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Louis Harris Survey

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# Pentagon Papers Deepen Public Doubts About War

By LOUIS HARRIS

One of the profound effects of publication of the Pentagon Papers about Vietnam was the visible deepening of public doubts about the credibility of decisions on that war made by the White House under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

In the case of current public assessments of former President Lyndon Johnson, a massive 75 per cent Americans give Mr. Johnson negative marks on his handling of the Vietnam war following publication of the top secret documents. When asked about President Johnson's credibility in divulging the facts about U.S. involvement to the public, 63 per cent say "he did not tell the American people the real truth about the situation there" against only 18 per cent who disagree.

In a comparable series of questions dealing with President Nixon, the public's estimate of his handling of the war slipped from 57 per cent negative to 61 per cent negative after publication of the papers. And his credibility standing on the war declined from a 48-40 per cent belief that "he was not telling the people the real truth about the war" in April to a 50-33 per cent vote of no confidence.

**THE SURVEY** was conducted between July 10th and 16th. It is worth noting that among the 3 per cent of the sample interviewed after the announcement of the President's forthcoming trip to mainland China, his credibility improved. Among this group, the number who then felt he had been "frank and straightforward about the war" jumped ten points, from 33 to 43 per cent.

It is obvious from these results that President Johnson lost considerably more in credibility than President Nixon from publication of the Pentagon Papers. But the fact that public doubts increased about the way both men handled dissemination of the facts about the war leads inescapably to the conclusion that publication of the documents sowed seeds of doubt deeper than ever about the degree to which the occupant of the White House levels with the public.

The cross section of 1493 households was asked:

"Do you think former President Lyndon Johnson was frank and straightforward about the Vietnam war, or do you think he did not tell the American people the real truth about the situation there?"

## LBJ CREDIBILITY ON WAR

	Total Public Pct.
Frank and straightforward .....	18
Did not tell real truth .....	63
Not Sure .....	19

The division on an almost identical question testing President Nixon's credibility was closer but still on the negative side:

"As far as the war in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos is concerned, do you think President Nixon has been frank and straightforward about the war, or do you think he has not told the American people the real truth about the situation there?"

## NIXON CREDIBILITY ON WAR

	Post- China Pct.	Pre- China Pct.	April Pct.
Frank and straightforward .....	43	33	40
Not told real truth .....	45	50	48
Not Sure .....	12	17	12

**MOST SKEPTICAL** of all groups in the population about the honesty of the past two presidents on Vietnam were young people between 18 and 20 who will be voting for the first time next year. President Johnson's credibility is doubted among teen-agers by 67 to 8 per cent, and President Nixon is doubted by 67 to 21 per cent. However, Mr. Nixon's position with the young is enhanced by the fact that, by 67-18 per cent, the 18- to 20-year-olds favor diplomatic recognition of Mainland China by the United States, a step likely to take place in the next few months.

There are important qualitative differences in the public attitudes toward the two presidents and their performance in keeping the people informed on key Vietnam decisions. One in four persons, when asked why they doubted Mr. Johnson's credibility, volunteered that "he did not tell the truth about escalation of the war."

A 39-year-old housewife in Joliet, Ill., said, "He kept pushing us further into the war while pretending he wasn't." In Hellertown, Tex., a steelworker added, "He never seemed to want us to know how serious the situation was and did it all sleight of hand." In Harper Woods, Mich., a 54-year-old store clerk said, "Lyndon Johnson pulled the wool right over our eyes."

In the case of Richard Nixon, the thrust of the doubts is not nearly as much over hidden escalation as it over the tactics of ending U.S. involvement.

**TYPICAL WAS** a 44-year-old housewife in Shaker Heights, Ohio, who said, "In Laos and Cambodia, he claimed he was shortening the war, but later facts showed it just got us in deeper." A machinist in Venice, Calif., added, "He is withholding real information about how the war is going. We hear different things from the boys coming back home than we do from the White House." A farm manager in Coal City, Ind., said, "He's taking a long time to keep his promise about ending the war, and his words sound better than his actions."

The key to Nixon credibility on the war is a kind of bottom line assessment of how well and how rapidly he finally disengages the United States from the conflict. Obviously, Mr. Nixon is in a better position than Mr. Johnson, who presided over deeper involvement in an unpopular war and won't be presiding over the end of U.S. involvement.

Significantly, however, one in nine persons came to agree with a 65-year-old retired small businessman in Moscow, Ida., who observed, "All politicians lie, and the higher up you go, the more important the decisions, the less we are likely to know the real truth." This sowing of doubt about the commander-in-chief in the White House is perhaps the most profound residual effect of the publication of the Pentagon Papers.