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CONTAINMENT AND CREDIBILITY

The Ideology and Deception that Plunged America into the Vietnam War

by

Pat Proctor, PhD.

Grace Freedson's Publishing Network, LLC.

7600 Jericho Turnpike

Woodbury, NY 11797

Telephone: (516) 931-7757

FAX: (516) 931-7759

gfreedson@gmail.com

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Introduction

The United States is in the grips of a new foreign policy ideology—the War on Terror. According to this ideology, Islamic extremists must be defeated abroad before they can perpetrate terrorist attacks inside the United States. This ideology was forged in the fires of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. This ideology blossomed in the days after 9/11, as anthrax-laden letters arrived at Congressional offices and newsrooms, as shoe bombers and underwear bombers boarded planes to conduct further attacks. It has reshaped what infringements the American people are willing to accept on their liberties as they board planes, talk on their cell phones, or use the Internet. This ideology has also spawned two wars, the war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan, that have cost the United States trillions of dollars and over 6,000 American lives. And, as this work is being written, the War on Terror ideology has embroiled the United States in yet another war, this time in Iraq and Syria against the heirs to al Qaida in Iraq—the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Fifty years ago, the Cold War ideology of containment was no less powerful. This ideology was forged in the fire of World War II, the bloodiest conflict in the history of mankind. It blossomed in American politics amid fear of atomic annihilation and paranoia about Communist infiltration in the 1950s. By 1964, an entire generation had grown up knowing no other framework for public debate over foreign policy; the American public *believed* that it was necessary to contain Communist expansion, using military force if necessary. President Johnson tapped into this ideology when he insisted that Communists were trying to expand into Southeast Asia through South Vietnam—the so-called domino theory—and had to be opposed by force. The resulting war lasted more than eight years and cost nearly 60,000 American lives.

Throughout the war, both President Lyndon Johnson and President Richard Nixon used the ideology of military containment of Communism to justify U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. From 1965 until early 1968, opponents of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam tried to stop the war by attacking the suitability of the strategy of military containment of Communism to Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Some opponents also attacked the entire ideology of military containment of Communism, not just in Vietnam, but anywhere. In 1968, most opponents of the Vietnam War switched tactics and began to focus instead on the President's credibility on Vietnam. These arguments quickly became the dominant critique of America's policies in Vietnam through the end of the war and were ultimately successful in ending it.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident on 4 August 1964—in which two U.S. destroyers were supposedly attacked by the North Vietnamese—and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution were central both to the Johnson administration's use of containment to justify U.S. military intervention in Vietnam and to the change of opposition strategy in 1968 from attacking the administration's use of containment to justify the war to attacking the administration's credibility. For President Johnson, the Gulf of Tonkin incident both provided dramatic proof of the growing aggression of the North Vietnamese in Southeast Asia and provided the political impetus to overcome the private skepticism of many in Congress over whether the goal of containing Communism in Southeast Asia was really important enough to warrant U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. The resulting Tonkin Gulf Resolution—the President's "blank check" to use U.S. military force in Vietnam—provided the administration with an insurance policy against Congressional dissent; whatever their later misgivings, all but two members of Congress voted for the resolution. For opponents of the war in 1968, glaring inconsistencies in the administration's version of the events of the Gulf of Tonkin incident provided compelling evidence that the Johnson

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administration had lied to the American people, making the resulting Tonkin Gulf Resolution—obtained as a result of this incident—null and void. For the American people, revelations about the administration’s dishonesty during the Gulf of Tonkin incident simply added to grave doubts they already had about the Johnson administration’s credibility; the American people lost confidence in President Johnson, ending his Presidency. The dramatic success of this new strategy—attacking the administration’s credibility rather than its use of containment to justify the war—encouraged most other opponents of the war to follow suit, permanently altering the framework of debate over the war.

This change in the opposition’s strategy—from attacking military containment as a justification for the war to attacking the administration’s credibility—had a number of important consequences. First, this change in opposition rhetoric ultimately forced an end to the war. To sustain his credibility against relentless attack, President Nixon was repeatedly forced to withdraw troops to prove to the American people he was making good on his pledge to bring an “honorable end” to the war. Ultimately, Nixon ran out of troops to withdraw and was forced to accept an unfavorable compromise peace. Second, this framework for public debate of foreign policy established in the latter half of the Vietnam War—between advocates of military intervention using the ideology of military containment and opponents of military intervention attacking the administration’s credibility—would reemerge nearly every time an administration contemplated a military intervention through the end of the Cold War. Finally, and most importantly, because opponents of military intervention stopped challenging the ideology of containment, the American public continued to accept the precepts of containment after the Vietnam War and the Cold War consensus survived until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

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From the beginning of his Presidency in November 1963 until August 1964, President Lyndon Johnson used arguments founded in the Cold War ideology of containment of Communism to justify U.S. military involvement in the conflict in Vietnam, just as his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, had. Few publicly opposed these arguments or the ideology of military containment of Communism that was the core of the broader Cold War consensus on American foreign policy. Still, despite a concerted public information campaign by the administration to build a consensus in Congress and among the public for the direct employment of American military force in Vietnam, the public and Congress did not support an American military escalation in Vietnam.

On 2 August 1964, the *U.S.S Maddox* was in the Gulf of Tonkin supporting raids by South Vietnamese commandos (with American advisors in support) when three North Vietnamese patrol boats launched an attack on the *Maddox*. The attack was turned away, with one patrol boat sunk and the others damaged. On 4 August, the *Maddox*, joined by the destroyer *U.S.S. Turner Joy*, reported that it was again attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats.

President Lyndon Johnson used this incident in the Gulf of Tonkin on 4 August 1964 to justify a retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam and to win a Congressional endorsement—the Tonkin Gulf Resolution—to use military force to protect the sovereignty of South Vietnam from what his administration described as northern aggression. After the incident and the retaliation, the Johnson administration immediately returned to the ideology of military containment of Communism—while occasionally evoking the tit-for-tat precedent of these initial retaliatory air strikes or the Tonkin Gulf Resolution itself—to justify “Americanizing” the

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Vietnam War through a series of escalations that started with sustained bombing of the North and ended with over 500,000 U.S. troops fighting in the jungles of South Vietnam.

During this same period, a growing number of opponents of President Johnson's policies in Vietnam began a dramatic broadening of the public foreign policy debate, attacking justifications for the Vietnam War rooted in the military containment of Communism and even attacking the broader ideology of military containment itself. These antiwar arguments ultimately had little impact on public support for the Vietnam War and Congress, restrained by the President's insurance policy against their dissent, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, remained silent.

In early 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong insurgents initiated a massive, coordinated attack across South Vietnam in an effort to trigger a general uprising of the South Vietnamese people against their government. In the United States, this attack, initiated during the traditional ceasefire over the Vietnamese lunar New Year called "Tet," was known as the Tet Offensive.¹

In the months immediately before this Tet Offensive—at the same time the administration was making ever more strident claims about its progress in Vietnam—a few opponents of the war began tentative attacks on the administration's credibility. Then, just as the Tet Offensive called into question the administration's rosy predictions from the previous fall, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee used the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as a weapon against Johnson's Vietnam policy, claiming that President Johnson had lied about the facts of the incident to deceive the Congress into passing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. This deluge of evidence caused a collapse of public confidence in President

¹ Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*, (New York: Frank Cass, 1995), 1-4.

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Johnson's credibility; he was forced to withdraw from the presidential race and stop escalating the war.

Opponents of the war perceived these new, highly effective attacks on the administration's credibility as responsible for the President's retreat. Soon after, a number of prominent antiwar candidates who continued to attack the ideology of containment or its application to the Vietnam War were defeated in the 1968 elections; most on both sides of the Vietnam issue interpreted these losses as a rejection by the American public of attacks on the Cold War consensus. Thus, after the 1968 elections, attacks on the use of the military containment of Communism to justify the Vietnam War or on the broader ideology of military containment itself virtually disappeared. Instead, antiwar arguments narrowed to themes surrounding Presidential deceptiveness in the initiation, conduct, and resolution of the war. These latter themes became the dominant critique throughout the remainder of the Vietnam War and, in fact, were decisive in undermining Congressional and public support for the war and ultimately ending it.

However, ending the war in this way—through attacks on each administration's credibility rather than through attacks on the use of military containment of Communism as a justification for the Vietnam War—had a lasting impact on public foreign policy debate in America, even after the war. First, the structure of the debate over U.S. policy in Vietnam during the latter days of the war—between the use of military containment as a justification for military interventions and questions about the administration's credibility on foreign policy matters—became the framework for nearly every future debate over military intervention abroad through the remainder of the Cold War. More importantly, however, while many foreign policy leaders in and out of government had abandoned the ideology of military containment after the Vietnam

War, the American public continued to support this foreign policy framework. In other words, while the Cold War consensus among members of Congress and foreign policy experts outside of government was broken, the Cold War consensus among the broader American public survived the Vietnam War, perpetuating the Cold War until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

This book is a mass political history of the Vietnam War. The phrase “mass political” is used here to distinguish this book from an intra-governmental political history (documenting the struggle within a single branch or between branches of the U.S. government) or an international political history (documenting the struggle between national governments over the war). Instead, this book is a history of the mass politics of the war—the public struggle between supporters and opponents of the Vietnam War to influence American public opinion about the war. This public struggle was primarily waged in the print and broadcast media, but also through demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, and even occasionally through violence. This book will examine the arguments that were being made for and against the war, the people who were making these arguments, and why they were making them (i.e., what effect they hoped their arguments would have on the American public and why they thought their arguments would have this effect).

This approach to study of the Vietnam War yields a number of significant new contributions to the historiography of the war. First, this book will show that opponents of the Vietnam War switched tactics in 1968 and began to focus their attacks on the President’s credibility regarding Vietnam rather than on the ideology of containment or its application to Vietnam. In the years since the end of the war, the historical narrative of President Johnson’s dishonesty in starting and prosecuting the Vietnam War has become the dominant narrative of

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About the Author

Lieutenant Colonel Pat Proctor, PhD., is a U.S. Army veteran of both the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars with over 22 years of service in command and staff positions from Fort Hood, Texas to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Lieutenant Colonel Proctor is currently the Senior Fire Support Trainer at the Joint Readiness Training Center in Fort Polk, Louisiana. Lieutenant Colonel Proctor most recently deployed to Jordan, on the front lines of the war on ISIS, as the commander of the Gunner Battalion (4th Battalion, 1st Field Artillery). In 2012, Pat served as the Chief of Plans for Regional Command-East in Afghanistan, planning the transition of the war to Afghan security forces ahead of the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. In 2009, Pat deployed to Iraq as operations officer for Task Force Patriot (2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery), an artillery-turned-infantry battalion battling insurgents in Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. In 2007, Pat was drafted to work in Iraq as part of a handpicked, 20-man team of soldiers, scholars, and diplomats commissioned by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker to create a new strategy for the war in Iraq. Pat worked with a State Department counterpart to write the strategic communication plan for what has since become known as the Iraq "surge."

Pat has written extensively on current affairs, military history, and military simulation topics. He is the author of *Task Force Patriot and the End of Combat Operations in Iraq* and co-author of *ASVAB AFQT Cram Plan*. Lieutenant Colonel Proctor has also written articles for the Phi Alpha Theta history honor society journal, *The Historian*, the U.S. Army War College journal, *Parameters*, Henley-Putnam University's *Journal of Strategic Security*, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College journal, *Military Review*, and consumer magazines including *Armchair General* and *Military Simulations & Training*.

Proctor-Containment and Credibility

Lieutenant Colonel Proctor holds a doctorate in history from Kansas State University. He earned his first master's degree in military arts for strategy from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). He also holds a second master's degree in military arts for theater operations from the highly selective School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). Pat holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Purdue University.