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Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam

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Lyndon Johnson's decision to take the United States into large-scale war in Vietnam in 1964-1965 must loom large in any evaluation of his presidency. This article argues that the decision was not forced on Johnson by pressures beyond his control, and that his choice for war is difficult to explain, in view of the international and domestic political context, the dynamics on the ground in Vietnam, and the thinking among U.S. officials themselves. The article maintains that Johnson could expect—on the basis of information available to him at the time—to pay a heavy political price if he Americanized the war, and examines why he nevertheless did so.

In 1965, the United States under Lyndon B. Johnson entered large-scale war in Vietnam. It did so incrementally, over a period of several months in the first half of the year. The contingency planning for war, however, went back considerably further. Already in the spring of 1964, Johnson administration insiders had agreed that the present policy—which limited overt U.S. involvement to funding, equipping, and advising the South Vietnamese government in its struggle against a Hanoi-directed insurgency—no longer had a reasonable chance of being successful. Absent a more active American intervention, involving either air and naval attacks on the North or ground troops in the South, Communist-led forces would take over in South Vietnam, probably within months, whether by way of a military victory, a collapse of the Saigon regime, or a diplomatic settlement among the Vietnamese.¹

American planners hoped any escalation could be delayed until after the 1964 presidential election. On November 3, 1964, the very day voters gave Johnson a landslide victory over Republican Barry Goldwater, senior officials commenced secret deliberations concerning how to stave off a South Vietnamese defeat. By early December, the president and his aides had decided to implement a two-phase escalation of the fighting. The first would involve “armed reconnaissance strikes” against infiltration routes in Laos—

1. This article draws from, and builds upon, my book *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

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part of the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail that carried men and materiel into the South—as well as retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam in the event of a major Vietcong attack. The second phase would see “graduated military pressure” against the North, in the form of aerial bombing, and, almost certainly, the dispatch of U.S. ground troops to the South. Phase one would begin as soon as possible; phase two would come later, some time after 30 days.

In February 1965, in response to Vietcong attacks on American installations in South Vietnam that killed 32 Americans, President Johnson ordered Operation Rolling Thunder, a bombing program against North Vietnam that continued, more or less uninterrupted, until October 1968. Then, on March 8, the first U.S. combat battalions came ashore near Danang. More troops soon followed, and in April, Johnson authorized them to engage in offensive operations within 50 miles of their base area. By mid-May, the total number of American forces in Vietnam had risen to 47,000 and was still climbing to the new ceiling of 82,000.

Then, in late July 1965, following several days of meetings among top civilian and military officials, Johnson approved the immediate deployment of an additional 50,000 U.S. troops and privately agreed to send another 50,000 before the end of the year. He also authorized General William Westmoreland, the commander of American forces, to adopt an aggressive search-and-destroy strategy and to increase dramatically the bombing of North Vietnam. Students of the war have tended to attach great importance to these “July decisions,” seeing in them the crossover point to major war. But by then the war was already under way. The air campaign had begun months before, and sizable numbers of combat troops were already on the ground and engaging in offensive operations. By July, Johnson’s options had narrowed drastically. His personal credibility, as well as the credibility of the Democratic Party and of the United States internationally, was on the line to a much greater degree than it had been before the beginning of March.

On some level, Johnson knew by July that he was hemmed in. For many weeks, he had been telling his wife Lady Bird and others that he felt trapped by his Vietnam commitment. He had said the same thing on occasion already in 1964, to be sure, but now the claim had more legitimacy. Maybe that helps explain why, in the spring and early summer weeks of 1965, he made little effort to break out of the trap, to order a full-scale reevaluation of policy including serious exploration of possible alternatives to a military solution. The discussions in July were extensive and seemingly wide ranging, but they had about them the character of a charade—Johnson wanted history to record that he agonized over a decision he had already made.

More important than the question of *when* Johnson made his decision is *why* he made it. This question must loom large in any evaluation of Johnson and his legacy, and of the war and its consequences, yet until recently it was often largely bypassed in the literature on the war. A sense of inevitability permeates much of this work, a notion that it was, in practical terms, impossible for an American president—whether Lyndon Johnson or anyone else—to have rejected the Americanization. The alternative of negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam was unthinkable, given its foreseeable consequences in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, among America’s allies and friends, and above all in the reaction of domestic political rivals and voters in the next electoral season. According to

many authors, a powerful “Cold War mindset” reigned in American opinion that wholeheartedly supported a staunch commitment to defend South Vietnam, indeed saw that defense as vital to U.S. security. In real political terms, therefore, so the argument goes, Johnson had no choice but to expand the war. (To the extent that he had a choice, it was moving faster and harder militarily, along the lines some military advisers wanted.) He was thus not really personally responsible, he cannot fairly be held accountable, for his “non-choice” to escalate the war. No one else in his position would have done differently. Viewed from the context of the time, moreover, Johnson and his top Vietnam advisers understandably believed that the new military measures would work, that Rolling Thunder and the dispatch of combat troops would compel Hanoi to throw in the cards. Add to all this the intransigence of North Vietnam on the subject of negotiations and it becomes clear that there existed no realistic way of averting the war.²

It seems a plausible, indeed powerful, interpretation, until one subjects these various components of the “inevitability thesis” to close scrutiny. Then each one begins to look wobbly, to the point where one could conclude that Johnson’s decision for war is, if anything, hard to explain. At no point from his ascension to the White House in November 1963 through the winter of 1965 was he confined to a certain course of action on Vietnam. He inherited a difficult Vietnam problem from John F. Kennedy, and his choices were few and difficult. But exist the choices did. Neither domestic nor international considerations compelled him to escalate the war. At home, Johnson confronted not an all-powerful Cold War mindset, fully committed to thwarting Communist designs in Southeast Asia, but a pronounced fluidity in nonofficial thinking about the conflict. The general public, to the extent it paid attention at all, was ambivalent, not wanting to lose in Vietnam but also not wanting to send America’s young men to fight and die there; in early 1965, large majorities voiced support for negotiations *and* for maintaining the present level of commitment to Saigon. In the intelligence community, skepticism about the prospects for any U.S.-led war in Vietnam was widespread. The same was true on Capitol Hill and in the mainstream press, including on the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Significantly, many of these observers said that the United States had more than fulfilled its obligation to a South Vietnamese government so patently unwilling to do its part in its own defense.

Consider, in particular, the mood in Congress, where the Democrats held large majorities in both houses in early 1965. The most respected, most senior Democratic lawmakers in the country opposed escalation—Armed Services Committee Chairman and Johnson mentor Richard Russell (Georgia), Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (Montana), Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright (Arkansas), and Senator and then Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey (Minnesota). All four were widely respected for their foreign policy expertise. They were also politically savvy, arguably no less so than the presumed master of partisan strategizing, Lyndon Johnson. Each of them held well-founded concerns about how opinion leaders in the press and in Congress as well as John and Jane Q. Citizen in Middle America would react to a long and incon-

2. Logevall, xvi-xvii.

clusive Asian war; each of them doubted the importance of Vietnam to U.S. security. Nor were they the only lawmakers to hold these views. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but certainly in the Senate a clear majority of Democrats and moderate Republicans were either downright opposed to Americanization or ambivalent; vocal proponents of taking the war to North Vietnam were strikingly few in number. (Congressional support would rise sharply in the spring and summer, after Americanization had commenced in earnest, in a textbook example of the rally-around-the-flag effect.)

Internationally, the United States was largely isolated on the Vietnam issue by the end of 1964. It was not that most friendly governments in Europe and Asia were hostile *per se* to American policy on Vietnam. Most were sympathetic to what Washington sought to achieve in Vietnam—to preserve an independent, non-Communist government in the South—and they shared the U.S. desire to check possible Chinese expansion in the region. Nevertheless, with the notable exception of Australia, these governments resisted what in some cases was strong and persistent American pressure to become actively involved in the defense of South Vietnam. Deeply skeptical that a lasting military victory against the Vietcong could be achieved—especially in view of the perceived politico-military weakness of the South Vietnamese government, and the apathy and war weariness of the Southern populace—many allied officials also possessed doubts that the outcome in Vietnam really mattered to Western security. Some also feared the domestic political implications of committing manpower to an overseas struggle whose importance to national security was open to question.³

China and the Soviet Union, meanwhile, were supporters of North Vietnam, but both were anxious to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States. All too aware of their military weakness *vis-à-vis* the Americans, both Communist powers made clear to the Hanoi leadership that it could not necessarily count on their material support in the event of a large-scale U.S. intervention. For the Soviets, in particular, major war in Vietnam would be a disaster, risking a conflagration in an inconsequential area of the world and likely halting the momentum toward Soviet-American *détente* begun in 1963. Kremlin leaders thus hoped for a political solution to the conflict, perhaps by way of a great-power conference. What is more, it now seems quite clear that neither Moscow nor Beijing, nor most American allies, believed Washington would suffer a crippling blow to its global prestige if it failed to stand firm in South Vietnam, particularly given the chronic ineptness of the Saigon government.

Above all, it was this bleak political situation in South Vietnam, and the apparent unwillingness of southern leaders to work to rectify it, that gave Johnson maneuverability on the war. Though there existed in the South committed anti-Communists who fought the insurgency with skill and determination, their numbers were never large enough. Overall, incompetence, corruption, and infighting characterized the political leadership in Saigon, while the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was plagued by a general reluctance among officers to engage the enemy and alarming rates of deser-

3. Fredrik Logevall, "America Isolated: The European Powers and the Escalation of the War," in Andreas Daum, Lloyd C. Gardner, and Wilfried Mausbach, eds., *America, the Vietnam War, and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

tion among soldiers. In the larger South Vietnamese population, war weariness, induced by two decades of fighting, was widespread. And underneath it all percolated a latent, but potentially powerful, anti-Americanism. For large numbers of independent observers the implications were clear: absent a much greater commitment to the struggle on the part of both the Saigon leadership and the mass of the population—an unlikely prospect, at best—there would be no hope for *any* U.S. military intervention, no matter how large.

North Vietnamese leaders looked with satisfaction on these developments in the South. They saw the struggle moving in their direction and were in no mood to make significant compromises. At the same time, Hanoi officials, though fully prepared to match any U.S. escalation with one of their own, were anxious to avert any major escalation of the fighting—no one needed to convince them of America's awesome military might—and they hoped that Washington might instead opt for withdrawal. They did not, however, do much to push the Americans in that direction by way of some kind of diplomatic offensive, and in hindsight one must consider this a major tactical blunder. Still, the evidence suggests that they were prepared to negotiate an agreement that would have allowed the United States a face-saving means of disengagement from the war.⁴

A crucial question is whether U.S. officials at the time were aware of these attitudes, of the deep misgivings among informed observers at home and abroad, of the severity of the politico-military problems in South Vietnam, of the thinking in Hanoi. The answer can be stated unequivocally: they were. At the start of 1965, they knew full well that support for the Vietnam commitment among the American people was broad but also shallow, and that the support presumed a level of U.S. involvement that stayed more or less the same. They knew that Johnson had won raucous applause on the campaign trail in the fall when he vowed not to send American boys to fight an Asian war. And they understood that influential voices in American society, including leading newspapers, were urging that the American presence in Vietnam be reduced rather than increased. Policy makers worried about the opposition to escalation among Senate Democrats such as Mansfield, Russell, and Fulbright, and among respected commentators such as Walter Lippmann, Hans Morgenthau, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1965 they worked hard to woo these critics, to convert them to the administration's position, or at least induce them to be quiet.

Nor did anyone need to inform senior officials of the problems in international opinion, of the opposition to escalation and desire for early negotiations on the part of key allied governments, of the misgivings about the war evident even in Asia itself. In the lead up to the Americanization of the war in 1965, the administration worked hard to get allied involvement in the military defense of South Vietnam, partly through an effort known as the "More Flags" program. Originally the program, which was launched in May 1964, sought only noncombat-related aid for South Vietnam, but in short order it was expanded to include also third-country troops. The campaign yielded meager results. A handful of countries eventually committed soldiers—though most drove a hard

4. Robert McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999); and Logevall, *Choosing War*.

bargain in doing so, which is to say their forces were mercenaries more than allies—but most, including all of the European allies, declined. By mid-1965, when large-scale war began, Washington's "More Flags" campaign had become its "few flags" problem.⁵

Most important, policy makers in Washington generally had a sound grasp of the situation on the ground in South Vietnam, and the thinking in Hanoi. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara would later claim, in his memoirs and a subsequent coauthored book, that he and his colleagues were largely ignorant of the dynamics of the struggle in Vietnam, of the obstacles to a military solution, and of Hanoi's openness to negotiations. "If only we had known," is the mantra in these works.⁶ He sells himself short. He was hardly an expert on Vietnam in 1964 and 1965, but neither was he unaware of the chronic problems in the war effort, or the thin nature of domestic and allied support for the war, or the deep and the deepening Sino-Soviet split. As early as the beginning of 1964, he was a gloomy realist about the state of the war effort; a year later, in late June 1965, as American ground troops were arriving in South Vietnam, he told Britain's Patrick Gordon Walker that the key indicators were pointing in the wrong direction. In the short term, the United States could hold on militarily, but over the long haul it was doubtful. "None of us at the centre of things [in U.S. policy making] talk about winning a victory," McNamara confessed to Walker.⁷

Much more than they later admitted, senior U.S. officials understood that they faced long odds in Vietnam, even as they Americanized the war. The hubris so often ascribed to them is seldom seen in the vast internal record, at least with respect to the prospects in the fighting. (The hubris *is* evident in their presumed right to be in Vietnam and to tell the Vietnamese what kind of society they ought to create.) Lyndon Johnson and his chief lieutenants fully agreed that the military picture was worsening each month, and though they liked to say that bombing North Vietnam would make a major difference to the situation in the South, privately they were doubtful. They were not optimistic that Hanoi would succumb to this form of coercion and cease its support of the insurgency, and they knew that, regardless, success or failure would hinge on developments below the 17th parallel. Even as they sent the first contingent of U.S. ground troops to the war, the president and his lieutenants understood that it would bring resentment from many southerners, including some of the leaders in Saigon, and generate charges of "colonialism" from elsewhere in Asia and around the world. As for the quality of the government in South Vietnam, policy makers were anything but sanguine: they knew it was less capable and less popular than ever, permeated with dissension and—in some quarters at least—not altogether unsympathetic to an early end to the war through a deal with the Vietcong.

5. On the More Flags program, see also Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994). The "free world" countries that ultimately sent ground troops to South Vietnam were the Republic of [South] Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand.

6. Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995); McNamara et al., *Argument Without End*.

7. Walker summary of talks in Washington, June 30, 1965, FO 371/180540, Public Record Office, Kew, England.

In short, the widely repeated assertion—by former officials and many scholars—that American decision makers did not know what they were getting into in Vietnam, cannot withstand close scrutiny. They had a sound grasp of what they were up against.

Very well, the skeptical reader could respond, but lack of optimism regarding outcomes need not necessarily be a barrier to action. Couldn't policy makers decide that the preservation of America's global commitments demanded a firm stance in Vietnam, even if the odds pointed against long-term success? Couldn't they perceive the United States as needing to be the "good doctor" (as McNamara deputy John McNaughton put it), who had to be seen trying to save the patient even if the chances for recovery were slim or nonexistent?⁸ Yes, and that kind of thinking certainly existed at the highest levels in the fateful months of decision. Even here, however, the analysis was more nuanced than is generally understood. In their estimations of the regional and global implications of a defeat in Vietnam, many senior policy makers did not differ all that much from most of the dissenters—especially if the defeat occurred because of the perceived ineptitude or apathy of the South Vietnamese themselves. Officials worried about possible Chinese expansion in the wake of such a defeat, but like the critics they understood that historic Sino-Vietnamese friction and very current Sino-Soviet friction reduced the chances of that happening. They were concerned about the possible increase in the appeal of Maoist revolutions in other newly emerging nations should Ho Chi Minh's be allowed to succeed, but they knew that the internal conditions that made Vietnam so ripe for a Communist takeover did not exist in many other nations in the region. With regard to the likely Soviet reaction to an early U.S. disengagement, it cannot be considered a major concern among senior planners. Most of them believed Moscow would want to continue steps toward improved bilateral relations with Washington regardless of the outcome in Vietnam, and they do not appear to have worried much about increased Soviet penetration in other Third World areas.

On the matter of diplomacy, American officials knew prior to the major escalation that Hanoi had not closed the door to early negotiations. They were aware in late 1964 that UN Secretary General U Thant had won assurances from Hanoi earlier in the fall that it would enter bilateral talks with Washington, and that Burmese leader Ne Win had agreed to serve as host for the talks. And there were other signs. In early December, for example, Undersecretary of State William P. Bundy told Canadian officials that Hanoi had in recent weeks been putting out hints in various quarters that it was interested in pursuing a negotiated settlement to the war. McNamara, in his coauthored book *Argument Without End*, makes much of Washington's misreading of Premier Pham Van Dong's "Four Points" statement of April 1965; no one in Washington, the book claims, realized that the statement might present an opening for talks. In actuality, several officials thought precisely that. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, for example, after describing North Vietnam's statement as "quite unacceptable to us," acknowledged to LBJ that Hanoi had referred to the Four Points as "a basis for discussions" and that he, Ray Cline (acting CIA director), and Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson all agreed

8. McNaughton's March 24, 1965 memorandum outlining this argument can be found in George C. Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers: Abridged Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 115-18.

that there existed “at least a hint of real interest from Hanoi in eventual discussions.” In late July 1965, a State Department intelligence report said: “Has Hanoi shown any interest in negotiations? Yes, repeatedly.”⁹

In sum, the Americanization of the war in Vietnam in 1965 can in no way be considered preordained. Severe doubts both at home and abroad about Vietnam’s importance to American and Western security; a South Vietnamese ally incapable and apparently unwilling to live up to its end of the bargain; pessimism among senior American policy makers themselves about the prospects in the conflict, and about the importance of the outcome; and an adversary open to negotiations—all these suggest that Americanization cannot be seen as overdetermined. One could indeed conclude the opposite, that the decision is difficult to explain, perhaps even incomprehensible on some level. Regardless, it seems undeniable that Lyndon Johnson, fated to be president when the key Vietnam decisions had to be made, could have chosen differently. He could have avoided this war.

This is not to suggest that disengagement was risk free, that it would not have cost Johnson anything politically. Such a course would have brought a domestic political cost, even if disguised through some kind of agreement leading to a coalition government in Saigon and a “decent interval” before any Hanoi takeover. The question is how big a cost. The president would have been branded an “appeaser” by Cold War hawks such as Richard Nixon and journalist Joseph Alsop, but in response he could call on his own team of heavy hitters to defend the decision. A distinction must be made, moreover, between being called names by your opponents and actually losing significant political power as a result. In view of the constellation of forces in Congress and in the press, especially after Johnson’s landslide election victory in 1964, there is little reason to believe that a decision against war would have exacted an exorbitant political price. Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, it bears remembering, had run as a hawk in the campaign and had been trounced, his belligerence on Vietnam as thoroughly repudiated as it could have been.

Furthermore, the cost of getting out must be judged against the cost the president could expect to incur if he chose what by early 1965 had become the only other real option: major escalation. Many contemporaneous critics of Americanization perceived these costs to be very considerable indeed, if not in the short term certainly in the medium and long term. They grasped what Johnson and the Democrats could expect to face on the home front in the event of large-scale war 7,000 miles from the coast of California. Many of them were political veterans, shrewd tacticians with decades of campaigning under their belt.

Consider Hubert Humphrey, vice president-elect and then vice president during the key period of decision making. Here was a man whose understanding of Democra-

9. Bundy to LBJ, April 20, 1965, Box 16, NSF VN, LBJL; INR (Hughes) to Rusk, July 28, 1965, Box 31, NSF VN, LBJL. For more internal commentary on Pham Van Dong’s Four Points, see Cooper/Thomson to MB, April 24, 1965, Box 11, Thomson Papers, JFKL; Cooper/Thomson to MB, June 29, 1965, Box 19, NSF VN, LBJL; Cooper to LBJ, May 25, 1965, Box 41, NSF NSC Histories—Deployment of Forces, LBJL; Thomson to MB, July 24, 1965, Box 20, NSF VN, LBJL; Goodwin to LBJ, April 27, 1965, Box 2, NSF MPB, LBJL. See also McNamara et al., *Argument Without End*.

tic precinct politics across the nation was every bit as authoritative as Johnson's, if not more so. Humphrey was as immersed in the politics and ideology of the Cold War as any Democrat before or after. He had led an attack on Communist-led unions after World War II, and thus could be regarded as one of the creators of the postwar anti-Communist doctrine. No one needed to educate him on the various problems, domestic and external, that might follow from the charge of "losing" a country to Communism. Yet here we find Humphrey in February 1965—arguably the most important month of the whole long quarter-century U.S. involvement in Vietnam—telling Johnson that 1965 is the best time to incur these risks and that the risks of escalation are far greater. "If we find ourselves leading from frustration to escalation and end up short of a war with China but embroiled deeper in fighting in Vietnam over the next few months," he warned, "political opposition will steadily mount."

It is always hard to cut losses. But the Johnson administration is in a stronger position to do so now than any administration in this century. Nineteen Sixty-Five is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson administration. Indeed, it is the first year when we can face the Vietnam problem without being preoccupied with the political repercussions from the Republican right. As indicated earlier, our political problems are likely to come from new and different sources (Democratic liberals, independents, labor) if we pursue an enlarged war.¹⁰

Many other influential Democrats in Washington shared this fear, including, again, the Senate leadership. We do not have a written record of explicit political prognostications by Mansfield, Russell, or Fulbright in this period, but we do know they feared the domestic implications of a long and bloody war. Such a war, they surely understood, could put Johnson and the Democrats in serious trouble as the campaigning began for the 1968 election. The party could be in the same position as in 1952: facing a tough battle, and probable defeat, in the election. It is critical to keep in mind, in this context, that few if any military advisers were offering even a chance of a swift victory in Vietnam. Even as they advocated escalation, virtually all of them were predicting a war on the scale of Korea, which in three years would be large and not close to being won. To achieve victory would take "five years—plus 500,000 troops," Marine Corps Commandant General Wallace Greene told Johnson on July 22, 1965; five months earlier, Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson had given essentially the same estimate.¹¹ Where would this put LBJ as the campaigning began for the 1968 election? With hundreds of thousands of troops in combat, large numbers of American casualties, and victory still years away.

In other words, just like Korea. At the start of that war, the public had rallied around the flag and around Harry Truman, but the enthusiasm waned once it became

10. The memorandum is reprinted in full in Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1976), 320-24. For Johnson's response, see Carl Solberg, *Hubert Humphrey: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), 287-88; and Humphrey, 327.

11. Notes of Meeting, July 22, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968—Vietnam*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), 214.

clear that victory would not come swiftly and cleanly. Though Lyndon Johnson would later claim that the “fall of China” in 1949 lost the 1952 election for the Democrats, this was a dubious reading of history. More likely, what lost it for them was what Truman did after that loss. That is, he entered into a large, stalemated, inconclusive war in Asia. If charges relating to China actually affected any votes at all in 1952, they no doubt resonated—as likely would have been the case in 1968 in the absence of war—with voters who were not going to vote Democratic anyway. Truman had learned firsthand the difficulty of sustaining popular support for a limited war far from America’s shores, one entered without a declaration of war and without popular understanding of the possible obstacles ahead.

Johnson now set about doing the same thing. In 1965, he refused to seek a declaration of war, and he rejected the plea from several top civilian and military advisers to fully prepare the nation for the struggle ahead. He opted, as George C. Herring has put it, to wage war in “cold blood.”¹² There would be no national debate on Vietnam, no call up of the reserves, no declared state of emergency. The United States would go to war on the sly. Historians have usually explained these decisions by pointing to LBJ’s fear that a full-fledged debate on Vietnam would jeopardize major pieces of Great Society legislation then pending in Congress, and by his belief that a low-key, gradual escalation reduced the chance of a major conflagration involving China and perhaps the Soviet Union. He may well have held these beliefs (though, in the case of the former, with dubious justification), but very likely he also had a third concern: that a public debate would bring out into the open the extent of the concerns in Congress and in the press and thereby undermine the shaky national consensus that existed on the conflict. Johnson knew as well as anyone that formidable players in Congress and elsewhere opposed Americanizing the war; it was not at all certain that his side would win a debate. And so he gambled, on a short-term strategy. He gambled that without taking exceptional measures he could hold public support long enough to achieve his objectives.

Here then, we find a principal reason why Lyndon Johnson took the nation into war in 1965. In the short term, military escalation represented the path of least resistance for him. At the start of 1965, the United States had been actively involved in the Vietnam struggle for some 15 years, first in support of the French war effort, and then, after 1954, in trying to create and sustain an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. At each point during that span when a decision had to be made regarding whether to expand or contract U.S. involvement, the presidents had chosen to expand it. Though there is a qualitative difference between these earlier decisions and the one LBJ now faced (none was as committing, as costly, as irreversible, as controversial, as dangerous in terms of domestic politics), it stands to reason that he, too, would give serious consideration to escalation. It is never easy for people in positions of authority to acknowledge the failure of an existing policy and embark on a new course; for those at the pinnacle of the political system, who have had to publicly defend that policy time and time again, it must be harder still. The president and his top Vietnam aides had put

12. George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 131.

themselves in a box with their repeated affirmations of South Vietnam's importance to U.S. security (in the case of top advisers McNamara, Bundy, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, all of them holdovers from JFK, the affirmations went all the way back to 1961), and one can see why they might stay the course in the hope that the new measures would work.

The issue was credibility, and the concern that it might be irreparably harmed by a failure to stand firm in the war. As most often interpreted by scholars, this imperative had to do with the credibility of America's commitments abroad—the fear that if the United States failed to prevail in Vietnam, friends and foes around the world would respect it less. American power would be much less credible, causing allies to lose heart and adversaries to become emboldened. But it was not merely a question of U.S. national credibility abroad: for at least some key players, including the president, more important were concerns about domestic political credibility and, especially, personal credibility. Johnson worried about the harm that failure in Vietnam could do to his domestic agenda; even more, he feared the personal humiliation he imagined would inevitably accompany a defeat (and for him, a negotiated withdrawal constituted defeat).¹³

Sympathetic biographers emphasize that Johnson was often cautious and skeptical on Vietnam. Indeed he was—on occasion more so than his aides—but that did not make him dovish. He declared already in late 1963 that he would not be the president who lost Vietnam, and he never wavered from that vow in the year and a half that followed. On occasion he could ask probing questions of his advisers, but he showed little patience when they tried to provide probing answers. Time and again during the months of decision, he framed his Vietnam choices in such a way that standing firm appeared the only option. The alternative of disengagement he dismissed, in characteristic (and telling) language, as “cutting and running,” as inevitably meaning a retreat to Hawaii or San Diego. Few challenged Johnson on these claims, in part because his obsessive fear of leaks led to a cloistered decision-making environment that effectively excluded contrarian voices from the deliberations and discouraged in-depth reexamination of the fundamental issues among those who remained.

To be sure, the many influential voices warning against Americanization could have done more to make themselves heard. Internationally, allied leaders who foresaw a calamity ahead should escalation occur failed to work hard to keep it from happening. Thus, while the French government of Charles de Gaulle forcefully disputed the administration's position at every turn (Johnson was embarking on an “absurd war,” he said), the more important American ally in London consistently refrained from doing so, despite the fact that Prime Minister Harold Wilson and other British officials largely shared the Frenchman's views. And even de Gaulle cannot be considered an agitator *per se* on negotiations in 1964-1965; for the most part he was content to state his position—in that aloof and superior tone that drove U.S. officials to distraction—and see what the Americans chose to do.

Congress, meanwhile, in these months accorded the executive branch wide latitude in decision making, both in terms of broad contours and narrow particulars of policy.

13. A more detailed articulation of this argument can be found in Logevall, chapter 12.

Democratic leaders in the Senate, though prescient in foreseeing problems in any attempt to Americanize the conflict, were unwilling to say forcefully what they really believed: that Vietnam was not worth the price of a major war and that a face-saving negotiated settlement was the best that could be hoped for. White House officials, all too aware of the deep misgivings on Capitol Hill—and especially in the Senate—were relieved when no genuine debate on the war ever occurred in the first half of 1965.

How to explain this Congressional reticence about speaking up? Partly it resulted from the certainty among majority Democrats that the president would not look kindly on public opposition to his actions—Johnson left little doubt that he expected party members to fall in line, and he ordered top advisers to apply pressure on wavering law makers. Partly, too, it resulted from the administration's repeated vows that it was keeping all options open, that it genuinely sought a political solution, that it saw real reasons for optimism in the Saigon government's prospects; these claims caused many doubters to swallow their concerns and profess support for U.S. policy. At the same time, however, there was on Capitol Hill a certain willingness to be deceived, a willingness to be strong-armed by the president. Many legislators were quite content to escape responsibility from a policy issue that seemed to be growing more complex each day, and for which few of them had a clear prescription.

All of which suggests it would be a mistake to reduce Vietnam simply to "Johnson's War." The circle of responsibility was wide. The president chose war, but he was urged on by both civilian and military advisers. Prominent opponents of Americanization, at home and abroad, in most instances proved unwilling to challenge the administration's course of action, while among the general populace ignorance and apathy concerning Vietnam were the norm. The public could have forced a debate on the issue in the winter and spring of 1964-1965; enough information existed, notwithstanding the administration's efforts to withhold information concerning the problems in South Vietnam and its plans to rectify them. Whatever the outcome of such a debate, there can be no denying that having it would have served the nation—and ultimately the president himself—well.

In the end, we come back to Lyndon Johnson, and are left with a mystery. At one point in "Path to War," the 2001 HBO dramatization of Johnson's decision making on Vietnam, the character portraying White House aide Richard Goodwin says of Johnson and Vietnam, "He's the best politician this country has ever seen. He'll find a way out of this." Why, if the first statement is true, did the second not come to pass? The filmmakers do not pause long over this conundrum. In their sympathetic interpretation, which follows closely that presented in much of the literature over the past quarter century, the president is indeed a master politician who on Vietnam is trapped by forces beyond his control. The better explanation is that Johnson, though he inherited a difficult Vietnam problem from his predecessors, stepped into a trap substantially of his own making, which in turn raises doubts about the extent of his political acumen. No doubt he was unsurpassed in his knowledge of the workings of official Washington, in his ability to get contentious legislation through Congress, in his skill at arm-twisting; it is far less clear that he understood the broader political forces in the country at large. He was a political virtuoso, but inside the Beltway. Here one can draw a contrast with

the oft-maligned Humphrey, who, as we have seen, did more than simply assure LBJ that he had political freedom of maneuver on Vietnam; he also warned him that a stepped-up war carried a much greater political risk than did reducing U.S. involvement. Johnson, annoyed by the advice, barred Humphrey from Vietnam meetings for the better part of a year, and went on to make Vietnam an American war.