

Elections and Invasions:  
The 1968 U.S. Presidential Election Understood Through the Lens of the  
Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia

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## **I. Introduction**

The spring months of 1968 marked a period of transformation across Czechoslovakia in both leadership and political culture. Popularity for hard-line communist leader Antonín Novotný dwindled among the Czech people since his assumption of office in 1957 as a result of his policies, which severely censored the press and deprived citizens of personal freedoms. Tensions boiled over in January leading to the ousting of Novotný from public office. He was quickly replaced by a more progressive figure of the party named Alexander Dubček. As a reformist who sought to loosen the rigid media, speech, and travel restrictions established by Novotný, Dubček's influence on the psyche of the Czech people played a crucial role in shaping the social and political landscape of the country. Ultimately, Dubček's reforms emboldened ordinary citizens to further engage in democratic liberalization efforts and mass protests that would soon become known as the Prague Spring. While these changes were embraced among the people of Czechoslovakia, as a satellite state of the Soviet Union, they were not as welcomed by authorities in Moscow. Thus, on August 20, 1968, the armies of the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Bulgaria invaded Czechoslovakia to put a halt to this counter-revolution, thereby marking the start of the Warsaw Pact invasion.

The following research aims to reveal how the Warsaw Pact invasion influenced the 1968 United States presidential election. These findings suggest that the invasion bolstered Republican candidate Richard Nixon's campaign and helped to secure a win against Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate, for three key reasons. First, the American press provided extensive coverage on the events transpiring in Central Europe and emphasized contempt from the American public toward their government's reaction to the invasion. Second, Humphrey, who served as vice president in 1968, continued to take the fall for President Lyndon B. Johnson's

foreign policy dubbed “No Action” by many Americans who felt sympathetic toward what was perceived as Czechoslovakia’s democratic cause. Finally, the invasion set the stage for Nixon to engage more readily in political posturing throughout his campaign as the Warsaw Pact invasion reaffirmed for many Americans the real military threat posed by the Soviet Union, and allowed the Republican Party to reinforce its image as staunch anti-communists. For these reasons, the Warsaw Pact invasion presented an advantageous moment for Nixon and the Republican Party to posture politically, increase their base of support, and secure the presidency.

Within the United States, various individuals perceived the context of the invasion differently. To some, it reflected reoccurring themes within the Cold War relating to nuclear proliferation and Soviet power over satellite states, while for others it was overshadowed by the ongoing Vietnam War. As an indication of public opinion, these perspectives informed the government’s relatively indifferent response to the events unfolding in Czechoslovakia. The timing of the invasion was unique as it took place at the height of the 1968 presidential election, occurring just before the Democratic National Convention and just after the Republican National Convention. Richard Nixon won the nomination for the Republican Party candidate, and Hubert Humphrey stood on the side of the Democratic Party. Thus, candidates on both sides utilized public appearances, speeches, and interactions with the press to frame the Warsaw Pact invasion as part of a larger, ongoing issue within the scope of the Cold War and the shattered prospect of nuclear disarmament between the two superpowers.

## **II. Scholarly Approaches**

The nuances of the Warsaw Pact invasion and foreign response are well-explored, but there remains a gap in the critical literature concerning how this international event impacted the

outcome of the 1968 presidential election. Works such as *Prague's 200 Days* by Harry Schwartz provide a necessary historical context of the landscape of Czechoslovakia during this formative year. Schwartz emphasizes the dynamics between the different political groups trying to achieve incompatible objectives as some focused on liberalizing the country while others concerned themselves with following what the Soviet Union expected of satellite states like Czechoslovakia. These clashing ideals ultimately fostered a social and political climate characterized by the Soviet Union as rebellious, thereby setting the stage for confrontation—in this case, the Warsaw Pact invasion. Schwartz clarifies that the invasion, carried out to thwart Prague Spring, did not constitute a mere blip on the radar to much of the world despite the United States treating it as such in their response of indifference.

By establishing a timeline of the events that initiated the Warsaw Pact Invasion in August 1968, it becomes clear, according to Schwartz, that the changes taking place in Czechoslovakia were revolutionary and should be treated as such by current scholars. One example of this is emphasized by the suicide of Dr. Jozef Brestanksy, the Vice President of Czechoslovakia's Supreme Court, following the shift in leadership earlier in the year. According to Schwartz, "The suicides symbolized the despair of many who had been linked to the old regime. In a mere three months, they had seen their comfortable world vanishing along with the premises on which Novotnyites had built careers and won good jobs."<sup>1</sup> By illustrating broad concepts of the social and political scene brought on by the Prague Spring with specific narratives, like the one of Dr. Brestanksy, Schwartz demonstrates the monumental shift taking place within Czechoslovakia that challenged the status quo the Soviet Union aimed to uphold. With this background

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Schwartz, *Prague's 200 Days: The Struggle for Democracy in Czechoslovakia* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), 124.

information, it becomes clear that the Warsaw Pact invasion, carried out to thwart Prague Spring, was not just a blip on the radar to much of the world despite the United States treating it as such in their response of indifference.

Other scholars such as Luke Nichter have explored public sentiment toward President Johnson and his administration during this period. In *Lyndon B. Johnson: Pursuit of Populism, Paradox of Power* Nichter illustrates the contempt that many Americans held toward President Johnson and his leadership capabilities due to the manner in which he approached a number of international conflicts like the Vietnam War and, subsequently, the Warsaw Pact invasion. Nichter's work exemplifies how this shift in public opinion toward Johnson impacted Humphrey in the presidential election given their close ties as President and Vice President.

Nichter cites polls to demonstrate that in 1968 only 39 percent of Americans approved of President Johnson's leadership as a result of the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Vietnam War complicated the situation in Czechoslovakia for President Johnson as many Americans already felt displeased with his leadership in the realm of foreign policy. Additionally, the Vietnam War had overshadowed much of what was taking place in Eastern Europe prior to the invasion; the conflict was at the forefront of politics, conversation, and everyday life, ultimately minimizing the attention given to other areas of foreign policy. According to Nichter, Europeans and Americans alike believed Cold War tensions had decreased during the 1960s in part due to the prevalence of the Vietnam War; not only did the Warsaw Pact invasion shatter these widespread beliefs, but it also reopened tensions between the United States and Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Nichter, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Pursuit of Populism, Paradox of Power* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2013), 155.

<sup>3</sup> Nichter, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Pursuit of Populism, Paradox of Power*, 148.

Finally, historian Kyle Longley has made significant contributions in understanding the complexity of the Johnson administration in his book *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval*. While Longley agrees with other scholars that 1968 was a particularly turbulent year for the United States, his approach differs in that he actually champions Johnson's ability to confront the various crises that emerged. Longley highlights that Johnson actually proceeded with patience and care when responding to the events transpiring in Eastern Europe. He claims that Johnson's response reflected his recognition of the lack of options available to him post-invasion, given the fact that the United States was overextended in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Longley puts forth a different framework of analysis from other scholars that is empathetic toward Johnson.

Previous scholarship has addressed various facets of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia: the dynamics of political factions in Prague at this time, the blunders Johnson made during the Vietnam War, and how the events shaped public opinion toward the administration. This shift in public sentiment, and the events taking place in America in 1968 coincided and ultimately reflected the decision by the Soviet Union to invade Czechoslovakia.

Section one analyzes the various ways in which the media portrayed the Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague and how those portrayals connected with the American people. The media was responsible for making these overseas events feel personal to ordinary American citizens and thus exacerbated discontent towards the previous administration. Section two explores how Humphrey inadvertently branded himself as a continuation of President Johnson through his inability to establish a campaign that was distinct to him and his achievements. Because the

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<sup>4</sup> Kyle Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 187.

public held many unfavorable feelings toward Johnson by the time of the election, more people were inclined to support the Republican Party. Finally, section three explores the inner workings of the Cold War and American perceptions of communism throughout this era that remained closely intertwined with the invasion. The Republican Party monopolized on this connection as an opportunity to uphold their reputation as vehement anti-communists and increase Nixon's base of support.

### **III. President Johnson & "No Action"**

Many have labeled the response of Johnson and his advisers towards the attack on democracy in Czechoslovakia as "indifferent" and "careless," while others have opted for an interpretation that frames him as pragmatic in his approach.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of their intent, the Johnson administration's response is best characterized by the term "No Action," a phrase that comes from his public speech the day after the election in which he called on Warsaw Pact allies to withdraw from Czechoslovakia and epitomizes the President's minimal action to quell the situation.<sup>6</sup> The consequences of the invasion hit Johnson hard as he spent most of 1968 trying to make progress on peace agreements with Moscow in hopes that it would overshadow the Vietnam War and serve as his legacy.<sup>7</sup> Johnson faced a dilemma as he desperately wanted to continue negotiations even in the wake of the invasion but knew it would send mixed messages

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<sup>5</sup> Kyle Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 185-204.

<sup>6</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Statement by the President Calling on the Warsaw Pact Allies To Withdraw From Czechoslovakia" (speech, August 21, 1968), The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-calling-the-warsaw-pact-allies-withdraw-from-czechoslovakia>.

<sup>7</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XIV, Soviet Union*, eds. David C. Humphrey and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2001), Document 288.

to the American public and the rest of the world. In the eyes of voters, conducting business as usual may as well have absolved the Soviet Union of their actions.

The global arena following the invasion was characterized by an overarching fear from all parties to take the first steps. Johnson looked to the international community within NATO for guidance but found little as NATO was equally depending on the United States and other Western countries to serve as a model of action. A report from the Council on Foreign Relations alludes to this very predicament: “The smaller allies, considering [the Warsaw Pact invasion] a big crisis, thought the big countries should take the lead. Thus, for a variety of reasons—all related to their internal politics—none of the members wanted to blow the opening whistle and suggest a new target for NATO after Czechoslovakia.”<sup>8</sup> Additional briefings for National Security Council meetings held in September reflect the same kind of action from the United Nations; while there was certainty that the Soviet invasion would be the dominant theme of the 23<sup>rd</sup> United Nations General Assembly and debate as to how the General Assembly could produce “a powerful expression of world opinion on the Czech crisis,” little substantive action was taken.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, Johnson’s response to this conundrum was to lay low even in the midst of pressure from international allies to take action. It was Johnson’s nonchalant demeanor in his speeches and appearances following the invasion that caused many Americans to openly condemn the administration via rallies, newspaper editorials, and public opinion polls for not intervening. In an appearance with the press on the night of the invasion, Johnson seemed to

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<sup>8</sup> Harlan Cleveland, “NATO After the Invasion.” *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (1969): 251-65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20039371>.

<sup>9</sup> [Briefing Papers for] September 25, 1968 National Security Council Meeting, " Meeting Notes Files, Box 3, , LBJ Presidential Library, , <https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/mtgnotes-b3-f25>.

disregard the urgency of the invasion and instead discussed concerns as mundane as his new haircut and a movie he had seen recently.<sup>10</sup> To the public, the Czech cause was one of democracy and freedom, something that seemed American by nature and worth stepping in to protect. These sentiments created discontent towards the Johnson administration, including Humphrey, that would escalate in the months to come.

#### **IV. The Influence of the Media**

The necessity of voting to fulfill one's civic duty is an idea that has circulated for decades, often escalating at the height of presidential elections. The election of 1968 proved no different. Pamphlets distributed by employers in the months leading up to the election echo this sentiment to their readers, declaring, "[Voting] is one of the greatest privileges granted to a democratic people, and it should be the obligation of every United States' citizen to become informed and to vote on election day . . . Study the facts and vote for the team in whom you have confidence to lead our country for the next four exciting years."<sup>11</sup> These kinds of reading materials, held in the Presidential Campaign Mementos collection at the University of Chicago, exude a sense of urgency that was prevalent in both the public discourse and the media in this period that reflected how citizens and lawmakers alike found the 1968 election especially pivotal for the country given the turbulence of the previous year.

Newspapers reinforced a similar sentiment, as demonstrated by an article published in the *The Christian Science Monitor* entitled "Crisis Impact on Candidates." The publication claimed that Nixon had been "outstanding" at taking a stern line against communism, a position that

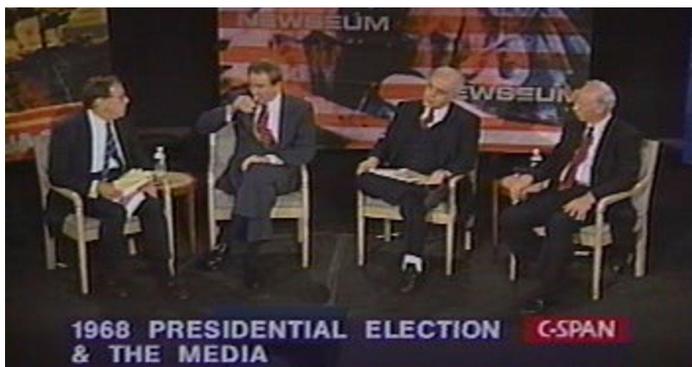
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<sup>10</sup> David Roth, "The American Reaction to the 1968 Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia," senior honors thesis, (The Ohio State University, 2010), 12.

<sup>11</sup> "Presidential Elections: Past and Present" pamphlet, 1968, MS-241, Box 1, Folder 6, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

would bolster his campaign in the presidential race.<sup>12</sup> Nixon relied heavily on television to engage in political posturing—both by reinforcing his commitment to containing communism in the midst of Soviet aggression against Czechoslovakia and by chastising Humphrey and Johnson for their lack of action in the wake of the invasion.<sup>13</sup> This, to many, created an impression of the Democrats as communist sympathizers, an advantageous take for Nixon to run with as the election grew closer. Ultimately, the Warsaw Pact invasion ultimately contributed to Nixon’s success because it offered a way for Nixon to elevate his own platform in a way that related to what the American people were looking for, while simultaneously portraying Humphrey as a candidate who would not be able to stand against communist aggression.

The obstacles that Hubert Humphrey confronted due to his close contact with President



Johnson proved to be exacerbated by the media in the months leading up to election. As such, the press assumed an equally consequential role in shaping the relationship between the Warsaw Pact

invasion and the 1968 election. In her dissertation titled “The Function of Television in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1968,” Suzanne Cott highlights the following as relevant functions of media in the scope of an election when she says, “The foregoing case studies reveal that it is used to perform a variety of other campaign functions as well—opinion management,

<sup>12</sup> Richard L. Strout. "Crisis Impact on Candidates." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug 23, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/crisis-impact-on-candidates/docview/511145756/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Cott. 1971. "The Function of Television in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1968." Order No. 7429574, Columbia University. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/function-television-presidential-election/docview/302555242/se-2?accountid=10051>.

image building and detracting, manifest approval, entertainment, informing, recognition, influencing opinion polls, avoidance, targeting and timing of appeals, confidence building, crowd building, fundraising and news generating.”<sup>14</sup> While Cott draws these conclusions from the emergence of the television becoming an influential forum of discourse within an election space, there is a degree of continuity that exists between video and print media as it relates to what it can accomplish. The extent to which a media outlet covers a current event has the potential to influence the perception of its subscribers. This is exactly what happened in the fall of 1968 leading up to election day.

Two critical components of media coverage stand out as being consequential in reworking how the public perceived the invasion of Prague in 1968: the sheer amount of content released and the nature of rhetoric utilized in the discussion. While the amount of press coverage narrating the events unfolding in Czechoslovakia is indispensable to unearthing the relationship between the invasion and the election outcome, these numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Rather, analyzing the subtle distinctions in the language of these articles reveals a far more nuanced understanding of the various biases at work, biases rooted in American nationalism and anti-communist sentiments. These biases are indicative not only of the journalists writing these pieces, but also the overarching attitudes that prevailed among the public during the Cold War era.

Previous scholarship highlights the wide dissemination of articles written about the Warsaw Pact invasion in the weeks following the event. A study following the *New York Times* throughout 1968 exhibits notable trends: “More than 1200 articles over the course of the year

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<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Cott. 1971. "The Function of Television in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1968." Order No. 7429574, Columbia University, 445.  
<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/function-television-presidential-election/docview/302555242/se-2?accountid=10051>.

were devoted to [Czechoslovakia], with the majority coming in July, August, and September. Furthermore, an impressive 215 of those articles appeared on the front page of the newspaper. In other terms, averaged out over the course of the entire year, almost six out of ten *New York Times* front pages featured an article about Czechoslovakia.”<sup>15</sup> Further analysis reveals that, while this extent of coverage was most apparent in the *New York Times*, other major publications, including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, followed suit.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to interpret these numbers from the *New York Times* not as an exception to the rule, but as part of a larger phenomenon developing in response to the crisis in Czechoslovakia.

Intentionally or unintentionally, the press’ inclination to highly publicize the events unfolding in Prague ultimately had profound consequences on the trajectory of the election. In the months following the invasion, Czechoslovakia was rivaled only by the Vietnam War as the most important issue at the forefront of the presidential race. This can be attributed to the vast coverage given to the Czech cause by the American press. Newspapers have long been understood as a broader reflection of the discourse surrounding a given matter, including coverage of the Warsaw Pact invasion. Thus, as the election loomed in the not-so-distant future, the invasion emerged as a more prominent issue than most people anticipated, due in part to the extensive attention the crisis received from the media. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Warsaw Pact invasion was connected to a number of ongoing concerns relating to the Cold War and nuclear tensions that had been ingrained in public discourse. To many Americans, it was

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<sup>15</sup> David Roth, “The American Reaction to the 1968 Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia,” senior honors thesis, (The Ohio State University, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Richard L. Strout. "Crisis Impact on Candidates." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug 23, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/crisis-impact-on-candidates/docview/511145756/se-2?accountid=10051>.

indicative of a host of tensions fueled by the Cold War that positioned the Soviet Union and communism as a threat to the United States.

The type of rhetoric employed by journalists and large publications is equally important, if not more consequential than the absolute number of articles published, because it alludes to concealed biases and opinions that a population may hold and constructs intentional narratives for readers' consumption. For these reasons, how a newspaper writes about a world affair, such as the Warsaw Pact invasion, can greatly influence the public's perception of the event. Grappling with the portrayal of the Warsaw Pact invasion requires tracing the evolution of the media back to the start of 1968 when the Prague Spring was beginning to take shape.

A reform movement that resulted from power shifting hands within the state, the Prague Spring was a period in which liberalism and democracy flourished within Czechoslovakia. Outside Czechoslovakia, the flourishing of democracy and liberalism during the Prague Spring was a manifestation of Western political ideals positioned in contrast to Soviet control.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, the values latent in the movement struck a chord with many Americans. As such, the press illustrated both the Prague Spring and the subsequent invasion in a manner that appealed to the ethos of the American people, thereby positioning themselves in support of Czechoslovakia. Press coverage of the Warsaw Pact invasion underscored values that many Americans related to, such as democracy, freedom, and liberty. This was achieved through the use of descriptive and emotional language. One article from the *New York Times* in September of 1968 narrated: "It began on Jan. 6 with the launching of a 'democratic socialist revolution' by a group of Communist progressives led by a mild and ideologically quiet Slovak named Alexander Dubcek.

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<sup>17</sup> John Jarrell, "No Thaw This Spring: The Competing Values of Lyndon Johnson and Alexander Dubcek" (master's thesis, East Carolina University, 2016), ProQuest (10143462).

It came to a clashing end at dawn of Aug. 21 when Soviet tanks and motorized infantry entered Prague to smash the ideas of Czechoslovakia's writers, artists, and philosophers."<sup>18</sup> This kind of writing, riddled with emotion and sympathy, is reflective of other newspaper coverage surrounding the invasion; the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, published a piece following the invasion that urged Americans to "not overlook the acts of naked aggression [that] befell the liberalized Communist government of Czechoslovakia."<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, depictions of this nature radically shaped the narrative portrayed to the American people.

The extent to which these factors kindled a sense of passion among the American public may be measured by the direct action that erupted in the form of protests and rallies. An article from the *Chicago Tribune* published on August 25 spotlights one such example of a rally in Illinois to support Czechoslovakia. The article features snippets of conversation with those in attendance as well as government officials that elucidates the extent to which many Americans were moved by the circumstances unfolding in Prague.<sup>20</sup> Former Governor of Illinois Samuel Shapiro echoed the sentiments of rally participants in his opening speech by praising "the spirit of freedom [that] burns bright in the hearts of the Czechs . . . although Russian tanks roll into the Czech nation, they cannot roll over the spirit that built that great nation."<sup>21</sup> For some, this allegiance to Czechoslovakia could be attributed to their own Czech heritage; for others, it was

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<sup>18</sup> Tad Szulc, "A Spring of Freedom is Cut Short in Czechoslovakia." *New York Times* (1923), Sep 01, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/spring-freedom-is-cut-short-czechoslovakia/docview/118348166/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Goldberg, "U.S.-Soviet Detente Still Needed." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Sep 10, 1968. <https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/155982014/77F9B67FD09A4D4BPQ/1?accountid=10051>

<sup>20</sup> "Rally Supports Czechoslovakia, Condemns Russian Invasion." *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), Aug 25, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/rally-supports-czech-oslovakia-condemns-russian/docview/168807735/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>21</sup> "Rally Supports Czechoslovakia, Condemns Russian Invasion." *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), Aug 25, 1968.

pride in the “American” ideals that the people of Czechoslovakia were fighting for that fueled their fervor.<sup>22</sup>

The power of the media to influence the psyche of the American people is revealed in the potential it has to alter perceptions of not only the invasion but also the presidential candidates and their response. By employing the kind of rhetoric illustrated above, newspapers and other forms of print media amplified support for the citizens of Czechoslovakia while simultaneously shifting public opinion of Johnson and the Democrats by highlighting the clear lack of response from the administration. As Johnson and his advisors continued to shy away from any sort of meaningful intervention in Czechoslovakia, bitterness directed toward Johnson and Humphrey took hold. The nature of media coverage only heightened this bitterness. Because the media was able to effectively garner support for Czechoslovakians in the following months by underscoring the similar beliefs held by both the Czechs and Americans, the Warsaw Pact invasion became an issue of high priority in the scope of the presidential race. As such, animosity toward Johnson and his advisors only increased as their response to the invasion gave voters the impression that the United States government did not support the values and ideals that they so readily touted as their own.

Furthermore, newspaper articles indicate that the press centered the Warsaw Pact invasion and Eastern European dynamics as issues that would take on pivotal roles not only within the scope of the presidential election, but in the months beyond as well. An article published by the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Czech Invasion Effect Weighed” purports this very claim, arguing, “It is not difficult to envision the next President paying more attention to American interests in Europe and around the immediate periphery of the Soviet-Warsaw Pact

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<sup>22</sup> "Rally Supports Czechoslovakia, Condemns Russian Invasion." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, Aug 25, 1968.

bloc and less to the Alliance for Progress, Africa, India, and—if Vietnam is settled—to Southeast Asia.”<sup>23</sup> While the Vietnam War was still positioned as the utmost priority, newspaper articles discussed the Warsaw Pact invasion as being relevant for the next administration as well. Framing it as an issue that would continue to be influential heightened its degree of relevance in the election at hand. The invasion’s relevance in the context of the presidential election became especially clear after the fact, as indicated by interviews with members of Johnson’s secretarial staff. One such person, Phyllis Bonanno, recalls: “As you go into this last period, the two things that always end up being most real in your memories are [Johnson] trying to make a deal with the Soviets and Vietnam... the rest doesn’t seem very real to me because in fact those were the two continuing underlying factors.”<sup>24</sup> Bonanno’s personal reflection reveals that, both inside and outside the White House, Soviet relations stood as the cornerstone of nearly all discussion in a manner that underscored Johnson’s shortcomings in achieving this goal.

Had the media taken a different route in how it approached the invasion—perhaps only publishing the occasional feature or employing language that appeared more facially neutral to viewers—each candidate’s response to the crisis in Czechoslovakia might have held far less consequence for their popularity among voters than it proved to hold. While discussions that isolated the gravity of the Soviet’s invasion in Prague ultimately died down before election day in November, the relevance of these events continued to fuel ongoing discussions of the Cold War and nuclear disarmament that stood at the forefront of election debate. Thus, the complexities of the Warsaw Pact invasion’s portrayal in print media during the fall of 1968

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Lambert, “Czech Invasion Effect Weighed,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/156083157/A4712144E5F54539PQ/1?accountid=10051>.

<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Bonanno, “Interview IV” by Michael L. Gillette, LBJ Library Oral Histories, LBJ Presidential Library (February 1984), <https://discoverlbj.org/item/oh-bonannop-19840218-4-05-17>.

denotes that there is a strong association between what newspapers chose to cover and the importance of these topics to the outcome of an election.

## **V. Preserving Johnson's Legacy**

As Vice President to Lyndon B. Johnson, Hubert Humphrey entered the election already confronting a number of preconceived notions that the public held in regard to his character and capabilities, which positioned Humphrey as a shadow of Johnson rather than a competent leader of his own. Thus, Humphrey faced a dilemma while crafting his image during the campaigning period. Speeches, public appearances, and interviews from this period reveal that Humphrey seemed to buy into this predicament rather than attempting to distance himself from its ramifications, a response that proved lethal for his success as presidential candidate.

The year of 1968 progressed with a number of developments in both the national and international arena that called for strong and decisive leadership from the Johnson administration, ranging from unforeseen assassinations of major public figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. to unprecedented political unrest and riots. As such, the general public had come to associate decisions and policies enacted by Johnson with Humphrey by virtue of their close contact in office. The aftermath of this phenomenon became especially exaggerated by the time the Soviet Union launched the Warsaw Pact invasion due to the negative impression President Johnson left on the public. Voter dissatisfaction toward Johnson was caused and perpetuated by a number of factors that would prove to be consequential throughout the election period.

First, the duration of the Vietnam War coupled with the United States' heavy involvement in the conflict had diminished the receptiveness of the American people toward the current

administration. As time progressed the public more readily began to believe that (1) the United States' involvement in Vietnam was entirely unnecessary and (2) that Johnson and his advisors were the sole cause of the mistakes made in Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup> Outside of the turmoil inflicted by the Vietnam War in both its staggering death toll and damage to the U.S. economy, 1968 was a particularly challenging year for the Johnson administration. Kyle Longley argues in *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* that the war, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the violent Democratic National Convention that erupted in Chicago during the campaign period each made Johnson look progressively worse.<sup>26</sup> LBJ himself made the following claim regarding the tension of 1968: "I recall vividly the frustration and genuine anguish I experienced so often in the final year of my administration. I sometimes felt that I was living in a continuous nightmare."<sup>27</sup>

The convoluted nature of these debacles instilled in the public the belief that Johnson and his staff were making the wrong decision time and time again.<sup>28</sup> Out of these frustrations grew the tendency to identify a scapegoat for the state of affairs in the country, and—for many people—Johnson and Humphrey were the conspicuous choice. An article from August 28, 1968 published in *The Washington Post, Times Herald* highlights the discontent emerging in regard to both the administration and their capabilities: "It applies with special force to Johnson as the time approaches to lay down power. For he can hardly hope for the place in history that he so understandably yearns for if the end is a shambles with the running sore of the most unpopular

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<sup>25</sup> Gallup Poll, *Gallup Poll # 1968-0768: 1968 Presidential Election/Vietnam* (September 19-24, 1968), distributed by Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/study/31087747>.

<sup>26</sup> Kyle Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval*, 1-24.

war in America's history."<sup>29</sup> The Warsaw Pact invasion only furthered these beliefs as Johnson's perceived indifference to the event sparked outrage that the United States did not chastise the Soviets for crossing borders. Given the fact that the invasion was carried out by a superpower that the United States had been competing with for decades in the context of the Cold War, there was an expectation that Johnson and his advisors would admonish the Soviet Union for invading Prague and intervene directly.

Additionally, the United States had established a record of paternalism in Central and Eastern European countries through the policy of bridge building that Johnson had dedicated significant time to during his time in office. Initiatives for bridge building—programs designed to promote a sense of cordialness between the East and the West with the ultimate goal of ending communist control over the region—took shape in Czechoslovakia in 1964. Successes included reducing export restrictions on hundreds of American goods, lifting travel restrictions as a result of U.S. influence, and a signed determination to allow the Export-Import Bank to guarantee commercial credits to Czechoslovakia.<sup>30</sup> Johnson reinforced his proclaimed mission in a speech given in Lexington during May of 1964: "We will continue to build bridges across the gulf which has divided us from Eastern Europe. They will be bridges of increased trade, of ideas, of visitors, and of humanitarian aid."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Marquis Childs, "Lyndon Johnson's Mysterious Ways" *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, August 28, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/143380495/E139287148AF4537PQ/2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell Lerner. "'Trying to Find the Guy Who Invited Them': Lyndon Johnson, Bridge Building, and the End of the Prague Spring." *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 1 (2008): 77–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24916056>.

<sup>31</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks in Lexington at the Dedication of the George C. Marshall Research Library" (speech, May 23, 1964), The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-lexington-the-dedication-the-george-c-marshall-research-library>.

The seeming devotion that Johnson and his administration displayed to the philosophy of bridge building starting in the early 1960s and leading up to the end of the decade allows for a better understanding of the confusion, anger, and frustration that the American public directed toward Johnson's administration following the invasion. For the entirety of Johnson's term as president, the American people watched as the administration poured time, money, and effort into bridge building programs not only in Czechoslovakia but also among other Central and Eastern European states such as Yugoslavia and Hungary. The fleeting response of the administration when Soviet armies entered Prague represented a stark divergence from the norms of the decade that championed U.S. involvement in nearly all aspects of Eastern European affairs. While Johnson may have claimed to be critical of the Soviet Union throughout the speeches he delivered in subsequent days, his actions in the following weeks indicated a sentiment fueled by the President's own intention to reach peace agreements with Moscow. This, for example, is made clear in a document summarizing the 590<sup>th</sup> National Security Council meeting in which the President's advisors take a strong stance against admitting refugees from Czechoslovakia into the United States following the invasion on the grounds that the Soviet Union could "argue that [the United States], is in fact, intervening in Czechoslovakian affairs."<sup>32</sup> This fervent commitment from both Johnson and his advisors to remain detached from the aftermath of the Warsaw invasion reveals a reluctance from the President to accept that negotiations with the Soviet Union would remain unresolved.

Furthering this sentiment, the Democratic Party Platform, published only six days after the Soviet Union crossed Czech borders, reinforces the party and, subsequently, Humphrey's

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<sup>32</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XVII, Eastern Europe*, eds. James E. Miller and Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 93.

commitment to arms control. The platform contends, “We must also recognize that the Soviet Union and the United States still have a common interest in avoiding nuclear war and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons... we must continue to work together.”<sup>33</sup> While it was reasonable for the party to continue to chip away at the negotiation efforts that had been culminating for years with the Soviet Union, the timeline between the invasion and the release of the platform displays an apparent lack of awareness on the part of the Democratic Party to take into account that the invasion reignited anti-Soviet attitudes among the public.

Because of his role as Vice President, Humphrey was burdened with the negative publicity directed toward Johnson and his administration throughout 1968 that was aggravated by the Warsaw Pact invasion. Further analysis indicates that this had dire consequences on Humphrey’s popularity that would impact the trajectory of the election to help Nixon secure victory. Whether or not Humphrey actually had a sizable role to play in these blunders did not matter. Johnson’s decisions might as well have been his own, and these ties proved hard to break as the election approached. Humphrey made matters worse for himself by continuing to emphasize his loyalty to President Johnson and, in some instances, even outwardly endorsing Johnson’s unpopular policies.



Rhetoric exuding strong support for Johnson and his policies was apparent at the Democratic National Convention when Humphrey accepted his nomination for the election. In his speech he refers to his actions as “in the tradition of Lyndon B. Johnson,” later claiming that

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<sup>33</sup> Democratic National Convention, “1968 Democratic Party Platform,” Chicago, IL, August 26, 1968, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/1968-democratic-party-platform>.

“President Johnson has accomplished more of the unfinished business of America than any of his modern predecessors.”<sup>34</sup> Conceptualized from the first moments of his candidacy, this stance raised questions as to how Humphrey would actually lead differently than Johnson, if at all. A newspaper article from August 1968 indicates the use of similar language within the scope of the Vietnam War as the journalist paraphrases: “In reply to a question about his differences with President Johnson, Humphrey said people are always trying to stir up a ‘fight’ between himself and Mr. Johnson but they have failed. Even on Vietnam, he said he had no criticism of the policies Johnson had pursued.”<sup>35</sup> While this instance was in reference to Southeast Asia, what becomes apparent is that Humphrey continuously aligned himself closely with Johnson and remained steadfast in his loyalty to the President on a number of policy issues.

Poll results from 1967 demonstrate the shift that took place during 1968 in regard to candidate popularity as a result of these circumstances. A question from a Gallup poll administered in 1967 asks, “Suppose the 1968 presidential election were being held today. If Lyndon Johnson were the Democratic candidate and Richard Nixon were the Republican candidate, which would you like to see win?”<sup>36</sup> To this, 45 percent favored Johnson, 45 percent favored Nixon, and 10 percent said they were either undecided or leaning strongly in one direction.<sup>37</sup> These poll results indicate that there is not a clear, strong sentiment leaning towards

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<sup>34</sup> Hubert H. Humphrey, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago” (speech, Chicago, IL, August 29, 1968), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-democratic-national-convention-chicago-2>.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Harwood, “Humphrey: Takes Harder Vietnam Line,” *The Washington Post*, August 26, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/143409948/7A323CA853F4BB2PQ/1?accountid=10051>.

<sup>36</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1967-0742: Vietnam War/1968 Presidential Election, Question 8, USGALLUP.742.Q12 Gallup Organization, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1967), Dataset, DOI: <https://doi.roper.center/?doi=10.25940/ROPER-3108772>.

<sup>37</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1967-0742: Vietnam War/1968 Presidential Election, Question 8.

Nixon at this point in time. The same assertion can also be made about Johnson, who had not yet announced that he would not be seeking reelection in the 1968 election.

In the same poll, similar attitudes are expressed that further isolate the turbulence of 1968 as a primary cause for the shift in public opinion that took place among voters. The first question asked the following of respondents: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Johnson is handling his job as president?”<sup>38</sup> In response, 45 percent approved, 41 percent disapproved, and 14 percent had no opinion.<sup>39</sup> While the margin between approval and disapproval is not significant, the mere fact that those who approve of Johnson’s leadership outweighs those who do not illustrates a markedly different scenario from what Johnson and Humphrey confronted in the final months of 1968. Conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these poll results that, at this point in early 1967, prospects for the election between the Democratic and Republican party seemed relatively equal, if not comparable. Thus, the uptick of support for Nixon that emerged as the election neared in 1968 may be partially attributed to the errors of the Johnson administration in handling the various crises throughout the year.

While Humphrey stood in Johnson’s shadow, the Vice President also did not fare well in convincing the American public that he possessed the strong leadership skills necessary to lead the country through times as challenging as these. The same article from *The Washington Post*, *Times Herald* reiterates that many Americans felt apprehensive about Humphrey’s ability to lead. The article asserts, “Humphrey, McCarthy, McGovern, Teddy Kennedy, they are good men. But

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<sup>38</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1967-0742: Vietnam War/1968 Presidential Election, Question 1, USGALLUP.742.Q01 Gallup Organization, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1967), Dataset, DOI: <https://doi.roper.center/?doi=10.25940/ROPER-3108772>.

<sup>39</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1967-0742: Vietnam War/1968 Presidential Election, Question 1.

measured against the turbulence shaking the foundations of order and civility everywhere, they seem to fall short of the terrible demands of the time.”<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, an article from the *New York Times* published in August 1968 titled “Report on the Candidate Named Humphrey” opens with a rhetorical question that raises concerns for the viability of Humphrey’s campaign: “The great pseudo-issue of Hubert Horatio Humphrey’s campaign for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States is, ‘Can he be his own man?’”<sup>41</sup> These newspaper articles reflect a more crushing perception that the public held of Humphrey: not only was he equated to President Johnson in every aspect of policy and decision making, but there was also a discernible amount of concern that Humphrey would not make an adequate leader in the turbulent times that the United States faced. By not taking a definitive stand against Johnson at any point during his term, especially during the period of unrest brought on by the Warsaw Pact invasion both on the home front and abroad, Humphrey gave voters the impression that he was too resigned to be in a position as authoritative as President. It is reasonable to conclude that, as Vice President, Humphrey held a certain degree of obligation to President Johnson to stand as a united front, a position that made it that much more challenging to craft his own narrative in the race. Newspaper articles like this reflect that this would make it difficult for Humphrey to achieve success as a presidential candidate.

Frustration elevated when, at least within the White House, clear warning signs became apparent that signaled the escalation of tensions in Czechoslovakia in August of 1968. Leaders in

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Harwood, “Humphrey: Takes Harder Vietnam Line,” *The Washington Post*, August 26, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/143409948/7A323CA853F4BB2PQ/1?accountid=10051>.

<sup>41</sup> Navasky, Victor S. "Report on the Candidate Named Humphrey: Candidate Named Humphrey." *New York Times* (1923-), Aug 25, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/report-on-candidate-named-humphrey/docview/118429691/se-2?accountid=10051>.

the international community, including President Johnson, were aware that the Soviet Union was closely monitoring the Prague Spring and how it was promoting democracy and liberalization within the country. A record of a Cabinet Room meeting from July 29, 1968, about a month prior to the invasion of Prague, detailed a conversation between President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford. In this document, Clifford claims, “This [Czechoslovakia] is very prominent in my mind, as I look ahead at this time, Mr. President, with the condition existing in Czechoslovakia, with existing in Vietnam—we’re waiting for the other shoe to drop over there—I can see more danger in a visit with Kosygin at this time than I can see benefit.”<sup>42</sup> Transcripts from other Cabinet meetings around this time carry the same tone and line of thought presented by Secretary Clifford in this meeting.<sup>43</sup> These conversations reinforce the notion that Johnson and those close to him were cognizant of the potential for tensions to escalate in Prague, yet there was no firm plan of action in place when the invasion was ultimately initiated. With this understanding, plans should have been in the works among NATO countries and individual governments about how countries would aid Czechoslovakia in the event that the Soviet Union would decide to take military action as they ultimately did. Fumbled responses from the United States and the international community that manifested as silence over the apparent breach of borders, however, show that this was the case in theory only.

Since there was already a clear association in the minds of the American public between the President and Vice President and no concerted effort on Humphrey’s part to sever this connection, Johnson’s balking during the Warsaw Pact invasion became Humphrey’s de facto stance on the issue. A report published from the American Institute of Public Opinion in May

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<sup>42</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XIV, Soviet Union*, eds. David C. Humphrey and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2001), Document 282.

<sup>43</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XVII, Eastern Europe*, ed. James E. Miller (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2001), Document 84.

1968 reveals the gravity of this challenge for Johnson; when individuals involved in the report were asked for words and phrases to describe Humphrey, the most popular choices included “Johnson’s shadow” and “just a puppet.”<sup>44</sup> These impressions certainly altered the public’s confidence in Humphrey’s ability to lead, but they also allude to Humphrey’s inability to establish autonomy from his position in the previous administration. This kind of rhetoric laid the groundwork for a scenario in which the anger and frustration that American citizens directed toward Johnson in the wake of the invasion transferred to Humphrey. Humphrey inadvertently branded himself as a continuation of LBJ’s legacy within the presidential race, and as a result Humphrey inherited much of the discontent directed at Johnson in the previous months because of the Warsaw Pact invasion. Had Humphrey been able to run a campaign that elevated his autonomy from President Johnson and established him as a strong and decisive leader, the landscape of the election may have evolved in favor of the Vice President. The public yearned for a change from the Democratic Party and the seemingly ineffective policies of LBJ. Due to Humphrey’s misguided approach, Nixon appeared better suited to meet the needs of the American people.

## **VI. The Opportunity for Political Posturing**

A final component in analyzing how the invasion allowed Nixon to secure victory stems from the opportunity that it presented for the Republican Party to benefit from the waning popularity of the Democratic National Committee by posturing politically. To the Republican Party in particular, the Warsaw Pact invasion was not simply a reflection of Czechoslovakia;

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<sup>44</sup> George Gallup, “Lack of Enthusiasm Found for ’68 Candidates” (Princeton: American Institute of Public Opinion, 1968).

rather, it represented a number of larger, ongoing concerns being hotly debated in the United States among politicians and the general public alike: rising Cold War tensions, the global threat of communism, and nuclear proliferation. Not only was the invasion carried out by the Soviet Union, America's notorious rival at the time, but it was also closely related to these contested topics that the general public felt strongly about moving into the election. As such, the Warsaw Pact invasion presented an opportunity in which the Republican Party, and more importantly Nixon, could move strategically and contort the narrative of the invasion to align with their ideologies. As the Republican Party had established themselves as staunch opponents of communism, the Warsaw Pact invasion allowed Nixon to capitalize upon this reputation to give the impression that he would provide exactly what the American people needed in that moment. In the grand scheme of the election, the Republican Party cleverly chose not to treat the invasion as an incident unfolding within a vacuum. Instead, they reinforced the perception of the Soviet invasion as being related to the spread of communism in a manner that ultimately strengthened their own position in the presidential race.

As early as his speech accepting his nomination for candidacy, Nixon was deliberate in how he framed both himself and the Democratic Party, specifically Johnson and Humphrey. Nixon, for example, began his speech with the following assertion: "We are going to win because at a time that America cries out for the unity that this Administration has destroyed, the Republican Party stands united before the nation."<sup>45</sup> This speech was given just a few weeks prior to the invasion, yet it shows that Nixon readily employed rhetoric that admonished the

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention" (speech, Miami Beach, FL, August 8, 1968), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami>.

Democratic Party for its shortcomings. In these campaign materials, the Republican Party takes a stand as being vehemently against the spread of communism, especially in Central Europe; given how closely intertwined the circumstances in Prague were with communism, the party reaped the benefits of this position following the invasion.

Additionally, Nixon was quick to respond to the events transpiring in Czechoslovakia and portrayed a sense of empathy for their plights in a manner that Johnson and Humphrey failed to achieve. The same article from the *Chicago Tribune* that highlights a rally in Illinois supporting the Czech people also recounts a telegram from Nixon that was read at the event: "For the third time in recent history, Czechoslovakia has suffered the cruel fate of invasion by foreign powers. The unprovoked invasion of a small state is an outrage against the conscience of the free world and can only be condemned by all who value freedom."<sup>46</sup> It is important to recognize that Nixon was in an entirely different position than Humphrey and Johnson and did not necessarily have to meet the same criteria to be looked upon favorably by voters. As President and Vice President, the public expected a form of action that matched the sentiments being put forth by Humphrey and Johnson. For Nixon, however, saluting the bravery of the Czech people was enough to solidify a base of support.

Polls from this period provide strong evidence as to public opinion regarding the candidates. For instance, a Gallup Poll recorded only two weeks following the invasion underscores the sentiment that the public perceived the Republican Party as better fit to address the challenges confronting the country. Responses from those polled indicate that 51 percent of

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<sup>46</sup> "Rally Supports Czechoslovakia, Condemns Russian Invasion." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, Aug 25, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/rally-supports-czech-oslovakia-condemns-russian/docview/168807735/se-2?accountid=10051>.

voters believed Nixon was better equipped to handle world affairs than Humphrey.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, 38 percent of respondents thought that Nixon was the better choice for president, compared to only 29 percent in favor of Humphrey.<sup>48</sup> While a myriad of factors certainly contributed to the sentiments reflected in these polls, the position that Nixon took against the Democratic Party as the election approached was consequential in shaping these viewpoints.

The same report from the American Institute of Public Opinion also sheds light on how the public perceived each man's ability to take on a position of leadership. When prompted to list positive words that most authentically represented Humphrey, participants's top choices included "plenty of ability," "sincere," "honest," and "full of life."<sup>49</sup> In comparison, the descriptors that appeared with most frequency to describe Nixon included "competent," "experienced," and "a man of action."<sup>50</sup> It stands out that the words voters associated with Humphrey related strongly to his character and moral compass, while those describing Nixon tended to encompass his ability to lead. This report ultimately reveals that, while many voters perceived Humphrey as having a strong moral character and empathized with him as a person, they did not necessarily believe that he was equipped to serve as a president with the ability to stand up to the Soviet Union. On the contrary, there is a firm belief that resonates with those involved in this report that Nixon was qualified professionally to guide the United States through difficult decisions, a notion that was backed up by the deliberate and intentional rhetoric Nixon utilized in public appearances, rhetoric that was then exacerbated by the media. Thus, it can be inferred based on this report that,

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<sup>47</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1968-0767: 1968 Presidential Election/Vietnam, Gallup Organization, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1968), Dataset, DOI: <https://doi.roper.center/?doi=10.25940/ROPER-31087747>.

<sup>48</sup> Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 1968-0767: 1968 Presidential Election/Vietnam, Gallup Organization, 1968.

<sup>49</sup> George Gallup, "Lack of Enthusiasm Found for '68 Candidates" (Princeton: American Institute of Public Opinion, 1968).

<sup>50</sup> Gallup, "Lack of Enthusiasm Found for '68 Candidates."

to a certain degree, Nixon and the Republican Party were succeeding in their goal to portray themselves as a party that was aggressive enough to tackle the spread of communism and confront the Soviet Union head on.

Finally, the degree of success that Nixon experienced through political posturing can be attributed to the methods by which he branded himself as a different kind of leader from what the United States had experienced in previous years. Given the bitterness and frustration that many Americans felt toward the



Johnson administration by mid-1968, it was in Nixon's best interest to present himself as bringing something new to the table. This was something Nixon emphasized in his nomination acceptance and rallies across the country. At the Republican National Convention in early August, Nixon positioned the tone of his campaign by drawing parallels between Humphrey and Johnson while also demarcating his own leadership when he said, "And this great group of Americans, the forgotten Americans, and others know that the great question America must answer by their votes in November is this: Whether we shall continue for four more years the policies of the last five years."<sup>51</sup> Utilizing this kind of language urged voters to reflect on the previous administration, specifically their shortcomings, and consider a political figure who would break from the norms of the previous leadership. Ultimately, this sort of rhetoric,

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention" (speech, Miami Beach, FL, August 8, 1968), The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami>.

combined with the direct association that the American people made between Johnson and Humphrey, alienated the Vice President.

Similar sentiments were expressed at public appearances throughout his campaign. A newspaper article published in *The New York Times* at the end of September recalls an appearance Nixon made in Wisconsin to Republican party workers in which he asserted, “[Johnson and Humphrey gave] the same old signals and the same old plays of the last four years... and we haven’t won a game. It’s time to win a few games.”<sup>52</sup> In both his speech delivered at the Republican National Convention and more informal gatherings such as the one highlighted in this article, Nixon effectively highlights the shortcomings of the Johnson administration and argues that electing Humphrey as president would only result in the same failures that the country experienced under Johnson. Adopting this approach provided Nixon the opportunity to set forth a new vision for the country that could be achieved under his leadership, one that was markedly different from what Humphrey had to offer and diverged dramatically from that of the previous four years.

Newspaper articles, speeches, and telegrams demonstrate the calculated decisions that Nixon made throughout his campaign that allowed him to engage in successful political posturing. In a discussion of the tactics utilized by the Nixon campaign at the Republican National Convention, Cott argues, “The Nixon convention strategy was consistent procedurally and substantively with the pattern set for the campaign as a whole. Nixon was presented as the

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<sup>52</sup> E. W. Kenworthy, “Nixon Says Nation Could Not ‘Afford’ A Humphrey Rule,” *New York Times* (1923-), September 24, 1968. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/nixon-says-nation-could-not-afford-humphrey-rule/docview/118391607/se-2?accountid=10051>.

statesman candidate, above the fray, as the logical, inevitable choice.”<sup>53</sup> While Cott analyzes the Nixon campaign as it appeared via television, Nixon’s speeches and other public appearances remained uniform with the persona presented above. In her analysis, Cott reveals the meticulous care that Nixon and his campaign advisors took to consider the context of the world stage in his public appearances during the race by citing a change Nixon made in his discussion of the Republican Party platform in the time after the invasion in which he edited out his desire to enter an era of negotiations.<sup>54</sup> Cott states, “This latter omission was considered especially important since the half-hour program was to be telecast the first of three times on the weekend after the Russians had invaded Czechoslovakia. It was felt that the country would not have been receptive to this proposal, made only a few weeks earlier at the Republican convention.”<sup>55</sup> This kind of tactic reveals a cleverness on Nixon’s part in putting himself in the position of the American people to decipher what voters wanted to hear and what might not be well received given the context of the invasion. While Humphrey’s lack of consideration for public opinion was almost haphazard and unwitting, Nixon seemed keenly aware that the Warsaw Pact invasion would open doors for the Republican Party to push an anti-communist narrative that would further their agenda and secure victory.

## VII. Conclusion

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<sup>53</sup> Suzanne Cott. 1971. "The Function of Television in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1968." Order No. 7429574, Columbia University. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/function-television-presidential-election/docview/302555242/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>54</sup> Cott, "The Function of Television in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1968," 306.

<sup>55</sup> Suzanne Cott. 1971. "The Function of Television in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1968." Order No. 7429574, Columbia University, 306.

From the start, the 1968 presidential election was sure to be contested given the tumultuous decade that preceded it. The complexity of the election, however, was only intensified by the aggressive and unanticipated nature of the Warsaw Pact invasion. After decades of Cold War tension and hostility, Johnson had begun to set the stage for monumental changes to take place between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result of his commitment to nuclear proliferation, peace negotiations were on the horizon and many Americans believed that the Soviet Union was no longer the threat they had once considered it to be. The shock of the invasion toppled this notion quickly. Johnson was at a crossroad—move forward with the summit scheduled in October with Moscow and risk being labeled as a pawn of the Soviet Union or take a stand against Soviet aggression demonstrated by the Warsaw Pact invasion and lose everything he had worked for that would secure his legacy. It was clear that no matter what route the administration embarked upon it was sure to isolate a section of voters.

Humphrey's loyalty to Johnson—and his policies—as Vice President would hurt him in the election as Johnson chose to remain detached and let the people of Czechoslovakia settle the matter for themselves. Americans were shocked, and it was ultimately Humphrey that took the blame for this decision in the election. There was little concerted effort on Humphrey's part to remain autonomous from Johnson, and his overexaggerated endorsement of Johnson and his policies further deteriorated his image in the eyes of the public. To voters, Humphrey was merely the epitome of a tradition and status quo that the country was desperate to depart from.

The media was another important factor that shaped the outcome of the race. Publications employed deeply emotional rhetoric that effectively linked the values of the Czech people to those of the Americans. The actions of the press fostered a mindset among readers that

if one was not with the Czech cause, one was against it. Johnson and Humphrey clearly fell into the latter category as a result of their perceived inaction. In addition, newspapers highlighted the rallies and demonstrations taking place across the country that further escalated emotions and shaped public opinion. These actions ultimately contributed to the anger that Americans directed toward Johnson and Humphrey come election day.

Finally, Nixon's win in relation to the Warsaw Pact invasion can, in part, be attributed to the fact that he crafted his image far more strategically than Humphrey by exaggerating the Republican Party's commitment to anti-communism. Nixon ultimately maintained a sense of agency over how he was perceived by voters in a manner that Humphrey was not able to achieve in relation to anti-communist action, thereby contributing to the public's belief that Humphrey was not a decisive candidate. After a decade filled with challenge after challenge for the United States, there seemed to be a consensus that the country needed firm leadership, and polls of public opinion support the notion that voters believed Nixon could meet this need.

For all that Humphrey failed to do in response to the invasion, it is equally important to acknowledge that a number of other factors also contributed to the downfall of the Democratic Party in the election. The apparent division among Democrats in 1968 hindered the party's ability to reach a consensus on which candidate to support in the election. Severed by the turmoil of the Vietnam War, the party saw a number of competing personalities vie for the spot as the Democratic candidate in the earlier half of the year, including Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy.<sup>56</sup> This abundance of competitors furthered the division by splitting the party's vote over

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<sup>56</sup> Joel Achenbach, "In 1968, Democrats held one of history's most disastrous conventions," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2018., <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/08/24/a-party-that-had-lost-its-mind-in-1968-democrats-held-one-of-historys-most-disastrous-conventions/>.

which man to support. As such, Humphrey already confronted stacked odds when he won the candidacy in August as he became the frontrunner for a party that lacked the unity to put their full support behind him. While the Warsaw Pact invasion certainly played a hand in Nixon's victory, other factors remained at play that, in retrospect, made Humphrey's defeat seem inevitable.

Amidst the chaos of the Warsaw Pact invasion, there is a lesson to be learned regarding the value of a robust international response that world leaders still lack. As the Soviet Union moved into Czechoslovakia, NATO, the United Nations, and other superpowers sat idly by for the sake of attaining a certain degree of peace. There was a growing consensus that it was a matter for the Czech people to handle. Although there was verbal opposition to the invasion, the rest of the world quickly fell into a state of compliance. In the present day, over 50 years later, the world finds itself in an eerily similar set of circumstances as Russia invades Ukraine. While the United States is presently arming Ukraine for military offensives against Russia, a stark contrast from what unfolded in Czechoslovakia in 1968, there is a similar attitude from the international community that seeks to maintain peace and security at the cost of direct intervention.

As the year drew to a close in November of 1968, the American public seemed desperate for stability in a year filled with one dilemma after another. Humphrey's pivotal role in the previous administration forged connections in the minds of voters that he would merely continue LBJ's turbulence. Nixon, on the other hand, represented something different, a divergence from the chaos that had become the norm. As Nixon offered the dependability that had been lacking from the previous administration, the public flocked to support him and the Republican Party come election day. For all these reasons, the fate of the Czech people as a result of the invasion

was not just their own, but Americans' too as it shifted the trajectory of the race in favor of Richard Nixon.

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