

Vietnam and the Presidency

TRANSCRIPT

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Ray Suarez: From American Public Media, this is an *American RadioWorks* special report: Vietnam and the Presidency. There is no greater test of a president than leading a nation in war.

Lyndon Johnson: I can't get out. I just can't be the architect of surrender.

Vietnam tested four American presidents.

Jack Valenti: No matter what mighty army you are, conquering a foreign land, you cannot win against an insurgency that springs from the population with their traditions and their religion and their culture.

As America fights a new, increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, the lessons of Vietnam become more vital.

Al Haig: We didn't lose Vietnam. We quit Vietnam. We strangled our effort.

Tim Naftali: In a democracy, it is hard to tell mothers who have already lost sons that the war they died for was actually a war of choice and not necessity.

I'm Ray Suarez. In the coming hour, Vietnam and the Presidency - a special report from *American RadioWorks*. First this news update.

Ray Suarez: From American Public Media, this is an *American RadioWorks* special report: Vietnam and the Presidency. I'm Ray Suarez.

Lyndon Johnson: - What do you think about this Vietnam thing? I'd like to hear you talk a little bit.

President Lyndon Johnson picks up the phone in May 1964 to talk about the conflict that will consume his presidency. Vietnam is not yet a full-scale war yet. Johnson's advisors say he should send in U.S. troops to help the government of South Vietnam fight off its communist rival, North Vietnam.

Richard Russell: Frankly, Mr. President, if you were to tell me that I was authorized to settle it as I saw fit, I would respectfully decline and not take it. It's the damn worse mess I ever saw...

Like many U.S. presidents, Johnson seeks advice on difficult issues from a range of people. Unlike most other presidents, Johnson tapes himself getting the advice, in this case, from his trusted friend Senator Richard Russell, a Georgia Democrat.

Richard Russell: I knew we were going to get in this sort of mess when we went in there and I don't see how we're ever going to get out of it without fighting a major war with the Chinese and all of them down there in those rice paddies and jungles. I just don't know what to do...

For historians of war and the American presidency, Vietnam is a special case. With troves of audio recordings, declassified documents and other materials, historians know more about how and why the White House waged war in Vietnam than in any other conflict. A major conference on Vietnam and the Presidency was recently held at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston. It drew together some of the most respected experts on Vietnam. They included scholars, journalists, diplomats - and top White House advisors from the time. Even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger - who rarely speaks in public about Vietnam - came to reflect on the war. For the next hour, *American RadioWorks* will present selections from this historic two-day conference on Vietnam and the Presidency. At a time when the U.S. debates what to do in Iraq, the lessons of Vietnam are more relevant than ever.

We'll start with a talk on the secret white house tapes of Lyndon Johnson. LBJ was president from 1963 to 1969. He expanded America's involvement in Vietnam into a full-scale war. Soon, people began to call Vietnam a quagmire. Johnson blamed the press. He said the media ignored the progress the U.S. was making.

LBJ had his White House offices rigged with a secret recording system to tape meetings and telephone calls. Hundreds of hours of Johnson's tapes are now open to the public. They offer an extraordinary view of a president at war. Presidential historian Timothy Naftali directed the presidential recordings program at the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. He's been appointed to head the Nixon Presidential Library. Naftali says Johnson's recording, including those with his Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, show how tormented LBJ was by the dilemma of Vietnam.

Tim Naftali: "I knew from the start," LBJ told Doris Kearns, later Kearns Goodwin, in 1970, "that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved, the Great Society, in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as an appeaser. And we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything, anywhere on the entire globe."

The Johnson tapes - we have through mid-1966 - do not contradict this image of a tormented leader. Rather they bring Johnson's indecision and agony to life in ways no written words could ever do. Forty years later, to a different generation, caught in a different war, Johnson in his own words, paints for us the bright lines of the box that he felt he was in. In this first clip, it's July 1965. The Saigon government has collapsed in yet another military coup. And Johnson's own military commanders have told him that to rescue South Vietnam, the United States needs to increase its deployments from about 75,000 men to 175,000 men. A year earlier, in August of 1964, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to authorize the use of, quote, "All necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression," unquote, in Vietnam. Listen as Johnson and McNamara discuss the fact that Congress really didn't authorize an Americanization of the war. But they would just have to go out on a limb and do it themselves. It's a

remarkable admission from the President about the limits of Congressional authorization of the use of force.

Lyndon Johnson: I don't believe, that if you ask them to go in with you, I think you'd have a long debate. And if you don't ask them, I think you'll have a long debate about not having asked them . . .

Robert S. McNamara: Yeah.

Johnson: With this kind of a commitment. And even though there's some record behind us, we know ourselves, in our own conscience, that when we asked for this resolution we had no intention of committing this many ground troops-

McNamara: Right. Right.

Johnson: --and we're doing so now. And we know its going to be bad, and the question [*is*]: do we just want to do it out on a limb by ourselves?

Ray Suarez: In July 1965, Johnson spoke with civil rights leader Martin Luther King about the voting rights act pending in Congress. But Johnson also wanted to talk about Vietnam. King had been publicly criticizing Johnson's handling of the war. King's side of the conversation can't be heard. But Johnson explains why he feels compelled to fight in Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson: I've tried to do my best to . . . I've lost about 264 lives up to now, and I could lose 265,000 mighty easy. And I'm trying to keep those zeroes down and at the same time not trigger a conflagration that would be worse if we pulled out. I can't stay there and do nothing. Unless I bomb, they run me out right quick. That's the only pressure we have, and if they'll quit bombing, if they'll quit coming in, if they'll quit tearing up our roads and our highways and quit taking over our camps and bombing our planes and destroying them, well, we'll quit the next day if they'll just leave the folks alone, but they won't do it. So the only pressure we can put on is to try to hold them back as much as we can by taking their bridges out, delaying them, by taking out their ammunition dumps and destroying them, by taking out their radar stations that permit them to shoot down our planes .

Now that's what we've been doing. A good many people, including the military, think that's not near enough; I ought to do a lot more. But I've tried to keep it to that so I won't escalate it and get into trouble with China and with Russia, and I don't want to be a warmonger.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: [Unclear.]

Johnson: If I pulled out, I think that our commitments would be no good anywhere. I think that we'd immediately trigger a situation in Thailand that would be just as bad as it is in Vietnam. I think we'd be right back to the Philippines with problems. I think the Germans would be scared to death that our commitment to them was no good, and God knows what we'd have other places in the world. I think it's the situation we had in Lebanon, I think it's the situation we had in Formosa.

I didn't get us into this. We got into it in '54. Eisenhower and Kennedy were in it deep. There were 33,000 men out there when I came into the presidency. Now, I don't want to pull down the flag and come home running with my tail between my legs, particularly if it's going to create more problems than I got out there, and it would according to all of our best judges. On the other hand, I don't want to get us in war with China and Russia. So I've got a pretty tough problem, and I'm not all wise. I pray every night to get direction and judgment and leadership that permit me to do what's right.

Naftali: Well, three weeks later, on July 28, 1965, Johnson would announce very quietly, actually, that an additional 50 thousand US troops would be sent to Vietnam immediately. And he is immediately worried about opposition.

Two and a half months after this conversation, it's already clear to the Department of Defense that this escalation is not working. This clip does two things. First of all it has a remarkable admission by Robert McNamara that this strategy is failing in Vietnam. This is November 2, 1965. And what's equally interesting is the President is much less interested in that than in the fact that this little-known Harvard professor named Henry Kissinger has just gone out to South Vietnam and has returned and is criticizing the administration. And this is also a sign of McNamara's pessimism about the war.

Johnson: How's your battle going out in Vietnam?

McNamara: Well, pretty well, Mr. President. We will have a paper for you, as I think [*National Security Adviser McGeorge*] Mac [*Bundy*] may have told you-

Johnson: Good.

McNamara: --end [*of the*] week next week after [*Secretary of State*] Dean [*Rusk*] and Mac and I work further on it in relation to Vietnam. The current battle is going along very well. The problem is that it's not producing the conditions that will almost surely win for us. It may, but it probably won't, and therefore we're going to have to pose the problem to you and suggest some alternative solutions to it. And I [*unclear*]-

Johnson: Who sent Kissinger out there, Bob?

McNamara: Christ, I don't know, but he certainly blew off in the paper this morning. I read in the cable that [*Ambassador Henry Cabot*] Lodge had asked for him; I don't know whether this is true or not.

Johnson: What'd he say?

McNamara: Well, the Washington Post has a story under the byline of a Los Angeles Times reporter which says, "There are authoritative reports that Kissinger will tell the White House that there's not yet a cohesive national government here, primarily because nowhere among the national leaders is there a true sense of dedication to the nations."

Johnson: Who in the hell lets these folks get in?

McNamara: I don't know, I don't know.

Naftali: The next and final conversation is between Johnson and Eugene McCarthy. This is February 1, 1966. The United States has resumed bombing North Vietnam. McCarthy is becoming more vocal in raising questions about this policy. This conversation has two elements that I think are very important. One is Johnson's increasing defensiveness about the box that he is in. And also, Johnson's anger at the mess that the Kennedy administration left him and his blaming the administration for the Diem coup, which he felt was a bad idea at the time and continues to feel is a bad idea.

Johnson: What they [supporters of the Walter Lippmann/J. William Fulbright arguments] really think is we oughtn't to be there and we ought to get out. Well, I know we oughtn't to be there, but I can't get out. I just can't be the architect of surrender. And don't see . . . I'm trying every way in the world I can to find a way to . . . ah . . . thing. But they [*the North Vietnamese*] don't have the pressure that will bring them to the table as of yet. We don't know whether they ever will. I'm willing to do damn near anything. If I told you what I was willing to do, I wouldn't have any program. [*Everett*] Dirksen wouldn't give me a dollar to operate the war. I just can't operate in a glass bowl with all these things. But I'm willing to do nearly anything a human can do, if I can do it with any honor at all. But they started with me on Diem, you remember.

McCarthy: Yeah.

Johnson: [*That*] he was corrupt and he ought to be killed. So we killed him. We all got together and got a goddamn bunch of thugs and we went in and assassinated him. Now, we've really had no political stability since then.

McCarthy: Yeah.

Naftali: The McCarthy conversation is heartbreaking to listen to. This is seven years before the war would end. This is before future Senator John McCain was even taken prisoner. And approximately 95% of those whose names would ultimately be on the Vietnam War Memorial were still alive. The President, however, does not know how to get out. In a democracy, it is hard to tell mothers who have already lost sons that the war they died for was actually a war of choice and not necessity.

Johnson's private agony was unknown to the public in 1965 and 1966, but it is very clear from the tape. Presidents, who in our system are commander-in-chief in addition to being head of state and head of government, cannot admit to a losing war in public. It is one of the conundrums of our democracy. The president is potentially the most powerful persuader. And yet fearing public and international public opinion, a president often chooses not to use his powers of persuasion, thus tying the country to what he knows to be a failed policy. Thank you. [*Applause*]

Suarez: Presidential historian Timothy Naftali speaking at "Vietnam and the Presidency," a conference at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. Coming up...

Al Haig: A conflict, if you enter into it, God forbid, must be entered into it with a full knowledge that your nation is being committed to the sacrifice of its young men and women. And for that reason, every asset of the nation must be applied to the struggle to bring about a quick and prompt, successful end or don't do it.

To hear all the presentations from the conference, visit our web site, *American Radioworks.org*.

I'm Ray Suarez. You're listening to "Vietnam and the Presidency," an *American RadioWorks* special report from American Public Media.

Ray Suarez: From American Public Media, this is an *American RadioWorks* special report: "Vietnam and the Presidency." I'm Ray Suarez.

Beginning with Dwight Eisenhower, four American presidents struggled with what to do about Vietnam. So did the men who worked for them - political and military aides whose job it was to craft U.S. policy against the communist government of North Vietnam. Today, some of those same men are watching as a new generation in Washington wages war in Iraq. A recent conference on Vietnam and the Presidency brought together four key White House insiders from the 1960s and 70s to assess what they had learned from Vietnam. This program presents some of the highlights from that conference. Among the speakers was Theodore Sorensen, special council to President John F. Kennedy. When Kennedy took office in 1961 there were 780 military advisors in Vietnam. By the time of his death, he had increased that number to 16,700. Still, Theodore Sorensen says Vietnam was never a central concern to Kennedy.

Ted Sorenson: Eisenhower had begun the policy of the sending in military advisors and instructors. Kennedy reinforced the policy of sending in advisors.

Three different missions were sent to Vietnam. One was headed by Vice President Johnson. All three of those missions came back and said essentially the same thing, "Mr. President, you have to send combat troop divisions to South Vietnam. That's the only way to save South Vietnam. And you have to bomb North Vietnam. That's the other essential." And Kennedy listened to all three reports, but never once did he send combat troop divisions to South Vietnam or bomb North Vietnam.

The best speech Kennedy ever made on Vietnam, interestingly enough, he made in 1954, when he warned Eisenhower and the American people from the Senate floor that we could not replace the French colonialists in Vietnam. As Al Haig said, it was a nationalist war and they were sick of having foreign troops on their soil. And no western power, the United States or the French, was going to win such a battle. And the young Senator John Kennedy said it would be futile, hopeless for us to send combat troop divisions there and he never did.

That was Theodore Sorensen, special counsel to President John F. Kennedy. Jack Valenti was special assistant to President Lyndon Johnson. He went on to head the Motion Picture Association of America

for nearly 40 years. Valenti was with Johnson on November 22, 1963 when LBJ took the oath of office aboard Air Force One, just hours after President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. President Johnson would turn Vietnam into a full-scale war.

Jack Valenti: Now on the day that he had his hand upraised on that airplane, we had over 16,000 fighting men in Vietnam. They were disguised as advisors but they were heavily armed and they were in the field.

One of the unanswerable questions is, if there were no troops in Vietnam at that time, would Johnson have sent them? I don't know the answer. All I know is that he determined to keep in place every single advisor to President Kennedy and every member of Kennedy's cabinet, and he did. I happen to believe, politically that was a mistake. He wanted to make sure that the country knew that he would not disrupt any policy that Kennedy had in place.

And the idea of getting out of Vietnam at that time was alien to him because that would look like a repudiation. And then, we got deeper and deeper. And the Pentagon would come forward with, "We can do this on the cheap, Mr. President. We can do this and that interdictive, Ho Chi Minh trail. Do a little bombing and the North Vietnamese will come to the table."

But if I may - we learned something in Vietnam One, that no president can win a war when public support for that war begins to decline and evaporate. It's like setting a heavy body loose down a hill. And once it goes, you lose control of it. There is a line that I read somewhere that says, "The people grow tired of a confusion whose end is not in sight." That's the primary thing that I learned - you cannot fight a war without public support.

The second thing is, you cannot, no matter what mighty army you are, conquering a foreign land, you cannot win against an insurgency that springs from the population with their traditions and their religion and their culture. It never has been done in history, in Afghanistan, in Dien Bien Phu, American colonies and you name it. There has never been an insurgency that didn't prevail against a mighty power.

And the third thing I learned was that if you are going to fight an enemy, you've got to know who they are. You've got to know their ancestral rhythms and their traditions, their mores, their customs. I remember one time going into the President's office and saying, "Mr. President, I would like to have you invite Bernard Fall and other historians of Indochina to tell you who are these people. What do we know about them?" And he said, "I think that's a good idea. Go see Bundy." And I went to see McGeorge Bundy who said, "Listen, Jack," he said, "We have our own historians at the Agency, the CIA, and State. And our historians know as much as anybody needs to know about that country." Well, as I left, I said to Mac, "That may be so, Mac, but I haven't seen any of our historians briefing the President on who these people are."

And the fourth thing I learned was that the Pentagon, about 60 to 70% of all their forecasts-- and by the way, this is done through retrospective wisdom, as makes us all very smart -- 60 to 70% of all the estimates, the forecasts, the recommendations they made turned out to be wrong. Now, I'm not

saying-- believe me there are two things, I never caustically criticize any president of any party because I know what he has to go through. And I don't believe that the Pentagon, McNamara on down, were developing delusive juices to pass on to the President about body counts and what they were-- I don't believe that at all. They just were wrong. I learned in Hollywood that nobody knows anything. *[Laughter]* And I learned that in the government nobody knows anything. And Wall Street, nobody knows anything. The vagaries of error infect us all. And when you rely totally on the military, no matter how gifted they are, General Haig, you excepted of course *[Laughter]*, they can be wrong.

Suarez: Jack Valenti, special assistant to President Johnson, speaking at a conference on Vietnam and the Presidency at the Kennedy Library in Boston. This program presents highlights from that meeting. Opposition to the war in Vietnam forced LBJ not to run for reelection in 1968. Richard Nixon won the White House, in part, by promising to end the war. But it would take another seven years and cost hundreds of thousands more American and Vietnamese lives. General Alexander Haig commanded a battalion in Vietnam...then worked as a military assistant to Nixon's national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Haig criticized the strategy of "incrementalism," matching what the enemy throws at you, rather than overwhelming it with military power.

Al Haig: A conflict, if you enter into it, God forbid, must be entered into it with a full knowledge that your nation is being committed to the sacrifice of its young men and women. And for that reason, every asset of the nation must be applied to the struggle to bring about a quick and prompt, successful end or don't do it. *[Applause]* That is the second perversion, incrementalism, that has reared its ugly head again, in Iraq. How can we believe that this kind of-- we send two and a third divisions into Iraq, when George Bush, Sr. had 26 division equivalents. And he didn't get rid of Saddam Hussein. That was a conscious decision of grave consequences and a big mistake. So we're there trying to police that up today, aren't we?

Now, having said that, we didn't lose Vietnam. We quit Vietnam. We strangled our effort. When the final hours of the bombing at Christmas time took place, and Henry and I know a lot about that, we were very much in favor of it. And it brought Hanoi to its knees.

Alexander Haig vigorously supported bombing North Vietnam to force the communists to make peace. In December 1972, the U.S. unleashed a massive air attack that became known as the Christmas Bombing. Haig was asked if he really believed that such tactics could have won the war in Vietnam.

Haig: Of course. There's no doubt about it. And I saw it first hand in the Christmas bombing. And I discussed it with poor President Nixon before he died. And he described the greatest mistake of his presidency was his failure to end the war decisively. What really happened was the President was threatened with impeachment if he continued the bombing. Everyone in his cabinet abandoned him and told him he had to cease the bombing.

If he had gone on with it for another three to four months, it's my view a victory would have been to have, the North would draw back to the Geneva Accord's agreement, the 38th parallel. And I think they would have. They simply could not do it because of the political situation.

Alexander Haig was a military advisor and later chief of staff for President Richard Nixon. Haig was one of four top White House advisors to speak at "Vietnam and the Presidency," a conference at the Kennedy Library in Boston. Panelist Henry Kissinger agrees with Haig that the U.S. could have won the war with more military force. Here Jack Valenti, special assistant to Lyndon Johnson, disputes that idea.

Valenti: Johnson's greatest fear, which I heard him utter to me privately dozens of times, he felt that he might start World War III. He used to say that some aviator is going to drop a bomb down some smokestack of a Russian freighter in Haiphong Harbor and the pilot will be from Johnson City, Texas and we've got World War III going on. He had a terrible horror of that. Now, you can talk about military adventures, but when you are president, the specter of another war like that is quite terrifying. So, whenever I hear people talk about-- and I say this--I happen to have a great devotion and admiration for Henry. Because I think he is one of the great political philosophers of our time. And I certainly admire Al Haig immensely.

But I differ with them on the idea that you go all out because going all out has consequences. You will incite people like a China. Remember MacArthur, crossing the Yalu and suddenly China comes in and we had the God-damnedest mess you ever saw, a bloody mess in Korea.

And second, trying to impress upon nations that have no democratic history, a democratic government is damn hard to do. I remember when President Diem was assassinated in October of '63. And after that Vietnam had a succession, a kind of a revolving door of new governments, one coup after another. I remember, Ted, I went in to see him one morning. I said, "I just heard from State Department, Mr. President. There is another coup in Vietnam." And Johnson just became agitated and he said, "God damn it. I'm sick and tired of this coup s*** that keeps coming back all the time." You couldn't install a government. Now we're engaged in Iraq now. We are trying to impress upon a people without democratic traditions a democratic institution.

Democracy gets very messy. And suddenly you've got people in power, democratically elected like Hamas in Palestine that we don't like, that we don't want. But that is the democratic process. Sometimes in this country we elect people that half the country doesn't like. But that's the process of democracy. *[Applause]*

Jack Valenti was an advisor to President Lyndon Johnson. Of the four White House advisors at the Boston conference, Henry Kissinger undoubtedly had the most direct control over the course of the Vietnam War. He was President Nixon's national security chief and later his Secretary of State. The U.S. had 500,000 troops in Vietnam when Nixon took office. Critics charge Kissinger with deepening and prolonging America's involvement there, which he vigorously disputes. At the conference on Vietnam and the Presidency, moderator Brian Williams of NBC news read a question to Kissinger from the audience: did he have any apologies for his role in Vietnam?

Henry Kissinger: This is not the occasion for this sort of a question. So if I can comment on what was said before-- We have to start from the assumption that serious people were making serious

decisions with the national interest and the world interest at heart. And so, this is a sort of question that is highly inappropriate.

The Nixon administration didn't send the 500,000 troops. It found the 500,000 troops. And how you extricate when you are the country on which the security of the world depends? First, how you extricate 500 thousand troops technically? The amount of time it takes when you are surrounded by a million North Vietnamese and a million South Vietnamese who could turn on you if you suddenly pull the plug. This is a very complicated-- This is a question that could not be dealt with by slogans and by advocating peace.

And all the decisions that we have made had to be seen in that context. Were mistakes sometimes made? That is open to a lot of debate. But that sort of question, it sort of implies that there is some horrible guilt that people ought to be allowing when they face the situation of 500,000 Americans. In fact withdrew those 500,000 Americans-- and without the catastrophe that could have happened.

That's not an appropriate question. It has nothing to do with my own personal feelings. It has to do with how, as a country, we look at ourselves. That serious people make serious decisions ought to be taken for granted. And then we can have a meaningful debate and can come to answers that guide us. That way is a way of dividing us, torturing ourselves and making it easy for ourselves. Because there is no reason to suppose that the people who ask that sort of question have a more elevated moral standing than people who everyday had to face the sort of decisions that Jack Valenti faced. And when you know that if it comes out wrong, the fate of your country and the free peoples depends on it.

Brian Williams: Respectfully--

[Applause]

Williams: Just one moment. Respectfully, Dr. Kissinger. I'm seeing this as a theme running through a lot of these questions coming up here. And as the advocate for the questioners in the audiences-- Quote: "You policymakers ripped the heart and soul from 58,245 American families. What do you say to those families and the sacrifices they made because of your lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, lack of caring?" It's been 30 years. There is a whole lot of anger about the conflict, Dr. Kissinger. That's what the question was meant to-

Kissinger: But anger is not enough. You owe it to yourself to analyze what the implications are and what the real choices were.

Former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, speaking at "Vietnam and the Presidency," a conference at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. Up next...

Frances Fitzgerald: There were a lot of people at the time, in the seventies and eighties, saying, "The press is losing the war," or "The press has lost the war for us because all they do is report the bad news, and they're turning the American public against the war and that's what's losing the war."

David Halberstam: Washington had created a great lying machine. So there was always going to be a light at the end of the tunnel. In truth, you know what was at the end of the tunnel? There was a tunnel at the end of the tunnel and it was filled with VC and NVA it was a marvel of modern engineering.

I'm Ray Suarez. You're listening to "Vietnam and the Presidency," an *American RadioWorks* special report.

Major funding for *American RadioWorks* comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. You can find out much more about Vietnam and the Presidency by visiting our web site, americanradioworks.org. You can hear all of the presentations from the conference, read transcripts and more at americanradioworks.org.

Our program continues in just a moment from American Public Media.

Ray Suarez: This is Vietnam and the Presidency, an *American RadioWorks* special report from American Public Media. I'm Ray Suarez. In Spring, 1975, the United States pulled its last troops out of South Vietnam. Within hours, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into the capital, Saigon. More than 58,000 Americans died in the war. More than a million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians also died.

In the years that followed, Richard Nixon and his supporters blamed the news media - at least in part -- for America's defeat in Vietnam. Caustic reporting on the war, they said, eroded public support, which in turn undermined the war effort. The Bush administration has made similar complaints about press coverage in Iraq.

Journalist David Halberstam covered Vietnam for The New York Times and was one of the most influential reporters of that war. He was viewed as a threat by both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. At the conference on Vietnam and the Presidency at the Kennedy Library in Boston, David Halberstam recounted a taped conversation between President Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. It was about "problem" journalists in Vietnam. Secretary McNamara told Kennedy that David Halberstam's idealism was coloring his reporting.

Halberstam: I would plead guilty to Secretary McNamara's description of me as an idealist. I think reporters should be idealists. I think they should be skeptical idealists but the alternative seems to me to be a cynic. And I think a journalist who's a cynic is dead. I think it's very important that you believe, that you believe in a kind of idealism. If you don't, if you lose faith in the truth, I think you lose faith in democracy.

But the great idealists of that era were these remarkable senior advisors in the field. They were marvelous men. I mean they all could have been school principals back home. They were educated. They thought of themselves as being on the cutting edge. And they found out soon...they found out that Saigon was rejecting their reporting. And they became more and more frustrated because young

Americans in their command were risking their lives and sometimes being killed. And as that happened, as their reporting was rejected by their superiors, they turned reluctantly to us. And they told us the truth.

And the reason was that Washington had created, and it is something that we really have to deal with anytime we talk about Vietnam, it should hang over this conference. Washington had created a great lying machine. And they and their truths were bouncing off it.

And what is a lying machine? A lying machine exists on a major issue when an administration has a policy that does not, for historic reasons, work out, but where the administration believes it is important to continue it for a variety of domestic political reasons and to pretend that it works so it forces its own people at the top to be disingenuous and punishes those government employees who dare to tell the truth and attacks the motives and professionalism of reporters who dissent. And gradually the lines harden and the lies dominate the policy and the lying machine has a life and a dynamic of its own. It becomes, as it did in Vietnam, an organic thing.

There were to be no real defeats. Victory was inevitable. The policy and the politics demanded it. The Washington rhetoric demanded it because when you invest that much more, 600 to 15,000 men, you have to have results and you have to have results quickly. So there was always going to be a light at the end of the tunnel. In truth, you know what was at the end of the tunnel? There was a tunnel at the end of the tunnel and it was filled with VC and NVA. It was a marvel of modern engineering.

Any officer, division advisor or anything else, was to know that if he did not play the game, did not get on the team, he would never get a star. You got on the team or you got out. I mention those extraordinary men that I knew, those wonderful men who were the lieutenant colonels and colonels of that era, the ones who told the truth and challenged the reporting, not a one of them got a star.

Thus was the lying machine created. And there is a danger in creating one. It's like riding a tiger. The danger is you may end up inside. The only people you may end up fooling is yourself.

Journalist David Halberstam speaking at Vietnam and the Presidency, a conference at the Kennedy Library in Boston. Other journalists who covered Vietnam took part in panel discussions about the war and spoke about David Halberstam's notion of a "lying machine." Among them, CBS television journalist Dan Rather.

Dan Rather: In the field-I never had a captain or a sergeant lie to me. When you talk about the lying machine, which David referred to, which did exist and in many ways still exists, in some ways of greater potency now than it was then. But the lying machine was not of the men and women (and in those days it was mostly men) who fought the war. They leveled with you. They knew what was going on.

For example - and excuse my reporter's French if necessary - it was not uncommon for you to crawl into someplace with the captain of the line and say, "What's happening, captain?" And he would say, "We are getting our ass handed to us." And you try to reflect that in your reporting. That reporting

would hit the wall in Washington because the Washington view was that we were handing them their backsides. They were not handing us ours.

But when I came back from Vietnam, the first time I was there - I had been the White House correspondent before I went and was shifted to London and wound up in Vietnam - but when I came back I was the White House correspondent. And I was selected for a special briefing in the bowels of the White House in the National Security Council room, by a very high-ranking member of the Johnson administration, who had a presentation. And he pointed to a place on the map where I'd actually been, which was on the Cambodian border. It later became known as the Hook.

And anyway, the briefer was talking about it. He said, "You know, we are having very effective operations in this area. We are using our armor." And I'm saying to myself, "Armor? Armor?" As far as I could make out there wasn't any armor within 50 to 75 miles of the place. And if it had been, it would have been bogged down in these tremendous bogs. And I said something. I said, "You know, I was in that area recently and there must be some mistake because there is no armor in there." He looked at me with the coldest eyes and said, "Well, you just don't know what you're talking about."

Now, a great deal of the difficulty of the press and those who were trying to manipulate public opinion at the time can be encapsulated in that. Journalists went out, you saw what was happening. The soldiers that were fighting the war told you what was happening and you came back. And you got a load of what was mostly fantasy. And one definition of a reporter is one who tries to separate brass tacks from bull shine. And if you went into the field you knew what the brass tacks were and you knew what the other was as well.

Dan Rather of CBS News speaking at a conference on Vietnam and the Presidency at the Kennedy Library in Boston. This program presents highlights from that conference. The session on press coverage in Vietnam was moderated by Brian Williams of NBC News. The next panelist was journalist Frances Fitzgerald. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her book on Vietnam, *Fire in the Lake*.

Frances Fitzgerald: There were a lot of people at the time, in the seventies and eighties who were saying, "The press is losing the war," or "The press has lost the war for us because all they do is report the bad news," and so forth. "And they are turning the American public against the war and that is what is losing the war."

On the other hand there has always been a tendency to make the press or the media into these heroes who simply destroyed the lying machine. And who, by their intrepid reporting, stopped the war. I think neither one is the case. The problem really lay in Washington where this machine had an extremely loud voice and one which carried often into the editorial rooms of the newspapers, the news magazines, the television studios and so forth.

Brian Williams: Frances Fitzgerald, Secretary Haig said earlier today in no uncertain terms he believes, as do many, the war could have been won with a different mindset in the United States. Do you share that belief?

Fitzgerald: I do not. And I found myself very puzzled by his explanation of this because to say that the Christmas bombing brought the North Vietnamese to their knees seems to me to be a gross exaggeration. This whole strategy of attrition, the notion that we could kill more people than could possibly get, stand up and come down the Ho Chi Minh trail-- Or that we would destroy the morale of the North Vietnamese was a key to the war strategy for a long time. And it simply didn't work because their morale remained as high as ever. So, what would winning the war mean? I mean paving the country over, literally?

Williams: That word was used.

Fitzgerald: A nuclear weapon, an occupation forever, what?

Journalist Frances Fitzgerald, speaking at a conference on Vietnam and the Presidency at the Kennedy Library in Boston. Whether they were historians or journalists or policy makers, most of the conference speakers agreed that the Vietnam War produced important lessons that could guide current White House decision-making on Iraq. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated the peace agreement that ended the Vietnam War. One lesson, he said, is that it's difficult to reform a country's government while your troops occupy that country.

Henry Kissinger: In Vietnam we had one advantage compared to Iraq, that we had a very homogeneous population. And towards the end of the Vietnam War, there was a government that was substantially in control of its region. In Iraq we are facing a society that is split into sectarian and ethnic groups and in which, therefore, there is no national-- there is not an adequate sense of nationhood. And where even a government when it is formed will more likely see its ministers represent sectarian divisions and sectarian interests than national interests. And the question that we need to address is not whether we should be committed to democracy. Of course, we should be committed to democracy.

But the pace at which it can be achieved and the relationship especially in situations like Iraq and Vietnam, to the immediate security situation--I know the problem better than the answer. But it is one of the challenges we absolutely face.

That was former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Other speakers drew different lessons from Vietnam. Pete Peterson was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for six years. A quarter-century later, Peterson returned to Vietnam as the first U.S. ambassador to that country since the war.

Pete Peterson: The first lesson that I learned after Vietnam was no more Vietnams. *[Applause]* That was it. But I'm absolutely convinced that before we engage in the next war or the next confrontation or the next, the next conflict, that we do what so many of the other panelists have said we must do. And that is to talk about it before we get there. Now for me, when I came back from Vietnam I said, "No more Vietnams." And I also said, "You know, I will never serve in another military conflict unless we have a declaration of war."

The other part of it, though, was I didn't want us to enter into another conflict where we didn't know the enemy, we hadn't studied their history, had no clue what the objective was and we hadn't answered the question that I think the first panel brought up. And that was the question of why. That question has to be answered before we engage our troops in any kind of future combat. And the only way to do that is by forcing public debate before, not after, the decisions have been made to go in.

Former POW and ambassador to Vietnam, Pete Peterson. He spoke at "Vietnam and the Presidency," a conference at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. While conference speakers said there were crucial lessons from Vietnam that might help the White House puzzle out what to do in Iraq, they sometimes disagreed over what those lessons mean. Henry Kissinger spoke for many when he said he understood the problems in Iraq better than the solutions. Others applauded Pete Peterson, who said too many lessons learned in Vietnam have been forgotten.

You've been listening to Vietnam and the Presidency, selections from a conference sponsored by the National Archives and the Presidential Libraries. You can hear all of the presentations at this historic meeting by visiting our web site AmericanRadioWorks.org. There you can download the program, sign up for our e-mail newsletter and find out how to order a CD of this program. This special report was produced by Stephen Smith and Kate Ellis, and edited by Catherine Winter. With help from Sasha Aslanian, Misha Quill and Ellen Guettler. The web producer is Ochen Kaylan. Executive Producer, Bill Buzenberg. Special thanks to WBUR in Boston, the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, and the John F. Kennedy Library. I'm Ray Suarez.

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