## Crusade: George McGovern's Opposition to the Vietnam War

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"My concern [over the Vietnam War] began out of intellectual curiosity," George McGovern explained in a 1987 speech, "and then it deepened into genuine alarm" until it finally "became an obsession . . . that I could not get out of my being." McGovern's intellectual curiosity had been piqued because United States Vietnam policy was counter to his own foreign policy philosophy. As American involvement and McGovern's moral concern grew, he moved from his initial stand of advocating a bilateral withdrawal to calling for a unilateral pull-out of all American forces. In an effort to change United States policy toward Vietnam, the senator utilized numerous strategies, from openly challenging the commander-in-chief to seeking the presidency. In the end, the South Dakota senator's obsession with Southeast Asia paid off when the United States withdrew from the region.

McGovern's background seems to have destined him to play the role of crusader. His father, a conservative Wesleyan Methodist minister, raised his children on religion and the Bible. In 1940, McGovern's upbringing prompted him to enroll in Dakota Wesleyan University, a small church-sponsored liberal arts institution in Mitchell, South Dakota. World

George S. McGovern, "America in Vietnam," in Vietnam: Four American Perspectives, ed. Patrick J. Hearden (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1990), p. 24.

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The events of World War II and McGovern's experiences as a bomber pilot were keys to his adoption of the Social Gospel and his views on the Vietnam War.

War II interrupted his studies, and he flew thirty-five missions as an army bomber pilot over Europe. The war, particularly the dropping of the atomic bomb, greatly affected McGovern's world view. The destructiveness of the new weapon made the annihilation of the human race a real possibility if peaceful means were not found to resolve conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

After the war, McGovern returned to Dakota Wesleyan to complete his degree and begin his search for peace. In his studies, McGovern discovered the Social Gospel, the literal interpretation of the Christian imperatives of feeding the hungry, sheltering the poor, and creating peace. For McGovern, the Social Gospel made religion relevant to the world around

<sup>2.</sup> Robert S. Anson, *McGovern: A Biography* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972), pp. 20, 32, 35; George McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 27, 30-31.

him, and it became the essential moral underpinning of his public and private life. If nations were to implement the principles of the Social Gospel, total annihilation could be avoided.

McGovern's first attempt to implement the Social Gospel came in the spring of 1946, when he enrolled in Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. After less than a year of study and time spent as a student pastor, McGovern decided that he was "ill-suited temperamentally" to the ministry and enrolled in the graduate program in history at Northwestern University, also in Evanston. It was at Northwestern that he first began to apply the principles of the Social Gospel to foreign policy. Through study and reflection, McGovern came to what he called "a more balanced view of the Cold War." In his opinion, the United States had overreacted to the Soviet Union after the Second World War, for the Soviets had not been bent on European conquest but rather on attaining a buffer from future invasion. The future senator also developed his views on Vietnam and Asia, concluding that Moscow and Beijing did not control all the revolutionary movements in the developing world and that the nationalistic desire for independence was the driving force behind them. McGovern, therefore, could not agree with United States support of French imperialism in Vietnam against the nationalist movement led by Ho Chi Minh.3

In 1951, McGovern accepted a position teaching history and government at Dakota Wesleyan in order to test it as a possible springboard into politics. The strength of his ideas led him to accept the executive directorship of the state Democratic party in 1953. Over the next three years, he rebuilt what had been a hopelessly floundering party, using it to win a seat in the United States House of Representatives in 1956. During his four years in the House, McGovern laid out the framework for his foreign policy philosophy based on the ideals of the Social Gospel—world peace was

the preeminent goal, achievable through succoring the poor, the ill, and the uneducated. Two other fundamental, interwoven principles further guided his vision of American foreign affairs: preservation of national security and promotion of democratic ideals. In his view, democratic societies were the foundation upon which United States strength and world peace rested. He also advocated peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union and détente, placing himself within a small minority. He repeatedly urged Congress to emphasize humanitarian and technical assistance over military aid in standing against despotic regimes in the developing world. Although McGovern made only one reference to Southeast Asia while in the House, including it in a list of places where the United States overemphasized military aid, he frequently articulated the principles that would lead him to oppose the war.<sup>4</sup>

After an unsuccessful attempt to move to the Senate in 1960, McGovern served briefly in the John F. Kennedy Administration as director of the Food for Peace program. When McGovern won his seat in the United States Senate in 1962, there were eleven thousand American service people in Southeast Asia. The country had been involved in Vietnam since the end of the Second World War when the United States assisted the French in reasserting its colonial control over the nation. When the French withdrew in 1954, America began economically to support the anticommunist forces in South Vietnam against the communist North Vietnamese forces. In 1961, President Kennedy sent the first troops to Vietnam to assist in training the South Vietnamese Army. By 1963, despite massive United States aid, the South Vietnamese government had not proven its ability to govern effectively and lacked the popular support of the people. Anti-

Anson, McGovern, pp. 63-67, 75, 84; U.S., Congress, House, Congressional Record, 85th
Cong., 2d sess., 1958, 104, pt. 1:1098, 1100-1101; Congressional Record, 86th Cong., 1st sess.,
1959, 105, pt. 8:11126-27; Congressional Record, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 1957, 103, pt. 12:1368.

government protests in the south began in May 1963 and evolved into riots by the summer.<sup>5</sup>

Reacting to the news coming from Vietnam, on 24 September 1963 McGovern included six short paragraphs on Southeast Asia in a lengthy Senate speech on disarmament. The situation in Vietnam demonstrated the limits of military power, he charged. Calling United States policy there one of "moral debate and political defeat," he urged policy makers to reevaluate America's role in the region. Two days later, the senator entered an article about the tyranny of the South Vietnamese government into the *Congressional Record*. In his introductory remarks, McGovern called for a total withdrawal of all United States forces and aid, contending that the country's support of the despotic government in South Vietnam weakened America in the "global competition with communism."

In November, shortly after a successful coup in South Vietnam, President Kennedy was assassinated, leaving Lyndon Johnson to deal with the situation. To the new president, the fight in Vietnam appeared to be a Moscow-guided attempt to gain control over all of Southeast Asia, and Johnson continued to support the anticommunist government in the south. Nevertheless, in a private discussion in which McGovern expressed his concerns, Johnson left the senator with the impression that the United States would begin to withdraw from Southeast Asia after the 1964 presidential election. Coupled with the hard line advocated by Johnson's opponent Barry Goldwater, the president's assurances prompted McGovern to remain silent on the issue for the time being.<sup>7</sup>

The following summer, Vietnam was back in the headlines. On 2 August 1964, a North Vietnamese vessel fired on the U.S.S. *Maddox*, which was engaged in intelligence gath-

Anson, McGovern, pp. 98, 101, 126; Stephen E. Ambrose, Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938 (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 42-43, 139-40, 194-97.

Congressional Record, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963, 109, pt. 13:17884, 18205.

<sup>7.</sup> McGovern, Grassroots, pp. 102-3.

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ering in the Gulf of Tonkin off the northern coast of Vietnam. Johnson used the incident to expand American involvement in Southeast Asia, hoping to continue the ideological battle against the Soviets and disarm critics who accused him of being soft on communism. On 5 August, Johnson presented a



In a White House reception line, McGovern and President Lyndon Johnson (third and fourth from left) appeared amicable, but their views on the war diverged sharply. Vice-president Hubert H. Humpbrey, at Johnson's left, would defeat McGovern in 1968 when the senator ran for the Democratic presidential nomination on a peace plank.

resolution to Congress that granted the commander-in-chief sweeping powers in the region. McGovern worried that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, as the measure came to be known, would lead to a wider war. On 7 August, however, he voted for the resolution, bowing to the arguments of J. William Fulbright, a senator from Arkansas and the measure's floor manager, who assured him that the legislation was harmless and necessary for

Johnson's election. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed the Senate 88 to 2 and the House 416 to 0.8

The following day, McGovern took the floor of the Senate and delivered his first major speech on Vietnam. He explained that he had voted in favor of the legislation to demonstrate that the president had congressional backing in the face of a military attack, but, he did not want his vote interpreted as an endorsement of the current policy of growing military involvement in Vietnam. McGovern clearly defined the nature of the conflict as political and stressed that it demanded a political solution between the countries involved, including North Vietnam and China. This belief, along with his September 1963 statements declaring Vietnam to be outside America's vital interests, were the foundations upon which McGovern would build his dissent.

On 15 January 1965, after President Johnson was safely reelected, McGovern reiterated his position that Vietnam's problems were political and demanded a political, not a military, solution. In a speech from the Senate floor, he suggested a set of terms upon which a negotiated settlement could be reached, basing them on the fundamental principle that South Vietnam would remain an independent nation. Mc-Govern argued that both North and South Vietnam should become neutral states and that a confederation between the two nations should be developed to facilitate distribution of food and development of the Mekong River. To force the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table, McGovern suggested that the United States make clear that it was willing to remain in Vietnam indefinitely and that it would withdraw only if a negotiated settlement were obtained. Finally, he proposed that the South Vietnamese army use infiltration and subversion to pressure North Vietnam into talks. 10

Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, pp. 199-200; Anson, McGovern, p. 153; Congressional Record, 88th Cong., 2d sess., 1964, 110, pt. 14:18470-71.

<sup>9.</sup> Congressional Record, 88th Cong., 2d sess., 1964, 110, pt. 14:18668-69.

<sup>10.</sup> Congressional Record, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, 111, pt. 1:784-86.

These remarks demonstrate McGovern's growing maturity as an opponent of United States policy on Vietnam. After months of study, the senator no longer advocated simplistic solutions as he had in 1963 but instead recognized the political realities of the situation, agreeing that the United States should remain in Southeast Asia until a solution that preserved an independent South Vietnam was negotiated. The January 1965 speech also marked the first time McGovern utilized a new strategy of criticizing the present action and offering an alternative. As he would later explain to his fellow lawmakers, it was their obligation as senators not only to speak out but also to search for a more viable course of action. <sup>11</sup>

Three weeks after McGovern urged the president to negotiate a settlement in the region, the Vietcong attacked a United States air base at Pleiku, killing eight Americans. President Johnson responded with intense air strikes that would continue throughout the war. McGovern's concern over the escalating American involvement caused him to look for new means to maximize the impact of his dissent. He began to coordinate his speeches on Vietnam with other foreign policy critics, primarily Idaho senator Frank Church. McGovern and Church were part of an emerging group of senators, known as "doves," who opposed American involvement in Vietnam. Beginning as a small informal group, the doves grew in numbers as the conflict escalated. Throughout the Vietnam era, they would meet to discuss strategy that would bring an end to United States involvement in Southeast Asia. McGovern and Church began their joint efforts in early February but refrained from criticizing the president. Rather, they praised his judgment and restraint and called for negotiations. McGovern also sought forums outside the Senate to push for talks. On 28 February 1965, he appeared in a New York Times print

<sup>11.</sup> Congressional Record, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, 111, pt. 3:2878.

debate with Senator Gale McGee, a Wyoming Democrat, and the following month advocated a negotiated settlement in a nationally televised debate with two "hawks." <sup>12</sup>

McGovern also continued to use private channels to voice his opposition. During early 1965, he met with Johnson or members of the administration on three different occasions to discuss Vietnam. The final meeting was part of the president's own effort to silence critics, even though McGovern was only one of about a dozen senators who opposed sending troops to Vietnam. The centerpiece of the president's effort was a speech on 7 April at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Before the talk, Johnson invited McGov-

12. Ibid.; Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, pp. 202-3; Anson, *McGovern*, pp. 157-58; John W. Finney, "Vietnam: A Debate over U.S. Role," *New York Times*, 28 Feb. 1965, p. E3; McGovern, *A Time of War, A Time of Peace* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 126.





ern and Church to the White House. The president dominated the thirty-minute meeting, explaining that he was trying to reach a point militarily where the United States could negotiate a settlement. That evening, Johnson officially offered to begin unconditional talks, but the offer was accompanied by increased bombings of the North and other conditions, and McGovern's opposition continued. He would not be invited to the White House again until 1975.<sup>13</sup>

In late July 1965, Johnson finally committed the United States to war. He accelerated the bombings and ordered a substantial troop increase in Vietnam. Furthermore, the commander-in-chief ordered United States forces to engage the enemy independently. Prior to this time, American troops were only allowed to support the South Vietnamese army and could not search out and engage the enemy in combat.<sup>14</sup>

In July, McGovern again offered a pragmatic plan to end the conflict and avoid American involvement in a major Asian land war. He proposed that all American forces be consolidated in urban centers and well-defended coastal enclaves and that all offensive measures, including the bombing, be ended. He then urged that a settlement be negotiated on the terms he laid out in January of 1965. In November, McGovern traveled to Vietnam, meeting with diplomatic and military personnel and visiting hospitals. The misery and suffering he witnessed dismissed "any lingering doubts" he had about his opposition and prompted him to intensify his efforts to end the war. <sup>16</sup>

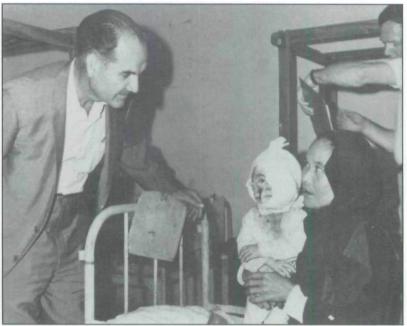
His opportunity to employ a more vigorous strategy came the following month. In December 1965, Johnson suspended

<sup>13.</sup> Anson, *McGovern*, p. 159; McGovern, *Grassroots*, pp. 104-5; telephone interview with George McGovern, 22 Aug. 1995; Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), pp. 39-40.

<sup>14.</sup> George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), pp. 140-41; Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, pp. 204-5.

<sup>15.</sup> Congressional Record, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, 111, pt. 13:18308-10.

<sup>16.</sup> McGovern, Grassroots, pp. 106-7.



McGovern's trip to Vietnam in late 1965 enabled bim to view the war's devastation firstband, leaving the senator even more committed to ending the conflict.

the bombing in North Vietnam to encourage negotiations, and McGovern and other doves quickly moved to extend the halt. On 5 January 1966, McGovern appeared on the National Broadcasting Company's "Today Show." The senator's remarks were couched in emotional language, and for the first time, he was critical of President Johnson. He called for the bombing pause to be continued indefinitely and advocated the National Liberation Front (NLF), the political wing of the Vietcong, be included in peace talks. On 27 January, McGovern joined five other Senators in a coordinated attack from the Senate floor, urging an extension of the bombing halt. Fifteen Democratic senators also sent President Johnson

a letter encouraging indefinite suspension of the air raids.<sup>17</sup> Despite the doves' pleas, Johnson ended-the bombing pause on the twenty-ninth and began to emphasize air power.

Throughout the remainder of 1966, McGovern continued his effort to end the war, but by January 1967, after almost five years of opposition, he was growing discouraged. He was frustrated that dissent was not having an impact on United States policy and that the American negotiating position lacked flexibility. Growing tensions between the president and the doves also contributed to his discouragement. Johnson no longer appeared even to listen to the opposition. McGovern's frustration led him to lament in an article written for the New Republic that the war critics' "principal satisfaction to date . . . has been the nervous, unprovable assumption that we would be involved in an even larger war had it not been for the critics both in and out of the Senate."18 His discouragement became so intense that he began to consider alternatives to a negotiated settlement. Between January 1967 and July 1969, McGovern would gradually move toward advocating an unconditional unilateral withdrawal.

In the fall of 1967, McGovern made his first public remarks in this new direction. In a 7 October speech before the Dakota Methodist Convocation in Aberdeen, South Dakota, the senator suggested that the United States bring home forty-five thousand troops before the war escalated any further. He then called on the South Vietnamese to take on a greater burden of the war or to end the conflict "on whatever terms" they could achieve. This speech in his home state marked the first time McGovern advocated a reduction in troop levels and a settlement that would not be entirely beneficial to the

18. McGovern, "Why Don't You Speak Out, Senator?" New Republic 156 (18 Mar. 1967):

<sup>17.</sup> Congressional Record, 89th Cong., 2d sess., 1966, 112, pt. 1:780-81, 1324-25; E. W. Kenworthy, "6 Democrats Try to Rally Senate against Bombing," New York Times, 27 Jan. 1966, p. 1, and "15 in Senate Urge President Extend Pause in Bombing," New York Times, 28 Jan. 1966, p. 1.

United States.<sup>19</sup> The following January, the senator told *U. S. News & World Report* that the South Vietnamese should take over "the major burden of their own affairs," and the United States should begin a "systematic phase-out" of its forces.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after McGovern's U.S. News interview, the Vietcong undertook a major offensive against South Vietnamese provincial capitals and major cities. Although the Tet Offensive, so called because it took place on the Buddhist New Year's holiday on 31 January 1968, was repelled, it shocked Americans and left the impression that the critics had been correct. In the two months following the Tet Offensive, the doves increased their criticism, and the pendulum of public opinion started to swing their way. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee initiated an investigation of the earlier Gulf of Tonkin incident and in March began nationally broadcast hearings on foreign aid to Vietnam. One week later, Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, who had entered the presidential race to challenge Johnson on Vietnam, captured forty-two percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary. His success prompted a popular dove, New York senator Robert F. Kennedy, to enter the race.21

On 31 March, President Johnson announced in a nationally televised address that he was dropping out of the presidential race, limiting the bombing in Vietnam, and offering to open peace talks anytime, anywhere. The speech marked the end of the gradual escalation of the war and the beginning of the Vietnamization process, in which the South Vietnamese army took over a greater burden of the fighting. Despite Johnson's shift in strategy, he still did not alter the ultimate goal of a free state in South Vietnam. McGovern was not completely satisfied with the president's stance, but he recognized the sit-

Congressional Record, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 1967, 113, pt. 22:30144-45.
"Pull Out or Stay in Vietnam—What Debate is All About," U. S. News & World Report 64 (5 Feb. 1968): 31.

<sup>21.</sup> Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, pp. 129, 133-37.

uation as a prime opportunity for ending the war and consequently refrained from criticism.<sup>22</sup>

On 13 May 1968, the negotiations to end the Vietnam War began in Paris and deadlocked almost immediately. While the peace talks stalled, McCarthy, Kennedy, and Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, the administration's candidate for president, battled it out in the primaries. McGovern privately supported his long-time friend Robert Kennedy. When the New York senator was assassinated in June, McGovern grew concerned that the Kennedy delegation might break apart and thus reduce the power of the antiwar caucus at the party's Chicago convention. On 10 August, just sixteen days before the opening of the Democratic convention, McGovern announced that he was seeking the nomination, even though he had little chance of winning. Kennedy and McCarthy had divided the antiwar support between them and were far behind Humphrey. During the South Dakotan's short campaign, the new candidate talked almost exclusively about ending the war and took another step toward advocating unilateral pull-out. On 19 August, he called for the reduction of half the troops in Vietnam within six months and an end to all offensive action.23

As the Chicago convention opened, McGovern teamed up with McCarthy and the Kennedy forces to draft a peace plank that called for a suspension of the bombing, creation of a coalition government including the NLF, and a mutual with-drawal of American and North Vietnamese troops. It encountered great resistance from the Humphrey-Johnson dominated platform committee but had the overwhelming support of the antiwar delegates. After a heated debate, the peace plank was defeated and McGovern turned his attention to rounding up delegates. The convention was extremely divided over

<sup>22.</sup> Ibid., p. 132; John W. Finney, "McGovern Condemns Ky as a "Tinhorned Dictator," New York Times, 18 Dec. 1968, pp. 1, 10.

<sup>23.</sup> Anson, McGovern, pp. 192-99; McGovern, Grassroots, pp. 117-21; Robert H. Phelps, "McGovern Urges Big Troop Pullout," New York Times, 20 Aug. 1968, p. 26.

civil-rights issues, and the war and McGovern had little luck. Although the South Dakotan had hoped to sway 300 delegates, after the votes were counted, Humphrey had the nomination and McGovern received only 146½ votes. The senator's efforts in Chicago added to the already deeply divided convention, and with the antiwar riots that erupted in the streets outside the hall, Humphrey would have little chance to unite the party and defeat his Republican opponent Richard M. Nixon.<sup>24</sup>

The convention over, McGovern concentrated on winning reelection to the Senate. Polls indicated that his actions in Chicago had hurt him in South Dakota. After leading his opponent Archie Gubbrud by nearly forty points in early summer, McGovern led by only two points in mid-September. His constituents were not impressed by the senator's performance in Chicago and believed his bid for the presidential nomination had not been in the best interests of the state. He campaigned hard through the fall, concentrating on farm issues and other domestic concerns, making Vietnam a secondary issue. This strategy worked well, and McGovern was reelected with fifty-seven percent of the vote. In the presidential race, Nixon, claiming to have a secret plan to end the war, narrowly defeated Humphrey.<sup>25</sup>

In January 1969, when President Nixon took office, there were over five hundred thirty thousand troops in Vietnam, and the president was determined to end the war and bring them home. His strategy was to apply military pressure on the North in order to obtain an honorable settlement and an independent South Vietnam. Within the first months of his presidency, the United States began secretly bombing enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. The North failed to buckle under these

<sup>24.</sup> McGovern, *Grassroots*, pp. 123-25; Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), pp. 533-37; Anson, *McGovern*, pp. 207, 210.

<sup>25. &</sup>quot;Gubbrud Gain Tightens Senate Race," Aberdeen American-News, 30 Oct. 1968; Anson, McGovern, pp. 213-16; McGovern, Grassroots, pp. 126-27; Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, pp. 162, 166.

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As the war escalated during the administration of President Richard Nixon, so did opposition to the conflict within Congress and across the country.

and other pressures, and by the end of the year, Nixon would be forced to return to Johnson's Vietnamization policy.<sup>26</sup>

McGovern had little faith that Nixon would keep his campaign promise to end the war, but he refrained from criticism for the first few months until the escalation in both offensive American ground action and casualties became evident. "For 4 years," McGovern said on 17 March 1969, "I have viewed our deepening involvement in the bloody jungles of Southeast Asia with a troubled mind and heavy heart. Now after all the political upheaval of 1968, after repeated indications that most of our citizens regret and deplore our involvement in this cruel and futile venture, I find it intolerable that we

Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 217-25; Stephen E. Ambrose, Nixon: Volume Two, Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), pp. 256-58, 275-76.

should still be pursuing the same tragic course with the same tragic results." The South Dakota senator again called for an end to all offensive measures and a pull-out of half the troops in Southeast Asia in order to break the deadlock in negotiations. <sup>27</sup> Concerned that criticism of the war was escalating, President Nixon publicly proposed on 14 May a comprehensive peace plan that included a mutual withdrawal of all forces, followed by a prisoner exchange. The president also hinted that American withdrawal would begin with or without an agreement. <sup>28</sup>

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the country's bargaining situation, McGovern met with the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front negotiators on 22 May 1969 in Paris. In ten hours of meetings, the South Dakotan discussed the negotiations and the positions of each side. In a 2 July speech from the Senate floor, McGovern took the final step in the evolution of his Vietnam policy and advocated a complete, unilateral pullout of all United States forces from Southeast Asia. His meeting with the North had convinced him that there would be no meaningful negotiations until an American withdrawal began.<sup>29</sup> He would continue to push for a complete pull-out until the war's conclusion.

In calling for a unilateral withdrawal, the senator sought platforms beyond the halls of Congress. He turned first to upcoming war protests: the Vietnam Moratorium and the Vietnam Mobilization. Since the 1965 bombings of North Vietnam, opposition to the war had been mounting within the United States. Early opposition had centered on college campuses, with left-wing activists and the young as primary participants. By the time of the Tet Offensive in January 1968, opposition had widened and the middle class began seriously questioning the war. In the wake of the offensive, just

<sup>27.</sup> Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 115, pt. 5:6576-78.

<sup>28.</sup> Ambrose, Nixon, pp. 275-76; Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 221-22.

<sup>29.</sup> Telephone interview with McGovern, 22 Aug. 1995; Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 115, pt. 14:18199-200.

under 50 percent of the population believed that it had been a mistake for America to get involved in Southeast Asia; by the fall of 1969, that number had increased to 58 percent. On 15 October, millions of people representing a cross section of Americans gathered in over two hundred different cities and towns to participate in the Vietnam Moratorium protest. McGovern, who spoke at three different sites, told demonstrators that it was the height of patriotism to pressure the president into ending the war. "To challenge the mistaken policies of our country is to pay it a high compliment—because it is based on the faith that we can do better," he concluded. It

Following the success of the moratorium, Nixon worked to discredit critics by calling for support from the "great silent majority" who approved of the war. At the same time, Vice-President Spiro Agnew lambasted the media for its coverage of the peace protests. Together, these speeches temporarily turned public opinion and affected the amount of air time McGovern's next major appearance received. On 15 November 1969, the senator from South Dakota spoke at the more radical Vietnam Mobilization demonstration in Washington, D.C., where he told two hundred fifty thousand protesters that the search for peace was the highest form of patriotism.<sup>32</sup>

McGovern's involvement in the protests set off a firestorm of criticism in South Dakota, where the Silent Majority quickly found its voice. State newspaper editors and their readers turned on the senator and strongly criticized his involvement in demonstrations. McGovern responded with an open letter to the citizens of South Dakota. He explained that he had never hidden his opposition to the war and that every South Dakotan knew when they voted for him that he would do everything possible to end the conflict. McGovern's letter

<sup>30.</sup> Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 171-73; Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, pp. 129-32, 162-65, 184.

<sup>31.</sup> Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 115, pt. 22:31513-14.

<sup>32.</sup> Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, pp. 187-90; Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 115, pt. 26:35481.

ended the barrage of criticism coming from South Dakota but did not win back the state's voters. McGovern's constituents were not impressed with his continued efforts to end the war or his emergence on the national political scene. Between 1969 and 1972, McGovern's popularity in South Dakota would plummet to its lowest point.<sup>33</sup>

After he calmed the voters back home, McGovern continued to search for ways to force the Vietnam issue and gain a wider audience. Early in 1970, the senator decided to draft an amendment to the Military Procurement Authorization bill that would cut off all funds for the war by 31 December 1970. The legislation would be known as the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, and it would offer the country an alternative to Nixon's Vietnamization, utilizing the last authority left in the hands of Congress, the power over the purse strings. As the senators drafted this legislation, Southeast Asia suddenly jumped into the spotlight once again on 29 April 1970, when South Vietnamese and American forces invaded Cambodia to destroy enemy sanctuaries. The invasion infuriated many in Congress and across the country, and the following day McGovern rose on the Senate floor to introduce the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, sponsored by both Democrats and Republicans, the goal of which was to end the country's involvement in Vietnam 34

The Cambodian invasion created an angry reaction throughout the country. Demonstrations erupted in major cities and on

<sup>33. &</sup>quot;Marchers Hindered Nixon's Peace Plan," Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, 19 Oct. 1969; "What Happened to George?", Brookings Register, 22 Nov. 1969; "Sen. McGovern in Trouble?", Mrs. Q. C. Miles to editor, and Bette Stablein to editor, Aberdeen American-News, 30 Nov. 1969; "McGovern Not in Step with S. D.," Aberdeen American-News, 10 Dec. 1969; Ann Whiteside Gertsen to editor and Elden L. Umiker to editor, Aberdeen American-News, 26 Nov. 1969; A. E. Joachim to editor, Aberdeen American-News, 12 Dec. 1969; Anson, McGovern, pp. 171-73; McGovern, "An Open Letter: McGovern Answers Criticism at Home," Aberdeen American-News, 17 Dec. 1969; telephone interview with George Cunningham, 30 Sept. 1995.

<sup>34.</sup> Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 2d sess., 1970, 116, pt. 10:13547-48; Ambrose, Rise to Globalism, pp. 242-43; Anson, McGovern, pp. 174-76; McGovern, Grassroots, p. 164.

college campuses. At Kent State in Ohio, protests turned violent when National Guardsmen killed four student demonstrators. The president had expected opposition but not of the magnitude that appeared. In the wake of the violence and protests, Nixon announced that all troops would be out of Cambodia by 30 June. His announcement did little to calm the Senate doves, whose well-developed antiwar legislative strategy was now underway. To promote their legislation, the senators arranged a nationally televised discussion of Vietnam and the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, which not only called for cutting off funds by the end of 1970 but also ordered troops home by 30 June 1971. McGovern's forces employed other lobbying efforts to sway fellow senators, but the Nixon Administration quickly organized its own Senate group to criticize the measure and its sponsors. The Administration also set up one or more front groups to create the public perception that the amendment was tantamount to surrender.35

As a result, the Senate doves had a difficult time maintaining support after the initial anger over the Cambodian invasion subsided. By the time the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment came up for a vote in late August, it was apparent that the measure would be defeated, even though the sponsors had pushed back the date for troop withdrawal to 31 December 1971. After months of hard work, McGovern was not willing to abandon the fight, however, and in an emotional speech from the Senate floor, he accused his colleagues of being partially responsible for all those killed and maimed in Vietnam. His decisive language failed to win additional votes, and on 1 September 1970, the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment was defeated fifty-five to thirty-nine.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35.</sup> Ambrose, Nixon, pp. 350-54; Anson, McGovern, p. 176; telephone interview with McGovern, 22 Aug. 1995; John W. Finney, "Bipartisan Senate Group Maps a 3-Pronged Antiwar Strategy," New York Times, 9 May 1970, p. 4; Tom Wells, The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 459-60; Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, pp. 208-9.

<sup>36.</sup> Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 2d sess., 1970, 116, pt. 23:30683; Anson, McGovern, pp. 177-78.

After the defeat, McGovern moved his cause to an even broader platform. On 18 January 1971, he announced that he was seeking the presidency. Speaking from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the senator pledged to make ending the war his top priority as president. Meanwhile, Nixon's growing concern about the war's impact on his reelection led him to search for a rapid conclusion to the conflict. On 8 February, he ordered the South Vietnamese army (with American air support) into Laos to cut off the North's supply lines in an attempt to force them to negotiate a settlement. Instead, the invasion failed and created a negative reaction in Congress. Members were so disgusted with the war they again tried to limit the president's actions. Over the next two months, five different resolutions restricting the president's powers were introduced. including a revival of the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment. On 21 February, McGovern appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press," calling the conflict the most inhumane act the nation had ever committed.<sup>37</sup> A week later, he condemned the bombing of Laos and Indochina as "the most barbaric act committed by any modern state since the death of Adolf Hitler,"38

Nixon was well aware of the dissenters' feelings about the invasion. In response to their criticisms, he proclaimed in a nationally televised address on 7 April that Vietnamization was a success and that American involvement in Southeast Asia was ending. The president also used the televised broadcast to criticize the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment. Without mentioning the legislation by name, Nixon stressed that establishing a pull-out date would only discourage negotiations and prolong the war.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37.</sup> George McGovern, An American Journey: The Presidential Campaign Speeches of George McGovern (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 6; Ambrose, Nixon, pp. 417-20; John Rourke, Congress and the Presidency in U.S. Foreign Policymaking: A Study of Interaction and Influence, 1945-1982 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983), p. 155; National Broadcasting Company, Meet the Press, 15 vols. (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973), 15 (21 Feb. 1971): 4.

<sup>38.</sup> Quoted in New York Times, 1 Mar. 1971, p. 6; Anson, McGovern, pp. 178-79,

<sup>39.</sup> Ambrose, Nixon, p. 429.

The 1971 version of the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment contained only minor changes from its predecessor and was greeted with only slightly more enthusiasm than it had been the previous year. On 22 April 1971, McGovern and five other Senate doves (all potential presidential candidates) appeared on American Broadcasting Company television to discuss setting a withdrawal date for American troops. McGovern argued that the nation's very soul demanded that the war end and suggested the passage of the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment as the best means. In spite of the broadcast and various protests, on 16 June 1971 the Senate once again defeated the legislation, fifty-five to forty-two.<sup>40</sup>

McGovern now spent more time on the presidential campaign trail. In August, he stated that he would make few public comments on the conflict in the future in order to concentrate on other concerns. This public silence created a good deal of criticism from his antiwar supporters and prompted McGovern to visit Vietnam to reassure doves of his commitment to end the war. After his return, he revived the Vietnam War as a central theme of his campaign, but by the early weeks of 1972, it looked as though it would not play a major role. The number of Americans in Vietnam had been significantly reduced, and United States involvement appeared to be ending. Voters were interested in domestic issues, and the McGovern campaign was having trouble generating support. After a strong showing in New Hampshire, mainly due to his strong organization in the state, McGovern finished last in Florida and Illinois 41

In the spring, when the North Vietnamese began a major offensive to which Nixon responded with massive bombing

<sup>40.</sup> Anson, McGovern, pp. 178-79; "5 Top Democrats Ask Nixon to Set Date for Pullout," New York Times, 23 Apr. 1971, pp. 1, 6; Congressional Record, 92d Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 117, pt. 15:20216.

<sup>41.</sup> Bill Kovach, "3 Democrats in New Hampshire Stress Economics," New York Times, 9 Aug. 1971, p. 16; Anson, McGovern, pp. 182-84; Gary W. Hart, Right from the Start: A Chronicle of the McGovern Campaign (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co., 1973), pp. 129, 131, 137.

raids on Hanoi and Haiphong, the war was once again of concern to voters. On 2 April, two days before the Wisconsin primary, McGovern appeared on Columbia Broadcasting System's "Face the Nation," where he explained that the invasion left the United States with only two options: escalation or withdrawal. Because the war was hopeless, and had been shown to be hopeless, he favored immediate withdrawal. On the following Tuesday, the outspoken senator won the Wisconsin primary. While the war escalated, McGovern continued to do well at the ballot box. According to exit polls conducted by the *New York Times*, the South Dakotan's campaign benefited from the intensified conflict. McGovern's long and vehement stand against the war prompted voters to support him.<sup>42</sup>

By the opening of the Democratic Convention in Miami in July, McGovern was the leading candidate with 1,154 delegates. Despite his commanding lead, a strong anti-McGovern movement had developed. The candidate's problems were due to his inability to bridge the gap between his antiwar supporters and the party's old guard. Setting a withdrawal deadline had become accepted Democratic doctrine by 1972, but McGovern's proposal to grant amnesty to draft evaders and his statements comparing North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh to George Washington were not easily acceptable to mainstream Democrats. In spite of a chaotic convention and intense fighting among delegates, McGovern captured the top spot on the ticket and promised to end the bombing in Vietnam on inauguration day, set a withdrawal date, and have every American soldier and prisoner of war (POW) home within ninety days. 43 Again, the hard-fought convention left

<sup>42.</sup> CBS NEWS, Face the Nation: The Collected Transcripts from the CBS Radio and Television Broadcasts, Vol. 15: 1972 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975), pp. 100-103; Jack Rosenthal, "Survey Shows Pennsylvania Voters Backed McGovern Because of Heightening of War," New York Times, 26 Apr. 1972, p. 29; Rosenthal, "Survey Ties Issues, Not Shooting, to Wallace Victory," New York Times, 17 May 1972, p. 30; Rosenthal, "Times Study Finds Doubt about War," New York Times, 19 May 1972, p. 42.

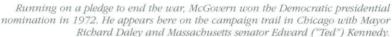
<sup>43.</sup> Hart, Right from the Start, pp. 208-10; Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 171; Anson, McGovern, p. 180; McGovern, American Journey, p. 20.

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the Democratic party with a shaky candidate amid much disunity and division.

Throughout the summer, President Nixon gradually turned the war issue to his advantage, painting himself as the peace candidate. In July, he announced that peace negotiations, which had broken off during the North Vietnamese offensive in March, would resume, and he expressed hope that a settlement could be reached before the election. In August, the president announced that all ground combat forces had been withdrawn and that the draft would be discontinued by July 1973. Nixon's strategy brought political success, and polls indicated that voters saw him as more likely to bring peace than McGovern.<sup>44</sup>

44. Ambrose, Nixon, pp. 592-94; J. K. Baral, "Foreign Policy as an Issue in the 1972 Presidential Election," Indian Journal of American Studies 17 (Winter/Summer 1987): 121-22.





By early September, the McGovern campaign was clearly in trouble. Voters had serious doubts about the Democratic nominee's integrity and leadership ability. The candidate himself had helped raise these questions. In August, McGovern forced his vice-presidential running mate Thomas Eagleton off the ticket after Eagleton's mental stability had been questioned. Two weeks later, the media reported that a McGovern representative had met with enemy negotiators. The senator initially denied the story but was then forced to confirm that he had sent supporter Pierre Salinger to Paris to discuss the status of peace talks with the enemy. These two incidents created doubt about McGovern among voters, and the Democratic candidate slipped fifteen to twenty points behind in the polls. On 10 October 1972 in a nationally televised speech, McGovern tried to revitalize his campaign by laying out a detailed plan to end the war. It was the same basic proposal he had been advocating since 1970: establish a withdrawal date, end the bombing, and discontinue aid to South Vietnam. The speech did little good, for the majority of Americans wanted to save face in Vietnam and saw McGovern's plan as a form of surrender. Nixon's proposal for withdrawal as soon as an acceptable settlement could be reached seemed far more palatable.45

When the speech failed to bring change in the polls, McGovern became frustrated. He was certain the war was immoral, and he was determined to raise the same sense of indignation in voters. Politically desperate and searching for a way to catch up, he heightened the rhetoric, making moralistic and, at times, careless statements. The candidate labeled the bombing of Indochina the "most barbaric action that any country has committed since Hitler's effort to exterminate Jews" and called the Nixon Administration "evil" 47

McGovern, Grassroots, pp. 215-16, 220-22; White, Making of the President, pp. 214-18, 225-26, 359-61; McGovern, American Journey, pp. 109-18; Gordon L. Weil, The Long Shot: George McGovern Runs for President (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), pp. 232-33.

<sup>46.</sup> Quoted in White, Making of the President, p. 122.

<sup>47. &</sup>quot;McGovern Bars Unity Drive if Beaten," New York Times, 29 Oct. 1972, p. 48.

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The administration, meanwhile, was negotiating a basic framework for a peace agreement. The settlement called for a United States withdrawal, a release of American POWs within sixty days of a cease-fire, and a coalition government to be established in the South. In late October, American negotiators announced that an agreement was attainable prior to the November election, and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger indicated that a settlement was, in fact, in hand. On 2 November, Nixon himself announced in a nationally televised speech that while a major breakthrough had been achieved in the negotiations, details still needed to be worked out, and that a settlement would not be completed before the election.<sup>48</sup>

McGovern reacted to the reversal with two emotional television speeches, noting that American youths were dying while the "details" of peace were being worked out. He called the announced peace settlement a political ploy and a cruel deception and criticized the president for distorting his views on the war. He concluded both speeches by reiterating his plan for peace. The remarks did little good, and on election day McGovern suffered one of the worst defeats in American history. He won only 37.5 percent of the popular vote and was defeated in the electoral college 521 to 17. The senator did not even carry his home state of South Dakota.<sup>49</sup>

After the election, discussions with North Vietnam resumed, and negotiators brought up over sixty issues to be renegotiated. When the parties failed to reach any agreement on the disputed points, negotiations broke off. In mid-December, Nixon ordered a massive bombing campaign, and for twelve days the United States dropped over thirty-six thousand tons of explosives on North Vietnam, exceeding the total used in the entire 1969-1971 period. Aware of strong opposition to

<sup>48.</sup> Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 244-45; Ambrose, Nixon, pp. 642-48. 49. Congressional Record, 93d Cong., 1st sess., 1973, 119, pt. 1:294-96; White, Making of the President, pp. 399-400.

the bombings, Nixon quickly sought a settlement before Congress had the opportunity to legislate an end to the conflict. Negotiations reopened on 8 January, and after six days of marathon sessions, the parties worked out an agreement—the same one that had been negotiated in October 1972, with only cosmetic changes. The United States would unilaterally withdraw from Southeast Asia, and a coalition government to include the National Liberation Front would be established in the South. The agreement left the political future of Vietnam undecided. By the end of January 1973, a cease-fire went into effect and the pull-out began.<sup>50</sup>

Over the next two and a half years, Congress took the lead on Vietnam. In the spring of 1973, the lawmakers enacted legislation ending all military activity in Cambodia and, ultimately, the rest of Southeast Asia. The following May, aid to South Vietnam was reduced by \$700 million, and in April of 1975 Congress refused to act on a request for additional aid to stave off a total North Vietnamese victory.<sup>51</sup>

McGovern played an insignificant role in congressional efforts after 1972. In the wake of his overwhelming defeat in the presidential election, the senator had considerably less power and influence on all issues, and he intentionally stayed out of the spotlight on Vietnam. He was up for reelection in South Dakota in 1974, and polls indicated that his approval rating was only 25 percent. Viewing the election as a referendum on himself, McGovern spent most of the next two years winning back the state's voters and seeking to vindicate himself. His hard work paid off as he won handily, returning to the Senate for a third term. After the election, McGovern did try to reassert himself on Vietnam, but by 1975 the issue had been generally decided. Congress was no longer willing to fund activities indefinitely in Southeast Asia. By April of

<sup>50.</sup> Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 246-50.

<sup>51.</sup> Thomas M. Franck and Edward Weisband, Foreign Policy by Congress (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 15-31.

1975, a North Vietnamese offensive reunited the country and ended United States involvement in the region.<sup>52</sup>

During more than ten years of dissent, McGovern had used three particularly effective long-term strategies in his efforts to alter United States policy. First, he coordinated dissent with other doves, increasing the impact of his criticism. This course of action was especially useful in the early years when the South Dakotan had considerably less political influence. Coordinating dissent not only maximized pressure on the White House, but it also generated attention outside the Senate, creating a public debate about the war and, in the long-term, affecting public opinion.

Second, by offering different approaches to United States involvement in Southeast Asia, McGovern and others cast doubt on the wisdom of official policy. This strategy prompted the creation of pragmatic plans for ending the war, giving the doves more legitimacy. These alternatives to the administration's policy also generated greater public debate over official policy, in turn creating a shift in the public perception of the war.

The third long-term strategy legitimized dissent. When McGovern, Kennedy, Fulbright, and others criticized the war, the protest achieved credibility. Not long-haired radicals but United States senators responsible for making policy were criticizing the war. The large and vocal group of Senate doves strongly appealed to the middle class and brought dissent into the mainstream.

According to Melvin Small in his book *Johnson*, *Nixon*, and the *Doves*, such long-term strategies forced policy changes by creating debate that shifted the public's perception of the war,<sup>53</sup> but other strategies McGovern utilized had a more immediate impact. His two most effective short-term

<sup>52.</sup> David Gopoian, "An Analysis of the Re-election Campaign of Senator George McGovern: Explaining the Vote in Rapid City, South Dakota" (M.A. thesis, Indiana University, 1975), pp. 2, 234; Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 252.

<sup>53.</sup> Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, pp. 225-30.

tactics were (1) offering legislation to end the war and (2) running for president. In 1970, McGovern introduced the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, which galvanized the antiwar movement and became the centerpiece of debate. The measure caused Nixon to defend his handling of the war and generated a heated discussion of Vietnamization, forcing the president to defuse the opposition by reducing troop levels and pulling forces out of Cambodia. McGovern's most effective method for changing policy, however, was his bid for the presidency. During the 1972 campaign, McGovern advocated unilateral pull-out within ninety days and was identified as the antiwar candidate. At least in part to prevent McGovern from using the war to his political advantage, Nixon cut troop levels, began negotiations, and ended the draft.

While the senator's short-term tactics helped bring about changes in United States policy, it was the less dramatic long-term dissent that had made the short-term strategies workable. The McGovern-Hatfield Amendment could not have been the centerpiece of dissent in 1970 had McGovern and the other doves not criticized the war for five long years. Without long and constant dissent, opposition to the war would not have worked its way into mainstream politics and McGovern would not have been the Democratic presidential nominee in 1972.

Despite McGovern's gradual move through several pragmatic plans to end the war, the senator always and increasingly saw the conflict in moral terms. As American involvement grew, so did McGovern's moral concern. By 1969, the senator saw the war as a black-and-white issue, and his moral indignation at times clouded his judgment, causing him to make careless and divisive accusations. His rhetoric became reckless. When the South Dakota senator called America's involvement in Vietnam the greatest moral tragedy in the nation's history and compared Nixon's actions to Hitler's, he gave the public the impression that he was a zealot who represented the extreme left and had a simplistic understanding

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of the war. These careless accusations came most often when McGovern's goal of ending the war seemed to be slipping away. In 1970, after working for several months to secure passage of the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment and defeat appeared imminent, he accused the senators of being partially responsible for the deaths of every soldier killed in Vietnam. Again, in the last weeks of the 1972 presidential race as McGovern's opportunity to win the Oval Office and end the war faded away, McGovern unleashed his moral outrage and labeled the bombing of Vietnam the most barbaric act since Hitler's extermination of the Jews.

In the end, McGovern's moral convictions, rather than well-reasoned strategies, drove his efforts to end the war. They prompted him to speak out against the conflict and sustained his criticism year after year. They drove him to challenge presidents, march in protests, meet with the enemy, and seek the presidency of the United States. His moral indignation made ending the Vietnam War more than an issue. For George McGovern, ending the war in Southeast Asia was a crusade.

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