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Helping them Along: Astroturf, Public Opinion, and Nixon's Vietnam War

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With the successful mobilisation of the Silent Majority in November 1969, President Richard Nixon and his aides embarked on an ambitious attempt to reshape domestic public opinion on the Vietnam War. Utilising internal White House documents, this article explores the way in which these projects combined grassroots activism and Administration-coordinated astroturf campaigns to rally supporters. The successful creation of Americans for Winning the Peace marked the apex of these efforts, but this article demonstrates that unexpected costs let to the quick return to less elaborate, but still carefully coordinated, appeals to special interest groups by 1971.

In early November 1969, President Richard Nixon could point to a desk piled with letters and telegrams to support his claims that he, and not the anti-war movement, represented US public opinion on the Vietnam War. The mail filling the Oval Office was certainly impressive, but Nixon's claims about its significance were disingenuous, if not outright deceitful. His Chief of Staff, H.R. Haldeman, later clarified the White House role in the post-speech response: "The silent majority thing, we really *did* crank up. ... We aided and abetted that activity, we encouraged it, and we had people volunteering to develop it."[1] These volunteers were necessary, Haldeman later told historian Tom Wells, because most of the seemingly grassroots supporters mobilised by the president's November 3rd speech "weren't ... activists, so you needed to help them along."[2] Part of a larger project to build what Haldeman described as a "countercampaign to the peace march stuff,"[3] the Silent Majority campaign gave shape to an anti-anti-war, pro-president sentiment in the US at the end of the 1960s. And a determination to "help them along" would become a defining trait of White House public opinion programmes.

Throughout Nixon's presidency, his staff – usually at the behest of the president himself – sought to influence public opinion through "programmed" displays of seemingly grassroots support. In many cases, the "help" Haldeman referenced involved significant control over outside supporters ranging from autonomous, grassroots organizations to puppet groups almost completely dependent on the White House. Such 'astroturf,' or false grassroots, organising seemed to offer the White House exactly what staffers were looking for in 1969: a way to influence public opinion without surrendering control to someone outside the administration. However by early 1971, aides had effectively cut off their most

successful group in favour of a return to a more ad hoc approach to public opinion heavily reliant on existing grassroots, labour, and veterans' organizations. This article traces the evolution of the Nixon administration's approach to public opinion from comparatively conventional attempts to rally supporters to the more far-reaching – and questionable – efforts to control these allies, creating and financing groups from the ground up.

Intended to isolate the anti-war movement by creating public displays of support for Nixon and his Vietnam policies, these projects grew out of the administration's often all-consuming need for control and resulted in a brief, but ambitious, programme of astroturf organising from 1969 to 1971. Unfortunately, these efforts are still at the margins of scholarship on Nixon's Vietnam War with relatively few works focusing on the nuances of the era's public-private relationships. Studies of the domestic side of the war tend to focus on Nixon's more overt attacks against the anti-war movement although Melvin Small, Tom Wells, and Rick Perlstein offer glimpses of the White House public opinion campaigns examined here.[4] More recent studies of Republican and conservative attitudes toward both Vietnam and Nixon help contextualise these White House efforts, but do not offer a complete picture of White House public opinion projects.[5] Filling this gap, this study of astroturf organising traces the process by which the Nixon White House first embraced and then rejected this approach. Not only does it offer us a glimpse into the inner workings of a secretive administration and the inevitable tensions between grassroots activists – even seemingly tame allies – and those who seek to control them, but it helps us understand how Nixon was able to continue waging an unpopular war despite campaign promises to the contrary.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS?

A clever, careful politician, Richard M. Nixon understood the importance of appearances in politics – effectively training his aides to believe that "what we accomplish is to a great degree less important than what we appear to accomplish."[6] Image, rather than substance, was therefore at the core of White House efforts to rally support for the Vietnam War. Aides worked to create a popular perception of a pro-war movement, rather than spending the necessary time and money to foster a viable counterpoint to the anti-war forces. These efforts depended in large part on the active cooperation of sympathetic individuals and organizations willing to spread the administration's message as their own. Even though staffers and surrogates consistently emphasized the autonomy and bipartisanship of outside support groups, few of these groups were truly independent of the White House.

Nixon, of course, was neither the first nor the last president to attempt to rally the American people behind his policies. All presidents have, to varying degrees, sought to mobilize domestic support, since an unsympathetic electorate can quickly undermine even the strongest presidency. In many ways, the wartime public opinion projects of Presidents T. Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt – the Committee on Public Information, or the Creel Committee, in World War I and World War II's William Allen White Committee, officially titled the Citizens Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies – paved the way for the more expansive projects of the Nixon administration. That such public-private partnerships set the precedence for Nixon administration projects is undeniable, but the latter programmes took White House involvement many steps further while at the same time taking great care to obscure and deny this very active role.[7]

Thus, although aides did invoke the William Allen White Committee as a model, their more immediate example was President Lyndon Johnson's belated, and unsuccessful, attempt to counter the anti-war movement. Johnson's failure to make his case for the Vietnam War meant that Nixon entered the White House in 1969 determined to seize the initiative from the war's critics. Even so, Johnson's "Progress Campaign" – particularly his administration's close relationship with established groups such as American Friends of Vietnam as well as purpose-built astroturf organisations such as the Citizens Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam – laid a foundation for Nixon's own public opinion programmes.[8] The new president also continued Johnson's troop withdrawals and negotiations – expanding the former into his policy of Vietnamisation. Combing troop withdrawals and increased support for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), it offered a way for the US to extricate itself from the war, but success required domestic patience with continuing involvement in Vietnam. Nixon therefore spent the end of 1968 and much of 1969 seeking a way to achieve "peace with honour" in Vietnam while expanding his domestic support networks. Furthermore, Nixon and his aides sought to reframe national identity so as to delegitimise their opponents. Using rhetoric and patriotic appeals, rather than making a case for the Vietnam War on its merits, they worked to isolate and marginalise the anti-war movement in popular opinion.

THE FIRST TEST

Consequently, Nixon asked his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in July 1969 to arrange "for the establishment of a group of prominent Americans who support the Administration's position on Vietnam."[9] Nixon specifically requested that Kissinger meet with William J. Casey, a New York lawyer and long-

time Nixon supporter, and "get him to set-up a Pro-Vietnam Committee."[10] Casey had already played a central role in earlier astroturf efforts surrounding debates over the SAFEGUARD antiballistic missile system in early 1969 with the creation of the Citizens' Committee for Peace with Security (CCPS).[11] Having seen the potential for influencing both Congress and public opinion though cooperative groups such as CCPS, Nixon hoped Casey and other supporters could form a similar group to promote his Vietnam policies. Such support would not only benefit Nixon at home, but would also strengthen the US position in the ongoing negotiations with Vietnamese officials in Paris. Nixon later recalled that he not only recognised the need for "solid support at home" in the face of what he saw as North Vietnamese intransigence, but even announced his 3rd November speech with the intention of strengthening his threat to escalate US involvement in Vietnam if the North Vietnamese refused to compromise before 1st November. Both the threat and the planned escalation, code-named "Duck Hook", were intended, Nixon wrote, to "give the North Vietnamese second thoughts about fishing in our troubled domestic waters."[12] Rumours from the anti-war movement of plans for major, nation-wide protests in October and November 1969 – the Moratorium and Mobilization protests – added to the urgency surrounding the need to mobilise the president's supporters.

Anticipating the political consequences from a successful series of anti-war protests, Nixon asked that his staff "game plan" some pro-war demonstrations for 15th October, "the date set by the other side." Stung by vocal critics at his own events, Nixon intended to "turn the trick" on the anti-war movement.[13] He further hoped to interrupt anti-war plans to use the October and November protests to show that opponents of the Vietnam War were not "just 'crazy radicals.'"[14] The popular perception of the anti-war movement as an alliance of spoiled students and angry extremists was central to White House efforts to undermine the war's opponents and the prospect of a "respectable" protest full of everyday citizens was a frightening one. The president and his aides therefore worked to arrange counterdemonstrations and letter-writing campaigns for October 15. Although significantly less prepared than their opponents, Nixon, his staff, and their outside allies were, in their own assessment, "moderately successful" with their efforts to promote patriotic displays during the protest. Nixon supporters organized counterdemonstrations, drove with their headlights on during the day, displayed flags on their homes and lapels, and one flag-waving supporter parachuted onto the Washington Mall.[15] Particularly impressive were the over 40,000 letters generated by a *New York Times* advertisement sponsored by the Citizens Committee for Peace with Security (CCPS) urging people to "Tell it to Hanoi" by writing to the Committee and their Senators and Congressmen about their support for the President's policies.

This group was a product of the earlier White House efforts to influence public opinion – in that case to rally support for the president's proposed Safeguard ballistic missile system. Casey's success with this project prompted Nixon's July request that Kissinger meet with him regarding Vietnam and by October 1969, CCPS was a reliable administration ally. The group was not, however, a true astroturf organisation as Casey – and later William O'Hara, another New York lawyer and head of the group after it reformed as the Tell It To Hanoi Committee – maintained its independence despite close ties to the White House. While not technically an astroturf campaign, therefore, the letters and telegrams that grew out of the CCPS advertisements do occupy a gray area in which the lines between grassroots and astroturf activism are blurred. Doubtless the majority of individuals who clipped the advertisements out of the newspaper to send to their Senators and Representatives did so for their own reasons. All the same, that the response tapped into grassroots support for the Vietnam War does not change the fact that the advertisements themselves were placed at the behest of the administration. In fact, aides reported that, when initially approached about collaborating with the White House, "the signers of the 'Tell It to Hanoi' ad … responded, to a man, even before they knew the details."[16] Such unhesitating cooperation demonstrated the success of the administration's initial foray into astroturf and grassroots organising.

Even so, Charles West, the White House staffer responsible for coordinating the counterprotests urged his colleagues to resist the temptation to be either "satisfied or smug."[17] His primary reason? A belief that the administration could have "eclipsed" the anti-war protesters had it been better prepared.[18] Anticipating the 15th November Mobilization protests, West promoted the idea of a "quiet, responsible, well-organized, private-sector, grass-roots program" to spread the president's message on Vietnam.[19] Essentially an expansion of the October efforts, he recommended additional newspaper advertisements, petition and letter-writing campaigns based on a pre-circulated "Speakers' Guide" produced by the administration, and increased distribution of flags and patriotic buttons and bumper stickers.[20]

In the midst of this flurry of patriotic activity, Casey wrote to the president advocating a much more ambitious public opinion project. Making the case for a national lobbying committee to serve as a "counter force,"[21] Casey claimed that existing allies "ha[d] only to be activated and supplied with material."[22] Reviewing the letter for National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, General Al Haig, Kissinger's assistant, tentatively endorsed a "tightly controlled, covertly administered program."[23] As with all outside projects, the White House was determined to stay "intimately, though covertly, in the driver's seat," but aides frequently returned to the idea of moving at least some of public relations work out of the White House.[24] First, though, they focused on countering the upcoming November 15 Mobilization protests, the true test of a broad-based campaign by the

administration and its outside allies. Vice President Agnew fired the first shot with a series of angry speeches in late October criticising the politics, ethics, and morals of the anti-war movement. Agnew's attack explicitly divided the "functioning, contributing portions of the American citizenry" from those who questioned US policy in Vietnam.[25] Aides intended to maintain the initiative with a comprehensive programme countering the Mobilization and also promoting both Veterans Day and a major presidential address on Vietnam.

Originally scheduled for 3rd November to strengthen Nixon's threatened 1st November deadline for progress in Paris, his speech took a domestic turn once the plans for military escalation were shelved following the success of the October Moratorium.[26] Instead, aides hoped that the speech would draw attention away from the anti-war protests and would, in turn, launch a pro-war campaign centred on Veterans Day. White House plans hinged on a project to frame support for Nixon and the Vietnam War as the only viable option for true patriots. To this end, political strategist and Special White House counsel Harry Dent, better known for his role in shaping Nixon's Southern Strategy, would be responsible for a "revival of the 'World War II' type display of patriotism."[27] These patriotic campaigns were part of a larger White House effort to ensure a significant, public, and favourable response to Nixon's upcoming speech and included an increased display of flags on houses, cars, or jacket lapels; pro-Vietnam advertisements; and petition and letter-writing campaigns. While the individual actions sought were small when compared to the massive anti-war protests of 15th October, the White House goal, as Nixon reminded Haldeman, was "not to compete with the protesters; it is merely to get across the point that not all of the crowd is anti-Administration."[28] Consequently, White House planning for the November 3 speech attempted to reach as broad an audience of potential supporters as possible. Incorporating local and national events, public gatherings and private letters, White House officials intended to spark a national movement supporting Nixon's "Crusade for Peace." Neither the speech nor administration planning set out to actually justify continued US involvement in Vietnam, but the president and his allies instead hoped to rally a more abstract movement in support of the president's plans to end the conflict.

CREATING A MOVEMENT

Nixon's speech on 3rd November, therefore, offered little new information. Instead the president sought to remind his listeners and viewers why the US was in Vietnam. Instead of proposing policy, or explicitly justifying the war, the president situated the conflict in a carefully structured narrative of US history. Framed as another example of the US taking the right side in a conflict, Nixon presented the Vietnam War as a honourable cause and reminded his audience: "Vietnam cannot

defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that." Invoking national pride and a nationalistic patriotism, the president closed with a direct appeal to "the great silent majority of my fellow Americans" rather than to the nation as a whole.

Even before he finished speaking, aides put their plans in motion to ensure maximum positive response to the speech. Key to this project were efforts by outside groups such as the Tell It To Hanoi Committee, formerly CCPS, and United We Stand, organized by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot. Although this reliance on outside allies had its limitations – Perot's growing obsession with the POW-MIA issue would prove particularly frustrating – the short-term results were impressive. As letters and telegrams poured into the White House, local politicians endorsed the president's position and plans to arrange a Congressional letter of support were overtaken by events as Congressmen circulated one amongst themselves.[29] The question of control aside, aides were not particularly concerned about which responses came from their own efforts and which were truly grassroots. Indeed, there was very little difference between the two in their eyes as both offer an effective counterpoint to the anti-war movement.

Impressed by the popular reaction to the speech, H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's Chief of Staff, tasked Special Counsel to the President Charles W. Colson with documenting the Silent Majority. Unfortunately for Colson and Haldeman, it proved impossible to create a database of domestic supporters as the Silent Majority was far too amorphous to be tracked in the kind of detail Haldeman demanded. Instead, Colson planned to make the newly mobilized constituency the centerpiece of a campaign to "ma[ke] the critics rather than the war the central issue in the national debate over Vietnam."[30] Central to this project was promoting an image of Nixon as the foremost representative of the Silent Majority – and patriotic Americans in general. Colson anticipated that an umbrella organisation linking established groups and these newly mobilised supporters would isolate the anti-war movement and push it to the margins of the domestic debate over Vietnam. Wealthy Nixon supporters such as Ross Perot would, Colson hoped, fund this national organisation. White House officials therefore worked to cultivate ties with the billionaire despite Haldeman's earlier complaints about the Texan's "*total* lack of sophistication."[31] The group Colson hoped to create would be run by a "small, highly select group of individuals, obviously other loyalists' with the stated mission of uniting existing pro-Administration groups and getting "all of them marching to the same drum beat." [32] This unity of message was key as the primary administration complaint about the otherwise useful network of local and regional groups was that such independent organisations did "not lend themselves to the same degree of control which we must have" for effective public opinion management.[33]

Colson instead recommended a national foundation based in Washington, D.C. whose "staff would respond to our needs on given issues."[34] It would appear to be independent and nonpartisan, but its actual role would be to "advance issues of importance to us."[35] Outside groups such as Perot's United We Stand and the Tell It To Hanoi Committee, would continue to operate, but Colson expected them to eventually become part of the larger organisation. But even as he agreed to support the project, Perot was deeply involved in planning what would eventually be a dramatic, but unsuccessful, effort to deliver Christmas presents, food, and medical supplies to US POWs in Hanoi. These and other projects – many of which White House officials saw as "cheapshot publicity gimmicks" – meant that Perot was increasingly less invested in White House projects.[36] Further complicating efforts to create an umbrella organisation was the reality that the self-identified Silent Majority had, in Nixon's words, "lost its steam" by February 1970.[37]

Nixon wondered to Haldeman whether the group possibly needed "another demonstration", but without a rallying point – provided in October and November by both the visible resurgence of the anti-war movement and the president's speech – aides struggled to remobilize the Silent Majority.[38] Faced with a challenge of maintaining momentum at the grassroots, aides scrambled to find ways to promote the idea of the Silent Majority and reward those groups and individuals still actively promoting the administration's patriotic agenda. Presidential phone calls and White House invitations were certainly useful, but in the end, it was not these proactive efforts to rally supporters that triggered the next wave of pro-war and pro-president demonstrations in the spring of 1970. Rather, as in the fall of 1969, it took a surge in anti-war protest – this time triggered by the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia – to do so.

Facing unexpected opposition to Nixon's April 30th announcement of US and South Vietnamese incursions into Cambodia, the president's staff scrambled in May 1970 to organize the "Nixon network" to strike back at its critics.[39] As aides quietly solicited telegrams and letters of support from the Silent Majority, a new group actively and aggressively claimed that identity for itself as members of the New York Construction and Building Trades marched down Wall Street on May 8, 1970. The shootings during a May 4 protest at Kent State, a rallying point for the reinvigorated the anti-war movement, also motivated these construction workers, building engineers, carpenters, longshoremen and other union members. But instead of marching against the Vietnam War and questioning the President's decision to invade Cambodia, the Hard Hats, as they came to be known, marched in opposition to the many changes they observed within American society. Acting on a shared belief that "anybody who raises an enemy flag in our country is a traitor,"[40] their seemingly spontaneous march interrupted an anti-war protest and vigil. The resulting clash between students and workers was a violent demonstration of support for Nixon and inspired the New York unions to organize

a second, official rally to take place 20th May. Building on this foundation, aides worked in the spring and summer of 1970 to organize a major patriotic celebration for the Fourth of July.

Publicly announced as Honor America Day in June 1970, aides promised that it would be "the biggest demonstration ever and not tied to the war."[41] Although outside groups were to be the primary public face of the effort, White House officials played a very significant role in planning and organizing the event. Although technically neither political nor partisan, the event enabled the Administration to shift public attention away from Vietnam and toward traditional patriotism in turn casting the President and the flag as the preeminent symbols of national identity. In its efforts to "rekindle the American spirit of patriotism," Honor America Day did not explicitly endorse Nixon's Vietnam policies, but it did help establish the President as the ultimate embodiment of American patriotism.[42] After their high-profile support for the president, White House officials anticipated a significant Hard Hat presence at Honor America Day, but were disappointed when few of the president's blue-collar supporters participated. Ultimately determining that "the Hard Hats turn out because of spontaneous events ... [and] react more to the negative than to the positive," White House officials turned away from the vagaries of grassroots organizing.[43] Instead, the successes – and failures – of Honor America Day encouraged them to pour more resources into the development of a "programmable" network of outside supporters.

AMERICANS FOR WINNING THE PEACE

Colson therefore re-doubled his efforts during the summer of 1970, organizing outside supporters to oppose Senators George McGovern and Mark Hatfield's amendment to the Procurement Authorization Act for 1971, which would have effectively limited US military forces in Vietnam to 280,000 troops. White House opposition to the amendment was concerned less with troop numbers – Nixon had a vested interest in continuing the troop withdrawals as part of his Vietnamisation policy – and more with the fact that Congress was interfering with his war. The centerpiece of the administration's anti-McGovern-Hatfield campaign was a seemingly grassroots group: Americans for Winning the Peace (AWP). Funded by the White House and coached in "disavowing White House contact," AWP consistently presented itself as a bipartisan, nonpolitical group of private individuals.[44] Gene Bradley, a foreign policy expert and the administration's "man from the outside," worked closely with Colson to organise committees in over twenty-seven cities by the end of August 1970.[45] Key to this early success was a carefully constructed, and widely accepted, view of the group as bipartisan, non-political, and independent from the politicians it supported. Recognising that

exposure of White House ties would make AWP "virtually useless to us," Colson and other administration officials kept well in the background.[46]

In this way, the rapid growth of local and regional AWP committees helped create the appearance of national opposition to the McGovern-Hatfield amendment. Building on a system of pre-cleared fact sheets for journalists drafted and circulated by Herb Klein in the White House Office of Communications, AWP's arguments reflected official briefings, seminars, and other materials from "our friends on [the] NSC."[47] Thus prepared, AWP worked throughout August to convince their fellow citizens to oppose the McGovern-Hatfield amendment. Committee members wrote articles and letters to the editor criticizing the McGovern-Hatfield amendment, spoke publicly against the amendment, and placed anti-McGovern-Hatfield advertisements, some edited and approved by Colson, in local papers.[48] The bulk of these advertisements were scheduled for August 29-30, 1970, timed to coincide with Senate debates over the Amendment and the September 1, 1970 vote. While AWP organizers hoped that these advertisements would convince people to oppose the McGovern-Hatfield amendment, the campaign's primary targets were policymakers in Washington, D.C. Many advertisements explicitly asked supporters to post copies to their Senators and Representatives as part of a larger campaign to "help our nation win the Peace" and both Colson and Bradley credited the results with securing the amendment's 55-39 defeat in the Senate.[49]

After this initial success, Bradley and his White House allies had ambitious plans for AWP to "be a catalyst to … business, labour, farm, religious, youth, school, and community and profession groups."[50] Furthermore, Colson fully intended for the group to become the national public relations organisation discussed since October 1969. To do so, the group would have to become at least somewhat independent of the White House in its daily operations – although Colson intended to maintain significant control over the agenda and message. What he did not plan to continue was the now-established practice of rewarding key organisers with access to the White House and the President. While effective, such privileged access had raised expectations throughout AWP. Having, in their eyes, directly contributed to the defeat of the amendment, many in AWP felt entitled to special treatment, access, and support from the administration. These local and regional leaders did not hesitate to bypass Bradley and contact administration staffers directly with their requests, dramatically increasing the time Colson and other officials had to spend managing these outside allies.

While most AWP members limited themselves to requests for White House invitations and administration speakers, one Florida organiser was far more demanding. Gene Whiddon not only asked that the U.S. Marine Band meet a group of Florida supporters at the airport, but also fully expected that his group would meet with either Nixon or very senior officials. In the end, the group did not

meet with the president but were delighted with the police escort from the airport to the White House, their private White House tour, the Rose Garden ceremony surrounding the presentation of their proclamation of support, as well as the State Department and Congressional briefings coordinated by White House aides.[51] Whiddon later described the trip as an "outstanding success"[52] and despite his repeated claims that the trip was "strictly nonpartisan," it certainly furthered administration projects to link the president with nonpartisan ideals of leadership and patriotism.[53] Although Bradley attempted to control and limit such requests,[54] he could not avoid the "real quid-pro-quo" elements of such organising campaigns.[55]

Both to reward AWP for its productive opposition to the anti-war movement and possibly in an attempt to limit requests such as Whiddon's, White House officials worked closely with Bradley to organise a January 1971 White House Leadership Conference. With briefings from National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Vice President Spiro Agnew and other high-level Government officials, the conference was intended to celebrate the transformation of AWP from a single-issue group into a broader "bipartisan support apparatus" despite the group's longstanding financial worries.[56] Given these concerns, the secondary goal of the conference was to help Bradley secure financial support for AWP as Colson refused to "assume any further responsibility for his funding"[57] beyond December 31, 1970. After that date, Colson insisted that AWP's budget must come from the membership itself as well as "friends outside,"[58] reminding Bradley in mid-January 1971 that "it should not be difficult to get the group self-sustaining."[59] Shortly after Colson rejected Bradley's pleas for continued financial support, Bradley himself left AWP and the group's new chairman, former Treasury Secretary Joe Fowler, declared that AWP under his leadership would not be an "organization working with someone at the White House."[60] For many in the White House, AWP's opposition to the McGovern-Hatfield amendment demonstrated the potential of top-down political organising, but the cost – in both hours and dollars – proved to be too great.

CONCLUSION

As with the Silent Majority in late 1969, White House officials in fall/winter 1970-1971 struggled to sustain a movement beyond the initial burst of enthusiasm. With the goal seemingly accomplished – speaking out in 1969 and defeating the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment in 1970 – all but the most motivated supporters returned to their pre-activism lives. The January 1971 White House Conference and other AWP initiatives were intended to prevent this shift, but failed to do so; likely for the same reason Haldeman knew the White House needed to take the lead in organising its supporters in the first place: they "weren't activists."[61] The stakes

were higher with AWP, though, because it was effectively a creation of the White House, so the challenge was not only to maintain momentum at the grassroots, but also to fund and reward key organisers.

AWP, in turn, relied on White House support – both moral and financial – thereby making it more vulnerable than a true grassroots organisation to changing priorities in the White House. The January 1971 conference was the last major event for AWP largely because the group had proven too costly to maintain, yes, but shifting priorities in the White House may well have doomed the organisation regardless. Even as Colson worked to organise the AWP White House conference, he and other officials struggled to put a positive spin on a November 1970 POW (prisoner of war) rescue attempt after it became clear that the prison was effectively empty at the time of the US raid. While the White House was able to frame the raid as a demonstration of the President's commitment to the POW-MIA (missing in action) issue, they had less success with the February 1971 defeat of ARVN troops in the Lam Son 719 invasion of Laos. With military failures strengthening the president's critics and a growing political need to shift domestic attention away from the war, White House officials moved away from the concerted effort to rally public support for Nixon's Vietnam policies. Instead, Colson and his staff worked with other White House offices to refocus administration public opinion projects on the 1972 Presidential campaign and those constituencies vital to Nixon's re-election.

Indeed, by the spring of 1971, this renewed focus on interest groups meant that the administration's approach to public opinion had essentially come full circle. The country – and the White House – hoped to move beyond the Vietnam War, even as that war limped along, thereby making the concerted public opinion projects of 1969 and 1970 less attractive to time-strapped White House officials. The costs associated with AWP and Perot's unfulfilled promises convinced White House officials that their public opinion goals would be better accomplished through cooperation with outside groups rather than through the creation of astroturf organisations. Aides therefore stopped pursuing a national public relations organisation and instead focused on cultivating the specialised constituencies that would form the core of the "New Majority" behind Nixon's 1972 re-election.[62] Rather than promote a broad-based programme rallying to promote Nixon's Vietnam policies, Colson's plans for the 1972 involved careful, targeted recruitment and organisation of individuals in myriad ethnic and special interest categories – most notably the "white ethnics" and other working-class groups. Which is not to say that their foray into astroturf and top-down grassroots organising was forgotten. Indeed, the White House again turned to AWP in January 1973 following Nixon's triumphant announcement of a peace agreement in 1973 with AWP members again taking to the editorial pages on behalf of their president.[63]

Setting aside even the issue of Vietnam, the public opinion programmes of 1969-1971 had consequences beyond anything anticipated by the staffers planning and carrying out the many White House "game plans." Claiming the flag for Nixon certainly isolated the anti-war movement and strengthened the Silent Majority, but Nixon's politicised patriotism further polarised an already-divided nation. Framing the Silent Majority as the only "real" Americans helped Nixon's supporters find their voices, but it also silenced many in the middle – those Americans struggling to balance their disgust at the war in Vietnam with their pride in and love for their country. These domestic divisions exacerbated the inherent challenges in political organising that compromised the efforts of both anti-war activists and the White House. Although Colson and his colleagues could turn to supportive millionaires to fund pro-Nixon and pro-Vietnam campaigns, maintaining enthusiasm and managing resources was always a challenge. Clearly, there is no magic formula for political mobilization, but the successes and failures of the Nixon administration's top-down organising highlight the importance of grassroots support – even if you have to plant it yourself.

NOTES

[1] Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 386.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (London: Scribner, 2008); Melvin Small, "Containing Domestic Enemies: Richard M. Nixon and the War at Home," in *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975*, ed. by David L Anderson (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 130–151; Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Melvin Small, *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005); Wells, *The War Within*.
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