

CONFRONTATION: ROBERT F. KENNEDY ON VIETNAM

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy died by an assassin's bullet. This event ended one era and opened another for his brother, Robert F. Kennedy. Until Dallas, Robert Kennedy had submerged himself in his brother's work. As Jack Newfield writes:

The assassination punctured the center of Robert Kennedy's universe. It removed the hero-brother for whom he had submerged all of his own great competitive instincts. It took away, in one instant of insanity, all of the power they had struggled together for ten years to achieve, and gave it to another, whom they both mistrusted. It thrust a man trained for the shadows into the sunlight. It made Robert Kennedy, a man unprepared for introspection, think for the first time in his life, what he wanted to do, and what he stood for.¹

What Kennedy would do and what he would stand for rested to a large extent in the hands of that "mistrusted" one, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

On November 24, 1963, two days after the assassination, the President convened a small group to meet with the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge. Johnson established his Vietnam policy:

I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went They'll think with Kennedy dead, we've lost heart. So they'll think we're yellow and don't mean what we say The Chinese. The fellas in the Kremlin. They'll be taking the measure of us I'm not going to make Vietnam go the way of China.²

That determination set the stage for a continuing struggle between Kennedy and Johnson over the conflict in Vietnam. At first hesitantly, then vigorously, RFK challenged the Administration.

This challenge would not come easily to Robert Kennedy. The Vietnam War was one of the many legacies left by his brother's Administration. When John Kennedy assumed office, 685 Americans were serving in South Vietnam. When he died, that number had increased to 16,500 men.³ All involved, including Robert Kennedy, knew a commitment of that size was not painlessly revoked.

While American commitment grew, the chances for success diminished. On November 1, 1963, a group of young army officers deposed Ngo Dinh Diem, the leader of South Vietnam. At the time of the coup, the government of South Vietnam consisted of Diem and members of his family; thus, the coup seemed to be a great opportunity for a "New Deal" in that embattled country.⁴ Unfortunately, the overthrow of Diem resulted in neither reform nor stability. In 1964 alone, Lyndon Johnson dealt with seven different governments in Saigon.⁵ As Chester Cooper writes:

In late 1963, the President had no way of knowing that already present were all of the ingredients that would soon combine to tear the fabric of American society apart and eventually lead to his decision not to seek a second term: the strength of the Communists was increasing, our Vietnamese ally was unable to achieve a broadly based and effective government, and frustration and anxiety were growing among the American people.⁶

These ingredients would fuse only if Johnson persisted in his course. Unfortunately, Johnson's Vietnam policy did not change until he announced his decision on March 31, 1968, not to seek reelection.

Johnson's policy was designed to cope with both domestic unrest and the military situation in Vietnam. In Vietnam, he began bolstering whatever regime was in power with public expressions of support, while steadily increasing the military pressure on the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. These actions would, Johnson hoped, produce a stable government in South Vietnam and a battered foe in the field who would be willing to negotiate on American terms. On the domestic front, Johnson chose to defend his approach as the only reasonable course against an increasing chorus of critics.⁷

In his excellent book, What Washington Said, F.M. Kail examines the rationales offered by the government for the American actions in Vietnam.⁸ Since Lyndon Johnson precipitated the bulk of the action, the book emphasizes his rhetoric. Johnson presented three primary reasons for the war in Vietnam. First, the Americans would improve the quality of life in Vietnam. This justification "focuses mainly on the demand that the people of that country had a right, through free elections, to select their own government."⁹ Johnson sought to capitalize on the high American regard for self-determination. This rationale also touched upon the American effort to build schools, roads, hospitals, and perform other humanitarian actions. To put it bluntly, we should carry the "white man's burden" of bringing the Vietnamese into the twentieth century. The second justification rested upon the "Domino Theory." If America did not apply a limited amount of force now, it might have to apply massive force later on, over a larger area, perhaps closer to home.¹⁰ This reason dovetailed neatly with the traditional, bipartisan containment

policy. America would prevent the Communists from achieving their goal of world revolution. Finally, Johnson spoke of America's honor. The United States had a commitment to South Vietnam, a commitment that Eisenhower initiated and John Kennedy supported.¹¹ Lyndon Johnson's America kept its word. Naturally, all three of these justifications formed a seamless web; however, they represent the basic elements of the policy that Robert Kennedy challenged.

Kennedy began to challenge Johnson's policy because increasingly it became clear that it could not work. Further, the American effort was creating havoc in Vietnam. The constant bombing devastated the country and American policy maximized the damage to the country. Chester Cooper explains Johnson's approach this way:

The intent was to hold the domestic front until, with American help and guidance, the Vietnamese would pull up their own socks. The hope was that with heavier bombing the men in Hanoi would come to the negotiating table. The expectation was that with more and more American troops deployed Communist attrition would become unacceptable to Hanoi.¹²

The attrition rate never did become unacceptable to Hanoi. Since Johnson's policy depended upon the cooperation of Hanoi in making this judgment, it was bound to fail. Further any policy which identified destruction as its only objective was morally repugnant, especially in a country where the United States found it difficult to separate friend from enemy. The fact that these crushed enemies were expected to peacefully rejoin the political process in South Vietnam, after suffering through years of official "attrition", made the policy even more suspect. Given all of these problems, Robert Kennedy began to question, then attack, this

approach to the war. Given Kennedy's unique political and rhetorical position, he found himself facing a complex challenge.

Statement of the Problem

Robert F. Kennedy ranks as one of the foremost critics of the Vietnam War. Yet rhetorical critics have afforded him surprisingly little attention.¹³ The unique features of his rhetoric arose from his ability to force the American people to come to grips with issues they did not want to face. That success, however, did not come easily, and Kennedy had to overcome problems posed by the audience and by his own credibility.

Memories of an era of protest have tended to obscure a clear view of the actual situation from 1964-1968. During this time, a majority of Americans generally supported American policy in Vietnam.¹⁴ Their natural inclination to rally around the President during a "war" found reinforcement on the evening news, which reported steady American progress.¹⁵ Only after the Tet offensive in January of 1968 did the public turn strongly against Johnson, and even then it was unclear whether the object of the dissatisfaction was the war or merely Johnson's handling of it. While many people came to doubt the wisdom of the war during this time, Robert Kennedy faced an audience that was not prepared readily to accept his proposals for a new policy. Thomas Powers's analysis of American views of the war recreates the complexity of this rhetorical situation:

For all the bitter argument over the war, it remained strangely distant, a far-away struggle on the periphery of American life. Business boomed. Few families had lost sons and there was no rationing. The killing all took place on television, between commercials, and the government insisted there was money enough for both guns and butter.

Even after President Johnson asked Congress for a 10 percent tax surcharge, the first request for new sources of money directly linked to Vietnam, the fighting itself remained remote Calling for a halt in the war in August 1967, when Johnson made his appeal for a tax surcharge, would have exacted a more immediate price in national humiliation, in lingering recriminations about a "stab in the back." The average American, and even the average Senator or Representative, instinctively felt the cost of ending the war was far greater than the cost of continuing it. The problem facing the antiwar movement was to make the war more costly than a change in policy . . . to impose a sanction on the country for a continuation of the war.¹⁶

With others who opposed the war, Robert Kennedy saw the need to specify the price Americans paid for the continued fighting. That price became the centerpiece of his rhetoric as he sought to arouse the American people without making himself the issue, because making himself the issue was one of the great dangers he faced.

Kennedy's reputation entailed significant liabilities. Many people regarded Robert Kennedy as a ruthless opportunist who would stop at nothing to regain the White House for himself and his family.¹⁷ From this perspective, the Vietnam War was being cynically used by him to further his own political fortunes. His well-known dislike for President Johnson only exacerbated the problem.¹⁸ The Christian Science Monitor cogently expressed this view of Kennedy's speaking:

. . . . when Senator Robert Kennedy breaks with President Johnson, the country knows there is far more in the offing than merely the conduct of the war.

There is, first, Senator Kennedy's unceasing and purposeful determination to seize upon every issue which he believes can bring him closer to the White House. There is, second, the never-healed animosity of the Kennedy group for the man who succeeded John F. Kennedy in the Presidency. There is, third, the continuing effort of the Senator's campaign managers

to invest everything he says with double importance regardless of the subject or whether others have said it earlier.

Thus, among the certain effects of the Kennedy speech will be to heighten domestic tension over the war and to deepen political cleavages as the 1968 Presidential campaign approaches.¹⁹

Some of the resentment of Kennedy and the cynicism about his motives came as a result of his reversal of position on the war. During his brother's administration, Robert Kennedy strongly supported the U.S. effort in Vietnam. In 1962, on a tour of Southeast Asia, he stated: "The solution there lies in winning it. That is what the President intends to do."²⁰ RFK was fascinated with the concept of counterinsurgency, specifically that the Green Berets and other units should be used to fight the guerrillas with guerrilla tactics. In opposing the war, Robert Kennedy attacked his brother's appointees, his brother's policy, and, ultimately his own past judgments. Unless he could offer a convincing rationale for this dramatic conversion, Kennedy was vulnerable to charges of political opportunism.

It would be foolish, however, to ignore the Senator's enormous rhetorical assets. He was heir to perhaps the most powerful political force in America. The mere name of "Kennedy" guaranteed a national forum for the junior Senator from New York. The name also assured him of considerable political support and power. Robert Kennedy was a force in the Democratic Party, probably the only person with the leverage to lead a revolution that had any chance at success. Moreover, he possessed the political skill and magnetism to take advantage of this situation.²¹ Finally, as this thesis will demonstrate, he was a rhetor of no mean ability. Kennedy could turn a phrase, and that skill would become crucial in the upcoming battle.

The problem, then, is clear. Robert Kennedy sought to change American policy in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson was unlikely to change at Kennedy's request, so the Senator had to convince the American people to demand a change. They, however, saw little reason to change, and, in fact, felt rather comfortable with the situation as it was. Further, they were not likely to listen to a politician as opportunistic as Robert Francis Kennedy. Senator Kennedy needed to find a way to shatter this complacency.

Methodology

Any approach to the rhetoric of Robert Kennedy should focus on his attempt to force a debate among the American people. I shall argue that Kennedy sought to make public his private experience on the war. If RFK would induce the American people to undergo the same process as he had, he would shatter their complacency and, thus, force argument and change. I shall maintain that Kennedy used three overarching strategies to create a consensus for debate and change. Maurice Natanson's concept of genuine argument provides the starting point.²² Natanson begins with the problem of a complacent audience and notes that people seldom risk their strongly held feelings and values in argument. Instead, they prefer to remain on the surface of a dispute. Genuine argument requires "the commitment of the self to the full implications of the philosophical dialectic."²³ In genuine argument, the participants open themselves and their fundamental assumptions to challenge. Naturally, people do not undertake this risk often or lightly. Natanson argues that "the affective world of the person" must be "existentially disrupted" to achieve genuine argument.²⁴

Natanson describes the challenge facing Kennedy. He needed to

create genuine argument; thus, he needed to disrupt the world of his audience. I shall argue that Kennedy used confrontative rhetorical tactics to achieve that goal. Most critics have portrayed confrontative rhetoric as reflecting an intractable conflict between two rival factions.²⁵ Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, however, offer a crucial observation about confrontation. They argue that the key to confrontation is guilt: "for having betrayed humanity, you are overwhelmed by guilt. The sense of guilt stops your hand, for what you would kill is the world you have made."²⁶ Guilt can only occur if the audience recognizes as valid the speaker's charges of moral transgression. Confrontative tactics depend upon that recognition and, thus, upon the assumption of shared values that have been violated.

Once Kennedy created guilt in the audience for their role in the prosecution of the war, he needed to channel that emotion in the direction of positive change. RFK built upon the base of shared values to create identification. I shall argue that after Kennedy used confrontative tactics "to pry apart the machinery of established power," he offered his own definition of what it meant to be a "good" American in wartime.²⁷ I shall contend he made himself one with the audience and then enacted for them the process of change. They could change as he did, for he shared the same values and beliefs about what it meant to be an American. By 1968, RFK made explicit his definition of patriotism and offered it as a means for Americans to expiate their guilt and change policy, while still feeling like patriots, not traitors. By using the concepts of confrontation, identification, audience creation, and genuine argument, I hope to analyze and illuminate the rhetorical transaction that occurred.

Review of the Literature

Few scholarly works examine the rhetoric of Robert Kennedy. Several theses and dissertations have appeared about Kennedy, but only two discuss the speeches on Vietnam. Craig Cutbirth examines Kennedy's Vietnam rhetoric in light of Lloyd Bitzer's concept of the rhetorical situation. Cutbirth argues that Kennedy's primary focus until February 8, 1968, was President Johnson.²⁸ In other words, Kennedy designed his rhetoric to deal with the exigence of a hostile sitting President, not with the exigence of the Vietnam War. Cutbirth's analysis reveals much about the Democratic Party maneuverings and the impact of Kennedy's speeches on the political scene, but little about the rhetorical transaction between Kennedy and the audience.

In contrast to Cutbirth who contends that for Kennedy ". . . the war did not become the overriding or organizing exigence until 1968,"²⁹ I shall argue that the speeches delivered between 1965 and 1968 seek to influence the debate over Vietnam policy. A. Weintraub looks at Kennedy's statements on the war from the death of his brother through his own death, using the traditional canons of invention, style, and disposition.³⁰ This effort is primarily descriptive and fails to take into account Kennedy's confrontation with the audience. Based as it is on the traditional canons, Weintraub's analysis ignores the confrontative aspects of Kennedy's speech and, instead, tries to examine ways that Kennedy adapts to the audience and to the problem of Lyndon Johnson. Both of these works seem to refuse to take Kennedy at his word and assume that he was most concerned with President Johnson and less with the war itself. I believe that this thesis, based on a clear reading of the text, will prove that Kennedy focused primarily

on the war. I shall argue that confrontation with the audience, rather than adaptation to the President, characterizes these speeches.

Other than studies by communications scholars, most of the work on Kennedy takes the form of biographies or reminiscences.³¹ While many of these authors display sensitivities to rhetorical concerns, none analyzes Kennedy's rhetoric. The works of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Jack Newfield have been of particular help in providing detailed accounts of Kennedy's life at the time of these speeches. Other than books of this sort, studies of Robert Kennedy have been rare.

A wealth of material has appeared treating the Vietnam War. While this study examines RFK's rhetoric about the war, several books on the war itself have proved very useful. Chester Cooper's The Lost Crusade, Thomas Powers' The War at Home, David Halberstam's The Best and The Brightest, and Stanley Karnow's Vietnam provide clear, well-written accounts of the period.³²

In selecting the speeches for this study, I have been as inclusive as possible. The speeches and statements analyzed here represent all of the major statements given by Kennedy on Vietnam. The only exception is the chapter on Vietnam in his book, To Seek A Newer World.³³ I have omitted this essay because it simply repeats large sections of the speeches studied here. The speeches to be examined provide a comprehensive view of Kennedy's discourse on Vietnam. All of the texts have been taken from the collection at the Kennedy Library. Discrepancies between versions of the individual texts will be discussed below in the course of the specific analyses.

Precis of the Chapters

This thesis will examine the speeches of Robert Kennedy chronologically. Chapter 2 analyzes addresses Kennedy made on May 6, 1965, and July 9, 1965. These speeches demonstrate the vagueness of Kennedy's early statements on Vietnam and his hesitancy in attacking Johnson's policy. They also reveal Kennedy's first attempts to begin a dialogue with the American people on Vietnam policy. Chapter 3 examines Kennedy's statement of February 19, 1966, advocating the inclusion of the National Liberation Front in the peace talks. Although the speech was not well-received, Kennedy laid the groundwork for his use of traditional American values by aligning himself with those values. Chapter 4 is devoted to the March 2, 1967, speech which morally condemned the war, himself, and his audience. This speech most clearly reveals RFK's strategy of confrontation and genuine argument. Chapter 5 looks at the extensions Kennedy made on the arguments of the March 2nd speech. On Face the Nation on November 26, 1967, he argued, for the first time, that John Kennedy's war was different from Lyndon Johnson's war. Kennedy also assailed the Administration's justifications for the war. Further, on February 8, 1968, Kennedy reacted to the Tet offensive in Vietnam by condemning the war in very strong terms. Finally, Chapter 6 examines the rhetorical implications of Kennedy's discourse, emphasizing the importance of confrontation, the use of shared values to create confrontation, and the genuine argument that resulted.

A recent column commemorating his death says of Robert Kennedy:

One sensed that R.F.K. would accept sacrifice and suffer politically for his beliefs. The difference was that one also sensed that he would want others to sacrifice and

perhaps suffer too What was behind . . . the
hate and the love alike was a hunch that he meant what
he said. That is not something that we know about a
lot of politicians today.³⁴

This thesis seeks to discover how Robert Kennedy earned such praise
through his rhetoric on Vietnam.

NOTES

- ¹ Jack Newfield, Robert Kennedy: A Memoir, (New York: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1978), pp. 18-19.
- ² Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Robert Kennedy and His Times, (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 782.
- ³ Alexander Kendrick, The Wound Within: America in the Vietnam Years 1945-1974, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), p. 199 and p. 75.
- ⁴ Chester Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970), p. 220.
- ⁵ Cooper, p. 226.
- ⁶ Cooper, p. 224.
- ⁷ This analysis comes mainly from Cooper and Kendrick.
- ⁸ F.M. Kail, What Washington Said: Administration Rhetoric and the Vietnam War 1949-1969, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973)
- ⁹ Kail, p. 102.
- ¹⁰ Kail, p. 122.
- ¹¹ Kail, p. 123.
- ¹² Cooper, p. 465.
- ¹³ See Review of Literature
- ¹⁴ Edward Jay Epstein, "The Televised War," in Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 210-232.
- ¹⁵ Epstein, p. 21-212.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Powers, The War at Home: Vietnam and the American People 1964-1968, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), p. 196.
- ¹⁷ "Robert Kennedy--His Public Image," Gallup Political Index, Report No. 6, November 1965, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger wrote: "No affection contaminated the relationship between the Vice-President and the Attorney General. It was a pure case of mutual dislike." Schlesinger, p. 671.
- ¹⁹ "Appraisal on Kennedy," The Christian Science Monitor, 3 March 1967, Sec. 1, p. 18, col. 1.

- 20 Newfield, p. 117.
- 21 "The Shadow and the Substance," Time, 16 September, 1966, p. 33.
- 22 Maurice Natanson, "The Claims of Immediacy," in Philosophy, Rhetoric and Argumentation, ed. Maurice Natanson and Henry Johnstone (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965) pp. 10-19.
- 23 Natanson, p. 12.
- 24 Natanson, p. 19.
- 25 See for instance Parke E. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Moral Conflict: Two Critical Dimensions," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April 1970), pp. 120-130 and "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand?" Quarterly Journal of Speech, 54 (April 1968), pp. 122-133.
- 26 Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 55 (February 1969), p. 5.
- 27 Scott and Smith, p. 5.
- 28 Craig Cutbirth, "A Strategic Perspective: Robert F. Kennedy's Dissent on the Vietnam War--1966-1968", Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 1976.
- 29 Cutbirth, p. 162.
- 30 A. Weintraub, "The Public Statements and Speeches of Robert F. Kennedy on the Vietnam War Issue," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1975.
- 31 See for instance, Ralph deToledano, R.F.K., The Man Who Would Be President, (New York: Putnam, 1967). Edwin Guthman, We Band of Brothers, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). James A. Hudson, R.F.K.: 1925-1968, (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1969). Victor Lasky, Robert F. Kennedy: The Myth and the Man, (New York: Trident Press, 1968). Jack Newfield, op. cit. Richard Schapp, R.F.K. (New York: The New American Library, 1967). Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., op. cit. Theodore Sorensen, The Kennedy Legacy: A Peaceful Revolution for the Seventies, (New York: The New American Library, 1969). William Vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman, On His Own: Robert F. Kennedy, 1964-1968, (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1970). Garry Wills, The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power, (New York: Pocket Books, 1982).
- 32 Cooper, The Lost Crusade, op. cit. Powers, The War at Home, op. cit. David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Crest Book, 1972), Stanley Karnow, Vietnam, (New York: Viking Press, 1983).
- 33 Robert F. Kennedy, To Seek A Newer World, (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 162-229.
- 34 TRB, "R.F.K. Remembered," The New Republic, 27 June 1983, p. 4.

CHAPTER TWO

RIGHT MAKES MIGHT

The 1964 Democratic National Convention saw the emergence of Robert F. Kennedy as an independent political leader. A few days before the convention, he had announced his candidacy for the Senate from New York, the first time Kennedy had sought elective office. At the convention itself, Kennedy became the object of adulation. When he rose to speak in honor of his brother, the delegates refused to yield the floor. For twenty minutes, they cheered the former Attorney General ¹ In the midst of the tumult, few were paying attention to a small war halfway around the world. That war, much more than the convention, would determine the political futures of both Robert Kennedy and the Democratic nominee, Lyndon Johnson.

The Republican Party also met in the summer of 1964 and it nominated Barry Goldwater, a major general in the Air Force Reserve and a prominent conservative, as its candidate for the Presidency. President Johnson, never one to miss an opportunity, ran as the peace candidate. Only Lyndon Johnson, he implied, could be trusted to keep the peace. In Manchester, New Hampshire, Johnson spoke on the Vietnam War:

I have not thought that we were ready for American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. What I have been trying to do . . . was to get the boys in Vietnam to do their own fighting with our advice and with our equipment We are not going north and drop bombs at this stage of the game²

While Johnson ran as a reasonable man, he also made it clear that even

reasonable men can only be pushed so far. An incident in the Tonkin Gulf allowed him to demonstrate his presidential resolve.

The events in the Tonkin Gulf in early August of 1964 have remained murky even to the present day. Johnson's response to the alleged attacks on American destroyers by the North Vietnamese, however, were crystal clear. He ordered the bombing of coastline targets in North Vietnam. He requested Congress to pass a resolution giving him the necessary authority to react quickly and decisively to future Communist provocations. The resolution was modeled on a similar authorization passed during the Eisenhower Administration, giving the President the power to respond immediately if the Chinese Communists invaded Quemoy and Matsu.³ Johnson invoked this precedent, swore he did not want to enlarge the war, and received his authorization. Few Senators realized the power that they had ceded to the President.

One future Senator took little or no public notice of this action. Robert Kennedy was busy running a strenuous campaign for the Senate in which he was the major issue. Vietnam did not play a role in the campaign, especially after the passage of the Tonkin Gulf resolution and the resulting atmosphere of bipartisan support for the President.⁴ It may have been fortunate that Kennedy ignored the war, for the complexion of the fighting changed dramatically after the election.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution gave Johnson the power to expand the war, but he did not take advantage of that power until early in his new term. On February 7, 1965, the President received the excuse, or, depending upon your point of view, the provocation that led to the escalation of

the war. On that day, the Viet Cong attacked an American airfield at Pleiku, killing 9 Americans and wounding 140. "They are killing our men while they sleep at night," he told congressional leaders, and "the time had come to end a situation in which the Americans fought with one hand tied behind their backs."⁵ American bombers embarked on a long series of sorties against North Vietnam itself, and American combat troops began to fill South Vietnam. The importance of this action is difficult to underestimate. Once American boys began to die, withdrawal would mean surrender, for who could want those boys to die in vain? Further, the bombing campaigns led directly to the presence of American prisoners of war, for the vast majority of the prisoners were pilots.⁶ Thus, the country would have to keep fighting for a settlement that would include the repatriation of those Americans. We now had a direct stake in the outcome of the fighting. After Pleiku, the American involvement became much deeper and a peace settlement more elusive.

Naturally, the Vietnam War became an important political issue. The first teach-ins and protests began to occur in the spring of 1965.⁷ Johnson's foreign policy became even more interventionist with the Dominican Republic crisis in late April of 1965. A revolution in that country threatened an American-supported regime, and President Johnson believed the insurgents to be Communists. He sent in 22,000 troops to quell the uprising.⁸ Many observers argued that the rebels were democrats, not Communists, and claimed that Johnson did not have any justification for this massive intrusion into another country's affairs. Equally disturbing to many was the President's refusal to work with the Organization of American States, an institution of which he once said, "It couldn't pour

piss out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel."⁹ The American people, however, seemed supportive of Johnson's policies.¹⁰ Encouraged by this success at intervention, Johnson sought a vote of confidence for his policy in Vietnam. He asked for an additional \$700 million to support an American presence that had increased to 45,000 troops. Since the soldiers were already there, it was difficult for anyone to vote against giving them the supplies they needed to stay alive. As Chester Cooper says, "It was a neat political ploy."¹¹ The bill passed the Senate with only three dissenters, and Johnson won his legislative endorsement. None of the dissenters was Robert Kennedy.¹²

The time had come, however, for Kennedy to form some position on the war. He presented his ideas in two speeches, one on May 6, 1965, and the other on July 9, 1965. Since so little time separated the two speeches and because they are substantively similar, I shall discuss both of them in this chapter. First, I shall examine Kennedy's credibility at this time; second, I shall analyze the speeches as efforts to provoke public discussion of U.S. policy in Vietnam; and, third, I shall review the reactions to the speeches and offer some reason for those reactions.

Robert Kennedy remains an enigmatic figure even today. After his brother's death, feelings about him were even more mixed. In order to impose some structure on the public's perceptions concerning Kennedy, I shall examine several different factors that played major roles in creating the Robert Kennedy that the public saw. First, I shall examine the Kennedys' political inheritance and the mystique that seems to surround them. Next, I shall discuss the situation in the Democratic Party after

the death of John Kennedy, and, finally, I shall focus on RFK himself. While some of the statements about Kennedy cited here appeared after the two speeches to be discussed in this chapter, these comments aptly summarize American public perceptions of Kennedy from 1964 until his death.

The Kennedy family exists as a unique phenomenon in American political history. Perhaps only the Adamses of the last century or the Roosevelts of this one rival the Kennedys as this country's premier political family. Literally hundreds of books document the peaks and valleys in the careers of various family members. What is important to this analysis, however, is the feeling in the country after the death of JFK. As the next in line, Robert Kennedy became the benefactor of this political inheritance. Kennedy himself expressed this idea at the Free University of West Berlin in June of 1964:

There are many who felt . . . that the torchbearer for a whole generation was gone; that an era was gone before its time But I have come to understand that the hope President Kennedy kindled isn't dead, but alive The torch still burns, and because it does, there remains for all of us a chance to light up the tomorrows and brighten the future.¹⁴

Time magazine also recognized the existence of the Kennedy charisma. Their September 16, 1966, cover story examined RFK and discussed the family inheritance. In part, Time claimed, RFK's popularity rested on the legend surrounding John Kennedy: "Time seems to enhance rather than diminish the glow of his martyrdom."¹⁵ Time explained:

In part, the phenomenon grows out of what Indiana's Senator Vance Hartke calls "a national guilt complex" over the assassination, a sort of politics of expiation whose

chief beneficiary is Bobby. And in part, there is seemingly in the United States today a subterranean yen for a pseudomonarchical Kennedy "restoration," with Bobby playing the role of exiled King.¹⁶

Newsweek also noted the adoration in a cover story:

Yet if a senator must be judged by what he does, a Kennedy must be measured here and now for what he is: the inheritor of a magic name, an uncompleted mission, and a deep-rooted family mystique of ambition and competition and power.¹⁷

Directly above the story, Newsweek printed a picture of all three handsome brothers grinning at the reader. The charisma of one brother symbolically enfolded all of them.

Whether all of this "hype" merely reported such a legacy or created it remains problematic. What happened, however, was that the Kennedy brothers transformed this legacy into raw political power. As Newsweek wrote:

Each Kennedy draws bigger crowds, attracts more mail, gets more speaking engagements, packs more people into galleries, runs a longer gauntlet of autograph hunters and Brownie snappers, and captures more and bigger headlines than any man in public life except LBJ himself.¹⁸

One Senator put it this way: "I'm a practical politician. One of these boys might be President some day and it makes you kind of cautious."¹⁹

Newsweek stated the matter succinctly: "In a Congress deep in debt to the length and strength of Lyndon Johnson's coattails, they [Robert and Edward Kennedy] alone have the power to lead a cohesive, continuing liberal opposition."²⁰

This peculiar circumstance came about partially because of the strange situation in the Democratic Party after the death of John Kennedy. Robert Kennedy was generally recognized as the number two man in the Kennedy Administration. He was the Attorney General, a trying post in those times of civil rights turmoil, and he also had a major voice in foreign affairs. Moreover, the tone and the style of the Administration revolved around the Kennedy family. Yet when JFK died, the power and the Presidency went to Lyndon Johnson. Normally, a President can co-opt the other prominent leaders of the party, but Lyndon Johnson could not afford to alienate the Kennedys with less than a year before the next general election. Nor could Johnson capture the easy grace of his predecessor or reduce the "national guilt complex." In short, Johnson faced a Kennedy party within the Democratic Party, a very uncomfortable situation.

A good relationship between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson might have eased this discomfort. Unfortunately, Kennedy and Johnson could barely stand one another in the best of times. Every source, regardless of political bias, seems to agree on this point. As Arthur Schlesinger writes: "No affections contaminated the relationship between the Vice-President and the Attorney General. It was a pure case of mutual dislike."²¹

Finally, we reach Robert Kennedy himself, a man of enormous contradictions. Jules Feiffer's cartoon characterizations of a "good" Bobby and a "bad" Bobby sum up the situation well. Kennedy's image had a positive and a negative side, and the critic must examine both, for as Feiffer wrote: "If you want one Bobby to be your President, you will have to take both . . . For Bobbies are widely noted for their family unity."²²

In November of 1965, the Gallup organization published a poll on

Senator Robert Kennedy.²³ While polls are not absolutely reliable, they are useful in providing a rough gauge of public opinion. This Gallup poll indicated that Americans liked Robert Kennedy for his intelligence, aggressiveness, and sincerity. They also liked him because he was a Kennedy. RFK ranked as the third most admired man in 1968. Only LBJ and Dwight Eisenhower ranked ahead of him, while such luminaries as Pope Paul VI and Hubert Humphrey fell behind.²⁴

Beyond the poll data, however, Kennedy sparked something in Americans. To be sure, it was partially the family legacy. At the same time,

There is an undeniable magnetism about him. He lacks Jack's graceful wit, and easy intellectuality, to be sure, and his reedy voice is oddly suggestive of a Bostonian Bugs Bunny. Yet his slight (5 ft. 10 in 165 lbs) wiry frame, his sandy, sun-bleached mane (to which a hand keeps straying nervously), his electric blue eyes all project an image that youngsters, in particular, see as the embodiment of his brother's appeal.²⁵

Apart from this charisma, Kennedy owned a record of success he could point to with pride. Kennedy came to the Senate at the age of 38 with fourteen years of public service behind him. He had managed all of his brother's winning campaigns and had won one himself against a tough opponent.²⁶ When Kennedy retired as Attorney General, the New York Times, which had criticized RFK's appointment, praised Kennedy for having "elevated the standards of the office."²⁷ Francis Biddle, FDR's Attorney General for four years, called Kennedy "certainly the finest Attorney General in the last twenty years, probably the best in this century."²⁸ While much more about RFK's stint came out later, in particular his penchant for wiretapping, he owned good notices for his work as Attorney General when he spoke on Vietnam.

Much existed about Kennedy, though, that bothered people. Most prominent was concern for his "ruthless" character. Time summarized the negative point of view:

Robert Kennedy, the ruthless kid brother, the vindictive Senate investigator of the 1950's who made no secret of his admiration for his one-time boss, the late Joe McCarthy, the heavy-handed hatchet man of 1960 who ran Jack Kennedy's campaign the way Captain Ahab ran the Pequod, the glowering, omnipresent Attorney General who always seemed to be under fire²⁹

Gallup noted that people disliked the way he seemed to capitalize on the family name, his pushiness, and his hunger for power.³⁰ Further, Gallup revealed that 40 percent of the people would like to see him as President one day, while 45 percent would not and 15 percent had no opinion.³¹ While this data presented strong negative opinions about RFK, it could also be taken as a measure of strength. In the December report, 58 percent of Americans did not want to see Hubert Humphrey become President.³² When Jack Newfield first began to write his book on Kennedy, he wrote down the twenty adjectives that were "most often evoked" by other writers to describe Robert Kennedy. They sum up the contradictory feelings about the man:

Intolerant, spoiled, vindictive, emotional, rude, moody, cold, simplistic, tense, pragmatic, authoritarian, competitive, tough, loyal, courageous, honest, ambitious, restless, moralistic, ruthless.³³

Kennedy's contradictory image had ramifications for his rhetoric on Vietnam. First, nearly everything RFK did or said on any subject, including Vietnam, that hinted at criticism of Johnson would be construed

in political terms. The prince would be seen as moving to wrest the crown from the usurper. This reality presented a significant rhetorical barrier for Robert Kennedy. Any attempt to provoke examination of U.S. policy in Vietnam would have to overcome this obstacle. Second, Johnson shared this perspective and quickly became paranoid.³⁴ Kennedy faced a competing rhetor of considerable power and resources. Third, any statement made by Kennedy generally received attention. Not only did RFK make headlines, but Johnson almost invariably sought to respond, thus heightening the effect of Kennedy's statements. Kennedy could reach the American public as very few people could. Though a junior Senator (96th in seniority), Kennedy "command[ed] a national following and extensive political resources."³⁵

When that Senator rose on May 6, 1965, to speak on the Dominican Republic and Vietnam, he did not challenge the popular President. He had voted for the appropriations request, and he wished merely to explain that vote. Kennedy sought policy definition, not policy change. That definition, of course, revealed Kennedy's views on Vietnam. He justified his support of Johnson's request by stating that he voted for a course of "honorable negotiation."³⁶ Kennedy used a residue or elimination type of topical structure to outline the three possible courses of action in Vietnam. While the primary power of these arguments came from the pragmatic ramifications of each alternative, Kennedy clearly assigned a moral value to each choice. Thus, he sought to engage the audience in genuine argument by presenting a policy that was both morally and practically correct.

Kennedy's thesis began the speech. He voted for the resolution "because our fighting forces in Vietnam and elsewhere deserve the unstinting

support of the American government and the American people."³⁷ Kennedy realized the obstacle imposed by Johnson's "neat political ploy." Responding in kind, Kennedy refused to play the role of the isolated liberal critic. He defined his view of Johnson's policy through the words of Senator John Stennis, a conservative Southern Democrat:

It is not a blank check We are backing up our men and also backing up the policy of the President. If he substantially enlarges or changes it, I would assume he would come back to us in one way or another.³⁸

By using the Stennis quotation, Kennedy established the point that he did not want the war escalated, but he managed to associate his position with that of Senator Stennis and, thus, avoid any "liberal" taint.

Kennedy then explored each of the three options in Vietnam: withdrawal, enlargement, and negotiation. By the end of the speech, Kennedy left the audience with only one possible option, negotiation.

The withdrawal discussion ran for only one paragraph, and this in itself indicated the futility of the option. The paragraph employed a climax construction, with each sentence presenting another, even more terrible ramification of withdrawal. He concluded this section by claiming that withdrawal would "gravely--perhaps irreparably--weaken the democratic position in Asia."³⁹ The language of the discussion set the tone for the examinations of the other options. Kennedy strongly condemned possible results of withdrawal. While these results would have pragmatic implications for American policy, Kennedy encouraged the audience to view this option through a moral perspective. Withdrawal would repudiate "commitments undertaken and confirmed by three administrations,"⁴⁰ We would be

acquiescing to "the Communist domination of South Asia--a domination unacceptable to the peoples of the area. . ."⁴¹ We would be engaging in an "explicit and gross betrayal" of our friends in Vietnam. All of these ramifications violated Americans' values. The language--"betrayal," "repudiation"--provided a moral evaluation of each implication and thus a moral evaluation of the policy option. Following Johnson's lead, Kennedy condemned withdrawal in moral terms.⁴²

Escalation was the next alternative examined. RFK argued that this would be a "deep and terrible decision."⁴³ Given the importance of the option, Kennedy gave it more attention. Again, he used vivid language to paint a dark picture of the possible consequences of escalation. In this section, the discussion became more specifically pragmatic; Kennedy argued that enlarging the war would be a disastrous policy choice. First, however, he engaged in refutation. He wanted to make clear that America could not win the war through bombing alone. He relied on his own personal authority and the power of his language to make this point. Bombing was "remote and antiseptic" and, as all fans of World War II movies knew, wars were not won by "remote and antiseptic" means.⁴⁴ He labelled the hope that the war could be won in such a fashion a "self-delusion."⁴⁵ The second part of his argument against escalation detailed in yet another climax construction the chilling consequences of enlargement. Comparing Vietnam to Korea, Kennedy contended that Vietnam had a much greater potential for disaster. The terrain presented more difficulties, the Chinese and their "inexhaustible reserves of ground troops" still inhabited the scene, and such an effort could lead to the use of nuclear

weapons and, thus, result in the Third World War.⁴⁶ The argument ended with the ultimate threat of the modern age, a threat that combined pragmatic and moral justification for rejecting the policy of escalation.

Before presenting his policy choice and, presumably, the President's policy, Kennedy briefly summarized his arguments, and this summary clearly indicated the dual nature of his strategy. He stated:

Both of these courses--withdrawal and enlargement--are contrary to the interests of the United States and to humanity's hope for peace.⁴⁷

America's interests and values demanded a rejection of both of these alternatives.

Finally, Kennedy reached the policy he preferred, "the policy we are endorsing today."⁴⁸ Kennedy portrayed the results of this policy in a revealing way. He did not argue that this choice would result in tangible benefits for the people of America. None of the advantages he cited would accrue to Americans. Instead, Kennedy maintained that this alternative would lead to a reduction in "the intervention and presence of foreign troops and ideologies" in Vietnam.⁴⁹ It would lead to developmental efforts, which would cost American taxpayers money, but which would aid the people of the area. Kennedy assumed the United States was in Vietnam primarily to help the Vietnamese, not to stop Communism or any other goal of that sort. In the process, of course, America might well stop Communism. That, however, was not the primary goal. Kennedy urged Americans to act in accord with their values, with their desire to see others attain those values, not with a desire for direct profit. The only sure reward for America would come from the conscience of the country.

Kennedy followed this depiction of the benefits of negotiation with a section praising President Johnson's efforts to negotiate. RFK applauded Johnson for his courtesy and his open-mindedness.⁵⁰ Given the obstacles cited above, this may have been a shrewd maneuver. RFK completed this strategy by stating that he, "along with a number of other Senators," had discussed the war with the President.⁵¹ In order to avoid any perception that he was challenging the President, Kennedy praised Johnson and presented himself as just another Senator seeking to do his duty. He hoped to remove the personality issue by doing this and, thus, be able to concentrate on policy matters. It was a tactic he would use again and again, with varying degrees of success. Since he seemed to be agreeing with LBJ in this speech, the effort to applaud his policy had more credibility.

In this attempt to praise Johnson, Kennedy blamed the failure of the negotiations on the North Vietnamese. He very carefully defined the role of the U.S. military in Vietnam. While sounding tough, "we must show Hanoi that it cannot win the war . . .," he restricted the military by arguing that they should only be used to make political action possible.⁵² Kennedy asserted: "I believe we have erred for some time in regarding Vietnam as a purely military problem when in its essential aspects, it is also a political and diplomatic problem."⁵³ By including himself as one who has erred, he revealed another strategy that he would use throughout his Vietnam discourse. When he admitted his errors in judgement, he made it easier for others to do the same. He also made himself a peer of the audience. He, too, was plagued with doubts about a war he was once

so sure about, but he was willing to admit mistakes and change policy. Even a Kennedy could be fallible. RFK ended the Vietnam section of the speech by noting the deficiencies of the present bill. It did not do enough for the people of South Vietnam who needed reasons to fight as well as material with which to fight. Presumably, Kennedy's new insight into the nature of the problem demanded this kind of policy. So, while fallible, Kennedy also was an experienced leader. He may have erred before, but now he knew the path out of the darkness. In order to succeed, American policy had to give the South Vietnamese "the hope of a better life which alone can fortify them for the labor and sacrifices ahead."⁵⁴ Pragmatic progress depended upon moral virtue. Without hope, the people of South Vietnam could not succeed. American policy must give that hope. It must act in accord with American values.

The rest of the speech dealt with the Dominican Republic, but three major themes applied to the situation in Vietnam. First, Kennedy again tried to find some common ground with President Johnson. He had more difficulty locating a patch on this issue. Kennedy limited his approval to Johnson's "determination to prevent the establishment of a new Communist state in this hemisphere."⁵⁵ He began to disagree with the President when it came to the means to reach this end. His second and third themes discussed the means. The President, Kennedy argued, could only strengthen the Organization of American States by using it. This second theme of peaceful international cooperation to solve problems applied to the predominantly unilateral American effort in Vietnam. Finally, Kennedy contested the claim that the revolutionaries were Communists and came close to violating Cold War dogma concerning Communists. Even if some

of the revolutionaries were Communists, that was not reason enough, Kennedy maintained, to condemn the entire revolution:

Our determination to stop the Communist revolution in the hemisphere must not be construed as opposition to popular uprisings against injustice and oppression just because the targets of such popular uprisings say they are Communist-inspired or Communist-led or even because known Communists take part in them.⁵⁶

Such words established a basis for attacking Johnson's policy in Vietnam, for they described the situation in Vietnam.

Several of the rhetorical strategies that appeared in the May 6 speech laid a foundation for Robert Kennedy's future discourse. First, Kennedy used the residue or elimination structure in a number of speeches. This inductive approach created the semblance of a dialogue with the audience. They participated with Kennedy in examining and discarding various policy options. This organizational pattern was a good strategic choice for Kennedy. Most people feel more inclined to lower their defenses and engage in public policy discussion with a speaker who allows them at least a sense of participation in such deliberations. Kennedy treated his audience as peers, not as inferiors. Kennedy's admission of error regarding Vietnam also reinforced this aura of equality and this admission was the second major strategy of the speech that was to appear again and again. Kennedy admitted fallibility and if he, the brother of the martyred President, could admit error, then anyone could feel more comfortable admitting a mistake in judgment about Vietnam. Such a change in attitude made policy change more possible. Finally, and most importantly, Kennedy argued that Right made Might. He assumed that we were in Vietnam

to help the South Vietnamese (and all Vietnamese). Thus, the best, the most efficient way to achieve that goal, was the policy that actually used American values. Logically, one could extend Kennedy's argument a bit, and contend that even if we were in Vietnam to save our own skins, our skins depended upon the will of the South Vietnamese to fight the war. Clearly, Kennedy did not come close to a moral condemnation of the war. He did, however, define the success of the war in moral terms. He made the values of hope, self-determination, and a better life the measuring stick of American progress, for "success will depend not only on protecting the people from aggression but on giving them the hope of a better life which alone can fortify them for the labor and sacrifice ahead."⁵⁷

While Johnson may have hoped the passage of the appropriations request would signal widespread support for the Administration's policy and quiet the debate, nothing of the sort happened. Instead, as U.S. News and World Report noted, liberals in the Democratic Party began carefully, but firmly, to articulate an alternative foreign policy.⁵⁸ While few strong disagreements as yet existed, the alternative departed from the Johnson line on a number of points. U.S. News argued that the Kennedy brothers provided the liberals with a legitimacy that they might otherwise have lacked.⁵⁹ Robert Kennedy's first formal speech to the Senate on June 23, 1965, did nothing to dispel that perception.⁶⁰ He discussed nuclear proliferation and, although the speech was not expressly critical of the Johnson Administration, it "was filled with somber quotations from John F. Kennedy about nuclear proliferation and carried the inescapable implication

that Johnson was not doing enough to stop it. Johnson was so annoyed that he struck his disarmament proposals from his own pending address to the United Nations lest someone think he was following Robert Kennedy's lead."⁶¹ Kennedy's speech was acclaimed. Newsweek praised the speech, noting that the Senate galleries were jammed and that more than fifty Senators were present.⁶² This address is an excellent example of Kennedy's drawing power. Many Senators were probably concerned about nuclear proliferation, but few could receive nationwide coverage, much less the attendance of fifty of their colleagues, when they spoke on the subject. Despite this slowly growing criticism, Johnson continued to do pretty much as he pleased in the foreign policy arena, and Vietnam proved no exception.

As Kennedy's concerns about the war deepened, he accepted an invitation to address the graduating class of the International Police Academy in Washington, D.C. The Academy specialized in the tactics of counterinsurgency, and Kennedy used this forum to indicate the necessity of political action as part of an overall solution for an insurgent war. Kennedy considered himself an expert in this area and possessed a deep interest in the subject. Early in his brother's administration, Kennedy advocated counterinsurgency constantly. He read Mao and Che Guevara and sought to incorporate the ideas of the famous British guerrilla fighter and diplomat, Sir Robert Thompson, into a new American fighting force, the Green Berets.⁶³ Even at the time, however, Kennedy did not envision counterinsurgency as a solely military effort. Jack Newfield explains:

It is necessary to recall now that, back in 1961, counterinsurgency was regarded by men like the Kennedys . . . to be

an original, flexible, and even humanistic concept to remedy the Dulles nostrums of massive retaliation and nuclear retaliation. And that social and political reform was an integral part of the concept. Counterinsurgency was in harmony with the ethos and the style⁶⁴ of the New Frontier: fresh, tough, and practical.

The speech at the International Police Academy sought to reinvigorate the original concept of counterinsurgency.

Kennedy again went to great lengths to avoid conflict with Lyndon Johnson and to focus attention on the substance of the address. In fact, he went to such lengths that he drew more attention to the politics of Vietnam and created textual problems for the critic.⁶⁵ Adam Walinsky, Kennedy's primary speechwriter, wrote the speech. It contained a number of passages directly critical of LBJ's Vietnam policy. Kennedy approved the text and sent copies to the media. Within the hour, he was receiving phone calls from excited news people, questioning him about the break with Johnson. That night, Kennedy deleted several of the sharpest passages. The text, however, was already out. The changes became the story, and the speech faded in importance. Nevertheless, this speech was important, for it provided a theoretical base for Kennedy's later attacks on Johnson's policy.

Throughout the May 6 speech in the Senate RFK asserted that the political portion of an American counterinsurgency effort should dominate the military action. That short speech, however, failed to develop that argument fully. The July 9 speech at the International Police Academy explained Kennedy's views on counterinsurgency. While he was careful to remain on the theoretical level, the concepts developed in the speech could not help but be applied to Vietnam, despite RFK's efforts to mute

any criticism of the Johnson Administration. This speech, then, argued that in order to win a guerrilla war, a government must be "effective and responsive to the needs of its people."⁶⁶

Kennedy began the speech with an introduction complimentary to the audience. More than in the other Vietnam speeches, Kennedy felt compelled to adapt to the immediate audience, instead of speaking to the country. Still, those deletions designed to placate the President made it clear that Kennedy expected the American people to listen. Thus, he spent a great deal of time justifying and defining his topic. He wished to discuss "revolutionary wars, sometimes called 'wars of national liberation' or insurgency" because these wars were "a central concern to all the world."⁶⁷ Kennedy used authority evidence and examples to buttress this claim. He quoted John Kennedy dismissing all-out war as unlikely due to nuclear weapons and claiming, therefore, that guerrilla wars were the challenge of the future. Robert Kennedy followed this quotation with a series of examples citing a number of such wars. Kennedy then made a curious statement on Vietnam. He said "that Vietnam has become more and more an open military conflict as well as a political one", in which military action on our part is essential just to allow the government to act politically."⁶⁸ This statement left a lot of questions. Kennedy obviously expected some political action in Vietnam. Yet he seemed to be saying that the military should play a larger role in Vietnam than was to be expected in the "normal" guerrilla war. This paragraph defined the Vietnam War as partially outside the concerns of the speech and as partially inside the speech. Kennedy never clarified this point. The number of examples from Vietnam, however, lend weight to the argument that he meant these concepts to apply to that war.

Kennedy's entire introduction reflected the ambivalence present in the statement that directly concerned Vietnam. That ambivalence certainly reflected the confusion that had started to permeate the American people. It also muddled his strategic purposes. On the other hand, Kennedy wished to focus the attention of the audiences, particularly the national audience, on the substance of the speech and not on the political controversy. Kennedy's emphasis on the importance and the nature of the topic was a strategy aimed at the national audience. The immediate audience, after the course at the Academy, knew the importance and the character of an insurgent war. They did not need this introductory section of the speech. Kennedy's justification of the topic sought to convince a national audience that he spoke on insurgent warfare simply because of the importance and timeliness of the issue, not because he wished to score political points. This strategy allowed Kennedy to deemphasize the political import of his remarks and, he hoped, open a debate about the nature of the American commitment in Vietnam with the national audience. RFK's use of his brother's words accomplished exactly the opposite. In all fairness, such quotations had the potential to create public re-examination of policy in Vietnam. They presented an audience that revered the dead President with the possibility that he would have disapproved of the present course in Vietnam. The quotations, however, also carried the inescapable implication that LBJ had departed from the Kennedy legacy. The quotations redirected the attention of the audience to political matters and inevitably brought up questions about Robert Kennedy's intentions. Would he challenge Johnson in 1968? How

could he not challenge the President if he thought the President's policies were wrong? Yet he claimed he would not challenge Johnson. The questions lingered and gnawed at RFK's credibility.

This speech also differed from the other Vietnam speeches because, for the most part, Kennedy played the role of teacher. As noted earlier, he treated the audience as equals in the May 6 Senate address, and I shall argue that he did the same in most of the other speeches. In this effort, however, he detailed the lessons that the United States and these students could learn from guerrilla wars past. While Kennedy still attempted to create some participation through the use of questions to simulate a dialogue, he basically took charge of the situation and presented a lecture on insurgent warfare. The role, of course, was a natural one to play at a commencement ceremony.

Kennedy began the lecture by creating identification with the immediate audience and thus reminding the national audience of America's revolutionary heritage. Kennedy argued that it would violate "our deepest traditions to oppose any genuine popular revolution."⁶⁹ But, he pointed out, the Soviet Union and China have fomented aggressive wars of national liberation, wars that offered "the greatest threat to the world order of free and independent states to which all nations pledged themselves in the charter of the United Nations."⁷⁰ In other words, the charter of the United Nations certified efforts to oppose Communist aggression. This paragraph is an excellent example of Kennedy's attempt to force the audience to rethink Vietnam policy. Kennedy managed to include America's revolutionary heritage, anti-communism, and the United Nations charter into a vague, but coherent policy on insurgent warfare. Kennedy was

reaching out to all parts of the populace.

The next paragraph presented the means for dealing with these wars and constituted the thesis he would argue that day. RFK stated that political, internal factors governed the outcome of these conflicts. He maintained that since the essence of these wars was political, they could only be won "by an idea and a faith, by promise and performance."⁷¹ The last sentence of the paragraph succinctly summed up Kennedy's position: "Governments resist such revolutionary challenges only by being effective and responsive to the needs of their people."⁷² Immediately, Kennedy defined what he meant by effective government, and it did not necessarily mean the American model. He argued for pluralism, maintaining that only the force of example could spread democracy. RFK assumed, probably correctly, that both audiences would respond to the value of self-determination.

As in the May 6 speech, Kennedy sought to ground American policy in American values. The most pragmatic policy in these wars, in fact the only pragmatic policy, consisted of freedom and democracy, of the use of the American values that the national audience cherished. Unlike the May 6 speech, however, Kennedy then began to specify what he meant by this policy. He argued that technological innovations had obscured the essentially political nature of the struggle.⁷³ Kennedy had little faith that technology alone could win these wars. Instead, the Senator promoted the power of an idea, and he provided two examples to illustrate the kinds of actions he had in mind: The British, who did not use political tools in Cyprus to complement their overwhelming military force and failed, and Magsaysay of the Philippines, who possessed inadequate military force,

but who prevailed through the use of political methods.⁷⁴ Kennedy strategically provided the listener with a positive and a negative example of the importance of politics.

Senator Kennedy asked two questions as a prelude to the next part of the speech, and these questions worked effectively because they might well have come from the audience.⁷⁵ Kennedy anticipated the logical search for reasons for the success of political methods, expressed those questions, and made them the next topics to be discussed.

Initially, he argued that the very nature of military force precluded its sole, successful use in a guerrilla war. In short, succinct sentences, reinforced by a hypothetical example, Kennedy maintained that military force destroys, and a government cannot destroy its own people and retain any claim to their loyalty. While this may sound simple, the hypothetical example, which described the situation in South Vietnam whether he intended it to or not, indicated that governments often forget this basic maxim.⁷⁶ Kennedy added more proof by telling the famous story of Napoleon's troubles in maintaining control over "conquered" lands.⁷⁷ RFK consistently associated military power with negative terms throughout the speech, especially in this section.⁷⁸ He also elaborated upon the Philippine example and quoted a noted guerrilla expert, General Edward Lansdale, to buttress his case.⁷⁹ In delineating the example, RFK provided details of Magsaysay's actions in the Philippines as a model for other governments to follow. This specifics reinforced his case and his ethos as an expert.

The next paragraph added another facet to the argument. Military

force alone was inadequate because the other side used both military force and political methods. Kennedy quickly enumerated three Communist countries where this had occurred, including Vietnam.⁸⁰ Another hypothetical example that described Vietnam made his case:

They [the insurgents] have thus entered into direct competition with the established government. When the defenders have ignored reform, the hopes of the people could only center on the insurgents. And when a victorious army is followed by landlords collecting back rent from the peasants, we should not wonder that the insurgents often attract the allegiance of the peasants.⁸⁴

Kennedy then began using repetition. He obviously wanted to make his point as clearly as possible and in as many ways as possible. He purported to offer another reason why military force could not work, but in actuality he merely restated his thesis in a slightly altered form. He claimed that military force could not give hope, again associating the military with negative terms. Only hope, Kennedy argued, could cause people to undergo the sacrifices necessary for victory.⁸² He again referred to the Philippines and also cited the British effort in Malaya.⁸³ RFK cited more authority evidence as support for the examples, and this particular piece of evidence emanated from a good source, George Marshall: "Let's not talk about this matter too much in military terms; to do so might make it a military problem."⁸⁴ This quotation revealed another strategy that Kennedy frequently used. He cited a number of military authorities who agreed with his position. Such evidence had the advantage of being reluctant testimony. People who argued contrary to their perceived self-interest would have a stronger impact on the audience

than most authorities. Such citations might very well shake the complacency of people who believed that the government experts were doing a good job of running the war and that the ordinary citizen should support such experts.

Robert Kennedy concluded this section of the speech by outlining the basic assumptions behind his ideas and refuting opposing positions. Using the words of President Kennedy, RFK argued that a government should view insurgents as citizens who must eventually reenter the political process.⁸⁵ The strategic advantages and liabilities of JFK quotations were discussed above. After summarizing with this general quotation, Kennedy rebutted the possible objections to his position.⁸⁶ Again, he made extensive use of specific examples. People cannot easily refute what has actually happened, and this speech provided a great many instances of the success of predominantly political programs in revolutionary wars.

More examples and restatement marked the rest of the speech, but one example in particular stood out. Kennedy told the story of a village in Vietnam where the women were forced to walk around a rich man's land in order to get to the well for their water. This practice had continued for hundreds of years, but the Viet Cong ended it as soon as they entered the village and thereby won the loyalty of the peasants.⁸⁷ This example was superb. It presented the same story often seen in moralistic melodramas: The cruel, heartless, rich landlord oppressed poor but good people and finally lost in the end. The little guy, the hero, the Viet Cong, won. Pragmatically, the very simplicity of the action was appealing and illustrated the sensitivity to political concerns that Kennedy sought.

The fact that the example came from Vietnam was probably no accident. Kennedy then listed many of the actions that a government could take to win the loyalty of its people. He emphasized the role of young people in bringing about the needed reforms. This emphasis reinforced his credibility among the young graduates and among the young in America. He accorded both groups a high sense of responsibility.⁸⁸

Finally, the conclusion returned to the immediate audience. He reminded them of their responsibility to implement these ideas in their own countries. The enumeration of good political actions, ending with a reference to the path story, added unity to the speech and summarized the main ideas.⁸⁹ Kennedy also traced the etymology of the word "police," reinforcing the political role of the police in an unusual and interesting manner. After all, if "police" and "politics" come from the same root, then police, these police, should take political action.⁹⁰ Kennedy ended by quoting his brother's inaugural address and rededicating himself to the "long, twilight struggle" that these wars will demand.⁹¹ This particular quotation was an interesting choice, for it is the only pessimistic statement in the inaugural. Such a choice implied that Robert Kennedy may have harbored some doubts about the future.

This speech, while an extension of the arguments made on May 6, contributed some new rhetorical strategies to Kennedy's repertoire. First, RFK sought to extend and prove his concepts of counterinsurgency. As a matter of fact, he tried to give his theory the validity of a natural law. He argued that the political should always dominate the military in an insurgent war. He provided a number of examples to "prove" his law.

Thus, any policy that did not put the political first was doomed to fail. In other words, Right made Might all of the time in revolutionary wars, and American policy should conform to American values. Second, Kennedy initiated the extensive use of authority evidence and, in particular, he began to quote his brother on this subject. The use of these authorities bolstered Kennedy's credibility. He was not a lonely radical on a quixotic quest. A lot of important people agreed with him, so maybe the audience should listen. Finally, this speech displayed Kennedy's characteristically clear organization. A sound structure existed in nearly every speech he gave and it made them easy to understand. This speech may have had too much repetition, but no one could complain that they couldn't catch his main points.

Unfortunately for Kennedy, neither one of these speeches had a very large impact. The May 6, 1965, speech disappeared without a trace. The New York Times made no mention of the speech; they reported only the vote and the dissenting votes of Gruening, Morse, and Nelson.⁹² The Washington Post was the only paper or magazine to mention the speech, noting that it seemed to sum up the "subdued, almost mournful mood" of the Senate.⁹³ Most Senators, the Post added, wanted only an extension of the present effort, not an escalation. No other source covered the speech, though U.S. News and World Report mentioned the Dominican Republic section of the speech when it discussed the liberal Democratic foreign policy alternative.⁹⁴ The May 6 address did not reach a national audience.

The July 9, 1965, speech received more attention, primarily because of the political controversy over the deletions. The New York Times

ran a headline stating "Kennedy urges Political Stance."⁹⁵ The Times presented Kennedy's criticisms of Johnson, then noted the deletions. It also reported on a press conference Kennedy held:

Talking to reporters after the speech, Mr. Kennedy stressed that any criticism had been made of policies of the past 20 years, including the Administration of his brother in which he had been personally involved. "We can all do better," he concluded.⁹⁶

This extemporaneous remark continued the strategy of assuming responsibility himself for the mistakes made in Vietnam. This assumption appeared in nearly all of Kennedy's remarks about the war. Other media that covered the speech concentrated on Kennedy's deletions, not on the substance of the address or comments made in this press conference. Time's article, "Saying It and Not Saying It," was typical. Noting that "Robert F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson have a history of mutual antagonism," Time analyzed the political fallout of the speech. It ignored the arguments.⁹⁷

Why did Kennedy's remarks fail to have much impact? Clearly, Kennedy failed to disrupt the belief system of his audience. He did not confront the audience with any violations of its values. While he sought to ground American policy in American values, the values he discussed were not central to most people's existence. Self-determination, voting rights, and capital improvements for Vietnam were important, but ignoring these values did not cause trauma in the audience. Moreover, it seemed as if Johnson was doing what Kennedy and the people of the country wanted. In 1965, Johnson was the proud owner of a 70 percent approval rating.⁹⁸ That rating dipped slightly to a still respectable majority of 60 percent when solely foreign policy was considered.⁹⁹

In November of 1965, 60 percent of the public said the American troops were doing "very well" in Vietnam.¹⁰⁰ Fifty percent, however, agreed that "our struggle in Vietnam will not be won on the battlefield--but in the minds of the native people living in that country."¹⁰¹ Fifty-nine percent of Americans believed that the United States "is likely to be more successful in winning the loyalty of the native people in that country."¹⁰² Overall, 48 percent of the country approved of Johnson's handling of the war while only 28 percent disapproved.¹⁰³ Clearly, the public thought that a political solution was important, but felt that Johnson was already pursuing the policy. Kennedy seemed to be splitting hairs with Johnson, and he provided no compelling rationale for changing policy or even for speaking. He assumed that the audience would be willing to argue about a new policy for Vietnam when in actuality they saw little wrong with the present policy. As Powers noted in a comment cited in the previous chapter, the opponents of the war needed to specify the cost of the war, and Robert Kennedy failed to do that. With no good justification for speaking, Kennedy found himself facing the political questions that sapped his credibility and revived discussion of his ambitious and ruthless nature. The lack of a specified cost of the war prevented Kennedy from achieving genuine argument.

These speeches, however, laid some groundwork for future discourse. First, Kennedy argued that the war should be judged by moral criteria. At this point, he was not specific about the ways the war violated the criteria nor did he focus on important values. Still, these speeches conditioned the audience to view the war through a moral perspective and cleared the way for a stronger moral attack on the war. Bound to

this perspective was the assumption that values superseded pragmatic considerations. Second, Robert Kennedy began to assume control over the Kennedy legacy. While the JFK quotations may have had a mixed impact in these speeches, their use asserted Robert Kennedy's right to decide if his brother would have approved of LBJ's Vietnam policy. Until this time, Kennedy had been content not to challenge Johnson publicly when he wrapped himself in John Kennedy's credibility. Since Johnson often justified his policy by relying on the precedent of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy's tentative rejection of that claim is significant, for only a brother of the dead President who had been close to his decision making had the credibility to make such a charge stick.¹⁰⁴ Given America's reverence for JFK, this rhetorical strategy had the potential to disturb the complacency about U.S. policy in Vietnam audience. If John Kennedy would not have approved, perhaps the policy needed to be rethought. Finally, RFK introduced the theme of personal responsibility. He admitted he had been wrong about Vietnam, and this admission made it easier for others to do the same. It also foreshadowed Kennedy's effort to make everyone responsible for the war, for he had to admit his own culpability before he could charge others with the same guilt. While these two speeches failed to have a major impact on policy or on opinion about the war, they introduced strategies that possessed the potential to accomplish those goals.

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CHAPTER THREE

A COALITION GOVERNMENT

The controversy over the July 5th speech silenced Kennedy, as did the press of other responsibilities. He made no further formal statements about the war in 1965. Questions about Vietnam, however, popped up whenever he met with the press or with college students. Kennedy consistently displayed a tendency to say exactly what he felt in these situations regardless of the public position he wanted to maintain. Such was the case at the University of Southern California on November 5, 1965. Kennedy defended youthful demonstrators and trod on controversial ground:

RFK: If a person feels strongly and wants to . . . burn his draft card I don't agree with it personally but I think that obviously /is/ the way /chosen by/ somebody that feels very strongly about this matter
Press: What about giving blood to the North Vietnamese?
RFK: I think that's a good idea.
Press: Is that going too far?
RFK: If we've given all the blood that is needed to the South Vietnamese. I'm in favor of giving /to/ anybody who needs blood. I'm in favor of them having blood.
Press: Even to the North Vietnamese?
RFK: Yes.¹

These remarks echoed around the country. The New York Daily News recommended that Kennedy "go the whole hog" and join the Communist forces.² The Chicago Tribune ran a cartoon showing Kennedy standing on a coffin marked "American Dead" carrying a placard indicating his willingness to help the enemy.³ Many seemed to share the opinion of Barry

Goldwater: "It was closer to treason than it was to academic freedom."⁴
 For a man who possessed a will to win with any means, these remarks appeared out of character. They certainly revealed his deep ambivalence about the war, for he seldom shied away from any tactic that might bring victory closer. Giving blood to the North Vietnamese was not a move designed to defeat them.

Shortly after these statements, Senator Kennedy left for an extended visit to Latin America. This trip was interesting for a couple of reasons. First, while Kennedy defended the Administration's Vietnam policy abroad, the events surrounding the trip revealed the depth of the antagonism between Kennedy and Johnson. When Kennedy attended the routine State Department briefing before the trip, he found an extraordinarily hostile Jack Hood Vaughn, the assistant secretary for inter-American affairs. After increasingly bitter exchanges over Latin American policy, Kennedy told Vaughn:

Well, Mr. Vaughn, let me get this straight. You're saying what the Alliance for Progress has come down to is that if you have a military takeover, outlaw political parties, close down the congress, put your political opponents in jail, and take away the basic freedoms of the people, you can get all the American aid that you want. But, if you mess around with an American oil company, we'll cut you off without a penny. Is that right? Is that what the Alliance for Progress comes down to?

Vaughn agreed. Kennedy left for Latin America and a tumultuous reception.

Kennedy's name provided one reason for such a greeting. His rhetoric on the tour, however, received quite a bit of attention and deserves some consideration. His speeches consistently stressed the

theme of personal responsibility:

If you object to American aid, have the courage to say so. But you are not going to solve your own problems by blaming the United States and avoiding your own personal responsibility to do something about them.⁶

In this Latin American trip, and in a later trip to South Africa, Kennedy placed considerable emphasis on the responsibility of each individual person for the policies of their respective countries. This argument for personal moral accountability for the actions of government had already appeared in the rhetoric of the New Left, particularly in the Port Huron statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, and it would soon appear in Kennedy's Vietnam speeches.⁷ At this time, RFK was not prepared to subject Americans to the same standards as these foreign students.

While Kennedy toured Latin America, the Johnson Administration became increasingly preoccupied with Vietnam. Nineteen sixty-five saw an enormous escalation of the American effort in Vietnam. The Administration committed 185,600 troops to the war, and nearly 1400 of those soldiers died, bringing the total casualty count to over 1600.⁸ Congress planned to appropriate \$12 billion specifically for the war in 1966, dollars supplemented by other defense funding that found its way into the war effort.⁹ The Johnson Administration spent 1965 making the Vietnam war into an American war.

This change did not achieve the desired results. Despite the massive effort, Secretary of Defense McNamara's figures revealed an increase, rather than a decrease, in the North Vietnamese infiltration

rates into South Vietnam.¹⁰ Shortly after Thanksgiving, American forces fought regular units of the North Vietnamese army for the first time.¹¹ On the political front, Johnson attempted to cope with seven different governments in Saigon and a growing American protest movement.¹² In August of 1965, the usually supportive media damaged Johnson's cause by televising the dramatic burning of Cam Re by Marines with cigarette lighters.¹³ The good guys seemed to be doing the same things as the bad guys. In November, two people emulated the Buddhists of South Vietnam by immolating themselves, one in front of the Pentagon and the other before the United Nations.¹⁴ A major protest also occurred that month, with twenty thousand people marching to the White House to express their opposition to the war.¹⁵ In August of 1965, seventy percent of a Gallup poll agreed that the situation was getting worse in Vietnam, though they still maintained that the American soldiers were doing well.¹⁶ Finally, on December 5, 1965, Robert Kennedy presented Lyndon Johnson with an early Christmas present, a call for a bombing halt in North Vietnam. Kennedy spent the rest of the interview defending Johnson.¹⁷ Johnson decided that Christmas was a propitious time for a "peace offensive."

As with almost anything Lyndon Johnson attempted, the peace offensive was a spectacle. He rushed Administration spokesmen to countries all over the world.¹⁸ He gave several speeches advertising his willingness to negotiate. Most important, he stopped the bombing for twenty-seven days.¹⁹ Unfortunately for his effort, he did not halt the largest American ground offensive of the war, an attack that began the day

after the bombing halt started.²⁰ Hanoi was not impressed, and the war dragged on. By late January, Johnson's generals were exerting tremendous pressure on Johnson to resume the bombing raids. Kennedy, hearing from McNamara about the conflict, sought to bolster Johnson's resolve by giving him a copy of Bruce Catton's Never Call Retreat, with marked passages discussing Lincoln's problems with his generals.²¹ Johnson responded with a warm note and four days later resumed the bombing. On January 31, Kennedy reacted with a short speech on the Senate floor.

He began the speech by emphasizing his support for the President. The only reason he provided for that support, however, was the fact that "the President had made his decision."²² His disagreement with the resumption was not subtle; he said: "obviously, the resumption of the bombing is not a policy."²³ Kennedy's clear attack on a specific Administration policy was a first. So was the strong language Kennedy used to condemn the bombing:

For if we regard bombing as the answer in Vietnam--we are headed straight for disaster. In the past, bombing has not proved a decisive weapon against a rural economy--or against a guerrilla economy. And the temptation now will be to argue that if limited bombing does not produce a solution, that further bombing, more extensive military action, is the answer. The danger is that the decision to resume may become the first in a series of steps on a road from which there is no turning back--a road which leads to catastrophe for all mankind. That cannot be permitted to happen.²⁴

This argument was a repetition of the escalation argument in the May 6 speech. But here, Kennedy linked that abstract argument to a specific

Johnson policy, contending that that policy could lead to "catastrophe." He moved closer to a direct attack. He also maintained the pattern of subordinating pragmatic concerns to moral considerations. The policy should be rejected because it will not work, but, as the climax construction suggested, what was more important was that it would cause catastrophe for all mankind. That could not be permitted to happen.

Another Senator became very angry about the resumption of the bombing. The head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, J. William Fulbright, opened public hearings on February 4, 1966. Ostensibly, the hearings were to approve some routine funding for the war, but they became a public debate over the war. These hearings transfixed the nation much as the Senate Watergate hearings were to do seven years later. Large parts of the hearings were carried on national television, and the committee received over 20,000 letters in the first three weeks after the conclusion of the testimony.²⁵ National hearings on network television, with experts such as General James Gavin, George Kennan, Wayne Morse, Eugene McCarthy, and Fulbright himself challenging Administration policy did much to legitimize the anti-war position. No longer were the kids on their own.²⁶ Most people, however, remained as undecided as the New York Times, which on the one hand, carried effusive praise of Dean Rusk by Max Frankel, and on the other hand, shrewdly noted that the Administration had changed its justification for the war.²⁷ Its position now rested primarily on the SEATO treaty and on the American duty to save the South Vietnamese from the

Red Menace. As Rusk's testimony indicated, the Administration seemed to think that the people of South Vietnam would be happy if they were not Communists and very few other factors were considered.²⁸

Robert Kennedy watched the hearings with a growing sense of frustration. He felt the hearings were too abstract, too academic. He wanted to know what concessions the Administration was ready to make to bring peace. In short, he wanted to find out what concrete steps the United States would take to end the war. Debate about the reasons for America's entry into the war or over the military strategy practiced in Vietnam would not formulate a peace policy. Since the Fulbright hearings failed to come to grips with these specifics, Kennedy decided to issue his own statement.

A remarkable degree of naivete accompanied the release of this position paper. Immediately after the press conference on the statement, Kennedy left for a ski vacation in Vermont. He assumed that few people would pay attention to a policy paper on Vietnam released on a Saturday morning. After all, he did not think he has said very much that was new.²⁹ The ensuing furor shocked Kennedy and made this statement an object of controversy.

RFK began the speech with a long and detailed justification for dissent. The opening line alluded to the just completed Fulbright hearings, labeling them "another great chapter in a great tradition."³⁰ Kennedy called the roll of great debates and great orators of congresses past to bolster his right to speak and dissent on Vietnam.³¹ The next portion of the argument detailed the ramifications of not debating

the issue. Relying primarily on the reasoning of Justice Holmes, Kennedy contended that democracy necessarily meant experimentation, that the only way to make good and reasoned judgments of the policies in a democracy was through the "marketplace of ideas."³² He ended this section of the introduction with a series of rhetorical questions comparing other, obviously minor, issues to "the great issues of war and peace."³³ Clearly, Congressmen had a duty to debate these great issues, for if they did not, they betrayed both their heritage and their constituency. Finally, Kennedy concluded the introduction with an admonition decrying ad hominem attacks:

To attack the motives of those who express concern about our present course--to challenge their very right to speak freely--is to strike at the foundations of the democratic process which our fellow citizens, even today, are dying in order to protect.³⁴

Kennedy completed this defense of dissent by invoking the words of Thomas Jefferson to accompany the mute testimony of American war dead.

This introduction attempted to justify public policy discussion and debate by placing Kennedy's dissent in the great, patriotic tradition of American history. In essence, Kennedy was seeking to shift the burden of presumption. Most opponents of the dissenters, such as Barry Goldwater, cited above, expected the dissenters to prove their patriotism since they fought the will of the President in wartime. Kennedy, on the other hand, argued that dissent was as American as apple pie, Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Webster, and Justice Holmes. Those who dissented possessed "courage and conviction."³⁵ Thus, the protestors

were only acting as Thomas Jefferson suggested and exercising rights provided by the Constitution. By arguing from tradition, Kennedy spoke the language of the "Great Silent Majority." He was an American, the same as any of them, and he revered the symbols that permeate American life. The introduction, however effective, justified only the act of dissent, not the substance of the dissent itself. Even if he had earned a hearing and good will, Kennedy still needed to make his case.

He began that process by listing the concerns of the American people. Kennedy sought to create his audience by giving them the same concerns that he felt. In essence, he asked them to take on certain characteristics, to play a role.³⁶ The introduction had begun the process by imbuing the audience with the traditional symbols of American life. Kennedy placed this audience in the American and Western tradition of reason, moderation, and open discussion. They would listen to all of the alternatives and make the rational decision. Kennedy continued this role by using the word "concern" when listing the problems of the Administration's policy. Rational people become concerned, not wild or furious, when policy worries them. In a series of parallel constructions, Kennedy presented the difficulties that troubled these Americans.³⁷ Moreover, he constantly sought to make himself the spokesman of the group. "We are concerned," was the constant refrain as Kennedy and the audience shared the discussion, bound together by common concerns. The speech enacted the same qualities assigned to the audience--rationality and moderation. The substance of the concerns also reinforced the aura of rationality.

This audience worried about the death and destruction in South Vietnam, they worried about the stability and characteristics of the South Vietnamese government, they worried about Communist China, and they worried about the effects of the war on domestic programs.³⁸

Unfortunately, this audience felt no guilt. "Concerned" people rarely challenge the existing order, unless they have very good reasons and strong motivation. Kennedy provided neither. In stark contrast to his later speeches, he did not make this audience personally responsible for the death and destruction in Vietnam. He did not admit any responsibility on his part. In other words, he specified no cost for continuing this war. The only price discussed came in the last area, the effects of the war on the domestic programs. RFK spent the majority of this paragraph arguing that the war perpetuated discrimination because the draft created inequities. He was right, but the middle class wanted the disparities to exist, for they kept nice, white middle-class kids out of the war.³⁹ Kennedy's failure to argue that the war cost the audience badly damaged his position, for the rest of the speech asked the audience to take risks to end the war. His policy, "the middle way--the way of negotiations--involves risks," risks that potentially could cause failure. Since Kennedy did not reveal the price of the current policy, he provided no reason for calm, rational, moderate people to plunge into the unknown.

This problem, in turn, carried implications for Kennedy's efforts to generate policy re-examination. His failure to specify the cost of the war for the audience left their belief system intact. Without a

clear justification for a change in policy, Kennedy made it more likely that people would view his motives with suspicion. If he did not have a reason to change policy, he had no reason to speak, unless, of course, he spoke for personal, political gain. The introduction justified Kennedy's right to dissent, but it did not provide the substance of the argument. When RFK failed to demonstrate that we needed to risk losing in order to achieve peace in Vietnam, he opened himself to strong attacks. Why chance a change when no reason exists to change? With his motives under suspicion and the audience still complacent, Kennedy could not provoke public policy deliberation.

The rest of the speech attempted to provide an alternative policy, but without a good justification for change, the speech labored under a heavy burden. After presenting the concerns of the audience, Kennedy articulated the "central question . . . our political strategy in Vietnam; not simply how to move, but in which direction we wish to move."⁴⁰ By taking this tack, Kennedy asked the audience to shift perspective. The Fulbright hearings failed to address this issue, concentrating, when they discussed negotiations, on how to get to the table, rather than on what we should do once we started the peace process. As Kennedy argued, "Negotiations or discussions are only a means by which our ultimate goals may be reachedWithout clear goals in mind, negotiations are pointless."⁴¹

The discussion of American goals began with two familiar Kennedy strategies. First, RFK used the words of the Administration to define the ends sought.⁴² Again, this strategy allowed him to find some

common ground with his opponents and made him appear a reasonable man. He also placed himself in the center of the American political spectrum, associating himself with those who believed America had a noble purpose in Vietnam. Kennedy, then, agreed that the United States sought self-determination for South Vietnam and an end to Communist aggression. Second, he employed a residue structure to sift through the policy options available to the American public.⁴³ He repeated the arguments he made in the May 6th speech, and they provided him with the same strategic advantages. He grounded the evaluation of alternatives in moral values and again came to the conclusion that withdrawal and escalation were morally repugnant and practically impossible. Thus, he left the audience with the option of a peaceful settlement and the feeling, created through the inductive structure, that they had participated in the discussion of policy. He led the audience to the conclusion that right made might and the policy that best exemplified this value should be enacted.

Unfortunately for Kennedy, this speech did not have as its purpose the examination of broad principles of guerrilla war. It sought to support a specific negotiating position that differed materially from the Johnson position.⁴⁴ Even as he conditioned the audience to view the war through a moral perspective, he provided no compelling moral reason to change policy. Johnson argued that his policy saved the South Vietnamese from the evil of Communism and America had a moral duty to do this. Kennedy agreed. Yet, as he argued next, he proposed to allow the Communists into the government of South Vietnam. Without an attack on the morality of the American actions in prosecuting the

war, Kennedy could provide no compelling reason for an immediate change in policy that carried considerable risks. If no immediate policy change was necessary, then the Johnson policy might well accomplish the same goals, with a much lower risk factor. Nevertheless, Kennedy presented his proposal.

He kept the rational tone of the speech by defining what he thought a negotiated settlement was in principle: "A negotiated settlement means that each side must concede on matters that are important in order to preserve positions that are essential."⁴⁵ Just before this definition, Kennedy acutely and bluntly presented the essential positions of the combatants:

For the United States it must be that we will not turn South Vietnam over to the North. For North Vietnam it must be that they will not accept a settlement which leaves in the South a hostile government, dedicated to the physical destruction of all Communist elements, refusing any economic cooperation with the North, dependent upon the continued presence of American military power.⁴⁶

This perspective required that the United States accede to North Vietnam's "one irreducible demand." The Communists in South Vietnam must be given a "share of power and responsibility" in the governance of that country.⁴⁷ This concession involved risk, of course, for, as many people would point out, Communists in the government often resulted in a Communist government. The American Cold War tradition verified this view, as did the only other limited war, Korea. Kennedy's description of the "irreducible demand" coincides exactly with what the United States achieved in Korea. RFK defended the risk in three

ways. First, America already took this risk "every day in a hundred countries in every corner of every continent" that might be an object of Communist aggression.⁴⁸ After all, America did not have troops everywhere. Moreover, Kennedy reinforced this line of reasoning with yet another residue structure. If the United States failed to risk, the only other options with these "discontented elements in South Vietnam" were to "kill them or repress them" or to "turn the country over to them," i.e. military escalation or withdrawal, two options already rejected.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the analogy did not quite hold, as repression did not necessarily equal escalation, as the Korea example proved for many people. Second, America was founded on "a basic faith in the aspirations of man."⁵⁰ When people could choose, they chose democracy. Again, the Cold War history demonstrated that the people often could not choose, as in Hungary. Finally, Kennedy provided a number of examples of the success of just such risks in American policy and attempted to provide international safeguards for his plan that would ensure free choice.⁵¹ The most successful example was that of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy pointed out that in "October of 1962" President Kennedy negotiated without surrendering America's vital interests and Senator Kennedy implied that his proposal would achieve the same success. He concluded by arguing that the risk would let Americans "meet our responsibilities to our posterity--to walk the final mile toward peace, not so much for ourselves as for those who will come after."⁵²

Eugene McCarthy expressed the frustration of Kennedy's Senate

colleagues when he told the Washington Post that he had made the same suggestion "a couple of weeks ago and nobody paid any attention to it."⁵³ People certainly paid attention to Kennedy. Hubert Humphrey attacked from his Pacific tour, variously labeling the proposal, "putting a fox in the chicken coop a prescription for ills that includes a dose of arsenic and an arsonist in the fire department."⁵⁴ On the day after the statement, George Ball on "Issues and Answers" and McGeorge Bundy on "Meet the Press" attacked the Kennedy proposal. Ball argued that Kennedy would force the South Vietnamese to face a "coalition government in which obviously the National Liberation Front would play the dominant role, and from which any representative from Saigon would be excluded."⁵⁵ Bundy struck a particularly low blow, quoting John Kennedy on coalition governments: "I do not believe that any democrat can successfully ride that tiger."⁵⁶ Senator Fulbright endorsed Kennedy's idea, as did McCarthy. They did not seem to outweigh the Administration.

Press reaction showed some variation, but most of the Fourth Estate attacked Senator Kennedy's proposal. The New York Times praised the speech, even as James Reston criticized the plan as unworkable and C.L. Sulzberger said, "Both Peking and Hanoi must have gained fresh encouragement by the joining of our know-nothings with our know it alls."⁵⁷ Kennedy captured the front page of the Times on February 20, 21, 22, and 23. The Washington Post devoted heavy coverage to Kennedy's speech, concluding in an editorial, "Peace and Principle," that Hanoi was obstructing peace and Kennedy was wrong.⁵⁸ The

Washington Star felt that Kennedy's solution was "fantasy." This editorial reappeared in its entirety in U.S. News and World Report.⁵⁹ The Christian Science Monitor argued that Hanoi would make Kennedy's plan impossible.⁶⁰ In a somewhat more vitriolic vein, the Chicago Tribune ran an editorial entitled "Ho Chi Kennedy," and the New York Daily News ran a cartoon depicting "a scrawny Kennedy holding a giant hatchet emblazoned 'Appease Viet Cong.'"⁶¹

The newspapers also discussed the political implications of Kennedy's stance. The New York Times ran an article entitled, "Kennedy's Vietnam Plea Spurs Popularity on Democratic Left."⁶² The Christian Science Monitor left its readers with these words: "It is also reported that groups of the Democratic left are turning to Senator Kennedy as their 'hero' on Vietnam--a result not entirely unforeseen by the Kennedy camp."⁶³ The Washington Post noted that this was a "bold, public move by the brother of the late President . . . a significant political development . . . [it] goes considerably beyond the Johnson Administration's public position."⁶⁴ The newspapers saw Kennedy breaking sharply with the Johnson Administration.

Given the adverse reaction to the rift, Kennedy took the practical political course and began to mend fences. He came back from his vacation and went on the "Today" show to defend his positions. Meanwhile, his old friend Maxwell Taylor said he believed that Kennedy's policy did not seriously diverge from the Administration's. If the South Vietnamese wanted to bring the "fox into the chicken coop," that would be fine. Johnson sought only to prevent a coalition government

before elections. Bill Moyers, Johnson's press secretary, seized upon this opening, and Kennedy agreed to the compromise. The rift was healed.⁶⁵

The compromise simply gave the press more ammunition. Time and Newsweek both discussed the deal. Time rather derisively portrayed the incident as Kennedy "in full retreat."⁶⁶ Newsweek concentrated on the accommodation, but also pointed out Kennedy's new-found popularity among the liberals. Newsweek, in a rare instance of media support, agreed with Kennedy, arguing that Johnson's veto of a coalition government constituted a major precondition to negotiations.⁶⁷ U.S. News and World Report engaged in the most comprehensive coverage. It reprinted Kennedy's entire statement and followed it with the negative Washington Star editorial.⁶⁸ In that same issue, U.S. News discussed the controversy in "The Fight RFK started--should we negotiate with the Viet Cong?"⁶⁹ The article rejected the Moyers compromise, contending that very real differences separated Johnson and Kennedy on this issue. RFK saw the Viet Cong as an independent entity, thus the war was civil, while LBJ saw the Viet Cong as generic Communists, thus the war was one of North Vietnamese aggression.⁷⁰ The "Washington Whispers" column of March 7th followed its usual form, noting that unspecified "people" think Kennedy took a bad gamble on Vietnam. He acted as an "obstructionist," and nobody liked obstructionists.⁷¹ Finally, in one last round of coverage, the magazine interviewed Kennedy, Humphrey, and, for a Republican view, Melvin Laird.⁷² For Kennedy, the coverage was finally over.

Robert Kennedy continued to use a number of the same rhetorical strategies that had previously appeared in the May 6, 1965 and July 9, 1965 speeches in this address. He accepted the Administration's definition of the war aims, a tactic that sought to create commonalities between himself and Johnson. He used inductive structures to encourage a sense of audience participation. In keeping with this strategy, Kennedy also remained on a peer level with the audience, displaying the same concerns they felt and always showing respect for their rationality and intelligence. Kennedy continued to quote considerable authority evidence, in particular, continuing the implication that John Kennedy would not have approved of the present Administration's policies regarding Vietnam. These strategies put Kennedy in a good position to provoke public argument, especially when he combined them with his increased concern for the beliefs and opinions of the audience. He not only made himself a peer of the audience, he clearly identified himself with them. He spoke as a "voice from within."⁷³ Kennedy spoke in a language that made him at home with the audience. They recognized his patriotic symbols, and this rhetoric had the potential to make RFK welcome in the minds of many Americans.

Unfortunately, Kennedy did not challenge the beliefs of these Americans. They might have welcomed him into their homes, but their view of the war did not budge one iota. A stock issues debater could have explained the problem to Kennedy. He did not create a need for change in the mind of the audience. Since he had spent so much time carefully defining the war in moral terms, he needed to present a reason for a new policy that rested on American values. This Kennedy

failed to do, leaving the symbolic realities of the audience intact. When he then asked the audience to risk America's prestige in a policy change, there existed little chance for acceptance. Kennedy introduced a concept, the inclusion of Communists in a government, that the Cold War mentality instantly rejected. Since Kennedy failed to force the audience to reconsider the views that formed that mentality, indeed used patriotic symbols that may well have fed into it, he invited the backlash that occurred. The familiar voice from within presented a very ugly policy proposal. Kennedy compounded the problem by his response to the whirlwind. The media constantly portrayed RFK's motives as political in nature.⁷⁴ Since he did not provide a moral reason for change, such as revealing his own horror at the war, he provided no alternative motivation for the audience to consider. When he then agreed with Moyers that he had not challenged Administration policy, he further reinforced this perception. Suddenly, he was not like the audience at all. He did not speak for America, he spoke for his own political gain. When the going got tough, Robert Kennedy collapsed. He bargained with Johnson's underlings. Such a perception of Kennedy did not encourage people to accept his request for policy re-examination.

Kennedy did not come away from this speech a completely crippled political figure. He still maintained an enthusiastic constituency that supported the Kennedy name, and, as the articles in the media pointed out, the Left became more enamored of Kennedy, even after his retreat. This statement, however, damaged Kennedy. He himself admitted that he had made "a few mistakes in handling it" and that it was

"unpopular politically." He insisted, however, that he "would do it all over again" if necessary."⁷⁵ Before that time arrived, Kennedy needed to refine his rhetorical strategy. In a sense, this statement is the most poignant of Kennedy's efforts, for he clearly identified the major problem. America wanted a negotiated settlement, but it did not want to concede the "one irreducible demand" of the other side, because, after two centuries of winning, it seemed so much like losing. Most opponents of the war, including Robert Kennedy, could not find a way to enter this universe of belief and persuade Americans to make the concession necessary to end the war.

NOTES

- ¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Robert Kennedy and His Times, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 789.
- ² Schlesinger, p. 789.
- ³ Schlesinger, p. 789.
- ⁴ Schlesinger, p. 789.
- ⁵ Schlesinger, pp. 746-9.
- ⁶ Schlesinger, p. 749. See also a more detailed account of the trip in William Vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman, On His Own: RFK 1964-1968, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1970), pp. 163-177.
- ⁷ See later analysis, esp. Chapter 4. For this view of the ideology of the New Left, see Jack Newfield, A Prophetic Minority, (New York: Signet Book, 1966), esp. pp. 91-3.
- ⁸ Alexander Kendrick, The Wound Within: America in the Vietnam Years 1945-1974, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974), pp. 218, 215.
- ⁹ Kendrick, p. 215.
- ¹⁰ Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 480.
- ¹¹ Kendrick, p. 215 contends that the battle at Ia Drang was a loss with heavy casualties. Karnow, p. 479 maintains that a "U.S. airborne division crushed a Viet Cong regiment." (my emphasis). Whatever the story and result, it was a major battle. The confusion today indicates the kind of data Johnson was dealing with in 1965.
- ¹² Chester Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam, (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970), p. 226.
- ¹³ Edward Jay Epstein, "The Televised War," in Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 211 provides an account of Cam Re and argues that before the Tet offensive, the media provided support for the American war effort.
- ¹⁴ Karnow, p. 481.
- ¹⁵ Karnow, p. 481.
- ¹⁶ "Vietnam," Gallup Political Index Report No. 4, September 1965, p. 9.
- ¹⁷ Vanden Heuvel and Gwirtzman, p. 217.

- 18 Karnow, pp. 482-484.
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- 20 Karnow, pp. 482-484.
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- 22 Cong. Rec., 31 January 1966, p. 1602.
- 23 Cong. Rec., 31 January 1966, p. 1602.
- 24 Cong. Rec., 31 January 1966, p. 1603.
- 25 Jack Newfield, Robert Kennedy: A Memoir, (New York: Berkeley, 1978), p. 123.
- 26 Newfield, p. 123.
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- 28 "Rusk Says Peace of World Is Issue In Vietnam War," op. cit.
- 29 Schlesinger, p. 793, Newfield, pp. 130-1.
- 30 These citations come from the text in U.S. News and World Report. That magazine reprinted the entire press release, as opposed to excerpt or the edited reading copy. Robert F. Kennedy, "Admit Them To a Share of Power and Responsibility," U.S. News and World Report, 7 March 1966, p. 104.
- 31 Kennedy, p. 104
- 32 Kennedy, p. 104.
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- 34 Kennedy, p. 104.
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- 42 Kennedy, p. 105.
- 43 Kennedy, p. 105.
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- 54 "Humphrey Scores Kennedy's Plan on Viet Cong Role," New York Times,
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CHAPTER FOUR

THE TURN TO OPPOSITION

The furor over the February 19, 1966, statement again quieted Kennedy. He had not found a good way to communicate his concern about the war to the American public. Moreover, the suspicion was growing among Kennedy and his supporters that LBJ would do exactly opposite of whatever Kennedy suggested just out of spite.¹ Such a perception did not encourage public statements. In April of 1966, Kennedy made his last formal statement of the year on Vietnam.

The impetus for the speech came from a Johnson Administration announcement of no sanctuary. If American planes engaged enemy planes over North Vietnam, American pilots would be free to pursue the enemy wherever they went, including China.² Naturally, this policy upset Kennedy, for it made more probable his greatest nightmare: Chinese intervention sparking World War III. In a short speech on the Senate floor, Kennedy expressed his disapproval of such a policy.³ He also noted that the Johnson Administration was once again concentrating on military matters, when only the creation of a "viable political structure in South Vietnam" would stabilize the situation in Vietnam.⁴ Apart from stating these two points, Kennedy said very little. As a matter of fact, he let two newspaper articles he inserted into the Congressional Record provide the bulk of his discourse.⁵ In press conferences, on the campaign trail in the fall for other candidates, or abroad, Kennedy refused to grapple with the issue and instead took refuge in broad generalities

about the complexity of such foreign policy decisions.⁶

Robert Kennedy, however, could never remain inactive and 1966 was no exception. While he failed to address the Vietnam question, a number of other statements affected his credibility and thus later influenced public reception of his speaking. In general, though, this period of quiet boosted Kennedy's ratings in the opinion polls.⁷ The explanation for this phenomenon is that Kennedy's popularity tended to wax and wane with Johnson's ratings. The more unpopular Johnson became, the more popular Kennedy, as the natural alternative to Johnson, became. RFK's own actions, however, also affected the polls.

In June, for instance, Kennedy conducted perhaps the most successful of his foreign trips, a journey to South Africa.⁹ He stepped into a tense situation. His invitation had come from one of the major protest groups in South Africa and his reputation as a strong liberal critic of apartheid preceded him. If he condemned the South African government too strongly, he ran the risk of becoming an outsider agitator and verifying to American observers his irresponsibility. On the other hand, if he failed to attack apartheid, the political consequences in the United States would be catastrophic, and he would greatly disappoint the people who had invited him.¹⁰ Kennedy responded by focusing on the value of an individual. This strategy of presenting the individual's responsibilities, duties, and rights also permeated Kennedy's Vietnam rhetoric and these South African speeches clearly revealed the political philosophy that guided Robert Kennedy. RFK made the welfare of the individual the measure of the society. He emphasized the universality of the "community of man [sic]." With words that echoed his brother's famous Berlin speech, RFK

argued that the fate of any one person affected all people. Finally, he explicitly contended that the most pragmatic policy was idealism:

It is not realistic or hard-headed to solve problems and take action unguided by ultimate moral aims and values. It is thoughtless folly. For it ignores the realities of human faith and passion and belief; forces ultimately more powerful than all the calculations of economists or generals It is this new idealism which is also, I believe the common heritage of a generation which has learned that while efficiency can lead to the camps at Auschwitz, only the ideals of humanity and love can climb the hill to Acropolis.¹¹

This statement was Kennedy's most eloquent argument for idealism. The rhetoric in South Africa forecast the major themes of the Vietnam discourse. Idealistic policy guided by moral values was the most practical policy. The individuals in society cannot relinquish responsibility to a nameless, faceless state. The success of the South African trip could only have reinforced in Kennedy's mind the efficacy of such strategies. Unfortunately for Kennedy, the rest of the year would see few such triumphs.

His troubles began in the summer of 1966. Attorney General Katzenbach informed Kennedy that the Justice Department planned to file a brief with the Supreme Court, confessing that the FBI had engaged in illegal wire-tapping in 1963.¹² Kennedy faced a no-win situation. Either he knew about the wiretaps, and acted illegally, or he did not know, and had acted incompetently. Kennedy preferred charges of lax administration to illegal activity and insisted he knew nothing about the taps. The attacks on this issue swirled about him for the rest of his life. As two of his strongest assets were his honesty and his integrity, the controversy hurt.¹³

The wiretapping affair hit a peak in December of 1966 with calls for a congressional investigation.¹⁴ This was unfortunate timing, for Kennedy also found himself embroiled in a messy controversy over William Manchester's book, The Death of a President. In 1964, in order to preempt other accounts, Robert and Jacqueline Kennedy commissioned Manchester to write a book about the death of John Kennedy. "On March 28, 1964, Manchester signed a contract providing that 'the final text shall not be published unless and until approved' by Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy."¹⁵ Manchester finished in late 1966, and the Kennedys objected to the text. Jacqueline Kennedy felt that Manchester used material from oral history interviews that was too personal. Manchester agreed in some instances, and excised certain passages, but he argued the main motive was political.¹⁶ Schlesinger agreed, but maintained that the original text portrayed Johnson as an essentially evil person, the personification of the Dallas that killed John Kennedy.¹⁷ This could hardly improve the already strained relations between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Again, Robert Kennedy found himself between a rock and a hard place. If he had let the book appear with the blessing provided by the contract, it would seem as if he had commissioned a character assassination of LBJ. On the other hand, when he decided to try to change the book, he revived all of the old charges of ruthlessness, at the same time the wiretapping controversy also emphasized those qualities. Events of the winter of 1966 caused a precipitous drop in Kennedy's fortunes.

He could hardly find solace in the progress of the war in Vietnam. Some five thousand Americans died in Vietnam in 1966.¹⁸ The Joint Chiefs of Staff thought that the 543,000 troops they wanted to have in Vietnam by the end of 1967 would turn the trick and Johnson himself went to Vietnam

and urged American troops "to nail the coonskin to the wall."¹⁹ The United States vigorously bombed North Vietnam throughout this period, with the approval of 67 percent of its citizens. Only 24 percent thought that the bombing should stop.²⁰ In November of 1966, 51 percent of Americans said that the United States had not made a mistake by entering the war.²¹ In September of 1966, 55 percent of the country felt that the Administration should increase the commitment to Vietnam.²²

Despite the polls, division continued to grow. The protest movement became more active and, in late 1966, the North Vietnamese allowed the first American reporter into the country since the start of the conflict. Writing from the North, Harrison Salisbury reported that the bombing raids were not the surgical strikes that the Johnson Administration claimed. He disclosed that cities and towns had come under attack, with considerable civilian casualties.²³ Further, a report commissioned by the government maintained that the bombing campaign was doomed to failure.²⁴ In words that echoed Kennedy's speech of January 31, 1966, the report argued that the rural economy of North Vietnam could not be bombed into submission. A CIA summary sent to Johnson at about the same time also questioned the effectiveness of the air war.²⁵ Finally, more and more of America's allies doubted the Administration's course and voiced their opinions, as Robert Kennedy discovered in early 1967.

In February of that year, Kennedy set off for Europe. Journalists likened the trip to that of a President. U.S. News and World Report called the tour "unprecedented" and Newsweek stated that it had "all of the earmarks of a Presidential procession."²⁷ In France, Kennedy met with Etienne Manac'h, the director of Far Eastern Affairs at the Quai d'Orsay.

Kennedy took John Gunther Dean, the Vietnam expert at the American embassy, along with him. During the conversation, Dean picked out a "peace feeler." Manac'h seemed to be saying that the North Vietnamese had told him that they would drop all preconditions for negotiations; they only wanted a bombing halt. This was a new position on opening the talks and constituted a breakthrough. Dean drafted a cable about the "feeler" and sent it to the State Department.²⁸ Combined with later statements from Premier Kosygin of the Soviet Union, it looked as if the negotiations might have a chance to begin.²⁹

Meanwhile Robert Kennedy had no idea that he had heard a peace feeler. The situation worsened when someone leaked the cable to Newsweek and the magazine reported that Kennedy had participated in this diplomatic flurry.³⁰ Johnson was already enraged that Kennedy had met with European heads of state. Now it seemed as if the Senator wanted to conduct his own negotiations. When Kennedy returned, he sought a meeting with Johnson to explain that he did not know what had happened. At the meeting on February 6, tempers exploded. According to various accounts Johnson told Kennedy that America would win the war in the next six months and that all the doves would be politically dead. Johnson also questioned Kennedy's patriotism. Kennedy nearly stormed out. While he did not treat the press to something quite that exciting, the damage was done.³¹ Time reported (and later retracted) that Kennedy called the President an "S.O.B."³² Kennedy appeared to be interfering with foreign policy, and his image suffered accordingly.³³ He came away from that meeting sure that Johnson sought military victory and determined to challenge such a policy. He ordered his aides to prepare

a major address on the war.

Johnson also realized the open break had arrived, and began to plan a series of responses to the upcoming speech. He knew Kennedy would propose a bombing halt to take advantage of the peace feelers. Kennedy also presented a three-step plan to bring peace, but the bombing halt was the clearest and easiest distinction between the two positions. Before Kennedy opened his mouth, William Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam, denounced a bombing pause.³⁴ Averell Harriman asked Kennedy "'in the national interest' not to encourage Hanoi and undermine the harassed President."³⁵ On the day of the speech, March 2, Johnson made

. . . . two unscheduled speeches in Washington, held an unscheduled news conference to announce that Russian Premier Kosygin had agreed to talk on reducing the stockpile of nuclear weapons, announced that he was inviting all of the Nation's governors to the White House, had Senator Henry Jackson read on the floor of the Senate a predated letter from him, explaining why the bombing was necessary, and confirmed the rumor that his daughter Lucy was pregnant.³⁶

Johnson still could not deny Kennedy the headlines.

Robert Kennedy's speech began by emphasizing the remoteness and complexity of the war: "Mr. President, 10,000 miles from this chamber we are engaged in a violent conflict that has engulfed the land of Vietnam."³⁷ The war presented "tangled and resistant complexities."³⁸ Kennedy, then, opened by discussing the reasons for the complacency of the audience. The battles raged outside of the experience of most Americans. There existed few reasons for them to feel responsible for American actions in prosecuting the war, nor did the price of the conflict seem to outweigh the cost in prestige of compromise. People simply followed the President, and Kennedy

acknowledged the "grave and painful responsibility" borne by Johnson.³⁹ Kennedy still refused to condemn the President publicly. RFK's introduction established the problems of the war and the difficulty in finding any sort of a solution. Such a mainstream position partially relieved Johnson of responsibility for failing to find peace and it placed Kennedy in the middle of the political spectrum.

Kennedy continued the process of affirming his credentials as a moderate by again accepting the Administration's goals in Vietnam.⁴⁰ He understood Johnson's problems, he recognized the complexity of the war, and he refused to join the young radicals in demanding immediate withdrawal. Kennedy remained a reasonable man seeking a reasonable solution to the Vietnam war. In other words, he was a traditional Democrat. He parted from the conventions, however, when he admitted his culpability for the current policy:

Three Presidents have taken action in Vietnam. As one who was involved in many of those decisions, I can testify that if fault is to be found or responsibility assessed, there is enough to go around for all--including myself.⁴¹

This key passage accomplished several strategic goals. First, he met the issue of his "dramatic conversion" directly. Rather than finding some excuse for his change of heart, he simply admitted error and asked to be held responsible for that error. Second, that admission mirrored the change taking place throughout the country. Kennedy's conversion made it easier for others to do the same thing; as long as no authority figure had taken such a step, few others were likely to take such a risk. RFK created a bond between himself and those who also were once true believers and who now felt doubt. Third, the strategy minimized the

personal conflict with Johnson. Kennedy not only praised the President, the Senator accepted at least some of the fire for a controversial policy. Finally, such an admission allowed Kennedy to place responsibility on every American for Vietnam. Without his own admission, Kennedy would have practiced the same confrontational style of many other war protestors. He would have attacked the American society as if he were morally superior, setting himself in direct opposition to much of the audience.⁴² Such a situation would not have provoked soul searching, for Kennedy would have been an alien, just as the student radicals were, and the audience would not have responded. Instead, Kennedy spoke as the voice from within, sharing the pain with the audience, and sharing in the search for a reasonable solution. This admission of responsibility and acceptance of fault was the keystone of Kennedy's strategy on March 2nd.

Since he had dismissed blame as an issue, Kennedy proceeded to define the real problem for the audience. As he had done many times before, he presented a moral perspective on the war. The pragmatic goals of the country could best be achieved while seeking the "most compassionate cause of humanity--the common cause of peace."⁴³ Using an eloquent parallel structure based on the phrase, "still there is no peace," Kennedy expressed the frustration of the audience with a Vietnam policy that expended enormous resources with few results.⁴⁴ For the first time in his Vietnam discourse, Kennedy pinpointed and detailed the futility of Johnson's policies. RFK emphasized the disparity of the combatants and the nature of the war:

We have sent more than 400,000 men into battle. Fleets of extraordinarily complex planes pour their devastation

upon the paths and villages which divide an ancient jungle. The most powerful country the world has ever known now turns its strength and will upon a small and primitive land.⁴⁵

By the end of this section, Kennedy had praised and noted the extravagant efforts of politicians, diplomats, and soldiers to end the war. Yet that one damning phrase revealed that all of these efforts had come to naught. Implicitly, Kennedy argued that no effort, perhaps short of nuclear attacks, could succeed, for if these tremendous exertions had failed, what remained? Finally, Kennedy created identification while causing discomfort. All felt the frustration, and could unite with Kennedy on that point. At the same time, Kennedy's depiction of the war caused unease. America, "the most powerful country the world has known," was "pouring devastation" on a "small and primitive land." Somehow, that did not seem American or right. The policy of peace instead brought death.

Kennedy, however, did not leave the blame primarily on America's doorstep. He claimed "the fault rests largely with our adversaries" for the continuing war.⁴⁶ Again, Kennedy placed himself in the middle of the political spectrum, agreeing with the conventional view of Communism as evil and of Communists as warmongers. This position, of course, represented the primary threat to Kennedy's arguments. If the Communists were at fault, then there was nothing the United States could do, and no one need feel guilty or responsible.⁴⁷ The audience could then reject any effort at genuine argument about the war. Their present set of beliefs provided a logical answer for the continuing conflict.

Robert Kennedy recognized the merits of this position: "If our enemy will not accept peace, it cannot come."⁴⁸ Kennedy, however, began the process of provoking the audience to rethink its positions by invoking a legal and religious standard known to most Americans:

Yet we must also look to ourselves. We must have no doubt that it is not our acts or failures which bar the way; that there is nothing we have left undone which we might have done. Our own course must be subject to ceaseless and critical examination, not with the certainty that people can take comfort and strength from the knowledge that America has taken every step, done every action, and performed every deed within its power to put an end to this distant and ferocious war.⁴⁹

This is an extraordinary paragraph which uses three rhetorical strategies aimed at allowing Kennedy to confront the audience while creating unity. First, Kennedy imposed the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard found in American courtrooms as a criterion for American policy in Vietnam. The clear presumption of such a standard, combined with the second strategy, the familiar echo of John Kennedy's Inaugural, made this a powerful argument. Finally, the first three lines of the argument echo the prayer of confession known to many religious groups in America. People routinely ask forgiveness not only for the evil they have done, but also for what they have failed to do. In this paragraph, then, Kennedy demanded that the audience invoke their own religious, legal, and political values to conduct a searching examination of American policy in Vietnam. RFK's words had the power to disrupt the belief system of the audience, clearly implying that all had sinned in the past, while creating unity by including himself in those sins and through his participation in their

value structure. Policy questions, however, almost always contained doubt. Why should these rigid standards be applied to American policy in Vietnam?

Kennedy hinted at the answer when he indicated that "our own people can take comfort and strength" from these standards. Kennedy demanded these criteria because he felt that all Americans were responsible for the horror in Vietnam, including himself, and he planned to assign them that burden. The only way most people could conscionably prosecute the war with such a perspective was by adhering to the standards. If Kennedy's proposal provided even the faintest glimmer of peace, the American people must accept it, for, if they did not, they would be guilty of causing the carnage in Vietnam. Kennedy confronted the American people with their responsibility for the deaths caused by the war to try to force them to change policy. Essentially, he asked them to put themselves and him on trial for murder before themselves and God. Only if America had done everything possible to bring about peace were its citizens innocent of sanctioning mass slaughter. By forcing the audience to confront its moral responsibility for this carnage, he provoked a public re-examination of policy in Vietnam.

He continued the process by repeating that the war may not have been "our doing."⁵⁰ Kennedy reiterated the theme of the introduction, noting the remoteness of the war and the difficulty of feeling "in our hearts what this war means to the people of Vietnam."⁵¹ It must seem like the Apocalypse, Kennedy said, again invoking religious values by quoting the prophecy of John in Revelations 6:7. He asked the audience to dwell "on the horror" of the war.⁵² For the first time, perhaps, the audience

came face to face with the human consequences of the war. Kennedy described in detail "the vacant moment of amazed fear as a mother and child watch death fall from the improbable machines sent by a country they barely comprehend."⁵³ In stark contrast to the official language on the war, Kennedy used terms that put the audience in the shoes of the mother and her child. It was not napalm, it was "death by fire." It was not a plane, it was an "improbable machine." It was not a bombing sortie, it was death.⁵⁴ RFK made the audience feel the terror of a civil official facing death at the hands of a Viet Cong assassin and, finally, he spoke of "the young men, Vietnamese and American, who in an instant sense the night of death destroying yesterday's promise of family and land and home."⁵⁵

He described in concrete detail the horror in Vietnam; he did not allow his audience to evade the devastation of the war. Kennedy completed his argument for a rigid standard by assigning responsibility:

All we say and all we do must be informed by our awareness that this horror is partly our responsibility; not just a nation's responsibility but yours and mine. It is we who live in abundance and send our young men out to die. It is our chemicals that scorch the children and our bombs that level the villages. We are all participants. To know this, and to feel the burden of this responsibility is not to ignore important interests, nor to forget that freedom and security must, at times, be paid for in blood. Still even though we know, as a nation, what it is necessary to do, we must also feel, as men, the anguish of what it is we are doing.⁵⁶

Senator Kennedy accomplished several important objectives in this statement. He made the deaths of that mother and child the individual responsibility of every single American, including himself. Only the

earlier admission of his own responsibility allowed him to adopt such a risky strategy. The audience, potentially, would not react negatively because Kennedy shared the burden with them. Both he and the audience had always realized the national interest and neither had ever denigrated its importance. Now he and the audience realized the pain of the war and the daunting burden of waging it. All of these deaths were on their heads if they missed an opportunity for peace. Thus, "our apprehension of this war's agony now joins with other mounting urgencies to command us to seek every opportunity, open every door, and tread every path which may lead to the end of the war."⁵⁷ Again, the familiar phraseology of the Kennedy Inaugural reinforced the standards Robert Kennedy demanded. RFK used the values of the audience to force them to confront the human devastation of the war and to place themselves on trial for those deaths. Such an experience shattered complacency and created the conditions for genuine argument.

Kennedy also tied the war to other, more pragmatic concerns of the audience. The destruction made the reconstruction of South Vietnam more difficult and expensive. The war increased tensions among the superpowers and causes disagreements between American and its allies. The conflict consumed resources needed to alleviate poverty at home.⁵⁸

All of these costs, moral and pragmatic, were in "pursuit of what Secretary McNamara has called limited objectives--not conquest or alliance, but the protection of South Vietnam from domination by force."⁵⁹ Kennedy pointed out that the government had always said this objective could best be achieved through negotiations. Kennedy again used the strategy of quoting the Administration and aligning his interests with their goals.

This passage, however, also pointed out the disparity between those goals and the methods being used in Vietnam. Limited goals logically required limited means. Kennedy suggested that the time had come to turn to more modest methods, for America was "balanced between" hints of peace and spreading conflict.⁶⁰ Obviously, the moral, and now, logical, forces in the situation rejected spreading the war. Before presenting his policy alternative, Kennedy dealt with one last objection.

He realized that many would claim that a negotiating initiative damaged the war effort and demonstrated weakness to the enemy and the world. Kennedy developed two responses. First, a peace initiative would not change the military picture. "If our effort fails," he said, "then the conflict will continue."⁶¹ He also argued that, if the discussions were a failure, then we could "reexamine our entire military strategy in light of the changing nature of the war."⁶² America had nothing to lose militarily. Second, he dealt with the prestige question. Turning the objection on its head, Kennedy maintained that it was our great prestige that allowed us to take initiatives: "No one is going to defeat us, or slaughter our troops, or destroy our prestige, because we dare take initiatives for peace."⁶³ Using support from the Bible: "Where no counsel is the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors, there is safety," Kennedy contended that advice, negotiating initiatives, and help should be welcomed from all quarters.⁶⁴

Senator Kennedy may have opened people's minds to the possibility of change, but he still had to persuade them to accept his proposals. He spent the remainder of the speech defending the practicality of his

ideas. Such a defense was not hard to make, for Kennedy had constructed easy criteria. If the plan offered the slightest chance for success, then the conscience of the audience would demand assent, for otherwise, the audience, not the Communists, would be to blame for the carnage of the war.

Kennedy⁶⁵ presented his alternative in three sequential steps: 1) Halt the bombing to take advantage of recent hints that a halt would bring negotiations. 2) Continue the negotiations without increased fighting. 3) Seek a final settlement giving the people of South Vietnam self-determination. The chronological actions gave the plan an aura of practicality. It seemed, on the surface, logical and attractive.⁶⁵

Kennedy knew from Johnson's preliminary salvos that the bombing halt would be the most controversial proposal. He developed a significant and effective defense to possible attacks along three lines. First, he argued for the credibility of the recent hints about negotiations. The feelers came from Kosygin, Soviet President Podgorny, and from the Foreign Minister of North Vietnam. Certainly, these men should have authority. Kennedy admitted the hints had often been obscure, but he used an excellent analogy to bolster the need to take advantage of them. President Kennedy had received just such contradictory signals from Krushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis. John Kennedy boldly seized upon the more conciliatory signal, and this decision resulted in success. Robert Kennedy proposed that the United States do the same thing in March of 1967.⁶⁶ This analogy not only supported Kennedy's claim, it reminded the audience of his participation in a foreign policy success. Second, Kennedy pointed

that America halted the bombing a year before without any evidence that the action would bring negotiations. "Why then do we not try again in this far more hopeful moment?"⁶⁷ Finally, Kennedy indicted the effectiveness of the bombing as a means to accomplish American objectives in Vietnam by using a familiar strategy: reluctant testimony. Carefully quoting the reasons President Johnson had provided for the bombing at Johns Hopkins in 1965, Kennedy concluded that the presence of 400,000 fighting men accomplished the function of increasing the confidence of the South Vietnamese.⁶⁸ The troops also achieved the objective of convincing the Communists of our commitment to Vietnam.⁶⁹ Kennedy noted that the third purpose of the bombing was to "slow down aggression." He quoted General Ridgeway, "the commander of our last ground war in Asia," General James Gavin, and Secretary of Defense McNamara, all of whom concluded that the bombing did not slow the infiltration rates.⁷⁰ Kennedy ended this section by refuting the punishment argument. Many felt that America ought to punish aggression. Kennedy asked whether we had the moral right "to play the role of an avenging angel pouring death and destruction on the roads and factories and homes of a guilty land."⁷¹

RFK based the workability of the next two steps of his plan on international supervision. The United Nations would step in and ensure the fighting would not escalate while negotiations continued.⁷² They would also be the agency that could conduct free and fair elections, insuring the participation of all elements in South Vietnam.⁷³ Kennedy, in keeping with the tone of this part of the address, offered these proposals as "suggestions to be refined and revised by the critical examination of

other minds."⁷⁴ However speculative the proposals were, Kennedy provided enough backing in terms of analogies and authority evidence to pass his test.⁷⁵ These suggestions offered enough of a practical possibility for success to demand assent.

Kennedy concluded the speech by returning to the stakes involved in the quest for peace. These stakes were the key, for they provided the reason for the acceptance of speculative plan. If Americans did not want to be blamed for the death of "a young American even now preparing for the day's battle," then they had better adopt Robert Kennedy's solution. As he summarized:

There is great principle and there is also human anguish.
If we can protect the one and prevent the other, then
there is no effort too great for us to make.⁷⁶

Admittedly, the country failed to unite behind Kennedy's proposals. Lyndon Johnson launched a counteroffensive, beginning with the letter to Henry Jackson.⁷⁷ Senator Jackson read the letter on the floor of the Senate, and it functioned as a rebuttal to Kennedy's position. It also hinted that Kennedy risked doing the boys overseas a disservice. The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, argued that "proposals 'substantially similar' to those put forth by the New York Democrat in a Senate speech today had been explored 'without result.'"⁷⁸ The Administration rejected Kennedy's ideas, continued the escalation in Vietnam, and mobilized the considerable firepower at its disposal to attack the Senator.⁷⁹

Other political figures around the nation lined up as expected. Given the ratio of hawks to doves, that did not help Kennedy very much. Senators Fulbright, Clark, Tydings, Pell, Gore, and Cooper, the only Republican ,

supported RFK.⁸⁰ Senator Charles Percy, another Republican, termed Kennedy's proposals useful, but said that the politics of the Democratic Party damaged the peace process.⁸¹ The Majority Leader of the Senate, Mike Mansfield, sought the middle ground between Kennedy and Johnson.⁸² Most other political figures, including major Republicans such as Dirksen and Nixon, attacked Kennedy.⁸³

Naturally, the speech attracted heavy media coverage. The press concentrated on the political consequences. Kennedy's proposals were seen as the means he planned to use to wrest the White House away from Johnson. As such, he was playing politics with an important issue. Newsweek, for instance, wrote:

The implied and always anonymous charge that Kennedy had thus sabotaged the peace process seemed debatable at best--but it was equally doubtful that the declaration of open warfare between the President and the Senator had advanced their common objective: to bring the war to an end.⁸⁴

Time and U.S. News and World Report also talked primarily of politics, while devoting considerable space to critics of the speech. Time, in particular, sought to refute Kennedy's arguments.⁸⁵ U.S. News used its "Washington Whispers" column to undermine Kennedy's authority:

Senator Robert Kennedy (Dem.) of New York is regarded by most of the Democratic leaders as a disruptive influence inside the party because of the Senator's repeated opposition to President Johnson on foreign and domestic policies, and particularly on the Vietnam War.⁸⁶

"Washington Whispers" of February 27, the week before the speech, gave Johnson space to worry publicly that Kennedy might become another "Harold

Stassen."⁸⁷ The Wall Street Journal attacked the speech on policy grounds, while the New York Times accepted the substance of the address.⁸⁸ Neither James Reston, nor C.L. Sulzberger, however, were enamored of Kennedy's ideas.⁸⁹ The Christian Science Monitor articulated the anti-Kennedy viewpoint most clearly:

Whereas the Kennedy speech seems unlikely to affect American policy on Vietnam, it can have a greater effect at home. For when Senator Robert F. Kennedy breaks with President Johnson, the country knows there is more in the offing than merely the conduct of the war.

There is, first, Senator Kennedy's unceasing and purposeful determination to seize upon every issue which he believes can bring him closer to the White House. There is, second, the never-healed animosity of the Kennedy group for the man who succeeded John Kennedy in the Presidency. There is, third, the continuing effort of the Senator's campaign managers to invest everything he says with double importance regardless of the subject or whether others have said it earlier.

Thus, among the certain effects of the Kennedy speech will be to heighten domestic tension over the war and to deepen political cleavages as the 1968 Presidential campaign approaches.⁹⁰

The American public gave some assent to this anti-Kennedy viewpoint. The Senator's other problems combined with the speech to drive his poll rating down, and he fell behind Johnson 45-41 percent in March.⁹¹ Gallup also discovered that of the 47 percent who knew the difference between the Johnson and Kennedy positions on the war, 59 percent preferred Johnson and only 30 percent chose Kennedy.⁹² Even that, however, was an improvement over the figures on the question of a bombing halt asked before the speech.⁹³ By May, LBJ ran ahead of Kennedy 49 percent to 37 percent among the general population and 52 percent to 39 percent among Democrats.⁹⁴ Kennedy's legions did not rally around the standard.

One explanation for media focus on the political ramifications is provided by Todd Gitlin. In his 1980 book, The Whole World is Watching, Gitlin argues that the media in the United States use "frames" to organize their coverage:

Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which the symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether visual or nonvisual.⁹⁵

For Gitlin, and for Kennedy in 1968, the key questions involve the frame around the event. What frame is it? Why one and not another? Gitlin provides at least one criterion for the selection of a frame: "Keep in mind that the traditional narrative structure of a news story selects for dramatic (preferably melodramatic) conflict Political polarization made good copy."⁹⁶ While Gitlin's analysis applies specifically to the SDS, the theory fits the coverage of Kennedy's discourse. The dramatic handle, the "peg," was the conflict between the two titans of the Democratic Party. Add in the bonus that the one was the brother of the dead President the other replaced and the fact of personal animosity between them, and the story was irresistible. The newspeople grabbed the conflict, while the editorial pages piously worried about the effect the conflict would have on the prospects for peace. Kennedy's substantive proposals failed to match the excitement of a battle between the crown prince and the President.

For Kennedy, such coverage yielded unfortunate results, for it emphasized his own worst qualities. He became the ruthless politician who, even in wartime, sought to undermine the President and grab power

for himself. Even when people doubted the President, they were likely to support him when he came under direct attack as he tried to lead the country through a crisis. Further, Kennedy's refusal to openly grapple the President damaged him. It appeared as if Kennedy harbored Presidential ambitions, judging from the press, while hiding them, judging from the speeches. The combination made Kennedy seem like a cynical politician, not a leader in a moral crusade to end the war.

The refusal to attack Johnson also failed to allow Kennedy's rhetorical form to complete itself. Kennedy sought to use confrontative strategies to provoke genuine argument and change policy. Recall that Scott and Smith write: "Justifying a sense of rightness and, perhaps, firing a sense of guilt in the other is the hopeful outcome of the many coy confrontations of some shy radicals."⁹⁷ Robert Kennedy used "coy" confrontation to fire that sense of guilt in the audience and, as Natanson demands, to "existentially disrupt" the "affective world" of the audience.⁹⁸ Kennedy did not wish to destroy the present order. Instead, he sought to shock the audience out of its complacency, to put the audience in a frame of mind to accept his policy proposal. The assignment of personal responsibility for scorching young children and killing American soldiers certainly had the potential to challenge the "immediate life of feeling and sensibility" of the audience.⁹⁹ Kennedy, however, despite his acceptance of blame, refused to accept his own challenge to "seek every opportunity, open every door, and tread every path" for peace. In theory, Kennedy could persuade Johnson to change policy if the country would turn against the policy. By not attacking Johnson, Kennedy held

his political options open. He did not have to run to fulfill that responsibility. In fact, everyone knew Johnson would not accept Kennedy's proposals. It was becoming increasingly clear that the only way Kennedy could implement his ideas was to challenge Johnson openly. This he refused to do. Either he was willing to accept all of this carnage on his conscience or he did not really believe what he was saying. Kennedy's rhetorical strategies painted the picture of an apocalyptic world where all needed to take a stand against evil. Yet, at this time, he refused to attack Johnson and clung to the notion that he could influence Administration policy from the Senate. If Kennedy continued this line of argument in the future, it would eventually compel him to challenge Johnson to retain any hope of changing policy. If he refused, he would consistently face the signs that had started to appear when he spoke on college campuses: "Hawk, Dove, or Chicken?"

NOTES

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy and His Times, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 798, and Jack Newfield, Robert Kennedy: A Memoir, (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1978), p. 134.

² See Kennedy's inserts into the Congressional Record, 27 April 1966, pp. 9041-2.

³ Cong. Rec., 27 April 1966, p. 9041.

⁴ Cong. Rec., p. 9041.

⁵ Cong. Rec., 27 April, 1966, pp. 9041-2.

⁶ Newfield, p. 133. Schlesinger, p. 797, notes that Kennedy turned to jokes when asked about his relationship to Johnson.

⁷ Schlesinger, p. 817.

⁸ Schlesinger, p. 817.

⁹ Schlesinger, pp. 800-807, provides an account of the trip and the positive response.

¹⁰ See Harriet Rudolph, "Robert F. Kennedy's University of Capetown Address," Central States Speech Journal, 33, (Spring 1982), pp. 319-32 for a good rhetorical analysis of the trip.

¹¹ Robert F. Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation Address," Speeches and Press Releases: RFK Senate Papers, Box 2, June 6, 1966.

¹² Schlesinger, pp. 817-18.

¹³ Schlesinger, pp. 817-18.

¹⁴ Schlesinger, p. 818.

¹⁵ Schlesinger, p. 818.

¹⁶ William Manchester, "Controversy," in Controversy and Other Essays in Journalism, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1976), pp. 1-76. Manchester provides a long, clear but somewhat bitter account of the controversy that emphasizes the political reasons for the changes.

¹⁷ Schlesinger, pp. 818-22.

¹⁸ Alexander Kendrick, The World Within: America in the Vietnam Years 1945-1974, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1974), pp. 227-30.

- 19 Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 501, tells the story of Johnson's trip to Camrahn Bay and his unusual exhortation. The statistic is from Kendrick, p. 230.
- 20 "Vietnam--Should U.S. Continue Bombing?" The Gallup Opinion Index, Report No. 21, March 1967, p. 5.
- 21 "Vietnam--Did We Make a Mistake?" The Gallup Political Index Report No. 18, November-December 1966, p. 11.
- 22 "Vietnam", The Gallup Political Index Report No. 16, September 1966, p. 6.
- 23 Karnow, p. 489-90.
- 24 Karnow, p. 499.
- 25 Karnow, pp. 503-4.
- 26 Schlesinger, p. 825, notes that Kennedy could find no leader in Europe who supported American Vietnam policy.
- 27 "Bobby Kennedy's Tour: Mostly Political?" U.S. News and World Report, 13 February 1967, p. 20, and "Peace? Hints, Signs, Hopes," Newsweek, 13 February 1967, p. 33-5.
- 28 Schlesinger, p. 825.
- 29 The entire bizarre account of this period is best told by a participant, Chester Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam, (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1970), pp. 325-368. Cooper confirms Kennedy's view that the Administration "was just not interested in negotiations to the extent necessary to prevent military actions from interfering with or even negating diplomatic initiatives."
- 30 Schlesinger, p. 825-7.
- 31 Schlesinger, p. 828.
- 32 Schlesinger, p. 828.
- 33 Schlesinger, p. 828.
- 34 Schlesinger, p. 830.
- 35 Schlesinger, p. 830.
- 36 William J. Vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman, On His Own: RFK 1964-1968, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1970), p. 254.

37 Cong. Rec., 2 March 1967, p. 5279. The text has been verified with the RFK Senate Papers.

38 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

39 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

40 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

41 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

42 Scott and Smith spend most of their time describing this kind of confrontation. Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59, February 1969, pp. 1-11.

43 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

44 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

45 Cong. Rec., p. 5279.

46 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

47 Refer to "Did We Make A Mistake" in fn. 21.

48 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

49 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

50 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

51 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

52 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

53 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

54 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

55 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

56 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

57 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

58 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

59 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

60 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.

- 61 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.
- 62 Cong. Rec., p. 5281.
- 63 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.
- 64 Cong. Rec., p. 5280.
- 65 Cong. Rec., p. 5281.
- 66 Cong. Rec., p. 5281.
- 67 Cong. Rec., p. 5281.
- 68 Cong. Rec., p. 5282.
- 69 Cong. Rec., p. 5282.
- 70 Cong. Rec., p. 5282.
- 71 Cong. Rec., p. 5282.
- 72 Cong. Rec., p. 5282-3.
- 73 Cong. Rec., p. 5282-3.
- 74 Cong. Rec., p. 5284.
- 75 Cong. Rec., p. 5284.
- 76 Cong. Rec., p. 5284.
- 77 Cong. Rec., pp. 5289-90.
- 78 Benjamin Welles, "Rusk Recalls Hostile Acts After Past Bombing Halts," New York Times, 3 March 1967, Sec. 1, p. 1, col. 5.
- 79 Richard L. Strout, "Week That Was," Christian Science Monitor, 6 March 1967, Sec. 1, p. 3, cols. 1-2.
- 80 Schlesinger, p. 833.
- 81 "Rift in Congress Over War Widens," New York Times, 4 March 1967, Sec. 1, p. 1, col. 7.
- 82 Cong. Rec., 2 March 1967, pp. 5285-6.
- 83 John Galloway, ed. The Kennedys and Vietnam, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1971), p. 96.

- 84 "Men At War: RFK vs. LBJ," Newsweek, 13 March 1967, p. 34.
- 85 "The War: Toughened Mood," Time, 13 March 1967, p. 21.
- 86 "Washington Whispers," U.S. News and World Report, 27 March 1967, p. 32.
- 87 "Washington Whispers," U.S. News and World Report, 27 February 1967, p. 31.
- 88 "Precedent of Panmunjon," Wall Street Journal, 6 March 1967, Sec. 1, p. 12, cols. 1-2. "The Vietnam Debate," New York Times, 3 March 1967, Sec. 1, p. 34, col. 1.
- 89 James Reston, "Washington: Johnson and Kennedy on Vietnam," New York Times, 5 March 1967, Sec. E, p. 8, cols. 3-4. C.L. Sulzberger, "Foreign Affairs: Politics and Policy," New York Times, 5 March 1964, Sec. E, p. 8, cols. 3-4.
- 90 "Appraisal on Kennedy," Christian Science Monitor, Sec. 1, p. 18, col. 1.
- 91 "Johnson v. Kennedy: Showdown Test," Gallup Opinion Index Report No. 22, p. 6.
- 92 "Kennedy-Johnson Vietnam Policy," Gallup Opinion Index Report No. 22, April 1967, p. 6.
- 93 See fn. 20.
- 94 "Johnson v. Kennedy," Gallup Opinion Index Report No. 24, June 1967, p. 9.
- 95 Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 7.
- 96 Gitlin, p. 90. Realize also that many perceived this conflict as the beginning of campaign coverage, which, as Crouse notes, would also lead to an emphasis on conflict and drama. Timothy Crouse, The Boys On The Bus, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), pp. 33-6.
- 97 Scott and Smith, p. 10.
- 98 Maurice Natanson, "The Claims of Immediacy," in Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation, ed. Maurice Natanson and Henry Johnstone, (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1965), p. 19.
- 99 Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

A MORAL CRISIS

The March 2nd speech marked a turning point for Robert Kennedy. Despite any criticism, he would continue to speak out on Vietnam. Newfield argues that the speech "emancipated Kennedy psychologically and intellectually about Vietnam."¹ This emotional catharsis cost Kennedy political prestige. He fell behind the President in public opinion polls, and his continued refusal to attack Johnson openly hurt his standing among his natural constituency, the anti-war young.² That refusal became more and more difficult as summer turned to fall and the talk turned to presidential politics. The Democratic left sought a challenger to Lyndon Johnson, and the pressure on Robert Kennedy began to mount.

Unfortunately for Lyndon Johnson, he could take joy only in his margin over Robert Kennedy that gloomy summer. The public's approval of his handling of Vietnam dropped steadily throughout this period. Further, Johnson faced yet more critical decisions about the war. In the spring of 1967, General Westmoreland came back from Vietnam with another troop request. While optimistic in public, in private he warned the President that, at present levels, this war of attrition could continue indefinitely. If, however, Johnson could see his way clear to send another one hundred thousand troops, the war could end in three years. "Add yet another one hundred thousand: he could shrink the schedule to

two years."³ Johnson, with visions of Korea dancing in his head, plaintively asked about the enemy's combat strength. Couldn't they just keep adding troops? Westmoreland reluctantly conceded it "likely."⁴ Couldn't they call for "volunteers" from China? Westmoreland thought that "a good question."⁵ Johnson gave the general forty-five thousand troops and told him to do the best he could.

Westmoreland did not go away satisfied and neither did the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moreover, they thought they might have a solution. Spurred on by Johnson's timidity and by a McNamara plan to limit the war effort until after the election concluded, the generals went to an ally in the Senate. John Stennis of Mississippi was as unhappy with the war as any dove. He, however, embraced a different philosophy, pungently summarized by a popular bumper sticker of the day: "Win or Get Out." Stennis frankly preferred to win, and when the generals came to him with their troubles, he was more than happy to oblige. He scheduled a series of closed hearings to investigate "the alleged attempts by 'unskilled civilian amateurs' to shackle the 'professional military experts.'" For Johnson, satisfying this powerful Southern conservative was a priority. On August 9th, the day before the hearings opened, Johnson eased restrictions on bombing targets and permitted the Air Force to attack targets within Hanoi and Haiphong.⁷

The doves in the Senate decided they needed to remind Johnson of their political presence. The increased bombing and the rumors of fraud in the South Vietnamese elections gave them the opportunity to make their point. It was becoming clear that the candidate certification

process in South Vietnam efficiently weeded out all opposition to the Ky-Thieu regime.⁸ The two Senators from New York, Kennedy and Republican Jacob Javits, rose on August 11th to launch a wide-ranging attack on Administration Vietnam policy.

Javits opened the barrage by taking the unprecedented step of proposing a Vietnam budget cut. He attacked the conduct of the war and the elections, and he vowed to fight appropriations for the war. Javits's speech sparked a rare extemporaneous exchange of views. That debate revealed an increase in opposition to the war. Previous supporters of the Administration, such as Pastore of Rhode Island and Symington of Missouri, questioned the American position in Vietnam.⁹

Robert Kennedy, first in prepared remarks, then in the debate, continued his opposition to Lyndon Johnson's policy. His prepared statements followed the same rhetorical strategies marked out in earlier addresses. He argued that the primary effort in Vietnam should be political and pointed out the failure of the South Vietnamese to take such political steps. The absence of fair elections, Kennedy maintained, could only undermine "the moral basis of our commitment in Vietnam."¹⁰

Kennedy began the speech by making yet another effort to place himself in the middle of the political spectrum:

I do not question the need for the United States to remain militarily strong; nor the wisdom of protecting other nations from aggression; nor the urgency of providing swiftly and fully the resources required by the men we have sent into battle. These remain items of high priority on our national agenda.¹¹

Kennedy clearly separated himself from the more radical position of Javits. He did not directly confront the issue of appropriations, hoping to sidestep such controversy. His determination to provide the necessary "resources" placed him in agreement with majority opinion. Kennedy continued to portray himself as a moderate in order to reach "Middle America."

Kennedy's entire statement of opposition carried a moderate tone. He quoted and agreed with Lyndon Johnson's war aim: "We fight for the principle of self-determination that the people of Vietnam should be able to choose their own course."¹² Kennedy then proceeded to demonstrate the increasing divergence from this goal by both the Americans and the South Vietnamese. He thus returned to the rhetorical tactics of 1965. RFK defined the war effort as one which should be primarily political and then documented departures from this ideal. The South Vietnamese government barred opposition candidates. It held political prisoners. It was controlled by the military.¹³ Kennedy also noted that this government could not even do a good job of prosecuting the war, and he again provided a great deal of substantiation. American casualties were higher than South Vietnamese casualties. The South Vietnamese draft age was a year higher than the corresponding American age. The rural pacification effort was failing.¹⁴ In general, the South Vietnamese had not made much of an effort to win the war, either politically or militarily.

Kennedy finished the speech by adding the fraudulent elections to the calculus. At this point, RFK began very tentatively to attack the

moral basis for the American effort. If the South Vietnamese did not allow free elections, then "we would not be honoring our commitment to self-determination-- we would be betraying it."¹⁵ For the first time, however carefully, Robert Kennedy publicly questioned the moral justification for the war. Prior to this speech, he had always agreed with the rationale for the war itself, but questioned U.S. tactics on moral grounds that because the war killed many people there was a moral imperative to take every opportunity to negotiate. These unfair elections, however, violated the basic premise of the America commitment. If the United States supported a government not of the people's choosing, it would have no moral position in that part of the world and no justification for the carnage of the war. Not merely the tactics, but the American effort itself was wrong.

Kennedy's prepared remarks did not come close to making such a controversial position explicit. He merely asserted that a representative government would be better able to carry on the political effort needed to negotiate an end to the war. The basis for a moral condemnation of the war existed, however, and Kennedy has a much more difficult time sounding moderate in the debate that followed his speech. After several Senators rose in support of his position, and indeed, went farther than RFK in attacking the war, Kennedy again voiced his misgivings.¹⁶ He noted that the allies in Vietnam had decided to divide the responsibilities, with the Americans fighting the major military engagements in order to allow the South Vietnamese to engage in pacification. The Americans, along with parts of the South Vietnamese army, achieved some military success, but the pacification efforts had

failed. That, as Kennedy argued once again, was the key to the war. He quoted John Kennedy on the need for a primarily South Vietnamese effort and maintained that a fraudulent election signaled the failure of the political push. Now the war had become an American war. The massive United States commitment, combined with the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese government, had changed the war. It had become "our war against the Asians, and thus a continuation of the struggle of the French against the people of South Vietnam."¹⁷ The analogy clearly argued that Americans possessed no moral right to fight in Vietnam.

Kennedy did not let the argument rest there. After listening to Frank Church oppose the war, RFK again spoke on the immorality of the American effort. This time, he completely abandoned the carefully modulated phrases of his prepared remarks. Kennedy began the attack by contending that the United States sought self-determination for South Vietnam. The present election completely violated the stated American purpose, and Kennedy listed the violations of fairness present in the election. He then explicitly stated the position he had so carefully implied earlier:

Where is our moral position in that part of the world?
Without a free election, I do not believe it is there
any longer. . . . If the Saigon regime is not going to
cooperate so that the people can decide what they want,
what is our position in Vietnam? I think it will be
destroyed.¹⁸

Predictably, the media reaction to the speech focused on Kennedy's strongest remarks. Fortunately for RFK, however, most reporters chose to discuss his criticisms in the context of the other speeches. The

New York Times began its article by noting that a "dozen Senators from both parties" attacked the elections.¹⁸ Kennedy's name was not even mentioned on page one, and the Times chose to reprint his prepared, moderate remarks, while quoting his stronger attacks late in the news story. The Times lumped Kennedy and Javits together and listed a number of Senators who supported them, including previous backers of the Administration.²⁰ The Washington Post also framed the story in terms of a Senatorial revolt, as did the Christian Science Monitor and Newsweek.²¹ While the Monitor downplayed Kennedy's role, both Newsweek and the Post identified him as a leader of the revolt and reported that he "went further than he ever has before in publicly questioning the underlying basis for the American presence in Vietnam."²² In general, press coverage of the speech put Kennedy in a favorable light. He had led a large group of Senators in condemning the war. Thus, his position did not connote personal ambition. Many other Senators agreed with him, indeed, felt more strongly than he did about the immorality of the conflict. While Kennedy's other Vietnam speeches had sparked Senate debate, coverage of those speeches had centered around Kennedy's statements and their political consequences. This time coverage made him part of a large group and explicated the substantive opposition to Administration policy. Moreover, Kennedy also possessed the advantage of being able to argue about an easily understood, concrete transgression against American values. Everyone understood the idea of a free election, and the exclusion of certain candidates clearly violated American ideals. For once, the doves saw a fat pitch to hit, and they drove it a mile. Kennedy could articulate strong, moral opposition to the war in a very advantageous

setting with lots of support. He could not help but benefit.

Public opinion polls reflected RFK's advantages. In September and October, he underwent a political resurgence. He pulled ahead of LBJ, leading by a wide margin in November.²³ The polls also showed increasing disenchantment with the war. In the November report, for the first time, a plurality of Americans felt that the United States had made a mistake by entering the war.²⁴ Further, by a wide margin of 70 percent to 21 percent, Americans felt that the Administration was not telling them all that they needed to know about the war.²⁵ American confidence in LBJ's leadership was not very high. Naturally, Robert Kennedy, as the strongest alternative to the President, began to feel very strong pressure to run for the nation's highest office. RFK, however, thought that the effort would be a futile one. The political logic of the situation demanded Johnson's renomination. Kennedy's moral arguments on the war, however, flouted such political logic. The moral imperative to "take every step" to end the war did not allow for political prognostication. Nowhere was Kennedy's ambivalence and agony over this decision more clearly displayed than on "Face the Nation," November 26, 1967.²⁶

The interview began with Kennedy denying any interest in the Vice-Presidency. Then, Martin Agronsky wasted no time cutting to the heart of the matter. Noting Kennedy's criticisms of the war, Agronsky wondered why Kennedy failed to place the national interest over party loyalty and run for the Presidency. Kennedy responded with a remarkably cogent description of his rhetorical problem. He argued that the press never treated his criticisms of the war as substantive attacks on Johnson's

policy. Instead, the media portrayed the discussion as a personality struggle between himself and the President. That perspective on his proposals for change weakened the dialogue taking place in the country. If, Kennedy argued, he was to run for the Presidency, the dialogue would be about personalities, not issues. Kennedy refused to let that happen.²⁷

RFK used the next question as a springboard for more discussion of the need for communication and discussion on the issues facing the country.²⁸ He accomplished two goals with this answer. First, he separated himself from the radicals by condemning the violence and the lawlessness in the streets. Later in the program, he also attacked the hecklers who prevented people from speaking, even if they disagreed with the views of those people. As he had done in the beginning of the February 1966 statement, Kennedy placed himself on the side of reason.²⁹ Communication and dialogue "could be healthy for the country" and Kennedy wanted to create such an atmosphere.³⁰ Second, Kennedy endorsed the idea of McCarthy's candidacy without endorsing McCarthy. The candidacy would spark a debate in the country and that was RFK's goal. Focusing on the need for dialogue allowed him to avoid an endorsement, while arguing that the discussion occasioned by the McCarthy campaign obviated the need for a Kennedy candidacy.

Kennedy had found a refuge from political pressures. Unfortunately for him, that argument clashed with the main themes of his rhetoric, and the questioners continued to press Kennedy. Clearly, the focus on dialogue was inconsistent with Kennedy's demand for risk. Since the March 2nd speech, RFK had consistently asked that the American people

take responsibility for the war. Kennedy's retreat into platitudes about the need for communication allowed him to escape such responsibility and implicitly let everyone else off the hook. If all one needed to do to clear one's conscience was to talk about the war, everyone should have a clear conscience by 1967. Oblivious to such contradictions, Kennedy continued to argue that the war was each individual American's responsibility. The inconsistency badly damaged any effort to achieve genuine argument, because Kennedy failed to display the very qualities of courage and risk that he so eloquently demanded of others.

The correspondents, particularly Agronsky, continued to ask Kennedy to clarify those positions. Agronsky put the matter bluntly:

Well, Senator, leaving hypocrisy aside, this business of dealing yourself out of the campaign until after the nomination might seem excessively timid, even self-serving for your own political future. Don't you feel that the issue of Vietnam is so important that you should participate in the debate?³¹

Agronsky's question, of course, left Kennedy a way out and he immediately insisted that he had participated in the debate. Evidently feeling that Kennedy would continue to stonewall, the correspondents shifted their line of questioning. They asked Kennedy if Johnson could negotiate a settlement, or if a new President was needed. Kennedy thought LBJ could, although he disagreed with the way Johnson sought peace.³² Wicker then noted that McCarthy could provide an alternative method and, if McCarthy did so, would Kennedy not come under more pressure to run as the candidate who offered both a choice and a chance? Kennedy responded with public agony. He repeated his pledge not to run and sadly noted, "No matter what I do, I

am in difficulty."³³ He said he just could not see what he could do "other than to get off the earth in some way."³⁴ Agronsky indirectly apologized to Kennedy, and quickly shifted to the substance of the Vietnam problem. RFK allowed the frustration he obviously felt about the campaign to pour out when he discussed Vietnam. He condemned the war in very strong terms.

First, in a response to a question about the war, Kennedy attacked the claims of impending success advanced by General Westmoreland. Kennedy noted that Westmoreland made his prediction contingent upon two conditions. First, that the United States continue the bombing and that the North Vietnamese not escalate. Second, that the South Vietnamese do more.³⁵ Kennedy refuted the idea that either condition would ever come to pass. He pointed out that while the North Vietnamese "don't bomb Detroit," they receive more sophisticated weapons from the Russians, they send in more troops, and the end result is the same. More Americans die.³⁶ The whole history of the Vietnam conflict, Kennedy argued, revealed this kind of response when the Americans escalated. Only the foolish could think that the Communists would stand quietly by while the Americans increased their effort.³⁷ Second, Kennedy noted that the South Vietnamese were doing less, not more, and he attacked the efforts of the Saigon government. He agreed that the South Vietnamese should do more, but contended that they had shown no inclination to do so.³⁸ Again, Kennedy buttressed his arguments with specific examples and with references to American values and American self-interest. He noted that the government of South Vietnam had failed to institute land reform or to hold free elections.³⁹ These transgressions led to an ineffective war effort, causing Americans to

take over the bulk of fighting, resulting in the loss of yet more American lives. The failure to enact moral values led directly to the loss of lives. Moral values must form the basis for successful policy. Kennedy, however, continued to follow this line of argument by questioning the moral justification for the war itself, and not just the tactics used to prosecute it.

Tom Wicker began a question by noting that the Administration had recently put strong emphasis on "a great threat from Asian Communism" as a justification for the war, and he wanted to know what Kennedy thought of that.⁴⁰ Kennedy launched into a comprehensive attack on the rationale for the war. He separated Johnson's war from John Kennedy's war, and he condemned the morality of Johnson's version. For the first time, Kennedy associated Lyndon Johnson with the immorality of the war.

RFK began by accepting his share of the blame for the war. Clearly, however, the mistakes he and his brother made differed markedly from the errors of Lyndon Johnson, and this difference rose from the change in goals. Kennedy asserted:

First, we were making the effort there so that the people would have their own right to decide their future That is certainly the way I looked at it when I was in President Kennedy's Administration and when I was with President Johnson. Now we turned . . . now we are saying we are going to fight there so we don't have to fight on the West Coast of the United States, so that they won't move across the Rockies. But do we--our whole moral position, it seems to me, changes tremendously."⁴¹

He argued that the war deaths were justifiable only so long as the people of South Vietnam wanted to make such sacrifices. Under this

Administration, however, only the United States demonstrated a willingness to fight and made the decision to do so. The people of South Vietnam did not seem to want to wage the war. As a result, he said:

We're going in there and we're killing South Vietnamese, we're killing women, we're killing innocent people because we don't want the war fought on American soil, or because they're 12,000 miles away and they might get to be 11,000 miles away Those of us who stay here in the United States, we must feel it when we use napalm, when a village is destroyed and civilians are killed. This is also our responsibility. This is a moral obligation and a moral responsibility for us here in the United States."⁴²

Agronsky encouraged Kennedy to continue: "You feel that our moral position, then, is not really defensible, that it can't be?"⁴³ Kennedy maintained that it "has been badly undermined and I think that should trouble us."⁴⁴ RFK provided specific details of incidents that should trouble the American people, and he also extended his analysis to the effects of this moral catastrophe on the country. In an argument that forecast his later campaign speaking, Kennedy contended that the moral collapse of the United States in Vietnam damaged the country at home:

If this country is going to mean anything--when we say we love our country but we love our country for what it can be and for the justice it stands for and what we are going to mean to the next generation. It is not just the land, it is not just the mountains, it is for what this country stands for. And that is what I think is being seriously undermined in Vietnam and the effect of it has to be felt by our people.⁴⁵

Media reaction to the speech focused on Kennedy's charge that Johnson's war differed markedly from John Kennedy's war. Using quotations

from John Kennedy, the press condemned RFK as a demagogue. The New York Times, for instance, ran a reasonably straight account of the interview on "Face the Nation" in its Monday edition.⁴⁶ On Tuesday the 28th, however, in an editorial entitled "Kennedy vs. Kennedy," the Times attacked RFK's use of JFK.⁴⁷ The Post also reported the interview, but did not make any editorial comment. On the next page, however, they presented a Harris poll that gave RFK a twenty point lead over LBJ and included the surprising information that fifty percent of the American public wanted a bombing halt.⁴⁸ The strongest attack on Robert Kennedy's performance came from Emmet John Hughes in Newsweek.⁴⁹ In "The Time of the Jabberwock" he noted that Kennedy's boyish style on television covered up appalling ethical and factual lapses.⁵⁰ Hughes minced no words. Robert Kennedy misused his brother's name and unfairly attacked LBJ.

In addition to angering the press, this interview significantly altered the direction of Robert Kennedy's speaking on Vietnam. Prior to the interview, Kennedy attempted to provoke thoughtful deliberation by affirming the values he shared with the audience and the Administration while attacking the way the war was being prosecuted. Specifically, Kennedy avoided open conflict with Johnson, and he avoided condemning the immorality of the war itself. He maintained that U.S. tactics caused death and destruction, but he agreed that the essential purpose of the war deserved moral approbation. On August 11, 1967, he began to depart from that philosophy, but he still refused openly to attack and condemn the Johnson Administration. With this interview, Lyndon Johnson became part and parcel of the immorality of the war. Robert Kennedy admitted his own mistakes and asked that Americans be troubled

by those mistakes and by American tactics in Vietnam. He noted, however, that "perhaps if you admit mistakes you perhaps are a little wiser than you were when you were committing them."⁵¹ While not using the specific quotation in this interview, Kennedy had begun to use the words of Antigone: "All men make mistakes, but a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong, and repairs the evil. The only sin is pride."⁵² Clearly, Lyndon Johnson was committing the sin, while Robert Kennedy was not. Kennedy still wanted genuine argument. However, he shifted to a more confrontative stance and, in doing so, probably lost part of his audience, as indicated by negative press reaction. Kennedy wanted to hammer home the point that gross immoralities were being committed in the name of the American people, and he sought to force Americans to come to terms with that fact. If they did that, they would reject the war itself as a tenable policy. In order to accomplish this task, Kennedy had to "bring the war home" to the American people. He needed to specify the cost of the war, especially in light of its futility, in even more detail. The rest of his rhetoric revealed an increasing obsession with the use of analogies and supporting materials designed to make the faraway conflict as real as possible. Kennedy wanted to make the American people believe that Lyndon Johnson was making them kill and maim thousands for no good reason. That, of course, meant that Americans were guilty of murder. The Tet offensive gave opponents of the war an opportunity to make this point quite forcefully.

On January 31, 1968, the American view of the war suddenly changed. As Epstein notes, until Tet, the American people saw very little actual

combat footage on the evening news.⁵³ The difficulties of taking television cameras to war, compounded by the military's unwillingness to have the American public see more than the military wanted it to see, prevented much initiative by television crews. The Tet offensive changed all that. The war appeared outside news photographers' hotel windows. To see a battle, all reporters had to do was to walk over to the American embassy. The war erupted in living color across the television sets of middle America.

What they saw shook the confidence of the American people in their cause and in their leadership. The scenes of the war were devastating, especially the photographs and film of the execution of a Viet Cong prisoner by the head of the South Vietnamese national police, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. Loan simply walked up to a Viet Cong prisoner, placed a revolver to the side of the man's head, and blew his brains out. The pictures appeared in newspapers and NBC showed a slightly edited version on the evening news.⁵⁴ Clearly, the actions of a top ranking South Vietnamese official did not conform to the rules of the Geneva Convention Americans had heard so much about and that America and its allies always obeyed. Right in their living rooms, Americans saw the people who were supposed to be deserving of our help murder a helpless prisoner of war. Americans also saw a great deal of combat footage that indubitably proved the vitality of the Viet Cong.⁵⁵ Any enemy that could penetrate and attack the American embassy possessed a lot of vigor. This impression formed the basis for the second reason for the profound distress of Americans about this offensive. It was completely unexpected. For several months, the Johnson Administration

had assured the American people that the "light at the end of the tunnel" had appeared. By January of 1968, this public relations campaign resulted in a bare majority of the public, fifty percent, believing that the United States was making progress in Vietnam.⁵⁶ Public approval of Johnson's handling of the war actually began to creep upward before the offensive.⁵⁷ Finally, the Gallup report of February, taken before the offensive, showed Lyndon Johnson pulling ahead of Robert Kennedy 48 percent to 38 percent.⁵⁸ After all of this optimism, the Tet offensive came as a shock. The Administration made a massive effort to prove the battles were a U.S. victory. The official line was that the offensive was a great failure, a situation analogous to Hitler's desperate last gamble in the Ardennes. Opponents of the war immediately responded. Art Buchwald wrote a column portraying a confident General Custer claiming that the "battle of the Little Big Horn had just turned the corner" and the Sioux were "on the run."⁵⁹ The Wall Street Journal, of all sources, warned that "the American people should be getting ready to accept, if they haven't already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed."⁶⁰ Robert Kennedy refuted the Administration's claims in a speech on February 8, 1968, in Chicago, Illinois, the site of the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the home of one of America's most powerful politicians, Richard M. Daley.

Kennedy gave the speech under difficult circumstances. A few days before, on the day before the offensive began, RFK announced that he would not seek the Presidency under any "foreseeable circumstances."⁶¹ The rational voices of the old politics, Edward Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen among others, told him that it simply could not be done, that

Johnson, as a sitting President, could not be denied renomination, and that RFK would destroy his political future in any attempt to dump the President.⁶² The Tet offensive, of course, changed everything. Kennedy used the forum of a Book and Author luncheon in Chicago to release his frustration and attack the Administration's claims.

Adam Walinsky, Kennedy's speech writer, later said that RFK took the toughest passages the speechwriters had to offer and added some of his own.⁶³ The speech reflected that attitude. It was the most organized of Kennedy's addresses, carefully dealing with the five major illusions Kennedy claimed characterized American policy. The speech employed refutation as its major strategy, clearly assuming that the Tet offensive had badly shaken the American people. If Johnson's arguments could be refuted, the speech seemed to assume, then it was likely that the American people would adopt Kennedy's policy. For the first time, Robert Kennedy felt that the presumption was on his side. Kennedy used four major strategies to refute Administration positions. First, he employed the strongest language he had ever used. The highly evaluative and emotional labeling was clearly designed to draw a strong response from the audience, "to existentially disrupt" their world. This strategy often involved the use of bitter and sarcastic humor, aimed at demonstrating the absurdity of Administration claims. Second, Kennedy provided a large amount of evidence to make this distant, complex conflict real to Americans. Analogies were particularly prominent, as Kennedy compared

experiences the audience would understand and know to Vietnam. Third, Kennedy structured the refutation as a pseudo-debate, quite often using phrases such as "It is said" or "We are told," and then rebutting the claims set forth. In this way, Kennedy could refute the Administration directly and enact the role of a superior strategist and debator. Finally, in the conclusion, Kennedy directly asked the audience to assume the characteristics of courage and bravery that would guarantee their participation in genuine argument. He invited his audience to become Americans who would unhesitatingly brave the pain of examining, then discarding, false assumptions. This strategy also indirectly refuted the often-held belief that opponents of the war were physical cowards. Kennedy, a strong authority figure, assured the audience that it took more courage to change than to blindly follow a misguided policy. All of these strategies aimed at provoking a policy debate. Clearly, the speech assumed that the Tet offensive had successfully disrupted the world of the audience. Now Kennedy sought to dispel any arguments that might allow Americans to slip back into the old routine of allowing the government a free hand and to assure the public that the discontent was good and should be channeled toward a change in policy. Kennedy employed rhetorical strategies to persuade the audience to "show as much willingness to risk some of our prestige for peace as to risk the lives of young men in war."⁶⁴

The beginning set the tone for the speech and introduced the theme of illusion versus reality. Using the strategy of labeling, Kennedy argued that Johnson dealt with illusions and that the country needed to

face reality. The opening quotation from Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary who helped negotiate the Munich agreements with Hitler, emphasized the magnitude of LBJ's delusions.⁶⁵ Using alliteration, Kennedy argued that the enemy, "savagely striking at will across all of South Vietnam, has finally shattered the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstance, even from ourselves."⁶⁶ Notice that while the illusions possessed "official sanction," all participated in them. Later, Kennedy included himself among those who had predicted victory. RFK continued to make everyone responsible for American policy in Vietnam. Not willing to let the audience conjure up the illusions, Kennedy carefully quoted a sampling.⁶⁷ The direct quotations devastatingly documented the scope of American blundering. RFK flatly stated that those "dreams are gone."⁶⁸ Acknowledging that the Viet Cong had sustained reversals, Kennedy nevertheless maintained that the attacks themselves demonstrated the vitality of the enemy and belied the "serene" reports of the Administration. Kennedy then asked the audience to "face the facts" about Vietnam and to take another look at the war, if only for "the sake of the young Americans who are fighting today."⁶⁹ Here, Kennedy directly appealed to the large number of Americans shaken by the Tet offensive. Reevaluation of the war would help, not hurt, the soldiers in Vietnam. Such an assessment obviously needed to occur.

The body of the speech, then, refuted each of the "illusions" of the Administration. The opening refutation will serve as a pattern for the rest, for all followed the same form. The first section directly

attacked the Administration's claims of victory. Kennedy placed all of the opposition arguments and his own responses into the form of a debate, refuting Johnson Administration claims primarily through the use of analogies and language that often became bitterly sarcastic. Taking a page from Art Buchwald's book, Kennedy compared the Tet offensive to another great disaster of American history: "It is as if James Madison were able to claim a great victory because the British only burned Washington instead of annexing it to the British Empire."⁷⁰ Kennedy demonstrated the absurdities of the Administration's quantifications of victory by adding up all of their claims, noting that the total exceeded the official estimate of Viet Cong and asking "Who, then, is doing the fighting?"⁷¹ Finally, Kennedy argued that the lack of a popular uprising in support of the Viet Cong hardly constituted a victory: "How ironic it is that we should claim a victory because a people whom we have given sixteen thousand lives, billions of dollars and almost a decade to defend, did not rise up in arms against us."⁷² The offensive proved, Kennedy claimed, that the people of South Vietnam would not defend themselves even to the extent of telling the Americans about the massive infiltration of Viet Cong before the attacks. Further, the attacks also demonstrated that no area of South Vietnam was safe from conflict. Kennedy concluded this section by absolving the American soldiers of any blame and by offering an explanation for the defeat:

This has not happened because our men are not brave or effective because they are. It is because we have misconceived the nature of the war: it is because we have

sought to resolve by military might a conflict whose issue depends upon the will and conviction of the South Vietnamese people. It is like sending a lion out to halt an epidemic of jungle rot.⁷³

The strategies revealed in this section of the speech appeared again and again throughout the address. Kennedy continued his use of strong, evaluative language, emphasizing, for instance, the disparity between the "huge resources" and the "most modern weapons" of the Americans versus the small size of the enemy force.⁷⁴ Extensive use of supporting material, from quotations of Administration sources through the examination of statistics and including the creation of effective and unusual metaphors and analogies, refuted the Administration's claims. Kennedy needed this evidence, for he claimed to be representing the light of reason. If he was to succeed in his goal, he needed to show that his view of the world best fit reality, and the clearest way to accomplish that objective was through the use of evidence. The evidence gave Kennedy's speech compelling logical power, as when he demonstrated the fallacious nature of the Administration's statistics.⁷⁵ The analogies and the metaphors placed the war in an entirely new perspective for the American people and may well have made it more real. The comparison between the burning of Washington and the Tet offensive was only one example. The jungle rot analogy vividly illustrated the misguided nature of the American effort, while still patriotically praising the troops. Later in the speech, to make the casualty figures more concrete, Kennedy asked the audience to

Imagine the impact in our own country if an equivalent number--over 25 million Americans--were wandering homeless

or interned in refugee camps, and millions more refugees were being created as New York and Chicago, Washington and Boston, were being destroyed by a war raging in their streets. Whatever the outcome of these battles, it is the people we seek to defend who are the greatest losers.⁷⁶

Using these same tactics, Kennedy refuted, in turn, the idea that the United States could succeed with the current South Vietnamese government; the claim that pursuing military victory is in the interest of the South Vietnamese people; the argument that South Vietnam is crucial to our national interest; and, finally, the idea that the United States could possibly achieve peace without conceding something. All of these claims were simply illusions, dreams to be discarded in the cold light of reality. Kennedy concluded the speech by summarizing his arguments and by redefining bravery in light of the conclusions drawn in the speech.

This redefinition of bravery became a key to the speech, for Kennedy attributed his kind of courage to the audience. Once his listeners possessed that quality, they would be more likely to engage in the genuine argument that would lead to changing convictions. Kennedy began the concluding paragraph with his view of bravery. He argued that the Vietnam War required more courage from the government and from the American people than any war in history. Immediately, however, he defined the kind of courage needed. All wars demand bravery under fire. This war, however, demanded that the country have the moral courage to discard the illusions that had comforted them for so long. In other words, Kennedy demanded that the audience have the courage to risk their beliefs and values. The country needed the courage to engage in genuine argument. Kennedy then assured Americans that they did indeed possess such fortitude. The leadership of the nation, he concluded, had to realize

the need for honest examination:

Any who seek to comfort rather than speak plainly, reassure rather than instruct, promise satisfaction rather than reveal frustration--they deny that courage and drain that strength. For today, as it was in the beginning, it is the truth that sets us free.⁷⁷

The last sentence reinforced Kennedy's position with that most fundamental of authorities, the Bible. This speech denied any effort by Kennedy to abandon America's values or to leave a loyal ally. Instead, Robert Kennedy argued that he wanted to reestablish the most fundamental values of the country, and he asked the audience to risk current beliefs in order to find those values. If his auditors wanted to seek truth, to possess courage, to find peace, and to stop killing, they should discard the illusion of Lyndon Johnson's position and adopt Robert Kennedy's perspective on the war.

The speech proposed two contrasting visions of America. Lyndon Johnson represented a weak, complacent country, possessed of the "courage" to kill thousands, while lacking the moral and intellectual courage to see the result of such a policy. Robert Kennedy's America knew the agony of the war and thus could find the courage necessary to seek peace. Kennedy made the choice easy. He attributed all of the good qualities of the country, the qualities that myth had given his brother's Administration, to his policy choice. Moreover, he organized these two views of America around the criterion of illusion versus reality, truth versus falsity. Given the fact that 70 percent of the country felt that the Johnson Administration had failed to tell them all that they needed to know about the war, and given RFK's reputation for honesty, even brutal honesty,

Kennedy chose his strategies well.⁷⁸ Add to that the shock of the Tet offensive, and it is clear that Kennedy possessed considerable rhetorical advantage. His use of evidence, his strategy of refutation, and his language combined to make the Administration seem out of touch with the reality of the war. Finally, and most important, Kennedy did not use this speech to attack and condemn those who had followed Johnson to this point. The system and the American people were not evil. Anyone could fall into the comfort of illusion, as Kennedy himself had done. The only real sin was failing to take action once one saw the dreams for what they were. Kennedy saw the illusions and detailed them for the audience. He confronted them, while cherishing the traditions of the country. Thus, the audience could choose to follow Kennedy, for he was one of them. He respected their values, wanted their help, and promised to restore plain talk and truth to the American political system. By respecting the audience, while insisting on pointing out their illusions and shocking their sensibilities, Kennedy made genuine argument possible.

The media reaction to the speech made two major points. First, most of the newspeople noted the exhaustive nature of Kennedy's critique and used a great deal of space recounting his arguments. The New York Times, for instance, in an article by Tom Wicker, claimed that "the brother of John F. Kennedy delivered the most sweeping and detailed indictment of the war and of the Administration's policy yet heard from any leading figure in either party."⁷⁹ Newsweek labelled the speech a "broadside," while the Washington Post emphasized Kennedy's view of

Administration policy as illusion, and his claim that the war could not be won.⁸⁰ Time and the Christian Science Monitor both attacked the speech, Time by completely ignoring it, and the Monitor by presenting its own "dialogue" between Kennedy and Johnson.⁸¹ The Monitor attack was rather effective, using Kennedy's own strategy against him, but it lost some credibility when the editors tried to present it as a straight news story. In general, a very large part of Kennedy's attack reached the public.

The second part of the coverage, of course, noted that this speech came about as close to a campaign speech as one could get. Tom Wicker's view is a representative sample. After indicating that the Senator's aides claimed that Kennedy was not a candidate, indeed, that he was trying to take his name off the ballot in several states, Wicker wrote:

The first reaction today among members of Congress and others here /Washington/ was that so strong an attack was nevertheless bound to have political significance. This was particularly so since the speech followed a spectacular Viet Cong offensive against South Vietnamese cities that has deeply disturbed many who have supported, as well as those who have doubted, the Administration's war policy.⁸²

Kennedy's refusal to go where the rhetoric clearly took him still plagued his efforts to create policy discussion rather than political examination. Newsweek summed up the situation quite well:

Kennedy's rhetoric was apocalyptic--an emotional assault on the immorality of the war in Vietnam and the neglect of domestic problems--but his response was politics as usual.⁸³

For Robert Kennedy, such a response could not last much longer.

His concern about running had always been pragmatic. It just did not seem possible to win, and he knew a run against Johnson would be covered as a personality struggle, thus damaging his chances and making him appear an overeager spoiler. The Tet offensive changed everything. Seemingly overnight, the country rejected Johnson's policies. One clear indication of that change appeared in a Gallup poll question that asked people to choose one of the two emotion-laden labels, hawk or dove. Before the Tet offensive, 24 percent of the country identified themselves as doves, while 60 percent chose to be hawks.⁸⁴ After the attacks, 42 percent saw themselves as doves, while 41 percent picked hawks.⁸⁵ Such a change was made even more remarkable by the results of the New Hampshire primary, which proved that people would be willing to vote their convictions. Kennedy decided to run.

Before his announcement, Kennedy made one last speech on the Senate floor concerning the war. It occurred during a long emotional debate that began with a Fulbright speech deploring any further escalation in Vietnam. Richard L. Strout remarked that it was "a debate rarely matched in modern times for emotional intensity."⁸⁶ Strout also felt that the "most passionate denunciation of the war came from Senator Kennedy."⁸⁷ In this speech, Kennedy released nearly all inhibitions and launched an emotional barrage on the war. The speech, clearly a campaign effort and not a policy address, concentrated on the use of analogy, metaphor, and emotional language to disrupt the world of the audience. It offers an interesting insight into how Kennedy translated his policy arguments into campaign speaking, and it was a natural

extension of the strategies he had been following since 1964.

Kennedy opened with the observation that the war had divided the country greatly. Such opposition demanded that the President justify to the Senate and to the American people any further escalation in the American effort.⁸⁸ Kennedy then proceeded to argue against any increased war effort and, as had been his wont, he based his argument on both pragmatic and moral grounds. It was an indication of how much he had changed, however, when the vast majority of his argument involved the "moral responsibility" of the American people. Gone were the carefully reasoned arguments maintaining that a guerrilla war demanded a political side. Instead, Kennedy simply pointed out that all previous policy had failed: "It seems to me if we have learned anything over the period of the last 7 years, it is the fact that just continuing to send more troops, or increasing the bombing, is not the answer in Vietnam."⁸⁹ This observation summed up the pragmatic arguments against the war by RFK.

Even the brief statement of pragmatic problems with Johnson's policy became wrapped up with the moral argument when Kennedy connected himself to the failed predictions:

The fact is that victory is not just ahead of us. It was not in 1961 or 1962, when I was one of those who predicted there was light at the end of the tunnel. There was not in 1963 or 1964 or 1965 or 1966 or 1967 and there is not now.⁹⁰

The careful listing of each year of failure reinforced the impression of a long, hopeless effort. Kennedy's willing identification with that cause, a rhetorical strategy that dated back to his final break

with the President on March 2, 1967, added a strong emotional appeal to a supposedly pragmatic argument. Again, Kennedy's admission of error made it easy for others to admit error and to accept the moral responsibility he demanded they bear.

Kennedy, after briefly indicating that some sort of new policy needed to be tried, resumed his attack on the old path. Specifically, he focused on the moral shortcomings of the current Administration stance, and he did so in the strongest language he had ever used. Kennedy created analogy after analogy that placed the United States in an indefensible moral position and certainly disturbed the audience. The brother of the martyred President, a man about to declare his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States, compared America to Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia:

As to our own interests in Vietnam, could not the Germans or the Russians have argued the same thing before the beginning of World War II--that they had the right to go into Poland, into Estonia, into Latvia, into Lithuania, because they needed them for their own protection, that they needed them as a buffer? I question whether we have that right in this country.⁹¹

These analogies speak powerfully to us today, but in 1968, with World War II still fresh in many minds, and memories of displaced and suffering Eastern European immigrants even fresher, they struck an even more sensitive nerve. Moreover, they spoke directly to the ethnic white vote Kennedy needed to break Johnson's base of support and win the nomination. If Kennedy could turn these people against the war, the people who then formed much of the base of the Democratic Party in the northern

industrial states, he could defeat Johnson. The analogies hit a tender nerve with all Americans who abhorred Hitler and Stalin, but they were particularly powerful with the people Kennedy needed to reach. Using many of the same tactics he had developed as an opponent of the war, Kennedy now acted as a proponent for his own candidacy.

The rest of the speech also revealed such a purpose. While Kennedy condemned the war, he condemned it as a failure in leadership on the part of the President, a failure all, including himself, had acquiesced to. Now all had a "moral responsibility to ask some very significant questions."⁹² Kennedy focused specifically on the American right to wage the war:

Are we like the God of the Old Testament that we can decide, in Washington, D.C., what cities, what towns, what hamlets in Vietnam are going to be destroyed? . . . Or do we have the authority to kill tens and tens of thousands of people because we say we have a commitment to the South Vietnamese? But have they been consulted--in Hue, in Ben Tre, or in the other towns that have been destroyed?⁹³

Kennedy concluded by arguing that some sort of a change in policy was needed and affirmed his belief that "we can do something about it in the Senate."⁹⁴ Kennedy's speech indicated that he planned to go beyond the Senate, and on March 16, 1968, he announced his candidacy for the Presidency.

The speeches discussed in this chapter presaged such a move. The Robert Kennedy of late 1966 and even early 1967 did not necessarily have to run for the highest office in the land. He had been arguing that the tactics used in the war violated the conscience of the American

people. Given such transgressions, everyone bore a moral responsibility to do as much as possible to end the war. They needed to extend themselves, to risk their own "existential worlds" to realize they were committing murder and then do something about it. Yet, as Kennedy repeatedly argued, national interest sometimes required war. Kennedy adhered to the position that the Vietnam War might well be such a case until August of 1967. Then, at first tentatively, then angrily, Kennedy denounced the justification for the war. The conflict itself was morally corrupt. The only way to purge the guilt caused by the "tens of thousands of deaths" was to end the war. Everyone bore a personal, moral responsibility to take such an action, for when a country acts, it acts in the name of each of its citizens. By 1968, it was clear that Lyndon Johnson would not end the war any time soon and that only Robert Kennedy stood a fighting chance to wrest the Presidency from the incumbent. Once Kennedy asked his audience "to show as much willingness to risk some of our prestige for peace as to risk the lives of our young men in war," he had to demonstrate his willingness to risk himself or lose all hope of policy discussion and change. He himself set the standard that demanded a race for the Presidency.

NOTES

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- ³ Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 504.
- ⁴ Karnow, p. 504.
- ⁵ Karnow, p. 504.
- ⁶ Karnow, p. 504.
- ⁷ Karnow, p. 504.
- ⁸ Hedrick Smith, "Senators Deplore Fraud in Vote Drive in Vietnam," New York Times, 12 August 1967, p. 1, cols. 6-7, p. 2, cols. 1-5.
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- ¹⁴ Congressional Record, p. 22352.
- ¹⁵ Congressional Record, p. 22353.
- ¹⁶ Congressional Record, p. 22359.
- ¹⁷ Congressional Record, p. 22359.
- ¹⁸ Congressional Record, p. 22360.
- ¹⁹ Smith, "Senators Deplore Fraud in Vote Drive in Vietnam," op. cit.
- ²⁰ Smith, op. cit.
- ²¹ "Angry Senators Denounce Saigon on Vote Barriers," Washington Post, 12 August 1967, p. 1, col. 8, p. 10, col. 7. "Viet Election Wrangle Jars Washington," Christian Science Monitor, 14 August 1967, p. 1, cols. 2-5. "LBJ at Low Ebb," Newsweek, 21 August 1967, p. 16.

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- 26 "Face the Nation," 26 November 1967, "RFK Senate Papers, Speeches and Press Releases, November 21, 1967-November 30, 1967," Box 4. Hereafter noted as "Face the Nation."
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- 28 "Face the Nation," p. 2.
- 29 See Chapter 3.
- 30 "Face the Nation," p. 2.
- 31 "Face the Nation," p. 3.
- 32 "Face the Nation," p. 4.
- 33 "Face the Nation," p. 5.
- 34 "Face the Nation," p. 5.
- 35 "Face the Nation," p. 6.
- 36 "Face the Nation," p. 6.
- 37 "Face the Nation," p. 6.
- 38 "Face the Nation," p. 6.
- 39 "Face the Nation," p. 6.
- 40 "Face the Nation," p. 7.
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- 42 "Face the Nation," p. 8.
- 43 "Face the Nation," p. 8.
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- 46 Peter Grose, "Kennedy Asserts Johnson Shifted U.S. Aim in Vietnam," New York Times, 27 November 1967, p. 1, col. 5, p. 15, col. 1.
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- 48 "War Aims Switch Charged by RFK," 27 November 1967, p. 1, cols. 1-2, p. 17, col. 3, "Harris Poll," p. 2, col. 1.
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- 66 Kennedy, p. 221.
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- 69 Kennedy, p. 221.
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- 72 Kennedy, p. 223.
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- 74 Kennedy, p. 222.
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- 76 Kennedy, p. 225.
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- 78 See note 25 and my discussion of Kennedy's personal qualities in Chapter 2.
- 79 Tom Wicker, "Kennedy Asserts U.S. Cannot Win," New York Times, p. 1, col. 2, p. 12, col. 3. 9 February 1968.
- 80 "A Broadside by Bobby," Newsweek, 19 February 1968, p. 23.
"Kennedy Calls For End to Illusion on Vietnam," 9 February 1978, p. 1, cols. 7-8, p. 2, cols. 2-4. Newsweek also took the unusual step of reporting excerpts.
- 81 Saville R. Davis, "Kennedy Sharpens Attack," Christian Science Monitor, 10 February 1978, p. 1, col. 5.
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CHAPTER SIX
A THEORY OF PERSUASION: A SUMMARY
OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY'S ARGUMENT

The opening chapter of this thesis concluded with a remembrance of RFK by the New Republic. Amid all of Kennedy's achievements, Richard Strout singled out as the most memorable RFK's unique ability to reach people and have them believe in him and what he stood for. Very few politicians earn such an encomium, and I have tried to discover the reasons for such praise by analyzing Kennedy's rhetoric on the Vietnam War. My analysis emphasized Kennedy's rhetorical skill in establishing a kind of dialogue with the audience. Robert Kennedy sought to induce in the audience the same kind of policy reappraisal that he had undergone. Several theoretical concepts have informed my thinking. I have argued that Kennedy used strategies of confrontation, identification, and audience creation as ways to achieve what Maurice Natanson called genuine argument, and I have asserted that Kennedy's argumentative choices forced him to run for the Presidency or risk losing his credibility with the American people.¹

As indicated earlier, Natanson uses the term "genuine argument" to designate those disputes that actually affect the combatants. Most arguments, Natanson contends, affect the participants very little, if at all. He uses the example of a stockbroker advising a client.² The broker argues for a change in the client's portfolio, and although the

two clash over the issue, they do not risk any of their beliefs or values: "The concrete existence of each member of this dyad is precisely excluded from the argument," he writes.³ By contrast, genuine argument requires that fundamental assumptions be at risk. The debaters agree to commit themselves to "the full implications of a philosophical dialectic, a saying, in effect, 'if you argue you choose to open yourself to the risk of discovering that argument has a fundamental structure that has, in turn, profound implications for your own being.'"⁴ Rather than deciding whether or not to buy more Xerox stock, the arguer must risk

the immediacy of the self's world of feeling, attitude, and the total subtle range of his affective and conative sensibility. To be perfectly blunt: When I truly risk myself to the viable possibility that the consequence of an argument may be to make me see something of the structure of my immediate world.⁵

To open oneself to such change on a consistent basis would make life impossible. Instead, one selects and chooses among arguments. Natanson notes that to engage in genuine argument is to "publicize /your/ privacy."⁶ Metaphorically, it would be as if you invited somebody into your home, "home as it is meant by the one for whom it is home."⁷ That does not happen very often, nor are people willing to take the risks necessary to explore their own fundamental beliefs and values every time an important issue comes up for debate. For genuine argument to occur, the disputants must feel the tremendous urgency of the issue, and they must also have a strong sense of trust in each other. Without excellent reasons, people will not abandon comfortable, conventional

argument for the uncertainties of genuine argument. As Natanson concludes:

Risk is established when the affective world of the person is existentially disrupted, and this disruption means that his immediate life of feeling and sensibility is challenged and made open to challenge.⁸

Robert Kennedy wanted to create genuine argument. His speeches reflect a search for the means to induce Americans to undergo the same agonizing process of reappraisal of the war he himself had undergone. Kennedy faced a daunting task because to argue about and to question the American effort in Vietnam meant a redefinition of self for most people. "Good" Americans did not question the President during wartime. They automatically rallied around country and flag and fought the enemy when the call came. Moreover, if people examined the war, they might find Americans committing actions that violated their concepts of their country and of how Americans were supposed to behave. Even to argue about the justice of an American war against communism meant risking values about what role citizens should play in political decision making. It meant risking fundamental assumptions about the definition of a "good" American and, ultimately, it meant assuming responsibility for American actions in Vietnam, rather than letting the amorphous entity of government be responsible for the killing. If Kennedy were to change policy, however, he had to turn the country against the President's policy and assume this monumental rhetorical burden.

Analysis of Kennedy's speeches reveals three major strategies designed to meet these problems. As in most good rhetoric, these

strategies came together to form a seamless whole. Kennedy began with the assumption that, if Americans accepted the same responsibility for military actions that he had, they would feel the same guilt and undergo the same change of heart about the war. Most people, however, did not feel directly accountable for the actions of government, and thus did not feel the same guilt as Kennedy. Americans avoided genuine argument by disclaiming responsibility for the actions involved in prosecuting the war. RFK needed to shake the audience out of this complacency and acceptance to make them carry the burdens of policy makers. Kennedy used his three major strategies to achieve this goal. He employed confrontative rhetorical strategies to create an "existential disruption" of the world of his audience. He sought to confront them with their responsibility for the war. Since, as I will argue below, confrontation implies shared values, it was an excellent means to achieve genuine argument. Kennedy confronted his audience, while using shared values to create identification. Finally, the values they shared allowed Kennedy to present an alternative view of what it meant to be an American, a redefinition consistent with the basic American values used to confront, yet, unlike the older view, flexible enough to allow dissent, even demand dissent, during a crisis. Kennedy forced Americans to argue about Vietnam, while assuring them that such an act did not mean a desertion of their identity as citizens. People other than "long-haired, hippie, radical freaks" could question justifications for the war.

As indicated in Chapter 1 and above, Kennedy began with a complacent audience. He needed a strategy that would allow him to shock them while he retained his credibility as a mainstream politician and political

leader. He settled upon a course of "non-totalistic confrontation." In an article published in 1969, Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith maintained that "Confrontation crackles menacingly from every issue in our country and reflects a dramatic sense of division."¹⁰ Because of domestic conflict at that time, most critics have used concepts developed there only when they saw two value systems in irrevocable conflict.¹¹ What has been obscured is their description of the non-totalistic use of confrontative strategies to pry apart and remodel "the machines of established power."¹² Rhetors may use strategies that upset and anger people, that force them to face issues they do not want to face, with the ultimate goal of attracting attention to those policies and bringing about change within the same basic system, rather than seeking to destroy that system. Further, confrontation as a strategy assumes shared values between speaker and audience. Confrontation depends upon the presence of guilt to succeed, for, if the audience feels no guilt, they can ignore the rhetors and treat them as aliens not worthy of serious attention. Guilt presumes the violation of some value; people do not feel guilty unless they feel they have done something wrong. Confrontative rhetoric forces the audience to come to grips with the fact that they have violated shared values respected by the society. Scott and Smith note this assumption when they discuss the attitude of radicals toward their establishment opponents: "having degraded humanity, you are overwhelmed by guilt. The sense of guilt stops your hand, for what you kill is the world you have made."¹³ Guilt can occur only if audience members acknowledge as true the violations of conscience the speaker charges. Thus, confrontation depends upon

shared values and can mean "only division, not radical division."¹⁴

In Kennedy's case, he confronted the audience with their responsibility for the moral transgressions of the war. In the March 2, 1967, speech on the Senate floor, Kennedy argued that the death of children in Vietnam required a sense of responsibility on the part of each individual American: "It is our chemicals that scorch the children and our bombs that level the villages." This was "not just a nation's responsibility but yours and mine."¹⁶ As indicated in Chapter 4, Kennedy used blunt language that contrasted sharply with official explanations. He described in detail "the vacant moment of amazed fear as mother and child watch death fall from improbable machines sent by a country they barely comprehend."¹⁷ Robert Kennedy asked the audience to dwell "on the horror" of the war, and forced them to realize the human consequences of American actions.¹⁸ RFK also demanded that Americans invoke their own values to judge the fitness of the war and the nature of America's search for peace:

Yet we must also look to ourselves. We must have no doubt that it is not our acts or failures which bar the way; that there is nothing we have left undone which we might have done. Our own course must be subject to a ceaseless and critical examination, not with the certainty that change will bring success, but in order that our own people can take comfort and strength from the knowledge that America has taken every step, done every action, and performed every deed within its power to put an end to this distant and ferocious war.¹⁹

The echo of John Kennedy's inaugural address, the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard of American justice, and the powerful religious requirement to avoid "sins of omission" all combine to demand that Americans

critically examine the war or be willing to accept the death it has caused. Such a critical examination of a policy that had caused tremendous suffering with no visible progress was likely to lead to the kind of change Kennedy wanted. As the previous chapters indicate, Robert Kennedy clearly and consistently invoked the conscience of each individual American to judge the horror of the war. Only if the individual audience member could accept all of the deaths could s/he reject genuine argument on the issue of Vietnam. Since Kennedy repeatedly demonstrated that the war violated anyone's sense of decency, RFK's chances of failure were slight.

As shown, Kennedy's confrontative strategy presumed the use of traditional American values. Even as Kennedy confronted the audience, then, he created identification. An earlier discussion revealed the many doubts people possessed about Robert Kennedy. Nevertheless, he never alienated himself from "Middle America" and he always had the potential to embody the dreams of many Americans.²⁰ He could create a bond of trust, a feeling of identification. The importance of this ability cannot be underestimated. As Burke says: "You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, imagery, idea, identifying your way with his."²¹ If Kennedy had merely disrupted the world of the audience, he would never have achieved genuine argument. He would have been just another radical alien. Implicit in the concepts of genuine argument and confrontation is the necessity for identification. Without a sense that "he is one of us, I can trust him," one would always reject the kinds of charges Kennedy

leveled. RFK's use of American, patriotic symbols helped create identification.²² Moreover, he began with the enormous advantage of his last name. Robert Kennedy was a living reminder, if not the incarnation, of the martyred President who, as critics admit, knew how to bring the country together in a vision of what it meant to be an American. Finally, and most important, RFK admitted his own mistakes in formulating the policy that led to Vietnam.²³ Kennedy was the only public official in this period to combine his attacks on the war with an admission that he felt personally responsible for the results of his earlier decisions.²⁴ Kennedy enacted the kind of process he wanted all Americans to undergo. By doing so, he made it much easier for people to question the war. If Robert Kennedy could express doubts, admit guilt, and call for change, then that course was legitimate and possible for all Americans. Kennedy used his credibility as a politician and a Kennedy to create a strong sense of identification with the audience and to legitimate and encourage the questioning process they had begun to undergo.

Kennedy's example constituted but one of several strategies he used to help the audience in its process of redefinition. To summarize the argument to this point, Kennedy needed to find some way to open the debate on the war, since patriotic Americans simply did not question the justifications for a conflict while it raged. RFK needed to create the context for genuine argument, because to generate debate meant to redefine what Americans did or did not do. The act of argument would have strong implications for each American, whether or not an individual decided to oppose the war. Thus, Kennedy used confrontative strategies to "existentially disrupt" the world of the audience and

force them to risk themselves. They would only do this, however, if Kennedy had established enough identification to allow the kind of trusting relationship that genuine argument demands. The shared values implicit in confrontation allowed him to achieve that goal, as did his explicit embrace of American symbols and patriotic values. But, if Kennedy were to threaten the existing definition of what an American did during a war, he needed to provide an alternative. People will not venture into the unknown without some guidance. Kennedy redefined the nature of American patriotism through his own example and in several speeches, but never more clearly than in the concluding paragraph of his February 8, 1968, speech at the Book and Author Luncheon in Chicago, Illinois.²⁵

Senator Kennedy began the conclusion with the normal assertion that "No war has ever demanded more bravery from our people and our government."²⁶ Kennedy continued, however, by creating a hierarchy of courage. All wars demanded "bravery under fire," or the "bravery to make sacrifices."²⁷ Those actions were to be expected. The Vietnam war required a new, and finer, quality: "the bravery to discard the comfort of illusion--to do away with false hopes and alluring promises."²⁸ Only this kind of courage, the courage RFK exemplified, could cope with the new and deadly conflict and realize the promise of "a great nation and a strong people."²⁹ Kennedy concluded that good Americans, brave Americans, did not shrink from the challenge, for the consequences of such cowardice were profound:

Any who seek to comfort rather than speak plainly, reassure rather than instruct, promise satisfaction rather than

reveal frustration--they deny that courage and drain that strength. For today, as it was in the beginning, it is the truth that makes us free.

Robert Kennedy not only legitimized dissent, he made it a sacred duty. Americans could engage in genuine argument over the war, they could accept the implications of the argumentation, for they would be fulfilling the most demanding requirements of what it meant to be an American.

The three theoretical concepts depend on one another and form a coherent theory of persuasion that offers an option to speakers facing similar situations. RFK wanted to change a complacent audience's views of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Natanson's injunction to "existentially disrupt" the world of the complacent audience suggests that a confrontative rhetorical strategy would be a good choice in such circumstances. Confrontation also presumes that the speaker and the audience share certain values, which can be used to create guilt. A tactic based on shared values encourages identification and builds the kind of trust necessary for genuine argument. Finally, if the speaker can assist in the process of redefinition of self entailed by genuine argument, he or she can strongly reinforce the argument for change. The new "people" created by Robert Kennedy, for instance, would be willing to participate in genuine argument and subject the war to "ceaseless and critical examination." Such an examination will likely lead to strong demands for change.

A rhetor must also realize the consequences of choosing to adopt these rhetorical strategies. Robert F. Kennedy demanded that every

American take up the sacred duty to do everything possible to end the war. After all, the guilt he created not only demanded argument, it demanded change. With Lyndon Johnson in office, change was unlikely. Opposing the war did not necessitate entry into the primaries against Johnson. Many Democrats sought to swallow the bitter with the sweet of incumbency and do the best they could with Johnson. Robert Kennedy, however, created a moral crusade. He chose to invoke deeply held values of compassion and decency and call them into service against the war. He also enshrined "sins of omission" as a criterion for judging national policy. If he refused to become personally engaged in this crusade, he would violate the sense of trust he had established with the audience. No one can make an issue into a moral crusade and make dissent a sacred duty, and then disappear when the time for action arrived, without losing a tremendous amount of credibility. If Robert Kennedy demanded that all people stand up and be counted, he needed to do the same. He could not define courage as he did and stay out of New Hampshire.

As we all know, he stayed out of the race. How Kennedy translated what Newsweek called his "apocalyptic rhetoric" into that most pragmatic discourse, campaign oratory, becomes the next natural subject for study. Robert Kennedy acted as a moral critic of the war. As a presidential candidate, he had to try to make Mayor Richard Daley and Senator Eugene McCarthy see their common interest in defeating Richard Nixon. Kennedy found himself trying to make a case against a Democratic President and against his challengers in the primaries, while trying to down lay a unified foundation for the fall campaign, and while taking into

account his rhetorical past as a moralist. Robert F. Kennedy faced a great challenge, a challenge defined in the past by his choice of rhetorical strategies as a Senate critic of the war from 1964 through 1968.

NOTES

- ¹ Maurice Natanson, "The Claims of Immediacy," in *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation*, ed. Maurice Natanson and Henry Johnstone (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965), pp. 10-19.
- ² Natanson, p. 11.
- ³ Natanson, p. 11.
- ⁴ Natanson, p. 15.
- ⁵ Natanson, p. 15.
- ⁶ Natanson, p. 16.
- ⁷ Natanson, p. 16.
- ⁸ Natanson, p. 19.
- ⁹ Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 55 (February 1969), pp. 1-8.
- ¹⁰ Scott and Smith, p. 1.
- ¹¹ See, for instance, Parke E. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Moral Conflict: Two Critical Dimensions," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April 1970), pp. 120-130, and "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand?" Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April 1968), pp. 122-133.
- ¹² Scott and Smith, p. 7.
- ¹³ Scott and Smith, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ Scott and Smith, p. 6.
- ¹⁵ Congressional Record, 2 March 1967, p. 5280.
- ¹⁶ Cong. Rec., p. 5280.
- ¹⁷ Cong. Rec., p. 5280.
- ¹⁸ Cong. Rec., p. 5280.
- ¹⁹ The early section of Chapter 2 provides an analysis of Kennedy's persona at the time of those speeches.
- ²⁰ Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 55.

- ²¹ RFK's statement of February 19, 1966, is analyzed in Chapter 3. He discussed the possibility of a coalition government in South Vietnam and he failed to demonstrate the need for such a government.
- ²² Chapter 4 analyzes the March 2, 1967, Senate speech. In the speech, Kennedy used audience values to make them responsible for the war.
- ²³ John Galloway, ed. The Kennedys and Vietnam, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1971), p. 89.
- ²⁴ Text of speech printed in Robert F. Kennedy, To Seek A Newer World, (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 221-9.
- ²⁵ Kennedy, p. 229.
- ²⁶ Kennedy, p. 229.
- ²⁷ Kennedy, p. 229.
- ²⁸ Kennedy, p. 229.
- ²⁹ Kennedy, p. 229.