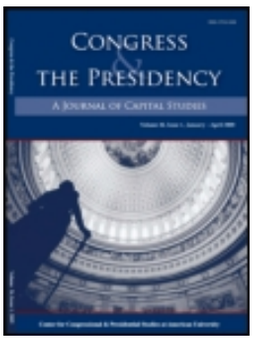

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The Presidential Manipulation of Inherited Wars of Choice: Barack Obama's Use of Nixonian Methods as Commander in Chief

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Despite their apparent differences, both Richard Nixon and Barack Obama secured their party's nominations and ultimately the presidency partly due to their manipulation of contentious and inherited "wars of choice." The wars in Vietnam and Iraq provided the political and cultural circumstances that made Nixon and Obama credible "peace candidates" in 1968 and 2008 respectively. Having championed their opposition to the wars to gain the presidency, both men continued the conflicts throughout their first term and subsequently utilized these conflicts to help secure a second term in office, declaring "victory" as part of their re-election campaigns. This study examines the manner in which Obama, like Nixon, benefited as president from an inherited "war of choice" and adopted Nixonian methods to maximize his chances for re-election in 2012.

Throughout his political career, Barack Obama has drawn repeated comparison with John F. Kennedy. His 2008 campaign for the presidency was happy to perpetuate this association, which as noted (Knoller 2011; Rich 2011; Smirnov 2013), continued after he took office in January 2009. This article, however, argues that the orthodox contrast with Kennedy is misleading, as it fails to address substantive issues of their presidencies and their differing approach to armed conflict. Instead, it argues that the Kennedy compassion is fundamentally flawed, and that President Obama's use of an inherited "war of choice" during his first term in office more closely resembles the actions of Richard Nixon between 1969 and 1973, rather than a Camelot for the 21st century.

The Kennedy comparison contorted historical parallels between the two candidates and was a particularly self-serving construct, both for the incoming Obama

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team as well as for former Kennedy aides seeking to maintain their continued relevance 50 years after leaving office (Sorensen 2007). It emphasized superficial aspects of imagery and tenuous similarities (Packer 2008), while overlooking vital differences, including the life experience of the two men, their tenures in office prior to their presidential bids, and the circumstances through which they governed (Greenberg, 2007).

Accordingly, the Nixon comparison is more revealing than that with Kennedy and provides a far more accurate manner to consider President Obama's management of armed conflict both in office and as a means to help secure reelection. All administrations inherit policy decisions from their predecessors, and these often involve troop deployments. Such an inheritance presents challenges and constraints, as well as opportunities, as was the case with the first Nixon administration (1969–1973) and again with the first Obama administration (2009–2013). An examination of the experience of these administrations reveals much in relation to the opportunities and challenges such an inheritance involves and contributes to a greater appreciation of the policy decisions made by the Obama White House, especially in relation to foreign affairs.

This article uses discourse analysis to consider official documents and speeches, and in so doing, examines the manner in which Obama's presidency has mirrored Nixon's previous efforts to benefit politically by ending a contentious, inherited "war of choice" ahead of his campaign for reelection in 2012. This approach has been utilized to maximize the available sources and motivated by a desire to draw on official materials and statements in order to provide an accurate rendering of presidential rhetoric and strategy. Accordingly, this article finds that the misleading Kennedy-Obama comparison that was constructed during the 2008 election cycle led to flawed expectations about the course of action that Obama would adopt in office. The two candidates, their routes to power, the policies they extolled, and the times they governed in were different enough to make such a comparison a futile exercise. In addition, both before and following his election, Barack Obama adopted positions toward the Iraq War that had more in common with Nixon's handling of the Vietnam conflict than previously considered.

Nixon and Obama both entered office having inherited a conflict instigated by their political opponents; both promised a rapid withdrawal of forces, only to have the withdrawal process consume much of their first terms. The article concludes that both the Nixon and Obama administrations embraced similar "indiginization" policies that enabled them to present themselves as "peacemakers" and to announce a timely withdrawal of forces ahead of their reelection campaigns, in an attempt to maximize the political benefit of their inherited "wars of choice." An appreciation of these similarities can help provide a more accurate appreciation of Obama's governing strategy, his philosophical approach to conflict, and assist in an understanding of the decision-making processes in the White House as he successfully sought a second term as president of the United States.

THEORETICAL BASIS

To date, the manner in which the Obama administration managed the Iraq War during its first term and the extent to which this mirrored a Nixonian approach to assist in its bid for reelection has received little attention. The accepted narrative (Bligh and Kohles 2009; Hollander 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Lee and Morin 2009) is that the Afghan conflict became "Obama's War" as he withdrew from Iraq, focused on the Taliban insurgency, and scaled back the Global War on Terror initiated by his predecessor, George W. Bush. This continued the 2008 campaign narrative, portraying Barack Obama as a man of peace, dedicated to coexistence, and deserving of his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Such a narrative, however, fails to address adequately the extent to which the Obama administration managed the Iraq War once in office and the degree to which its conclusion was, at least partly, orchestrated to increase the president's chances of reelection. This is not to suggest that nothing has been written on the Obama administration's approach to foreign policy in general, or to armed conflict in particular. However, the administration's handling of the war in Iraq, and its political approach to foreign policy ahead of the 2012 reelection campaign, has received insufficient attention to date.

The attempt to chronicle the use of force during the Obama presidency has dwelt on military strategies rather than on broader political implications, with an overwhelming focus on the Afghan operation at the expense of any serious consideration of the administration's Iraqi initiatives. While focusing entirely on the administration's foreign policy exploits, Singh (2012) fails to dedicate a chapter to Obama's engagement with Iraq, despite stand-alone chapters on relations with Iran, Russia, and China. Indeed, the Iraq War receives only scant mention in relation to Iran and to Obama's campaign pledges to withdraw U.S. forces. Woodward (2010) continues the author's noted use of deep background reporting, but focuses almost exclusively on the Afghan theater of operations and addresses the Iraqi mission only in relation to its military conclusion, not in relation to its political implications. Even when comparisons with the Vietnam era are drawn, they are with the operation in Afghanistan and, intriguingly, are with the presidential election of 1964, not 1972, ensuring that an important historical parallel has been missed.

Klaidman (2012) examines the tactics employed by the Obama White House in its continuing struggle with terrorism, but fails to address the operation in Iraq or the political importance of efforts to end the war ahead of the 2012 reelection campaign. Even Alter (2010), who focuses solely on Obama's first year in office, makes little reference to the ongoing situation in Iraq and again, does so almost entirely in relation to the Afghan operation. Saldin (2008, 1) concludes that coverage of Obama's 2008 election is "incomplete because it does not take foreign affairs seriously." The same is true concerning Obama's 2012 campaign and the policies and incidents that preceded it. Zakaria (2008, A15) comes closest to revealing the Nixonian approach that Obama employed in regard to the Iraq conflict as commander in chief, noting that Obama "seems—unusually for a modern day

Democrat—highly respectful of the realist tradition," and highlighting the candidate's "enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H. W. Bush." However, while these observations are noteworthy, they only hint at the manner in which the Iraq War was managed by the Obama administration during its first term in office, and concluded in a timely manner in preparation for the 2012 campaign. This stands in contrast to the work of Small (1999), Mason (2004) and Johns (2012), which acknowledge the importance of ending the Vietnam War to President Nixon's reelection strategy 40 years earlier.

This lack of attention might well be a reflection of the fact that the Afghan conflict is perceived to be "Obama's War," as opposed to the struggle in Iraq. However, this orthodox interpretation is misleading, as it ignores the importance of the Iraq War to Obama's political rise and its continued implications once in office. This approach diminishes the role that the Iraq War played in the months and years leading up to the reelection campaign and the efforts made to neutralize the conflict ahead of 2012. This lack of attention to the Iraq War in studies of Obama's presidency in general, and ahead of his 2012 reelection campaign specifically, reveals a continuing, inherent bias against considerations of foreign policy in domestic political decision making, an issue this article addresses. Obama's mirroring of Nixon's management of an inherited "war of choice" has not adequately figured in an appreciation of his successful campaign for the presidency in 2008 and has thus far been under-examined as one of the tools he used to enhance his chances of reelection in 2012.

This article, however, does more than merely address the gap that exists in the literature on the Obama administration. Building on an earlier work (Boys, 2014) that addressed Obama's utilization of the Iraq War to gain office in 2008, this article draws on an extensive range of materials to examine the hitherto unexplored degree to which Obama mirrored Nixonian methods to manage the withdrawal from the conflict, and in so doing, increase his chance of reelection. The passage of time has enabled a wide range of primary sources on Nixon to emerge, especially from the Nixon Library in California. Due to the contemporary nature of the Obama presidency, however, primary source material is limited to speeches, statements, and official documents, most notably derived from *The Papers of the Presidents* series. Accordingly, this article has supplemented primary research with respected secondary sources to ensure the use of the most effective material available. Where appropriate, this has been compounded by the use of relevant polling data to reveal the importance of the conflicts to the American people, and by extension, to the two administrations as they sought a second term in office.

Discourse analysis has been utilized to consider the exact terminology used by Nixon and Obama as they sought to clarify their policies on their inherited "wars of choice." Weldes (1998, 271) observed that studying political language is vital since it "actively produces the issues with which policy makers deal and the specific problems that they confront." This article focuses on the use of polit-

ical speeches in the construction of official policy and the manner in which these were used to advance a specific course of action, designed to maximize the incumbents' chances of reelection in 1972 and 2012. George (1994, 191) noted that what unites studies of discourse analysis is a commitment to understanding how "textual and social processes are intrinsically connected and to describe, in specific contexts, the implications of this connection for the way we think and act in the contemporary world." As policy implementation has traditionally followed policy pronouncements, it appears logical that we should consider the words spoken by candidates and incumbents for clues as to future actions. Such spoken words reveal much about candidates' commitment to a cause and their potential willingness to exploit situations for their own political advantage.

It is noted, however, that although language is vital to the notion of discourse, social and political life are not reducible to language or linguistic analysis alone. Indeed, problems exist within this analytical approach, and selection bias is an ever-present challenge. Doty (1993) noted that discourse analysis consists of a "system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense," but also produces interpretative possibilities. Accordingly, in selecting material, this article has been careful to draw upon the specific words of the presidents, rather than on material that may be interpreted politically by third parties. Where material has been drawn from contemporary reportage, it is to convey the words of the candidates, not journalists. This article's focus on the spoken word does not seek to distract from the evolving reality on the ground in Vietnam and Iraq, but rather to highlight the degree to which official policy was concocted in a series of speeches that sought to perpetuate an image of Nixon and Obama as peacemakers, and therefore assist in their reelection campaigns of 1972 and 2012 respectively.

The article recognizes that for both Nixon and Obama their inherited "wars of choice" were merely one of many issues that had to be addressed during their tenures in office; competing issues such as inflation, unemployment, health care and terrorism were considerations playing on the minds of the respective administrations as well as the electorate. Furthermore, it notes that both presidents were attempting to forge a new electoral majority and establish their party as the natural choice of the electorate. However, the article focuses on the inherited "wars of choice" as a vehicle to address issues of trust in the presidency. Having campaigned in 1968 and 2008 as agents of change and against the wars, both Nixon and Obama would have faced political difficulties by running for reelection without having addressed the deployments. This article addresses the way in which both administrations managed the withdrawal to maximize its political significance and contribute, in part, to the reelection effort. In both conflicts, and despite considerable differences, U.S. forces were dispatched to a country very different from their own in terms of language, culture, and history (Packer 2005; Polk 2005) in what became, for both Nixon and Obama, inherited "wars of choice."

The Nixon and Obama administrations both managed the respective conflicts to assist their own political purposes and an appreciation of how and why this was

done is important for what it reveals about their administrations and their campaigns for reelection. A consideration of speeches and official documents reveals the extent to which the Obama administration mirrored Nixon's initial efforts to benefit politically from an inherited "war of choice" by adhering to a timescale for withdrawal that exacerbated the chance of reelection in 2012. This article first evaluates the Nixon precedent before considering the manner in which Obama mirrored this approach between 2008 and 2012. This analysis concludes by highlighting the value of an analytical approach focused around foreign policy and "wars of choice."

THE NIXON PRESIDENTIAL PRECEDENT

Forty years before Barack Obama came to power, Richard Nixon campaigned for the presidency with a plan to end the war in Vietnam, where the United States faced an enemy that, for the most part, refused to engage directly, utilizing guerrilla-style tactics to entrap the superpower in a war of attrition. The most notable exception to this tactic was the Tet Offensive of January 1968, an event that proved catastrophic for Viet Cong forces, despite the psychological blow it inflicted on the United States. Schuman and Corning (2006) observed that in both Iraq and Vietnam the United States faced "an enemy difficult to identify clearly and seemingly impossible to combat by traditional military means."

The Vietnam War played an important role in Richard Nixon's 1968 election, for as noted by Converse, Miller, Rusk, and Wolfe (1969, 993–94), "although other things were going on, Vietnam was the major issue of the day." Nixon secured the Republican Party's nomination, in part, by exploiting his foreign policy credentials, and as observed by Chester, Hodgson, and Page (1969) and English (1969), by stressing his removal from the decision-making process that led to the war.[1] Having won the presidency, Nixon initially appeared content for the war to have lasted just long enough to help him secure victory. According to Clifford (1991, 600), President-Elect Nixon assured him that he wished to withdraw U.S. forces "the quicker the better." Even in his inaugural address, Nixon (1969a, 2) gave further hope to those who believed that an end to the Vietnam War was in sight, as he declared, "the greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America—the chance to help lead the world at last out of the valley of turmoil."

However, despite this declaration and repeated campaign pledges to end the war, Nixon (1969c) actively planned to widen the conflict while still president-elect, telling incoming national security adviser Henry Kissinger, "I think a very definite change of policy toward Cambodia probably should be one of the first orders of business when we get in." As widely noted (Hersh 1983, 119; Kalb and Kalb 1974, 120; Riegle 1972, 20; Small, 1988, 166), those who expected President Nixon to end the Vietnam War immediately were disappointed, as U.S. combat deaths for

the first half of 1969 actually increased and the war was secretly expanded into Cambodia under the auspices of Operation Menu.

However, the incoming administration was concerned that their ability to enact any dramatic change might be undermined by bureaucratic resistance. A memo from Nixon's campaign aide Bryce Harlow (1968) revealed the concern that "the vast bulk of 'liberals' in the U.S. Foreign Service/State Department establishment believe that the allegedly thin margin of Mr. Nixon's victory will make it impossible for the new Nixon team to impose any deep or meaningful change . . . in terms of U.S. foreign policy operations." The fear that the State Department might undermine Nixon's foreign policy, therefore, was raised before he even took office. Harlow noted further, the belief that "Nixon's candidacy not only was unsupported by nearly 90% of the personnel of the Department of State—it was opposed, at least passively." These concerns regarding opposition from the diplomatic corps appeared to be prescient, for as Eliot (1970) noted in a subsequent memo, the State Department counseled caution in Southeast Asia, advising the White House to "emphasize that our policy is to continue to support Cambodia's independence, neutrality and territorial integrity."

Such advice was at odds with the ambitions of the White House, which had initiated the secret bombing of Cambodia two months after taking office, following advice from the Joint Chiefs. Siniver (2008, 71) revealed that two years later, on April 22, 1970, Nixon remarked to Kissinger, "I think we need a bold move in Cambodia," and promptly dispatched 32,000 troops into the neutral country. Addressing the nation on April 30, 1970, Nixon justified his actions, claiming the need to retain a role for the United States on the world stage in what was still a dangerous cold war setting. In language that President Obama echoed in January 2010, Nixon (1970, 410) concluded his remarks by stating, "I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power."

The tactical challenge for the Nixon administration was to disengage from Vietnam without reducing the U.S. role in the world and without impeding Nixon's ambitions for a second term. The Nixon administration, therefore, was in the conflicted position of conflating the long-term national interests of the United States with its own short-term political interests, which initially found focus on the 1970 mid-term elections. Accordingly, rather than seeking to end the Vietnam War in its first year in office as had been implied on the campaign trail, the Nixon White House devised a medium-term plan that focused on international and domestic political considerations.

Internationally, President Nixon feared a poorly orchestrated withdrawal could have disastrous consequences. As James Keogh (1969) noted, Nixon advised a joint meeting of the cabinet and the National Security Council, "If we fail to end the war in a way that will not be an American defeat, and in a way that will deny the aggressor his goal, the hawks in Communist nations will push for even more and broader aggression. . . . If a great power fails to meet its aims, it ceases to

be a great power." To address this concern, and as addressed separately by both Kissinger (1968) and Nixon (1967), the administration initiated an international policy of Triangular Diplomacy, as it sought to extricate the United States from Vietnam by negotiating with the Russians and the Chinese, placing Vietnam in a pincer movement.

Domestically, as Parmet (1990) notes, the White House focused on the electoral gains that could benefit the Republican Party if a peace settlement were reached ahead of the 1970 mid-term elections. Nixon had won the presidency in 1968, but as Mason (2004, 34–35) notes, his ambitions of presiding over a new era in American politics were in doubt. Nixon had secured only 43.3% of the vote in 1968, winning with only 500,000 more votes than Vice President Humphrey, due in part to the presence of third-party candidate George Wallace, who won 13.5% of the vote. Nixon's ambition of presiding over a new era in American politics was hindered further by the failure of the Republican Party to secure a mandate in either house of Congress or in state legislatures across the country. Despite the tumultuous events and policy implementations of the 1960s, the 1968 elections had seen the Democrats retain control of the House of Representatives with a 248–187 margin, and the Senate by 58–42, while nationally, the Democrats controlled 57.5% of all seats in state legislatures. Small (1999, 30) notes, therefore, that despite Nixon's public displays of confidence, his share of the electorate "did not represent a coherent vote of confidence in a Republican future."

The continuing war and accompanying deaths of U.S. service personnel exacerbated fears over the margin of Nixon's victory and fueled concerns regarding the president's hopes for reelection in 1972. Mueller (1973, 59) identified casualty rates as being the "relevant measure" of "the amount of pain caused by war," a fact that has subsequently been reinforced by Eichenberg and Stoll (2006) and Ostrom and Simon (1985). However, Geys (2010, 357) notes that "casualty numbers are not the only war characteristic affecting people's opinions about their leaders" noting the importance of "economic and fiscal impacts of war, trade disruptions, loss of cultural heritage, environmental damage, and so on." Nixon's inherited "war of choice" in Vietnam was not the only consideration for voters, but domestically it needed to be dealt with so as not to hinder electoral chances.

Despite the best efforts of the Nixon administration to leverage foreign policy for domestic political gain, however, the 1970 mid-term elections proved to be a disappointment as the Republicans lost 11 governorships and 9 seats in the House of Representatives, while the Democrats held the Senate by 55–45 seats. With the Democrats polling 4.5 million more votes nationwide than the Republicans, it was clear that Nixon's reelection in 1972 was by no means certain and could depend on his ability to assuage voters' concerns over his capacity to end the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The 1970 midterm elections revealed the danger of failing to address the Vietnam situation prior to the 1972 election. The administration had made much of the president's ability to manage the conflict as an example of his overall competency, and presented his promise to withdraw as an example of his

honesty, which previously had been questioned. Nixon's inherited "war of choice," therefore, was not only an issue in itself with the electorate, but in addition, his handling of it and his ability to withdraw on a timescale were presented as issues of trust. A U.S. victory in Vietnam needed to be declared in order for Nixon to campaign for reelection as a president who had kept his promise and extricated the United States, undefeated, from an unpopular war.

As Ambrose (1989, 507) observed, "Nixon had to do something: His reelection depended on what he did in Vietnam . . . he had to convince the voters he had done all that could be done to end the war." In a move that was repeated 40 years later in Iraq, the Nixon White House implemented a plan to withdraw U.S. troops as the indigenous people resumed responsibility for their own country. Doing so allowed the United States to draw down its forces prior to the end of hostilities on the basis that they were no longer needed, since local forces could assume responsibility for their own defense. This was the policy of Vietnamization. As explained by Hanhimaki (2004, 43), the rationale for the policy was straightforward: "While fewer body bags were likely to mean fewer moratoriums, more material aide [sic] should satisfy the concerns of those who really could not stomach the reality that the United States was being gradually smoked out of Vietnam." The Nixon administration's Vietnamization policy saw a sharp reduction in U.S. forces from a 543,000-man contingent in 1969 to 25,000 in 1972. As noted by Dallek (2007, 356) and Saldin (2011, 193), the number of draftees sent every month was reduced from 8,000 in 1970 to 500 in December 1971, having once accounted for 49% of all non-commissioned personnel.

Vietnamization, however, was a policy that caused great division within the administration. Kissinger (1979, 1481) expressed his concerns to Nixon in September 1969, stating that, "Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public: the more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded. This could eventually result, in effect, in demands for unilateral withdrawal—perhaps within a year." However, as Dallek (2007, 130) noted, Secretary of State Rogers and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird were strong advocates of the proposal, believing that the South Vietnamese could take over the majority of the fighting. Therefore, in a rare example of Kissinger being overruled, and based on what Nixon (1978, 392) referred to as the "enthusiastic advocacy" of the defense secretary, the policy of Vietnamization was implemented.

Nixon (1969b, 901–09) unveiled the policy to the American people, noting, "I pledged in my campaign for the Presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge." It was, therefore, vital that the administration present Vietnamization as being the result of Saigon's genuine ability to defend itself, rather than of American determination to withdraw; for as Kissinger (1969) observed, Vietnamization had to be "accomplished as an act of strength rather than weakness." As Dallek (2007, 183) notes, polling indicated that Nixon had little room to maneuver on the issue, with 84% of Americans favoring a withdrawal of U.S. troops. White House Counsel

Leonard Garment (1969) advised the president that the nation was impatient and wished "to turn away from excessive world problems and back to the solution of social problems at home." Further delays could seriously backfire, he warned, "causing even greater impatience."

However, there was a contradiction in the administration's policies, for as Nixon reduced the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, he simultaneously expanded the fighting into Cambodia. Despite his strong anti-Communist credentials, Nixon was not immune to domestic pressure from the right of the Republican Party, which was unhappy with the Vietnamization policy and forced the president to disengage more slowly than he wished. As Johns (2012) observes, this contributed to the contradictory nature of the Vietnam policy, at once disengaging while also expanding the fighting. Gaddis (1982, 299) observes that this process fit with a manoeuvre that Nixon and Kissinger engineered, designed to cover "strategic withdrawals with tactical escalations." In such a way, "Uncertainty itself became a deterrent" (1982, 300).

Such an effort was initiated to confound Nixon's opponents, both foreign and domestic, and on a timetable that assisted the president's reelection campaign. As Bell (1977, 209–10) observes, as a result "the dichotomy between the need to disengage, and the need to minimize the consequences of doing so, was met by the process of diplomacy, delay and Vietnamization." It was a policy, however, that enabled the United States to draw down its forces prior to the end of hostilities on the basis that they were no longer needed, as local forces assumed responsibility for their own defense. As Mason (2004, 183) notes, by his actions Nixon addressed those who sought a withdrawal in the name of peace, by engaging in negotiations announced at the start of the year, as well as those who advocated manoeuvring from a position of strength and a continued use of force, demonstrated by the renewed attacks on the north in the spring.

The Vietnamization policy also enabled the Nixon White House to meet a vital deadline: the 1972 election season, during which the war was, according to Saldin (2011, 208), "an unusual issue." Having campaigned in 1968 on a platform dedicated to ending the war, Nixon was not in a position to repeat this pledge four years later. Key to the 1972 reelection campaign, therefore, was a focus on the role of President Nixon as peacemaker. Nixon presented himself as a determined warrior for peace and portrayed his Democrat opponent, Senator George McGovern, as a threat to America's standing in the world, due to his preparedness to surrender in Southeast Asia. As noted by May and Fraser (1973, 235) Nixon's aide Jeb Magruder stressed that the priority was to make Nixon appear to be "the most reasonable person in trying to solve the problem that he himself had not created."

The dilemma for the Nixon White House, however, was when precisely to end the war. As noted (Hanhimaki, 2001; Kimball, 2001; Suri, 2007), by 1971 Nixon and Kissinger were seeking to establish a "decent interval" between the eventual U.S. withdrawal and a potential North Vietnamese takeover of the south. All that remained to arrange were the precise details to ensure the administration

and the United States retained some remnants of credibility. It has emerged that Nixon wanted to remove all U.S. troops by the end of 1971, but Kissinger cautioned that if South Vietnam came under renewed attack in the interim period, it could have an adverse effect on the president's hopes for reelection. Instead, in a move that betrayed the deliberate manipulation of the inherited "war of choice" to assist the reelection effort, Haldeman (1994, 221) reveals that Kissinger recommended a withdrawal in the fall of 1972, "so that if any bad results follow they will be too late to affect the election."

President Nixon recognized the inherent political risks in Kissinger's call for an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam in September 1972. It exposed his campaign to accusations that the withdrawal had been arranged to benefit Nixon politically and that the administration was placing its survival ahead of the well-being of American troops, as well as the long-term interests of both the United States and South Vietnam. As Ambrose (1989, 494) notes, having advised *Time* magazine, "Vietnam will not be an issue in the campaign . . . because we will have brought the American involvement to an end," the president was quickly forced to deny any political manipulation of the war. In an interview with Dan Rather on January 2, 1972 Nixon (1972, 6–8) dismissed the suggestion that the timing may be politically motivated, insisting, "those decisions have no political connotations whatsoever." However, as Ambrose (1989, 594) observed, Nixon later told Stewart Alsop of *Newsweek*, "I'm sure of one thing. The war will be over. The war won't be holding over us in a second term."

As Election Day approached, the political considerations continued to alter. As Hersh (1983, 591) notes, on October 15, 1972, Kissinger pushed for a quick pre-election settlement, but the president refused, fearing that "a settlement would let people say 'Well, thank goodness the war is over. Now we can go on and worry about peace and we will elect a Democrat because Democrats always do more in peacetime."' As Election Day loomed, Nixon's advisers recognized that "after the fifteenth of October it was definitely contrary to our interests to get an agreement." Polling indicated that the electorate preferred Nixon's policy of fighting for peace with honor to McGovern's alternative. A Gallup poll in mid-October revealed 58% of respondents thought Nixon would better deal with the war, while only 26% preferred McGovern (Mason, 2004, 184). This sentiment was reflected on Election Day 1972, as Nixon won 60.7% of the popular vote, with a margin of victory of 22.3% and with 18 million more votes than McGovern. On January 23, 1973, three days after repeating the oath of office, Nixon announced the end of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War with the formal declaration ending hostilities being signed on January 27. The Nixon administration claimed to have negotiated peace with honor, and achieved a second term in office. Neither, however, would long endure.

In 1968, Nixon campaigned as an outsider, claiming to be innocent about the war in Vietnam and untarnished by the decision-making process that had led to war. Nixon manipulated the war in Vietnam to gain office and then continued the fighting

throughout his first term to ensure that the timing of the final peace negotiations benefited his reelection efforts. Most analysis of Nixon's presidency has focused on other elements, and has overlooked his administration's manipulation of the Vietnam War for political and electoral gain. However, his use of an inherited "war of choice" to gain domestic political advantage was not lost on everyone, as it was mirrored 40 years later by the most unlikely of candidates.

OBAMA'S UTILIZATION OF THE IRAQ WAR AS COMMANDER IN CHIEF

Forty years after Richard Nixon came to the presidency with a plan to end his inherited "war of choice" in Vietnam, Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency with a pledge to end the war in Iraq, where the United States again faced an enemy that utilized guerrilla-style tactics in an unpopular war of attrition. Indeed, critics of the conflict in Iraq (Krugman, 2004) saw it as a distraction from the wider struggle with terrorism and compared it unfavorably to the previous deployment in Vietnam. The Iraq War had been a vital factor in Obama's 2008 election, played an important role during his first term, and its conclusion was crucial ahead of his 2012 reelection campaign.

During his 2008 campaign for the presidency, Obama's greatest advantage in exploiting opposition to the war in Iraq was not being a member of the United States' Senate at the time of the 2002 vote authorizing an invasion. As revealed by Boys (2014), Obama benefited from his early critique of the conflict, his constant position on the subject and the fact that his Democratic opponents had all voted to authorize military action. This marked Obama as belonging to a new generation, unblemished by the decision-making process that had led to war. He successfully utilized his own inexperience, the actions of his opponents, and the Iraq War in general for his own political benefit. Having emphasized his opposition to the war to neutralize Hillary Clinton in the primaries, he then defeated John McCain in the general election using similar tactics successfully to tie his Republican opponent to the Bush administration's policies, including the Iraq War. Obama, therefore, succeeded in both the primary season and the general election, in part due to his pledge to end an inherited "war of choice" quickly, as Nixon had done in 1968.

Barack Obama's presidency promised a very different approach from that of his predecessor, George W. Bush. The first opportunity to reveal this came with the inaugural address, in which Obama (2009a, 2) pledged that the United States would "begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people." A further, oblique reference to Iraq was made in a rebuke to the outgoing administration as the new president rejected "as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience sake." Considering the centrality of the Iraq War to Obama's campaign and ensuing victory, this was a

scant reference in such a vital speech and did little to convey the importance that the Iraq War had played on the campaign and would continue to play in Obama's first term. Like Nixon, therefore, Obama used the inaugural to portray himself as a "peacemaker," committed to ending an inherited "war of choice," initiated by his political opponents.

President Obama's decision-making process has been noted for its deliberation and consideration of opposing views, a cautious approach that appears at odds with the sweeping language of his 2008 campaign. However, as president, Barack Obama needed to withdraw from his inherited "war of choice" in a manner that did not undermine the United Sates' standing in the world or his own chances of reelection in 2012. Obama had been assisted in this regard by his predecessor, President George W. Bush, who signed the Status of Forces Agreement with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in December 2008. As revealed by Baker (2013, 617–20), Bush believed it was vital to bequeath his successor a strategic framework agreement for ending the war. Bush and the Iraqi prime minister agreed to the withdrawal of American troops from Iraqi cities by the end of June 2009 and the total withdrawal of forces by the end of 2011. Bush hoped it would make it easier for Obama to finish the war in Iraq without feeling pressured to withdraw abruptly. At a stroke, he had also effectively set Iraq policy for the first three-quarters of his successor's first term.

Despite inheriting this initiative, President Obama (2009a, 6) initiated a 60-day review of the war on his administration's first full day in office and "asked the military leadership to engage in additional planning necessary to execute a responsible military draw-down from Iraq." The review coincided with an article in *Foreign Affairs* that increased the pressure on President Obama to adhere to his campaign commitments. Haass and Indyk (2009, 41–5) urged Obama to "gradually reduce the number of U.S. troops in Iraq, limit their combat role, and increasingly shift responsibility to Iraqi forces." They further suggested that by mid-2010, the administration "should be able to reduce U.S. forces significantly, perhaps to half their pre-surge levels." The article reflected the Obama campaign's pledge to withdraw from Iraq on a 16-month timescale.

Obama (2009a, 151) addressed the war in his first speech to a joint session of Congress, in which he promised an imminent statement that would "announce a way forward in Iraq that leaves Iraq to its people and responsibly ends this war." Three days later, on February 27, 2009, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, President Obama announced that by August 31, 2010, two months before the mid-term election, all but a transitional force of up to 50,000 troops would be withdrawn form Iraq. On the campaign, Obama had pledged to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq by the summer of 2010, but events threatened this commitment, not least of which was the Status of Forces Agreement that committed U.S. forces to Iraq until the end of 2011. However, the timetable announced at Camp Lejeune ensured that the majority of troops would be withdrawn over a year before the deadline that initially had been agreed between President Bush and Prime Minister al-Maliki.

President Obama (2009a,) announced that this was possible due to his executive actions since taking office, which reflected his campaign pledges: "I made clear my support for a timeline of 16 months to carry out this draw down . . . Let me say this as plainly as I can: by August 31, 2010, our combat mission in Iraq will end." Obama was adamant that the residual forces would not remain in Iraq for long and would be out ahead of the presidential election of 2012: "Under the Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi government, I intend to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. We will complete this transition to Iraq responsibility, and we will bring our troops home with the honor that they have earned." In keeping with the 2008 Democratic Party Platform, the U.S. forces that remained would be engaged in "training, equipping, and advising Iraqi Security Forces . . . conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions; and protecting our ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq." However, having made very careful use of rhetoric on the campaign, it was notable that Obama's specific wording bore an uncanny echo of Nixon's January 23, 1973, statement regarding "peace with honor" in Vietnam. Yet the concept of a residual force was one that caused the Obama administration a problem, since it committed the United States to a continued presence in Iraq. As Gordon (2010, A1) reported, "The administration does not want to touch this question right now [as] it runs counter to their political argument that we are getting out of these messy places." The residual force, however, was central to the second element of the withdrawal plan, ensuing that Iraq did not collapse into anarchy, since a stable Iraq enabled Obama to benefit domestically.

As with Nixon beforehand, the Obama administration was in a conflicted position that risked conflating the long-term national interests of the United States with their own short-term political interests, which initially focused on the 2010 mid-term elections. The Obama White House sought to align its political interests and U.S. national interests to ensure that a withdrawal from Iraq was achieved on the Obama administration's electoral timescale. As Jacobson (2010, 585) observed, "Obama's prospects for a successful conclusion to the Iraq War depended not only on political and military events on the ground . . . but also on the American public's support for, or at least acquiescence to, his military and diplomatic decisions." As in Vietnam, an exit strategy required more than merely withdrawing U.S. ground troops. It meant a full and honorable retreat, presented as a victory, coupled with an assurance that Iraq would not descend into chaos, but could be defended and secured by its citizens.

The Obama administration's Iraq policy was based on an effort to withdraw U.S. ground forces ahead of the 2010 mid-term elections, while ensuring that the local population assumed responsibility for their own safety and security. President Obama's policy of withdrawal, combined with the resumption of control by an indigenous population could clearly trace its lineage back to Nixon's Vietnamization plan. As noted, (Dodge 2008; Gordon 2006a; Koopman 2006) it was also a continuation of the Indigenization Policy that had been announced by President George W. Bush (2005, 1074) in June 2005, on the basis that "as the Iraqis stand up,

we will stand down." In a move that replicated President Nixon's efforts 40 years earlier, the Obama White House initiated a plan to withdraw U.S. troops as Iraqis resumed responsibility for the defense of their own country. Doing so allowed the United States to draw down its forces prior to the end of hostilities on the basis that they were no longer needed. As Singh (2012, 75) notes, "Obama's new 'surge and drawdown' strategy effectively echoed Richard Nixon's 'Vietnamization' approach from 1969–74." In its use of an indigenization policy and attempt to gain short-term political advantage in mid-term elections, the Obama administration's attempt to mirror the Nixon approach to an inherited "war of choice" becomes apparent.

Many issues were driving voting intentions ahead of the 2010 midterms, including the economy and the administration's Affordable Healthcare Act; however, the Obama White House sought to link these concerns with its Iraq policy and maximize the financial benefits of withdrawing. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner recognized the political advantage to be derived from savings accrued by reductions in the Overseas Contingency Operations fund. As Woodward (2012, 241) observed, Geithner conceded that this wasn't real savings, but it was a peace dividend, noting, "We need to have this because the ratings agencies and markets believe in this stuff." The White House had reason to address the Iraq situation with caution. An *AP-GfK* poll in August 2010 revealed that 43% disapproved of Obama's handling of the war, a conflict that was opposed by 65% of respondents. The same month a *CNN/ORC* poll revealed 56% believed the United States was "not winning" the war in Iraq. In September 2010 *CNN/ORC* revealed that 62% of Americans believed the Iraq War "was not worth it."[2] The same month, an *AP-GfK* poll, designed to gauge potential voting patterns in the forthcoming midterms, revealed that 63% of respondents indicate that the situation in Iraq was viewed as being very important to them personally.[3]

Much of the Obama administration's considerations centered on its support among key demographics. Heavily dependent upon the youth vote, the White House was aware that the Pew Research Center (2005) had previously revealed that support for the war was lower in younger men than in older Americans (62% of men aged 18 to 49, compared to 66% of men aged 50 and older). The Obama campaign had particularly targeted the educated youth vote, well aware that, as noted by Schuman and Corning, (2006, 79), studies by Converse and Schuman (1970), Mueller (1973) and Zaller (1992) indicated that college graduates were most aware of and accepting of a presidential administration's worldview. As Geys (2010) notes, the study by Mueller (1973) that identified casualty rates as the "relevant measure. . .[of] the amount of pain caused by the war," inspired a series of studies that reinforced this finding (Gartner 2008; Kernell 1978; Kriner 2006). Casualty numbers, however, were not the only war characteristics affecting voting intentions in Obama's first term, and the White House was determined that the Iraq conflict not impede the president's hopes for reelection, or the Democratic Party's standing in the midterms.

The deadline set by President Obama in his speeches was adhered to and on August 31, two months ahead of the 2010 mid-term elections, the United States' combat mission in Iraq ended, as almost 100,000 troops left Iraq and U.S. bases were transferred to Iraqi control. Despite the successful withdrawal, however, the Obama administration's hopes of a political reward went unfulfilled in the elections, mirroring the 1970 result. In the largest mid-tem election losses since 1938, Democrats lost 63 seats in Congress, 6 seats in the Senate and 11 governorships. As in 1970, the mid-term elections called into question the president's hopes for a second term. Miller (2010), noted that after suffering what the president referred to as a "shellacking," the importance of completing the withdrawal from Iraq ahead of the 2012 campaign season gained even greater significance. Obama, like Nixon, could ill-afford to campaign for reelection having failed to adequately address a war he had been elected, at least in part, to end.

Barack Obama's campaign pledges to bring peace had been carried over from the campaign and continued into his presidency, during which he made repeated references to his desire to end the Iraq War and position himself as a global "peacemaker" ahead of the 2012 reelection campaign. The speech by Obama (2009a, 763) at Cairo University on June 4, 2009, received wide coverage, but many overlooked his acknowledgment of the Iraq conflict as having been "a war of choice," despite the statement's importance and political connotations. His apparent commitment to withdrawal and a reappraisal of U.S. priorities overseas contributed to his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, but he used his acceptance speech to note that the choices he faced were far removed from those that troubled previous recipients such as Dr King or Mahatma Gandhi. As Remnick (2010, 348) noted, using language that appeared to defy the rationale of the award-granting body, "Obama refused the purity of pacifism and insisted on the complexity of the real world . . . and the need, unfortunately, to rely on force when diplomacy has failed and the moral and political circumstances demand it." This embrace of realism, in keeping with Zakaria's 2008 observation, was far removed from the idealism that defined the 2008 campaign and was far more in keeping with a Nixonian philosophy, as Obama (2009b, 1799–1804) told his audience that he, unlike they, lived in the real world of hard choices.

As Dodge (2008, 55) observed, "strategic necessity and electoral pressure will mean a dramatic change in U.S. policy towards Iraq by the end of the president's first term. This would be needed for him to achieve reelection." Accordingly, on December 14, 2011, just 20 days before the 2012 Iowa Caucus, President Obama confirmed that the final U.S. contingent would leave Iraq in the coming days, following the withdrawal of 150,000 troops since he took office. The announcement at Fort Bragg had the feel of a campaign speech, rather than an address to the troops. The echoes of his breakthrough speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention were apparent as Obama (2011) told the troops, "you remind us there's something bigger than our differences, something that makes us one nation and one people regardless of color, regardless of creed, regardless of what part of the country we come

from, regardless of what backgrounds we come out of. You remind us we're one nation." President Obama worked to link the Iraq mission into a wider narrative of U.S. military intervention and to the continuing engagement in Afghanistan. "You, the 9/11 generation . . . are part of an unbroken line of heroes spanning two centuries . . . men and women who fought for the same principles in Fallujah and Kandahar, and delivered justice to those who attacked us on 9/11."

Obama, who had campaigned against the mission in Iraq on the basis that it threatened to divert attention from the need to pursue the al Qaeda leadership, now observed that, "as we draw down in Iraq, we have gone after al Qaeda so that terrorists who threaten America will have no safe haven, and Osama bin Laden will never again walk the face of this Earth." Having withdrawn from Iraq, continued an indiginization policy akin to Vietnamization and killed Osama bin Laden, President Obama managed to neutralize foreign policy heading into the reelection campaign season. Only briefly, when questions were raised about incidents in Benghazi, Libya, did the subject become a topic of debate with Republican candidate Mitt Romney, helping to ensure that Obama won reelection with 51.1% of the popular vote and with almost 5 million more votes than his challenger.

Despite Obama's idealist, anti-war rhetoric during the 2008 campaign, it has been noted (Boys, 2011) that his tenure in office has been marked by a realist continuation of Bush policies in relation to Iraq, an embrace of the Bush indigenization program, with its echoes of Nixon's Vietnamization policy, a prolonged withdrawal and a refusal to expressly prohibit rendition. As Nixon continued his inherited "war of choice" in Vietnam and built upon the policies of his predecessor, so too did Obama in Iraq. The surge, opposed by Senator Obama, now worked to his advantage, ensuring he inherited an agreement to withdraw negotiated by the Bush administration. As Joyner (2009) noted, "Yes, this is what Obama advocated all along. But it would have happened had Bush stayed in office."

Just as Nixon had campaigned against Lyndon Johnson's war in Vietnam before expanding it into a third country (Cambodia) as president, so Obama ran against George W. Bush's policies in 2008, before embracing much of them in 2009. Obama retained Bush's defense secretary, Robert Gates, along with other senior members of the national security establishment and adhered to Bush's plan for a three-year withdrawal from Iraq. He replicated the Iraq surge by sending more troops to Afghanistan and used drones and armed incursions to widen the conflict into a third country (Pakistan), actions that validated some of Bush's most controversial decisions. As Baker (2013, 644) revealed, by 2013, former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer could claim with some justification that Barack Obama was "carrying out Bush's 4th term."

Finally, Obama's use of Nixon precedents was compounded by his choice of language. Having alluded to Nixon's "peace with honor" statement in his February 2009 address at Camp Lejeune, Mooney (2010) reported Obama's insistence to Diane Sawyer that he would "rather be a really good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president." This echoed the Nixon (1970, 410) statement when

he noted, "I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power." The Obama administration discovered, as Nixon's had previously, that campaign promises to withdraw from an inherited "war of choice" proved easier than implementing such policies once in office and sought to blame the media for its shortcoming. As noted by Alter (2013, 116), the Obama administration grew frustrated at its inability to adequately convey its message, concluding that the media had become "obsessed with politics and indifferent to policy." Of particular annoyance was the lack of recognition "that 100,000 fewer troops were in Iraq [and that those]. . .who had confidently predicted that the United States would construct a string of permanent bases in Iraq were reluctant to give the administration credit when the troops withdrew."

Just as Nixon could not seek reelection in 1972 without having waged peace in Vietnam, so too was it with regard to Obama and Iraq in 2012. Both presidents assisted their chances of a second term by positioning themselves as "peacemakers," presenting the final departure of U.S. forces as a vindication of policy and on a timetable that aided them in their bids for reelection in 1972 and 2012 respectively. President Obama's willingness to gain political advantage from his inherited "war of choice," first to win the presidency in 2008 and then in his bid for reelection, ensured that he had the opportunity to enter his second term unencumbered, with every opportunity to make it something other than mediocre. As Richard Nixon discovered previously, however, ending the war would not guarantee plain sailing in a second term.

CONCLUSION

Having campaigned and won office as an agent of change, with a distinct rhetorical style and repeated references to a classic liberal approach to government, it is not surprising that Obama's presidency drew initial, repeated comparisons with that of John F. Kennedy. As this article has argued, however, this parallel is deeply flawed and based on superficial elements and driven by self-serving motivating factors. Instead, Obama's continued utilization of an inherited "war of choice" once in office makes study in regard to President Nixon's approach to the Vietnam conflict far more appropriate. There are clear similarities between the conflicts and the manner in both Nixon and Obama benefited from them during their first terms. The conflicts were separated by 40 years, but both were "wars of choice" rather than necessity, waged against militarily inferior nations that lasted far longer than expected. They were political wars as much as military conflicts, the outcomes of which were decided at home as much as in the theater of conflict. The wars consumed administrations and ultimately fell to subsequent presidents to conclude. There were differences in scale and conscription; however, both conflicts divided the nation and were utilized by presidents to aid their reelections.

After successfully exploiting the conflicts to gain the presidency, Nixon and Obama found their first terms dominated by their inherited "wars of choice" as they sought to disengage while minimizing the long-term impact on the United States' standing in the world and maximizing their chances for a second term. They did so by presenting the final departure of U.S. forces as a vindication of policy and on a timetable designed to assist them in their bids for reelection in 1972 and 2012 respectively. The Vietnam War was deliberately drawn out until 1972 to ensure that any ensuing collapse or uprising in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal did not negatively affect President Nixon's reelection campaign. Forty years later, Barack Obama mirrored Nixon's earlier efforts to benefit politically from an inherited "war of choice," ensuring that all troops left Iraq just days before the start of the 2012 campaign season. Obama utilized public discontent with the George W. Bush administration and the Iraq War to gain national prominence in 2004. Having done so he positively portrayed his inexperience in relation to his Democratic rivals to secure the nomination and then the presidency in 2008. Once elected, Obama used the withdrawal from Iraq to portray himself as a "peacemaker" as his announcement of the final troop departure on the eve of the 2012 presidential election season completed his utilization of his inherited "war of choice" for political ends.

By understanding President Obama's Nixonian manipulation of an inherited "war of choice" as commander-in-chief, it is possible to better explain his actions in office and why his foreign policy has caused such a sense of disappointment among his supporters. This article may well instigate a greater effort to appreciate the Obama administration's utilization of its own inherited "war of choice" more accurately as a vehicle to retain political power in the United States. Although the final historical record is not yet clear, it is already apparent that inherited "wars of choice" played a major role in the administrations of two very different presidents, separated by four decades but not, it would appear, by a philosophical approach to governing or campaigning.

NOTES

1. For more on Nixon's effort to utilize the Vietnam War for electoral gain in 1968, see J. D. Boys (2014) "Exploiting Inherited Wars of Choice: Obama's Use of Nixonian Methods to Secure the Presidency," *American Politics Research* 42, No. 5 (September) pp. 815–840.
2. For polling data, see http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm.
3. For data, see http://surveys.ap.org/data/GfK/AP-GfK%20Poll%20September%20Topline%2009 1510%20final.pdf

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