

IB Extended Essay

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How did the changing American cultural landscape correlate with Robert Kennedy's variation in perspective regarding America's involvement in Vietnam?

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Introduction

Robert Kennedy was fatally shot on June 5th, 1968, after he finished speaking to a crowd of supporters in Los Angeles, California. Kennedy was campaigning for the Democratic nomination for the United States presidency. His tragic death left many of his supporters dejected and anxious over the fate of the United States.

Specifically, many Americans were concerned with the situation that was taking place overseas in Vietnam. The Vietnam War had deeply impacted American unity. People were divided over the logic of US involvement in the war. In my Higher Level History of the Americas course, we discussed whether the US involvement was successful, or even logical to a certain extent. The United States military had lost more than 57,000 soldiers. Morale was at an all-time low amongst not only the military, but the American people back home. Many wanted the US to pull out of the war and needed a leader who demanded the same. Robert Kennedy, the brother of former president, John F. Kennedy, began his campaign for the US presidency in March of 1968. Young, charismatic and experienced, Kennedy immediately gained support and appealed to these people.

His work as Attorney General during the JFK presidency allowed him to be a close confidant and an advisor during significant issues in American history, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. His service in the United States Navy gave him an intelligent and logical military perspective on the Vietnam War, as well. Kennedy initially supported US involvement in Vietnam. However, as the tensions amongst the American people, as well as with the Soviet Union- who supported the North Vietnamese- increased, he became convinced the war was illogical. He concluded that both sides must come together and negotiate for a settlement.

Opposition of the Vietnam War amongst the American people grew throughout different social groups, including college students, middle-class suburban civilians, labor unions and even government institutions (Barringer, Illinois University). However, mainly the younger generation of voters were the ones to protest US involvement. Different rallies and protests all over the country proved that these young men and women were strongly willing to platform their opposition. This varies from those who tended to support the troops' efforts. This support mainly came from an older generation of Americans, who believed that the younger people of their country were not showing any sense of nationalism. This split of the American people did not go unnoticed. As the war continued, more United States people were losing faith in their military power. With this historical perspective in mind, I found myself asking the question: how did the changing American cultural landscape influence Robert Kennedy's perspective regarding America's involvement in Vietnam?

Presidents tried satisfying both parties by amplifying the war efforts in order to hurry up the end of US involvement. Presidents Johnson and Nixon were examples of US leaders who promised an exit from the war but continued to use tactics that actually escalated the violence. This divided the American people even more. In addition to the disagreements over Vietnam, domestic issues such as unemployment and racial discrimination were also impacting US unity. As these situations back home continued, Robert Kennedy, in large part due to the changing American cultural landscape, evolved his perspective and knew national changes needed to be made, especially in Vietnam.

Support from Middle Class and Younger Generation of Americans for Kennedy:

During a period of time where the United States seemed to be the most superior among world superpowers (mostly as a result of WWI and WWII outcomes), Americans felt that their great nation was invincible. However, many domestic issues contradicted this self-acclaim. Civil Rights issues and poverty were two issues within the US that caused many citizens to fear for the future for the nation. Robert Kennedy was one politician who advocated for change in both areas, which appealed to certain demographics of Americans.

Kennedy's reputation was greatly influenced by his contributions as attorney general. His bravery and ability to make drastic decisions during a national crisis resulted in a landslide victory as he ran for state senate for New York in 1964. Kennedy had influential perspectives on social issues that many young, American voters also shared. As senator, Bobby introduced programs that benefited under privileged children and students with learning disabilities. He was constantly stressing the issue of poverty in the US and fought for this awareness. "These conditions," he said, "are not confined to rural (areas). They exist in dark tenements . . . within sight of the Capitol, in Harlem, in South Side Chicago, in Watts. There are children in these areas who have never been to school, never been to a doctor or a dentist. There are children who have never heard conversation in their homes, never read or even seen a book" (Kennedy's establishment of Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation charity in 1967). Kennedy's awareness of the poverty issue within the nation was also a factor in his support from many American people. He gained first-hand knowledge of the issues throughout various cities and locations in the United States. The Mississippi Delta, Appalachia and urban ghettos were all

places where Kennedy was exposed to the extreme poverty. Specifically, he saw children starving, unable to attend school due to lack of supplies and clothing.

Robert Kennedy exemplified his avid support for the Civil Rights movement, the African American community and other minority groups the day Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed. Kennedy was travelling to an Indiana ghetto for a rally when he received the news. Although warned that it would not be a good idea that he'd attend, Bobby demanded that he be there. As he delivered the news to the uninformed group of people, he claimed, "I'm only going to talk to you just for a minute or so this evening, because I have some—some very sad news for all of you. ... Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight... For those of you who are black and are tempted to fill with—be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. ... What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black" (Robert Kennedy primary rally, Indianapolis, Indiana, April 4th, 1968).

RFK strongly believed in granting African Americans equality in terms of voting, education and the use of public facilities. Through such experiences and policies as a politician, Kennedy gained more and more support from such an underprivileged class of people, as well as the middle class. As a result of his relatability and care for social and economic equality amongst all American citizens, it became apparent that Kennedy was one of the few politicians in the US

government who gained the trust from such types of people. According to Larry Tye, a writer from American Prospect Longform Magazine, Kennedy had a “gift for connecting to the white working class as well as to blacks. He was building bridges—between blacks, browns, and blue-collar whites, as well as between hippies and hard hats—in stark contrast to the divisions sowed then by Richard Nixon.”

Original Stance:

Bobby Kennedy understood the frustration of this generation. However, his initial perspective of US involvement was based on nationalism, the protection of South Vietnam, and the status of the Cold War, as well. As a politician, it was important that Kennedy showed pride in the US military. Especially during the Cold War era, the nation needed to know that its leaders had trust built into its military. This era not only established nationalism in the United States, but a sense of fear or alarm, as well. This fear came from the spread of communism that instigated the Cold War in the first place.

The communist-influenced North Vietnamese government began to invade its southern border into American-ally South Vietnam. The US was obligated to aid them for these reasons. Specifically, Bobby Kennedy, himself, strongly encouraged the defense of South Vietnam. As a US official, Kennedy was exposed to different American perspectives, both disagreeing with and in favor of his own. This included a note from John Bayliss, a member of the English department of Indiana State University. In response this, Kennedy defended the actions taken by the United States government. He stated: “I have made clear my belief that we must provide the resources required by the men we have sent into battle in Vietnam. Our goal in Vietnam is to protect the

right of the South Vietnamese people to govern themselves" (Kennedy's letter to Indiana State's English department, September 15th, 1967). Kennedy made it clear that containment was the ultimate priority.

Although the Cold War never lead to official warfare between the United States and the Soviet Union, it is valid to say that the two political stances, democracy and communism, were represented by both sides of the Vietnam War. This is especially relevant because the Soviets supported the North Vietnamese, while the US backed the South Vietnamese. According to an official CIA document from 1968, "From 1954 to date North Vietnam has received over \$3.2 billion in military and economic assistance from Communist countries" (CIA document, March 7th, 1968). The Soviet Union, along with China, made up the bulk of this investment. Most US politicians, especially Robert Kennedy, believed that the containment of communism was the top priority of the United States. For example, as Vice President, Richard Nixon once stated, "The Cold War isn't thawing; it is burning with a deadly heat. Communism isn't sleeping; it is, as always, plotting, scheming, working, fighting" ("Kitchen Debate" between Nixon and Soviet leader, Nikita S. Khrushchev, in Moscow, 1959). This perspective was not only shared among government officials, but American nationalists, as well. As the investment in North Vietnam increased year after year, Kennedy felt strongly about supporting the South Vietnamese ally due to this common point of view. As his brother, John, considered supporting a coup in South Vietnam in order to overthrow the communist government, Bobby, Attorney General at the time, weighed in. During a cabinet meeting, RFK is recorded saying, "The government was split in two. It was the only time, really in three years, [that] the government was broken in two in a very disturbing way" (The National Security Archive, Cabinet meeting, August, 1963).

In addition to this, it was well-known that Kennedy personally despised the Soviet Union. This was evident in his role with the Cuban Missile Crisis, where he contributed in removing the Soviet missiles located ninety miles away from US borders. This threat created a large fear in the American people, but lit a fire under Kennedy, who took action by demanding the United States retaliate. He was able to persuade a large group of government officials, pleading that an attack on Cuba would be identical to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and would lead to an all-out war. He suggested a naval blockade and a letter be written to Nikola Khrushchev from his brother, President John F. Kennedy, which negotiated the removal of missiles and ensured peace between the two superpowers. Bobby Kennedy proved that he was able to make smart decisions when it involved the US enemy Soviet Union. He also showed that he would do anything he possibly could to defeat the communist world-power.

American Nationalism Before and During Vietnam

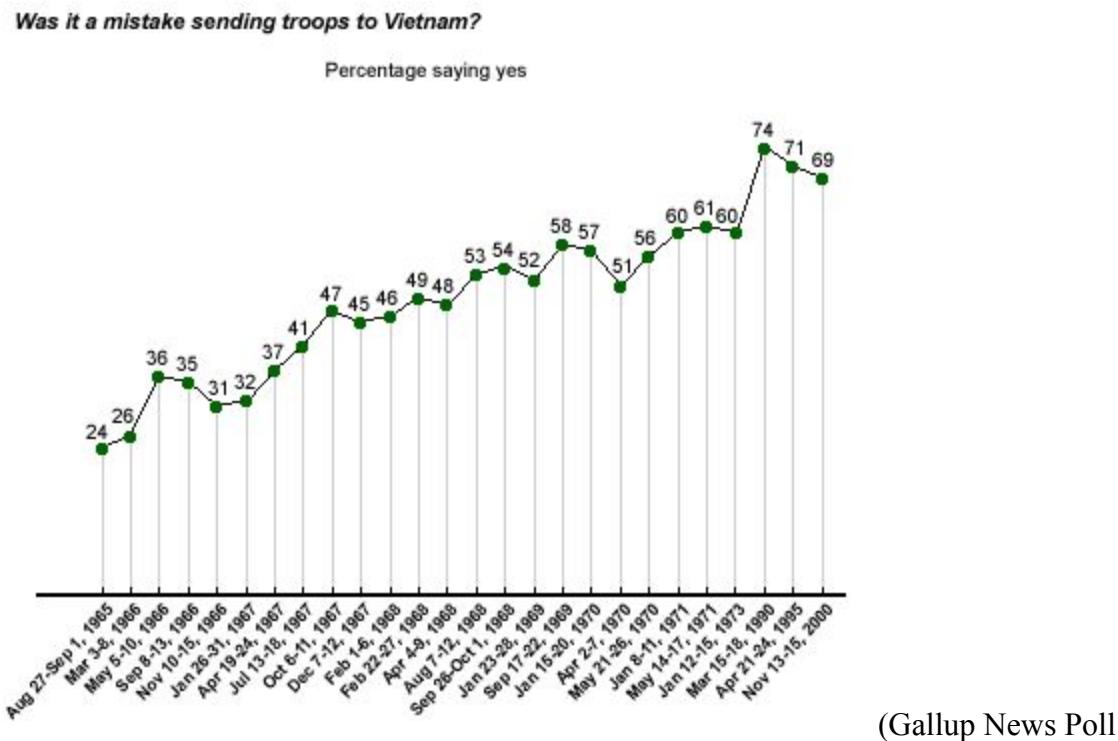
The need for communist containment was not the only factor that lead to the initial support of Vietnam from many Americans. Being part of the winning side of both World Wars, as well as post-war economic strength, also contributed to the nationalism of many Americans, which can arguably be considered arrogance. For the most part, this was the mindset for many US citizens going into the Vietnam War. They were convinced that a small, Asian country would not be capable of defeating the self-proclaimed “strongest nation in the world.”

However, the shock of events that took place in Vietnam changed the perspectives of many Americans. The Vietnamese tactics overwhelmed the United States military, for example. Also known as the Vietcong army, these soldiers used guerilla warfare. Booby traps, land mines

and elaborate tunnel systems helped them elusively combat the United States. Another tactic used was the Vietcong uniform itself. The soldiers dressed as Vietnamese civilians in order to blend in and confuse American troops. Therefore, it was almost impossible to properly identify the Vietnamese soldiers (British Broadcasting Corporation).

The impact the war had on US soldiers was overwhelming, as a result. When the draft was implemented, many young men were forced, by law, to fight in a war that most were not in support of. Many of these soldiers used a method called fraggings, where they would throw unidentifiable bombs at their commanders, killing them. This way, they didn't have to follow orders to fight. Many of these protesting soldiers wore "UUUU" on their helmets. This stood for "the Unwilling, led by the Unqualified, doing the Unnecessary, for the Ungrateful." This demeanor was quite uncommon in the US military. After many wars resulting in an American victory, this left a sense of shock to the US government. After a tradition of success in warfare, a genuine feeling of failure and fear among the military began to change the perspectives of politicians.

US presidents, such as Nixon, had promised an exit from the war. Nixon even stated, "I share your concern for peace. I want peace as much as you do. There are powerful personal reasons I want to end this war. This week I will have to sign 83 letters to mothers, fathers, wives, and loved ones of men who have given their lives for America in Vietnam... I want to end the war to save the lives of those brave young men in Vietnam" (Richard Nixon address to the American people on the War in Vietnam, November 3rd, 1963). However, as each leader inherited the presidency, the war had escalated more and more. Empty promises increased not only the war efforts, but protests back home in the United States.



Assistance, approval/objection of war)

The anti-war movement had spread all over the country. Hundreds of thousands of Americans expressed their objection. As seen in this graph, by 1968, the majority of Americans opposed the US involvement (Gallup News Poll Assistance). These people came from different social classes and backgrounds, with different motives for, ultimately, a United States exit. This included the demand for world peace, a refocus on Civil Rights, an opposition to the draft, and the awareness of lack of progress for the United States' goal of the containment of communism. Most protests tended to root from the younger generation of American citizens. Specifically, these people were college students. One example is the protest at Kent State University.

On May 4, 1970, a group of young protesters voiced their opinion against the logic of the war. However, the national guard, who had been watching over the crowd to make sure they did not become violent, fired shots into the crowd of students, killing four and injuring nine (Kent

State University website). This led to a nationwide uproar, as more and more college campuses filled with protesting students. All of this turmoil leads me to ask, how did the changing American cultural landscape influence Robert Kennedy's variation in perspective regarding the US' involvement in Vietnam?

Kennedy's Evolved Perspective

As the war continued, Robert Kennedy's perspective changed from his prior, nationalistic attitude. Initially, Kennedy was confident in the American troops, who proved their strength in prior war affairs. However, the statistics of the war resulted in a swaying of opinions from all over the nation, including RFK. By 1968, over 37,400 soldiers died in Vietnam. Over 58,000 American casualties occurred by the end of the war (Statistical information regarding casualties in the Vietnam War, National Archives).

Casualty Category	Number of Records
ACCIDENT	9,107
DECLARED DEAD	1,201
DIED OF WOUNDS	5,299
HOMICIDE	236
ILLNESS	938
KILLED IN ACTION	40,934
PRESUMED DEAD (BODY REMAINS RECOVERED)	32
PRESUMED DEAD (BODY REMAINS NOT RECOVERED)	91
SELF-INFILCTED	382
Total Records	58,220

The American people were starting to notice that the military was not reaching their expectations, whatsoever. As a result, the pressure on the government to win the war and

continue the containment of communism had increased. However, this only resulted in more bombings and more warfare in Vietnam, escalating the issue, as opposed to ending it. This caused plenty of backlash from the American people toward the US government, especially because many military officials advised government that the war was senseless. In fact, Robert Kennedy's speech to the Senate on July 9th, 1965, recalled these statements. Kennedy exclaimed, "Yesterday's press carried several stories reminding us of some of the difficult problems if the war in Vietnam is to be won. The first story... appeared in The Washington Post under the headline, 'Bombs Kill Viet Village Innocents.' It relates that a pro-government village was 'hit three days running with bombs, rockets and cannon fire from American and Vietnamese fighter bombers'" (Kennedy's address to the Senate, July 9th, 1965). Kennedy saw the major issues beyond the American casualties. The deaths of women, children and other civilians outnumbered the deaths of the enemy. It is estimated that the total death toll range widely from 1.3 million (Guenter Lewy) to 3.9 million (R.J. Rummel), according to vietnamwar.info statistics. This knowledge convinced him that an exit from the war was most logical for both nations, at that point. He continues, saying, "But the dilemma is found in the words of another US advisor, who is quoted as saying, 'That's why we are going to lose this stupid damn war. Senseless, it's just senseless.' (Death by Government, R.J. Rummel)"

Many politicians opposed the war from the beginning, and now more government officials were understanding the pressure that came both from Vietnam and within its own domestic borders. These government representatives were now speaking out against the logic of the war, including Bobby. In fact, Kennedy demanded that President Johnson stop bombing Vietnam, exclaiming, "Are we like the God of the Old Testament, that we can decide, in

Washington, D.C., what cities, what towns, what hamlets are going to be destroyed? Do we have to accept that? I do not think we have to. I think we can do something about it" (Kennedy's address to President Johnson and the Senate regarding the Vietnam War, March 7th, 1968). Kennedy came to the realization that the United States military was not as elite as many Americans portrayed them to be. It also appeared that Kennedy, an American politician, momentarily believed that the US government does not have the right to make drastic decisions such as bombing foreign nations.

Supportive reaction to this evolved perspective from younger generation/middle class

It was known through many American perspectives, no matter what age, race or class, that the United States underestimated the military power of Vietnam. Specifically, the middle class and younger generation of Americans voiced their opinions the most, challenging the logic of US involvement almost from the start. Kennedy's evolved perspective of the issue granted a sense of relief to these protesters. In their minds, politicians were not listening to their voters because of their political arrogance. To many politicians, nationalism and containment were the priorities of the war that disguised their awareness of the power of the Viet Cong strategy. Once Robert Kennedy, among other government officials, began to change their opinions of the Vietnam involvement, it seemed that the idea of pulling out of the war was becoming plausible.

The support from middle class and young voters augmented significantly for Kennedy following his evolved perspective. During his campaign for the 1968 Democratic nomination, it was likely he would have won, had he not been assassinated. Many believed Kennedy would have been elected President. His reputation as a Civil Rights leader and supporter for

impoverished had appealed to this demographic of Americans. However, it was his stance on the Vietnam War that had gained the majority of his voters.

Conclusion

How did the changing American cultural landscape correlate with Robert Kennedy's variation in perspective regarding America's involvement in Vietnam? Although I do not believe Kennedy based his perspective solely on the opinions of the majority of US citizens, I believe a correlation exists. Kennedy was known to have received support from the younger generation of voters, as well as the middle class because of his stances on various issues. His support for the Civil Rights movement and his campaigns for helping the poverty level within the United States was encouraging for many people. The Vietnam War was a third large-scaled issue that captivated the opinions of many Americans during the late-1960's. He was able to gain the support of this demographic because he shared their perspective.

Initially, Kennedy was in support for the US involvement in Vietnam. As stated earlier, the years after World War II had resulted in a rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The containment of the spread of Soviet-communist influence was the top priority for American foreign policy. As communism began to spread in countries within the Asian region, such as China and Vietnam, the US became more conscientious of their rival. A military action was necessary, in many politicians minds, in Vietnam. Kennedy, who had deep, hateful emotions (dating back to the Cuban Missile Crisis) was one of these politicians who felt that the Soviets needed to be stopped.

Nationalism had also played a role in Kennedy's perspective. Kennedy, like many Americans, felt very proud of the US dominance after both World Wars. The United States military was considered the most powerful in the world. Fighting a small, Asian country, such as Vietnam, would be no major issue and an easy victory for the American troops. However, as the reality of continues militaristic failures became more apparent, the reactions of the United States citizens began to change.

The Viet Cong strategy and methods were too much for the military to handle. As a result, many soldiers refused to fight. Back home in the US, protests and riots represented the thousands of outraged Americans who questioned the logic of the involvement in Vietnam. Many politicians saw this reaction, yet believed military interaction was crucial to eliminate communist influence in the Pacific region. As the war continued, and more and more casualties increased, politicians began to see their mistake, yet empty promises persisted and American troops were forced to stay in battle.

The US turned to strategies of bombing Vietnamese villages, poisoning food and killing many women and children. This led to even more outrage from mostly young voters, among many Americans. Robert Kennedy saw this indignation. He recognized that it was seemingly impossible for the United States to leave Vietnam victoriously. The casualty statistics for American troops was only growing faster, and many innocent Vietnamese citizens were dying at the hands of the US military. Kennedy knew change needed to be made.

Before his death on June 5th, 1968, Robert Kennedy campaigned for the Democratic nomination, and eventually, President of the United States. Within his campaign promises, Kennedy expressed his support for granting equal rights among all races, reinforcing his

appreciation for the Civil Rights movement, a war on the US poverty issue, and of course, an exit from the Vietnam War.

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