and senior military commanders, attempting to stop the continuing coverage of the battle for Ap Bia.²¹²

A major component of the one war strategy was that it restricted operations to protecting the Vietnamese population in an effort to promote pacification and gave greater focus to training the South Vietnamese army. Despite this, the North Vietnamese Army's use of neighbouring Cambodia as a staging area for attacks was a great concern for Nixon and his National Security Adviser Kissinger, but these views were not shared by Laird or Rogers who were opposed to any further escalations of US forces, particularly into another state.²¹³ Central to the division in the administration was the perception that US forces were being used to escalate the conflict, while at the same time maintaining in public that US forces were progressively being brought home. Regardless of executive criticism of the plan, and his reluctance to listen to the news media, Nixon authorized the deployment of nearly 100,000 US and Allied troops into Cambodia in May, 1970.

Following the announcement of the operation to the news media, the majority of reporters supported the views of Laird and Rogers. For example, a *The Wall Street Journal* article commented just after the operation that the war had taken, "a cruel toll in

²¹¹ William M. Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, ed. Jeffrey J. Clarke (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 89.

²¹² Zaffiri, 279.

destruction of the bonds of consensus and authority,” and that “the dangers of disintegration here is far more serious than any military threat in Indochina.”²¹⁴ In general, coverage tended to focus on anti-war protests and the purpose of the operation at this stage of the war, and largely criticized the administration for escalating the conflict into another state, all themes that appear to have greatly influenced Nixon and Kissinger to end the operation. Reflecting on the growing criticism of US strategy in news reporting of the period, Andrew Katz argues that, “former administration personnel and observers contend that domestic political pressure forced the president to curtail the extent of the invasion and thus cripple its intended effect.”²¹⁵ Likewise, Kissinger - a major supporter of the operation in its planning stages - admitted in his summary “Report on Cambodia” that the public response to the operation proved the escalation was unacceptable and, thus, influenced a reverting of US strategy back to one of planned de-escalation and Vietnamization.²¹⁶ Consequently, Nixon put in motion plans to disengage from Cambodia by first limiting the operation to twenty-one miles and second to withdraw troops by June 30. Moreover, Nixon made repeated statements that he would meet this deadline and opposed South Vietnamese requests to continue supporting their forces in Cambodia.²¹⁷ Therefore, by being critical of the operation in the news media the focus of coverage influenced decision-makers to reject further troop escalations for the remainder of the conflict. In

²¹³ Joseph R. Cerami, "Presidential Decisionmaking and Vietnam: Lessons for Strategists," *Parameters* (Winter 1996-97): 70.

²¹⁴ Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 318.

²¹⁵ Andrew Z. Katz, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Nixon Administration and the Pursuit of Peace with Honor in Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 501.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 501.

²¹⁷ Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 341.

sum, Cambodia firmly entrenched the rules of engagement for US forces to resort only to self-defense operations which, in turn, resulted in US decision-makers rejecting the use of American troops in Laos and any further escalation of US forces.

Coverage of US operations, even in their limited form, continued in 1971 as the ARVN invaded Laos to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Nixon predicted that even though US forces could no longer participate in the operation, due to Congressional restrictions, this engagement would prove that the ARVN could operate without US assistance. However, by March 15, the news reporters covering ARVN's advance stated that their advance had been halted within days and that South Vietnamese forces had largely begun returning home.²¹⁸ For example, NBC News described the evacuation of a regiment of troops commenting that "many of the troops seemed desperate to get out. We filmed three separate instances of panicked ARVN soldiers who rode on the skids of helicopters in preference to waiting for another helicopter that might not come."²¹⁹ Reflecting on another rise in negative reporting Kissinger argued on March 18 that the South Vietnamese withdrawals "would kill us domestically."²²⁰ Indeed, following this incident the American media perceived the South Vietnamese Army as defeated and, once again, this created renewed pressure for the US to cease support for the operation. As a result, efforts were made at a meeting the next day to escalate troop withdrawals to curb public criticism.²²¹ The new troop withdrawal schedule was announced on April 7, promising to extract 100,000 troops from South Vietnam between May and November and, therefore,

²¹⁸ Lee and Haynsworth, 49.

²¹⁹ Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 482.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 474.

end any further US support for ARVN operations.²²² Taken together, this is proof of the CNN effect because the news media appears to have influenced decision-makers to escalate withdrawals and hold the current US strategy despite the probable impact it would have on the South Vietnamese Army's ability to conduct operations.

Moreover, as US forces continued to withdraw in 1972, the relationship between Kissinger and Laird was further strained on the eve of the Easter Offensive. The offensive called for the use of decisive air and sea power against North Vietnam, but any escalation of force had been rejected by Laird due to his concern that domestic politics negated any possibility of reengagement in the unpopular war.²²³ Laird's view was supported by pollster Louis Harris in May 1972 who noted that 76% of Americans wanted US forces home by the end of the year, a statistic Nixon certainly would have received in his daily briefings.²²⁴ Taking all this into account, Nixon authorized the mission, but limited the operation as to do "virtually everything we can do, short of putting American troops in, which we won't do."²²⁵ Despite the limited use of US forces, the news media remained critical of any escalation of force, as predicted, and served to echo and drive public opinion against the Easter Offensive.²²⁶ Acknowledging this problem, and firmly aware that an attack on the ARVN was likely to come within weeks, Nixon

²²¹ Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 146-147.

²²² Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 484.

²²³ Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 115.

²²⁴ Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 556.

²²⁵ H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, NY: Putnam Adult, 1994), 438.

²²⁶ Richard M. Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York, NY: Arbor House, 1985), 146.

ordered that US force levels would drop by another 20,000 by July 1 as an effort to placate increased negative public opinion.²²⁷ Although Laird was supportive of this move Nixon no longer held his criticism at this phase of the war in high regard as he and Kissinger were meeting with the Secretary of the Treasury John Connally as Laird's potential successor.²²⁸ As a result, given the further slide in support for the war in the news media and the public Nixon had to escalate withdrawals, this further prevented him from making any changes that could affect volatile public support.

The decline in public support for the war in late-1968 made the escalation of US forces difficult for the embattled president, which appears to have influenced Nixon to implement and maintain the steady stream of US troop withdrawals. Although this was a campaign promise, the incoming president had made his intension to end the war clear and had attempted to use Abrams post-Tet strategy to attack North Vietnamese logistics inside and outside Vietnam. Despite this he could not get the public to support any action that could be perceived as widening the war. Moreover, Nixon's well documented interest in polling data made him particularly vulnerable to the news media's criticism of his strategy.²²⁹ Taking this into account the news media's influence on Nixon era strategy strongly supports the groupthink and media theoretical models and the hypotheses of this paper.

²²⁷ Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam: Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, 558.

²²⁸ Randolph, 162.

²²⁹ Jacobs and Shapiro: 191.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that the US executive, the major decision-making group in the Johnson and Nixon administrations, did not reflect the central tenets of the groupthink theory. Both the Johnson and Nixon cabinets demonstrated the ability to search for additional information within the group and, outside the group, both presidents allowed their advisers to find and present a full range of advice to them with little personal restriction, and while sharing similar backgrounds differed ideologically in many respects. As a result, the group was susceptible to news media influence as the war progressed and as coverage increasingly focused on US strategy. This connection between the US executive is an important reinforcement of the failure of groupthink, in this case, as decision-makers used information supplied by the news media, an outside group, to influence changes in military strategy. Overall, these results indicate that even a traditional administration that is open to outside criticism, which occurs when searching for alternative sources of information, can be influenced by the news media if they are not certain of the direction to take on a particular policy.

CHAPTER 4 : THE IRAQ WAR

American performance in Iraq, a major intervention of US forces first to defeat and then to secure Iraq for turn over to a new government has been deemed a military failure by many members of the news media since 2003.²³⁰ Compared to Vietnam the rate of pessimistic reporting appearing in the early days of Iraq is striking, for in Vietnam the majority of the news media did not report critical coverage until well into 1967, and this coverage only became sustained after the Tet Offensive. Of even greater importance, the news media in Vietnam were largely independent, whereas in Iraq the vast majority of the news media were embedded into US military units giving them access to US personnel and, as US mission planners had hoped, the American view of the war. Despite early attempts to focus the news media on positive images of the war, the George W. Bush administration appears to have ignored media criticism and shown a high level of cohesiveness in its message, and strategic certainty in actions in spite of negative reporting.

Taking this into account, this chapter will analyze if the Bush administration has shown signs of groupthink in its decision-making on the war. Evaluating this case is important to expanding current research on the conflict that has largely focused on the

²³⁰ Reporting in major US news sources in 2003 include: Peter Arnett, "Transcript of Peter Arnett Interview on Iraqi Tv," *CNN*, March 31, 2003, Richard Berstein, "The New Agenda: Go It Alone. Remake the World," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003, Steve Chapman, "Time to Face Reality of Failure in Iraq," *Baltimore Sun*, September 5, 2003, Dana Milbank and Mike Allen, "U.S. Shifts Rhetoric on Its Goals in Iraq; New Emphasis: Middle East Stability," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2003, Ruth Rosen, "What's the Exit Strategy?," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 10, 2003, Richard W. Stevenson, "A Change in Tone: Pitfalls Emerge in Iraq," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2003.

period of March to May 2003.²³¹ Moreover, as media reporting became near universally negative during the counter-insurgency campaign, and the Iraqi strategy laid out in the planning stages has an important role here, expanding research into the post-2003 period is particularly important to demonstrating the presence of groupthink in this case. Following this, the chapter will employ the Media-Strategy Interaction model to determine if the news media influenced the US executive branch of government. Taken together, in contrast to Vietnam, this chapter will demonstrate the presence of groupthink and, consequently, how this limited the potential influence the news media could have on the course of US strategy.

Applying the groupthink hypothesis

To determine the presence of groupthink in the Iraq War the Bush administration will have to be shown as highly cohesive, an important preceding condition for the structural faults of the organization and, in turn, groupthink to occur. Therefore, if proven to be cohesive, the US executive will be analyzed against the four structural conditions of the theory. Finally, if groupthink can be shown the symptoms of the theory will be evaluated to determine to what extent the administration has, and continues to be, isolated from outside criticism.

²³¹ Many books on the Iraq War focus on the prewar and major conflict period of March-May, 2003 including: Lee Artz and Yahya R. Kamalipour, *Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War, Communication, Media, and Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2003), Jim Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York, NY: Viking, 2004), Alexander Moens, *The Foreign Policy of George W. Bush: Values, Strategy and Vision* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), Judith L. Sylvester and Suzanne Huffman, *Reporting from the Front: The Media and the Military* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), Tumber and Palmer.

Group Cohesiveness

The Iraq War case provides a particularly good example of the structure of a cohesive group. The majority of Bush's cabinet was made up of either close-friends from the previous George H.W. Bush administration, or people who had been promoting an engagement in Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein during the Clinton administration. Indeed, Dick Cheney acted as Bush Sr's Secretary of Defense, and Colin Powell was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Persian Gulf War making them both keenly aware of issues relating to Iraq. Moreover, in the 1990s, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz formed a group to push the Clinton administration to promote regime change in Iraq, a policy they promoted strongly in a direct letter to the president in February 1998 that Iraq was "ripe for a broad-based insurrection," and that "We must exploit this opportunity."²³² Furthermore, in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, officials close to the president assert that he was determined to make Iraq the next target in the war on terror and requested that Rumsfeld re-evaluate plans for intervention in Iraq.²³³ This process continued unabated over the next two years. The group was so closely knit that a formal review of plans for Iraq, such as searching for additional intelligence to support the war aims, were ignored by the war-focused cabinet.²³⁴ Therefore, when the Iraq war began in 2003, it was the product of research, experience, and a mutual goal to promote the end of Saddam Hussein's regime.²³⁵

²³² Michael J. Mazarr, "The Iraq War and Agenda Setting," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 1 (2007): 4.

²³³ Glenn Kessler, "U.S. Decision on Iraq Has Puzzling Past," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2003, 1, Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 1-3.

²³⁴ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2006), 92-93, Woodward, 25.

²³⁵ Mazarr: 11.

Structural Faults of Groupthink

Lack of Norms Requiring Methodical Procedures

In stark contrast to the Vietnam War, the Bush administration in the Iraq War has lacked important procedures for evaluating alternatives before and during the war. Whereas in the Johnson administration strategy was determined over the course of weeks to months, regime change in Iraq appeared as the only viable option to members of the Bush administration. According to one administration official, “there was absolutely no debate in the normal sense,” on the merits and evidence against Iraq.²³⁶ Indeed, in an interview conducted with Bob Woodward for his book, *Plan of Attack*, Bush admits that he had never asked either Powell or Rumsfeld if they felt attacking Iraq was the right thing to do, as both members knew of Bush’s support for the plan and this only enhanced their confidence.²³⁷

Moreover, George W. Bush, unlike his father, had little foreign policy experience before the war and this largely caused him to rely on his staff for advice.²³⁸ While Powell was often critical of this process, this gave Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld, and especially Cheney more access to the president because of their preference for discussing their true feelings in private.²³⁹ However, Powell goes on to note that “the president must be satisfied with the way the NSC and the White House were operating,” because the president has never used his authority to change the way information was given to him, or

²³⁶ James Fallows, “Bush’s Lost Year,” *Atlantic Monthly* 294, no. 3 (October 2004): 79.

²³⁷ Woodward, 251, 272, 416.

²³⁸ John P. Burke, “The Contemporary Presidency: Condoleezza Rice as Nsc Advisor: A Case Study of the Honest Broker Role,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005): 554, Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 478.

as plans progressed he did not seek out additional information to support his case for war.²⁴⁰ Furthermore, members of the American bureaucracy were often excluded from the decision-making process. For example, the State Department's "Future of Iraq" project, a group made up of experts on Iraq which had produced thirteen volumes of reports and recommendations since 2001 had sent their findings to Rumsfeld to advise him in post-war planning. Despite their collective experience, Rumsfeld was convinced that US forces would be met openly in Iraq and promptly rejected any outside advice.²⁴¹ Consequently, any member of this group was blocked from participating in the reconstruction effort and bureaucrats in Iraq were told to ignore the projects recommendations.²⁴² This is supported by Bob Woodward who, in a series of interviews on Iraq, was told directly by Bush that: "I have no outside advice. Anybody who says they're an outside adviser of this administration on this particular matter is not telling the truth."²⁴³ Thus, the flow of information in the White House deliberately limited debate and outside experts compiling information on a post-Saddam Iraq were routinely rejected due to the closed nature of the administration.

Group Insulation

The Bush administration was, to a large extent, isolated from the broader foreign policy community. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rice, and Powell would often

²³⁹ Andrew Cockburn, *Rumsfeld: His Rise, Fall, and Catastrophic Legacy*, 1st Scribner hardcover ed. (New York, NY: Scribner, 2007), 177, 178, DeYoung, 477.

²⁴⁰ DeYoung, 478.

²⁴¹ Patrick J. Haney, "Foreign-Policy Advising: Models and Mysteries from the Bush Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 2005): 297.

²⁴² Moens, 197, Woodward, 283-284.

discuss issues related to Iraq in closed door meetings, and when communicating with administration appointed officials outside the government, such as L. Paul Bremer, the Director of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance for post-war Iraq, meetings were rarely face-to-face and critical messages on US policy were often ignored.²⁴⁴ For example, in a draft RAND report which criticized low US troop levels, Bremer summarized the study with his comments and sent it to Rumsfeld with the note: "I think you should consider this," however, he did not receive a response to this, or any of his requests for additional troops during his time in Iraq.²⁴⁵ In addition, the group was also insulated to avoid leaks to the press, an issue that concerned few of the members when they did occur, but it remained an annoyance for many, in particular Rumsfeld.²⁴⁶ According to Michael Mazarr's analysis of the prewar period, "It is striking how little outside advice Bush sought, how few tough questions were asked of knowledgeable observers."²⁴⁷ Moreover, Richard Clarke, a US government official, argues that Bush "doesn't reach out, typically, for a lot of experts. He has a very narrow, regulated, highly regimented set of channels to get advice."²⁴⁸ Consequently, the system appears to have been responding to the collective push from Bush - and through the history of many of those around him - to engage Iraq at the earliest opportunity and that outside influences were shut out of the decision-making process as a result.

²⁴³ Haney: 296.

²⁴⁴ L. Paul Bremer and Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 10, DeYoung, 479.

²⁴⁵ Bremer and McConnell, 10, DeYoung, 479.

²⁴⁶ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 121.

²⁴⁷ Mazarr: 19.

²⁴⁸ Nicholas Lemann, "Remember the Alamo: How George W. Bush Reinvented Himself," *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2004, 148.

In addition, Bush's personal drive, and that of his closest advisers, to engage Iraq on their terms reduced the influence that public opinion and media criticism could have on the administration. Support for the president which soared following September 11, 2001, decreased quickly in January 2003 as France and Germany refused to commit to the planned invasion citing a lack of reliable intelligence data.²⁴⁹ By March 2003, support for a non-UN backed Iraq invasion stood at 54 percent a bare majority, and if the Bush administration did not seek a final UN Security Council vote to authorize the war support dropped to 47 percent.²⁵⁰ This contrasts well with early support for the Vietnam War which continued in majority territory until a few weeks after the Tet Offensive.²⁵¹ Despite this, Bush and his closest aides, Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Wolfowitz had long supported attacks on groups or nations that encouraged terrorist activity and intelligence reports pointed to Iraq as the most likely state capable of attacking the United States. As a result, public opinion data while not significantly negative in the run up to the war pointed to a descending trend. However, this did not influence these strategically certain decision-makers to reconsider the conflict.

Impartial Leadership

Although Bush would often rely heavily on the experience of his advisers, he has been consistent on strategy in both phases of this war, and he would never refrain from making his views clear to his advisers. Indeed, as discussed above, Bush was a long-time

²⁴⁹ DeYoung, 434-435.

²⁵⁰ Richard Benedetto, "Poll: Most back war, but want U.N. support," *USA Today*, March 17, 2003.

²⁵¹ Braestrup, 470-471.

supporter of regime change in Iraq which can be traced back to statements made in 2000 during his presidential campaign in which he argued that: "If I found in any way, shape or form that he was developing weapons of mass destruction" that "I'd take 'em out."²⁵² Similar statements were repeated by members of his staff in meetings on Iraq and in public speeches in the run up to, and during, the war. Powell notes that this norm appeared to be solidified by 2003 arguing that Bush disliked "anything... that suggests any weakness in the [administration's] position," which often left Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage out of important policy meetings.²⁵³ Consequently, during his term as Secretary of State, Powell would often refrain from openly criticizing the president or his advisers and eventually accepted his outsider status in the administration, a factor which is wholly consistent with this structural condition of groupthink.

Homogeneity of Members' Social Background and Ideology

In contrast to the Vietnam case, the insulation of the Bush administration has been only enhanced by their common ideological views. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Rice were able to work closely in large part because of their common view of Saddam Hussein as a major threat to international security. This is important to note as Rumsfeld and Bush's father were political enemies dating back to the 1970s; however, their common view on defense policy convinced them to work together in 2000 and was only enhanced after September 11th, 2001.²⁵⁴ The War on Terror had a further affect on

²⁵² John Lancaster, "In Saddam's Future, a Harder U.S. Line," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2000, 1.

²⁵³ DeYoung, 490.

²⁵⁴ Cockburn, 96-97.

Bush who viewed an expansion of the conflict as a moral choice to, in his words, “rid the world of evil.”²⁵⁵ At the same time, Cheney expressed strong support for the use of military force in Iraq as a method for reshaping the Middle East, a view strongly supported by Bush and the political elites at the Pentagon.²⁵⁶ Likewise, Wolfowitz a strong supporter of an assertive foreign policy after September 11th, had moved the group to consider regime change in Iraq. In his view this was an extension of Bush’s emphasis on defeating regimes that support terrorism, a point he made very clear to the cabinet on 13 September 2001.²⁵⁷ Moreover, even less vocal members of the administration, such as Rice, expressed similar views arguing in late 2002 that: “There wasn’t a flash moment. There’s no decision meeting. But Iraq had been on the radar screen that it was a danger and that it was something you were going to have to deal with eventually.”²⁵⁸ Therefore, in contrast to even often cited close relationships between Nixon and Kissinger, Bush has been able to work very closely with the majority of his staff and this only proved to reinforce US strategy in Iraq which has remained consistent despite criticism of his decisions by the news media.

Moreover, as noted above, the group members have a similar social background. Cheney acted as Secretary of Defense under the previous Bush administration. Rumsfeld had been Secretary of Defense and Chief of Staff to President Gerald Ford. Powell held the position of National Security Adviser to Ronald Reagan and in 1989 became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In addition, Rice, Wolfowitz, and Armitage were

²⁵⁵ Moens, 135.

²⁵⁶ Spender Ackerman and Franklin Foer, "The Radical: What Dick Cheney Really Believes," *The New Republic*, December 1 and 8, 2003, 20.

²⁵⁷ Moens, 137.

long-term Republicans who served in various branches of the federal government for decades before joining the Bush administration. As a result, this similar social background only served to reinforce the current US strategy as each member, both past and present, has been highly supportive of the basis for the US presence in Iraq.

Provocative Situational Context

It has been demonstrated that in the Iraq War, and in particular during the pre-war stage, the US executive has shown sufficient evidence for the presence of the structural conditions of groupthink. Based on this, an expansion should be made to examine the influence of high stress from external sources and the affect low self-esteem had on the decision-making process.

High Stress from External Sources

In the Iraq War, decision-makers were not under constant stress akin to the Vietnam War or even shorter crises such as the Cuban missile crisis.²⁵⁹ Despite this, stress did influence decision-makers prior to 2003, wherein members were under diplomatic pressure to develop a strong coalition for the invasion of Iraq. Whereas in the Gulf War the United States was able to secure the cooperation of many Arab states against Iraq, few of its former partners would assist the US in 2003. For example, Turkey

²⁵⁸ Mazarr: 6.

²⁵⁹ Yetiv: 427.

opposed US plans to use the state as a northern front for the invasion force.²⁶⁰ US decision-makers feared that a single front battle from the south would significantly increase the probability that Iraqi forces would burn the oil fields north of Baghdad, inflame ethnic rivalries between Arabs and Kurds, and give Iraqi forces more time to mobilize.²⁶¹ Furthermore, by deploying forces through Turkey, US decision-makers hoped to catch the Iraqi Republican Guard by surprise and encourage these units to disband.²⁶² However, requests to move the US 4th Division to another location were opposed due to members of the administration concerns that any further delay could jeopardize the operation.²⁶³ Although the US strategy was successful in defeating the Iraqi army through speed and technological superiority, despite modest troop strength, members were under constant stress due to political and military complications that could not be anticipated in the initial planning stages.

However, the group did experience stress in part from news media criticism of US and coalition casualties which mounted after the end of combat operations in May 2003. Members of the administration were concerned that, similar to Vietnam, the American public would only accept American casualties for a short period before the majority would become critical of the war and US strategy. Indeed, on September 7, 2004 the death of an American soldier in Sadr City brought the death toll to 1,000, a milestone that was reported and repeated in all major newspapers, television, and on the internet as a

²⁶⁰ Eric Peltz et al., "Sustainment of Army Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Major Findings and Recommendations," (RAND, 2005), 7.

²⁶¹ Gordon and Trainor, 127.

²⁶² Stephen T. Hosmer, "Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was So Weak," (RAND, 2007), xiii.

²⁶³ DeYoung, 457.

major turning point in the war. President Bush attempted to counter these negative reports in his brief statement that “we mourn every loss of life,” but that “we will honor their memories by completing the mission.”²⁶⁴ As the war progressed, Rumsfeld and Bush have on separate occasions admitted to reviewing casualty figures in response to the rising deaths being reported in the news media. Despite these incidents, doubt over casualty figures has not entered the president’s public speeches or in many of his private conversations with political and military elites. Instead, he has shown resolve to end the war on American terms. Indeed, in a speech delivered on October 28, 2005, to a group of American troops, President Bush maintained that, regardless of the violence against American forces “we will never back down, never give in, and never accept anything less than complete victory.”²⁶⁵ As a result, the Bush administration was clearly aware of the negative pressure of the news media throughout the conflict, but he and his cabinet were seemingly able to handle the tough task of managing their message on the war.

Low Self-Esteem

For this case, there is little evidence that any member of the administration considered the operation to be a failure. Given that Operation Iraqi Freedom was highly successful in its goal of defeating the Iraqi army and overthrowing Saddam Hussein’s government, all group members, including later critics Colin Powell and Richard Armitage, considered the conflict a major political success. Moreover, as criticism of US

²⁶⁴ “Fierce Fighting in Fallujah as U.S. Toll Tops 1,000: Bush, Kerry Spar over Rising Number of Deaths,” *MSNBC News Services*, September 9, 2004, 1.

²⁶⁵ Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2006), 395.

force levels rose after the invasion, critiques of US strategy have been ignored even from US appointed advisers and close-friends of the administration.²⁶⁶ For example, during a direct meeting between Rumsfeld and Jay Garner who led the post-war reconstruction effort in 2003, Rumsfeld responded to his comments stating that “we are where we are, there’s no need to discuss it.”²⁶⁷ Furthermore, the consistency of the US strategy in holy cities such as Fallujah and Najaf after the invasion demonstrates that US decision-makers had little difficulty coming to its decisions. Finally, the group did not have any moral concerns over the decision to go to war, nor did they feel before or during the war that a choice was made that violated their sense of ethics as each member fully supported the mission.

Evidence of Groupthink in Iraq

As the above evidence proves, the Iraq War is a prime case for examining if the news media can influence decision-makers showing signs of groupthink. In this case, the central members of the US administration have shown to be cohesive, shown structural errors in the decision process, and evidence supports the situational context being a potential factor in decision-making. Therefore, a brief examination will be made of the symptoms of groupthink that can lead to defective decision-making.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 358.

²⁶⁷ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 167.

Overestimation and the Illusion of Invulnerability

While some differences in views existed, ample evidence exists that the members responsible for planning and execution of the conflict including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Cheney, and Bush believed that the war plan would not fail. Indeed, as the initial invasion date approached the US plan which originally called for as many as 500,000 troops was recast six times, wherein the final version called for just 78,000.²⁶⁸ Although the plan appeared to be successful as US forces were able to move quickly through the country using superior technology, a joint command structure, and close coordination from nearby Kuwait, the counter-insurgency phase was impacted by Rumsfeld and his deputy's refusal to provide additional troops to secure Iraq.²⁶⁹ The two men believed the plan would be so successful in rapidly defeating Iraq's army, and that American forces would be viewed as liberators from the dictatorial regime of Hussein; that a small force could maintain the peace before being turned over to a new Iraqi army.²⁷⁰ Sending major numbers of troops at any phase of the war, in Michael Isikoff's and David Corns' words would be, "an admission of error and miscalculation. And acknowledging mistakes wasn't part of the president's campaign."²⁷¹ As a result, the Bush administration has clearly shown signs of the illusion of invulnerability in both phases of the war and as Bush's public statements have noted, this is unlikely to change.

²⁶⁸ Woodward, 287.

²⁶⁹ Clayton Dennison, "Operation Iraqi Freedom: What Went Wrong? A Clausewitzian Analysis," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 2006/07): 16-17.

²⁷⁰ Cockburn, 169-170.

²⁷¹ Isikoff and Corn, 358.

Closed-Mindedness

Following years of difficulty conducting weapons inspections in Iraq and Hussein's expulsion of UN weapon inspectors, the Bush administration did not consider negotiation as a possible resolution to the conflict. In addition, as there was no doubt within the group that Saddam possessed illegal weapons, the group shared a view that Hussein was evil and could not be dealt with peacefully.²⁷² Indeed, early drafts of the 2002 State of the Union address originally included only Iraq as a major threat to national security. Although this was later changed to include Iran and North Korea to prevent the appearance of a declaration of war, the decision to intervene had clearly been made in the previous few months.²⁷³ Members of the administration not only refused to seek alternatives to the plan, but also attempted to build connections between Hussein and known terrorist supporting states and groups, while also refusing to negotiate a possible resolution to the conflict.²⁷⁴ This collective view has only continued as violence from the insurgency began to increase. Referring to the intelligence he was provided on the insurgency, Rumsfeld complained in one meeting that it was "failing to confirm what *he knew* to be true," asserting that the insurgency did not exist and hostile acts against US forces were the result of small groups of Saddam loyalists.²⁷⁵ Here, Rumsfeld's statement confirmed too many in the military of the flaws in his personality, shared by many in the administration, that they were convinced of their position and contrary evidence could not influence them. In addition, Rumsfeld's statement reflected the general policy of the

²⁷² DeYoung, 448-449, Mann, 348.

²⁷³ Burke: 561.

²⁷⁴ Cockburn, 168, Fritz et al., 177-185, Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 120-121.

Bush administration to reject claims of an insurgency, which continued for months, prior to the beginning of major counter-insurgency operations in 2004.²⁷⁶ Taking this into account, the members of the Bush administration appeared to stereotype outside groups and had collective rationalizations, both of which have strongly influenced US strategy in Iraq.

Pressures towards uniformity

Although many of the groups' members continue to be supportive of US efforts in Iraq, following the initial invasion and the US difficulties in battles with the insurgency some members began to criticize US strategy and evidence suggests they were marginalized in the group as a result. For example, Powell was a major supporter of the war prior to the invasion, however, to counter rising difficulties in Iraq following the invasion he recommended using Mideast experts from the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, but all of his recommendations were rejected by Cheney and Rumsfeld, and their own people were given these positions without consulting Powell.²⁷⁷ Moreover, prior to the invasion, DoD was given authority for determining the development stages of the operation, normally a matter for the Department of State, which seriously diminished Powell's position and his relationship with Rumsfeld.²⁷⁸ As a result, Bush's preference to reduce friction and disagreement often left Powell out of important strategy sessions. Consequently, Rice was often used as an intermediary

²⁷⁵ Cockburn, 193.

²⁷⁶ Alice Hills, "Fear and Loathing in Falluja," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (July 2006): 631.

²⁷⁷ DeYoung, 462.

²⁷⁸ DeYoung, 417, 458, 518.

between Powell and the president to be both informed and to ensure that his opinion was expressed to Bush.²⁷⁹ Therefore, direct pressure from members of the administration seriously affected the decision-making environment and the influence some members could have on US strategy.

Moreover, Powell's criticism of the functioning of the advisory system in the White House made his term in the Bush administration difficult.²⁸⁰ As discussed above, meetings often occurred between small groups and the president, and as Powell observed the president was often influenced the most by "the last person to whisper in his ear," and that "that person was usually Cheney."²⁸¹ While not overtly planned, Bush's relationship with his vice-president is closer than in most US administrations. In part due to his limited foreign policy experience prior to the conflict, major decisions on the war have largely been made with Cheney present. As a result, Cheney was often used to prevent changes in US strategy from occurring as he remains the most adamant supporter of US strategy in the Iraq. In contrast, as a former military commander Powell was far more sensitive to the military situation on the ground.²⁸² Consequently, after Bush was re-elected in 2004, Powell promptly left the administration feeling that many members refusal to admit to previous mistakes had led to errors being uncorrected and tense relations between State and Defense to continue unabated.

Similarly, difficulties have arisen between Rice and Rumsfeld over his recommendations for US troop levels and dismissal of recommendations from experts.

²⁷⁹ Burke: 561-562, Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 266-269, 149-250.

²⁸⁰ George Gedda, "Colin Powell: Four Tumultuous Years," *Foreign Service Journal* 82, no. 2 (February 2005): 32.

²⁸¹ DeYoung, 478.

However, unlike Powell, Rice has refused to damage the administration's cohesiveness over a personal clash, a factor wholly consistent with self-censorship in groupthink. According to an assessment by Thomas Ricks of Rice and Rumsfeld's relationship, he notes that "challenging Rumsfeld was outside her boundaries," due to his support from Cheney and Bush who repeatedly rejected requests to have him replaced following his handling of the insurgency.²⁸³ Taking all this into account, the Bush administration has shown signs of all three pressures of uniformity, including direct pressure and the limited access given to Powell, and Rice's self-censorship. As a result, for many inside and outside the US executive, it has been very difficult for critical assessments of US strategy to affect the president due to his closed-minded attitude and similarly stubborn senior cabinet.

In sum, the evidence supports the central tenets of groupthink and its three major conditions that can develop into defective decision-making. Here, it is important to reiterate that while these symptoms can cause defective decision-making, the purpose of this research is to determine if decision-makers can be influenced by an outside group, the news media, and is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of Iraq as a potential fiasco.

²⁸² Ibid., 516.

²⁸³ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 303.

The News Media in Iraq

Major Combat Operations in Iraq, 2003

The invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003 following months of build up in the Middle East and years of planning from the Bush administration received mixed coverage during the opening week of the war. US and UK reporters were embedded into combat units in an attempt to both give the coalition's perspective on the war and as a method for the Bush administration to shape American reporting. Therefore, reporters could file stories on US military action nearly instantly, using television, print, and the internet. Moreover, following the lack of control the US imposed on the news media in Vietnam, and the censorship imposed on newscasters in Grenada and Panama, the embedded system used in Iraq received relatively little criticism from media organizations.²⁸⁴ Given that many of the stories produced were often less biased than originally anticipated and according to one report "embedded reporters had among the highest percentage of neutral stories (91 percent) of any type of reporter," early critical views of the system were largely baseless and only appeared to provide much needed access to US political and military elites.²⁸⁵ With this in mind, the embedded system proved to follow common patterns of reporters using mainly official sources of information to compile their stories.

Despite the early success of positive or neutral coverage, reporting on US military strategy turned negative after only a week of fighting. The process of embedding reporters with infantry and armoured units gave reporters the unique ability to develop

²⁸⁴ Shannon E. Martin, "Us Media Pools and Military Interventions in the 1980s and 1990s," *Journal of Peace Research* 43, no. 5 (2006): 608.

²⁸⁵ Aday et al: 15.

stories from the perspective of the US military. It also presented the media with an unprecedented opportunity to report negatively on the implementation of US military strategy on the front lines, which largely began to appear during the second week of military operations. For example, several stories referring to “two week jitters” appeared across major US media outlets when a major sandstorm slowed the advance of US forces toward Baghdad.²⁸⁶ Some of the resulting headlines included “Questions Raised About Invasion Force: Some Ex-Gulf War Commanders Say U.S. Needs More Troops, Another Armored Division,” “Allies’ Pre-War Assumptions Fall Short As Iraqi Resistance Stiffens,” and “Sandstorm Brings Forces to Grinding Halt.”²⁸⁷ Embedded reporters expressed to domestic audiences that US forces had been completely stopped by the bad weather, a result of poor planning in a desert environment. However, media reports of major difficulties proved to be unfounded as US forces continued to move on Iraqi roads towards Karbala and the outskirts of Baghdad.²⁸⁸ According to an assessment of the progress by a senior Marine commander, “its regiments needed and expected no pause.”²⁸⁹ Indeed, as the force was designed to operate lightly and to keep pressing the enemy it was able to continue its operations despite distancing itself from the slow

²⁸⁶ Douglas Kellner, “Media Propaganda and Spectacle in the War on Iraq: A Critique of U.S. Broadcasting Networks,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 3 (August 2004): 332.

²⁸⁷ These and other headlines included: Vernon Loeb and Thomas E. Ricks, “Questions Raised About Invasion Force: Some Ex-Gulf War Commanders Say U.S. Needs More Troops, Another Armored Division,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2003, Barbara Slavin and Vivienne Walt, “Allies’ Pre-War Assumptions Fall Short As Iraqi Resistance Stiffens,” *USA Today*, March 25, 2003, Ellen Knickmeyer, “Sandstorm Brings Forces to Grinding Halt,” *Washington Times*, March 25, 2003, Ronald Brownstein, “Iraq Forcing Longer, Conventional War,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2003, Richard T. Cooper and Paul Richter, “Former Commanders Question U.S. Strategy,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2003, and Thomas E. Ricks, “War Could Last Months, Officers Say,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2003.

²⁸⁸ John Keegan, *The Iraq War* (London, UK: Hutchinson, 2004), 155.

²⁸⁹ Francis J. West and Ray L. Smith, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2003), 83.

moving logistics vehicles.²⁹⁰ Thus, some units were preparing to assault cities along the Tigris river before ordered to pause by commanders of the 3rd Infantry Division.²⁹¹ Moreover, many units had progressed so quickly in the sandstorm they were forced to backtrack 23 miles to meet the rest of the division.²⁹² As a result, many embedded units received little or no coverage because operations were progressing far more quickly than could have been anticipated.

In addition, embedded press during this period expressed concern that US planning was inadequate, particularly with respect to troop and equipment levels, and commented that US strategy was overly ambitious and unworkable.²⁹³ US strategic planners had predicted that a strong strike through southern Iraq toward Baghdad would eliminate Baathist strongholds and undermine the resolve of the Iraqi forces defending Baghdad.²⁹⁴ Early press reports reflected commentary by former US military officers including Wesley Clark and Desert Storm division commander Thomas Rhame. Both made frequent appearances on television during this period to criticize US force levels and equipment leading to speculation that the war could last for months.²⁹⁵ Despite the collective experience of these commanders, their criticism in the media did not appear to have an observable effect on strategy. Indeed, although US planners had a limited

²⁹⁰ Michael DeLong and Noah Lukeman, *Inside Centcom: The Unvarnished Truth About the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 102-103, Nicholas E. Reynolds, *Basrah, Baghdad, and Beyond: The U.S. Marine Corps in the Second Iraq War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), West and Smith, 83.

²⁹¹ Reynolds, 90.

²⁹² Keegan, 156.

²⁹³ Christopher Paul and James J. Kim, "Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 55-56.

²⁹⁴ Murray Williamson and Robert H. Scales, *The Iraq War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 195-208.

timeline and far fewer forces than were deployed in 1991, the Iraqi Army's personnel and equipment had never fully recovered from Operation Desert Storm. For example, in 1991 the on paper strength of the Iraqi regular army was over forty divisions, by 2003 the army reported seventeen divisions, and it had less than half the equipment it operated in 1991 including just 2,000 largely obsolete tanks.²⁹⁶ Lacking a large and well-equipped army, US forces relied on a strategy of speed and tactical superiority to reach Baghdad which showed to be quite effective during the initial stages of the war. Moreover, the continued progress of US forces following the sandstorm largely negated calls to deploy the 4th Infantry Division which was originally slated to enter through Turkey, or call up additional heavy armor divisions behind held in reserve.²⁹⁷

Moreover, as the sandstorm lifted, US forces resumed their original strategy of bypassing major cities in southern Iraq to hit Baghdad directly.²⁹⁸ Statements by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld emphasized the progress made by US ground forces during the opening weeks of the campaign and pointed out that, at the time of heightened media criticism over alleged slow progress and despite the weather, US forces were within 50 miles of Baghdad.²⁹⁹ Indeed, despite the slowdown of US forces the operation went more smoothly than US planners could have anticipated. Taking these examples into account, these events not only demonstrate that a tangible phenomena, the

²⁹⁵ West and Smith, 82.

²⁹⁶ Keegan, 128-129.

²⁹⁷ Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E. Griffith Jr., "Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model " *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/06): 141, Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 457, Ricks, *Fiasco*, 121.

²⁹⁸ Romesh Ratnesar, *Sticking to His Guns* (cited November 21, 2005); available from <http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/31/timep.guns.tm/index.html>, 1.

sand storm, could and did have a temporary effect on the speed of prosecution of US strategy, but also that media coverage of the problems created by this phenomenon had no discernable effect on the course of US strategy during this period of the Iraq War.

The news media was further isolated from senior officials during this conflict by the level of certainty demonstrated by US officials, even to criticism from senior military advisers. Prior to the invasion, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended 250,000 to 300,000 troops be used to secure Iraq, but these numbers were later revised by Rumsfeld and his staff in the weeks before the war to 140,000.³⁰⁰ The force plan developed by the Joint Chiefs was designed to be used as a guide for the number of troops that would be needed in the occupation phase of the war. However, Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz had a dramatically different view of US troop levels, arguing that he did not see, "why it would take more troops to occupy the country than to take down the regime."³⁰¹ Any increase in troop requests had to be approved after careful scrutiny by Rumsfeld and his deputy, resulting in many conservative estimates for occupation force levels being significantly reduced.³⁰² This further contributed to strain among Pentagon staff and CENTCOM commanders in Iraq as numbers had to be reviewed frequently before approval severely increasing opportunity costs of the mission.³⁰³ Consequently, this is particularly important because the level of resolve of the US executive to reject

²⁹⁹ Donald Rumsfeld and General Frank Myers, "Dod News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), March 28, 2003), 1.

³⁰⁰ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 287.

³⁰¹ Ricks, 123.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁰³ Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 251-253, Gregory Hooker, *Shaping the Plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Role*

troop recommendations from senior military advisers demonstrates the limited influence the news media could have despite the frequency and accuracy of their reports.

The Joint Chiefs displayed similar problems influencing decision-making in the months leading up to the conflict. In early 2003, former Joint Chiefs Chairman General Hugh Shelton stated publicly at a Pentagon meeting that he felt troop levels were insufficient to conduct the full scale invasion requested by DoD.³⁰⁴ His concerns were echoed by other senior members of the US Army including General Eric Shinseki, who reporting his concerns directly to Congress and, consequently, he was later dismissed by DoD.³⁰⁵ Senior military commanders were especially critical of plans to remove two heavy tank divisions from the invasion force, a measure reportedly to increase efficiency by using rapidly mobile forces rather than slower-moving heavy units. In addition, requests to have the force numbers reviewed were rejected many times by senior DoD officials, straining relations between the two sides.³⁰⁶ Despite the apparent need for additional troops, Rumsfeld's earlier commitment in 2000 to reform and shrink the US military by using small mobile forces and technology overrode, to him, the collective experience of senior military staff. According to a senior general close to the process, "the running argument was eroding relations with Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz and so needed to be brought to an end."³⁰⁷

of Military Intelligence Assessments (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), 22, Ricks, *Fiasco*, 122.

³⁰⁴ John P. Burke, "The Contemporary Presidency: Condoleezza Rice as NSC Adviser: A Case Study of the Honest Broker Role," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005): 568.

³⁰⁵ James Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," *Atlantic Monthly* 293, no. 1 (2004): 64-65, 73, Michael R. Gordon, "The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2004.

³⁰⁶ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 119.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

Although orders to deploy the 1st Armored Division were eventually accepted, it was the result of months of immense pressure and internal criticism from the Joint Chiefs that one of the two units needed to be put into service to accomplish the goals of the US administration.³⁰⁸ In this way, by presenting the use of heavy armor as being essential to accomplishing US strategic goals in Iraq, which required crippling Iraqi forces and occupying territory, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz reluctantly accepted.³⁰⁹ Many of the generals opposing the US administrations plan including Shinseki were later forced into retirement following this and other battles over troop support levels. Moreover, where Rumsfeld did agree with the US Army staff, including Richard Myers, Peter Pace, and Tommy Franks, who collaborated with the Bush administration on the invasion and occupation strategy in 2002, were selected because of their reluctance to be critical of their superiors and their ability to “play politics.”³¹⁰ Thus, while some senior personnel were critical of the invasion plan, these men were often forced to retire and those willing to work with the Bush administration on the invasion and restructuring plan were promoted into senior military positions. Taking this into account, the example set by the major combat phase of Iraq is highly supportive of hypotheses H1 and H2 and the central tenets of groupthink.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 120.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 120, 127.

³¹⁰ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 3-5.

The Iraq Insurgency

The First Major Battle, Fallujah 2004

The Iraqi insurgency, which has been active since 2003, has seriously delayed the efforts of US forces to establish peaceful conditions in Iraq. Compounding this difficulty, reporting on the effectiveness of the US counterinsurgency strategy has been largely negative. For example, an article that appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* during the US operations in Fallujah in November, 2004, the largest single operation in the counterinsurgency campaign, commented that, "Iraqi insurgents based in Fallujah presented U.S. military forces with two choices, one bad and the other worse. Marines opted for the bad one Monday, assaulting the city with the understanding that civilians as well as fighters would be killed and Arab passions would be inflamed far outside Fallujah and Iraq."³¹¹ The coverage of the application of American military strategy in Fallujah was symptomatic of a general trend in coverage of the US counterinsurgency operation in Iraq, wherein the news media emphasized US casualties, successful insurgent attacks on Iraqi civilians, and has largely downplayed the success of the strategy in stabilizing most of the country. During Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, US and Iraqi forces managed to strike against major insurgent bases in Fallujah, clearing house to house of enemy combatants.³¹² The combined ground and air operation is credited with eliminating thousands of insurgents in the city during the month of November. However, again, articles published by news organizations like *The Associated Press* argued that the US-

³¹¹ David Walsh, *Us Media Applauds Destruction of Fallujah* (cited November 17, 2005); available from <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/nov2004/fall-n17.shtml>, 1.

³¹² Christopher M. Ford, "Speak No Evil: Targeting a Population's Neutrality to Defeat an Insurgency," *Parameters*, no. 35 (Summer 2005): 60.

led military actions turned Fallujah into a safe haven for insurgents, and alleged that military operations concentrated against civilian targets.³¹³ Nevertheless, despite consistently negative coverage of the application of US strategy in Fallujah, the United States resisted changing the course of its strategy.

Moreover, support for the Iraqi Security Forces has also been crucial to US operations to counter enemy tactics of using religious sites as fortifications in an effort to limit US attacks. Indeed, similar tactics were used in Vietnam by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces, wherein they used the cover of small villages, such as Cam Ne, to attack US forces, which in the presence of the news media caused alarm that US forces were causing reckless civilian casualties. Therefore, US decision-makers, supporting the “clear, hold, and build” strategy, have increasingly transferred responsibility for clearing civilian and in particular religious buildings to the ISF. For example, when attacking a mosque in Fallujah that was used as a barracks for insurgent forces, the ISF invaded the building clearing room to room, a tactic US commanders felt was better suited to an Arab force.³¹⁴ Moreover, Iraqi forces were more successful than US units in clearing the city of civilians, and using the remaining residents to help them find hidden weapons caches used by insurgents.³¹⁵ The promotion of Iraqi forces in the battle for state-wide security is consistent with the strategy established by US decision-makers as this battle ended the first of many in the volatile al Anbar province. Promoting the ISF was supported by Bush who saw this battle as critical to securing Iraq from insurgent forces, and as a result went

³¹³ Robert H. Reid, "Analysis: A Fine Balance," *The Associated Press*, November 10, 2004.

³¹⁴ Ron E. Hassner, "Fighting Insurgency on Sacred Ground," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 156.

³¹⁵ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 406.

ahead with the attack, despite initial criticism from Prime Minister Iyad Allawi who aimed to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.³¹⁶ The media, in turn, was not effective in changing the focus of US strategy in Fallujah.

In addition, when the news media reported the difficulties faced by US planners due to low numbers of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) participating in during the initial stages of the Fallujah assault, this did not directly impact the US strategy of progressively turning over security responsibilities to Iraqi soldiers. For example, during Operation Phantom Fury, the ISF fought and secured the neighbourhood of Jolan, and on November 11, 2004, was given responsibility for its security.³¹⁷ In addition, under the leadership of the US 2nd Marine Division, the ISF deployed 4,200 soldiers to secure the al Anbar province, which includes Fallujah, and has been progressively delegated greater responsibility for patrols of the Syrian border.³¹⁸ The ISF displayed the ability to protect these areas and maintain secure traffic between the borders of the two states with limited US oversight. These operations are consistent with the strategy set out by the US executive during 2003, wherein US forces would secure territories for eventual transfer to the ISF.³¹⁹ Indeed, a statement made by a senior US General in October 2005, noted that, “we have right now 18 battalions of Iraqi security forces – Iraqi army forces currently working with our folks in this area. I estimate that by November about half of those will

³¹⁶ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 359.

³¹⁷ John Pike, *Operation Al-Fajr. (Dawn) Operation Phantom Fury* (cited November 22, 2005); available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oif-phantom-fury-fallujah.htm>, 1.

³¹⁸ US Department of State, "Report on Iraq Relief and Reconstruction," (United States Department of State, Section 2207, April 6, 2005), 7.

³¹⁹ Hess, 1.

be at a level where they will be able to take the lead in such things as planning, coordinating and actually executing operations.”³²⁰

Equally important, the difficulty faced by Iraqi Security Forces in securing major violent uprisings by insurgent groups in Fallujah has not been a major concern of administration officials. For example, on November 12, 2004, during the battle of Fallujah former Secretary of State Colin Powell supported increasing US troop levels in response to his belief that US, British, and Iraqi troop levels were too low to provide security and capture and hold terrain.³²¹ Moreover, he recommended replacing Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense due to his miscalculation of the insurgency and reluctance to change US strategy.³²² However, this strong opposition to US strategy resulted in the resignation of Powell and the appointment of Rice who, like Bush, strongly opposed disrupting the war effort and the overall momentum achieved in these battles.³²³ Therefore, even internal government pressure could not influence US strategy because of opposition within the administration to any changes that would be perceived as admitting past mistakes, and thus the news media could not be influential in this political environment.

Najaf

The United States received similarly negative reporting during its counterinsurgency operation in Najaf. During the month of August 2004, attempts by US

³²⁰ Stephen T. Johnson, "Briefing with Major General Stephen T. Johnson," ed. Department of Defense (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), 2005), 1.

³²¹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 407.

³²² Woodward, *State of Denial*, 361.

Marines and the ISF to attack the forces of Muqtata al Sadr were met with critical reporting of damages to holy buildings in the city.³²⁴ According to Kenneth Payne's analysis of the media reports of this operation, "media reporting of hardships in the town and of considerable damage to urban environments... [led to] political pressure to limit the assault quickly."³²⁵ However, as Donald Rumsfeld countered, the military had the capacity to defeat Sadr's militia, but decided instead to make a negotiated settlement to end the operation.³²⁶ As al Sadr's militia's base of operations was in the city's major mosque, the US did not want to inflict further damage on a building of religious significance to the population. Instead, the negotiated settlement represented another method for achieving the same end for the operation and ensured that the city could be secured for rebuilding, and be transferred to the ISF. Rumsfeld went on to argue that coalition forces "would have successfully retaken the city. It turned out they didn't have to. The fact that it was clear to Sadr and his crowd, the militia, that they did have the ability to do that is what without question led Sadr to encourage his militia to get out of town."³²⁷ Moreover, the United States began transferring authority for provincial security of Najaf to the ISF in November, 2004, which allowed Iraqi forces to conduct their own planning and operations outside of the authority of the US Marines.³²⁸ This is, once

³²³ Hills: 631, Woodward, *State of Denial*, 361.

³²⁴ Patrick J. McDonnell, "Iraqi City Lies in Ruins," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2004, Kirk Vick, "Iraqi Holy City Left Broken by Urban Warfare," *The Washington Post* August 27, 2004.

³²⁵ Kenneth Payne, "The Media as an Instrument of War," *Parameters*, no. 35 (Spring 2005): 88-89.

³²⁶ Rumsfeld, "Secretary Rumsfeld's Speech at the National Press Club," 1.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ American Forces Press Service, *Iraqi Army Takes Control of Najaf; U.S. Soldier Killed by IED* (cited November 22, 2005); available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2005/20050907_2632.html, 1, American Forces Press Service, *Iraqi Security Forces Take Control of Najaf Province* (cited November 22, 2005); available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Nov2004/n11302004_2004113003.html, 1.

again, consistent with the US strategy in Iraq to transition responsibility for Iraqi security to the ISF. This transition was completed in Najaf by September, 2005.³²⁹

While some argue that the frequency of news reporting on Iraq fell during the spring and summer of 2004, the death of the 1,000th US soldier in the short war only increased calls to change US strategy. For example, reports in newspapers and on television highlighted that of the 1,000 deaths, 647 had occurred since May 1, 2003, when major combat operations were declared over.³³⁰ Following the resolution of US operations in Najaf, portions of the Mehdi Army moved to the Baghdad suburb of Sadr city and rejoined the battle against American forces, which began to be covered extensively as US casualties reached the important milestone.³³¹ However, these reports did not appear to influence US strategy. For example, in early September 2004, close members of the administration Rice and Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director, approached the president about improving the White House's message on Iraq, but the request was ignored by the president who, once again, refused to discuss mistakes or reconsider his strategy even to his closest aides.³³² Moreover, during October 2004, Bush felt that there was little reason to change US strategy as coalition and Iraqi forces fought pitched battles against al Sadr's forces in the Haifa street area of Sadr City, and from October 7 and 9, insurgent forces agreed to a truce and many surrendered their weapons. Although still a volatile area of the city, US forces transitioned parts of Sadr City to Iraqi control in March 2005 and the remainder of these areas to the ISF in 2007 as

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Isikoff and Corn, 371.

³³¹ Tom Bowman and Gail Gibson, "U.S. Military Deaths Climb Beyond 1,000: Grim Milestone May Spur Turning Point, Analysts Say," *Baltimore Sun*, September 8, 2004, 1.

Iraqi forces took the lead in planning and conducting counter-insurgency operations in parts of Baghdad.³³³ Therefore, despite constantly negative coverage of US casualties and progress in the ISF, the news media could not influence US strategy or decision-makers who have shown to be resistant to criticism despite the frequency and support of these reports inside the US executive branch of government.

The War in 2005 and 2006

The generally negative tone of media reporting, coming from the majority of the American print and televised media, has brought into question the US strategy to remain in post-Saddam Iraq. A study commissioned by Pew Research concluded that the steady stream of largely negative reporting is “significantly undermining support for U.S. military operations there.”³³⁴ Despite this, US political and military decision-makers did not change the direction of military strategy to counter rising criticism. Instead, the US administration demonstrated resolve in maintaining the Iraq strategy outlined above, which includes destruction of the insurgency operation mounted against US forces. For example, in statements made in 2004 and in the 2005 State of the Union Address, President Bush maintained that, despite the increased violence against American forces, troops would remain to defeat the insurgency.³³⁵ Furthermore, in statements made to the

³³² Woodward, *State of Denial*, 332.

³³³ Anthony H. Cordesman and Patrick Baetjer, *Iraqi Security Forces: A Strategy for Success* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2005), 200-201, George W. Bush, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 2007), 31.

³³⁴ Andrew Kohut and Jodie Allen, "Guantanamo Prisoner Mistreatment Seen as Isolated Incidents, Iraq News Increases Calls for Troop Withdrawal," (The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press), 2.

³³⁵ George W. Bush and Iyal Allawi, Bush, Allawi Affirm Commitment to Overcome Insurgency, (cited November 5, 2005); available from <http://japan.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-20040927-38.html>, 1, and George W.

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in October, 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argued clearly that, “our strategy – the key – is to clear, hold, and build: clear areas from insurgent control, hold them securely, and build durable, national Iraqi institutions.”³³⁶ These expressions of the Bush administration’s resolve to maintain effectively the same strategy in Iraq that it has followed since the end of major combat operations suggests that, despite the high level of media criticism of the US military strategy in Iraq, the news media has had little influence on the course of American strategy in this conflict.

Media criticism over the direction of military strategy has continued into late 2005. Statements by US Congressman John Murtha in November, 2005, unleashed a new wave of media criticism of US strategy in Iraq and have added pressure to the US administration to set an end date for operations there.³³⁷ However, repeated statements from members of the US executive suggest that a state of strategic certainty exists in the Bush administration’s resolve to reaffirm the long term commitment to the counterinsurgency strategy. Furthermore, no end date has been publicly identified for the strategy despite growing concern in the news media for the mission to end. For example, Donald Rumsfeld speaking in July, argued that: “Insurgencies tend to go on five, six, eight, 10, 12 years,” and that; “We’re going to create an environment that the Iraqi people

Bush, State of the Union Address 2005, (The White House, cited November 5, 2005); available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>, 7.

³³⁶ Rice, 1.

³³⁷ Charles Babington, "Hawkish Democrat Joins Call for Pullout. GOP Assails Murtha's Demand to Leave Iraq," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 2005.

and the Iraqi security forces can win against that insurgency.”³³⁸ Likewise, Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker stated that the US will prepare for four years in Iraq, departing after President Bush leaves office.³³⁹ Although the numbers provided in these statements differ, they all maintain a multiyear commitment to the existing US strategy of transition to the ISF which is anticipated to be completed in 2008.³⁴⁰ Moreover, on November 29, 2005, President Bush made statements reinforcing the administration’s commitments to its counterinsurgency strategy by stating that US forces will not leave the state “without having achieved victory.”³⁴¹

In addition, as the counter-insurgency operations have shifted away from major battles to basic security and anti-terrorist operations the strategy has moved into the phases of holding, and rebuilding Iraq, a plan being conducted increasingly under the supervision of Iraqi forces. At the same time reporters increasingly focused on a potential civil war developing in Iraq and criticized US decision-makers for ignoring growing unrest in some areas of Iraq.³⁴² Despite these frequent negative reports and its coverage on television, in newspapers, and on the internet members of the US administration have refused to acknowledge problems in Iraq. For example, in his public radio address on

³³⁸ The Associated Press, *Rumsfeld Braces for More Violence in Iraq: Says Insurgency Could Endure 'for Any Number of Years,' Perhaps until 2017* (Associated Press, cited November 14, 2005); available from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8366705/>, 1.

³³⁹ The Associated Press, "Army Planning for Four More Years in Iraq: Top General Says U.S. Military Prepared for 'Worst Case'," *The Associated Press*, August 20, 2005.

³⁴⁰ Bush, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," (June 2007), 1,

³⁴¹ CNN, *Bush: No Iraq Pullout without Victory: Democratic Senator Urges President to Give 'Unvarnished' Picture*. (cited November 29, 2005); available from <http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/11/29/us.iraq/index.html>, 1.

³⁴² Wolf Blitzer, "Iraq on the Brink; Port Delay Deal," in *The Situation Room* (CNN, February 24, 2006), 1, Editorial Desk; SECTA, "Iraq on the Brink," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2006, 1, Michael Paul Williams, "Numbers Alone Can't Measure Casualties from War in Iraq," *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 31, 2006, 1.

March 2006, Bush once again reiterated his belief in the success of the strategy, noting that “in the past three years, Iraqis have gone from living under a brutal tyrant to liberation, sovereignty, free elections, a constitutional referendum, and last December, elections of a fully constitutional government.”³⁴³ Likewise in private conversations between Rice and Cheney in 2005, Cheney reiterated that the US would do whatever is necessary to win in Iraq and, once again, refused renewed calls to replace Rumsfeld from former top army generals and staff.³⁴⁴ Even calls from former Bush Sr. administration official Brent Scowcroft who wanted the president to consider replacing Rumsfeld were met with scorn from Bush who argued forcefully that, “I’m sick and tired of getting papers from Brent Scowcroft telling me what to do, and I never want to see another one again.”³⁴⁵ In addition, the US administration has repeatedly noted recent successes in stabilizing former strong insurgent areas by Iraqi forces. Indeed, according to an analysis by Anthony Cordesman, Iraqi forces have “now deployed in the Mosul area, active in the greater Baghdad area, operating in Fallujah and Ar Ramadi, deployed at An Numaniyah and Scania, and beginning to deploy in the west in al Anbar.”³⁴⁶ Consequently, as these units take on an increasingly large security role they have taken the lead in preparing and coordinating operations and, in some cases, now outnumber US forces in major anti-insurgent operations.

³⁴³ George W. Bush, "President's Radio Address," (Washington, DC: March 18, 2006).

³⁴⁴ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 456.

³⁴⁵ Cockburn, 219.

³⁴⁶ Cordesman and Baetjer, 210.

The 2006 Congressional Election and “The New Way Forward”

The gradual decline in supportive news coverage in the run up to the 2006 Congressional election, including reports of increases in bombings and their destructive aftermath during the summer, appears to have influenced US public opinion. The loss of the majority in the US Congress and Senate to the Democratic Party had an inevitable effect on the Bush administration, which resulted in the immediate dismissal of Rumsfeld and the appointment of a new Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates. This appointment resulted in a surge of US forces being deployed to Iraq to help secure important zones, primarily Baghdad, as a major component of the new six point strategy titled “the New Way Forward in Iraq.”³⁴⁷ Therefore, the news media appears to have been influential on decision-makers, if indirect, and the administrations groupthink was perhaps broken due to the firing of Rumsfeld and the change in US strategy that appeared in early 2007.

Despite these important events, the news media does not appear to have influenced US strategy or the strategic certainty in the Bush administration. During the summer of 2006, critical coverage of escalating violence in many parts of Iraq, supported by reports of insurgent attacks increasing to 900 in May 2006, news reporters, once again, attempted to increase pressure on the Bush administration to change their military strategy.³⁴⁸ Instead of having the intended effect, those close to the administration note that Bush and Rumsfeld scored US and coalition casualties against insurgents killed and by these numbers interpreted these recent skirmishes as victories for US forces.

³⁴⁷ George W. Bush, “Initial Benchmark Assessment Report,” (Washington, D.C.: The White House, July 12, 2007), 2.

³⁴⁸ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 480.

According to one official, Bush once remarked referring to the tally sheets after a battle with insurgent forces that “they killed three of ours. How many did we kill of them?”³⁴⁹ Efforts to convince Bush of the importance of casualty aversion to the US public and media was ineffective as he interpreted coalition success on raw data instead of tangible results. Moreover, Rumsfeld appeared more distant to the violence in Iraq and coverage of it during the months leading up to the election. One of Rumsfeld’s top aides, Torie Clarke, had brought in issues of *Newsweek* and *Time* for Rumsfeld to get an idea of what the US public was reading; however, by summer 2006 this process had stopped as Rumsfeld no longer appeared concerned with press reports despite rising casualties, and growing domestic unrest, and no one on his staff dared to contradict him.³⁵⁰ Therefore, Bush and members of his administration were not concerned about escalating violence so long as it showed that insurgent forces were being killed in higher numbers, a condition consistent with the illusion of invulnerability and direct pressure symptoms of groupthink.

In addition, following the US congressional election in 2006, the Bush administration decided to fire Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense as a measure to calm public criticism of the war. Although Bush and Cheney remained supportive of Rumsfeld assertive policies in Iraq, they had little choice but to replace Rumsfeld as the Republican Party was reeling from the election. Despite this and the appointment of Secretary Gates,

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 482.

³⁵⁰ Cockburn, 217-218.

a member of the Iraq Study Group, the US strategy did not change.³⁵¹ Indeed, the New Way Forward Strategy announced on January 10, 2007, merely has a new name as the central goals of the “clear, hold, and build” security strategy conceived in 2003 remain. For example, in the summary report of the strategy released by the White House, the security side of the strategy keeps Iraqi forces in the lead to isolate extremists and protect the population, and emphasizing, above all, that the US should “accelerate transition to Iraqi responsibility and increase Iraqi ownership.”³⁵² Furthermore in Bush’s statements unveiling the newly titled US strategy in January 2007, he maintains that “our troops have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis *clear* and *secure* neighbourhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of provided the security that Baghdad needs.”³⁵³ Bush’s resolve to continue essentially the same strategy, which has only changed the word “hold” to “secure” and given a more tangible goal of building security and Iraqi forces in major populated areas, suggests that the news media has not influenced the Bush administration despite the firing of Rumsfeld as a result of the congressional election.

Moreover, the strategy did not change due in large part to Gates holding a similar ideological and social background to members of the Bush administration. In statements made in November 1997 and in the days before the 2003 invasion he argued that the use of force was the only method US decision-makers had available in regards to dealing

³⁵¹ Michael A. Fletcher and Peter Baker, "Bush Ousts Embattled Rumsfeld: Democrats near Control of Senate: Ex-Cia Chief Robert Gates Nominated to Lead Pentagon," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2006.

³⁵² Bush, "Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq," 1.

with Hussein. Although he may have found the mission more difficult than Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz did in 2003, he admitted at the time that an invasion was “a manageable task.”³⁵⁴ Moreover, like Cheney, Gates had worked closely with the administration of Bush Sr. as Deputy National Security adviser and held many of the same views on Iraq, and Saddam in particular, as difficult to deal with. He admitted, like much of the intelligence community, to have supported US war aims in 2003.³⁵⁵ As a matter of personality, Gates appears to share many of traits with the current administration and this has been reflected in the limited changes to US strategy in 2007 despite low public support for the war and increasing negative coverage from all forms of media.

For example, the report *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, released in June 2007, incorporates the new strategy to provide additional security as part of the US surge to Baghdad, but the report continues to emphasize the growth of Iraqi Security Forces and the transition of authority of these units.³⁵⁶ Similar statements and data on the transfer of provincial authority to the Iraqi government have appeared in previous reports in 2006 and early 2007, and in public statements made by members of the Bush administration over more than a year.³⁵⁷ US forces were intended to be increased as a

³⁵³ Lorry M. Fenner, "Stand up and Be Counted: The Continuing Challenge of Building the Iraqi Security Forces," (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, 2007), 23.

³⁵⁴ Wolf Blitzer, *The Situation Room: Can Republicans, Democrats Work Together?* (CNN).

³⁵⁵ The Wall Street Journal, "Robert Gates: In His Own Words," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 8 2006, 1.

³⁵⁶ Bush, "Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq."

³⁵⁷ Bush, "Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq," 1, George W. Bush, "Initial Benchmark Assessment Report," (Washington, D.C.: The White House, June 12 2007), 1, George W. Bush, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 2007), 1, George W. Bush, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, August 2006), 1, George W. Bush, "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," (Washington, D.C.: The White House, November 2005), 1.

temporary measure, as part of the Iraqi led Baghdad Security Plan, which has been described by Gates as being considered to last months rather than years.³⁵⁸ Although the surge has lasted longer than initially anticipated, US forces continue to shift to more demanding combat zones and transition provincial authority to the ISF, a goal consistent with the November 2005 *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* and subsequent reports.³⁵⁹ This is further supported by the July 2007 assessment of progress in Iraq, which argues that “our overarching strategy continues to emphasize a transition to the Iraqi Government and its security forces,” and that the New Way Forward Strategy was only a response to an upsurge in violence by insurgents in the summer and fall of 2006.³⁶⁰ Moreover, as four of eighteen provinces have been fully transferred to Iraqi control, three more will transition within the next few months, and all provinces are scheduled to transfer to Iraqi authority by March 2008, US decision-makers have only reinforced their cohesive view of US strategy as successful in the face of mounting media criticism.³⁶¹ As these points make clear, the US executive remains deeply committed to its existing strategy and have resisted all external pressure to change course, including those generated by the American news media.

³⁵⁸ Robert Gates and Peter Pace, "DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates and Gen. Pace from Pentagon," (Department of Defense, February 2, 2007), 2.

³⁵⁹ Bush, "Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq," 1, Bush, "Initial Benchmark Assessment Report," 1, Bush, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," 1, Bush, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," 1, Bush, "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," 1.

³⁶⁰ Bush, "Initial Benchmark Assessment Report," 2.

³⁶¹ States, 29.

Conclusion

This analysis of decision-making in the Iraq War has shown that the groupthink tendency of the Bush administration prevented any outside information from influencing the US executive. The Bush cabinet has shown significant rivalry among some of its key members, in particular Powell against like-minded members Rumsfeld and Cheney. The inability of Powell to change US strategy, due in large part to his limited access to the President, is wholly consistent with the central tenets of the groupthink theory. In addition, the minor changes to the “clear, hold, and build” strategy in 2007 cannot be attributed directly to media pressure or to the 2006 election as increasing violence throughout the previous summer members had already received reaction within the Bush administration which had already committed to the newly formed Baghdad Security Plan to counteract violence in the Iraqi capital and populated areas in the summer.³⁶² The US cabinet, moreover, has displayed strategic certainty in the main objectives of their strategy, which has made media influence in this case very difficult to determine. Ultimately, while the news media is an important and influential group in some conflicts, in cases where decision-makers demonstrate groupthink, and are strategically certain of their goals, the news media cannot be influential despite the frequency and intensity of coverage.

³⁶² Woodward, *State of Denial*, 480, David McKeeby, “Baghdad Security Plan Progressing, Says Coalition Spokesman: Iraqis securing capital, assuming military command, pursuing reconciliation,” (US Department of State, August 28 2006).

CHAPTER 5 : FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has demonstrated the potential for groupthink to serve as a barrier to outside influences on military strategy in international conflicts. In Vietnam, it was found that the news media was influential because the US administrations examined were open to, and seeking, alternative opinions on US strategy as the war progressed. In contrast, the George W. Bush administration resisted outside influences and moved to suppress critical opinion even within the US cabinet, factors consistent with the central tenets of Janis' theory. Although this paper reviewed only two cases, the results do suggest that the news media can influence strategy when members of the decision-making group are receptive to criticism that challenges majority opinion.

The final chapter of this paper provides a summary of conclusions, outlines policy implications derived from these findings, and finally, this chapter explores possible avenues for future research.

Summary of Findings

This paper asked two questions: how, and to what extent, does the degree of strategic certainty present among the core strategic decision-makers in the executive branch of the US government condition their receptiveness to outside criticism and alternative points of view on their preferred strategy? To what extent has news media reporting of the Vietnam and Iraq War influenced the course of American military strategy during these conflicts?

I argued that groupthink can prevent a decision-making group from effectively making decisions due to the tendency for group members to prioritize cohesive decision-

making over the best course of action in a given situation. This occurs when they possess one or more structural conditions which include: lacking norms for requiring methodological procedures, exhibiting signs of insulation from outside groups, lacking the tradition of impartial leadership, and sharing similar backgrounds and ideology. These conditions affect a group's capacity to find a full range of alternative solutions to a problem and can further induce defective decision-making. Thus, when these symptoms occur strategic certainty is almost ensured and will make demonstrating the CNN effect highly improbable. Conversely, the news media can be influential when a decision-making group does not show signs of groupthink and are uncertain of their strategy. If the personalities of one or more members of a group are susceptible to outside influences, such as the news media, under these conditions the news media could potentially be powerful. In turn, this should increase the probability that the decision-making group will change military strategy if a high level of critical reporting is maintained.

In addition, an analysis of news reporting in the Vietnam War, from July 1965 to October 1972, and the Iraq War, from March 2003 to July 2007, showed that the lack of groupthink in Vietnam was an important factor in the news media's ability to influence decision-makers, and in Iraq where groupthink occurred, the media has shown no visible signs of changing US strategy.

Implications for Policy

Personality of Decision-makers in Determining Groupthink

Certainly the most important condition for the presence of groupthink is how each member's personality influences each other when coming to an important policy

decision. As explained in chapter 2, the diverse personalities of group members in the Johnson and Nixon administration's motivated them to search for alternative solutions when they disagreed, such as during planning for Duck Hook. Here, Nixon and Kissinger sought and responded to the opinions of Rogers and Laird despite knowing that one or both would oppose the plan.³⁶³ In addition, Johnson's use of a wide range of advisers with widely varying opinions following the Tet Offensive signalled his concerns for the psychological toll the battle had on him, his staff, and the American public.³⁶⁴ Consequently, so long as a decision-making group includes individuals or groups with differing personalities then the group can be expected to avoid a defective decision-making process.

Moreover, personality could provide an even stronger motivation for members to seek advice from outside the group to support their viewpoint, or find a greater range of information before coming to a decision. Even if the advice brings the group to a poor decision they will still have surveyed alternatives and broken the possibility for group insulation, when groups with similar personality traits and ideologies agree easily, to occur. Taking all this into account, groups that hold differing personalities should not only be motivated to find additional information outside the group, it should also be motivated to find the best possible policy action to take rather than conform to the opinion of the majority of the group's members.

Moreover, motivating members to speak openly to the group about their concerns, even when groupthink symptoms are occurring, could potentially influence the group to

³⁶³ Mitchell: 195.

break the negative aspects of their policy-making process. In addition, by members of the group speaking openly, even within the group, this can potentially remove barriers to outside sources of information being accepted by political elites. It should be noted that, although Colin Powell did speak at times critically to the group, this was very rare. He would often comment on his problems with the US cabinet, Iraq, and members Rumsfeld and Cheney, to like-minded colleagues in the State Department, and on occasion to Condoleezza Rice who did not raise his, or her own, concerns publicly.³⁶⁵ Only after leaving the US Executive did Powell speak directly and openly to Bush about US strategy in Iraq at a meeting of former Secretaries of State on May 12, 2006.³⁶⁶ Although this did not change US strategy, Bush was much more receptive of Powell's advice without the presence of other like-minded members of the US executive and allowed the president to hear an open dialogue about the state of US efforts in Iraq. Therefore, Powell's concerns during his time in the administration often went unheard, in part, because of his reluctance to speak openly to the president and the group, as the president would often receive reassurance from Cheney and Rumsfeld.³⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Powell's reluctance to challenge his opponents publically due to his loyalty to his office, made his opinions ineffective until after he left office.³⁶⁸ Conversely, prior to the escalation decision in Vietnam, George Ball and Hubert Humphrey would be given considerable time to voice

³⁶⁴ Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 158.

³⁶⁵ Burke: 556, 562, DeYoung, 478.

³⁶⁶ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 468-469.

³⁶⁷ DeYoung, 478.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 510.

their concerns to the group, which influenced Johnson and others in the executive to find more information before finally deciding to escalate US forces in 1965.³⁶⁹

To reiterate, when decision-making groups are coming to an important policy decision, having a diverse set of individuals with differing personalities could be important to finding the full range of policy outcomes available in a given situation. With this said, the diverse opinions of the US executives in Vietnam, contrasted against the ideologically similar Bush administration in the Iraq War, proved to be an important factor in the openness of the former group to outside opinion and advice, and the latter group's difficulty in breaking from the symptoms of groupthink.

Potential Expansion of the CNN Effect to Include Personality

Equally important, the inclusion of personality in determining the presence of the CNN effect in international conflict could be an important step in expanding the concept. Previous attempts to narrowly define the CNN effect have failed due to the inability of these studies to link political decision-making with global communications. This could be resolved by including personality as an important factor in decision-making because political actors can prevent the news media from being influential due to their reluctance to acknowledge their reports.³⁷⁰ This contributed to the scenario described in chapter 3, where the news media, though increasingly negative of US strategy, did not influence members of the Bush administration due to their resistance to news reports and

³⁶⁹ Barrett, "The Mythology Surrounding Lyndon Johnson:" 642-663.

³⁷⁰ Gilboa, "Global Television News and Foreign Policy:" 38.

confidence in their strategy.³⁷¹ Indeed, members of the Bush administration frequently opposed requests by the news media to increase troop levels in Operation Iraqi Freedom, made direct statements against their sources and reinforced the central tenets of their strategy despite increasingly negative coverage. Similarly, requests by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to increase troops in 2003 were opposed by Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz in large part because they were convinced that their strategy was correct even after troop levels appeared to be too low to sustain an occupation.³⁷² In this way, the failure of the CNN effect could be explained by observing that the majority of the US executive was highly resistant to any criticism despite its frequency and accuracy, a condition of personality and a central tenet of groupthink.

As an independent actor, the news media is often difficult to associate with political decision-makers as reporters would not be factored into the policy cycle. Yet, decision-makers from Vietnam to Bosnia have cited the news media as being influential despite a lack of direct evidence as it is difficult to gauge impact from newspaper reading or television viewing.³⁷³ However, as explained in Chapter 2, the contrasting views of members of the Johnson and Nixon administration's proved to be the decisive factor in the news media influencing US strategy. This means that the news media can be influential when a set of decision-makers are susceptible to outside sources of information. Therefore, the CNN effect concept should be expanded to include psychological factors that can impact decisions. The Tet Offensive, in particular, is a very

³⁷¹ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 164, 325.

³⁷² Ricks, *Fiasco*, 121.

³⁷³ Gilboa, "The CNN Effect:" 28.

good example of the potential psychological effect the news media can have on strategic decisions. Indeed, as this battle demonstrated US strategy shifted significantly despite the positive defensive efforts of US and ARVN forces against northern Communist soldiers. Conversely, in Iraq, the lack of a major focusing event and the reluctance of the Bush administration to admit to any errors in its planning could not be influenced by the news media despite the level of reporting.

In sum, the CNN effect concept can potentially be used to determine news media influence on political and military elites, but it will need to be expanded to include unique personality traits of decision-making groups in order to prove the influence of news coverage on the policy cycle. As Janis correctly points out, a decision-making group such as the US executive branch is relatively small and centralized, allowing for important indicators found in Iraq, especially the stubbornness exhibited by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, could quite possibly be included in a new interpretation of the CNN effect concept. With this reality in mind, efforts to redefine the CNN effect should move beyond criticism of its connection with policy-makers, and should instead focus on the potential for certain policy-makers' personalities being the key determinate of influence; rather than of an examination of *content* and *keywords* as prime determinates of cause and effect.

Implications for Future Research

This thesis provides a theoretical explanation for how the news media can influence US strategy in select situations. It proposed hypotheses that need further testing. The arguments for the absence of groupthink making way for news media

influence in the Vietnam case, and the inability for the news media to influence the highly cohesive US executive in Iraq, appear to support the hypotheses of this paper, but questions still remain about how generalizable these findings will be to other post-Vietnam cases and in other news media states. Future research could determine whether either of the two cases being considered are unique and whether strategic changes could be attributed to the news media or other salient factors. Moreover, groupthink and research on decision-making groups could be expanded to include additional cases that are not considered to be military fiascos in order to determine if groupthink is likely to occur in highly successful operations, such as the Persian Gulf War or Kosovo. Furthermore, this research could be valuable in assessing cases where an intervention did not occur, such as Rwanda, to determine to what extent the personality of the core group of decision-makers influenced the decision to oppose an intervention. Indeed, as noted above, as the majority of cases of media influence occurred in the 1990s as humanitarian and human security operations, determining the extent that personality effects entering into and exiting a conflict could be crucial to proving the CNN effect. Taking this into account, a necessary avenue for future research would be to expand the number of cases considered and to test groupthink, and an expanded CNN effect concept as outlined above, in the full range of post-Vietnam cases or in states such as Canada, the United Kingdom, or any other states with a large and independent news corps.

Conclusion

Testing the hypotheses of this paper involved two case studies: the US intervention in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 and the Iraq War from 2003 to July 2007. The

results of this analysis lend support for these hypotheses and suggest that, in conflicts where strategic certainty exists, the news media should not have significant influence on the course of strategy. Moreover, the results of this analysis suggest that small decision-making groups showing signs of groupthink, combined with strategic certainty, make news media influence virtually impossible. Taken together, these results suggest that the CNN effect concept should be re-evaluated, as outlined above, and that groupthink, or the key variable, personality, should be further tested as a determinate of resistance to strategic changes in other cases of highly negative media reporting in international conflict.

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