



Presidential Address

Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Making of a Tragedy*

The appearance of Robert S. McNamara's book on Vietnam in the spring of 1995 touched off an explosion of recrimination reminiscent of the 1960s. McNamara's confession that the war was a great mistake that he, President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and other civilian and military advisers should have avoided confirmed war opponents in the belief that Vietnam was a transparent error in judgment that need not have happened.

McNamara's supposition that John F. Kennedy would have checked the drift into an unwinnable struggle deepened the feeling that Vietnam was an unnecessary war that wiser statesmanship could have prevented.¹ Since McNamara, according to his own account, came to understand this, but felt compelled to hide his disillusionment, critics have attacked his confession of error as self-serving, an attempt to make peace with himself, win forgiveness from those who suffered losses in the fighting, and, not incidentally, make a significant sum of money on an international best-seller.

The impulse to see Vietnam as a readily avoidable mistake is, I believe, a case of bending history to presentist assumptions. To be sure, dissenting voices at the time warned against the dangers of involvement in an Asian land war, predicting a stalemate that could cost the United States substantial losses in blood and treasure. But almost no one counseled simply letting Vietnam go; early opponents of expanded U.S. military action urged some kind of negotiated settlement that would protect South Vietnam from a Communist takeover.

Three of the most vigorous early opponents of an American war in Vietnam, Senators J. William Fulbright (D-AR) and Mike Mansfield (D-MT) and Undersecretary of State George Ball, did not reject initial American efforts to preserve Saigon's independence. Fulbright and Ball, for example, were warm supporters of Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin Resolution announcing American intentions to resist Communist aggression against

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1. Robert S. McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995), 95-97.

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South Vietnam, and Mansfield proposed a number of negotiating scenarios for keeping the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese from seizing control of the South.

Moreover, there is good reason to think that had he lived, John Kennedy, like Johnson, would have expanded upon the military efforts of his thousand days in the White House to save Saigon from communism. Noam Chomsky's *Retbinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (1993) makes a convincing case that Kennedy had no intention of withdrawing American forces from South Vietnam without a greater test of the Communist drive for control. Chomsky quotes JFK's public declaration on 12 September 1963: "What helps to win the war, we support; what interferes with the war effort, we oppose. . . . We have a very simple policy in that area [Vietnam]. . . . We want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home. . . . But we are not there to see a war lost." Chomsky points out that had Kennedy intended to withdraw, it is hard to understand why he so consistently spoke publicly about holding the line in Vietnam. JFK was too astute a politician to have created a public expectation that he intended to abandon after reelection in 1964.²

Retrospective arguments in behalf of an American withdrawal in early 1965, before Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing campaign begun in March 1965, and the massive expansion of ground forces begun in July, are difficult to credit. The widespread and prevailing opinion in the administration, Congress, and the press and among the mass of Americans was that the United States simply could not walk away from Vietnam and sacrifice a pro-Western country to Communist aggression. In February 1965, for example, 79 percent of Americans believed that a U.S. withdrawal would mean a Communist takeover of all of Southeast Asia; 79 percent viewed it as "very important" to prevent that from happening; 64 percent favored continuing present efforts in Vietnam; 63 percent believed our presence in Vietnam "very important" to America's national security; 48 percent supported "sending a large number of American troops to help save Vietnam"; and 60 percent gave the president positive marks for his handling of Vietnam.³

In the winter of 1965-66, nearly 60 percent of the American people saw the Vietnam War as the country's most urgent problem. The number had more than doubled since the presidential campaign in 1964. Two out of three Americans considered it essential to take a stand in Vietnam, with only 20 percent favoring a pullout over an expanded role for U.S. forces.

2. Noam Chomsky, *Retbinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (Boston, 1993), 46.

3. See Bill Moyers to LBJ, 16 February 1965, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Papers, White House Central Files, Confidential File: PR16, LBJ Library, Austin, Texas; William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War* (Washington, 1988), 3:72-77.

Seventy-five percent of a sample poll viewed the war as “part of our worldwide commitment to stop Communism.”⁴

Almost everyone who thought about Vietnam remembered the run up to the Second World War and the appeasement of Hitler. There was genuine fear in 1965 that giving the Communists a free hand in Vietnam might be the prelude to bolder actions that would lead to a Soviet-American and/or Sino-American confrontation that could result in a nuclear war. Further, the “loss” of Vietnam could mean the start of a chain reaction in Southeast Asia that would put anti-Communist countries on the defensive around the globe. Finally, Johnson and his principal advisers could not ignore memories of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s assault on Democrats and State Department officials for “losing” China. It was feared that the “loss” of Vietnam would produce a political reaction in the United States that could cripple the Johnson administration and accuse the Democratic party of failing to meet the Communist threat.⁵

My point here is not that Johnson and his advisers were wise to have escalated the U.S. stake in Vietnam but that in the context of 1964–65 it is difficult to imagine them doing anything else. This is not the same as saying they had to expand and sustain that involvement, which of course they did, between 1966 and 1968. Indeed, here is where I think JFK would have acted differently from LBJ. By 1966–67, when it became increasingly evident that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong would not easily succumb to American power, either in the near or even possibly long term, Kennedy would have cut U.S. losses and found a way to extricate us from the war. Unlike Johnson, who had no significant diplomatic achievements and no fund of political credibility as a foreign policy leader, Kennedy had the prestige of success in the Cuban missile crisis and the Soviet-American Test Ban treaty to bolster any big decision he made in foreign affairs. No one can say with certainty, of course, what Kennedy would have done, but, as his behavior in the Bay of Pigs and missile crises demonstrated, he was a cautious foreign policy leader who resisted compounding errors and taking risks that could lead to a wider war or divisions at home that could jeopardize the country’s Cold War consensus.⁶

Lyndon Johnson’s response to the war was another matter. Indeed, the central question that I see for historians considering LBJ and Vietnam is not why he escalated American involvement in the fighting in 1965 but why he failed to take the political precautions necessary to protect his administration from a stalemate or even failure in Vietnam.

4. Hayes Redmon to Jake Jacobsen, 30 November 1965, and Jack Valenti to LBJ, 14 December 1965, White House Central Files, Executive: PR16.

5. The arguments for fighting in Vietnam are clearly reconstructed in Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1991).

6. See Tom Wicker, “Committed to a Quagmire,” *Diplomatic History* 19 (Winter 1995): 167–71.

Johnson knew, as his mentor Franklin D. Roosevelt had demonstrated in 1939–1945, that an effective policy abroad requiring significant sacrifices had to rest on a solid political consensus at home. “We are in bad shape in Vietnam,” Johnson told *New York Times* editor Turner Catledge in December 1964.

Uncertainties in that area are far more than the certainties. Yet we can't afford to, and we will not, pull out. We must find some way to bring the job off even if we have to set it up so that a withdrawal would have a better face. . . . Whether we spread military operations across North Vietnam is yet to be decided. We certainly haven't decided against it. We've got to do whatever it takes, either to get a good settlement there, or to furnish a good face behind which we can withdraw. Again, withdrawal is not in the picture, certainly not now.⁷

Judging from his comments to Catledge, Johnson was mindful of U.S. public opinion in deciding how to meet the difficulties in Vietnam. Moreover, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey cautioned him against losing sight of this essential ingredient of a successful policy toward the conflict in Southeast Asia. In February 1965, as LBJ was about to commit himself to Rolling Thunder, Bundy advised him to prepare the country for substantial sacrifices by publicly stating what an air campaign might mean. Bundy told Johnson that

at its very best the struggle in Vietnam will be long. It seems to us important that this fundamental fact be made clear . . . to our own people and to the people of Vietnam. Too often in the past we have conveyed the impression that we expect an early solution. . . . It is our own belief that the people of the United States have the necessary will to accept and to execute a policy that rests upon the reality that there is no short cut to success in Vietnam.

Johnson made it clear to Bundy, however, that there would be no “loud public signal of a change in policy,” that White House aides would say little or nothing to the press, and that statements about Vietnam would be confined to general remarks by Rusk and UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson.⁸

At the same time, Hubert Humphrey tried to persuade Johnson that policymaking toward Vietnam might include “the most fateful decisions of your Administration.” Humphrey believed it essential that Johnson make the war “politically understandable” to the American public. “There has to be a cogent, convincing case if we are to enjoy sustained public support,” he wrote LBJ on 15 February 1965. “In World Wars I and II we had this.”

7. Memorandum of conversation between LBJ and Catledge, 15 December 1964, Arthur Krock Papers, Princeton University.

8. Bundy to LBJ, 7, 13, and 16 February 1965, LBJ Presidential Papers, National Security File: Memos to the President.

Even in Korea, where “we could not sustain American political support for fighting Chinese,” the public had a better understanding of what we were doing than in Vietnam. Humphrey predicted that 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, political opposition will steadily mount.” Humphrey warned that this opposition would come from “Democratic liberals, independents, [and] labor” and would gain a hold “at the grassroots [level] across the country.”⁹

It is a given of the Johnson presidency that LBJ refused to allow a debate in Congress, the press, and the country about what to do in Vietnam. Instead, he escalated the war without consulting those who would have to fight and support it with their lives, money, and convictions. Relying on the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as giving him autonomy to expand the war, he provoked what millions of Americans came to understand as the “credibility gap”: Lyndon Johnson’s failure to speak honestly to the people. “How do you know when Lyndon Johnson is telling the truth?” a joke was told around the country. “When he strokes his chin, pulls his ear lobe, he’s telling the truth. When he begins to move his lips, you know he’s lying.”¹⁰

Johnson’s impulse to shun a debate about Vietnam during the first seven months of 1965, when the initial major stepup occurred, has a plausible explanation. Johnson was fearful that encouraging public discussion of an expanded war would divert the Congress and the country from agreeing to the explosion of Great Society legislation—federal aid to elementary, secondary, and higher education, Medicare, Medicaid, Voting Rights, clean air and clean water bills, immigration reform, the creation of a Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. Johnson believed that conservatives eager to kill off his programs of domestic reform would have been all too happy to seize upon the expanding war as an excuse to stall and ultimately kill the Great Society and war on poverty.

Yet at the same time, Johnson was defensive about not consulting the public and Congress and enraged by talk of the “credibility gap.” Johnson “is particularly sensitive to charges that he is not talking enough to the American people about the complexities and risks of the Vietnam war,” *New York Times* columnist James Reston wrote at the end of February. “He carries around in his pocket a series of private polls that purport to show that the vast majority of the people not only know what he is doing but approve what he is doing.” Johnson understood perfectly that this could change. In politics, he liked to say, “overnight chicken shit can turn to chicken salad and vice versa.” For the moment, however, he believed it sound policy to

9. Hubert Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man* (Garden City, 1976), 320–24.

10. Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York, 1969), 484–85.

keep his counsel. If and when developments dictated otherwise, he would consider shifting ground.¹¹

But he never did. And not because he lacked opportunities after July 1965. To the contrary, in the winter of 1965–66 he had a further chance to invite a public debate about the expanding war in Southeast Asia. On 10 November, the Joint Chiefs asked for an additional 113,000 troops to shift from Phase I of the fighting, in which we had stopped “losing the war,” to Phase II, in which we would “start winning it.” They also recommended intensified bombing, highlighted first by strikes against petroleum, oil, and lubricant (POL) facilities and electric power installations and then military targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. In late November, Westmoreland increased his estimate of troop needs to 200,000, for a total of 410,000, 135,000 more than originally assumed in July. Although the president would not commit himself to Westmoreland’s request then, neither would he turn it down. He preferred to delay decisions on troop strength, but clearly he had little room to maneuver unless he chose to cut U.S. losses and reduce rather than expand America’s role in the war.¹²

The pressure for troop increases and more bombing could have been an occasion for a great debate on what to do about the fighting. But instead of openly confronting the hard choices the country now faced in Vietnam and encouraging a national discussion, Johnson obscured the harsh realities, planning, for example, to expand troop commitments month by month without acknowledging that decisions had been made for a doubling of forces by the end of the coming year. For the second time in six months he had a chance to rally a generally receptive public to fight a difficult limited conflict and make Vietnam America’s war. Instead, he chose the path of indirection, which irrevocably made the struggle Lyndon Johnson’s war and all that would mean for a president presiding over a potentially losing cause.

Johnson’s manipulativeness extended to a bombing pause, which he launched on 27 December 1965. The day before, after a Christmas truce ended on the ground, Johnson considered whether to resume bombing as well. Rusk and State Department subordinates wanted renewed air strikes and a pause later, after the White House had made clear to Moscow that a major peace effort was under way. But Mac Bundy, McNamara, Jack Valenti, and Bill Moyers counseled otherwise. The latest polls showed 73 percent of Americans eager for a cease-fire, with 61 percent favorable to “all-out bombing” of the North if no negotiations followed a pause. Moyers and Bundy warned that a resumption of bombing before the New Year would result in attacks on the pause as “half-hearted.” General Maxwell Taylor also urged a longer halt as a way to show “the American public that we have left no door to peace untried.” McNamara, who spent three hours

11. *New York Times*, 27 February 1965.

12. Gibbons, *U.S. Government and Vietnam* 4:103–6. See also McGeorge Bundy Notes, 22 and 23 November 1965, Bundy Papers, LBJ Library.

talking to the president at his ranch on the evening of the 27th, apparently pressed the case for a longer pause. He and Taylor saw few, if any, negative military consequences resulting from an extended bombing halt.¹³

Johnson now agreed to begin a "peace offensive." He was skeptical that it would come to anything, but, as Rusk cabled Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon, it was a way to test and expose Communist propaganda and prepare the country for a larger war: "The prospect of large scale reinforcement in men and defense budget increases of some twenty billion for [the] next eighteen month period requires solid preparation of [the] American public. A crucial element will be clear demonstration that we have explored fully every alternative but that [the] aggressor has left us no choice." Johnson himself told Averell Harriman: "We don't have much confidence that much will come out of this but that is no reason not to try. . . . I think with your friends Fulbright, Scotty Reston, Mansfield, Arthur Krock and the *New York Times*, all these people thinking there could be peace if we were only willing to have peace, we ought to give it the old college try." But there was to be no debate, just a demonstration of administration eagerness for peace and Hanoi's unwillingness to compromise.¹⁴

Why would Johnson not allow a public argument that could have served both the war effort and the political advantage of his administration? An open discussion of the pros and cons of escalating U.S. involvement in the war would have shown Hanoi that there was substantially more resolve to defend South Vietnam than the Communists believed. In addition, a debate that underwrote an expanded war would have increased LBJ's freedom to escape from the conflict when the public lost hope of winning without substantial losses, the only way it really wanted to fight the war. Had a debate followed by escalation occurred, LBJ could have depicted the fighting as the public's choice. Moreover, once the country began to sour on the war, the president could have seized upon the mass mood to declare victory and leave, as Vermont's Republican Senator George Aiken had counseled in 1966. Johnson could have announced a policy of Vietnamization, as Richard M. Nixon later did, declaring that American forces had blunted Communist aggression and given the South Vietnamese the wherewithal to survive. Even if this proved to be a false assumption, as it did in 1975, the American public, weary of a struggle that cost more than it wanted to pay, would have been in no mood to attack a president and an administration following the public's lead.

But several things dissuaded Johnson from taking a more politically expe-

13. McGeorge Bundy memos. (2) to LBJ, 27 December 1965, National Security Files: Memos to the President; Jack Valenti to LBJ, 24 December 1965, White House Central Files: CO312; Hayes Redmon to Jake Jacobson, 23 December 1965, Moyers to LBJ, 27 December 1965, White House Central Files, Executive: PR16; Robert McNamara oral history interview, 8 January 1975, LBJ Library; Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston, 1993), 364.

14. Gibbons, *U.S. Government and Vietnam* 4:127-29.

cient course. First, it was not his personal political style to make policy by debate. Throughout his years as Senate majority leader, important business or negotiations leading to bipartisan passage of major bills was conducted behind the scenes in the inner sanctum of the Upper House rather than on its floor. Historian Paul Conkin has pointed out that as majority leader, Johnson "had little sympathy for those who wanted to air points of view, to use speeches as a vehicle of public education. Debate tended to sharpen differences or allow senators to posture for audiences back home. . . . Success required a masking of issues, not sharpening them through debate."¹⁵

Johnson's political career had been largely the product of back room discussions and private manipulations. In 1935, he had won appointment as Texas director of the National Youth Administration through pressure on the White House by Texas friends and associates. His successful race for a House seat in 1937 partly rested on secret financial contributions that allowed him to outspend five better known rivals. During his almost twelve years in the House, he made his mark on his district and in the Congress more generally by building close private ties to the White House and congressional leaders. His Senate races in 1941, 1948, and 1954 were rife with skulduggery not only by his own campaign but also by those of his opponents, especially the 1948 primary contest against Governor Coke Stevenson. Johnson's eighty-seven-vote victory with tainted ballots gave him the unflattering nickname of "Landslide Lyndon." From Johnson's perspective, the most successful politicians were also the most manipulative, Texans like Alvin Wirtz, Maury Maverick, "Pappy" O'Daniel, Sam Rayburn, and John Nance Garner and national figures like Franklin Roosevelt, Huey Long, Thomas G. Corcoran, and the Kennedy clan. In brief, Johnson's impulse to expand the war in Vietnam without public discussions calculated to build long-term national support partly grew out of developments in twentieth-century American politics in which he played a significant role.¹⁶

Johnson's personality also lent itself to unilateral action rather than open, free-wheeling debate. Johnson was an imperious character who made his way in politics by dominating everyone around him. Stories about his grandiosity and overbearing nature are legion. "I understand you were born in a log cabin," the German Chancellor Ludwig Erhart is supposed to have said during a visit to LBJ's ranch. "No, no," Johnson replied. "You have me confused with Abe Lincoln. I was born in a manger." "Don't dig it too deep," Johnson told some associates discussing his grave site. "I only expect to be in there for three days."

Johnson's political success partly rested on his ability to dominate people by the sheer force of his personality. "Never seen his equal," Eisen-

15. Paul Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon B. Johnson* (Boston, 1986), 135.

16. See Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (New York, 1991).

hower aide Bryce Harlow said, "and I've rubbed up against the greatest people this country has produced for twenty years running." Johnson's presence in the Senate, Florida Senator George Smathers recalls, was like a "great overpowering thunderstorm that consumed you as it closed around you." Meeting Johnson reminded the *Washington Post's* Ben Bradlee of going to the zoo.

You really felt as if a St. Bernard had licked your face for an hour, had pawed you all over. . . . He never just shook hands with you. One hand was shaking your hand; the other hand was always someplace else, exploring you, examining you. And of course he was a great actor, bar fucking none the greatest. He'd be feeling up Katharine Graham and bumping Meg Greenfield on the boobs. And at the same time he'd be trying to persuade you of something, sometimes something that he knew and I knew was not so, and there was just the trace of a little smile on his face. It was just a miraculous performance.¹⁷

The economist Gardner Ackley remembers a meeting in LBJ's office with Roger Blough, the chairman of U.S. Steel. Johnson wanted Blough to hold the line on steel prices. And so he

just started working him over and asking him questions and lecturing him. I have never seen a human being reduced to such a quivering lump of flesh. Roger was unable to speak at the end of that interview. LBJ just took him apart, spread him out on the rug; and when we left, Roger was just shaking his head. All that awesome power was really brought to bear! I'd just never seen anything like it. . . . But it wasn't really what he said, it was the way he just leaned over and looked at him.¹⁸

Robert Strauss, the Texas Democratic party power broker, was an intimidating figure in his own right. Yet he recalls being no match for Johnson. "Lyndon Johnson just towered over me and intimidated me terribly," Strauss said.

He's the one person who had my number all his life. Even when he was a sick old man, out of office, whenever he called, perspiration broke out on the top of my head. He was the best I ever saw. Tragic, but the best I ever saw. I remember once asking him, "Why did you cast that vote, Mr. President?" "Bob," he said, "one thing you'll learn someday is that you have to be a demagogue on a lot of little things if you want to be around to have your way on the big things." I'll never forget him saying that. A lesson in primer politics from the Master.¹⁹

17. Bryce Harlow oral history interview, LBJ Library; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York, 1968), 105, 115–16.

18. Gardner Ackley oral history interview, LBJ Library.

19. Marie Brenner, "Mr. Ambassador!: Bob Strauss Comes Home," *The New Yorker* 68 (28 December 1992): 148, 150.

As president, Johnson became even more imperious. "I'm the only President you have," he told opponents of policies he favored. He was particularly insistent on asking support for foreign and defense policies he believed essential to national security. Indeed, he could not understand how Americans could take issue with him on Vietnam. With American boys fighting and dying to shield the country from Communist advances, he believed it unpatriotic, if not treasonous, to give comfort to the enemy by publicly opposing the war. Johnson could not accept the possibility that antiwar opponents were as loyal to the United States as war advocates. He could not believe that they were in fact acting in the larger interest of the country. To his thinking, they were under the influence of Communist diplomats in the United States.

In a meeting with state governors in March 1966, Johnson declared that "our country is constantly under threat every day—Comm[unists] working every day to divide us, to destroy us. Make no mistake about the Comm[unists]," he said. "Don't kid yourself [for] a moment. It is in the highest counsels of gov[ernment]—in our society. McCarthy's methods were wrong—but the threat is greater now than in his day."²⁰

By May, the proliferation of student protests against the war, including marches, rallies, picketing, and sit-ins on university campuses, the decision of professors to deny information on students to the Selective Service without the student's permission, the tactic of civil rights leaders in trying "to drive a wedge between the poor and the rest of the country" by arguing that Vietnam meant taking money from the ghettos, and a media LBJ saw as giving one-sided "nation-wide publicity" to war opponents confirmed Johnson's belief that sinister forces were behind the push to abandon Vietnam.²¹

Historian and White House intellectual Eric Goldman remembers that by the middle of 1966 "the domestic reformer of the Great Society days had become a war chief. . . . The ebullient leader given to moments of testiness and rage was now, day after day, bitter, truculent, peevish—and suspicious of the fundamental good sense and integrity of anyone who did not endorse the Vietnam War. This Lyndon Johnson was not only depressing; at times he could be downright frightening." Goldman recalls an informal session at the White House with a cabinet member and three aides over potato chips and sodas. The mention of a liberal Senate war opponent brought a sneer to the president's face. These liberals were "crackpots," who had "just plain been taken in. . . . It's the Russians who are behind the whole thing," he declared. The FBI and the CIA "kept him informed about what was 'really

20. Meeting Notes, 12 March 1966, Office Files of the President: Valenti, LBJ Library.

21. See D. W. Ropa to Bill Moyers, 25 March 1966, National Security Files: Country: Vietnam; Hubert H. Humphrey to LBJ, 27 April and 19 May 1966, Humphrey Papers, Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota; Joe Califano to LBJ, 13 May 1966, White House Central Files, Executive: HU4; McPherson to LBJ, 18 May 1966, Office of the President Files: McPherson.

going on.’ ” He described the Russians as “in constant touch with anti-war senators. . . . These senators ate lunch and went to parties at the Soviet embassy; children of their staff people dated Russians. ‘The Russians think up things for the senators to say. I often know before they do what their speeches are going to say.’ ”²²

J. Edgar Hoover was particularly active in feeding Johnson’s suspicions. On 13 May 1966, Richard Russell participated in a two-and-a-half-hour discussion at the White House, which “mostly [focused on] Vietnam & CIA investigation. Talked to J E[dgar] H[ooover] while I was there. [He] showed me visitors to S[oviet] E[m]bassy & contacts.”²³

Since Johnson saw the war opposition as essentially un-American or the expression of what “gullible” intellectuals and journalists were hearing from Communist officials, he had every hope that the great majority of Americans would continue to back the war effort. In other words, there was no need to encourage a debate because most Americans were already convinced of the wisdom of combatting Communist expansion in Vietnam, and only the Left, with whom a majority of the country had little patience, was ready to abandon the war.

Johnson also believed that he could overcome the limited impact that dissenting antiwar sentiment was having on Americans by his manipulation of the media. “Reporters are puppets,” Johnson believed.

They simply respond to the pull of the most powerful strings. . . . Every story is always slanted to win the favor of someone who sits somewhere higher up. There is no such thing as an objective news story. There is always a private story behind the public story. And if you don’t control the strings to that private story, you’ll never get good coverage no matter how many great things you do for the masses of the people. There’s only one sure way of getting favorable stories from reporters and that is to keep their daily bread—the information, the stories, the plans, and the details they need for their work—in your own hands, so that you can give it out when and to whom you want.²⁴

Johnson set a precedent for bending the media to his purposes in the 1964 presidential campaign. The press and television, which were scared to death of the intemperate Barry Goldwater, had been highly responsive to White House pressure. In September 1964, for example, after Goldwater had attacked Johnson and Humphrey as “misfits” and Humphrey in particular as a draft dodger, Johnson aides Bill Moyers and Walter Jenkins spoke to Drew Pearson, Kay Graham, and Al Friendly at the *Washington Post*, William S. White and James Reston at the *New York Times*, and syndicated

22. Goldman, *Tragedy of LBJ*, 590–93.

23. See MGW to Russell, 13 May 1966, with Russell’s handwritten notes on the memo, Interoffice Communications, Richard Russell Papers, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

24. Doris Kearns, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, 1976), 246–47.

columnist Walter Lippmann about responding to the “degrading way the Republican campaign has opened.” Most of them promised to take Goldwater to task for his irresponsible statements. The following week, Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, persuaded syndicated columnist Sylvia Porter to attack a Goldwater tax cut plan, while Lippmann agreed to consider doing a column and the *Washington Post* prepared “a stinging editorial.”

The White House also convinced reporters covering Goldwater to supply detailed accounts of what the senator was saying off the record. In mid-September, when Cliff Carter at the Democratic National Committee gave Valenti one such report, he wrote: “The attached was written by a reporter travelling with Senator Goldwater. We’re trying to make connections so that we can always have him thusly covered.”²⁵

More important to the White House than having reporters spy on Goldwater were editorial-page endorsements and anti-Goldwater, pro-Johnson material in the news columns of the papers. Leonard Marks, a Washington attorney who had represented the Johnsons’ radio and TV stations and would become the director of the United States Information Agency in 1965, worked “to secure editorial endorsements from newspaper friends and clients.” Once papers agreed to back Johnson, a member of the DNC was assigned to keep in touch with their editors and publishers and supply them with campaign materials. The White House also closely followed “how Mr. Johnson’s speeches, utterances or releases were carried across the country. . . . We had reporters in about fifty major cities that would call in during the night and report what placement in the paper Mr. Johnson’s speech got,” a campaign aide recalls. Johnson himself, who closely followed these efforts, met with the Washington bureau chiefs of leading papers in an effort to improve his image while helping to knock down Goldwater. The objective was to “convey a picture of a President calm, concerned, busy at his Presidential business, but eager to win a decisive mandate in November.”²⁶

Johnson saw the press as essential in helping him defeat Goldwater, but he wanted a more systematic and reliable mechanism for using it and other means to win the election. To answer Johnson’s concern, the White House organized a sixteen-man committee presided over by aides Myer Feldman and Fred Dutton and including people from a number of government agencies and Clark Clifford’s Washington law firm. The committee met twice daily, preparing statements on major issues on which Goldwater had made himself vulnerable for distribution to people who could “get them into the

25. Moyers to LBJ, 5 September 1964, White House Central Files: Moyers; Heller to LBJ, 10 September 1964, and Carter to Valenti, 16 September 1964, White House Central Files, Executive: PL6-3.

26. Leonard Marks to LBJ, 18 September 1964, and Tom Finney to LBJ, 31 October 1964, White House Central Files, Executive: PL2; Clifton C. Carter oral history interview, LBJ Library; Douglas Cater to LBJ, 1 October 1964, Diary Backup, LBJ Library.

papers in the right places at the best time." They assigned one staffer to feed negative information to LBJ supporters, who would get it in the local press prior to or during Goldwater visits. They prepared rebuttals of Goldwater-Miller statements and assigned committee members to get them published. They fed hostile questions to reporters traveling with Goldwater; they wrote letters to popular columnists like Ann Landers; they made lists of columnists they knew and lobbied them regularly for articles critical of Goldwater; and they pressured mass magazines like *Look*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Parade* to attack Goldwater's views on nuclear weapons.²⁷

Against this backdrop, Johnson had every confidence that he could bring the media along on Vietnam. In August 1965, for example, when CBS broadcast a report by Morley Safer with film of a U.S. Marine using a Zippo lighter to burn a thatched hut in the village of Cam Ne, while an old peasant woman pleaded for her home, Johnson woke up CBS President Frank Stanton to complain that the network had "shat on the American flag." Johnson wanted to know why CBS would use a story by Safer, a Canadian with "a suspicious background." He also asked: "How could CBS employ a Communist like Safer, how could they be so unpatriotic as to put on enemy film like this?"

CBS executives ordered correspondent Murray Fromson back to Washington to explain the story to the White House. In a conversation with Bill Moyers, Fromson explained that Safer's nationality was irrelevant to a story that poignantly showed Vietnamese peasants fleeing huts burned by U.S. troops. Moyers, whom Fromson describes as unconvinced by his explanation, devoted himself to repairing American prestige. "I have been working the past few days on steps we can take to improve coverage of the Vietnam war—steps in Saigon and Washington," he wrote Johnson. "We will never eliminate altogether the irresponsible and prejudiced coverage of men like Peter Arnett [a New Zealander] and Morris [*sic*] Safer, men who are not Americans and do not have the basic American interest at heart, but we will try to tighten things up." "Good!" Johnson scribbled on Moyers's note.²⁸

In general, the media supported Johnson's decision to fight in Vietnam. Like most Americans at this time, they believed it in the national interest to prevent a Communist takeover in the South. But this was not enough for Johnson. He wanted to control the flow and content of the news and bend the media to his designs. Johnson refused to be passive toward media criticism. He and his principal press aides believed that "poisonous and sour" reporting seriously undermined the war effort. Johnson suspected

27. Myer Feldman to Moyers, 10 September 1964, White House Central Files, Executive: PL2.

28. Morley Safer, *Flashbacks: On Returning to Vietnam* (New York, 1990), 88–97; David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York, 1979), 488–90; Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 132; Murray Fromson interview with author, 21 August 1993; Moyers to LBJ, n.d., Handwriting File, LBJ Library.

that “subversives” had “infiltrated the press corps.” “The Viet Cong atrocities never get publicized,” he complained. “Nothing is being written or published to make you hate the Viet Cong; all that is being written is to hate us.” The White House also saw attacks on the president’s war policies as encouraging the Communists to think that America would not stay the course in Vietnam.²⁹

The media’s antagonism enraged Johnson. “We treat those [critical] columnists as whores,” he told the historian William E. Leuchtenburg in September 1965. “Anytime an editor wants to screw ’em, they’ll get down on the floor and do it for three dollars. That’s the price of [naming to Leuchtenburg two of the best-known Washington correspondents]. We don’t pay any attention to it.”³⁰

But, of course, he did, taking pains to ensure as far as possible that news out of the White House was only what he wanted it to be. Managing the news by invoking national security, planting questions at press conferences, encouraging publishers to print prowar columns, and making life as difficult as possible for unfriendly reporters became standard operating procedures.³¹

Johnson assumed that a reasonably rapid end to the war would also make a debate unnecessary. To be sure, by the end of 1966, a number of people, including McNamara, were warning against a stalemate that could last for years. In mid-October, after returning from a trip to Vietnam, McNamara told the president that he saw “no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon.” Despite some improvement in the military situation, the Communists were not about to crack. They had “adopted a strategy of keeping us busy and waiting us out (a strategy of attriting our national will).” Pacification was “a bad disappointment.” So was the air campaign, which had neither “significantly affected infiltration [n]or cracked the morale of Hanoi.”³²

Yet at the same time, there were optimistic reports that the tide was turning and that Hanoi and the Viet Cong would not be able to hold out much longer, especially if the administration managed to mute opposing sentiment in the United States, which Johnson believed was encouraging the Communists to continue fighting.

Military and civilian advisers disputed much of what McNamara said. They believed the war was going reasonably well. “By early 1967 most of my advisers and I felt confident that the tide of war was moving strongly in

29. Douglass Cater to LBJ, 14 August 1965, Handwriting File; Cater to LBJ, 5 August 1965, White House Central Files, Executive: PR18; Cabinet Room Meeting, 17 December 1965, Meeting Notes File; Harry McPherson, Jr., to LBJ, 22 September 1965, White House Central Files, Executive: ND19.

30. William E. Leuchtenburg, *American Heritage* 41 (May/June 1990): 62.

31. See Moyers to LBJ, 27 July and 1 November 1965, Office Files of the President; Valenti to LBJ, 2 August 1965, Moyers to LBJ, 7 October 1965, and Merriman Smith to Moyers, 21 October 1965, White House Central Files, Executive: PR18.

32. McNamara to LBJ, 14 October 1966, National Security Files: Country: Vietnam.

favor of the South Vietnamese and their allies and against the Communists," Johnson later said in his memoirs.³³

And most of his advisers, who, like him, felt compelled to see the bright side, to believe that somehow or other American power had to prevail over so weak an enemy, gave him words of constant encouragement about the likely results in Vietnam. "You are still dead right on all the big issues & you still know more about how to make them come out right than any man in America," Mac Bundy told him in November. "For the first time since 1961 the U.S. military in Saigon and Washington estimate a net decline in VC/NVN forces in South Viet Nam," National Security Adviser Walt W. Rostow wrote him two days later.³⁴

Rostow and Robert Komer, LBJ's pacification chief in Vietnam, sent him a series of papers in December laying out strategic guidelines for 1967. They brimmed with optimism. Despite lots of problems and "the immensity of the task," Komer was "convinced that if we can jack up our management in Washington and especially Saigon, and press the GVN a lot harder than we have, we'll be able to see daylight by the end of 1967."³⁵

No one beat the drum louder for positive developments in Vietnam than Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. "In the 'military' war, our capacity to defeat the big Communist units and destroy redoubts is so well demonstrated that I would expect a very different military situation indeed here by next year," he cabled the president in December 1966. As for the political situation, "one need not be an expert to see the difference between . . . today and that which existed in November 1963. . . . Vietnam is moving towards constitutional democracy." In a meeting with LBJ at his ranch eight days later, Lodge stated that many worries of a year ago in Vietnam had disappeared: "They no longer feared that the Viet Cong could cut the country in half," or "that regionalism backed by the Buddhists might tear the country apart. They no longer feared a Communist coup from within." As for future military developments, "The Ambassador 'expects brilliant results in 1967.'" Pentagon claims that comparative military casualties in Vietnam had increased from 2.2 to 1 in 1965 to 3.3 to 1 in 1966 made Lodge's estimate seem compelling.³⁶

Johnson's character, experience, and outlook on what to expect in Viet-

33. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York, 1971), 257-58.

34. Bundy to LBJ, 17 November 1966, Office of the President: McGeorge Bundy; Agenda for the President, 19 November 1966, National Security Files: Files of W. W. Rostow.

35. Robert Komer to LBJ, 28 November and 10 December 1966, National Security Files: Country: Vietnam; Strategic Guidelines for 1967 in Vietnam, 10 December 1966, National Security Files: Files of W. W. Rostow; Komer to LBJ, 1 December 1966, National Security Files: Files of Komer; Rostow to LBJ, 10 December 1966, with LBJ's reply, Handwriting File.

36. Lodge to LBJ, 11 December 1966, National Security Files: Memos to the President; meeting with the president, 19 December 1966, National Security Files: Files of W. W. Rostow; Comparative Military Casualties, 13 December 1966, National Security Files: Country: Vietnam; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 258.

nam made him the wrong man at the wrong time in the wrong place. By 1968, the great mandate of the 1964 election had been lost in the flames of Vietnam. And along with it, the national consensus for Cold War policies abroad and liberal social reforms at home. By some mysterious law of unintended consequences, the war in Southeast Asia inflicted the first defeat in a foreign war on the United States, destroyed the momentum for the Great Society and war on poverty, and destroyed Johnson's hopes of historical standing as a great president. Along with Woodrow Wilson, John Kennedy, and Richard Nixon, LBJ will hold a place as one of those tragic twentieth-century presidents who fell short of what his talents and wishes might have allowed him to achieve.