
Vietnam: Mr. Johnson's War. Or Mr. Eisenhower's?

Author(s): Edward Cuddy

Source: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 351-374

Published by: Cambridge University Press for the University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1408716>

Accessed: 28-07-2018 18:22 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cambridge University Press, University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Politics*

Vietnam: Mr. Johnson's War —Or Mr. Eisenhower's?

Edward Cuddy

Conventional wisdom pins responsibility for the Vietnam War primarily on Lyndon B. Johnson. This essay presents a revisionist argument, attempting to shift primary responsibility for the war on President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The case rests heavily on John F. Kennedy's challenge to historians: "How the hell" can they evaluate presidential performances unless they know the "real pressures" and the "real alternatives" confronting the occupiers of the Oval Office. In assessing those pressures, this essay concludes that Eisenhower had the unique luxury of a clean break from President Truman's commitments, thanks to the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu, and a clear-cut alternative provided by the Geneva Accords. Unfortunately, Eisenhower chose to ignore the Accords, committed America to South Vietnam, and played a major role, during and after his presidency, in creating the heavy pressures that shaped Johnson's Vietnam decisions.

The Kennedy Challenge

"How the hell can you tell?" snapped President John F. Kennedy, when asked to rank American presidents for the Schlesinger poll in 1962. He was challenging Schlesinger's son, Arthur, Jr., historian and presidential aide. Only the president himself can know his "real pressures" and "real alternatives," he insisted, though a detailed study could help reveal the differences made by individuals. "Would Lincoln have been judged so great a President, if he had lived long enough to face the almost insoluble problem of Reconstruction?" he mused.¹

Today, Kennedy's words reek with prophetic irony. Like Lincoln, he, too, was assassinated and succeeded by another President Johnson, leaving historians to debate a similar question: Would Kennedy's stature have fared so well if he had confronted the intractable dilemmas of Vietnam?

Of the five presidents from Harry S Truman to Richard M. Nixon who contributed to the ultimate disaster, it was President Lyndon B. Johnson who emerged as the fall guy, the culprit primarily re-

1. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publication, 1965), p. 619.

sponsible for Vietnam in popular memory and scholarship. Eisenhower and Truman have escaped *relatively* unscathed.

"One of Ike's greatest accomplishments was staying out of Vietnam," claims the late Stephen E. Ambrose, a point echoed by several Eisenhower revisionists who flourished during the 1980s. Thanks to his "hard-headed military reasoning," he avoided the calamity which ensnared his successors, Kennedy and Johnson. This view is a distortion of history. Eisenhower played a major role, *arguably the most crucial role of all presidents*, in America's slide down the "slippery slope" into Vietnam.²

Johnson's role as arch-villain, simply stated, boils down to two major arguments: his key policy decisions which "Americanized" the war and his flawed personality which produced them. During 1964-65, Johnson launched several operations transforming Vietnam into a full-scale American conflict: Oplan 34 A, February 1964, a series of covert attacks on North Vietnam; the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution granting the president sweeping war-making powers, in August; Operation "Rolling Thunder," the air war against North Vietnam, launched in March 1965; and most fatal, the introduction of U.S. combat troops six days later culminating in the open-ended commitment of American forces the following July.

2. Stephen E. Ambrose, "The Ike Age," *New Republic* 184 (May 9, 1981): 32; *Eisenhower*, vol. 2, *The President* (New York, Simon and Shuster, 1983), p. 185. Eisenhower revisionists provoked a backlash among historians, by the late 1980s, who spotlighted Ike's role committing the U.S. to Vietnam. The revisionists, argued Robert J. McMahon, relied too heavily on his refusal to rescue the French at Dien Bien Phu while downplaying his later policy propping up the "puppet government in Saigon." In his relations to Third World areas like Vietnam, McMahon insists, Ike underestimated the force of nationalism, confused it with Communism, and aligned the U.S. with "inherently unstable" regimes." McMahon, "Eisenhower and Third World Nationalism: A Critique of the Revisionists," *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (1986): 457-61. See also James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military and America's Intervention into Vietnam* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991); David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Still, Eisenhower's part in the Vietnam tragedy remains obscure in popular memory and some scholarship. In describing the presidential roles, Jeffrey B. Kimball's anthology, *To Reason Why: The Debate About the Causes of the Vietnam War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), includes essays only on Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. David Halberstram's study, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), published two decades after his acclaimed study on Vietnam, virtually ignores Ike's post-Geneva Vietnam policy despite several pages devoted to his foreign policies. In Robert S. McNamara's writings, brimming with mea culpas for his own misdeeds as Johnson's secretary of defense, Eisenhower's role is nearly eclipsed by his heavy emphasis on the Johnson administration's responsibility for the Vietnam tragedy. See, McNamara, *In Retrospect, The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995); McNamara et al., *Argument Without End* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999).

Tragically, the United States was led by a man full of swagger and cowboy machismo, and hell-bent not to be the first president to lose a war—a “man of the fifties,” from Texas where “McCarthyism was particularly virulent,” as David Halberstram puts it.³ After committing American ground forces to battle, “retreat would have been difficult for any man,” declares Bernard Brodie, “and for a Lyndon B. Johnson close to impossible.”⁴ H. R. McMaster has forcefully restated the prevailing view in recent years, emphasizing the “uniquely human failure” on the part of Johnson and his advisers, their “arrogance, weakness, lying . . . and, above all, the abdication of responsibility to the American people.”⁵

Johnson’s warmonger image looms larger in the glare of the “If-Kennedy-had-lived-debate.” Better versed in foreign affairs and adamantly opposed to sending American boys to fight an Asian war, JFK probably would have piloted the nation clear of Vietnam, many observers contend. His assassination was a major cause of America’s “1965 commitment to the war in Vietnam,” claims Brodie.⁶

Eisenhower’s Vietnam Policy

President Kennedy, however, never faced Johnson’s dilemmas. His words indicate he would have been less disposed to condemn his successor than to explore the pressures and limited alternatives which, he felt, hemmed in all presidents. His “How the hell can you tell?” stands as a challenge to historians to examine Johnson’s policies in the light of the total situation that shaped them—a predicament seeded largely by Eisenhower and cultivated by Kennedy, himself.

After Truman’s initial policy supporting French colonialism in Indochina, the next three presidents each dug a deeper hole entrapping their successors. But Eisenhower, alone, had the luxury of a clean

3. Halberstram, *The Best and the Brightest* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1969), p. 718.

4. Brodie, “Accidents of History: JFK and LBJ Compared,” in Kimball, *ed.*, *To Reason Why*, p. 94.

5. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 323-24. Most accounts of Johnson’s Vietnam role, David M. Barrett observes, fall into two categories: the “personalist,” emphasizing personal flaws of Johnson and/or his advisers; and the “structural,” stressing external forces, that shaped his Vietnam policy. McMaster exemplifies the former, Barrett the latter. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993), p. 5.

6. Brodie, “Accidents of History: JFK and LBJ Compared,” pp. 195-98. Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense for both Kennedy and Johnson believes Kennedy would have accepted the loss of all of Southeast Asia—rather than send U.S. combat forces into battle. See McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 95-97.

break from Vietnam after Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh forces shattered French power at Dien Bien Phu, May 1954, and peacemakers at Geneva drew up the blueprint for Vietnam's orderly transition to independence. The Geneva Accords ("The Final Declaration of Geneva on Indochina") temporarily divided Vietnam into northern and southern "zones" which were to be reunited by general elections under international supervision in July 1956.⁷ In short, a "South Vietnam" was not supposed to exist—only one nation forged from two "zones."

After announcing its support for the Accords, Washington secretly planned to sabotage them amid reports that elections would sweep the Communist revolutionary hero, Ho Chi Minh, to a landslide victory. To preempt Geneva's looming "disaster," warned the National Security Council, the Administration should try to "prevent a Communist victory through all Vietnam elections" and "support a friendly noncommunist South Vietnam."⁸

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles soon organized the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to contain Communism in Asia, extending its protection to southern Vietnam—as though it

7. In line with the principles of "independence, unity and territorial integrity" for Vietnam, the Accords declared, the "military demarcation line [separating the two zones] is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary," "Geneva Conference: Indo China," in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 1: 573 (hereafter cited as *PP*). Eisenhower's "clean break" claimed above is subject to dispute. See Anderson's comment and my rejoinder below, n. 94.

8. Statement of Policy by the National Security Council on Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East, (c. August 1954), *U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, 10: 731-37. Even with a stable government in South Vietnam, "the Viet Minh will almost certainly win" the 1956 elections," concluded a National Intelligence Estimate Report, August 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter cited as *FRUS*), 1952-1954, *Vietnam* 13: 1905-14. Washington's strategy was to blame Hanoi for the failure to hold elections by demanding conditions for "free elections" which the Communists would surely reject. Unhappily, neither Vietnam cooperated. Diem, southern Vietnam's new ruler, was too weak even to give "lip service," and appeared disposed to repudiate the Geneva Accords outright rather than "play the game." The Viet Minh, were ready to counter with "moderate proposals" which would undermine Washington's plans to blame them for the failed elections. See *FRUS, 1955-1957, Vietnam*, 1: 105, 550, 660; Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, *ibid.*, pp. 208-209; National Security Report, May 17, 1955, DRAFT STATEMENT OF U.S. POLICY ON ALL-VIETNAM ELECTIONS, *ibid.*, p. 411; Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs to the Secretary of State, June 8, 1955, *ibid.*, pp. 437, 421-22. The International Commission established to supervise the elections, later reported that in trying to implement the Accords, it "experienced difficulties in North Vietnam, [but] the major part of its difficulties has arisen in South Vietnam." "Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, 1956-1957," in George Donelson Moss, ed., *A Vietnam Reader* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), pp. 50-52.

were an independent nation. SEATO would invest the emerging commitment with an aura of "solemn" obligation, reinforcing the impulse toward future military interventions.

The entangling web thickened as Washington backed the new government of Ngo Dinh Diem and his cancellation of the 1956 elections and poured massive amounts of military and economic aid into creating a new nation out of France's former colonial fragment. Eisenhower's "nation-building" represented a drastic escalation of American intrusions into Third World countries. Going beyond Truman's interventions to bolster dictatorial regimes against revolutionaries, Eisenhower had already authorized the overthrow of reform governments in Iran and Guatemala. Now came the boldest move yet—carving a new nation out of a patch of land which, by international agreement, was supposed to become part of a *united Vietnam*.

More ominous, was the evolving set of ideas solidifying Eisenhower's commitments in which he defined South Vietnam's survival as a major American security interest, especially with his domino theory, and enmeshed America's global containment structure with SEATO. The result was a toxic blend of Cold War ideology and distorted history: that communism, not Vietnamese nationalism, was the driving force behind the Vietnam conflict; that Ho was a puppet and Hanoi a pawn in the "Soviet-Chinese ... drive to dominate the world," in spite of deepening divisions between the three Communist countries and Ho's hostility toward all foreign control, Communist or capitalist.⁹

Most treacherous was the notion that would become the central rationale for America's war: that North Vietnam started it, and America's cause was to preserve an independent South Vietnam against Hanoi's aggression. Hidden in the ideological fog was the fact that Saigon's very existence—a violation of Geneva and an affront to Vietnamese nationalism—was a provocation for war.¹⁰

9. Eisenhower, Special Message to the Congress on the Mutual Security Programs, May 21, 1957, *PP*, 1: 613.

10. Geneva's vague guidelines for implementing the 1956 elections, Anderson claims, "left room" for Washington "to maneuver against communist expansionism" in South Vietnam. Yet, the conflict between U.S. policy and the Geneva provisions was clear enough to spur the campaign to derail the Geneva "disaster," as Washington regarded it, and provoke international criticism over its rejection of the 1956 elections. Anderson, *Trapped*, pp. 62-63, 159. The Accords' provision for the "expression of the national will" through unifying elections approximated a "mandate from heaven" which for many Vietnamese already belonged to Ho Chi Minh. "There is no proper grass roots support of any leader in Viet Nam, leaving aside Ho Chi Minh," reported General Lawton J. Collins, Eisenhower's special emissary to evaluate the Vietnam situation (*ibid.*, p. 106). See also Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 1985), pp. 34-41.

More to the point, it was Diem's corrupt, ruthless regime—not Hanoi's aggression—that actually set off the revolt. Diem's repressive policies alienated large numbers of South Vietnamese, especially his anti-Communist campaign, launched in 1955, imprisoning, torturing and executing thousands of innocent people, Communists and suspected sympathizers.¹¹ In sheer self-defense, southern rebels retaliated with a campaign of terror, defiant and even angry at Hanoi for its policy of "peaceful reconciliation." Not until 1959 did the North begin supporting her southern cousins, eventually to unite by force what Eisenhower and Diem had split in two.¹²

Washington's official interpretation blaming the conflict on North Vietnam, contradicted its own intelligence sources as reflected in the *Pentagon Papers*: "Most of those who took up arms [1956-1959] were South Vietnamese" fighting for causes which "were by no means contrived in North Vietnam."¹³ In fact, it was the study of Eisenhower's policies, the alleged perversity and deception buried in them, that radicalized Daniel Ellsberg, accelerating his transition from hawkish defense-establishment official to the rebel whistle blower who later exposed the secret documents dubbed as the "Pentagon Papers."¹⁴

11. The anti-Communist campaign was simply the most provocative issue among Diem's blunders, which included the suppression of village councils, the reversal of Viet Minh land reforms, the anti-Buddhist policies, and the diversion of financial aid to the military while ignoring the pressing need for economic development. *The Pentagon Papers* (New York Times ed., 1971), pp. 67-78; Anderson, *Trapped*, pp. 80, 81, 152-56, 165-66, 97-102.

12. American intelligence reports were close to the enemy's interpretation of the conflict, as McNamara learned during the 1998 dialogues between former American leaders and their Vietnamese foes. After years of struggle against Japanese invaders and French colonialists, Hanoi was in no mood for more war even though it deemed it justified by Washington's violation of the Accords. Ho's orders to the southern allies to refrain from "armed struggle" while the "Diem puppet regime ... carried out a bloody fascist repression," as General Van Tra put it, provoked considerable anger against the North. Hanoi's reluctant intervention in 1959 was a far cry from American claims attributing the war to Communist aggression from the North. See McNamara, *Argument Without End*, pp. 179-80; 196-97.

13. *Pentagon Papers* (NYT ed.), p. 67. See also, *PP*, 1: 622-27.

14. As a researcher on the Vietnam history project launched by McNamara, Ellsberg was stunned at the "brazen" falsehoods which had shaped his own hawkish views when, for the first time in 1967, he examined the secret documents recording Eisenhower's policies: Washington's claims asserting that "the accords had created two separate, independent states, North and South Vietnam." After reviewing Eisenhower's decisions to "overturn" Geneva and support Diem's "police state," and then the documents recording Truman's support for French colonialism, he could no longer regard Vietnam as a civil war. It was nothing less than "a war of ... American aggression," which he had promoted. These discoveries would help drive him to the rebellious act which, he feared, could lead to life imprisonment: the unleashing of the classified "Pentagon Papers" to the press. Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), pp. 250-75.

Hence, Eisenhower's legacy included a cluster of historical ideas at odds with historical realities. "Our ignorance" of Vietnam's history, was among the "major causes for our disaster in Vietnam," claims Robert S. McNamara, defense secretary to both Kennedy and Johnson.¹⁵

Johnson's advisers might have surmounted that ignorance, he suggests, were it not for the crippling purge of Asian experts from the State Department sacrificed to the "McCarthy hysteria" during Eisenhower's administration. Without their "nuanced insights" advisers "badly misread China's objectives," underestimated Ho's nationalism and failed to grasp the bad blood between North Vietnam and China.¹⁶

Journalist Theodore White reached the same conclusion years after suffering threats to his own livelihood for testifying on behalf of respected foreign service officer John Paton Davies. Cowed into silence, himself, as America drifted toward disaster, he later concluded that the McCarthyite purgers had "poke[d] out the eyes and ears of the State Department on Asian affairs" leaving behind a terrorized and compliant Foreign Service which contributed mightily to "the ultimate tragedy of America's war in Vietnam."¹⁷

By mid-century, the "politics of anticommunism" (blaming Democrats for Communist gains in Europe and Asia) had become a staple in Republican tactics—and one more factor sealing America's fate in Vietnam. Brandishing their new war cry, "Who

15. McNamara, *Retrospect*, pp. 321-22.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33. Given Johnson's tendency to stifle debate, McMaster argues, access to Asian experts was "irrelevant." McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 400, fn. 81. But knowledgeable observers reporting during the Vietnam years, also maintained that the purge contributed significantly to the Vietnam tragedy. See John W. Finney, "The Long Trial of John Paton Davies," *New York Times*, August 31, 1969, SM, 7; James Reston, "Washington: The New China Experts," *New York Times*, February 16, 1966, p. 42. Moreover, Eisenhower's McCarthyized State Department exerted a critical influence in his agonizing decision to stake American policy on Diem against the dire warnings of his trusted emissary, General Collins. See Anderson, *Trapped*, pp. 118-19.

17. After testifying on behalf of Davies, White found himself temporarily deprived of his passport essential for reporting on foreign affairs. Thereafter, he shied away from reporting on controversial East Asian issues as the Vietnam crisis worsened. See White, *In Search of History* (New York: Warner Books, 1976), pp. 510, 514-18. The State Department purges actually began under President Truman in 1947. Eisenhower, however, actively targeted senior Asian experts who had been protected by Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. Under Scott McLeod, a McCarthy zealot, many respected officials, including talented China experts like Davies, were tossed overboard. See Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), pp. 43-45; Ambrose, *The President*, 2: 63-65.

Lost China?" after Mao Zedong's victory during Truman's presidency, the GOP led by Eisenhower and his zealous anti-Communist running mate, Richard Nixon, captured the White House and both houses of Congress in the 1952 elections.

Thereafter, Democrats would be under constant pressure to prove their mettle as cold warriors. By the time Johnson confronted Vietnam, "Withdrawal was not an option," historians James S. Olson and Randy Roberts claim, "especially for a Democratic president familiar with the criticism directed at Truman in 1949 for the fall of China."¹⁸ Eisenhower waded into the quicksand under the prod of his own sword. Having bashed Democrats for losing China, he told advisers, he did not want critics, asking "Who lost Vietnam?" if "we ... let Indochina be sold down the river to the Communists."¹⁹

SEATO, commitments to South Vietnam, an ironclad mind-set tightening those bonds, a crippled State Department, the politics of anticommunism—all these would not have been enough to force Johnson to "cross the Rubicon" in 1965, had Eisenhower picked an ally strong enough to fight its own battles. But South Vietnam, devastated by war, riddled by class and religious conflicts, ruled by a despised despot, and dependent on a ragtag army tainted by prior support for the French, was a loser from the start. Diem was widely viewed as an American pawn in the familiar pattern of "subservience to foreigners," claimed Truong Nhu Tang, a former leader in the National Liberation Front.²⁰

Eisenhower drew his containment line right through the jungle against guerilla forces highly skilled in jungle warfare. In Ho Chi Minh, he chose a formidable adversary, steeled by decades of struggle and revered as the heroic symbol of Vietnamese patriotism. "Had it looked all over the world," writes George C. Herring, "the United States could not have chosen a less promising place for an experiment in nation building."²¹

Moreover, Eisenhower made his moves with alarms going off. Repeatedly, "key military men ... objected strongly to a growing involvement in Vietnam," declares James R. Arnold.²² From the Joint

18. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where The Domino Fell*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 139.

19. Quoted in Ambrose, *The President*, 2: 208, 173-85.

20. Truong, *Viet Cong Memoir*, p. 65. Truong was a non-Communist driven like many others by Diem's despotism to join the National Liberation Front, the Communist dominated political organization which orchestrated the revolution in the South.

21. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 56.

22. Arnold, *First Domino*, p. 388.

Chiefs of Staff (JCS) came warnings that South Vietnam was "devoid of decisive military objectives,"²³ that Saigon's army was useless without a "stable civil government,"²⁴ that the Viet Minh might be provoked into attacking the weaker southern forces.²⁵

"Get out of Indochina completely and as soon as possible," warned Defense Secretary Charles E. Wilson, seeing "nothing but grief in store if we remained in this area."²⁶ General J. Lawton Collins, a respected World War II commander, brought similar tidings back from his special mission to assess Saigon's prospects for survival. Diem's autocratic, brittle regime was no match for the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh, he warned. Absent a better leader, the United States "should withdraw from Vietnam."²⁷

Eisenhower, nevertheless, forged ahead with his nation-building, while trumpeting Diem as the "tough little miracle man,"²⁸ guiding his country toward democracy,²⁹ manning the Free World's Asian outpost in the global struggle against Communism.³⁰ Ike's glowing portrait contrasted sharply with tales coming back from Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow in Saigon: grim reports of Diem's corrupt regime engaged in torture and extortion, its people alienated, its army increasingly battered by Viet Cong ambushes.³¹

When Ike passed the baton to Kennedy, January 1961, his Vietnam policy, "so deeply embedded in U.S. global strategy," was

23. Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, *PP*, 1: 354.

24. M. F. Twining, Chief of Staff, USAF, "Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Assumptions of Training Responsibilities in Indochina," August 4, 1954, *US-VN Relations*, 10: 702; see also, Arthur Radford, Chairman, JCS for the Secretary of Defense, August 4, 1954 and September 22, 1954, *ibid.*, pp. 758, 760.

25. Arnold, *First Domino*, p. 287; see also *FRUS*, 1955-1957, p. 412.

26. Record of National Security Council Meeting, October 26, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, vol. 13, *Indochina*, pp. 2185-86.

27. Telegram From the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State, April 7, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, *Vietnam*, 1: 218-21; J. Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1979), p. 408.

28. Quoted in David L. Anderson, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and Wholehearted Support for Ngo Dinh Diem," in *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975*, Anderson ed. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993), pp. 53-56.

29. U.S. Sends Greetings to Vietnam on Anniversary of Independence, October 25, 1960, *PP*, 1: 628. See also Address by President Eisenhower Before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 21, 1956, *PP*, 1: 609-610.

30. Eisenhower, "Radio and Television Address to American People on the Need for Mutual Security in Waging the Peace," May 21, 1957, *PP*, 1: 615. See also Eisenhower, Address at Gettysburg College Convocation, April 4, 1959, Document 25, *PP*, 1: 626.

31. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Saigon, March 7, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, I, *Vietnam*, pp. 300-302.

“virtually unassailable,” claims David L. Anderson.³² By early 1963, however, a disillusioned Kennedy was speaking privately of his plans to withdraw from Vietnam—but only after the 1964 election.³³ Meanwhile, he continued to dig a deeper hole for his successor, increasing military aid and combat operations, often touting South Vietnam’s strategic importance. Defeat there, he warned shortly before his death, would signal that “the wave of the future was with China and the Communists.”³⁴ At the time of his death, the loss of approximately 100 American lives, the overthrow and assassination of Diem, and the ensuing chaos in South Vietnam deepened the compulsions to stay the course.³⁵

Johnson’s Inheritance: A “God-Awful Mess”

And so, the hot potato finally landed in Johnson’s lap, “a god-awful mess” far more dangerous than what Kennedy had inherited, as McNamara describes it.³⁶ Yet, Lyndon Johnson, “confident in his cold war faith [and] code of manliness,” argues Michael Hunt, “must bear primary responsibility for the Vietnam War.”³⁷ Ignoring pleas from major allies for a negotiated settlement, “He never seriously considered any alternative to war,” adds David Kaiser.³⁸

Weighty evidence culled by legions of historians goes far to certify Johnson’s status as the Vietnam War president supreme. Yet a mountain of documents, examined in the light of the Kennedy challenge, suggests a more complex conclusion: that Johnson’s

32. Anderson, *Shadow*, p. 44.

33. Kenneth P. O’Donnell and David F. Powers, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 16. Kennedy had actually submitted a plan for withdrawal later found in the “Pentagon Papers,” according to Schlesinger. Nevertheless, in allowing the commitment to grow, he admits, Vietnam became “the fatal error of his presidency.” Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 414.

34. President Kennedy’s NBC Interview, September 9, 1963, *PP*, 2: 827–8. For examples of Kennedy’s numerous statements endorsing the Vietnam commitment, see *PP*, 2: 794–831.

35. America’s role in Diem’s overthrow, McMaster concedes, “saddled the United States with responsibility” for his successor. The coup, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge cabled Rusk, “launched the U.S. on a course from which there is no respectable turning back” (McMaster, *Derelection of Duty*, pp. 39, 41).

36. McNamara, *Retrospect*, p. 101.

37. Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson’s War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), p. 106.

38. David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 290.

America was already caught in a swelling current of commitments, perceptions and jarring events abroad, dragging the nation and its reluctant president toward disaster.

Shortly after taking office, LBJ was zapped with news that things in South Vietnam were going much worse than previously thought—unnerving reports of political chaos and military incompetence, of the Viet Cong expanding its territorial control, of a rising tide of troops and supplies pouring down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the North. A latent contradiction in Eisenhower's policy and Kennedy's rhetoric was rising to the surface: that South Vietnam's survival was a vital U.S. security interest; but its soldiers, not Americans, must do the fighting and dying.³⁹

Feeling like a "catfish" which had "just grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook" in it, LBJ was slipping toward a crossroads no other president had to face: either abandon South Vietnam to communism or send in American forces to save it.⁴⁰ But what exactly would be the "domino effect," he queried the CIA, if Saigon fell (along with endangered Laos). The response was electrifying. Having committed itself "persistently" and "emphatically" to preventing a Communist takeover, the agency reported, failure there would not only endanger East Asia, but would "seriously debase" American credibility elsewhere, vindicating Chinese claims that the United States was a "'paper tiger'" and that the underdeveloped world was "ripe for revolution." It confirmed the administration's worst fears, McNamara recalls, that the "West's containment policy was at serious risk in Vietnam."⁴¹

The emerging "credibility argument" was becoming increasingly dominant in the frantic memos blanketing the administration as it confronted Saigon's impending collapse. For ten years, Vietnam had been ballyhooed as Washington's line in the sand, the test case for American reliability in the global struggle against Communism.⁴² More than Vietnam's strategic

39. Johnson's advisers, McNamara admits, failed to confront the basic question that had challenged Eisenhower and Kennedy—whether the loss of South Vietnam would threaten American security enough to warrant the deployment of U.S. air and ground forces. McNamara, *Retrospect*, pp. 101-102.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-25. See also Board of National Estimates Memorandum to CIA Director McCone, June 9, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-68, *Vietnam*, 1: 484-87.

42. See, Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, March 16, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, *Vietnam*, 1: 153-67; McNamara, *Retrospect*, p. 195; Bundy Group upon returning from Saigon, March, 1965, *PP*, 3: 309-10; Wm. Bundy, Memo for the Secretary, January 6, 1965, *ibid.*, pp. 684-86.

importance or the specter of tumbling dominos in Asia, the sheer fact of American commitments made and enshrined in SEATO would weigh heavily against arguments for abandoning Vietnam. "If we ran out on Southeast Asia," LBJ later wrote, "I could see trouble ahead in every part of the globe" opening "the path to World War III."⁴³

From government offices to editorial boards, the simple phrase, "we're there," packed a wallop even among those uneasy over the Vietnam commitment. Maybe "we shouldn't have been there in the first place," mused *Washington Post* publisher, Katherine Graham, after visiting Vietnam. But "we were there," leaving "no choice but to help the South Vietnamese" fight Communist guerrillas. Her editor, Russ Wiggins, likewise supported Johnson's war policy, even though he longed for an alternative without destroying America's "international position."⁴⁴

The spell cast by the credibility doctrine may seem far-fetched today, but for Johnson's generation, the solemn "promises of 1954" were heavily charged by the "lessons of the 1930s:" appeasement at Munich, followed by the traumas of World War II, postwar Communist expansions in Europe and Asia and more recent crises in Africa and Latin America.⁴⁵

The Agony of Decision Making

The central rationale for going to war—North Vietnam's alleged aggression against South Vietnam—was always a stretch, especially during the Eisenhower years when Hanoi held its fire while Washington split Vietnam in two. But by the mid-sixties, Communist leaders, themselves, were stoking American fears that Vietnam was the cutting edge of global Communist expansion. Soviet and Chinese officials had announced support for "wars of national liberation" and Hanoi had identified her cause with the "socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union against American imperialism."⁴⁶ Beijing's aid to Hanoi, Moscow's policy shift to send large-scale modern weapons to Hanoi, and Hanoi's increasing control over the war in the South, all reinforced American images of North Vietnam

43. Johnson, *The Vantage Point, Perspectives of the Presidency: 1963-1969* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1971), pp. 147-48.

44. Graham, *Personal History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), pp. 375-76.

45. See McNamara, *Retrospect*, p. 195.

46. "Hanoi's View of the Southern Insurgency, February 1960," in Moss, *Vietnam Reader*, pp. 54-56.

as a spearhead for a monolithic Communism working toward world revolution.⁴⁷

In these circumstances, LBJ was no loose cannon itching for a showdown. Recorded phone conversations, recently released, reveal a troubled president turning to “outsiders” like UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Senator Richard Russell, groping for alternatives to war. In rambling comments laced with angst, he talked of Americans who knew little about Vietnam and “care a hell of a lot less,” of that “little old sergeant that works for me” and his six children, and “every time I think about ... sending that father of those six kids in there And what the hell are we going to get out of his doing it? And it just makes the chills run up my back.”⁴⁸

Their replies hardly calmed the presidential tremors. Stevenson had been “shuddering this thing for three years,” and now, “you don’t have any alternatives,” he feared. “And it’s a hell of an alternative.” “It was “the damn worst mess I ever saw,” added Russell. “I just don’t know what to do.”⁴⁹

In the following months, Johnson continued to agonize over the bitter choices toward which events were dragging him, worrying over provoking Chinese intervention, fretting over how “damned easy [it is] to get into a war” but “awfully hard” to get out.⁵⁰

But practically speaking, “we’re in there.” And abandoning “a solemn commitment” would debase “our word” and encourage aggression in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.⁵¹

Nations are prisoners of their past—especially the perceptions through which they interpret their past. What are the odds that Kennedy or other presidents would have chosen peace over war given the rush of events and the entrenched ideas governing American thought about

47. Cooperation between the three Communist powers masked deep hostilities simmering beneath the surface. Soviet documents made available during the 1990s clearly indicate the Soviet Union’s repugnance for war and its efforts to prod both Washington and Hanoi toward a peaceful settlement. China had her own reasons for aiding North Vietnam, including her competitive rivalry with the Soviet Union for leadership of the Communist world. Hanoi played the two powers against each other to squeeze military support from both. When Moscow finally came to the aid of Hanoi, she resented both China’s competitive pressures and Washington’s escalating intervention for forcing her hand. See I. V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 1996), *passim*.

48. Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York, Simon and Shuster, 1997), pp. 362, 364-65, 369.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 363-64.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 377.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 403; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 147-52.

Vietnam in the mid-sixties? It is striking how many future critics reflected and reinforced the intellectual milieu that was tugging Johnson's America toward war. Speeches by J. William Fulbright two years before launching his antiwar offensive in the Senate, spotlighted the "harsh realities" requiring military escalations: Hanoi's "expansionist ambitions" which offered "little prospect of a negotiated settlement" until the balance of forces were "substantially altered in our favor."⁵²

"The fall of Southeast Asia" would be a "strategic disaster," declared war correspondent Neil Sheehan years before he punctured American war claims with the *Pentagon Papers*.⁵³ In 1965, Daniel Ellsberg, the mole who later provided Sheehan with the top secret *Papers*, volunteered for service in Vietnam.⁵⁴ Senator Robert F. Kennedy wanted neither escalation nor withdrawal, but simply a better counterinsurgency strategy to save South Vietnam.⁵⁵ John Kerry, Yale trained and blue blooded, willingly went to Vietnam as a naval officer in 1966, only to emerge later as a militant leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.⁵⁶

Most telling was David Halberstram's proposal in 1965, years before he castigated Johnson's flawed personality as a leading cause for the war in his blockbuster study, *The Best and the Brightest*.⁵⁷ Sending American combat forces into battle would be disastrous, he warned. But so would withdrawal or even the "dishonor" of a negotiated settlement which would bring harsh retribution to America's Vietnamese supporters, increase Communist pressures in Southeast Asia, erode American "prestige throughout the world," and embolden enemies to foment more "insurgencies" beyond Vietnam.

No combat troops! No withdrawal! No negotiated settlement! Well, what then?

America should remain stuck in the "quagmire," Halberstram counseled, until her losing cause became so intolerable that the Vietnamese, themselves, preferring "Communist rule" over "endless bloodletting," asked Americans to leave.⁵⁸ Halberstram's bizarre pro-

52. *PP*, 3: 287; *Congressional Record*, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, 18399 – 18400. In 1966, Fulbright turned his Foreign Relations Committee into a sounding board for opponents denouncing the war.

53. Quoted in Olson and Roberts, *Where The Domino Fell*, p. 109.

54. Ellsberg, *Secrets*, pp. 98-101.

55. Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), pp. 311-15. Kennedy would challenge Johnson and his war policy as a presidential candidate in the Democratic primaries of 1968.

56. David Corn, "Defining John Kerry," *Nation*, 273 (July 16, 2001): 15-20.

57. Halberstram, *The Best and the Brightest*, p. 796.

58. Halberstram, *The Making of a Quagmire*, rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, 1965, 1988), pp. 177-78. Halberstram entertained a "very frail" hope that eleventh-hour desperation might force the Vietnamese factions to unite and mount a viable military force against the enemy.

posals—to keep sacrificing lives for the incredible objective of losing “honorably”—underscores the depths of Johnson’s dilemma.

While others dabbled in abstract solutions and Congressmen shuddered over rumors that he might stick them with the war decision,⁵⁹ LBJ chose to bite the bullet, himself, when “every choice presented the possibility of disaster,” declares Michael Lind.⁶⁰ When Senator George McGovern gave him a memorandum explaining why the current military involvement was wrong, Johnson exploded: “Don’t give me another g history lesson I don’t need a lecture on where we went wrong. I’ve got to deal with where we are now.”⁶¹

By early 1965, nothing was working. Washington had poured in huge weapons supplies and 23,000 military advisers, launched covert 34-A attacks against North Vietnam, expanded presidential war-making powers with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution—and still the flow of troops and supplies from the North accelerated along with Communist victories in the field and political coups in Saigon.

On January 27, 1965, the crisis entered “the most crucial phase of America’s thirty-year involvement in Indochina,” according to McNamara, with McGeorge Bundy’s “Fork-in-the-road” memo signaling that Johnson’s “middle course” was leading to “disastrous defeat.”⁶² With South Vietnamese morale sinking while America withheld its “enormous power,” it was time for “harder choices”: either commit American forces “to force a change in Communist policy” (favored by Bundy and McNamara) or enter negotiations

59. “[The Senators] just got the living hell scared out of them,” Johnson gloated to McNamara, after telling Senator Mike Mansfield he was willing to let Congress decide to declare war or “tuck tail and run.” Despite his anti-war fervor, Mansfield insisted that senators wanted nothing to do with a war decision. After hearing about the president’s comment, Senator George Aiken, griped on the Senate floor that Johnson was sending them a war declaration to take himself “‘off the hook.’” See Beschloss, *Reaching For Glory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp. 350-51, n. 6, 351.

60. Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous. Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999), p. x. Lind’s revisionist study contends that, in Johnson’s circumstances, he would have been derelict had he abandoned South Vietnam to the Communist bloc without a major struggle. To preserve American credibility, the foundation of the global containment policy, the U.S. needed to escalate the war, accept the loss of about 15,000 American lives and then abandon the Vietnam struggle after 1968 to preserve the political consensus supporting the Cold War on other fronts (Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, pp. ix, x, xv, 256-60).

61. George McGovern, *Grassroots* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 104-105. Even most early opponents of Johnson’s war decisions shied away from advocating outright surrender of South Vietnam, preferring a “negotiated settlement,” which was widely regarded as a prelude to Communist victory.

62. McNamara, *Retrospect*, p. 169. See also *PP*, 3: 287-88; 389-90.

to salvage "what little can be preserved." Secretary of State Dean Rusk, dreading both options, clung to the crumbling status quo, hoping desperately to make "our present policy work."⁶³

Presidential pressures mounted rapidly in the following weeks, primed by a Viet Cong attack on Americans at Pleiku, February 7, and unanimous decisions from the JCS and National Security Council demanding a systematic air war against North Vietnam. A cascade of memos circulating through the administration reflected an emerging consensus: with time running out in Vietnam, American military intervention offered the best hope of changing the military balance to achieve meaningful negotiations.⁶⁴

It was at this critical juncture that Kennedy had planned to withdraw from Vietnam. Given his absence, supporters can more readily speculate that he would have swerved clear of the impending disaster. Eisenhower revisionists have no such alibi.

Arriving at the White House on February 17, the former president spent two and a half hours sounding a familiar theme for LBJ and his advisers: "Munichs win nothing." Endorsing the proposed air war against the North, and the commitment of U.S. combat forces, if necessary, Ike warned that they must negotiate from strength, not from the current "disastrous" weakness.⁶⁵ His words, together with a more hawkish stance taken by Rusk and George Ball, Johnson's most ardent antiwar adviser, virtually "preordained" the result, McNamara claims.⁶⁶

63. M. Bundy to The President, January 27, 1965, in *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers*, ed. David M. Barrett (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), pp. 101-103; McNamara, *Retrospect*, pp. 167-69. Bundy's memo urging Johnson to change course and the ensuing debates over military policy are hard to square with Kaiser's claims that Johnson never seriously considered an alternative to war and had already approved Pentagon plans for an air war against North Vietnam and "massive deployment" of American ground troops. "Few were as determined as Johnson" to solve the "intractable" Vietnam problem "without military escalation," McNamara later recalled. See Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 290, 397, 410-11, 443, 447-49; McNamara, *Argument*, pp. 154, 207-208.

64. See M. Bundy to The President, February 7, 1965, in Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, pp. 108-110; *PP*, 3: 297, 315-16, 318-19, 389-90, 655-56, 686; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 196.

65. Memorandum of Meeting with the President; Present: The President, General Eisenhower, Secretary McNamara, General Wheeler, Mr. McGeorge Bundy, General Goodpaster, by Gen. A.J. Goodpaster, February 17, 1965, in Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, pp. 119-24; McNamara, *Retrospect*, pp. 172-74.

66. Shedding previous inhibitions, Rusk now supported a "major escalation" to counter Communist aggression. The dovish Ball also came on board, McNamara recalled, hoping the bombing would "increase U.S. bargaining power" making possible a "satisfactory political solution." Ball's own account, however, suggests that his support was a tactical maneuver, in the face of "a unanimous view" among other advisers, to

"Operation Rolling Thunder" was unleashed against the North, March 2, and U.S. ground troops arrived six days later to protect the air bases but soon expanded in numbers and combat operations.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, these measures simply revealed the futility of America's back-up role in Vietnam, a point ominously conveyed by U.S. Commander William Westmoreland's "bombshell," as McNamara dubbed his June 7 cable—a jarring message of rising enemy power and allied disintegration, culminating in an urgent plea for open-ended escalation of U.S. combat forces.⁶⁸

"We're in a hell of a mess," McNamara groaned to colleagues the following day. It was the beginning of a frenzied, seven-week search for "the least bad road."⁶⁹ And pressures to pick all-out war as the "least bad" option were intense.

For one thing, there was ambivalent news from the front: bad news, scoring the urgent need for American forces, and good news, indicating that beefed-up allied forces were taking a heavy toll on the VC, raising hopes that increased American power would "bring victory over time."⁷⁰ A Rand report based on interviews with enemy prisoners and defectors, for example, reflected their increasing doubts of Communist victory.⁷¹

By the mid-sixties, the military establishment had done a 180 since the days they had opposed Eisenhower's entry into the Vietnam imbroglio. Fed up with "fighting the war on the enemy's terms" the JCS since January, 1964, had been pressing LBJ to send

maintain his credibility for deterring future escalations toward war. See McNamara, *Retrospect*, n. p.174; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 390-91; Report by Bromley Smith, "For the President Only, Summary Notes of 545th NSC Meeting and 546th NSC Meeting," in Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, pp. 104-108.

67. The arrival of U.S. ground forces breached a major fire wall—Kennedy's sacrosanct line against sending American boys to fight Asian wars. Hanoi hardly encouraged a diplomatic solution with her demand, following Johnson's olive branch proposal in April, calling for America's unconditional withdrawal from Vietnam before negotiations could begin. See McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 235-36, 260.

68. McNamara, *Retrospect*, p. 188. "The specter of U.S. involvement in a major Asian land war was painfully clear," according to the Pentagon study. *PP*, 3: 462.

69. McNamara, *Retrospect*, pp. 188, 205.

70. See *PP*, 3: 391-92; M. Taylor to The President, March 11, 1965, in Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, pp. 134-35; Report on Honolulu Meeting of R. McNamara, W. Bundy, J.T. McNaughton, Ambassador Taylor, General Wheeler, Westmoreland, Admiral Sharp, April 21, 1965, *PP*, 3: 705-706.

71. McGeorge Bundy to the President, "Re: Rand Studies of Viet Cong Motivation and Morale," June 28, 1965, Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, p. 183; M. Bundy to Chester L. Cooper, NSC Staff, "Re: Summary of Rand's Latest Interrogation of Viet Cong Captives and Defectors," July 10, 1965, in *ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

U.S. air and ground forces into direct combat.⁷² Their hawkish voices undoubtedly muted Johnson's vexing doubts over American military prospects. At a JCS meeting, July 22, 1965, General Harold K. Johnson glibly summarized the options: "Least desirable alternative is getting out. Second least is doing what we are doing. Best is to get in and get the job done." The Marines, Johnson was assured, would "force" the enemy "to the Conference table."⁷³ "You must take the fight to the enemy," breezed JCS Chairman General Earle Wheeler on one occasion. "No one ever won a battle sitting on his ass."⁷⁴

In words suggesting that his own legacy was at stake, Eisenhower added his hefty clout to the gathering momentum for war. Having appealed to military force, he told Johnson in a July 2 phone conversation, "You have to go all out! ... We are not going to be run out of a free country that we helped to establish."⁷⁵

General Maxwell Taylor, former JCS chairman and current ambassador to Saigon, now abandoned his previous opposition to sending American ground forces into Vietnam. The powerful enemy offensive recently unleashed, he later explained, "had completely overcome my former reluctance to use American ground troops in general combat."⁷⁶

And what about the man at the crossroads—the first president forced to confront head-on the contradictory impulses lodged in the Vietnam policy: either abandon an ally to Communism or commit American forces to save her? Associates later recalled a "man

72. Quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 295-96; See also Editorial Note on JCS Memorandum to Defense Secretary McNamara, January 22, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, *Vietnam*, 1: 35.

73. Meeting of President, McNamara, Vance, Clifford and the Generals, July 22, 1965, in Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, pp. 235-42.

74. Quoted in Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 163.

75. "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation [between the president and Eisenhower], by "'LHB'," [taking notes for Eisenhower], in Barrett, *Johnson's Papers*, pp. 201-202. See also, "Memorandum for the Record Re: Meeting with General Eisenhower, 16 June 1965 by: Gen. Goodpaster, in *ibid.*, pp. 169-70. Eisenhower's hawkish advice in these months, does not necessarily mean he would have decided for war had he been president, involved in the prior advisory sessions and forced to make the actual decisions for war.

76. Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 347. Swelling the prowar crescendo was a group of distinguished retired leaders including former Secretary of State Dean Acheson—the "Wise Men" as Johnson dubbed them. Saigon's sinking fortunes required a "new role" for the U.S., they concluded at a July 9 meeting—taking a major part in the combat itself," with "large additional forces and probably much heavier casualties." Roswell L. Gilpatrick to M. Bundy, July 9, 1965, *ibid.*, 205-06.

literally torn to pieces,” wanting to do “anything rather than send more troops.”⁷⁷ McNamara remembered a “very depressed” president in “constant turmoil,” seeing neither a “plan for victory” nor an escape from obligations binding him to Vietnam.⁷⁸

Johnson’s questions fired at political and military advisers reflected his tremors over the minefield ahead. Were they starting something they couldn’t finish? Had they done everything possible on the negotiating front? Would China and Russia enter the fray? Was South Vietnam the best place to hold the line against Communist expansion?⁷⁹

The inner churning boiled over into his private life. “I can’t get out,” he had groaned to Lady Bird. “I can’t finish it with what I have got. So what the Hell can I do?”⁸⁰ On the verge of his final decision, she awakened in the early morning hours to his fitful sounds: “I don’t want to get in a war and I don’t see any way out of it. I’ve got to call up 600,000 boys, make them leave their homes and their families.” Feeling guilty, like one abandoning her post, she dragged herself into a separate room to snatch another hour or two of restless sleep.⁸¹

Curiously, two of Johnson’s most passionate antiwar advisers later emerged among his most sympathetic critics. “Among all the top command,” Ball recounted, “President Johnson was the most reluctant to expand America’s involvement.”⁸² Rare was the “voice that counseled caution,” Clark Clifford recalled, chiding those who tagged Vietnam, “Lyndon Johnson’s war.” Most experts saw “simply no alternative” to sending American forces into battle. And that was “where President Johnson’s situation differed from those of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy.”⁸³

77. Miller, *Lyndon*, p. 417.

78. McNamara, *Retrospect*, pp. 191-92.

79. Meeting of President, McNamara, Vance, Gen. Wheeler, Gen. Johnson, *et al.*, July 22, 1965, in Barrett, *Johnson’s Papers*, p. 235.

80. Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 248.

81. Lady Bird Johnson, Tape Recorded Diary, July 22, 1965 in Beschloss, *Reaching*, pp. 402-403.

82. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 377.

83. Miller, 413. Weighty studies have faulted Johnson for his flawed advisory system— his failure to develop a coherent forum for debating conflicting views, and his intimidating style which frequently dampened criticism. After banning Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey from advisory sessions for raising objections to Rolling Thunder, McMaster claims, even Ball “would no longer question the general direction of the policy.” McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 241-42; 325-331; John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundations, 1989), pp. 120-25, 284-85. According

Johnson's torment stemmed partly from fears for his Great Society, especially over Congressional conservatives who might "use the war" to block his domestic programs. He knew from the start, he later told his biographer, Doris Kearns, that "If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war ... I would lose everything at home. ... all my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless ... to provide education and medical care" for browns, blacks, the lame and the poor. Yet, if he abandoned South Vietnam, following Chamberlain's World War II example, he would be rewarding aggression, inviting Moscow and Peking to "exploit our weakness."⁸⁴

With the window of opportunity closing fast in Vietnam, LBJ worked feverishly to push his Great Society through a balky Congress, rallying northern Democrats, cajoling foot-dragging Republicans, and ultimately achieving spectacular results for voting rights, education, health care and a host of other programs for his "war" on poverty and racism. Strained to the limit by months of Vietnam, Selma, Watts, and Congressional battles, his body, beset by severe heart problems and prone to break down under

to Ball's own accounts and documentary evidence, however, he continued to pepper the president with memos opposing the drift toward war. Johnson always read them, after which he would call a meeting and call on Ball to present his views. Barrett also portrays a broader advisory process shaping Johnson's decision-making. Dovish voices commanded his attention even as hawkish advisers dragged him "kicking and screaming" toward escalation. Going beyond formal channels, he turned repeatedly to strong anti-war senators like Fulbright, Russell and Mike Mansfield to evaluate the drift toward war. Despite their substantial agreement with McMaster, Burke and Greenstein indicate that intensive consultation and a search for conflicting points of view was central to Johnson's operating procedure. *Ibid.*, 243; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 389-403; Barrett, *Uncertain*, pp. 24, 25, 29, 33, 36, 44-46, 50, 59-60.

84. Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 251-53. McMaster links Johnson's Great Society program to his Vietnam failure. His thesis faults Johnson, *not for going to war*, but for failing to act on the real message from his military advisers: their call for a "hard blow" commitment to the war as the only effective strategy. Fearing that he might alienate Congressional hawks or doves supporting his program, he evaded his duty to make the hard choices: full commitment to war or disengagement from Vietnam. Clinging to a disastrous middle ground, he lied his way gradually into war then pursued a strategy guaranteed to lose it. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 107-108, 277, 298-99, 323-34. See also Beschloss, *Reaching*, pp. 178, 292, 403; McNamara, *Restrospect*, p. 206. Politics certainly influenced LBJ's Vietnam policy, but his middle course diplomacy, owed much to other factors—his penchant for working toward consensus, for example, and the widespread repugnance for both horns of his dilemma: the dread of either surrendering South Vietnam to the Communists with probable retribution impending or sending American boys into war.

political pressure, collapsed in an excruciating attack of kidney stones at summer's end, followed by removal of his gall bladder. Lady Bird kept a black dress in her White House closet, anticipating Lyndon's possible death in office.⁸⁵

On July 28, the president announced his approval for the military commitment setting the wheels in motion for the Americanization of the war. After the lessons of "Hitler at Munich" and the "solemn pledges" of four presidents, he told the public, "We just cannot now dishonor our word ... or leave those who ... trusted us to the terror ... that would follow."⁸⁶

"We were sinking into quicksand," McNamara lamented.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The debate over Johnson's responsibility for Vietnam extends to the post July 1965 period—beyond the primary focus of this study. His warmonger image was etched more deeply by his stubborn persistence in Vietnam amid soaring casualties, mounting protests and resignations from disillusioned advisers.

Yet, at what point, should he have thrown in the towel—and how? Critics have strayed all over the field, from those flailing the "shoot-from-the-hip Texan ... who destroyed Vietnam to save his own ego" to those condemning the "timid, all-too-political war leader" for refusing to unleash the nation's fire power to win the war.⁸⁸ General Taylor concluded that Johnson's controlled warfare in Vietnam was "probably about right" for that most difficult of military operations—the "limited war" designed to avoid World War III.⁸⁹

As the antiwar movement gathered steam, critics focused on a negotiated settlement as the key to ending the carnage. But with Hanoi apparently demanding nothing less than an American "sell-out" of South Vietnam, as Taylor described it, early peace talks, themselves, would have undermined the American war strategy to achieve an acceptable compromise while providing a "priceless sounding board for enemy propaganda" as they waged war at leisure.⁹⁰ In 1966, even George Kennan, appalled at the misapplication of his Containment policy to Vietnam, warned U.S.

85. Beschloss, *Reaching*, pp. 168, 394, 426.

86. *PP*, 3: 476-77.

87. McNamara, *Retrospect*, p. 206.

88. Anderson, *Shadow*, p. 87.

89. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, p. 174.

90. *Ibid.*

Senators that a “precipitous ... withdrawal ... in present circumstances” would undermine American interests and world peace.⁹¹

No historian can whitewash the enormity of Johnson’s tragic decisions for war in 1964-65 nor the personal flaws that increased his disposition to follow the hawkish herd rather than the dovish warnings of the Balls and the Mansfields.⁹² Maybe Kennedy, more sophisticated in diplomacy, and more wary of the “miscalculations” endemic to warfare, would have cut loose from Vietnam in 1965, as some observers believe.⁹³ But after allowing the carnage to continue until he was safely re-elected, as he had planned, it would have taken an astonishing act of courage to cut the Gordian Knot at that late hour—the kind of moral heroism seldom seen in American politics.

Kennedy’s “How the hell can you tell?” remains an enduring challenge, beckoning scholars to careful analysis when evaluating presidential performances and the unique pressures that shape them. Among the presidents who led America to war in Vietnam, no one was so deeply ensnared by predecessors’ policies as Johnson; and no one had so sharp a break from previous policies as Eisenhower. Together, Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Accords provided a clear alternative.⁹⁴ Had Ike honored the Accords, as he promised, Ho Chi

91. Quoted in Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, p. 135. Kennan was the major architect of Truman’s Containment policy launched in 1947. Pulling out of a war in progress was far more difficult than avoiding it in the first place. For Nixon, the only other president to grapple with that problem, it took four more destructive years and 27,000 American lives to fulfill his 1968 campaign pledge to end the American fighting.

92. Even the sympathetic Ball fingered Johnson’s character as a significant factor leading to the Vietnam tragedy. Boasting that he was “not going to be the first President to lose a war,” Ball observed, he lacked the inner strength to “face the consequences of withdrawal.” Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 422.

93. In 1967, Ellsberg put the “hard question” to Bobby Kennedy: “Would JFK really have been willing to accept defeat, to see Saigon go Communist, as the alternative to sending the troops?” “‘Nobody, can say for sure what my brother would actually have done, in the actual circumstances of 1964 or ‘65,’” Kennedy replied. Even President Kennedy “‘couldn’t have said that in ‘61.’” Ellsberg, *Secrets*, pp. 193-98. By many accounts, Kennedy was psychologically more disposed than Johnson to accept a Communist victory over sending American troops into battle. On the other hand, by 1965, he would have been in a deeper hole than Johnson, having been responsible, since 1961, for the descent into the Vietnam quagmire.

94. The “sharp break,” in this context, refers to the political rupture in 1954, which dictated a new political order for the Vietnamese and the U.S. Ideological and political pressures remained. Given the “loss of China,” the Korean stalemate, the global cold war, the successful covert operations in Iran and Guatemala and Eisenhower’s “New Look” diplomacy, Anderson argues, “abandoning South Vietnam to the communists” was an unrealistic option for him. Anderson, *Trapped*, pp. 21-22, 66-67. His perspective reminds us that alternatives are clearer to historians with 20-20 hindsight than to political leaders grappling with the dilemmas of the day.

Minh probably would have won the 1956 elections and reunited Vietnam under a fiercely independent Communist regime.

Unfortunately, Eisenhower, tried to win in the political arena what was lost on the battlefield. Indeed, the very nature of the Vietnam War, in large measure, can be defined as North Vietnam's delayed reaction in the 1960s to Eisenhower's interventions in the 1950s. It was Ho Chi Minh's struggle for Vietnam's "independence, unity and territorial integrity," won at Dien Bien Phu, promised at Geneva, thwarted by Eisenhower and Diem, and finally consummated with the fall of Saigon in 1975. Tragically, the Eisenhower years also spawned a contrary idea, rooted more in ideology than history and quickly hardening into unassailable dogma: that there were two independent Vietnams, and America's struggle was to save "the independent nation of South Viet-Nam" against the aggression of the North.⁹⁵

Unfortunately this latter notion dominates and distorts our memories of Vietnam to this day, sustaining exaggerated views of American innocence and enemy perversity—enough for Washington to have refused diplomatic relations with Vietnam for two more decades. This historical understanding, as Ellsberg discovered, owes much to our heavy focus on the Johnson years rather than the Eisenhower era when American control replaced French colonialism, adding a new chapter to the centuries of Vietnam suffering at the hands of foreign powers. After researching the Pentagon documents on the 1950s which he had initially delayed as irrelevant, Ellsberg concluded that no other documents "had so great an impact on my perspective toward the war."⁹⁶

Our selective historical amnesia—remembering the enemy's aggression while ignoring our prior provocations—has become a national habit which continues to complicate American diplomacy

95. Quoted from "Excerpts from Speech Given by President Johnson at Johns Hopkins University," April 7, 1965, in Moss, *Vietnam Reader*, pp. 84-85. McMaster (like many historians) emphasizes Johnson's congenital lying in his blistering critique of LBJ's Vietnam folly. Significantly, his comments on Johnson's oft quoted Johns Hopkins address, completely ignored the warped history at the heart of his war rationale: North Vietnam's aggression against "the independent nation of South Viet-Nam . . . is the heartbeat of the war." See McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 259-60. By 1965, Hanoi's increasing intervention certainly reinforced that perception for most Americans, including Ellsberg—until he studied the Eisenhower documents. As an insider, he had participated in the deception pervading Johnson's defense department. (One of his assignments was a rush order for six "alternate lies" for a McNamara press conference.) Only after examining the pre-1960 documents, did he conclude "that the pattern of executive deception" had shaped America's Vietnam policy from the beginning. Ellsberg, *Secrets*, , p. 41, 414.

96. Ellsberg, *Secrets*, p. 274.

today, blinding leaders and people to U.S. policies which have primed the pump of anti-Americanism in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Johnson had the misfortune to be in the barn when Ike's chickens came home to roost: SEATO, a mind-set identifying South Vietnam with the global containment struggle, a State Department purged of top Asian experts, the politics of anticommunism, a nagging credibility issue, and ultimately, a shaky, makeshift nation, largely American made and generating immense pressure for an American rescue.

Eisenhower cast a long shadow over the sixties, promoting Johnson's military escalations, taming his doubts en route to war. When protests broke loose the following years, Ike railed against antiwar "kooks and hippies," even calling for a congressional declaration of war. With antiwar candidates emerging during the 1968 presidential primaries, he threatened to take the stump against any Democrat or Republican who "suggests we pull out of Vietnam, turn our backs on 13,000 Americans who died in the cause of freedom."⁹⁷

"The tragedy of Lyndon Johnson—and for America," George Ball has observed, was a matter of "catastrophic bad luck," being forced to divert energy and resources from his war on poverty to a war he resented, "swept along by a momentum others had set in motion."⁹⁸ His remarks are worth pondering in the light of Kennedy's challenge to historians. The main burden of responsibility, I submit, falls more heavily on Eisenhower than Johnson—if we factor in comparable situations, "real pressures" bearing down on each leader and "real alternatives" on the table.

I may be on a slippery slope myself in re-assigning primary blame to Eisenhower. At the very least we should raise the question: Has history been too kind to Eisenhower and too unkind to Johnson?

97. Quoted in Ambrose, *The President*, 2: 662-63.

98. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 375.