1968 DOC. #1: LBJ and Vietnam Poster

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1964, when Lyndon Johnson won an unprecedented landslide victory over Republican Barry Goldwater, it seemed that he might be able to achieve all the social transformations envisioned with his “Great Society” programs. In just a few years LBJ signed legislation creating Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, the Civil Rights Act, the War on Poverty, the Air Pollution Control Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Lyndon Johnson might have gone down in history as the most successful President since Franklin D. Roosevelt if it hadn’t been for Vietnam.

No matter how much the President wanted it to, the war simply would not go away. Nightly news images, particularly during the Tet offensive of January, 1968, made it clear that the U.S. was losing. Even TV anchor Walter Cronkite called the war “unwinnable” (Roberts 100). Johnson watched as anti-war protesters filled the streets calling for his impeachment, carrying signs with slogans like “Drop LBJ on North Vietnam.”

Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota decided to run against Johnson as a “peace candidate” in the Democratic primaries. McCarthy won a majority of delegates in the first primary in New Hampshire. Three weeks later Johnson made a major televised address announcing steps to end the war. At the end of his talk he shocked the nation by announcing that he would not seek reelection.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a year of profound change throughout the world. As U.S. students were shutting down universities to protest the war, workers and students from Paris to Mexico City to Prague united in efforts to transform their governments. Unlike previous elections of the 20th century, some of the most imaginative campaign material was being created by people outside the offices of campaign managers and advertising agencies (Fischer 259).

This poster was made by artist David Nordahl in 1968. It is one of many such posters created by opponents of the war and the Johnson presidency that were displayed on college campuses and at anti-war rallies. Although 18-21 year olds did not get the vote until 1971, college campuses were fertile ground for political activism in 1968, in part because of the continued military draft.
What are the messages the artist is trying to make about Lyndon Johnson? Give evidence to support your conclusion.

Suggested Answer: He is responsible for much suffering among the Vietnamese people, but he doesn’t seem to care.

Evidence: Johnson is pictured in front of the U.S. soldiers, representing his role as Commander in Chief; he looks away from the scene of abuse, reclining in a lawn chair with a drink and sunglasses in his hands ignoring the violence.

What techniques does the artist use to stir the emotions of his audience?

Suggested Answer: The artist includes images of U.S. soldiers dragging a man away from his family beneath an image of Hitler, soldiers praying next to a fallen body, and women and children as victims of war. The text includes: “Filmed in real blood ‘n gute color” and “Price of admission: Your son.”

Further Questions:

- Why did the artist use the style of a movie poster?
- How does the artist use irony to make his point?
- What might a modern version of this poster look like today?
- Could a grassroots artist like David Nordahl have any impact in a Presidential campaign today? Why or why not?

Note: The man in the lawn chair in the bottom center is President Lyndon Johnson.

Additional Info:

After Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection, he fell into a deep depression. He said, “I’ve never felt lower in my life. How do you think it feels to be completely rejected by the party you’ve spent your life with, knowing that your name cannot be mentioned without choruses of boos and obscenities?” (Genovese 158).

Connections (see thematic listing):

- Attack
- Foreign Policy