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Exploiting Inherited Wars of Choice: Obama's Use of Nixonian Methods to Secure the Presidency

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Abstract

Despite a slogan advocating a change from practices of the past, Barack Obama's presidential campaign of 2008 had an intriguing similarity to that of Richard Nixon in 1968. Like Nixon, Obama benefited from and secured victory partly due to his opposition to a contentious "war of choice." The wars in Vietnam and Iraq provided the political and cultural circumstances that made Nixon and Obama credible candidates in 1968 and 2008, respectively. The wars weakened support for the incumbent party and caused divisions within the country and in their own parties that both men exploited to neutralize political rivals in the primary season and defeat their opponent in the general election. This article examines the manner in which Obama, like Nixon, benefited directly from conflict by promoting his opposition and apparent solutions to gain public confidence, neutralize political opponents, and secure the presidency.

Keywords

Obama, Nixon, Kennedy, Iraq, Vietnam

As widely noted (Frame, 2012; Rich, 2008; Sherwell, 2008; Stuckey, Curry, & Barnes, 2010), Barack Obama's 2008 campaign drew repeated

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comparisons with John F. Kennedy's (JFK's) presidential bid of 1960 due in part to its emphasis on a call for a change in national direction and on the candidate's youthful appeal. The political and emotional implications of this resonated further when Obama received the endorsement of the Kennedy family. As Kennedy (2008) wrote,

> I have never had a president who inspired me the way people tell me that my father inspired them. But for the first time, I believe I have found the man who could be that president—not just for me, but for a new generation of Americans. (p. A18)

In this article, however, I argue that such an orthodox contrast is inadequate, as it focuses on concepts of style and not of substance. The contrast reduces the candidates to caricatures and fails to address far more substantive issues such as their campaign strategy and approach to conflict. Rather than paralleling Kennedy's bid for office in 1960, Barack Obama's exploitation of a contentious "war of choice" in Iraq during his campaign to win the White House in 2008 more closely resembled the efforts of Richard Nixon to exploit the Vietnam War in 1968. Both campaigns sought to exploit opposition to the wars, first, in an effort to secure their party's nomination, and then the presidency in the general election. The successful exploitation of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars by Nixon and Obama, respectively, proved to be central to both men's campaigns. The wars contributed directly to the defeat of their political opponents and aided their eventual electoral successes in 1968 and 2008, respectively.

The Obama/Nixon comparison is more credible and distinctive than that with JFK as it produces a far more useful means of appreciating Obama's electoral strategy and his political use of conflict in the 2008 campaign. In this article, I utilize "discourse analysis" to consider campaign speeches and official documents to examine the ways the Obama campaign mirrored Nixon's earlier efforts to benefit politically from a contentious war: first to neutralize political rivals in the primaries and then to help defeat his opponent in the general election. A deconstruction approach has been selected in an effort to provide a more accurate analysis of Obama's use of the Iraq War during the 2008 campaign. This approach has been adopted partly due to availability of sources and through a desire to draw upon candidates' own words rather than on third-party interpretations. This enables the analysis to provide a more accurate understanding of both the rhetoric and strategy. As a result, in this article, I find that a misleading comparison between Kennedy and Obama was constructed in the 2008 election. An appreciation of Obama's Nixonian use of an inherited "war of choice" as an election year tool sheds

light on his later decisions as president, especially in relation to foreign policy initiatives, which, as Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon (2012) and Younge (2012) have observed, have not been as liberal as his supporters had anticipated.[1]

Despite the decades separating them, Obama adopted positions toward the conflict in Iraq that mirrored Nixon's exploitation of the Vietnam War to a degree that has not previously been considered. Obama exploited opposition to the war to defeat Hillary Clinton in the primaries and John McCain in the general election by making their initial support of the war an electoral albatross. The conflicts, like the stances adopted by Nixon and Obama, had their similarities, as both were entered into more for ideological reasons than self-defense. This was in contrast to the defensive engagement in Afghanistan, for example, following the 9/11 attacks. The wars in Vietnam and Iraq diverted attention from serious domestic problems and raised doubts over United States' international leadership. Despite attempted justifications regarding the containment of Communism or the hunt for weapons of mass destruction, neither Vietnam nor Iraq posed a credible or substantial threat to U.S. national security, nor to its economic or diplomatic interests. However, while these conflicts were "wars of choice," the U.S. deployments in Vietnam and Iraq were different in tone, scale, and cost.

United States' active personnel numbers in Vietnam peaked at 540,000 in December 1968, compared with 165,000 in Iraq. As Summers (1985) and Tucker (1998) note, the difference in scale, as well as improvements in technology, was reflected in casualty rates, with over 58,000 American fatalities in Vietnam compared with 4,484 in Iraq. The use of conscription during Vietnam had a bearing on the public reaction to the war and resulted in sustained protests across the country. As noted by Record and Terrill (2004), although protests were held against the Iraq War, they failed to rival the intensity that was evident in the Vietnam era, partly due to the use of an all-volunteer army, as well as the efforts of the Bush administration to link Saddam Hussein to the attacks of 9/11. The Iraq War did not result in inflation or increases in taxes, as was the case in Vietnam, instead politicians sought to ensure minimal public disruption, lowered taxes, and increased the national deficit.

Differences existed between the two men as well as between their contentious conflicts. Nixon was a recognized anti-Communist who had built his career advocating a position of strength in regard to the Soviet threat, whereas Obama had no such foreign policy credentials to campaign on. Instead, he sought to focus the struggle and concentrate on those responsible for the attacks of 2001, rather than on a war in Iraq. Despite these differences, however, the similarities between Nixon and Obama's utilization of the conflicts

for political and electoral purposes are striking, as both men used their opponents' support of the war to gain an electoral advantage. An appreciation of these similarities can help provide a more accurate appreciation of Obama's campaign strategy and his philosophical approach to conflict.

Theoretical Basis

Too little attention has been paid so far to Obama's foreign policy during the 2008 campaign or to the manner in which he mirrored Nixon's approach to an inherited "war of choice" to secure his party's nomination and then the presidency. The orthodox narrative (Bligh & Kohles, 2009; Hollander, 2010; Kinder & Dale-Riddle, 2012; Lee & Morin, 2009; Saldin, 2008) is that the 2008 Democratic primary season focused on issues of race and the personality clash between Obama and Hillary Clinton, while the general election turned on the state of the American economy. This is not to suggest that nothing has been written on Obama's approach to foreign policy in general or to the war in Iraq specifically, but the role of foreign policy in the 2008 campaign has received insufficient attention to date. The chronicle of the 2008 election by Heilemann and Halperin (2010) may be engaging but singularly fails to address the importance of foreign policy to the Obama campaign strategy or to draw any parallels with Nixon's Vietnam precedent. Likewise, Wolffe (2009) draws on hours of interviews with the candidate himself, but offers scant insight into the use of foreign policy in the campaign or of the manner in which it was utilized for electoral advantage.

This may be a reflection of the fact that despite expectations, the 2008 election ultimately failed to focus on issues of foreign policy. Instead, like 1992, the economy dominated debate due to the financial collapse that occurred in the latter stages of the race. This has been reflected in the material that has been produced to date. Sabato (2010) fails to adequately address the role of foreign policy in the campaign. Such an oversight reveals an inherent bias against considerations of foreign policy in domestic political decision making, something that this article makes a distinct effort to rectify. When the Obama team planned their electoral strategy, they placed the candidate's opposition to the Iraq War at the center of his campaign and repeatedly contrasted his own voting record with that of Senator Clinton, revealing their recognition of the electoral importance of the conflict. When Americans elect a president, they are also selecting a commander-in-chief and although the Cold War may be over, the heightened tensions following the attacks of September 11, 2001, demonstrate that no chief executive can focus solely on domestic or economic issues. This article does not purport to imply that the foreign policies of Nixon and Obama were solely responsible for their

victories, nor that the corresponding positions of Humphrey and McCain in regard to Vietnam and Iraq were solely responsible for their defeat. Clearly the American electorate must consider a range of factors when deciding on their chief executive, and foreign policy is but one aspect of any campaign. However, the manner in which a candidate utilizes foreign policy in a campaign is instructive as to the approach he or she will adopt once in office, and to date, Obama's use of foreign policy in the campaign has been considered merely as a prelude to power.

Singh (2012) dedicates an early chapter to the role of foreign policy during the election, but does so in a very broad sense, and again, in keeping with an approach to the subject as a prelude to power. This article rectifies this by examining Obama's specific use of continuing conflict to neutralize his party rivals in the primaries and defeat his opponent in the general election. A concerted effort to address the subject was attempted by Saldin (2008) in his *Forum* article, "Foreign Policy in the 2008 Election." However, while he reminds us that material on the 2008 election "is incomplete because it does not take foreign affairs seriously" (p. 1), the article is not sufficiently focused upon Obama's utilization of policy. Instead it adopts too broad an approach, considering the foreign policy initiatives of both Obama and McCain, while also seeking to place the election and its use of foreign policy in a wide historical context. Zakaria (2008) comes closest to revealing the Nixonian approach that Obama adopted, in his article "Obama the Realist." Writing in *The Washington Post*, Zakaria noted that Obama "seems-unusually for a modern day Democrat-highly respectful of the realist tradition," and reported the candidate's "enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H. W. Bush" (2008, p. A15). This, however, is as close as the article comes to connecting Obama to any previous candidates or their approach to war to gain office and as such offers but a glimpse of Obama's manipulation of the ongoing conflict in Iraq for electoral advantage.

This article addresses this gap in the literature as it currently stands. Obama's mirroring of Nixon's utilization of an inherited "war of choice" has not figured in any appreciation of how he successfully secured the Democratic Party's nomination and then the presidency in 2008. This article addresses this omission in the literature through a discourse analysis appropriately drawing from an extensive range of available materials. The passage of time has enabled an extensive range of primary sources on Nixon to emerge, especially from the Nixon Library in California. Due to the contemporary nature of the Obama presidency, the primary source material is limited to speeches, statements, and official documents. This has been compounded by the use of respected secondary sources to ensure the use of the most effective sources available.

The adoption of discourse analysis has been utilized to accurately analyze the historical wording used by Nixon and Obama to explain their positions on their wars of choice. George (1994) notes 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" (p. 191). This article focuses on the use of political speeches in the construction of campaign policy and the manner in which they were used to advance the cause of one candidate at the expense of another. Since policy implementation has traditionally followed policy pronouncements, it naturally follows that we are wise to address the words spoken by candidates to secure office as a guide to future actions. Such spoken words may also reveal much as to their commitment to a cause and their willingness to exploit situations for their own political advantage. Weldes (1998) observes that studying political language is vital since it "actively produces the issues with which policy makers deal and the specific problems that they confront" (p. 217).

Doty (1993) notes that discourse analysis consists of a "system of statements in which each individual statements makes sense" (p. 302), but it also produces interpretative possibilities. This article recognizes that while language is crucial to the notion of discourse, social and political life is not reducible to language or linguistic analysis alone and that problems exist within this analytical approach. Clearly, selection bias is an ever-present challenge in any use of discourse analysis. In selecting material, this article has been careful to draw on the words spoken by the candidates, rather than on material that may be politically interpreted by third parties. Where the material has been drawn from contemporary reportage, it is to convey the words of the candidates, not the journalist. This article's focus on the spoken word does not seek to distract from the evolving reality on the ground, but merely to highlight the degree to which campaign policy was concocted in a series of speeches that sought to perpetuate an image of Nixon and Obama as peacemakers, while diminishing the electoral chances of Clinton, McCain, and Humphrey.

Both Nixon and Obama utilized these conflicts for their own political purposes, and an appreciation of how and why this was done is important for what it reveals about their campaigns and how they acted once in office, a topic that will be examined in a subsequent paper. A consideration of campaign speeches and official documents reveals the extent to which the Obama campaign mirrored Nixon's earlier efforts to benefit politically from the war in Iraq: first to neutralize political rivals in the primaries and then to defeat his opponent in the general election. This article will now evaluate the Nixon

precedent before considering the manner in which Obama utilized this approach to gain the presidency. This will then be concluded by an analysis that highlights the value of an analysis focused around foreign policy and "wars of choice."

The Nixon Precedent

America's foes in Vietnam were incapable of confronting the United States directly, resulting in guerrilla-style tactics being harnessed to entrap the superpower in a war of attrition that became the crucible in which lives and reputations were lost. Both conflicts lingered beyond the terms of the presidents responsible for their commencement to cast a shadow over the administrations and legacies of Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush. The wars also contributed to their parties' defeats in the presidential elections of 1968 and 2008, as political opponents rhetorically manipulated the public perception of the conflicts to secure the presidency. The approach adopted by Richard Nixon provided something of a blueprint for Obama in 2008, to neutralize his party rivals in the primaries and to defeat his opponent in the general election.

Had it not been for the war in Vietnam, it is unlikely that Johnson would have faced a challenge for the Democratic Party's nomination in 1968; having passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and enacted vast swathes of legislation as part of the Great Society program, his position would most likely have been secure. However, growing divisions led to anti-war campaigner Senator Eugene McCarthy taking 42% of the vote in the 1968 New Hampshire Democratic Primary and the subsequent collapse of Johnson's re-election campaign. The ensuing maelstrom that consumed the Democratic Party during 1968, including the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the riots at the Chicago convention, exacerbated a feeling that the Republican Party seemed more coherent despite lacking the incumbency. These events contributed to making Richard Nixon a viable candidate for the presidency in 1968.

Following his defeats in the 1960 presidential election and the Californian gubernatorial race of 1962, Nixon portrayed himself as an outsider, someone removed from the decisions that had led to the war and therefore able to address the conflict anew: "I have had a chance to reflect on the lessons of public office . . . I have sought to apply those lessons to the needs of the present . . . I believe I have found some answers" (Nixon, 1968e). Nixon presented himself as a man respected on the world stage, removed from the debacle at hand, and capable of restoring leadership in a time of crisis. He utilized his time away from office to inoculate him from the Vietnam conflict

and the decision-making process that had caused it, while using his opponents' presence in power against them by portraying them as the architects of the unpopular war. However, while Nixon portrayed the war as having been the responsibility of a Democratic administration, his claim to have been removed from the decisions that led to an escalation in Vietnam was problematic due to his involvement as vice president from 1953 to 1961.

As vice president, Nixon was involved in the debate surrounding "Operation Vulture," which included an option for a nuclear attack on Vietnamese forces. Nixon believed that the United States should support the French in their colonial struggle and unsuccessfully petitioned Congressional leaders, including Lyndon Johnson, to grant President Eisenhower the authority to launch air strikes if necessary. When asked in April 1954 about sending American troops to prevent a communist takeover of Indochina, Nixon replied "I believe that the executive branch of the government has to take the politically unpopular position of facing up to it and doing it, and I personally would support such a decision" (Nixon, 1954). Nixon's eagerness put him and Secretary of State Dulles at the vanguard of a movement for engagement, a forthright position not shared by President Eisenhower. Indeed, Nixon's diary entry following a 1954 meeting of the National Security Council reveals his disappointment in Eisenhower's prevarication:

> He seemed resigned to do nothing at all unless we could get the allies and the country to go along with whatever was suggested and he did not seem inclined to put much pressure on to get them to come along. (Nixon, 1978, p. 151)

Vietnam may well have been Lyndon Johnson's war by 1968, but it is clear from Nixon's public statements and diary entries that he advocated a U.S. troop deployment there as early as 1954, a fact he was eager to downplay during the 1968 election, when much of this was unknown to the electorate. Nixon was content to perpetuate this state of ignorance, as he told voters, "I was vice president for eight years, and I am proud of the fact that I served in an administration that ended one war and kept the nation out of other wars for eight years" (Nixon, 1968c).

Nixon had been out of power, but he had used the time to write and speak, stressing his foreign policy credentials and interest in America's place in the world. He had addressed the developing situation in Vietnam, but was hesitant to make concrete pronouncements, choosing instead to fluctuate his stance to leave his options open and to appeal to all wings of the Republican Party. As the 1968 primary season approached, Nixon produced two articles on the war, designed to reach the widest possible audience. He wrote "What Has Happened to America?" for *Reader's Digest*, boasting a readership of

approximately 20 million. The piece addressed the social unrest caused by the Vietnam War, blaming the elite intelligentsia for suggesting that society was to blame when laws were broken, rather than the criminal (Nixon, 1967b). Despite critiquing the elite, he also unveiled "Asia After Viet Nam" in *Foreign Affairs* that addressed the future role of China, and which was at odds with his earlier rhetoric on communist regimes (Nixon, 1967a). This twin-track approach was a deliberate effort by Nixon to address domestic and foreign policy, to reposition himself in the minds of Americans heading into the election process, and to reach out to intellectuals, decision makers, and voters ahead of the forthcoming campaign. This was also done to help erase the image of Nixon constructed by Adlai Stevenson in 1956 (as cited in Greenberg, 2003) who had lamented the potential rise of "Nixonland": "A land of slander and scare; the land of sly innuendo, the poison pen, the anonymous phone call and hustling, pushing, shoving; the land of smash and grab and anything to win" (Greenberg, 2003, p. 62). Like Obama, Nixon was aided by his opponents' shortcomings and his willingness to utilize an inherited "war of choice" for his own political benefit to secure his party's nomination for the presidency.

Nixon arrived in New Hampshire at the height of the Tet Offensive, ensuring that the Vietnam War and President Johnson's oft-stated declarations of imminent victory were foremost in voters' minds. He sought to stress his executive branch foreign policy experience and far-sighted vision, as he pledged on March 7, "new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific" (Nixon, 1968d). Throughout the primaries Nixon outmaneuvered his opponents by stressing his foreign policy credentials in relation to the Vietnam War. He purposely adopted a series of forceful positions, insisting that the United States must convince the North Vietnamese that a military victory was not possible, that the United States should train the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, and that fundamentally, the United States was "not making adequate use of our vast diplomatic resources and powers. The heart of the problem [lies] more in Peking and Moscow than in Hanoi" (Nixon, 1978, p. 298). Such an approach enabled Nixon to exploit the Vietnam War by stressing that as a former vice president, he was capable of bringing experience and intelligence to extricating the United States from the conflict, in contrast with his less qualified challengers.

Despite his willingness to exploit the war, Nixon remained vague on details, refusing to discuss any specific plans to end the war in Vietnam. He did, however, issue statements that later re-emerged as policy and attacked the Johnson administration for "failing to train the South Vietnamese to take over the major share" of the fighting and called for "a diplomatic offensive with the Soviet Union and others who might influence the North Vietnamese

to come to the conference table" (Whalen, 1972, p. 82). This call for what eventually became Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, however, was far from groundbreaking, as President Johnson had already begun to initiate such a policy following recommendations from Defense Secretary McNamara. Despite this, Nixon sought to present himself as a foreign policy heavyweight and an equal to the president. However, as a challenger, Nixon was forced to be reactive to events, a predicament best illustrated following President Johnson's withdrawal from the 1968 campaign.

Johnson's withdrawal left Nixon as the most experienced candidate in the race, from either party. Having planned to campaign against an unpopular incumbent, saddled with a divisive war, Nixon now faced an uncertain primary season. Indeed, Nixon's Republican Party opponents appeared determined to forego the primaries altogether if at all possible and focus on the national convention in August. Governors Reagan, Rockefeller, and Romney clung to the belief that Nixon was incapable of winning on the first ballot and that his support would collapse on a second. Ironically, the only time when Nixon's grip on the nomination was placed in doubt was when it seemed secured; having dithered in the spring, Nelson Rockefeller decided to seek the nomination and unveiled his own plan for dealing with Vietnam, devised by his adviser, Henry Kissinger, on July 13, 1968. It proved to be too late, however, and despite a similar half-hearted overture by Reagan, Nixon secured the Republican Party nomination in Miami. Johnson's decision to focus on the pursuit of peace rather than power ensured that foreign policy remained central to the campaign and a viable area for Nixon to exploit. As portrayed by Chester, Hodgson, and Page (1969), Nixon won the nomination having exploited his foreign policy credentials, having stressed his removal from the decision-making process that had led to the war in Vietnam and by emphasizing his executive-level experience in contrast to that of his party rivals.

Having benefited from the social and political impact of the Vietnam War to secure the Republican Party's nomination, Nixon's campaign then turned its attention to the Democratic Party candidate, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. The war was utilized once more, but whereas before it had been used to highlight Nixon's experience and detachment from the decision-making process, now it was exploited to expose what Republicans saw as the combined foreign and domestic failings of the Johnson/Humphrey administration. American involvement in Vietnam had led to domestic disturbances as protests against the draft had given rise to sit-ins and demonstrations across the nation and at leading universities. The combination of domestic and international unrest was seized on by the Nixon campaign, with the candidate intoning, "When the President of the United States cannot travel overseas or

to any major American city without fear of a hostile reception, then it is time for new leadership" (Nixon, 1968a). The Republican Party Platform (1968) included an indictment of the administration's handling of the war, which it claimed to be a contradiction of promises to not dispatch ground troops. Conversely, after a war that had raged for 4 years, the Democratic Party Platform (1968) reiterated the Party's desire for peace, but not at any cost, and rejected calls for a unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces. Nixon's exploitation of the war cleverly placed his opponents on the defensive, as he had never suggested such a course of action.

Nixon's campaign advertising was designed to appeal to the rising anti-war sentiment, utilizing shocking visuals from Vietnam, contrasted with a calming Nixon speech that promised peace. Simultaneously, he warned that America's enemies in Hanoi were aware of the national divisions and sought to exploit such tensions. Nixon was actively adopting contradictory stances on the war and was able to do so for much of the campaign due in part to the dilemma of Hubert Humphrey. As White (1969) noted, as vice president he could not attack his own administration, "nor did he dare defend the issue before the electorate and his divided Party. Thus, a man of peace committed to a war . . . waffled and wobbled" (1969, p. 388). Having finally broken with Johnson following a Salt Lake City speech on Vietnam, Humphrey's best hopes for victory were to be found in the Paris Peace Talks, which by the autumn of 1968 appeared to be succeeding. Their ultimate failure, however, is perhaps the most notable example of the Nixon campaign's exploitation of the Vietnam War. Humphrey had already indicated that prolonged U.S. aid was "not in the cards" (Hung & Schecter, 1986, p. 21), and had promised to stop bombing the North and to reduce U.S. troop levels. Little wonder, therefore, that South Vietnamese President Thieu believed that a Nixon victory was required if his regime was to "have a chance" (Hung & Schecter, 1986, p. 21).

On October 31, 1968, after months of negotiation, President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam in the hope of initiating face-to-face talks between Hanoi and Saigon. That evening Nixon addressed a campaign rally at Madison Square Garden in New York. He told the crowd, "I will not comment on those talks that are going on in Paris . . . I trust that this action may bring some progress in those talks," assuring his audience that he would not "say anything that might destroy the chance to have peace. We want peace above politics in America" (Nixon, 1968b). Publicly, Nixon supported Johnson, but in private, he seethed with resentment, fearful of a repeat of 1960. Nixon was convinced that the peace initiative was at least in part a political ploy, designed to swing the election to Humphrey, fears that were borne out in polling. On October 21, 1968, Gallup gave Nixon a 44% to 36%

lead over Humphrey. As revealed by White (1969) on November 2, 2 days after the end of bombing, his lead was 42% to 40%, while a Lou Harris poll had Humphrey ahead at this point. As far as Nixon was concerned, President Johnson was manipulating the peace talks to influence the election, something he had no intention of being allowed to happen.

Since the 1950s, Nixon had been in contact with Anna Chennault, who had been born in Beijing, worked as a journalist, and was married to Chiang Kai-shek's chief air adviser, American aviator Lieutenant General Claire Lee Chennault, leader of the Flying Tigers. After her husband's death, she worked for a variety of news agencies, including the Voice of America, while maintaining strong links with Southeast Asia. Vitally, she also served as the Republican Party's National Committeewoman for the District of Columbia and headed the National Republican Asian Assembly. Accordingly, she was in a singular position to liaise between Southeast Asia and Republican politicians. By 1968, she was a wealthy, widowed, Washington hostess, vice-chairwoman of the Republican National Finance Committee and co-chair of Women for Nixon-Agnew. In 1967 she met with Nixon and his campaign manager, John Mitchell, and agreed to provide advice on Southeast Asia. According to Chennault (as cited in Diem & Channoff, 1999), in July 1968 she again visited Nixon, this time with the South Vietnamese ambassador, Bui Diem, whom Nixon advised, "If I should be elected the next President, you can rest assured I will have a meeting with your leader and find a solution to winning this war" (p. 237). In so doing, Dallek (1998) noted that the former Vice President of the United States and his closest advisers initiated a process that bordered on treason and led to domestic surveillance due to suspected violations of the Neutrality Act and Foreign Agents Registration Act. Chennault had further meetings in New York with Mitchell and Nixon, who advised her to inform Saigon that if Nixon became president, South Vietnam could expect "a better deal" (Hung & Schecter, 1986, p. 23). Chennault was in daily contact with Mitchell who maintained that if peace talks were announced it was vital to encourage Thieu not to take part. Two days after Johnson announced the ceasefire, Thieu privately declined to attend. The White House desperately sought to change Thieu's mind, but on November 2, 3 days before the election, Thieu stated publicly that he would not attend.

Thieu had his own reasons for not capitulating to Johnson, but even Nixon admirers such as Aitkin (1993) concede that "in private, Nixon made contact with President Thieu in an effort to scuttle the peace process" (p. 366). These efforts were, according to Clifford (1991), "probably decisive in convincing President Thieu to defy President Johnson" (p. 582). Nixon's public statements at the time compounded his private manipulation of the war. On October 25, Nixon refused to address speculation that the ceasefire was "a

cynical last minute attempt by President Johnson to salvage the candidacy of Mr. Humphrey. This I do not believe." Johnson, he assured the nation, "will not play politics with this war" (Nixon, 1968f). This statement, of course, merely focused attention on the suggestion that the ceasefire and planned talks were indeed a cynical attempt by the administration to enhance Humphrey's chances of victory. The use of Anna Chennault and others to derail the negotiations in their final hours contributed to Nixon's razor-thin majority on Election Day. The utilization of sensitive information by the Nixon campaign is the clearest evidence of its willingness to actively exploit the war for political ends, at the cost of a further 19,000 American lives and countless Vietnamese (Chester et al., 1969, pp. 730-735; Dallek, 2007, pp. 72-78; Johnson, 1971, pp. 517-518, 548-549; White, 1969, pp. 443-445).

Throughout the 1968 campaign, and in a pattern that Obama repeated in 2008, Richard Nixon presented himself as a unifying figure at a time of national and international crisis, stressing at his final campaign appearance at Madison Square Garden that "America needs to be brought together" (Nixon, 1968b). In a pattern that would be repeated 40 years later, Nixon campaigned against a war initiated by a Texan president who had come to office in circumstances that caused many to doubt his legitimacy, but who had implemented his policies regardless and been re-elected for a second term. Nixon ran against a candidate known to be at odds with the sitting president, yet one who could not afford to break from him entirely if he hoped to secure victory. Nixon willingly exploited an ongoing "war of choice" to enhance his own position within the primary season and to defeat his eventual opponent in the general election. Like Obama, Nixon campaigned on a promise of hope and an end to conflict, on a sea change to the previous 8 years that had seen American values questioned around the world and a tearing apart of the social fabric at home. Nixon, like Obama 40 years later, was also forced to address the mighty expectations for peace that he had exacerbated in the campaign.

Obama and Utilization of the Iraq Conflict

Were it not for the Iraq War, Barack Obama's candidacy in 2008 would have been unimaginable. Although the initial conflict toppled Saddam's regime in less than 3 weeks, Secretary of State Colin Powell's warning, as reported by Woodward (2004) that the war would "become the first term" (p. 150), quickly appeared optimistic. The war altered political reality in the United States; just as the Vietnam War made Lyndon Johnson susceptible to a challenge from within the Democratic Party, the war in Iraq made possible the candidacy of a senator with less than half a term in office. Without the war, the Democratic nomination would surely have been contested among the

party's grandees, with every expectation of a Hillary Clinton victory. However, the political divisions that the war created ensured that just as in 1968, expectations were challenged and conventions defied. Obama initially exploited his anti-war stance in Illinois to secure a seat in the Senate in 2004. Having done so, his lack of a voting record consistently provided him with an advantage over his competitors during the 2008 election process, enabling him to stress his opposition to the war to secure the Democratic Party's nomination and ultimately the presidency.

On September 19, 2001, Illinois State Senator Obama responded to the attacks of 9/11 in an article for the *Hyde Park Herald.* In "Our Politicians Weigh in on Attack," Obama (2001) observed, "We will have to make sure, despite our rage, that any U.S. military action takes into account the lives of innocent civilians aboard" (p. 4). Obama's approach, of advocating a military response, while warning of collateral damage, was being made long before troops were dispatched to Iraq, as he sought to forge a name for himself ahead of the 2004 Senate race. A year later, Obama participated in an anti-war rally that brought him to the attention of national Democratic Party leaders. Remnick (2010) has noted that his stance was deliberately set "to distinguish him from his Democratic opponents . . . attract younger voters and the liberal wing of the Party" (p. 24). Obama (2002) spoke for just a few minutes during a demonstration that lasted less than an hour, as he explained his position of opposing war in Iraq while professing a willingness to use force when necessary. He claimed that he did not oppose all wars, merely "dumb wars," and attacked members of the Bush Administration as "armchair, weekend warriors." Such a stance was not without risks, however, for while it drew national attention, it risked being interpreted as appeasement for terrorism.

Due to Obama's delicate positioning, his speech received only polite applause on the day, but the text was referenced years later as evidence of his early opposition to the war and of his apparent far-sighted commitment to a policy of peace. There was, however, a more realist interpretation of this stance as Chris Sautter, Obama's media consultant in the 2004 congressional race, told Remnick (2010): "The coalition he needed to build to get elected was blacks and liberals, and he wasn't going to get liberals if he was supporting Bush in the war" (p. 345). Obama's true stance on the Iraq War might be gleaned from an unguarded moment during the 2004 Democratic National Convention. As revealed by Davey (2004), when asked by the *New York Times* how he would have voted in 2002 had he been a member of the Senate, Obama replied, "I don't know. What I know is that from my vantage point the case [against invading Iraq] was not made" and that he was "not privy to Senate Intelligence reports" (p. A1). Most revealing, perhaps, was his remark as revealed by Kass (2004) that "there's not much of a difference between my

position on Iraq and George Bush's position at this stage" (p. 2). As suggested by Malcolm (2007), such statements raise doubts as to Obama's commitment to his crusade against the war and present the possibility that he was willing to exploit opposition to the Iraq War for his own political gain.

Following Obama's 2004 election to the Senate, he continued to reference the war. Obama noted that the challenge facing lawmakers was "to figure out . . . how to ensure that U.S. troop withdrawals occur in such a way that we avoid all-out Iraqi civil war, chaos in the Middle East and much more costly and deadly interventions down the road" (2005).

This was a challenge that Obama was not content to ponder as a member of the Senate for long. On January 30, 2007, Obama introduced the Iraq War De-escalation Act, which sought to cap troop numbers in Iraq at January 2007 levels and initiate a phased redeployment of U.S. forces by March 31, 2008. The plan sought to reverse the troop surge and re-deploy U.S. troops to Afghanistan. Obama (2007a) stated, "No amount of American soldiers can solve the political differences at the heart of somebody else's civil war." It was among his last acts before announcing his intention to seek the presidency of the United States.

Barack Obama faced a number of hurdles in his bid for the presidency: an unusual name and heritage, a formidable opponent in Hillary Clinton, lack of executive experience or military service, the traditional perceptions of Democrats as being weak on national security issues, and finally his voting record in the Senate. Obama exploited the Iraq War to counter these factors: He stressed his inexperience as evidence of his new generational thinking and as a way to tie his opponents (both Republican and Democratic) to the politics of the past. Obama portrayed himself as pro-military, but anti-Iraq War to raise the role of commander-in-chief, whereas Hillary Clinton was perceived as being weak; he stressed his consistency of message to highlight the voting record of others and his plan for a phased withdrawal from the conflict. Finally, he sought to portray his opponents, both Republican and Democrat, as being alike, and vitally, as having all been in favor of the war in Iraq. Above all, as Boys (2011) notes, he sought to position himself as "the anti-Bush" and campaigned on a message of "change" pledging to overturn the policy of rendition and torture and end America's involvement in foreign "wars of choice." To do so, Obama replicated Nixon's approach of addressing influential bodies and publishing articles in respected journals as well as the mainstream press to convey a sense of learning; he sought out foreign heads of state to project a sense of leadership in waiting; he spoke out against the war and its civilian architects, while emphasizing his belief in a strong U.S. military; and he used his position in the Senate to launch attacks as well as legislation. His initial challenge was to exploit the war to neutralize and

defeat Senator Hillary Clinton in the primaries before using it to his advantage in the general election against the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain.

Like many previous candidates for the presidency, Barack Obama lacked experience in foreign affairs. He had traveled the world as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but his primary experience was domestic. To address this, he utilized an approach that Nixon had successfully adopted in 1968, of giving a series of keynote speeches to selected, high-profile audiences, and producing articles in both academic and poplar publications. Obama sought the middle ground on foreign policy, advancing positions that were within the mainstream of Democratic Party policy. This, however, was at odds with his soaring rhetoric of change, prompting some to question his true intentions: "At best, he will be a gradualist," former California state senator Tom Hayden advised Dreyfuss (2008, p. 20). Obama began this process shortly before announcing his candidacy, in an address to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Obama called for a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops within 12 months, ahead of the presidential election of 2008: "It is time to give Iraqis their country back, and it is time to refocus America's efforts on the wider struggle yet to be won" (2006). Of course, had his calls been heeded, a major rationale for his candidacy would have been removed, blunting his challenge to both Democrat and Republican opponents alike. Obama (2007c) returned to the same venue several months later, this time as a declared candidate for the presidency, to explain his opposition to the war, which he viewed as being "based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the threats that 9/11 brought to light."

The speeches and the stance they adopted placed Obama firmly in the mainstream of the Democratic Party, in a policy position that was akin to that of New Democrats: strong on foreign affairs but judicious in deployment. As observed by Dreyfuss (2008), Will Marshall, director of the Progressive Policy Institute of the Democratic Leadership Council, noted, "On most of the details, he's aligned with the general Democratic consensus" (p. 20). Accordingly, Obama's foreign policy stance was acceptable to middle America, if not to the Republican Party or its prospective candidates, as Obama tied his opponents, Republican and Democrat, to the policies of George W. Bush. His policy position and speeches on the war prevented any efforts by Hillary Clinton to take a similar stance without being seen to merely agree with her younger, less experienced rival. To do so would have forced Senator Clinton to apologize for her earlier vote authorizing the use of force in Iraq and to retract a statement opposing troop withdrawal. Obama was eager to utilize national opposition to the war to gain office, but he remained committed to a strong American presence on the world stage.

Obama (2007d) advised readers of *Foreign Affairs*, for example, that the Iraq War was no reason for the United States to revert to neoisolationism: "We can neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission. We must lead the world, by deed and by example" (p. 4). Obama addressed these issues in a speech titled "A New Strategy for a New World," in which he identified his foreign policy priorities as

> ending the war in Iraq responsibly; finishing the fight against al Qaeda . . . securing all nuclear weapons and materials from terrorists and rogue states; achieving true energy security; and rebuilding our alliances to meet the challenges of the 21st century. (2008d)

Clearly this was far from groundbreaking and highlighted the presence of continuity as well as change in the Obama candidacy.

Although Obama repeatedly announced his intention to remove all U.S. service personnel from Iraq within 16 months, contradictions were apparent: A *New York Times* assessment, "Three Plans for Iraq" (2007), of Obama's plan noted that it called for "a residual U.S. presence [to] remain in Iraq for force protection, training of Iraqi security forces and pursuit of international terrorists" (p. A15). Later, Shipman (2008) noted that Obama himself conceded that he might be forced to "refine" that promise. This was reflected in Obama's statement of July 3 (as cited in Jones & Montanaro, 2008), when he insisted that the pace of withdrawal would be dictated by military requirements, not political considerations. The pledge to withdraw remained, but the timescale for such a move was beginning to slip long before Election Day and clearly not all Americans would be leaving Iraq under the Obama initiative. Dreyfuss (2008) noted that a senior military aide to Obama acknowledged that the candidate was being "studiously ambiguous," about the details, noting, "It might be possible, or it might not be possible, to go through this campaign without resolving that ambiguity" (p. 23). This was allowed to go largely unnoticed amid the rhetoric of change and withdrawal, in a move that exasperated his opponents who felt Obama was being given an unfair advantage. Little separated Obama and Senator Clinton politically. Despite being portrayed as part of the generation that had sanctioned the war, Clinton's voting record in the Senate was nearly identical to Obama's, as her husband attempted to highlight throughout the primary season: Obama's anti-war image was based almost entirely on his 2002 speech. Obama's use of the war to differentiate himself from his most potent adversary caused former President Bill Clinton to attack the media (Youngman, 2007) for its refusal to ask Obama about these remarks and about the real policy differences between the two campaigns.

As a Democrat, Obama was determined to avoid accusations of weakness in national security affairs. Accordingly, Obama routinely sought to praise the military, while suggesting that the Bush Administration, and by extension the Republican Party, sought to avoid responsibility for the events in Iraq. Obama adopted this approach in an interview with *USA Today*, telling Lawrence (2007) that "the military has performed its task. The problem has been the civilian leadership." However, as a member of a party viewed as more inclined to diplomacy than the use of force, Obama lacked even a veneer of credibility, having never served in uniform. Despite this, he strove to portray himself as being in favor of a strong military, but against the mission in Iraq. Doing so allowed him to appear to the right of the Democratic Party, which helped in the general election and also kept the role of commander-in-chief in voter's minds, a move designed to undermine support for his most potent adversary.

The Clinton campaign had polling data that revealed her primary weakness arose over the perception of her as a credible commander-in-chief, and as a result, Senator Clinton ensured that her statements were designed to convey a sense of strength and determination. An advertisement, involving a 3 a.m. phone call at the White House, was specifically designed to highlight her experience in contrast to that of Obama, but without making explicit reference to the military. This was a constant focus of the Obama campaign, which made repeated references to the role of commander-in-chief to highlight Senator Clinton's perceived weakness and exploit the ongoing military deployment. Obama (as cited in Lawrence) insisted, "My first task if I were Commander in Chief would be to call the Joint Chiefs together and not tell them how to do their job, but I would tell them your job is to begin a phased deployment" (2007). This approach allowed Obama to raise questions about Clinton's capacity to serve as commander-in-chief, appear balanced in terms of withdrawal, and attack the surge policy of President Bush.

The 2008 Democratic primary season, therefore, was characterized by Obama's exploitation of the war to present his relative inexperience as a virtue and to neutralize Senator Hillary Clinton. Obama emphasized his early critique of the war and the fact that his Democrat opponents had all voted to authorize military action. Like Nixon, Obama presented himself as removed from the decision-making process that had led to war, in contrast to his challengers whom he portrayed as accomplices to the conflict. With her vote in support of the Iraq invasion, Clinton was tied to the war in a way that Obama was not. Freed from this, he could challenge not only the administration but also his most formidable Democratic opponent, declaring, "When I am this party's nominee, my opponent will not be able to say that I voted for the war in Iraq" (Obama, 2007b). Accordingly, he exploited the war and defined

himself both in his own right and in contrast to Hillary Clinton, a battle that was ultimately ended when Clinton conceded, allowing Obama to turn his attention to the general election.

To secure the presidency, Senator Obama needed to link his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, to the outgoing administration of George W. Bush. Just as the disarray of his opponents had aided Nixon in 1968, McCain assisted Obama by telling voters in New Hampshire that he would have no complaints with American troops remaining in Iraq for a hundred years, as long as they were not being injured or killed. With an unpopular war and an economy on the brink of recession, any Republican candidate would have struggled in 2008, but McCain appeared content to make life easy for Obama and his continuing efforts to gain high office through the manipulation of war. One of the first platforms for this was an article in the *New York Times* in which Obama directly linked McCain to the Bush Administration, both of whom viewed Obama's timetable for the removal of American troops as "surrender" (2008c). Obama insisted that he would re-deploy U.S. combat brigades out of Iraq within 16 months of coming to office, by June 2010. Dodge (2008) noted, however, "Obama has failed to address the costs and consequences of the speedy withdrawal he advocates. There remains a distinct possibility that such a course will catapult Iraq back into civil war" (p. 53). Obama's summer 2010 deadline also played into the electoral calendar, coming in the lead up to mid-term elections, raising doubts as to the military rationale for such a date, which appeared to be driven more by political than strategic considerations.

Despite the centrality of the war to Obama's campaign, the Democratic Party Platform (2008) failed to address the Iraq War in depth until halfway through the document, prioritizing instead the economy, health care, social security, education, and housing. When Iraq was referenced, it was in language taken from Obama's campaign speeches, honoring the sacrifice of the troops and the failings of the civilian leadership. In accordance with the candidate's repeated statements, the document presented a timeline for withdrawal within 16 months of Obama coming to office. The platform remained committed to the concept of a residual force in Iraq, but as had been the case in the primary season, the details remained unclear. In contrast, the Republican Party Platform (2008) only addressed Iraq in a country-by-country assessment of U.S. responsibilities. The document advocated victory in Iraq, continued to link violence in the nation with terrorist groups, and warned against a premature withdrawal based on politically motivated timescales. In his acceptance speech, McCain (2008) only mentioned Iraq twice: once to champion his support of the surge and secondly to announce that he was wearing the bracelet of a soldier who had died in the conflict and in whose memory he

sought the presidency. Neither statement was an endorsement of the war and yielded the issue to Obama to utilize accordingly.

Dreyfuss (2008) has observed that the extent to which Obama sought to contrast himself with McCain was a topic of heated debate within the campaign, between those who "want to draw a stark contrast with McCain on Iraq and those who'd prefer that Obama tack to the center and blur the differences" (p. 25). The candidate, however, recognized the advantage in his opposition to this "war of choice" and openly challenged McCain on his stance, insisting, "I opposed going to war in Iraq; Senator McCain was one of Washington's biggest supporters for war" (Obama, 2008d). In keeping with his pattern of exploiting the war and his opposition to it, Obama addressed the conflict in his acceptance speech, linking it directly to his opponent: "While Senator McCain was turning his sights to Iraq just days after 9/11, I stood up and opposed this war, knowing that it would distract us from the real threats we face" (2008a).

In contrast, McCain, like Humphrey before him, was in a tortured position; he was known to have disagreed with the Bush administration over the execution of the war in Iraq. McCain (as quoted in Heilemann and Halperin, 2010) stated that it had been "just incompetent . . . terrible" (p. 275). However, he appeared unable to adequately state his position on the war or to distance himself from the White House. This provided Obama with an opening, explaining that while McCain may be an American hero, "his priorities don't address the real problems of the American people, because they are bound to the failed policies of the past" (Obama, 2008b). Just as Nixon had marginalized Humphrey in 1968, now Obama portrayed McCain as the last man standing in support of the conflict, refusing to accept the inevitable. The policy distinctions were evident in the candidates' reaction to the 2007 surge, in which 28,000 additional U.S. troops were dispatched to Iraq in an effort to reduce casualties and accelerate the drawdown of American forces.

Writing in *USA Today*, Lawrence (2007) reported Obama's July 2007 belief that the surge in Iraq was not working and had failed to alter the situation on the ground. Indeed, he felt that the move had merely placed more U.S. troops at risk. Several months later, however, Petraeus (2007) testified that this was not the case, as he told Congress that the military objectives of the surge were being met. This was borne out by data released by O'Hanlon and Campbell (2009) that revealed Iraqi civilian deaths of 3,500 in November 2006, 2,700 in February, and 490 in June 2008. Throughout the campaign, Obama stuck to his call for a U.S. withdrawal and by the summer of 2008 the results of the surge actually allowed him to continue to do so. Despite his opposition to the surge, its success allowed Obama to adhere to his policy as the United States could now withdraw without "being forced to accept

responsibility for either the violence it would have left behind in 2006 or the outright defeat at the hands of Islamic radical jihadists it would have faced" (Dodge, 2008, p. 55). As Jacobson (2010) observed, on Election Day, this proved to be of little consolation for John McCain; despite the success of the surge, "the damage proved irreversible . . . the Iraq War was, through direct and indirect pathways, ultimately the single most important contributor to Obama's presidential victory" (p. 208).

Conclusion

Having campaigned as a champion of change and received the endorsement of the Kennedy family, it was not surprising that the Obama campaign of 2008 drew repeated comparisons with John F. Kennedy's presidential bid of 1960. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, however, Obama's exploitation of a contentious "war of choice" initiated by political opponents, first to neutralize political rivals in the primaries and then to defeat his opponent in the general election, was more reminiscent of Nixon's campaign strategy in 1968. There are clear similarities between the conflicts and the manner in which they were utilized by the two candidates. The conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq were separated by 40 years, yet both were "wars of choice" waged by the United States against lesser nations that dragged on far longer than could have been imagined. The conflicts consumed administrations, tainted the records of presidents, and ultimately fell to others to conclude. They were political wars as much as military conflicts, whose ultimate outcome was decided at home, as much as on the battlefield; they helped elect presidents as well as destroy them. Both wars claimed casualties beyond the battlefield in terms of opportunities lost and advances postponed. The wars were separated by a draft and by scale; however, both conflicts divided the nation and were exploited by presidential candidates in 1968 and in 2008. The Obama campaign mirrored Nixon's earlier efforts to benefit politically from an inherited "war of choice." It did so first to neutralize the threat posed by Senator Hillary Clinton in the Democratic Party primaries and then to defeat Senator John McCain in the general election. Having utilized and exploited the conflicts to gain office, the "wars of choice" consumed the first terms of Presidents Nixon and Obama, as both sought to disengage while minimizing the long-term impact on the United States' standing in the world. They did so by drawing out a withdrawal process and presenting the final departure as a vindication of policy and on a timetable designed to assist them in their bids for re-election.

By understanding Obama's adoption of Nixon's use of an inherited "war of choice" as an election year tool, it is possible to better explain the sense of

disappointment in Obama's foreign policy initiatives. The article has drawn on the available material in an effort to demonstrate the degree to which the Kennedyesque perception of Obama's presidential campaign was at odds with the Nixonian reality. Further evidence of this may well emerge as more accounts emerge from those involved in the campaign and as official records are subsequently released. Indeed, this article may well inspire a new direction in thinking that causes greater investigation into the true tone and content of foreign policy in the Obama campaign and of its utilization of its own inherited "war of choice" as a vehicle to gain political power in the United States. While the final rendering of history will be made from various political perspectives, it is apparent that inherited "wars of choice" played a major role in the election of two very different presidents, separated by four decades but not, it would appear, by a philosophical approach to campaigning.

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1. Barack Obama's use of his own inherited "war of choice" in Iraq, as commander-in-chief is the subject of continuing research to be published shortly.

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