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Achilles' Heel: The Vietnam War and George Romney's Bid for the Presidency, 1967 to 1968

by
Andrew L. Johns

Most party presidential nominations are lost rather than won. Candidates in recent years have stumbled over their political views, off-the-cuff remarks, and personal lives, thereby forfeiting their chance at the White House.[1] The 1968 Republican presidential campaign was no different. Although the GOP nominee, former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, went on to capture the White House in the fall campaign against Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, he had not been the favorite for the nomination a year before. That distinction was held by Michigan's Governor George W. Romney. A moderate whose views on civil rights, America's cities, and other domestic issues made him extremely popular both in his own state and throughout the country, Romney's presidential ambitions foundered on the most divisive issue facing the country, the Vietnam War. Indeed, Romney's bid for the Oval Office might have succeeded if not for his misstatements, ambiguous policy, and dovish sympathies in regard to America's longest war.

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[1] Notable examples in recent years include Colorado Senator Gary Hart's affair with Jessica Hahn, which likely cost him the Democratic nomination in 1984; Jessie Jackson's remarks about Jews and New York; and the failure of Bob Dole's opponents in 1996 to mount a credible challenge to Dole's uninspiring campaign for the GOP nomination. Of course, there have been exceptions. Most notably, Bill Clinton faced numerous obstacles and scandals that could have torpedoed his campaign, yet he managed to win the 1992 Democratic nomination.

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Little attention has been devoted to examining Romney's views on Vietnam or his political career in general. Historians have relegated Romney to obscurity in most of the literature on the 1960s; only a handful of articles and political biographies exists of a man who served at various times as the head of a major American car company, governor of Michigan, and a cabinet official in the Nixon administration.[2] Most of these works, moreover, appeared either during his abortive campaign for the presidency or soon thereafter. In one of the few academic discussions of Romney's presidential bid, Dennis Lythgoe argues that Romney's failure to win the Republican nomination was due to the fact that "Romney's politics and his piety were inseparable," which caused more damage than his presidential aspirations could withstand.[3] This article challenges Lythgoe's argument and contends that the Vietnam War, not overt spirituality, proved to be the Achilles' heel of Romney's bid for the White House.

American elections, conventional wisdom holds, turn on issues of economics and domestic policy rather than foreign policy; indeed, the precipitous decline in President George Bush's political fortunes in 1992 provides ample evidence of this axiom. Yet during the race for the Republican presidential nomination in 1968, the candidates' positions on the Vietnam War were clearly pivotal. To be sure, the war in Vietnam transcended the garden variety foreign-policy problem. The ramifications of the conflict affected American domestic politics deeply (and vice versa), causing fissures within American politics and society not seen since perhaps the Civil War, and the GOP was not immune to these divisions. In comparison, on most of the other substantive issues in the Republican primary campaign each of the major candidates took positions which, if not identical, were certainly analogous.[4] The other issues notwithstanding, the

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[2] The scarcity of the literature on George Romney's life and career is astonishing. For contemporary accounts of his life prior to the 1968 election, see D. Duane Angel, *Romney: A Political Biography* (New York: Exposition Press, 1967); T. George Harris, *Romney's Way: A Man and an Idea* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967); and Clark R. Mollenhoff, *George Romney: Mormon in Politics* (New York: Meredith Press, 1968).

[3] Dennis L. Lythgoe, "The 1968 Presidential Decline of George Romney: Mormonism or Politics?" *Brigham Young University Studies* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1971): 240. General accounts of the 1968 campaign tend to treat Romney only in passing. See, for example, Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968* (New York: Viking, 1969); and Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

[4] Other major issues in the campaign included law and order, America's cities, and the lingering problem of race relations. Polls indicated that voters considered Vietnam the most vital issue by an overwhelming margin. Dwight Eisenhower wrote in 1968 that "in domestic

overwhelming importance of Vietnam in the 1968 Republican primaries cannot be denied. As one account of the 1968 election argues, "Nothing is clearer than the imperative that an account of the politics of 1968 must start with Vietnam, the progress of which dominated the struggle for the Presidency from first to last." To consider the campaign for the GOP presidential nomination without recognizing Vietnam's importance "would be like *Hamlet* without the murdered king."[5]

The 1960s had not been kind to the Republican party. Richard Nixon came tantalizingly close to the White House in 1960, losing by only a handful of Cook County votes to John F. Kennedy, but that was as close as the party came to power for eight years. In Congress, the Republicans seemed destined to remain the minority party in perpetuity, with no prospect of regaining control of either the House or Senate. The GOP reached its nadir as a political organization in November 1964 when it was devastated by the landslide victory of Lyndon B. Johnson over the ultraconservative Arizona Senator Barry M. Goldwater.[6] Many pundits openly questioned whether the party of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Dwight D. Eisenhower could survive as a viable political entity. According to historian Lewis Gould, the question was "whether Republicans had become a permanent minority party which could no longer mount a credible challenge."[7] Yet out of the ashes of this defeat came a party that realized it needed to refocus itself and broaden its voter appeal in order to survive as a national political force. In early 1965 the incoming chairman of the Republican National Committee, Ray Bliss, and other party leaders also recognized the need for party unity in the wake of the 1964 debacle, both in supporting candidates and in maintaining at least a semblance of centralized policy under the auspices of the Republican Coordinating Committee.[8] Their goal was twofold: first, to make a strong

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affairs, I have been able to make very little differences in the political differences [sic] in the philosophies of Rockefeller and Nixon." Eisenhower to Robert Cutler, 26 March 1968, Dwight D. Eisenhower Post-Presidential Papers, Special Names Series, box 3, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter DDEL).

[5] Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 21.

[6] Johnson carried all but six states and beat Goldwater 486-52 in the electoral college. The gap in the popular vote between the candidates was sixteen million. Johnson's coattails were long as well; the Democrats controlled the House 290-145 and the Senate 68-32.

[7] Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election that Changed America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 5.

[8] Goldwater's nomination had torn the party apart in 1964, with many moderate and liberal Republicans refusing to publicly support the nominee in the fall election. Bliss, a staunch party regular and former Ohio state chairman, replaced Dean Burch, who had been

showing in the 1966 midterm elections; and second, to regain the White House in 1968.

Republicans looked forward to the 1966 campaign with great optimism. Midterm elections traditionally result in gains for the minority party, particularly when the White House is occupied by a president of the majority party. Republican leaders knew that the political pendulum would swing back in their favor following the catastrophic results in 1964—realistically, the GOP had nowhere to go but up. Vietnam loomed as a potentially important issue in the congressional campaigns in 1966. Not only had American combat troops been committed to the defense of South Vietnam for eighteen months with little tangible evidence of success, but also Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had held hearings on the administration's decision to involve the U.S. in the Southeast Asian conflict, which intensified public scrutiny of the war.[9] With over a quarter of a million troops in country (and requests for nearly two hundred thousand more from the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland) and no immediate prospect for victory, the war could have been a significant electoral issue in 1966.

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selected by Goldwater to head the RNC. The Republican Coordinating Committee was created as an effort, in the words of Wisconsin Representative Melvin Laird, to "bring people together and to have a discussion so that we could speak more with one voice, and to use our national leadership in a more effective way." The membership of the new group included former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, all past presidential candidates, selected governors (including George Romney), and other party officials, but congressional representation was the dominating factor. Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois and House Minority Leader Gerald Ford of Michigan announced the formation of the coordinating committee on 11 January 1965, saying it would "guide Republican Party Policy at the national level, in the absence of a Republican President and Vice President, by the record they write in the Congress. It is their responsibility." Quoted in Terry Dietz, *Republicans and Vietnam, 1961-1968* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 84.

[9] The hearings, which ran from 28 January to 18 February 1966, gave opponents of the war a visible and respectable platform within the political system from which to argue their position. Due to the SFRC's inability to sway public opinion or the administration, however, the hearings had only a marginal effect on America's policy in Vietnam. An edited version of the testimony given at the hearings, including the complete statements of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, George Kennan, and General Maxwell Taylor, can be found in *The Vietnam Hearings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); the complete hearings are found in U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Supplemental Foreign Assistance, Fiscal Year 1966: Vietnam: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 89th Cong., 2d sess., 1966.

Yet GOP congressional leaders shied away from taking advantage of the administration's difficulties. Two of the most influential Republican members of the House of Representatives, Minority Leader Gerald Ford of Michigan and Melvin Laird of Wisconsin, advised their colleagues not to focus on the Vietnam issue during their campaigns. Both agreed, however, that the war would play a major role in the midterm elections. Ford went so far as to comment that he believed "Vietnam is going to be a liability to any incumbent" in November.[10] One candidate who did use the war effectively as an issue in his campaign was Illinois GOP senatorial hopeful Charles H. Percy, who defeated incumbent Democrat Paul H. Douglas in the election. Percy attributed his victory to "voter dissatisfaction with inflation, the war in Vietnam and 'Civil rights and civil disorder.'"[11] Confirming Ford's preelection prediction, Percy ran as an opponent of the conflict, attacking Douglas for his hawkish stance on the war and support of the administration's policies.

Although Vietnam figured only peripherally in the campaign, the results in 1966 could not have been scripted better for the Republican party. Thanks in good measure to the tireless campaigning of Richard Nixon, the GOP gained forty-seven seats in the House of Representatives, three in the Senate, eight governorships (including a decisive win in the critical California election), and over five hundred state legislative seats.[12] In the wake of their national resurgence, Republicans turned their attention to the approaching 1968 presidential campaign. Given their success in the recent elections, the possibility that the Johnson administration would remain bogged down in Vietnam, and latent dissatisfaction over the evolution of the Great Society, party officials could not be blamed for feeling very optimistic about the party's chances to regain the White House in 1968. Although political prognosticators identified any number of potential

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[10] *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 July 1966.

[11] *New York Times*, 10 November 1966.

[12] Of the sixty-six House candidates Nixon campaigned for, forty-four won; of the eighty-six Republican candidates for all offices that he helped, fifty-nine were elected—a success rate of 68.6 percent. See Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1995), 287. Perhaps most important, after the 1966 elections, Republicans held the governorships in states whose electoral votes totaled 293, twenty-three more than required to elect the president in 1968. See Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 185.

candidates for the 1968 GOP presidential nomination, the clear favorite was George W. Romney.[13]

Supported by opinion polls from around the country, the national media had anointed the Michigan governor as the Republican front-runner after the 1966 midterm elections.[14] A former lobbyist and automotive executive who had been extraordinarily successful and popular during his tenure as governor, Romney was a member of the party's moderate wing.[15] Although he was often considered a stalking horse for New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller's perennial presidential ambitions, the Democratic party still took him seriously. Democrats tried to take advantage of every controversy to deflate Romney's popularity and reduce the risk he posed to Johnson's reelection bid.

The most significant obstacle Romney faced as he considered the move from state to national politics was his tendency not to be clear or consistent on the issues, particularly in the area of foreign affairs where his inexperience was readily apparent. Romney also had to contend with two other impediments to his presidential aspirations: his citizenship and his religious background. Romney's parents had moved to Mexico to avoid persecution for their membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as the Mormon church. George Romney was born while his parents lived south of the border, and this caused some critics to charge that the governor was ineligible to serve as president under

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[13] John Bailey, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said in January 1968, "We know who our nominees will be. . . . I'm happy to be able to say the Republicans have all their bloody infighting to look forward to." Quoted in Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 183. Among the many Republicans who were mentioned as potential candidates were former Vice President Richard Nixon, perennial candidate and New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, California Governor Ronald Reagan, former Minnesota governor and Eisenhower cabinet official Harold Stassen (who did declare himself a candidate), Senators Charles Percy and Thruston Morton, liberal New York Mayor John Lindsay, and former Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater.

[14] A Harris poll after the November election indicated that voters preferred Romney over Johnson by 54 percent to 46 percent. A Gallup poll reported Republican candidates had the following support: Romney, 39 percent; Nixon, 31 percent; Reagan, 8 percent, Rockefeller and Percy, 5 percent, and Lindsay, 2 percent. See Dennis Wainstock, *The Turning Point: The 1968 United States Presidential Campaign* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1988), 34. Polls also indicated that Romney would defeat Johnson in the general election.

[15] Romney had ended a fourteen-year Democratic hold on the governor's seat in 1962 by 80,573 votes. He was reelected in 1964 by 382,913 votes despite the fact that Goldwater lost to Johnson by over a million votes in Michigan. He culminated his tenure as governor with a 1966 reelection margin of 527,047 votes. See White, *The Making of the President*, 37.

the Constitution.[16] Although legal experts assured him that he qualified under the constitutional stipulations, Romney faced sporadic questions on this issue early in his campaign.

The religion question caused the governor more serious problems, particularly in terms of his stance on race relations. Despite his strong record on civil rights, Romney's Mormon faith raised flags with reporters and party leaders alike, which forced him to deal with questions about his beliefs throughout his run for the White House.[17] More subtly, Romney's overt piety, which resulted from his staunch adherence to Mormon teachings, tended to be a double-edged sword.[18] On the one hand, his exemplary personal life benefitted the governor since no one could legitimately question his background or character. On the other hand, however, his speeches were replete with overt religious references unheard in American politics since the days of fundamentalist and presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryan, and this made many Americans very uncomfortable. If Romney had come on the national scene eight years later in 1976, he might have profited from the same political currents that propelled the evangelical Protestant Jimmy Carter into the White House; in the 1960s, however, his piety did not resonate with the electorate. Romney might have been able to overcome these obstacles eventually, but his candidacy was destined to fail over both his rhetorical faux pas and his position on the Vietnam War.

By 1967 the Vietnam War had become the dominant political issue in America, eclipsing even Lyndon Johnson's Great Society agenda. The American public had grown increasingly frustrated with the administration's war policies and weary of the increasing protests and dissent over the fighting.[19] In addition, the war had seriously divided the Democratic party. In 1964 only such political mavericks as Senators Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska had publicly opposed American

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[16] Article II, section 1 of the Constitution states, in part, "No Person except a natural born Citizen . . . shall be eligible to the Office of President. . . . "

[17] Until 1978 the LDS church did not allow African Americans to be ordained to the priesthood and its doctrines did not recognize the ability of African Americans to achieve the highest degree of exaltation in the afterlife.

[18] Romney adhered to the faith's Word of Wisdom and did not consume alcohol, tobacco, or coffee; he declined to be interviewed or conduct political business on Sundays; he had served as a church missionary in England and Scotland; and he served for a period of time as a stake president in Michigan.

[19] Perhaps the second most important issue was law and order, which derived at least in part from the divisiveness of the war and the violence it engendered.

involvement in Vietnam, but by 1967 many of Johnson's former Democratic congressional colleagues had broken openly with the administration.[20] As a result the Republican party had a golden opportunity to take advantage of the Johnson administration's difficulties and put forward its own solutions for concluding the war in Southeast Asia. But it was unclear what form a GOP resolution to the conflict would take.

Members of the GOP had very different ideas about what position the party should take on Vietnam for the 1968 election. Although a large contingent within the party still supported the war—and were even willing to increase American involvement—several notable Republicans began to express doubts.[21] Perhaps most visible among these GOP doves was Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, a proponent of a negotiated settlement to the war as early as 1965.[22] Joining Cooper in opposing the war was the "wise old owl" of the GOP, Senator George D. Aiken of Vermont. The ranking Republican in the Senate, Aiken believed that Romney should be the nominee in 1968 because "he would try to get us out of this war (in Viet Nam)." Nixon, he contended, had been "altogether too hawkish in his views and pronouncements on the war."[23] The newly elected senator from

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[20] Morse and Gruening cast the only dissenting votes on the Tonkin Gulf resolution in August 1964, although two other congressmen abstained. In addition, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana and Senator Fulbright had privately urged the administration to revise its policy toward South Vietnam as early as 1963. See for example, Mansfield to Johnson, 7 December 1963 (also 6 January 1964 and 1 February 1964), Memos to the President, box 1, National Security File, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas.

[21] Ronald Reagan argued that consideration "should be given to an outright declaration of war in the Vietnam conflict." *New York Times*, 26 October 1967.

[22] Remarkably, the story of the Republican doves remains absent from the literature. For a brief look at Cooper's dissent, see Fredrik Logevall, "A Delicate Balance: John Sherman Cooper and Republican Opposition to the Vietnam War," in *The New Anti-Imperialists: Senate and House Opposition to the Vietnam War*, ed. Randall Bennett Woods (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[23] *Burlington Free Press*, 3 December 1966. Vietnam was the issue that vaulted Nixon back into contention for the presidency. His attacks on America's Vietnam policy during the mid-1960s did more than place pressure on the Johnson administration to prosecute the war more vigorously. His uncompromising rhetoric during the period from 1964 to 1967 served to alienate a large segment of the American public and contributed to the inflammatory domestic climate on the war. Ironically, the increased protests and violence against American involvement in the conflict—which Nixon lobbied to escalate—provided him with one of his central themes in the 1968 campaign. Indeed, Nixon's "law and order" platform was instrumental in his victories in the GOP primaries and the general election. For a more in-depth look at Nixon's criticism of the Johnson administration during this period, see Andrew L. Johns, "A Voice from the Wilderness: Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War, 1964-1966,"

Oregon, Mark O. Hatfield, advocated that the GOP be the "peace party" in 1968, and he supported an effort to "de-Americanize the whole Vietnam War."[24] These Republican doves formed a tacit alliance with antiwar Democrats and lobbied Johnson to find a way for the United States to extricate itself honorably from the conflict. It is important to note, however, that virtually no member of Congress advocated the unilateral withdrawal of American forces from Southeast Asia and that the administration's budgetary requests for continued support of the ongoing commitment to Saigon's defense faced only token opposition.

In September 1967 Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine called for the Republican nominee to run as a peace candidate in 1968.[25] Some Democrats believed that even the hawkish Nixon would run as a dove against Johnson. Missouri Senator Stuart Symington told national security adviser Walt W. Rostow, "We are getting in deeper and deeper [in Vietnam] with no end in sight. In 1968 Nixon will murder us. He will become the biggest dove of all times."[26] Regardless of how members of the Republican party felt about the war, however, they recognized that Vietnam was a central issue in 1968. David C. Roller, an assistant professor of history at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, wrote to Kentucky Senator Thruston Morton in mid-1967 and told him that the GOP "may be on the verge of recapturing the support of academics," which had been a traditional Republican constituency until 1933. The issue that could return the professoriat to the party fold, Roller wrote, was Vietnam—due to the "considerable distrust of Johnson, disgust with the administration's deepening involvement, and apprehension over our escalating objectives and expanding military involvement."[27] It remained to be seen whether the

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[24] *New York Times*, 11 August 1967. Like Percy, Hatfield had been elected to the Senate in the 1966 midterm elections.

[25] *New York Times*, 9 September 1967. Romney responded to Smith's statement indirectly: "I think that a Republican candidate in 1968 must have assurance in his own heart and mind . . . that he can bring about a sound peace at the earliest possible date." Press conference transcript, 9 September 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 245, George W. Romney Papers (hereafter Romney Papers), Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

[26] Quoted in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 386-87.

[27] David Roller to Thruston Morton, 2 May 1967, National Republican Committee series, Political File—National Campaigns, 1963-1968, box 19, Thruston B. Morton Papers, Modern Political Archives, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky. Roller's letter indicated support for a Rockefeller, Percy, or Romney candidacy in 1968 and noted that there

Republicans could capitalize on the public's disenchantment with the conflict to craft a coherent and unifying policy on the war for the 1968 elections.

Indeed some members of the party had difficulty in defining their own positions on the war. For example, George Romney had been a supporter of the president's Vietnam policies since he visited Vietnam in late 1965.[28] He told Dwight Eisenhower upon his return that he saw the situation in South Vietnam as a "clear-cut and fundamental" struggle in which the "issues are the same that brought our country into existence."[29] The next day, in a speech at the University of Detroit, the governor told students he was "now convinced the war in Vietnam involves circumstances much more complex and fateful than any war in which our country has been involved," calling the conflict "morally right and necessary."[30] Unfortunately for Romney, his subsequent statements on the war were neither as clear nor as convincing. In July 1966, *Newsweek* criticized both Romney and the GOP for their positions on the war. Since Johnson escalated the conflict in March 1965, the magazine opined, "the Republicans have been groping for a viable way to capitalize on it. No one has groped more earnestly than Michigan's Gov. George Romney—but he has shifted his ground on the issue so many times that by now probably not even Mrs. Romney is sure where he stands." *Harper's* sounded similar concerns, arguing that Romney's "confusing remarks are not the guileful ambiguities of a Nixon but rather the product of ignorance and genuine uncertainty complicated by a terrible need to be right, both ethically and politically."[31]

In an attempt to clarify for the public (and perhaps himself) where he stood on the war, Romney made a speech in Hartford, Connecticut, on 7 April 1967. During the days prior to his address, he sent draft copies to various members of the GOP to solicit their opinions on his proposed

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was not much support for unilateral or immediate withdrawal.

[28] Romney said in Japan during the trip that "the American presence in Vietnam is necessary, if the world is to maintain liberty and freedom" and gave his full support for the American effort in Vietnam. *Japan Times*, 4 November 1965, clipping in Gubernatorial Series, box 129, Romney Papers.

[29] George Romney to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 15 November 1965, Gubernatorial Series, box 363, Romney Papers.

[30] Speech, 16 November 1965, Gubernatorial Series, box 246, Romney Papers.

[31] *Newsweek*, 18 July 1966, 21; William V. Shannon, "George Romney: Holy and Hopeful," *Harper's*, February 1967, 61.

remarks, receiving general praise for their content.[32] In his speech, Romney called withdrawal "unthinkable" and declared that the U.S. "must use military force as necessary to reduce or cut off the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam, to knock out enemy main force units, and to provide a military shield for the South." But he also asserted that the U.S. "must avoid such future entrapments" and "should continue to seek meaningful negotiations. . . . America's major objective and contribution must be a just peace."[33] Although it was intended to be a defining statement on the war that would increase his appeal as a presidential candidate, Romney's Hartford speech instead clouded public perception of his stance on Vietnam because of its ambiguity. He had moved away from a position of unequivocal support of the war, but Romney had not completely rejected the legitimacy of the American war effort and continued to stand behind the president. Reaction to the Hartford speech was generally favorable, although many observers perceived lingering ambiguity in Romney's statement. The *Detroit Free Press*, for example, wrote that "Romney has not yet removed Vietnam as the most troublesome issue among Republicans." Calling Vietnam "the most important issue, in his campaign for the presidency," the paper saw Romney's address as giving at least superficial support to Johnson's policies while not becoming "one of Lyndon Johnson's converts. But," the editors concluded, "he has taken his pew in the LBJ church. It remains to be seen if he will be a believer or a backslider."[34] The following week, Romney's staff assessed his performance in much the same way. Jonathan Moore, Romney's foreign-policy adviser,

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[32] One copy went to New York Senator Jacob Javits, who had a "generally favorable reaction" but thought "the demand that the NLF negotiate itself out of existence . . . [to be] unreasonable, unrealistic, and naive—an impossible condition that . . . renders the whole approach unworkable." Nevertheless, Javits promised "he won't be critical publicly." See Al Applegate to Romney, 7 April 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 263, Romney Papers. On the memo, Romney's handwritten comments dismiss Javits's point: "I may be wrong, but I'm not unduly concerned about this criticism."

[33] Speech, 7 April 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 263, Romney Papers.

[34] *Detroit Free Press*, 9 April 1967. Romney's position "(1) Avoids an immediate row with President Johnson, (2) Is acceptable to both dove and hawk wings of the Republican party, and (3) Leaves Mr. Romney with freedom of action if the situation in Vietnam . . . should change. . . . Mr. Romney had to have a position on the war. That was required of him as proof of the seriousness of his candidacy for the Republican nomination. . . . Had he taken up an extreme position, either way, he could have attracted to himself much criticism which now knows only the President as its target. . . . The Republican party is in the safe position of not pretending to know how to run the war from the opposition benches. . . . It merely watches critically and remains ready to take advantage of any serious blunder by the White House." *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 April 1967.

told the governor, "It got the press off your back on not having a Vietnam position" and made it clear that "you stood basically with the President." Yet the "speech was too close" to Johnson's position; "I don't think, in general, there's enough George Romney in the speech."[35] Moore believed that in order to differentiate Romney from Johnson and his potential rivals for the nomination—and to distance the governor from the administration if the war turned sour—Romney would need to stake out a recognizable and flexible position on Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson saw the speech as an opportunity to mute Republican criticism of his policies and heartily thanked Romney for his support, choosing to interpret the statement as a vote of confidence in administration policy. Uncomfortable with the implications of Johnson's gratitude, Romney quickly responded that his statement should not be taken as "blank-check approval" of the administration's policies.[36] Nevertheless the Hartford speech foreshadowed the difficulties Romney would have throughout his campaign with the war question. The conflicting rhetoric in the speech, while effective in temporarily neutralizing Vietnam as an issue for the governor, would return to haunt him as the campaign for the GOP nomination continued. Romney's rivals for the nomination, Democratic opponents, and the media would point to his enigmatic position as a sign that Romney did not have the requisite leadership qualities and foreign-policy experience to be president.

Indeed Romney's comments at Hartford struck a negative chord among GOP hawks. In response to the governor's suggestions that the U.S. pursue "peace with honor," California Governor Ronald Reagan stated that "my idea of honorable disengagement is that you win the war. When you commit men to fight and die for a cause, it must be worth winning."[37] Reagan's remarks echoed those of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Throughout his post-presidential years, Eisenhower stood firmly behind the Johnson administration's efforts in Vietnam, remaining hawkish and convinced of the possibility of victory well into 1968. Still, Eisenhower responded very well to Romney's Hartford speech, telling him in a letter that it "should relieve you from the necessity of answering daily or periodic questions about the war in Vietnam."[38] For several years the

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[35] Jonathan Moore to George Romney, 14 April 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 263, Romney Papers.

[36] Quoted in Mollenhoff, *George Romney*, 268.

[37] *New York Times*, 19 August 1967.

[38] Dwight D. Eisenhower to George Romney, 18 April 1967, Special Names Series, box 18, Dwight D. Eisenhower Post-Presidential Papers, DDEL.

former president considered Romney as presidential timber; indeed, throughout the mid-1960s he encouraged Romney and offered advice and policy recommendations on numerous occasions. But Eisenhower's support would turn tepid after the governor made one of the most glaring misstatements in American political history.

On 31 August 1967 Governor Romney made a statement that would prove to be the death knell of his presidential ambitions. In a taped interview with Lou Gordon of WKBD-TV in Detroit, Romney stated, "When I came back from Viet Nam [in November 1965], I'd just had the greatest brainwashing that anybody can get." He proceeded to make a quantum shift in his position on the war. "I no longer believe that it was necessary for us to get involved in South Vietnam to stop Communist aggression in Southeast Asia," he declared. Decrying the "tragic" conflict, he urged "a sound peace in South Vietnam at an early time."[39] In essence Romney disavowed American participation in the war and turned 180 degrees away from his earlier belief that the war was "morally right and necessary." The connotations of brainwashing following the experiences of the American military in Korea and the popular perception of the term in the wake of the film *The Manchurian Candidate* made Romney's comments devastating. Although the governor and his campaign staff subsequently attempted to clarify his remarks[40] and some Republicans came to his defense,[41] Romney's brainwashing statement seriously damaged his status as the GOP front-runner. The interview generated an immediate maelstrom of controversy and elicited derision from fellow Republicans, Democrats eager to tarnish the governor's reputation, and the media. Congressman Robert Stafford sounded a common concern among party members in a

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[39] Interview, Romney on WKBD (Detroit), 31 August 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 245, Romney Papers. The interview with Gordon was taped so Romney would not have to appear on Sunday, in keeping with his strict religious practices. Columnist William S. White of the *Washington Post* had commented on Romney's increasingly dovish sentiments the previous week, although he believed that the governor's position remained ambiguous and could damage his chances for the nomination. See *Washington Post*, 23 August 1967.

[40] A week later, Romney stated, "I believe that the full record clearly indicates that there has been a systematic continuation of inaccurate reports, predictions, and withholding information. This has kept the American people from knowing the facts about the Vietnam war and its full impact on our domestic and foreign affairs." Statement, 9 September 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 245, Romney Papers.

[41] Eisenhower told Willard Marriott, "I have personally felt that his 'brainwashing' statement was a mere explosive expression rather than an attack upon others." Dwight D. Eisenhower to Willard Marriott, 3 January 1968, Gubernatorial Series, box 363, Romney Papers.

television interview in his native Vermont. "If you're running for the presidency," he asserted, "you are supposed to have too much on the ball to be brainwashed."[42] The implication was that if Romney could be fooled by Americans, how could he possibly conduct a meaningful foreign policy in the face of the Soviet threat?[43] Much less charitable was Ohio Governor James Rhodes, who later said of his colleague's entire campaign, "Watching George Romney run for the Presidency was like watching a duck try to make love to a football."[44]

Even more damaging to Romney was the reaction of the eight governors who had accompanied him on the fact-finding trip to Vietnam in 1965—all of whom denied the brainwashing allegations—and the correspondents who had covered the trip. Unfortunately for Romney, one of those governors was now the chairman of the Nixon for President Committee, Oklahoma's Henry Bellmon. Bellmon cited the brainwashing statement as proof of Romney's "lack of ability to handle some of the issues he has encountered." Philip Hoff, the Democratic governor of Vermont, said, "Who the hell is he to say it was brainwashing? Either he's a naive man or lacks judgment." Former Georgia Governor Carl Sanders sarcastically suggested that perhaps Romney "may have gone off in a corner somewhere and been brainwashed privately" during the three-day trip.[45] Awkwardly, Romney's chief foreign-policy adviser was Jonathan Moore, the State Department official who had accompanied the nine governors on their 1965 Vietnam tour and who was therefore indirectly implicated as one of the brainwashers. Members of the media also piled on Romney. One correspondent who covered the trip suggested that if Romney had been brainwashed, it was because "he brought so light a load to the Laundromat," having done no homework on the country or the conflict prior to the trip.[46] Others noted wryly that it took a long time—almost thirty months—for Romney to get his brain back from the laundry.[47]

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[42] *St. Albans Messenger*, 2 October 1967.

[43] Democratic National Committee Chairman John Bailey sounded a common refrain: "Can't you just see him coming back from a conference with Kosygin yelling that he had been brainwashed by a Russian?" Quoted in *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 30.

[44] Quoted in White, *The Making of the President*, 54.

[45] *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 30-31.

[46] *Time*, 15 September 1967, 22. Romney was often criticized for his lack of intelligence and inadequate preparation on political issues.

[47] James Jackson Kilpatrick, "Romney: Salesman on the Move," *National Review* 19, no. 49 (12 December 1967): 1382.

Not all members of the media criticized the governor so harshly. The statement placed Romney in a unique position among presidential hopefuls, and some commentators recognized that fact. In denying the validity of the war, CBS's Eric Sevareid commented, "Romney has broken the pattern of all the potential presidential candidates. None of the others has gone anywhere near this far." To his credit, Sevareid continued, Romney had "joined a distinct and growing pattern involving scores of other serious minded citizens, in Congress and out."[48] Indeed, while opinion had begun to turn against the war in Vietnam, only a handful of politicians in either party had made such blunt statements against the war at this point. Sevareid's recognition of Romney's "unique"status, accurate though it was, did not insulate the governor from further criticism, even from those who had previously backed him.

The *Detroit News*, which had been extremely supportive of Romney as governor, had recently begun to reproach the governor for his lack of a coherent Vietnam stance. "The Romney policy," the editors opined in July, "is a pretty tired retread of a disproved strategy. . . . While we think Romney is a splendid governor of Michigan, his latest position paper on Vietnam proves he's an appallingly unrealistic strategist amid the complexities of a confused and confusing war."[49] After the WKBD interview, however, the paper stopped temporizing, threw its support behind Nelson Rockefeller, and stated bluntly, "The time has come for Gov. George Romney to get out of the Presidential race."[50] The *Chicago Daily News*, another previously sympathetic paper, asked whether the U.S. could "afford as its leader a man who, whatever his positive virtues, is subject to being cozened, flim-flammed and taken into camp."[51] Even the governor's closest political allies disavowed his comments. Senator Wallace F. Bennett of Utah had been vocal in his advocacy of Romney's bid for the nomination despite his admiration for Richard Nixon. In the wake of Romney's interview, Bennett wrote to a constituent, "Unfortunately, Governor Romney has not been too wise in some of the statements he has made, particularly about Viet Nam."[52]

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[48] Commentary transcript, Eric Sevareid on "Face the Nation," 5 September 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 266, Romney Papers.

[49] Editorial, *Detroit News*, 13 July 1967.

[50] Quoted in *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 31.

[51] Quoted in *Time*, 15 September 1967, 22.

[52] Wallace Bennett to Durant C. Black, 10 October 1967, series 5, box 10, Wallace Bennett Papers, Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Bennett wrote Congressman Bill Brock, "Dick [Nixon] is one of my good friends. We came into the Senate on the same day, and if he gets the nomination I will have no difficulty in supporting him

John Chafee, Rhode Island's GOP governor and a staunch Romney supporter, denied that he had been brainwashed on the trip, but lamely added in Romney's defense, "I don't want to disagree with what someone else felt."[53]

The governor's comments also demolished his year-long lead in the polls. In its first poll following his gaffe, the *Los Angeles Times* found that among Republican voters, support for Romney's candidacy had fallen dramatically. According to the survey, Nixon was favored as the GOP candidate by 28 percent of those polled, Romney by 13 percent, Rockefeller by 13 percent, and Reagan by 11 percent.[54] A mid-September Harris poll showed Romney plunging to fourth place, and when he officially entered the race on 18 November, his standing had sunk so low that many observers considered him merely a stand-in for Rockefeller.[55] Romney was no longer the front-runner, and his status as a viable challenger for the nomination was now in question.[56] As in sports, momentum is a critical intangible feature in a political campaign. Romney's had dissipated. Although in retrospect the brainwashing statement might appear to be simply a footnote to the story of the 1968 presidential election, Romney's comments were "huge in public thinking at the time" and mortally wounded his promising presidential campaign.[57]

This incident raises two important questions about Romney's candidacy: First, why did Romney use the term brainwashing in relation to his fact-finding trip to Vietnam in 1965? And second, why did this comment do such immediate, drastic, and permanent harm to the Michigan governor's presidential campaign? George Romney often referred to himself as a plain-spoken man who said what he meant. Although many other candidates have attempted to portray themselves as such, in Romney's case the claim was accurate. The governor frequently spoke off-the-cuff, much to the chagrin of his political aides and supporters. He also lacked political sophistication and failed to appreciate the differences

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wholeheartedly. However, I have more compelling personal reasons to support George Romney [both were Mormons] and have already publicly announced that support." Wallace Bennett to Bill Brock, 1 December 1967, series 5, box 10, Bennett Papers.

[53] *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 30-31.

[54] *Los Angeles Times*, 17 September 1967.

[55] Wainstock, *The Turning Point*, 35.

[56] *Newsweek* believed that the "monumental gaffe" could take Romney "right out of contention for the Republican Presidential nomination." See *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 30.

[57] White, *The Making of the President*, 57-58.

between a state race—where eccentricities can often be an advantage—and a national race—where perceptions and appearances play a far greater role. Romney's laudable candor and propensity to speak extemporaneously without considering the consequences clearly cost him in this instance.

These problems were compounded by Romney's failure to be thoroughly briefed prior to his press conferences. His critics within the GOP regarded him as "essentially a reciter of lines," particularly on international issues. As the *National Review*'s James Jackson Kilpatrick wrote, "So long as Romney carefully memorizes the foreign-policy statements prepared for him by his staff, he is all right."[58] Thus Romney's ability to enunciate his views was compromised by his lack of preparation and understanding of the issues. After the interview, *Time* noted that while politicians often changed their minds, "the good ones do so with such grace that people hardly notice, or such logic that everyone understands." Romney did neither in this case; he had "offered so inept an explanation of his shifting views on Vietnam" that *Time*'s editors believed his presidential ambitions might well be doomed.[59]

In his subsequent statements and his campaign's "clarifications," Romney asserted that his comments were meant to illustrate the chronic lack of honesty from the administration on Vietnam rather than to suggest that he had been the victim of mind control. Decrying the "credibility gap" that allegedly plagued the Johnson administration was a tactic used by most Republicans at some point during the 1966 and 1968 electoral campaigns. Hawks and doves alike criticized Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and other officials for distorting the truth and misleading the American public about the progress of the war. Unfortunately for Romney, however, he was unable to frame his statement within the parameters of the credibility gap during the WKBD interview, although he did so subsequently with much more success.[60] By using the emotionally charged term brainwashing rather than the political catchphrase credibility gap, Romney fell into a rhetorical trap from which he could not escape. Perhaps he did not grasp the implications of using the phrase or simply did not

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[58] Kilpatrick, "Romney," 1382.

[59] *Time*, 15 September 1967, 22.

[60] Several days later, Romney told a news conference at the Washington Hilton that the real issue was "whether the American people have been told the truth about the war." In his opinion, they had been subjected to "a systematic continuation of inaccurate reports, predictions and withholding of information." He went on to say, "I was not talking about the Russian type of brainwash but about the LBJ type"—a clear reference to the credibility gap issue. See *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 31.

think before speaking—a cardinal sin for a politician. Either way, he became the victim of a self-inflicted wound from which he never recovered.

There are two reasons for the precipitous and rapid decline in Romney's political fortunes following the WKBD interview. First, despite latent congressional opposition and a growing uncertainty about the war among the American people, public opinion remained generally optimistic regarding the possibility of victory through 1967. Thus Romney's lamentations regarding the dim prospect of achieving U.S. goals in Vietnam did not resonate with voters as much as they would have after the Tet Offensive. In addition, Romney's political views placed him to the left of the core of the Republican party. Although "liberal Republican" was not the oxymoron in 1967 that it has become today, the Charles Percy-John Lindsay-Nelson Rockefeller wing of the party was clearly losing its influence to the more conservative forces led by Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.[61] Moreover, as recently as May 1960 Romney had categorically disavowed membership in the Republican party, preferring to remain nonpartisan.[62] And given his liberal views on civil rights and his failure to support Goldwater in 1964, he had much greater support among independents and Democrats than among conservative Republicans. No wonder, then, that Romney's support within the party was the proverbial "mile wide and inch deep," based almost wholly on the assumption of his electability, a critical consideration for the party in the wake of the 1964 Goldwater debacle. Once the aura of inevitability of his nomination and probable victory over Johnson disappeared, Romney could not rely either on his own political experience or the dedication of long-term loyalists. All that remained for Romney was to attempt to rebuild his fragile support and hope that his opponents for the nomination would stumble later in the race.

Romney tried to rehabilitate his image and position on the war in an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" in mid-October. Unfortunately, his tendency toward ambiguous answers and vague statements of belief did not help the perception (and reality) of his inexperience in foreign affairs, nor did it boost his standings in the polls. For instance, when asked if he believed the Republicans should nominate a hawk who supported escalating the American commitment or even invading North Vietnam, Romney responded evasively. He said, "I think this is going to be a subject of great debate and discussion in the period immediately ahead. . . . I have faith at

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[61] See for example Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans From 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[62] Kilpatrick, "Romney," 1377.

this point that the Republican Party through such debate and discussion can come up with a basically unified position." He would, however, "oppose anyone who favors lessening our determination in Viet Nam"—a discordant statement considering his remarks in September.[63] Recognizing that his candidacy was sputtering before it was officially launched, Romney realized the need for a definitive and convincing statement on the war to jumpstart his campaign.

With their candidate severely damaged, Romney's campaign brain trust gave serious consideration to how the governor should address the Vietnam issue in the months leading up to the all-important New Hampshire primary. They concluded that "it would be a very serious mistake" to discuss foreign policy in stump speeches or interviews in New Hampshire if Romney were not "prepared to articulate a detailed specific Vietnam policy." The advisers recognized that "there is no issue, foreign or domestic, which even begins to approach the Vietnam War in terms of the level of concern of New Hampshire voters." For Romney to avoid Vietnam would "make him appear either irrelevant or evasive, or both." They firmly believed "the outcome of the primary here hinges on the Vietnam issue and the ability of Governor Romney to enunciate a clear, specific position different from Nixon's (and Johnson's), thus in effect turning the primary into a plebiscite on Vietnam."[64] Toward this end, they presented him with a series of six options for his Vietnam policy, most of which were much more dovish than Romney's previous public statements on the war. Although he chose the most neutral of these suggestions, Romney's papers clearly indicate that both the governor and his advisers would have been more vocally opposed to the war if such a position had been politically viable.

Taking the advice of his campaign staff, Romney unveiled a new approach in a speech at Dartmouth College on 30 October 1967. Identifying himself as a dissenter on the war, he appealed for the support

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[63] Transcript, "Meet the Press," 15 October 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 242, Romney Papers.

[64] John Deardourff to Richard van Dusen, Leonard Hall, and Jonathan Moore (Romney advisers), 19 October 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 263, Romney Papers. Two days later, Moore told Romney that "there is no doubt that Vietnam is a big issue, perhaps the biggest of all, in New Hampshire as elsewhere," but cautioned the governor that "a full-scale treatment [of his position] would be advisable. . . . We have not yet been willing to leave the generally middle ground and declare for a more clearly dovish position, an unwillingness I heartily agree with at this juncture." Moore worried about "blow[ing] the thunder of the neutralization proposal too early." See Jonathan Moore to George Romney, 21 October 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 263, Romney Papers.

of the largely student audience by arguing that he was "looking for an alternative, not merely a more popular or devastating criticism of the way things are going."[65] This would be a common theme for Romney for the remainder of his campaign and indeed throughout the rest of his public speeches in 1968. Yet identifying himself as a dissenter did not help his candidacy within the party. Indeed criticism of the war effort angered many in the GOP, particularly Eisenhower and Nixon.[66] Many Republicans attributed the burgeoning dissent around the country to a lack of candor on the part of the administration, which led to a misunderstanding of the nature and goals of the conflict. California Governor Ronald Reagan, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, opined that the public was "thoroughly confused" about the war. "How can people evaluate these ideas until the government levels with them on its goals? . . . It comes back to the old Jeffersonian concept: if the people know the truth they won't make mistakes."[67] Meanwhile, Nixon continued to urge Americans to support the war effort. "The true stake in the struggle," he told the National Association of Manufacturers in December, was "not merely the fate of a small, remote country, not even the future of freedom in Asia, but above all the possibility that by halting aggression now in a limited war, we may avoid the risk of a catastrophic world war."[68] Romney's strategy had backfired. Rather than gaining support from a disillusioned public, he had made his own views more opaque and invited further attacks from his fellow Republicans.

Still stinging from the backlash of the brainwashing remarks and the dissenter speech, Romney's advisers hoped their candidate could maintain a low profile on Vietnam as 1968 began. In preparation for an appearance on ABC's "Issues and Answers," they told the governor, "We all agree that you should not try to make any headlines on Vietnam during this show. We don't want to go an inch beyond where we already are." They urged

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[65] Speech, 30 October 1967, Gubernatorial Series, box 263, Romney Papers.

[66] Eisenhower wrote an article in 1968 in which he decried the violence and protests against the war and urged Americans to pull together and support the war effort: "Here at home, this is election year, and I hope we do not permit the Vietnam war to become a divisive political issue. . . . It is improper, and I think unpatriotic, to voice dissent in such a way that it encourages our enemies to believe we have lost the capacity to make a national decision and act on it. . . . *I will not personally support any peace-at-any-price candidate who advocates capitulation and the abandonment of South Vietnam.*" See Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Let's Close Ranks on the Home Front," *Reader's Digest*, April 1968, 49-53 (quote from 52-53).

[67] Interview, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 1967.

[68] Speech, 8 December 1967, Senatorial Series II, 1956-1972, box 665, William Miller File, John Sherman Cooper Papers, Modern Political Archives, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

Romney to "stop short of too much specifics. . . . In your continuing position on Vietnam you want to maintain some potential for responsiveness and not get static."[69] Romney's staff had finally figured out what Richard Nixon had known all along and would raise to an art form during 1968: no comment on Vietnam was better than a bad comment or a controversial one.

But Romney did not have the luxury of following that advice. With nothing to lose and everything to gain, Romney finally presented a substantive proposal for extricating the United States from South Vietnam based on a multilateral agreement on Southeast Asia, which he characterized as "guaranteed neutralization." If the Soviet Union, China, France, and the United States all had a vested interest in keeping the region neutral, he argued in a 16 January 1968 speech in Keene, New Hampshire, then the fiasco of the Laos neutralization compromise would not be repeated and America could honorably settle the war. Although many saw the idea as "reasonable and realistic as far as it goes," critics asked for more "concrete suggestions on how to get the warring participants to the negotiating table." Romney, one newspaper lamented, "still teeters between the hawks and the doves. Fence-sitting will not help get us out of this mess."[70] Romney's proposal failed to generate much enthusiasm in the press or in New Hampshire and did nothing to close the gap with Nixon.

Shortly after Romney's speech, however, there occurred a watershed event in the history of America's involvement in the war. The Tet Offensive of 1968, which began on 30 January, served to usher in a new phase of the conflict. Although in strictly military terms Tet resulted in debilitating losses for the Viet Cong and Hanoi, the psychological and political impact of the surprise attacks was devastating for the United States. Images of the American embassy under siege, the on-screen execution of a member of the Viet Cong by a South Vietnamese general, and the saga of the U.S. forces in Khe Sanh came directly into American living rooms and stunned the nation. Having been assured for years that success in Southeast Asia was just around the corner, the public reeled when it heard Walter Cronkite's disbelieving reaction on national television during the crisis ("What the hell is going on?" he cried. "I thought we were winning the

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[69] Briefing memo for 21 January 1968 "Issues and Answers" appearance, 19 January 1968, Gubernatorial Series, box 242, Romney Papers.

[70] *Grand Rapids Press*, 17 January 1968.

war!") and his scathing remarks about administration policies after his own visit to Vietnam in late February.[71]

Nearly three years of ineffective escalation against an enemy perceived to be inferior to the United States in virtually every way combined with the Tet crisis to destroy most of the public's remaining support for the war and caused a fundamental reexamination of the war in the minds of millions across the country. Opinion polls reflected the decline in support for the conflict and an increase in support for an honorable settlement. In this shifting context, Vietnam remained central to the battle for the GOP nomination. The Republicans, however, were in an awkward position. Attacking Johnson's Vietnam policies was one thing, but offering solutions on how to conclude the war successfully was another matter entirely, especially given recent events in Vietnam. Every candidate for the GOP nomination, regardless of his stance on the war, realized the need to maintain flexibility for the campaign against Johnson in the fall.[72]

Back in New Hampshire Nixon and Romney continued to vie for support in the first, and arguably most important, primary of 1968.[73] As the *Grand Rapids Press* pointed out, "the Vietnam War issue, to the almost exclusion of all other issues, continue[d]" to separate the two candidates.[74] In an effort to exploit that difference, Romney challenged Nixon to a debate to "make their positions on key issues facing us crystal clear." When Nixon declined on the grounds that such a debate would only help the Democrats in the fall, Romney retorted, "To go through the many stages of a Presidential primary without a face-to-face engagement between the two principals would be like insisting on touch football all season, with no real contact until the super-bowl game."[75] Nixon brushed aside Romney's protestations, and no debate ever took place.

His last-ditch efforts to confront Nixon directly thwarted, Romney responded with a preemptive strike on Nixon's Vietnam stance. On 16 February he announced that "the Vietnam War would be his major

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[71] Quoted in George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 209; see also Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 138.

[72] Dietz, *Republicans and Vietnam*, 131.

[73] A January 1968 Gallup poll showed that Republicans favored Nixon three to one over Romney and three to two over Rockefeller for the nomination. Quoted in Wainstock, *The Turning Point*, 35.

[74] *Grand Rapids Press*, 12 February 1968.

[75] Telegram, George Romney to Richard Nixon, 5 February 1968, Gubernatorial Series, box 240, Romney Papers.

campaign issue in the New Hampshire Presidential primary" and called Nixon "a me-too candidate on Vietnam," charging that the former vice president had "presented to New Hampshire voters no more than a blurred carbon copy of the discredited Johnson policies for ending the war. . . . He has offered nothing in the way of a positive plan for peace." The Republican party would not regain the White House, he asserted, without an alternative to the Johnson policy in Vietnam.[76] Despite this critique of the front-runner, Romney failed to clarify his own position, choosing instead to reiterate his standard campaign rhetoric—which had not been developed beyond the neutralization proposal. The results were predictable. Nixon maintained his healthy lead in New Hampshire while Romney faded into the background.

A *Boston Globe* editorial a few days later observed that Romney and Nixon "have crossed swords on one of the vital issues, the war in Vietnam, and this is all to the good so far as it has gone. . . . What should be demanded of each of them, now," the paper opined, "is the fullest possible elaboration of his thinking on this toughest of all campaign topics." The editors believed that if the candidates took their advice, "one of them unquestionably would seal his doom. But each has the duty fully to argue his convictions."[77] What the editors did not recognize, however, was that neither Romney nor Nixon could afford to fully argue his convictions on Vietnam. To do so would risk searching questions from political opponents and the media and possible electoral defeat. The *Globe*'s editorial was not enough to prompt either candidate to provide any details, but it was accurate in one sense—Romney's doom was sealed.

New Hampshire proved to be the burial ground for George Romney's presidential ambitions. Neither his attacks on Nixon nor his efforts to redefine himself could salvage the governor's sinking candidacy: his own polls showed him facing a six-to-one deficit against the former vice president. Facing the prospect of an embarrassing defeat in the primary, Romney decided to cut his losses. Rather than wait until after the balloting, Romney bowed to the inevitable and announced the end of his campaign in a statement to Republican governors on 28 February 1968. Romney asserted that his withdrawal was due to the fact that he had "not won the wide acceptance with rank and file Republicans that I had hoped to achieve."[78] Yet his failure ran deeper than that. His inability to present his

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[76] *New York Times*, 17 February 1968.
[77] Editorial, *Boston Globe*, 19 February 1968.
[78] Statement, 28 February 1968, Gubernatorial Series, box 240, Romney Papers.

views concisely and consistently limited his effectiveness as a candidate, and his ambiguous, dovish position on Vietnam had a negative impact on his standing with GOP hawks and even many moderates within the party. Romney himself recognized that his candidacy faltered in large part due to the Vietnam War.

> I did rather dramatically reverse myself in 1967 from the position I had taken in 1965 on Vietnam. I used strong words. But I had to in order to make it abundantly clear I no longer believed the war had as its purposes and was being directed in the manner I was advised earlier. I do not regret making this declaration. More important than the Presidency is that enough voices speak to the subject of Vietnam in such a way that we will extricate ourselves from that conflict. . . . It has been some satisfaction to see the likes of Senator [Thruston] Morton [of Kentucky], Senator [George] Aiken [of Vermont] and others taking much the same position in recent months, and I have hopes that Mr. Nixon and Governor Rockefeller will develop positions along the lines I have advocated.[79]

So ended George Romney's presidential campaign not with a bang but with a whimper. He could not formulate an acceptable and consistent policy on the Vietnam War, and as a result his official campaign lasted only one hundred days. Yet Michigan's governor was nothing if not tenacious, and he continued to speak out on the war and promote the neutralization of Southeast Asia for the next six months. Indeed, his departure from the campaign trail did not prevent him from playing a role in the creation of the GOP platform at the August convention. Romney took full advantage of his opportunity to influence the direction of the official Republican statement on the war both prior to and during the convention.

His GOP colleagues were not as forthcoming. The party's congressional leadership consciously avoided saying anything inflammatory or controversial about the war or the GOP platform on Vietnam during the weeks preceding the convention. They sought to prevent an incident akin to Romney's brainwashing comment from ruining a show of unity in Miami. During a press conference on foreign relations just two weeks prior to the convention, Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois

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[79] George Romney to Joseph S. Karp, 13 March 1968, Gubernatorial Series, box 240, Romney Papers.

purposefully neglected to mention the war. As Terry Dietz has argued, Dirksen likely wanted to "leave all this business alone until after the Republican National Convention."[80] This strategy resulted from the fact that questions persisted about the content of the party's platform plank on Vietnam. In the weeks leading up to the convention, Republicans of all stripes had expressed their opinions on what the party should stand for (or against) on the war.

The Foreign Policy and National Security Sub-Committee of the GOP's platform committee, which was headed by Representative Glenard P. Lipscomb of California, brought a draft plank on Vietnam to the convention. This hawkish document was "somewhat more martial than the Goldwater position of 1964." It indicted the administration for failure in Vietnam and attributed the debacle to an insufficient effort; it "all but sounded the call for the march on Hanoi."[81] Clearly, the uncompromising and strident language of the draft plank would have to be changed to represent more accurately mainstream GOP (and national) opinion if the party hoped to avoid a repeat of the 1964 fiasco.

These concerns were reported in a *New York Times* article in late July. Richard Nixon, the paper asserted, did not "want to be saddled with a platform so hawkish that it would permit Vice President Humphrey to outflank him on the left [in the fall]. Without knowing how to achieve it," the article continued, "he is said to want a formulation that would put some distance between the Administration's Vietnam policies and his without at the same time corrupting his own fundamental view that the war has been necessary to resist Communist expansion in Asia."[82] Concerned indeed. When Nixon flew to Los Angeles on 21 July, ostensibly to work on his acceptance speech, his real reason for seeking solitude back home was to work on the Vietnam plank for the convention. Because the party—and, more importantly, Nixon as the candidate—would clearly have to say something specific in the platform, Nixon needed to stake out his position. Would he end the war by winning it militarily or by withdrawing?[83]

Others would weigh in on the nature of the platform as well. Although no longer a candidate for the nomination, George Romney remained an important figure on the platform committee, and he made every effort to

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[80] Dietz, *Republicans and Vietnam*, 136.

[81] White, *The Making of the President*, 245.

[82] *New York Times*, 21 July 1968.

[83] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 166.

influence the Vietnam plank. He told the committee that the platform "must contain three basic elements. First, it must clearly set forth our aim in Vietnam. Second, it must present a conflict strategy to achieve that aim. Third, it must include a positive program for peace." If the plank resorted to vague generalizations, he argued, or if the GOP were to "pussyfoot or mince words on the Vietnam War issue, the American people will not turn to us for leadership, nor will we deserve it." Romney again proposed Vietnamization and guaranteed neutralization of Southeast Asia in concert with cooperative multilateral action as a substitute for the unilateral U.S. military action in South Vietnam and the basis for a GOP pledge of an honorable peace.

Romney's proposal diametrically opposed that of the foreign-policy subcommittee and reflected the Miami convention's uncertainty over Vietnam. Indeed, the party remained divided on the direction of its policy. Nixon said that "the United States must seek a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam war but must prepare for new military and diplomatic approaches if the Paris Vietnam peace talks fail. . . . 'The present need is for 'a dramatic escalation of our efforts on the economic, political, diplomatic, and psychological fronts.'" Dwight Eisenhower, still an unapologetic hawk on the war, told the party not to recommend anything approaching a camouflaged surrender. Meanwhile, liberal New York Mayor John Lindsay fell in line behind Romney, arguing the party "should assume forthright leadership for the cause of ending this unwanted war."[84] These disparate views on the war made a compromise on Vietnam difficult, but agreement was mandatory for the party's unity.

Fortunately for the party, the extremism and ideological rigidity of 1964 gave way to concessions by all sides. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on 3 August that "the Republican platform committee appears likely to hammer out a 'peace plank' most any GOP candidate could walk. . . . Despite some differences on the two major issues—Vietnam and the cities—there were indications the 1968 platform would produce no major battle on the convention floor."[85] The differences in the party over Vietnam were real and nearly insurmountable. But the desire for unity and the GOP's institutional memory of 1964 was powerful enough to restrain the objections of even the most vocal hawks and the most committed doves.

The platform that came out of the GOP convention was "a masterpiece of political carpentry," taking the middle course between

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[84] *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 August 1968.

[85] *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 August 1968.

conservatives and liberals in domestic policy and between hawks and doves on Vietnam. The last draft prior to printing literally had numbered sentences and paragraphs highlighted by word and phrase with indications of where each section originated.[86] Although ideologically it was suitable for Nixon, Romney, or Rockefeller, it tended to be left of the positions advocated by Reagan throughout the past year. Nevertheless, its language was flexible enough to avoid offending the broad center of political opinion in the country and it left Nixon free to pursue any course of negotiations to achieve peace. The Vietnam plank advocated a progressive Vietnamization of the war but said nothing regarding a bombing pause or a coalition government that would include participation by the National Liberation Front.[87] Best of all the plank was adopted by the party without a single dissenting vote—a testament to its inclusivity and the Republicans' overwhelming desire for unanimity. Romney's stance on the war had failed to win him the nomination, but his views and proposals on how to achieve an honorable peace clearly influenced the party's platform for the fall. He could take a modicum of pride and satisfaction in this accomplishment, salvaging something from an otherwise painful experience.

The Vietnam War has been blamed for the downfall of both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. To this list we should add George Romney. In many ways Romney and Johnson were alike—both were more experienced and interested in domestic affairs than in foreign policy, and both were dedicated to improving society on all levels. Vietnam prevented them from achieving their broader ambitions. George Romney's failure to win the Republican presidential nomination in 1968 can be traced in general to his failure to appear decisive on the issue of the Vietnam War in the years 1967 to 1968 and specifically to his brainwashing comment. Not only did Romney hand his opponents a gold-plated catchphrase with which to attack him, but also the American public and the Republican electorate could not conceive of a president who could be misled so easily or admit so casually that he had been deceived.[88] All else being equal in the GOP primaries, Romney's ambiguous position on Vietnam was no match for Richard Nixon's foreign-policy experience, his reputation as a staunch

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[86] White, *The Making of the President*, 246. For example, "P" stood for platform draft, "R" for Romney's suggestions, and "N" for Nixon's contributions.

[87] Wainstock, *The Turning Point*, 101-2.

[88] *Newsweek* compared the brainwashing comment to the "rum, Romanism and rebellion" slogan that destroyed James G. Blaine's presidential bid in 1884. See *Newsweek*, 1 September 1967, 30.

anticommunist, and his ability to avoid making any definitive statement on the war.[89]

In contrast to Romney, Richard Nixon deftly maneuvered around the Vietnam issue during the primaries and the convention, seeking to be all things to all members of the party. By subtly implying that he had a strategy to end the conflict—and thanks to unexpected help from the media, which publicized his "secret plan"—all the while maintaining his reputation as an ardent opponent of communist expansion, Nixon walked the tightrope of opinion within the party without committing himself to a politically dangerous policy position. As a result, he both won the GOP nomination in Miami and achieved the flexibility on Vietnam that would serve him well in the campaign against Hubert Humphrey in the fall of 1968.

Nixon's success in managing the Vietnam question during 1968 leads one to consider why Romney seemed unable (or unwilling) to deal with the war during his presidential campaign. As mentioned above, his inexperience in foreign-policy matters and lack of preparation left him at a distinct disadvantage relative to Nixon and certainly prevented him from being perceived as an authority on the conflict. Possibly Romney's piety also figured into his obvious confusion on the issue. Could religious conviction have been a factor in Romney's failure to adopt a Nixonesque "no comment" policy on Vietnam?[90] Perhaps. Did his determination to be candid and forthright with the public, combined with his inexperience in international affairs, make his flailing about on Vietnam inevitable? Almost certainly. Of course, the conflict in Southeast Asia challenged even the most seasoned politicians, especially as the war dragged on and public opinion

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[89] Nixon combined effective campaign strategy with good fortune. William Safire and other campaign advisers convinced Nixon to craft a series of policy statements on the war to be delivered in national radio and television addresses. Aimed at distancing Nixon from the administration and staking out his own position more specifically, these speeches would undoubtedly have produced pointed questions from the media and Nixon's opponents on both sides of the aisle that could have slowed Nixon's momentum and conceivably opened the door to a challenge at the convention by a Rockefeller-Reagan ticket. Fortunately for Nixon, his first speech was scheduled for 31 March 1968 and was canceled when his staff learned of President Johnson's impending speech. Nixon took full advantage of Johnson's withdrawal from the race. The following day, he issued a statement declaring a self-imposed "moratorium" on comments on Vietnam. By doing so, he insulated himself from criticism on the war while retaining the flexibility to break his silence when he saw fit since Vietnam remained a critical issue in the campaign. Thus he was able to avoid the pitfalls of a specific policy on Vietnam that felled Romney.

[90] Ironically, Nixon's Quaker heritage did not play a role in his astute handling of the Vietnam issue during the 1968 campaign.

began to turn against the administration's policies. But few seemed as lost or perplexed as did Romney, who was forced to confront Vietnam if he harbored any hope of defeating Nixon for the nomination. Had he been able to avoid the issue completely and focus on his domestic policy agenda, or had he come out definitively against the war as did Senator Eugene McCarthy, then perhaps his legacy—if not his political fortunes—might have been different.

An intriguing counterfactual argument can be made if one assumes Romney could have defeated Humphrey in the November election.[91] That Romney could have been an effective president on domestic issues is unquestionable, and certainly his skills as an administrator were proven and well-respected. Indeed, Nixon tapped his former rival as his administration's secretary of housing and urban development, a post in which the Michigan governor served with distinction and acclaim. Furthermore, given time and the proper advisers, Romney might have developed a cohesive and articulate foreign-policy agenda. It is safe to assume that his approach to negotiations with the North Vietnamese would have differed substantially from the Nixon-Kissinger strategy and might well have brought an earlier end to the conflict. Moreover, a Romney-led administration would not have become mired in the Watergate scandal and the subsequent decade of lethargy and self-hatred the nation had to endure. But a Romney presidency only exists as speculation. In reality, like so many other American politicians, Romney failed to survive the gauntlet of his party's presidential nominating process. The war in Vietnam was his Achilles' heel.

Andrew L. Johns is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the associate director of UCSB's Cold War History Group (COWHIG).

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[91] The utility and even appropriateness of using counterfactual analysis in historical writing has been much debated by scholars. Fredrik Logevall argues that counterfactuals can be employed effectively by historians and discusses the specific parameters within which such analysis can be properly utilized. See Logevall, "Kennedy, Vietnam, and the Question of What Might Have Been," in *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited*, ed. Mark J. White (New York: New York University Press, 1998).