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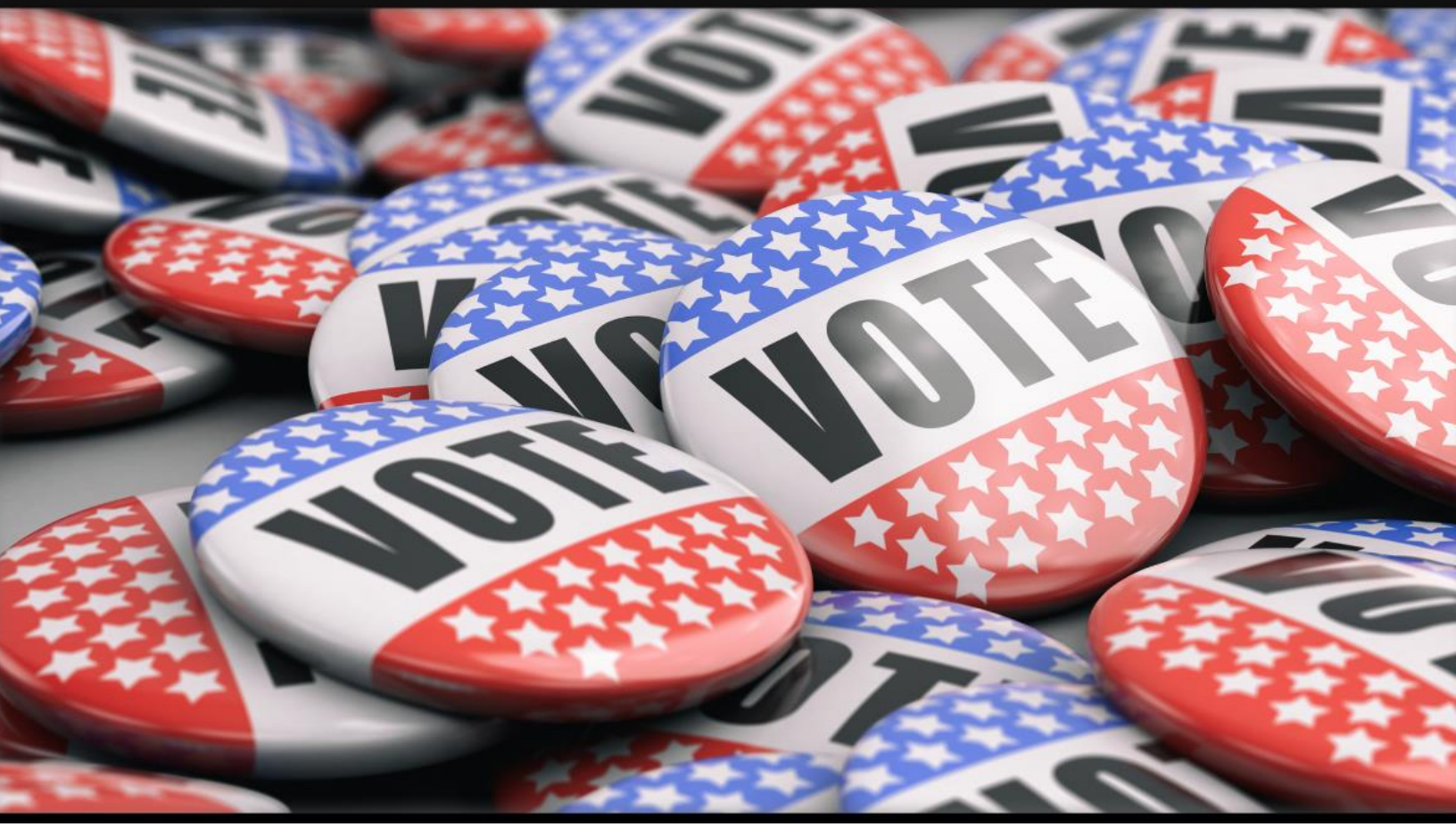

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Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections: The Case of 1968, and Perhaps 2024?

By: Luke A. Nichter

At least since James Carville coined the phrase, “it’s the economy, stupid,” during Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign, the conventional wisdom has been that U.S. foreign policy does not play a decisive role in the outcome of presidential elections. Is that true? If so, why? Perhaps it is true that Americans are more motivated to vote according to pocketbook or kitchen table issues. It’s easier to form an opinion about the state of the nation, not to mention one’s personal finances, by, say, weekly visits the grocery store these days, than by watching a daily briefing by the State Department spokesperson. Seen from that vantage point, regardless of where one finds themself on the political spectrum, I imagine the state of the nation is something that probably most people have an opinion about this year, even those who do not typically share unsolicited political thoughts. These used to be called “nerve issues,” because like an electrified third rail they shocked you when there was a sudden shift – topics like inflation, crime, and those that people find personal or moral. To these voters, it’s not primarily politics that drives their thought process. It’s personal, and sometimes even visceral.

Subjects like foreign policy and grand strategy, on the other hand, can seem more distant, complex, and abstract for the average voter – I would guess even for most families with long traditions of military or other forms of public service. Whether presidential conduct in the area of foreign policy is driven more by grand strategy or simply reacting to events of the day is something that academics are supposed to debate. The average American is not likely to be as passionate about the future of bilateral treaty relationships, how to negotiate an end to the wars in Ukraine or Gaza, or whether we are now in a Cold War 2.0 situation, as some have suggested, than they are about the price of child care, formula, and heating oil. The unwritten rule of politics in 2024 might be to say as little as possible about foreign policy – unless a serious crisis emerges that becomes an unavoidable test of leadership. Perhaps that strategy has not changed much over recent history. I suppose LBJ said it best when he said – and I paraphrase, since I suspect many things attributed to him are actually apocryphal – “you know, foreigners, they’re not like us.”

At the same time, foreign policy obviously plays some kind of role in every campaign and sometimes a big role in some campaigns. Every serious candidate has foreign policy advisors who not only keep their candidate informed and are trained to react to events and crises that pop up during campaigns. This year, for example, ongoing peace talks between the U.S., Israel, and Gaza could produce a breakthrough of some kind that could make a difference in this year’s election. And that breakthrough could produce a ripple effect in U.S.-Israeli relations, those between the West and Iran, between the U.S. and Russia and China, and

U.S. policy towards the Middle East more generally. Or, on the other hand, the secret talks could remain devoid of any great milestone until after Election Day. Another lesson of history is that the closer it gets to Election Day, the more pressure there will be to achieve a breakthrough – or an imagined "breakthrough" – according to American political timing. And that's something the other side is aware of, too, and will use to their advantage. That's the unpredictable nature of foreign policy, unpredictable in part because Americans tend to overstate our importance and underappreciate the importance of the other side. We are not usually in control of diplomatic timing as much as we think we are.

Therefore, while the role of foreign policy in presidential elections is often not decisive, in part because it can be unpredictable, it cannot be written off entirely either – even if it will be many years before a true history of this year's campaign is written. The fact is, the first draft of history written by journalists is necessarily incomplete and even inaccurate, produced as it is based on only partial documentation and tight time constraints, yet it's essential because it's what influences voters more than anything written by a historian – and why we're interested in this subject now.

Even if foreign policy issues do not figure prominently in the clash of campaigns this year, at least so far, that does not change the fact that there are many issues worth discussing. And it's also worth exploring whether there are examples to the contrary – whether there are other recent elections in which U.S. foreign policy played a bigger role than usual, or could have played a decisive role. That leads me to 1968, a year in which foreign policy played a bigger than usual role during that presidential election, one that has been a point of comparison with 2024 in many ways, and was the subject of my last book, *The Year That Broke Politics: Collusion and Chaos in the Presidential Election of 1968* (Yale University Press, 2023). There are indeed comparisons to be made and lessons to be derived, especially the role of an unpopular war and a rising isolationist trend among part of the electorate, and suggestions for clues to watch out for between now and Election Day this year. But let me first start with 1968 before coming back to 2024.

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If you were to ask me for an example of a recent presidential election in which foreign policy figured largely, I would say I can think of at least a few prominent examples. In 1952, the Korean War was a major issue. General Dwight Eisenhower campaigned on a pledge that he would go to Korea, implying that he would solve the crisis on the Korean Peninsula that had been stalemated since late 1950, following Chinese entry. Eisenhower indeed went to Korea, and an armistice was achieved in July 1953 – only six months into his presidency. More recently, in 2004, I remember how 9/11 still loomed large. The Bush 43 administration made the case that it was better to take the fight to Afghanistan,

and Iraq, rather than have another attack on U.S. soil. I remember the fear that many Americans had that it was a question of *when* and not *if* another attack would occur. It took many years for that concern to gradually fade away.

Even then, during the 2004 presidential election, it proved difficult to drive an enthusiastic turnout around the subject of foreign policy. So Karl Rove took a gamble that actually domestic issues such as the Defense of Marriage Amendment, or DOMA, and character issues – Bush 43 was seen to be someone more Americans wanted to have a beer with, as opposed to the supposedly elitist windsurfing Senator John Kerry – would drive a more favorable mix of turnout in swing states like Ohio, back when the once-purple Buckeye State was a must-win swing state for Republicans. I attended both Bush and Kerry rallies in Ohio that year, and I think Rove made the right call. It is also interesting that an administration founded on domestic policy, with Governor George W. Bush pushing back on the idea of an expansive foreign policy (a.k.a. "nation building") during debates with Vice President Al Gore, ended up being known largely for foreign policy – and an expansive one at that. It is a reminder that major shifts in history are not always planned, and that the role of foreign policy can be unpredictable.

However, 1968 is a year that comes to mind in which foreign policy was a factor from January to December. According to Gallup polls, Americans consistently ranked it high in their political thinking throughout the year. In fact, the year as a whole has been an exceptionally good guide to 2024: a surprise presidential withdrawal, vice presidential succession, an unpopular war that mobilized the youth and the left, a Republican candidate eager for redemption after losing his previous bid for the presidency, political violence, stronger than usual third-party challengers, the return to Chicago for another lively convention, and a historic loss of faith among the electorate in American institutions. While history does not predict the future, it can illuminate some possible paths forward and demonstrate how we reacted to earlier circumstances. And it still gives us things to watch for in the remainder time between now and Election Day 2024.

In 1968, voters had plenty to think about in terms of foreign policy. The year started with the North Korean seizure of the crew of the USS *Pueblo.* Up until not that many years ago one could visit the captured Pueblo on a trip to Pyongyang. Then there was the Tet Offensive, a simultaneous coordinated attack on American and allied military forces in cities throughout South Vietnam. Coming at a time when Americans had been told the war was going better, how could that be true in light of that attack? The national media raised troubling questions, right as the presidential primaries were beginning, and the issue framed an important part of the campaign and the rest of the year. Some in the media got it really wrong, such as reports that Tet Offensive attackers had breached the U.S. Embassy or were firing down upon the roof, reporting that powerfully revised the American view of the war. The Tet Offensive led directly to

the Paris peace talks, which began in May – both the public talks, as well as the private ones that started later – which continued in fits and starts for over four years through the first term of the Nixon administration.

The Tet Offensive also led to Senator Eugene McCarthy's near defeat of Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. In fact, many books suggested that McCarthy won, which is not true. I argued in my book that McCarthy was running as much against the presidency as he was for it. However, what is true was that he was the first to challenge LBJ from within his own party. That took courage and conviction. He wasn't some minor politician few had heard of, like those too timid to challenge President Joe Biden earlier this year, but a prominent U.S. Senator – soon to be joined in the race by another, Senator Robert Kennedy. Johnson won in New Hampshire despite having no forces on the ground and not appearing on the ballot, similar to how Eisenhower won it in 1952. Yet, what shaped the popular view post-New Hampshire was that LBJ was vulnerable and could be defeated that year based on the worsening news coming out of Vietnam – which a growing number in the national media had turned against. At the beginning of the year, the major media outlets assigned reporters knowledgeable about Vietnam to cover the presidential race, because it was assumed Vietnam would be the most prominent issue in the campaign.

The public peace talks that began in May in Paris, which expanded into parallel private talks that summer, drug on over the summer without a breakthrough. The negotiators, led by U.S. delegation leaders Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance, were under close supervision by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the White House itself. The delegation in Paris was eager to announce a breakthrough, and ultimately to work in the next administration, since there was going to be a new President no matter who won in November given LBJ's surprise withdrawal on March 31. Vice President Hubert Humphrey was inserted into what was left of Johnson's campaign infrastructure, and prepared to go to LBJ's convention in Chicago and defend what was largely Johnson's platform, too. Humphrey got the nomination not because he was the strongest candidate but because he was the least disruptive substitute for Johnson. Humphrey was criticized for not entering any primaries and for refusing to debate; he claimed there were no debates because Republican candidate Richard Nixon also refused to debate, which was true, but there was no way Humphrey would have shared a debate stage with George Wallace the way, say, George H.W. Bush did with Ross Perot in 1992.

HHH, as Hubert Horatio Humphrey was known in the political world, quickly learned how difficult it would be to run on both change and continuity simultaneously. If he had a new idea, if it was so good when why wasn't it implemented already during his time as Vice President? Everything Humphrey said on the campaign trail was compared to statements he made before he was a candidate, in the hope of finding some difference – and especially to find any

perceived difference between him and the President he continued to depend on for support, who was very much still in charge during his remaining months of office. Some pressed Humphrey to resign the vice presidency so he could be truly independent. But he was unwilling to be disloyal, since he had gotten as far as he had in politics due to Johnson. Instead, he found a compromise. After September 30, he stopped using the vice presidential seal at campaign events as a symbolic act of independence. One of the things that sets my book apart from others is that I restore LBJ to a central place in the story – an idea I picked up from a conversation I had with former Vice President Walter Mondale. Rather than treating Johnson as a lame duck after his withdrawal on March 31, I show how a withdrawal from the ballot was not a withdrawal from politics. If anything, LBJ worked even harder on his remaining agenda and influencing the choice of his successor – who could do a lot to influence LBJ's place in history. The most controversial argument I make in the book is that Johnson ultimately preferred his old nemesis Nixon as his successor, based on my first access to the Rev. Billy Graham's diary, who operated as a messenger between them, because Johnson concluded it would be better for his own legacy. With Humphrey promising to end the Vietnam War within six months, not only would Nixon be better on that score but he offered surprisingly progressive proposals in the domestic policy area that provided sufficient reassurance for Johnson. As President, Nixon no more ended the Great Society than Eisenhower did the New Deal. The size of government didn't shrink under Nixon; it grew.

In the midst of the 1968 campaign, the Soviets also invaded a neighbor, Czechoslovakia. I do wonder whether American adversaries, especially in Hanoi and Moscow, took advantage of LBJ's lame duck status and the perception of American weakness, or at least the perception of being distracted by an unusually chaotic election cycle. Johnson desperately wanted to be known as a peacemaker in history, or at least make some strides towards that goal during his remaining months in office, or at least leave his successor in a better position than they would have been in without his help. Vietnam was one thing, but he also hoped to be the first President to go to Moscow. He had even proposed to do so during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in late August, which would have further humiliated Humphrey. Even after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Johnson hoped he could visit Moscow later that year. But soon he was distracted by the biggest foreign policy issue of all, the Paris peace negotiations in the final month before Election Day and the increasingly politicized role they took on.

While Americans had consistently identified the Vietnam War as their top or near top concern through the year, according to Gallup, there was a noticeable shift following the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April and Senator Robert Kennedy in June. It's an argument I make in the book, that after the political violence of that year, if you add up the individual

domestic concerns that Gallup asked about, like violence, arson, looting, and crime, they started to overtake the biggest single concern of Vietnam, and it largely remained that way until Election Day. And a lot of the concern about Vietnam had to do with its domestic component, the draft – which united far more Americans across political, social, and economic boundaries in opposition to the war than, say, the wars in Ukraine or Gaza today. That opposition was strong enough that while we still register in compliance with the Selective Service Act, we haven't had compulsory military service since Vietnam.

In other words, the 1968 presidential election, the best example we might have a recent presidential election that, at least according to the conventional wisdom, was decided on the basis of foreign policy, namely growing doubts about the Vietnam War, was actually decided because of domestic concerns. After the assassinations during the spring, then both party nominees agreeing to wind down American military involvement in Southeast Asia, each in their own way, that lessened the war as the most important issue. It does not mean that foreign policy was not important that year. It just means it was more difficult to tease out major differences between the candidates in an area where there are fewer partisan divergences. While today we no longer have the unison that we used to have, when despite our differences over domestic policy when the election was over we used to rally together and had a bipartisan foreign policy, it's more difficult to tease out differences in say, a candidate's position vis-à-vis Vietnam in 1968, or China today, then it is tax policy or student loan forgiveness. Speaking of today, it's probably a good time to return to 2024.

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As in 1968, there is no shortage of foreign policy issues to discuss. Flipping through a few related publications, and taking in a few related podcasts, let me take a stab in no particular order at what has been in my newsfeeds lately:

- the Houthis in Yemen;
- Turkey's decision to join the BRICS bloc – which will not only need a new letter in its acronym but might ultimately become a kind of economic Warsaw Pact;
- Israel and Gaza – recently I did an event at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library with former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, who I thought had a good compromise arguing for a two-state solution as long as Hamas was eliminated first;
- Brazil – Looking beyond the freedom of speech dispute with Elon Musk, is it really headed towards communism? We know how tolerant the United States typically is of communist governments in the western hemisphere. (I'm looking at you Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba);
- Ukraine and Russia – There's been all sorts of speculation lately about how a Harris or Trump administration might handle the issue

differently. What's especially concerning to me lately is what appears to be a growing number of Ukraine attacks on Russian soil, and what that might mean in terms of potential escalation of the war;

- Iran – If we are to believe much of what is reported nationally about the Middle East, it seems all or at least most roads lead to Teheran. This is one foreign policy issue where the Democrats and Republicans seem to have positions different enough to tease out – with Democrats falling in line behind what's left of the Obama era accords, and Trump taking a much tougher, and I think more popular line. That's not a political statement, but simply the fact that Americans seem less patient with diplomatic agreements that do not seem to produce fruit in a short period of time;
- China – Where do we begin? How about August's ramming of a Philippines Coast Guard vessel, what was apparently the seventh act of aggression in that month alone. At what point do we change our nomenclature to the West Philippine Sea, or, as I am fond of, the East Vietnamese Sea, or does that not matter? Perhaps it's something to consider. In diplomacy, sometimes how you say something can be as important as what you say;
- Mexico – The United States needs a strong southern neighbor as much as we need Canada to be a strong northern neighbor. How about the border? I'm fascinated by the political shifts that have been taking place in South Texas, which have to be one of the last parts of the FDR New Deal coalition to hold together, but perhaps not for much longer, and how the political shifts in that sector are different from trends in other parts of the Southwest. This year's election result is likely to produce a lot of fascinating data. By the way, does the border count as a foreign policy issue? I feel like it should be, but when was the last time you saw a major foreign policy figure make an appearance there? It seems it is primarily treated as a domestic policy issue or one left to the states;
- AI – Is artificial intelligence a foreign policy issue? That answer might officially be classified by the U.S. Government. I'm waiting for the first time a presidential candidate, or a world leader, posts a shocking video that brings nations to the brink of war only for us to learn the video was an AI deep fake. I think the day is coming when we have to digitally authenticate communications from leaders, both current and would-be ones. Another technological innovation I feel is right around the corner is the ability to early vote and then securely change our vote. With so many people voting early, in some states later this month, I suspect in the future there will be a growing call to allow us to change our minds. That would benefit not only the

candidates and the political parties, but I suppose it would empower the voters, too. It would be wise to strengthen our voting system before we find ourselves in a crisis. This year we faced the possibility that someone might have dropped out after votes were cast. And while former President Trump seems to be younger, he's not that much younger than President Biden. Much of the fall campaign, which used to not go into high season until after Labor Day, occurs after an increasing number of Americans have already voted. The idea of the October Surprise, which used to be prominent – LBJ was a master of it, for example – as a way of shocking the electorate on the eve of Election Day, now means much less, and probably disproportionately affects Republicans who are more likely to vote on Election Day. I suspect as soon as we figure out how to change our vote securely we will have that option;

- Finally, the perception of American weakness, or at least distraction – As in 1968, the question is how much is this playing a role in terms of foreign policy challenges this year? People across the political spectrum naturally want to feel assured that American interests are being protected. But President Biden seems to be more disengaged than President Johnson was, and Vice President Harris is campaigning as Vice President Humphrey was, and I'm not sure either were deeply involved in foreign policy leadership to begin with. LBJ was fond of reminding his staff that foreign adversaries also read the *New York Times*; our adversaries today can see that we seem exceptionally preoccupied by politics this year. Will the archives of the future one day reveal that our adversaries were taking advantage in 2024? They did in 1968, without a doubt, as revealed in the transcripts of the Paris peace talks.

In conclusion, I would ask how many of these foreign policy issues do you think Americans are really paying attention to? How much did Americans pay attention to in 1968? The latter is an easier question for me to address. I am fond of saying that since I can barely make sense of the past, I have no chance of making sense of the present. The conventional wisdom in the first draft of history of 1968 was that the American people voted primarily according to their views on Vietnam. If you were for getting out of the war sooner, you voted for Humphrey – or not at all, since you might have been a McCarthy or Kennedy supporter unwilling to make the shift to Humphrey. If you were for ending the war, but doing so in a way more consistent with LBJ's gradualist approach, you voted for Nixon – who made sure never to criticize Johnson's position on Vietnam after March 31, realizing that he could do much to help the Nixon side simply by withholding support from the Humphrey side that was trying to break from LBJ's position. If you were for winning militarily

in Vietnam, reducing the involvement of politicians in Washington and increasing the decision making of commanders on the ground, then former (and future) Alabama Governor George Wallace was your only option. But as if often the case, how people voted was more complicated, because there were many other factors in play – and I argue that those factors – the economy, inflation, and crime – eclipsed Vietnam for most Americans in 1968 by the time they reached Election Day.

Luke A. Nichter

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