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Crossing the Rubicon: LBJ and Vietnam 1963-1965

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CROSSING THE RUBICON: LBJ AND VIETNAM 1963-1965

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree Of

Master of Arts

by

Rajarshi Roy

1997

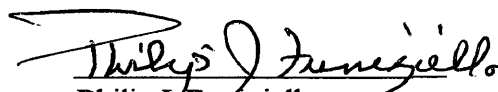
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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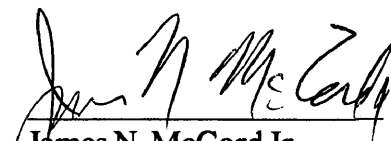

James N. McCord Jr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER ONE. LBJ, THE COLD WAR AND SOUTH VIETNAM.	4
CHAPTER TWO. LYNDON'S MEN. THE CIVILIAN AND MILITARY ADVISERS TO THE PRESIDENT.	35
CONCLUSION	92
APPENDIX	98
BIBLIOGRAPHY	99

PREFACE

We do not seek the destruction of any government nor do we covet a foot of territory...but we insist and we will always insist that the people of South Vietnam shall have the right or the choice to shape their own destiny...and they shall not have any government imposed upon them by force and terror as long as we can prevent it...we did not choose to be guardians at the gate, but there is nobody else.¹

Lyndon Johnson speaking at a White House press conference on July 28 1965.

July 1965 was a troubling month for Lyndon Baines Johnson. The President's time was increasingly being taken up by disturbing events in South Vietnam. LBJ was committed to defending this nascent country against a Communist insurgency which he believed was directed by the insidious North Vietnamese and the Chinese Communists. Every day, fresh news of disasters on the South Vietnamese side would be patched through to the White House Situation Room or would flash across the teleprinters installed in the Oval Office. It was becoming clear that South Vietnam was on the brink of collapse. Lyndon Johnson grew restless. He was now aware that he would have to send large numbers of US troops, the flower of American youth, into battle. After conferring with his trusted advisers and much personal agonising, the President had decided that he would allow US ground troops to be sent to the region to deny the Communists victory. On July 28 1965 he summoned the White House

¹ Public Papers of the Presidents. Lyndon B. Johnson. 1965 (Washington, 1966)p.388 President's Press Conference of July 28 1965

press corps and announced that he would not renege on his country's commitment to the freedom of South Vietnam. The US Commander, William C. Westmoreland, who had requested US troops to bolster the South Vietnamese would receive an extra fifty thousand troops immediately.(thus taking the total number of Americans serving in Vietnam to 125,000) But the President did not share with the press or the country exactly how many troops he was prepared to send altogether to Vietnam. He ambiguously added that more troops would be sent if needed. By failing to place limits on the US role in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson had unknowingly made an open-ended commitment to Vietnam which would lead to the presence of half a million men in South Vietnam by 1968, and would make Johnson one of the most unpopular Presidents in American history. In March of 1968, exhausted by the burdens of the Vietnam war, Johnson announced to a deeply divided nation that he would not seek re-election that November.

The aim of this thesis is to establish the motives for the President's decision to expand the war in South Vietnam which ultimately destroyed his career, and tore his country apart. This paper will approach this topic thematically. It will examine the role of ideology and beliefs in the decision-making process, and how far it contributed to Johnson's decision to escalate the war in 1965. It will also consider the the advice rendered to the President by his advisers, and how the relationship between the President and his main advisers influenced the way in which he viewed their advice. Furthermore, this thesis will explore the impact of other influences on the formulation of US policy in Vietnam. The role of the US armed forces, the US ambassador and outsiders such as Senator Mike Mansfield and Clark Clifford played in the decision will all be discussed here. This piece of work will also attempt to discover how far

domestic politics, and in particular Johnson's own deep-rooted commitment to domestic social reform, influenced his handling of the Vietnam war. The thesis will also seek to establish how far international politics shaped the course of action pursued by the President. This topic has obviously been covered by other historians, and this paper will take account of some of the debates provoked by authors on this topic. In particular it will address the debate on the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, on the President's failure to inform the American people that they were at war in Vietnam, and Johnson's treatment of his principal advisers. Finally a brief conclusion will collate these themes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Ed Crapol for his support, insightful comments and advice. His suggestions have undoubtedly improved the quality of this piece of work. I wish to express my thanks to the two readers of this thesis, Dr. Philip Funigiello and Dr. Jim McCord for their ideas and recommendations. I also wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Jim Bill for allowing me to read his then unpublished biography of George Ball, and for giving up his time to talk with me about Ball. My roommates, Todd Pfannestiel and Eric Gee also read through portions of this thesis, and made valuable criticisms and suggestions. I would like to acknowledge my classmates who have made this year abroad for me a more enriching and enjoyable experience. I should also like to pay tribute to my friend and former adviser at the University of Exeter in England, Dr. Joseph Smith. Joe has given me unstinting support throughout my brief academic career, and has shaped my understanding of US foreign policy. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my parents who have been just magnificent to me all my life, and without whose support I could not have advanced this far. It is to them that this thesis is dedicated.

Rajarshi Roy
Williamsburg, May 1997

ABSTRACT

In July 1965 President Lyndon Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam by dispatching large numbers of US troops to the country. His commitment of US troops drew the United States deeper into the quagmire of South Vietnam and created deep discontent and division at home.

The aim of this thesis was to establish the reasons for President Johnson's decision to initially wage an aerial campaign against the North Vietnamese, and later to massively increase the number of US ground forces in South Vietnam in July 1965.

This thesis has concluded that the anti-Communist ideology of the President and his advisers contributed to the decision to intervene in Vietnam. The inability of the South Vietnamese to effectively wage war against the Communist Viet Cong and North Vietnamese caused the President to believe that if he failed to intervene, Vietnam and Southeast Asia would be lost to the Communists. Furthermore, almost all of the President's advisers recommended that he launch an aerial campaign against the North Vietnamese, and send US ground forces to the region. Their advice had a massive impact on a President who was inexperienced and unsure of himself in foreign policy. Finally, the belief of the President that the United States' global reputation would be seriously damaged by a failure to fight the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam made it extremely difficult for him to withdraw from Vietnam.

**CROSSING THE RUBICON: LBJ AND
VIETNAM 1963-1965**

INTRODUCTION

I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.

Lyndon Baines Johnson speaking shortly after his accession to the Presidency in 1963.

President Lyndon Baines Johnson asserted that the fear of an international Communist conspiracy which prevailed within his administration, in combination with the collapse of the South Vietnam government during the period 1964-1965 left him with little option but to escalate the war in Vietnam. His opponents contended that LBJ was the President who duped the American Congress and the public into giving him a blank cheque for the war he so desperately wanted. In other words, international Communism was little more than a convenient pretext for the massive US intervention in Vietnam in 1965. This thesis will argue that the fear of international Communism did prevail within the administration, and caused the President and his advisers to view the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam with considerable concern. But this concern on its own could not prompt the decision to commit US ground forces to the region. The growing inability of the South Vietnamese government to effectively deal with the Vietcong exacerbated the feeling of anxiety in Washington; consequently Johnson decided to bomb North Vietnam and to send troops to the South to bolster the ailing South Vietnamese forces. There was no pre-planned well-

organised scheme within the administration to enter the war. The Gulf of Tonkin incident and the subsequent resolution rammed through Congress by the administration has been seen by Johnson's enemies as evidence of a plot to drag the United States into a bloody war. This paper will attempt to show that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was an isolated one and was not part of some scheme to enter the war in Vietnam. Moreover, this study will contend that the Johnson administration escalated the conflict to force the North Vietnamese to enter negotiations. The President's fears of the international repercussions of a withdrawal from Vietnam also played a significant role in his decision to commit US troops to the region. Furthermore, almost all of Johnson's advisers recommended escalating the war. Their advice had a massive impact on the President because he respected and trusted the men he had inherited from President Kennedy. Ultimately, Lyndon Johnson took the momentous decision to send troops because of his beliefs and the circumstances in Vietnam in 1965; if he did not, his worst fears of Communist China and North Vietnam spreading their revolution throughout the Far East would be realised.

CHAPTER ONE. LBJ, THE COLD WAR AND SOUTH VIETNAM

The Significance of Cold War Ideology

Lyndon Baines Johnson took the oath of office at a time when Cold War ideology was still a central tenet of US foreign policy makers and politicians. From 1947 onwards US policy makers had become firmly convinced of the existence of an international Communist conspiracy to achieve world hegemony which they believed ultimately imperilled the security of the United States. Consequently Communist agitators were seen by successive US governments as initially tools of the Soviet Union and later Communist China. National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC 68) drafted in 1950 represented these opinions. NSC 68 also contended that the United States must meet the Communist threat with force. While Lyndon Johnson was no diplomat or expert in international affairs, there is little doubt that he subscribed to the prevailing opinions in foreign policy. As a young Congressman he had witnessed Soviet aggression in Czechoslovakia and Poland. As a Senator he had seen China be 'lost' to the Communists, and watched President Eisenhower articulate the domino theory. He had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Aid to Europe, and had been an advocate of a bi-partisan foreign policy.² Johnson also belonged to the generation which was heavily critical of the appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain in

² this was the belief in the late 1940 and 1950s that foreign policy was above politics, and that both parties should not try to make political capital by attacking the incumbent President over his conduct of foreign policy.

the 1930s. For this generation, the Soviet Union and Communist China could not be appeased in the way Hitler had been at Munich in 1938. In the 1940s as a Congressman, LBJ had drawn the comparison between the two situations. All of the men who surrounded Johnson were of the same mentality. Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy, Bill Bundy and Maxwell Taylor shared a similar outlook in foreign policy. McNamara later said "I cannot overstate the impact our generation's experiences had on...us."³ Consequently when they were faced with a Communist insurgency in South Vietnam they viewed it as being part of a larger conspiracy to subvert the region.

Admittedly the global situation had changed considerably from the 1940s. In the late 1950s Eisenhower and Khrushchev had eased tensions in US-Soviet relations, and in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile crisis, a new closer relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States had been forged. But the fears and ideas of the 1940s still remained prevalent in the 1960s. The President himself said "in the 1930s we made our fate ...by what we failed to do..and there must just be no such failure in the 1960s."⁴ Furthermore, by the 1960s, the President and his advisers were obsessed by the threat posed by the Communist Chinese. They had become convinced that the Chinese were the new enemy seeking to extend their doctrine to the Southeast Asian region. Neither the President nor his advisers bothered to remember that China had invaded Vietnam in the past, and that the Vietnamese did not look upon their neighbours with any affection. The events in the region in the 1960s appeared to be

3 R. McNamara, In Retrospect The Tragedy and the Lessons of Vietnam (New York, Random House 1995) p.195
4 The Pentagon Papers. The Defence Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam Vol III (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p. 730 Speech by LBJ April 17 1965

far more compelling evidence of a Communist plot to subvert the region. Laos which was technically a neutral country according to the Geneva Accords of 1962 was being infiltrated by the Communists, Malaya was the scene of a Communist guerilla uprising against the British, and Indonesia under Sukarno appeared to be drifting ever closer towards Communist China.

For Lyndon Johnson and his advisers, the activities of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam were part of an international conspiracy to subvert not just South Vietnam, but also the entire South East region. In his first pronouncement on the situation in Vietnam on November 26 1963, in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273, the President referred to the "externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy," to destroy South Vietnam.⁵ Secretary of State Dean Rusk subsequently wrote in a memo that "the peace and security of South East Asia are seriously threatened by a systematic and deliberate campaign of Communist aggression against the nations and peoples of that area." He concluded by noting that, the loss of the any nation in South East Asia "would ..pose a direct threat to the security of the United States."⁶ The domino theory articulated back in 1954 by President Eisenhower which argued that the loss of one state to Communism would lead to the loss of neighbouring states, was still a deep rooted belief of foreign policy makers over a decade later. In an extreme version of this theory, the director of the Policy Planning Staff, Walt Rostow predicted that, the loss of Vietnam would have serious consequences. He argued that "Thailand would no longer rely on US backing and probably Burma would go to the Communists..."⁷

5 Declassified Documents Reference System (Hereafter Declassified Documents)National Security Memorandum NSAM 273 November 26 1963

6 Declassified Documents. Department of State (Hereafter DOS) . Memo by Dean Rusk, June 11 1964

7 ibid. Letter from Rostow to Dean Rusk, February 13 1964

Such pessimistic declarations worried the President and caused him to support continuation of aid; in National Security Action Memorandum 273, he declared that it was "the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and the government to win their contest..."⁸ In early December, he informed Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara that not enough attention was being paid to the pressing problem in South Vietnam, and that he should pay a visit to the region. But while LBJ had committed himself to assisting the South Vietnamese, he was not remotely willing to contemplate the dispatch of US troops at this time; in NSAM 273 he reaffirmed "the objective of the United States with respect to the withdrawal of US military personnel." Johnson was still receiving overly optimistic assessments of the situation from the US commander Paul Harkins who reported that the US presence was working and that the troops could leave by the end of 1965.

Events in South Vietnam soon began to cause alarms within the administration. Lyndon Johnson's inheritance from his predecessor had not been a good one. South Vietnam was a former French colony with no tradition of democratic government, and was racked with factionalism, conspiracies and coups. After the withdrawal of the French from Indochina in 1954, Vietnam had been divided into two, with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh controlling the north, and the South ruled by the US backed despot Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem's repressive tactics had effectively stifled this factionalism and political infighting. When the US strong man, Ngo Dinh Diem was removed from power and assassinated by the Vietnamese military in November 1963 just weeks before Johnson's accession to the Presidency, political

⁸ Declassified Documents. National Security Action Memorandum NSAM 273 November 26 1963

instability had markedly increased. The new President had not approved of the US acquiescence in the coup against Diem. Diem had represented the best hope for a stable government in LBJ's mind. And Johnson believed that a stable government was essential to the success of the South Vietnamese in their battle against the Viet Cong. In his typically earthy manner, he remarked that, he was "tired of this coup shit."⁹ For Johnson, a stable government was one which could keep order, represent the disparate factions and arouse a degree of popular support.¹⁰ Consequently, the new military junta which had replaced Diem and was headed by General Duong Van Minh was viewed in a sceptical light on account of its inability to rally any popular support. In his report on his trip to Vietnam in December 1963, Defense Secretary McNamara was far from positive in his assessment of the new regime. In his report addressed to the President in December 1963 McNamara wrote that "the new government is the greatest source of concern. It is indecisive and drifting."¹¹

Some historians have contended that the Johnson administration actually helped to contribute to the instability by engineering a coup against Minh because of his willingness to accept the neutralisation of South Vietnam, and negotiate with the Viet Cong.¹² George Kahin in particular suggests that Minh was willing to allow the NLF (the political wing of the Viet Cong) to participate in an open election, and to ask all foreign troops to leave the region. The United States found this unacceptable, were openly hostile towards the new government

⁹ PBS Documentary, *Vietnam* (1983)

¹⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States Vietnam, 1964* (hereafter FRUS) (Washington, US Government Printing Office, 1992) Record of meeting December 1 1964

¹¹ *The Pentagon Papers Vol III* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) Memo by Secretary McNamara 16 March 1964 p.504

¹² see G. Kahin, *Intervention. How America became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1986) pp.190-202 or M. B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York, Harper and Row, 1991) pp.106-107

and encouraged the Vietnamese military to overthrow Minh.¹³ Minh however, appeared to want to work with the United States. After meeting Minh Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge reported that the new government expressed its desire to work with the US government.¹⁴ It also seems as if Minh was strongly opposed to any suggestions of neutralisation of his country and was actually worried that the United States might actually favour such a course of action. When the New York Times advocated the neutralisation of Vietnam, Generals Minh, Don and Kim requested a meeting with Ambassador Cabot Lodge to express their fears. Lodge cabled the Secretary of State informing him that the Vietnamese leaders "pointed to the effect of such articles on morale of Vietnamese population."¹⁵ Minh's hostility to a neutral Vietnam is further revealed in a report from McNamara which stated "possible neutralisation is strongly opposed by Minh, and our attitude is somewhat suspect because of editorials by the New York Times...we reassured them as strongly as possible on this."¹⁶ It is not clear either if Ambassador Cabot Lodge was hostile to the new government. When General Khanh, the leader of the coup tried to convince the Ambassador that leading generals in Minh's government were in favour of neutralisation, Lodge was not persuaded. He stated that they were patriots and that General Khanh's comments went against his deepest instincts.¹⁷ It was only well after the coup that Lodge accepted Khanh's belief that the government had favoured neutralisation.

11 G. Kahin, Intervention. How America became Involved In Vietnam (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1986)p.201

14 Declassified Documents. Department of State Cable from Ambassador Lodge to Secretary Rusk November 30 1963

15 ibid. Cable from Ambassador Lodge to Secretary Rusk December 1963

16 The Pentagon Papers Boston, Beacon Press, 1971 p.497 Report by Secretary McNamara 21 December 1963

17 ibid. p.38 Cable from Lodge to Secretary Rusk

The ambitious General Nguyen Khanh overthrew Minh in January 1964. But the political instability in South Vietnam did not abate. The squabbling and factionalism within the new administration of Nguyen Khanh worried the Johnson administration; as long as the South Vietnamese failed to establish a government which had any support, the Viet Cong would continue to make inroads and there would be no desire to resist them. The United States government's concern with the situation in South Vietnam reflected in a resolution drawn up by Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Bill Bundy asking Congress to give the administration power to strike North Vietnam in case the situation worsened in the South. In order to further help the South Vietnamese Johnson now authorised the use of covert operations (codenamed OPLAN 34A)¹⁸; in a telegram to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, the President declared that Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara were in the process of drawing up plans for pressure against North Vietnam.¹⁹

While the President may well have authorised members of his administration to draw up plans which considered the possible use of force in Vietnam, he showed little interest in widening the war at this point. These draft resolutions and papers were not in any way accepted government policy. Rather, they were contingency plans drawn up in the event of the collapse of South Vietnam. Johnson made his feelings clear in telegram to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that year where he remarked that "the essential task is to strengthen the Southern base...our planning for action against NVN is on a contingency basis..." (emphasis

18 These covert operations included acts of sabotage and raids carried out by the South Vietnamese

19 Declassified Documents DOS Telegram from LBJ to Lodge Feb 21 1964

added)²⁰ Nor were any other members of the administration enthusiastic about the possibility of force. In a memo on the subject, NSC adviser McGeorge Bundy wrote that overt measures should not be considered until covert operations had been tried.²¹ Even the ruthless McNamara who would later be called a "hardliner" on Vietnam by McGeorge Bundy, argued in a memorandum that US troops should not be introduced. He contended that a US military presence would show that the South Vietnamese were not in control of the insurgency. He noted that "The possible advantages of such action would be far outweighed by its psychological impact. It would cut across the picture of the Vietnamese winning the war."²² The United States was still in Vietnam in an advisory capacity. Furthermore it appears as though the administration was still hoping to withdraw by the end of 1965. In the same memorandum, the Defence Secretary suggested that "substantial reductions in personnel should be possible before the end of 1965."²³ Johnson and his officials continued to demand that Khanh clean up the corruption in the South, and establish a viable popular government before stronger action could be taken. Johnson and his advisers believed that taking overt measures would be too risky whilst the South was not strong enough to withstand any possible retaliation from the North.²⁴

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident: A step on the road to escalation ?

On August 2 1964, the USS Maddox on an intelligence (Desoto) patrol reported that

20 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press 1971) p.511 Telegram from LBJ to Lodge 20 March 1964

21 Declassified Documents DOS Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to LBJ 16 March 1964

22 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p.509 memo by Secretary McNamara, 16 March 1964

23 *ibid.* memo by Secretary McNamara, 16 march 1964 p. 509

24 L. B. Johnson, The Vantage Point. Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969 (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) p. 167

it had been the subject of an attack by North Vietnamese boats. Two days later both the USS Maddox and C. Turner Joy filed a report of another attack by North Vietnamese boats. The response of Lyndon Johnson and his administration has been the subject of debate amongst journalists and historians for the past three decades. Johnson and his main advisers Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara have been accused of provoking the incident and of lying to Congress about the events in the Gulf in order to secure a resolution which would allow the President to declare war. Historians such as Marilyn B. Young and politicians such as Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Arkansas) have suggested that the administration simply fabricated the second attack, and that Defense Secretary McNamara deceived Congress, when he pointedly referred to the "deliberate and unprovoked attack" of the North Vietnamese, and when he later stated to Congress that the Maddox and Turner Joy had in fact been the subject of an attack on August 4th 1964.²⁵

The actions of the administration were not part of a grand scheme to escalate the war, and were in fact a specific response to the events in the Tonkin Gulf. The Johnson Administration had not sent the USS Maddox into the Tonkin Gulf to provoke an incident. The USS Maddox was not part of the covert activities (OPLAN 34A) being conducted by the CIA and the South Vietnamese. It was on a routine intelligence gathering patrol. Besides, Lyndon Johnson was not seeking an excuse to escalate the war. The situation in South Vietnam was not so desperate that force was needed. The Assistant Secretary of State for Far

²⁵ Joint Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Committee on Armed Services. United States Senate. A Joint Resolution to Promote the Maintenance of International Peace and Security in Southeast Asia August 6 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1966) p.22

Eastern Affairs Bill Bundy later admitted in a radio interview that the incident did not fit with the plans of the administration.²⁶ When Nguyen Khanh had suggested taking the war North, the President had vetoed such an idea immediately. Even more importantly, LBJ was in the midst of the Presidential election campaign, where he sought to portray himself as a man of moderation in contrast to the bellicose Republican Barry Goldwater. Launching a war would almost certainly have shattered this image instantly.

Indeed the President's reluctance to initiate a war can be borne out by the course pursued by the administration; no action was taken in response to the first attack on the USS Maddox. It was certainly not the most popular decision. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor in Saigon fired off a cable condemning the President for his inaction, warning him that his failure would send a signal to the Communists that "we are prepared to accept regular...harassment in international waters" and that it would "be construed...as an indication that the US flinches from direct confrontation with the North Vietnamese."²⁷ In his memoirs, Taylor recalled that he was surprised by "the failure of the administration to retaliate immediately after the first attack."²⁸ And when the President did finally agree to respond to the second attack, he waited for official confirmation that such an attack had occurred; Defense Secretary McNamara contacted Admiral Sharp, the Commander of the Pacific forces,(CINCPAC) and ordered him to confirm the attack. The President also dispatched his chief lieutenants Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara to Capitol Hill to secure Congressional approval for his action.

26 M. Charlton, and A. Moncrieff, Many Reasons Why: American Involvement in Vietnam (New York, Hill and Wang, 1978)p.117

27 FRUS Vietnam 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1992) p.593 Telegram from Taylor to State Department August 3 1964

28 M. Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares (New York, W. W. Norton,1972) p.319

Years later, one of the pilots providing air cover to the USS Maddox claimed that there was no second attack. Furthermore, at the time, the captain of the ship, Commodore Herrick, had radioed in a message warning that the initial report of an attack could possibly be erroneous. Johnson later on conceded to Under Secretary of State George Ball that it may have been possible that the ships could have been "shooting at flying fish." The most recent historian of the Gulf of Tonkin incident has concluded that stormy weather conditions had caused radar operators on the USS Maddox to believe that enemy vessels were preparing to attack. He concludes that there were no North Vietnamese vessels in the area at this time.²⁹

What is more important is that at the time, the President and his Defense Secretary had ample reason for believing that such an attack had occurred. Firstly, Commodore Herrick dispatched a message exactly one hour after his initial warning declaring that he was convinced that there had indeed been an ambush. In addition, the administration had intercepted a North Vietnamese message which indicated that North Vietnamese ships had been ordered to attack a US ship. In the fevered atmosphere in Washington, this message appeared to be proof of an attack.³⁰ Even then, McNamara refused to agree to strikes until he was certain that there had been an attack. He pointedly told Admiral Sharp (CINCPAC) that, "we don't want to do it [launch the retaliatory strike] until we are damned sure about what happened."³¹ Johnson, according to the evidence, was not interested in escalating the

29 E. Moise, Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996)p.108

30 M. Charlton, and A. Moncrieff, Many Reasons Why: American Involvement in Vietnam (New York, Hill and Wang, 1978)p.117

31 R. McNamara, In Retrospect (New York, Random House, 1995)p.134

conflict. One memo from the director of the Policy Planning Staff Walt Rostow referred to the "evident desire of President Johnson to limit the ...conflict."³² Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs in the Defense Department, John McNaughton noted that the United States had attacked only patrol craft and installations.³³ And Maxwell Taylor dispatched a cable from Saigon noting that the retaliation was " in effect an isolated US-DRV incident."³⁴ Besides, the President had no desire to widen the war; as well as being preoccupied with the election, he was also fearful at this time that the response he had ordered would provoke Chinese intervention. The President went on television to speak about the US attack, not to inform the American people, but to inform the Chinese that this was not attack on them or an act of war. ³⁵

Indeed, the whole incident had shaken the President and made him less willing to become involved in this conflict. Just over a month later, another US ship dispatched a report to Washington that it might have been attacked by North Vietnamese vessels. In the cabinet room, Johnson polled the opinions of his advisers. Rusk and McNamara were in a particularly self righteous mood, and argued that this event deserved a retaliatory response. Johnson listened intently, before speaking. He was not convinced, he told them, that there had been an attack. The evidence appeared flimsy to him. He did not believe that there had even been a hostile vessel in the region. The President then ruled out any action. ³⁶

32 Declassified Documents DOS Memo by Walt Rostow 5 August 1964

33 *ibid.* Memo by John McNaughton 7 August 196

34 *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p. 523

35 L. B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point. Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York, Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971) p.117

36 Declassified Documents. *White House File* Memo of meeting by McGeorge Bundy September 16 1964

Some authors have argued that Johnson misled Congress into granting him such sweeping powers by the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Under this resolution, the President was authorised by Congress to take any measure to repel any attacks on US forces and any further aggression.³⁷ But Congress seems to have been aware of the power it was granting the President. When Senator Cooper asked J. William Fulbright if the Committee was effectively giving the President the right to go to war by their resolution, Senator Fulbright, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, (who would later become one of LBJ's main opponents over Vietnam) replied in the affirmative.³⁸ And when Senator Gaylord Nelson suggested adding an amendment preventing the President from going to war, Fulbright dismissed it.³⁹

Other historians such as George Herring have suggested that the administration had sought a Congressional resolution to demonstrate its resolve and commitment to the North Vietnamese. This argument is persuasive. It does appear as though the President hoped that the threat of even the possible use of force might convince the North Vietnamese to desist from aiding and supporting the Viet Cong. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, John McNaughton instructed the US embassy in Canada to ask the Canadian intermediary between the North Vietnam and the United States, J. Blair Seaborn to emphasise to Pham Van Dong the North Vietnamese Premier, that the "US Congressional resolution was passed with near unanimity reaffirming...the determination of the US government...to

37 Senate Hearing (Washington, US GPO, 1966) p.1

38 R. McNamara quoting Congressional Record vol 110 pp.18399-471 in In Retrospect (New York, Random House, 1995)p.137

39 M. Young, The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990 (New York, Harper and Row, 1991) p. 122

continue to oppose firmly DRV efforts to subvert and conquer South Vietnam."⁴⁰

Even though he was concerned with his election campaign, Johnson was still troubled by the inability of the South Vietnamese to achieve his demand of a stable government. His fears were reflected in his decision to set up a Working Group on the Vietnam war to consider the course which should be followed by the United States. The Working Group seemed to be of the opinion that US action should stepped up, mainly to instil some resolve into their weak Southern Vietnamese allies. The group came up with three possible courses of action. The United States could either continue with their present policy, (Option A) begin an series of immediate overt military measures against the North (Option B), or follow a course of gradual escalation (Option C). Negotiations with the North Vietnamese were noticeably not one of the options. Under their recommendation the US would launch airstrikes against the infiltration routes of the North Vietnamese from Laos, followed by a sustained bombing campaign against the North.⁴¹ The administration hoped that this action would bolster the struggling ARVN; Assistant Defense Secretary John McNaughton informed the President that "action is to some extent a substitute for strengthening the government of South Vietnam."⁴²

But Johnson still remained committed to his principle that the South must establish stability before the United States considered increasing their aid: whilst he acquiesced in the proposal to bomb infiltration routes in Laos (called Operation Barrel Roll), he still refused to

40 The Pentagon Papers (Boston 1971) Telegram from McNaughton to US embassy in Ottawa, 8 August 1964
41B. Van De Mark, Into the Quagmire. Lyndon Johnson and the decision to escalate the Vietnam War (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991)pp.26-28
42 *ibid.* p.34

agree to any widescale bombing campaign. For the President, there seemed little point in launching an attack if the South could not repel a possible retaliation from the North. Likening South Vietnam to a sick person, he stated that he was hesitant to sock neighbour if fever [is] 104. Want to get well first."⁴³ The South would have to agree to his demands. At a particularly fractious meeting with Ambassador Taylor on December 1st 1964, he declared "they do it [establish a workable government]... even if it takes all fifty states and Rockefeller's money. They do it or else."⁴⁴ The President bluntly informed Ambassador Taylor he would be given one last chance to help create some order in the chaos of South Vietnam.

But Taylor faced an uphill task; on December 7th 1964 the military intervened overthrowing the civilian government of Huong. Taylor's concerns regarding the implications of this constant political infighting manifested itself in the haranguing which he gave to the Vietnamese military later that day. Some members of the administration now recognised that the United States must give some help because the South Vietnamese seemed incapable of dealing with the Communist threat on their own. This sentiment was reflected in a cable from Under Secretary of State George Ball to the American embassy in London which emphasised that the administration was "deeply concerned about the fragility [of the] internal GVN." Ball continued "[it]requires some additional elements that would tend to lift South Vietnamese morale."⁴⁵

43 FRUS Vietnam, 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.966 Memo of meeting December 1st 1964 p. 966

44 ibid.p.966 Memo of Meeting December 1st 1964

45 Declassified Documents. DOS Telegram from George Ball to US embassy in London December 4 1964

Escalating the War to Save the South

Clearly members of Johnson's inner circle began to believe that it was perhaps futile to keep asking the South Vietnamese to produce a viable government. McGeorge Bundy now remarked "we wonder whether this requirement is realistic or necessary."⁴⁶ Worse was yet to come. In early January, two of the supposedly elite ARVIN regiments were decimated by the Viet Cong. According to McNamara, this heavy defeat caused the administration to believe South Vietnam might be perilously close to collapse and that the United States must take some action to stave off this defeat.⁴⁷ Ambassador Taylor now cabled Washington from Saigon stating "we are going to have help to give Saigon more stability."⁴⁸ Even Johnson now seems to have been convinced that the only way to help Saigon was to attack the north. He now stated "stable government or no stable government, we'll move strongly."⁴⁹

Consequently the widescale aerial campaign which had been proposed back in November 1964 now began to be viewed seriously as a means of supporting the inept South Vietnamese. Ironically the demand that the South establish stability, which had once been a barrier to action, had now become the justification for it. In January 1965, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, Bill Bundy argued that such a policy might help to improve the situation in South Vietnam.⁵⁰ On March 2 1965 Operation Rolling Thunder began. Although the airstrikes were launched ostensibly in response to North Vietnamese attacks on US bases

46 B. Van Denmark, Into the Quagmire (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 59

47 R. McNamara, In Retrospect (New York, Random House, 1995) p. 166

48 B. Van Denmark, Into the Quagmire (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 55

49 *ibid.* p. 59

50 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p. 686 memo from Bill Bundy to Robert McNamara January 6 1965

such as the bombing of US barracks at Pleiku in February of 1965, it seems that this was a convenient pretext used by the administration to begin an aerial campaign to prop up the South. McGeorge Bundy, Johnson's NSC adviser later compared Pleiku to a streetcar which the administration had climbed aboard.⁵¹ In a paper on the bombing campaign, Bundy was more even more explicit about using the attacks at Pleiku as the reason for beginning the campaign. In a memorandum on Operation Rolling Thunder in early February, he stated that the attacks "have created an ideal opportunity for the prompt development of sustained reprisals."⁵²

Operation Rolling Thunder, however, was not the first step on the road to increasing US ground forces in the region. There was no certainly no agreement within the administration at this point on the possibility of sending American troops to Vietnam; when the President asked Ambassador Taylor for his opinion on the introduction of American forces, the former general who had championed the flexible response theory⁵³ was vehemently opposed to such an idea. According to Taylor, sending US troops would encourage an already incompetent and ineffective army to withdraw even further and simply allow their American ally to take up the burden; that US troops "might lead the South Vietnamese to slacken their efforts."⁵⁴

The approval of the aerial campaign had, however, now made it more difficult for the

51 D. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, Random House, 1972)p.533

52 *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston,Beacon Press, 1971) p.690 Memo by McGeorge Bundy 7 February 1965

53 After retiring as Army Chief of Staff, in a book entitled *The Uncertain Trumpet*, Maxwell Taylor openly criticised the defence policy of the Eisenhower administration with its emphasis on nuclear weapons and 'massive retaliation'. Taylor argued that the United States had to be prepared to fight local conventional wars, not unlike the situation in Vietnam.

54 M. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York,W. W. Norton 1972) p. 333

President to resist being drawn further into the conflict. If planes were to be sent to the region, troops would be needed to protect them and it would be difficult to prevent them from being involved in offensive operations. Almost inevitably, LBJ received a request from William Westmoreland, the US commander in Vietnam, asking that troops be sent to secure the US airbase at Da Nang.⁵⁵ In his memoir, Clark Clifford, Johnson's erstwhile friend, wrote that the military failed to inform the President that troops would be needed to protect the airbases.⁵⁶ Whilst the military did remain conspicuously silent, the President could have shown a little more foresight when he approved the bombing campaign. Robert McNamara later admitted that the administration should have considered the longer term consequences of the decision to bomb the north.⁵⁷ It would be easy to conclude that LBJ knew well in advance that these troops would be used in combat, and that this was part of an elaborate scheme to stealthily secure America's entry to the war in Vietnam. However, it does seem as though the President genuinely believed that the troops he was sending would not be involved in the fighting. Secretary of State Dean Rusk dispatched a telegram to the embassy in Saigon stating that the mission of the soldiers was to "provide security for the Da Nang airfield...this is [a] deployment for a limited purpose."⁵⁸

Escalating the war to break the North

The President seems to have been swayed by the idea that an aerial campaign would

55 FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p. 351 Telegram from Westmoreland to Admiral Sharp February 23 1965

56 C. Clifford, *Counsel to the President. A Memoir* (New York, Random House, 1991) p. 406

57 R. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York, Random House, 1995) p. 175

58 FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p. 376 Telegram from Rusk to Taylor February 26 1965

convince the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table. The North had been willing to engage in negotiations, but on terms which the United States found unpalatable. These included the presence of the National Liberation Front(the political wing of the Viet Cong) in the new government. The United States wanted to be able to negotiate on more favourable terms. Robert McNamara urged his chief to be willing to talk with the North at any time, but importantly "always on our own terms."⁵⁹ The US sought the establishment of a free and independent South Vietnam with no Communist influence. Yet, up until 1964 the administration had no bargaining counter and no means of convincing the North Vietnamese that they should accept the proposals of the United States. In an Executive Committee Meeting in November 1964 "there was a consensus that any negotiating outcome under Option A [staying in Vietnam in an advisory capacity without any pressure on the North] ...was likely to be worse than under Option B [immediate pressure] or Option C [gradual pressure]"⁶⁰ Bill Bundy noted in a memorandum in early January 1965 that "under existing circumstances ..we could not expect to get an outcome that would really secure an independent SVN."⁶¹ Although a widescale aerial campaign was primarily seen by the President as a means of bolstering America's weak South Vietnamese allies, bombing might persuade the North to agree to the terms of the United States. It could be used in a carrot and stick fashion; negotiations in return for a cessation of the bombing. As Maxwell Taylor later recalled, "the sword must appear to be inescapable to produce a change in the enemy's

59 R. McNamara, In Retrospect (New York,Random House, 1995) p. 181

60 Declassified Documents. DOS Memo of Executive Committee Meeting November 25 1964

61 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p. 686 Memo by Bill Bundy to Robert McNamara January 6 1965

conduct."⁶² LBJ clearly hoped that a bombing campaign might help to actually prevent the conflict in South Vietnam from being prolonged.

The Collapse of South Vietnam

By March of 1965 Johnson was clearly beginning to consider the idea of sending more US troops; in the top-secret NSAM 328, he authorised the use of US marines already in Vietnam for active combat if deemed necessary by the Secretary of Defence.⁶³ Equally, it is difficult to establish whether the President was now genuinely committed to sending troops to Vietnam. The following month, at Johns Hopkins University he appealed to North Vietnam to come to the negotiating table and promised large quantities of aid for the region. Nor did he appear to be particularly pleased about the direction in which US foreign policy was heading. In April 1965, he lashed out angrily against the military and their recommendations. "Bomb, bomb, bomb that's all you know," he is reputed to have said to the army chief of staff Harold K. Johnson.⁶⁴ In early May he suspended the bombing of North Vietnam in the hope that it might persuade the North Vietnamese to enter negotiations. What these events tend to suggest is that while Johnson was by now considering escalation, he still hoped to avoid sending more troops.

Events in South Vietnam in late May and early June of 1965 hardened the president's attitude towards Vietnam. The situation there was now desperate; nowhere was this more evident than at Ba Gia where on May 30 1965, the Viet Cong routed a bedraggled and

⁶² M. Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares (New York, W.W. Norton, 1972) p. 357

⁶³ Declassified Documents National Security Action Memorandum 328 April 1 1965

⁶⁴ G. Herring, LBJ and Vietnam. A Different Kind of War (Texas, University of Texas Press, 1994) p.31

demoralised South Vietnamese army. The effect of this rout on the outlook of the United States should not be underestimated. A few days later on June 7th, the US Commander in Vietnam, William Westmoreland sent a cable to the President demanding more troops, citing as his main reason "the collapse in the ARVN's will to fight."⁶⁵ Robert McNamara paid a quick visit to the region in mid-July 1965, and came to the same conclusion. In his report to the President, he argued that unless the United States dispatched troops, the ARVN would be "faced with a series successive tactical reverses."⁶⁶ What made this situation even more desperate was the growing strength of the Viet Cong. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor recalled that he Viet Cong was marching on with "regimental strength and...a high degree of professional competence."⁶⁷

The situation in South Vietnam was now inextricably linked to the Cold War ideology of the Johnson administration. For Johnson and his advisers, South Vietnam had to be saved to prevent the Communists taking over in Vietnam and spreading their Communist revolution to the rest of South East Asia. As far back as November 1964 the State Department in a special intelligence assessment had argued that "the loss of SVN..could be that bad...driving us to progressive loss of other areas..."⁶⁸ In July 1965 (the month in which the crucial decisions were taken), Secretary of State Dean Rusk, in a cable to the US embassy in Paris warned of "the consequences [of] US failing or ceasing to assist SVN people resist this

65 B. Van Demark, *Into the Quagmire* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991) p.151

66 FRUS Vietnam. *June-December 1965* (Washington, US GPO 1996) p. 178 Memorandum from Robert McNamara to President Johnson July 20 1965

67 M. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1972) p.346

68 *Declassified Documents*. DOS Intelligence assessment of situation in South Vietnam prepared in the State Department 26 November 1964

aggression would be to encourage similar efforts external communist by means [of] war many other parts of the world. "⁶⁹

At meetings, nearly all of LBJ's advisers warned of the serious consequences of failing to act. The condition that the South Vietnamese must establish a viable government was now almost irrelevant. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge said at the meeting on Vietnam "there is no tradition of a national government in Saigon.... we have to do what we think we ought to do regardless of what the Saigon government does."⁷⁰ Sending troops would achieve the objective of saving the South from an immediate collapse, and in turn preventing the Communists expanding throughout the continent.

Yet Lyndon Johnson seemed remarkably cautious for a man who was supposedly determined to become embroiled in a bloody and costly war in Vietnam. At meetings, it was the President who appeared the most sceptical about increasing the United States' commitment to South Vietnam, and investigated all possible options. Johnson frequently asked the in-house dove George Ball for his opinions on the situation, telling him "we have no mortgage on victory. I think it is desirable to hear you out." He also demanded another meeting to discuss Ball's alternative proposals and asked all his advisers to consider alternative courses of action.

One of the other main motives for widening the war was the failure of Operation Rolling Thunder to achieve its objectives. As explained earlier, bombing was seen by the President and his advisers as a means to give the Saigon regime time to put its house in order,

⁶⁹ Declassified Documents DOS Rusk to Paris Embassy July 13 1965

⁷⁰ FRUS Vietnam, June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p.193 Notes of a meeting July 21 1965

and to convince the North Vietnamese to end their support of the Viet Cong and accept US terms. The sustained bombing campaign was a failure in terms of re-invigorating the South. The South Vietnamese regime actually entered a new phase of instability and turmoil. In May 1965, the military led by Air Vice Marshal Cao Ky and General Nguyen Thieu overthrew the civilian government of Phan Huy Quat and established themselves in power. The United States did not see the return of the military as a positive development. Assistant Secretary Bill Bundy caustically remarked of Cao Ky and Nyguyen Thieu "we have reached the bottom of the barrel. The absolute bottom of the barrel."⁷¹ Ultimately Ky's government would last longer than any of its predecessors, but in 1965, the United States government had little faith in this brash young Turk who openly proclaimed an admiration for Hitler. At a meeting on Vietnam shortly after the coup, McNamara remarked that Ky's government would not last long.⁷²

Another reason for widening the war was that the bombing campaign seemed to be having no effect on the morale or on the resolve of the North Vietnamese. By May 1965 the State Department had concluded that the introduction of ground troops might be the one way to convince them to leave. In a memorandum dated May 20th 1965, the State Department had concluded that "no amount of bombing is going to persuade the DRV/VC to abandon their strategy. They can be persuaded to abandon it only if they are convinced that the trend of events is against them."⁷³ Clearly a few decisive victories on the American side would influence their attitude. This new philosophy can be seen in a letter from Secretary of State

71 G. Herring, America's Longest War. The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975 (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1986) p. 137

72 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p. 197 Notes of a meeting July 21 1965

73 Declassified Documents DOS State Department Memo, May 20 1965

Dean Rusk to Ambassador Taylor. In it he contended that the air campaign had to be supported by a vigorous land campaign in the South to " create the frame of mind in Hanoi which will lead to the decisions which we seek. "74

The role of international politics in the Johnson Administration's Policy in Vietnam

According to former officials such as George Ball, Lyndon Baines Johnson agonised over the decision to widen the war.⁷⁵ Yet however much LBJ was troubled by the prospect of sending troops to Vietnam, he was even more worried by the thought of remaining idle. Lyndon Johnson was the leader of the nation which had become a world power during and after World War Two, and was now at the height of its power. For Lyndon Johnson, the reputation and the prestige of the United States as much as its national security was at stake in Vietnam; withdrawal would seriously damage the reputation of his country both in the eyes of the United States' enemies as well as its friends. A troubled President was heard to remark by his Defence Secretary "I think it [withdrawal] would just lose us face in the world and I just shudder to think what all of 'em would say " ⁷⁶ Withdrawal or defeat in Vietnam would make the United States a paper tiger in the eyes of the Communists, and would send a signal to NATO allies that the US commitment to Berlin was based on weak foundations. The Johnson administration believed that if it failed to help the South Vietnamese, their influence and dominance in NATO would be severely undermined. In November 1964, Bill Bundy suggested the United States, must appear to be strong to her European allies as their

74 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p. 705 Telegram from Taylor to Rusk April 17 1965

75 see G. Ball, The Past Has Another Pattern (New York, Norton and Co 1982)p.399 Ball contends that LBJ was extremely reluctant to become involved in Vietnam.

76 R. McNamara, In Retrospect (New York, Random House, 1995) p. 191

"willingness to accept continued US primacy in NATO, " would be influenced "by the way we handle South East Asia."⁷⁷ In this sense the situation in South Vietnam was a test of the integrity of the commitment of the US government.

The reaction to the one man who opposed this view indicates just how obsessed Johnson and his advisers had become about preserving the reputation of the United States abroad. George Ball was the only adviser who did not share such pessimistic opinions of the international repercussions of leaving South Vietnam. Ball who was Under Secretary of State as well as being the State Department's European Affairs specialist had come to know the opinions of America's European partners through his extensive dealings with European leaders such as De Gaulle, Adenauer, and Harold Wilson. He had perceived that they were surprised at the Johnson Administration's stubbornness and inflexibility over Vietnam. In meetings he repeatedly argued that it was actually the United States continued presence in Vietnam which was damaging its reputation amongst American friends and allies. The United States' European partners thought that the United States was committing a serious error by remaining in Vietnam. In the debate on the decision to widen the war, Ball boldly stated that "Western Europeans look at us as if we had got ourselves into an imprudent situation...what they are concerned about is their own security- troops in Berlin have real meaning."⁷⁸

Ball also rejected the standard interpretation that abandoning South Vietnam would make the United States appear weak to the Communists. In several memoranda and meetings he advised the President not to become further embroiled in Vietnam. In June 1965 he

⁷⁷ Declassified Documents DOS Memo by Bill Bundy 11 November 1964

⁷⁸ FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p. 195 Notes of a meeting July 21 1965

ventured to suggest that members of the administration were seriously overestimating the impact of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam.⁷⁹ Yet no-one within the administration or the cabinet was willing or able to accept his contentions. For the most part his arguments met with vehement opposition or were treated with scorn. In July of 1965, when Ball pleaded again for a negotiated withdrawal, the President's response reflected his fears, as this excerpt from a meeting shows; "wouldn' t all those countries say that Uncle Sam is a paper tiger... I gather you are not basically troubled by what the world would say about our pulling out."⁸⁰ Nor was the President the only one to subscribe to such views. McGeorge Bundy, the President's NSC adviser, attacked Ball's arguments declaring that "the world, the country and the UN would have alarming reactions if we got out."⁸¹

After reflecting on the situation over the weekend at Camp David, the President made his decision. The United States would stand in Vietnam. On July 28 1965 at a White House press conference he announced that fifty thousand ground troops would be sent to South Vietnam. But it was a low key speech, with little of the rhetoric characteristic of a declaration of war. However, American boys would now doing the job which the President had once said should be done by their Asian counterparts.

The Credibility Gap

In hindsight, Johnson's announcement on July 28th 1965 to the White House press corps is conspicuous for the President's failure to inform his countrymen that they were

79 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) Paper prepared by George Ball, undated

80 *ibid.* p. 195 Notes of a meeting July 21 1965

81 *ibid.* p.196 notes of White House meeting July 21 1965

effectively at war in South Vietnam.⁸² Nor was this a mere oversight on the part of a harried President who had spent the previous week contemplating his administration's future policy in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson consciously sought to deceive the American people from April 1965 onwards by telling them that US policy in Vietnam had not changed. In March of 1965, LBJ had yielded to the demands of his Commander in South Vietnam and his own Joint Chiefs of Staff that the US troops stationed in South Vietnam in an advisory role should now be permitted to engage the enemy. But there would be no debates, and no formal announcements. In National Security Action Memorandum 328 written on April 6th 1965 National Security Adviser (NSC) McGeorge Bundy noted that the new US policy of using US troops in combat missions should be implemented "as rapidly as practicable, but in ways that should minimise any appearance of sudden changes in policy." Changing the mission of the existing troops was clearly a major change in US policy, but the President had no intention of publicly announcing such a change. Bundy continued to state that the President wanted the movements to appear as "gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy."⁸³ In his address to the Press on July 28th the President failed to place the nation on a war footing, and refused to mobilise the reserves.

Johnson had been almost obsessed with keeping his decision secret from the press and the public. When the State Department's Press Officer, Robert McCloskey, committed the cardinal sin of admitting to the suspicious press pack on June 8th 1965 that the role of US

82 Public Papers of the President. Lyndon B. Johnson. 1964-1965 Vol. 2 (Washington, US GPO, 1966) address to the press 28 July 1965

83 FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) NSAM 328 6 April 1965. p.539

forces in South Vietnam had changed, the President was enraged. McCloskey he roared would be doing his briefing in Africa in the future.⁸⁴ In the meantime, Johnson's own Press Secretary George Reedy, besieged by the White House correspondents, was issuing vehement denials of McCloskey's earlier statement.⁸⁵ In the weeks leading up to July 28th 1965 some of the President's civilian advisers and his military advisers emphatically stated that the administration should inform the American public. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who needed the funds to fight the war, was in favour of the President sending a war message to Congress asking for a massive appropriation. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy reported to the President "Bob [McNamara] is carrying out your orders to plan this whole job with only \$300-400 million...he thinks our posture of candour and responsibility would be better if we ask for \$2 billion."⁸⁶ But, on this occasion Johnson ignored the recommendations of his advisers. The aim of this section will be to establish why the President failed to take either Congress or the American people into his confidence when he took the crucial decision to wage a full scale war in Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson had no desire to be a war President. The only war which he was really committed to fighting was his war on Poverty. Vietnam was an irritant, a distraction which was deflecting the President's attention away from pressing social issues. But LBJ could not withdraw. As mentioned earlier on, US policymakers from Truman onwards believed that the Communist threat had to be met and defeated. A declaration of war would though require

84 D. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, Random House, 1972) p. 587

85 FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p.738 Memo from Bundy to LBJ

86 *Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy* (University Publications of America, Frederick, Maryland, 1985) memo from Bundy to LBJ 21 July 1965

approval from Congress. And Lyndon Johnson knew Congressmen better than any man. He had worked with them, flattered them and cajoled them as Majority Leader. And he was aware that many Congressmen were not remotely interested in his domestic programme. Indeed, some of them were openly opposed to it. He became convinced that an open declaration of war would allow these politicians to argue that American soldiers would need financial support, and that Johnson's reform programme would have to be postponed until the Communist aggression had been crushed. The President's fears were reflected in a conversation with one of his aides; "if we get into this war, I know what's going to happen. Those damned conservatives are going to sit in Congress and they're going to use this war as a way of opposing my Great Society legislation. People like [Senator] Stennis and Gross...they don't want to help the poor and the Negroes...they'll take the war as their weapon...they'll say...we have this job to do, beating the Communists..."⁸⁷ And LBJ was determined that he would surpass even his hero Franklin Roosevelt in the amount of domestic legislation he would push through Congress. For the President, deceit appeared to be the only way of preserving his reform programme. The only debate which would be taking place in Congress that summer would be on civil rights. The President's thinking was reflected in a memorandum drafted by his NSC adviser McGeorge Bundy, entitled "why not to have a \$ 1 billion dollar appropriation." Bundy argued that a request for extra funds from Congress, " would create the false impression that we have to have guns, not butter and would help the enemies of the President's domestic legislation. "⁸⁸(emphasis added)

87 L. Gardner, *Pay any Price. Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, I. R. Dee, 1995) pp.157-158

88 *Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy* (University Publications of America, Frederick, Maryland, 1985) Memo from Bundy to LBJ 30 June 1965

While the President was concerned about the domestic impact of a declaration of war, he was equally worried about the global repercussions of sending a war message to Congress. He was always mindful of the Chinese intervention in Korea in 1950, and he was constantly fearful of triggering another Chinese intervention. In July 1965, he frequently asked Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, if he thought that the expansion of US forces would provoke Chinese intervention.⁸⁹ Johnson believed that a public declaration of war against the North Vietnamese would encourage them to turn to their Chinese allies and request military support. In a meeting just days before he officially approved General Westmoreland's request for more troops, the President considered the suggestion that he should send a war message to Congress, request massive appropriations and declare a state of emergency. Johnson then explained why he was opposed to such a policy; if the United States declared war "then North Vietnam would go to its friends - China and Russia - and ask them to give help. They would be forced into increasing aid. For that reason, I don't want to be dramatic and cause tension. I think we can get our people to support us without having to be provocative."⁹⁰ In his memoirs, Walt Rostow (then chairman of the Policy Planning Staff) recalled that Johnson had deliberately sought "to avoid a sharp political and psychological change in course." According to Rostow, the President was convinced this course of action might prevent the Soviet Union and Communist China from entering the war.⁹¹

The President and some of his advisers were also fearful of provoking a nuclear war

89 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 Vol 2 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) Memo of meeting 22 July 1965 p.215

90 Declassified Documents of the United States. White House File Memo of meeting in White House 27 July 1965

91 W. Rostow, The diffusion of power. An essay in recent history (New York, Macmillan, 1972) p.449

through their actions in South Vietnam. LBJ and his civilian advisers were horrified by the prospect of using nuclear weapons. Defense Secretary McNamara later recalled that both he and his chief executive were shocked "at the cavalier way in which the [joint] chiefs and their associates...referred to and accepted the risk of nuclear weapons."⁹² Placing the nation on a war footing would in the opinion of the President would create an unhealthy war fever among the American people which might lead US policymakers to contemplate using nuclear weapons. Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, declared in an interview after he left office, and in his memoirs that the Johnson administration did not parade military units or ask film stars to sell bonds because in a nuclear world "it was too dangerous for an entire people to grow angry."⁹³ Consequently, American involvement in South Vietnam would kept as low key as possible.

Clearly, the President who sought to bring about some of the most wide ranging reform at home was convinced that the only way of protecting his beloved Great Society was to mislead Congress and the American people over the depth of US involvement in Vietnam. Johnson's commitment to domestic reform should not be doubted. In the long term, however, Johnson's refusal to conduct a debate in July 1965 would lead to more opposition and would ultimately undermine his Great Society.

⁹² R. McNamara, In Retrospect. The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam (New York, Random House, 1995)p.160

⁹³ D. Rusk, As I saw it (New York, Norton and Co., 1990)p.456

CHAPTER TWO. LYNDON'S MEN. THE CIVILIAN AND MILITARY ADVISERS TO THE PRESIDENT

It is easy for the President's advisers to be brave, but it is the President who must live with the decision.

McGeorge Bundy writing to the President on December 12, 1964

In the beginning none of them were Johnson men. On that bright but snowy morning in 1961 when a young John F. Kennedy took the oath of office they were all the brightest stars in the constellation of Kennedy's New Frontier. Few of them had ever had dealings with the Vice President. Johnson was so anonymous that the President almost forgot to invite him to the first cabinet meeting. LBJ's time as Vice President had been an unhappy experience. Bill Moyers, a Johnson aide recalled that he had been "a man without a purpose, a great horse in a very small corral." Harry McPherson another Johnson aide, stated that by the summer of 1963 "Johnson had grown heavy and looked miserable."¹ It was in this frame of mind that LBJ suddenly found the Presidency thrust upon him in November of 1963. With the nation traumatised by the assassination of the President, Johnson would have been inhuman not to experience feelings of inadequacy. Moreover, LBJ was inexperienced in foreign policy. He had been involved in some of the major events of the Cold War, but even then he had viewed foreign policy through the lens of domestic politics. In 1954, when Eisenhower was

1L. Gardner, Pay and Price. Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam (Chicago, I. R. Dec, 1995)p.90

considering a commitment to Indochina, the perceptive Johnson argued against it because he believed that the American people would not support a war so soon after the conflict in Korea.² Even though Senator Richard Russell, Johnson's old friend from the South, urged Johnson to appoint his own advisers, the President had decided that Kennedy's advisers had to be retained. They were Johnson's main link to Kennedy's policies and they could give legitimacy to the President's policies. Johnson's ties to the media were also limited, and he was convinced that without the support of the media he could not govern.³ Some of Kennedy's men did have close ties to the media. The Bundy brothers and the hard-line anti-Communist columnist Joe Alsop were on good terms, and Under Secretary of State George Ball had a good working relationship with James "Scotty" Reston, and Walter Lippmann.

The new President was also extremely impressed by the awesome intellect and brainpower of the men who Kennedy had appointed. On the day he became President he pleaded with Kennedy's advisers to stay, telling them "You're the men I trust. You must stay with me. I'll need you. President Kennedy gathered around him extraordinary people... You're the ablest men I've ever known. It's not just that you're President Kennedy's friends, but you are the best anywhere, and you must stay."⁴ Johnson was renowned for his flattery, but on this occasion it would appear as though there was an element of truth in LBJ's request. In view of the President's high opinion of the men who surrounded him, it is highly likely that their advice and recommendations influenced him greatly.

2 D. Halberstam, 'The Very Expensive Education of McGeorge Bundy' in *Harpers Magazine* (July, 1969)p.33

3 L. Gardner, *Pay Any Price. Lyndon Johnson and the wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, I. R. Dec, 1995)p.91

4 *ibid.*p.90

'A Smart Kid.': McGeorge Bundy in the Johnson White House 1963-1965

The President's National Security Adviser (NSC), McGeorge Bundy was not a man with long term vision. He was a crisis manager.⁵ For him, every crisis had a solution. And Bundy believed that the best solution for the pressing problem in South Vietnam was the use of force. Force would show the Communists that the United States would not abandon South Vietnam and would eventually bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. In addition Bundy believed that the United States national security, and her prestige were at stake in Vietnam. During the next one and a half years, Bundy's advice would become increasingly more hawkish, and by the summer of 1965, he was recommending a large increase in the US commitment to South Vietnam.

In November 1963 the former Harvard professor was not deeply interested or involved in South Vietnam. He was by inclination more attracted to European issues. When Bundy had become NSC adviser under Kennedy, he had divided the world up into two spheres. He would focus on the Western hemisphere, and his deputy Walt Rostow would concentrate on issues East of Suez.⁶ However, he had also been shaped by the memory of Munich in 1938 and he subscribed to the belief that the Communists sought world hegemony. For Bundy the lesson was clear. Aggressors could not go unpunished. Failure to act would only encourage the Communists to spread their revolution throughout the world. In 1963, and 1964 leading US politicians such as Mike Mansfield and international statesmen such as

⁵ D. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, Random House, 1972) passim

⁶ T. McCormick and W. Lafeber, *Behind the Throne. Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents 1898-1968* (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993)p.208

Charles De Gaulle were advocating the neutralisation of Vietnam and the withdrawal of all outside forces. Bundy was determined that the new President should not be swayed by such advice. Part of Bundy's role as NSC adviser was to present opposing sides of the argument, but as will become evident in this chapter Bundy had become a policy advocate. Very few of the memoranda he submitted to the President argued against escalating the commitment in South Vietnam.

When Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Montana) had submitted two memoranda arguing strongly in favour of the neutralisation of South Vietnam, the NSC adviser acted swiftly to prevent such heretical ideas influencing the President. Bundy's response was emphatic. Neutralisation would inevitably lead to a Communist victory in Vietnam. He wrote to the President in January 1964, stating "we can still win, even on present ground rules. Any deal to divide or to neutralise South Vietnam would inevitably mean a new government in Saigon which would in short order be Communist dominated." (emphasis in original). Bundy decided to ensure that the President was left in no doubt about the consequences of a Communist victory. In the same memorandum he invoked the domino theory, telling him "the consequences of a Communist dominated South Vietnam are extremely serious...Laos would almost certainly come under North Vietnamese domination, Cambodia would accept Chinese domination, Thailand would become very shaky...a truly neutral Southeast Asia is very unlikely from such a sequence of events." (emphasis in original).⁷ Although LBJ had made his

⁷ Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, Frederick, Maryland, 1985) memo to the President January 8 1964

commitment to South Vietnam clear from the day when he assumed office, the Harvard dean wanted to reinforce his commitment. In March of 1964 he sent a memorandum to Johnson entitled "Why is South Vietnam important to us." He informed the President that it was an important part of Southeast Asia, and that the United States had a commitment in honor and national prestige. Bundy was concerned that the dire situation in South Vietnam might weaken the new President's resolve. He told the President "this is no time to quit, and it is no time for discouragement."⁸ The Senator from Montana continued to pressure the President to hold talks with the North Vietnamese throughout 1964 and 1965. Bundy continued to vehemently refute Mansfield's arguments. In December 1964 he wrote to the President stating "we do not see how we can have useful exploratory talks with the Chinese...everything we know about Peking suggests there is no interest in a serious conversation."⁹

Bundy's position on the US role in South Vietnam was becoming more evident during 1964. As mentioned earlier the NSC adviser believed strongly in the use of force. During the Cuban missile crisis Bundy had favoured an attack on the Soviet sites in Cuba, and in the Dominican crisis of 1965 it was Bundy who advocated sending the US marines to the island. Most importantly, the United States would be using force. Not some second rate country like France who had no idea how to deploy force effectively. And the Americans in Bundy's opinion had the best trained forces and the best technology. There was little doubt in Bundy's mind that the mere threat of US action would overwhelm its opponents. In May 1964, he

⁸ Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, Frederick, Maryland, 1985) memo to the President March 14 1964
⁹ *ibid.* Memo to the President December 16 1964

urged the President to launch a selected and graduated military campaign against the North Vietnamese. Bundy had clearly reached the conclusion that the covert operations under the aegis of the CIA were having a minimal impact on the situation. He suggested that "the deployments be on a very large scale from the beginning... a pound of threat is worth a pound of action."¹⁰ By August the NSC adviser was contemplating the use of US forces in the region. Bundy's confidence in the superiority of American soldiers resonated throughout the memorandum he sent to the President. He confidently predicted that the presence of two brigades would "be good medicine everywhere."¹¹

The President who was campaigning as a man of moderation in contrast to the trigger happy Goldwater had refused to act upon his adviser's suggestions. In January 1965, worried by the inability of the South Vietnamese to form a stable government, Bundy sent the President one of his most forceful memoranda. In it he declared that he and Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara were "pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat." Bundy was openly critical of the advisory role of the United States in Vietnam. He warned the President that "this essentially passive role "would lead to eventual defeat and the withdrawal of US forces."¹² The language had been carefully chosen to make an impact on the President. The use of the words "passive" and "defeat," would naturally provoke Lyndon Johnson who despised both inactivity and defeat. Bundy offered the President two options. The United States could either use the military power at its disposal or

¹⁰ Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, Frederick, 1985). Memo to the President May 25 1964

¹¹ *ibid.* Memo to the President August 31 1964

¹² *ibid.* Memo to the President January 27 1965

negotiate. Bundy recommended the use of military power. The President's NSC adviser had been dispensing his advice in his typically cold, calculating and detached manner up to this point. In February he paid a visit to South Vietnam which removed any doubts he might have had and made his commitment to escalation almost irreversible.

During McGeorge Bundy's trip to South Vietnam, the Viet Cong launched a mortar attack on the US barracks at Pleiku. It was not the first such attack. The VC had attacked the airbase at Bien Hoa and the Brinks hotel in 1964 which enraged Maxwell Taylor, the US ambassador to South Vietnam. This time Bundy was in the country when the attack occurred. The attack reportedly infuriated Bundy. Moreover the sight of the wounded US troops upset the usually detached NSC adviser. His response was swift. On a secure telephone line to Washington, he recommended to Deputy Secretary Vance that the US should carry out a retaliatory raid.¹³ Jim Thomson who worked for Bundy on the National Security Council later recalled that "Mac the dispassionate man became, for a while ardent."¹⁴

After Pleiku, Bundy worked vigorously to secure the escalation of the US commitment in Vietnam. Those who opposed him were scythed down in Bundy's incisive and ruthless way. George Ball constantly reminded his colleagues of the French experience in Indochina in 1954. The National Security Adviser attacked such opinions. He believed that the United States was infinitely superior to the French. The French had failed in Bundy's opinion because they were weak and incompetent. The French he caustically remarked "were never united or constant in their prosecution of the war." They were a "colonial power out of

¹³ FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 Vol 1 (Washington, US GPO,1996) memo of White House meeting by Cyrus Vance 7 February 1965

¹⁴ J. Thomson, article on McGeorge Bundy, in New York Times 22nd September 1996

touch with Vietnamese nationalism." By contrast, the United States was "responding to the call of a people under Communist assault." Moreover, unlike the French the United States was in Bundy's opinion far more united and prepared for a campaign in Vietnam.¹⁵ Bundy worked assiduously to destroy Ball's arguments. In early July of 1965 when Ball submitted a memorandum to the President suggesting withdrawal, Bundy attached a covering note where he stated "my hunch is that you will want to listen hard to George Ball and then reject his proposal."¹⁶

For McGeorge Bundy, America's national security and its prestige were at stake in Vietnam. In emotive and forceful language in his report on Vietnam to the President in February 1965, he declared that the United States reputation, and its global influence were on the line in Vietnam.¹⁷ When George Ball argued in favour of a US withdrawal and negotiations during the crucial meetings in July 1965, Bundy opposed him vigorously. In the July meetings, Bundy calmly, but authoritatively stated that the abandonment of Vietnam would be little short of a disaster. Bundy declared that "He would rather maintain our present commitment and waffle through than withdraw."¹⁸ He sarcastically asked the Under Secretary, "what are you going to say to the world about the people whom you have said you would never desert?" Bundy's intervention was telling. Johnson who had previously been

¹⁵ Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, 1985) memo to the President June 30 1965

¹⁶ FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 Vol 2 (Washington, US GPO 1996) Memo from Bundy to the President July 3 1965

¹⁷ FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 Vol 1 (Washington, US GPO 1996) Memo from Bundy to the President February 7 1965

¹⁸ Declassified Documents. White House File Memo of White House meeting by Chester Cooper July 21 1965

listening hard to Ball' s suggestions changed the subject and began to discuss the need for favourable press coverage.¹⁹

In that meeting on July 21 1965, Bundy remarked that it was the function of his staff to put forward both sides of an argument. Nor should Bundy's position within the White House be underestimated. His office was in the White House basement which gave him regular access to the President, and he controlled the flow of information to the President. Yet as his response to George Ball's opposition shows, at no time did Bundy expose the President to the different opinions within his government. Jim Thomson who worked for Bundy on the NSC staff recorded that he tolerated and encouraged dissent. If he did, he certainly did not share it with the President. George Ball had sent his first memorandum to Bundy in October of 1964. The memorandum did not reach the President. Ball passed the document to the young Presidential aide, Bill Moyers who ensured that the President saw it. The President finally saw Ball's arguments in February 1965 when he had already authorised Operation Rolling Thunder.²⁰

There is evidence that the confident Bundy even had personal doubts about Vietnam. In a memo of a meeting with the President on June 10th 1965, Bundy scribbled a personal note which asked "how effective our people are in combat - this really is a serious matter."²¹ Yet again there is no evidence which shows that he raised these doubts with the President; and

19 J. Bill, George Ball. Behind the Scenes in US Foreign Policy (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997) p.14

20 D. Di Leo, George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991)p.115

21 FRUS. Vietnam January -June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p.748 Memo of meeting by McGeorge Bundy June 10th 1965

these were precisely the types of question which the President needed to hear from his NSC adviser. When Defense Secretary McNamara recommended a large increase in the US troop contingent in Vietnam, the NSC adviser sent him a memorandum which questioned some of his ideas. Bundy in his forthright manner told his colleague "my first reaction is that this programme is rash to the point of folly." He questioned McNamara's belief that the VC would fight a conventional war, and then suggested that the objectives of the Secretary of Defense were unclear.²² The memorandum was addressed to the Secretary of Defense, and according to Jim Thomson, Bundy never passed it on to the President.²³ The NSC adviser was too committed to intervention in Vietnam. Johnson had been deprived of important arguments and opinions by his NSC adviser.

Bundy had been one of the men closest to Kennedy. JFK admired his incisiveness, and his sharp analytical mind. Lyndon Johnson was not so enamoured with his new NSC adviser, however. Johnson who both loathed and respected intellectuals, was suspicious of Bundy. Johnson thought him to be both superior and condescending.²⁴ Initially their relationship was fraught with tension. Bundy later admitted that the first few months were a stressful time. But the Harvard professor was no Kennedy partisan in the mould of Arthur M. Schlesinger or Theodore Sorensen. Bundy's loyalty was to the Presidency. He represented generations of service to the Presidency. His father Harvey Bundy had worked for former Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, and Bundy himself had helped Stimson write his memoirs. Bundy had been

²² Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (University Publications of America, 1985) memo to the Secretary of Defence 30 June 1965

²³ J. Thomson, article on McGeorge Bundy, in New York Times 22nd September 1996

²⁴ D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York, Random House, 1972)pp 515-517

trained to serve. And so he worked hard to prove his loyalty to the new President. Shortly after Kennedy's death, he wrote an article entitled, 'the Presidency and the Peace' in which he argued that he could serve both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. When Arthur M. Schlesinger continued to snipe at the President, Bundy berated him in a letter, telling him "there is every reason of purpose and policy for those who loved President Kennedy to give our full support to President Johnson."²⁵ Sensing a hostility towards the new President on his own National Security Staff, Bundy called a meeting, and reprimanded his staff.²⁶ Although his relationship with the President was never close, it had improved by 1964 and Johnson had come to trust and rely on his National Security Adviser. Talking to Bundy was like talking to Kennedy he once said. And Bundy's advice was by late 1965 beginning to influence the President. During the debate on the multi-lateral force (MLF) Bundy's vigorous opposition to the MLF convinced the President to abandon the project.²⁷ And on the issue of Vietnam, his advice was having a major impact on the President. Johnson had refused to wage a bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese, much to the dismay of Ambassador Maxwell Taylor. But when Bundy visited Pleiku and recommended air strikes, the President concurred in such a decision with surprising promptness, according to Maxwell Taylor. Vice President Hubert Humphrey later recalled that Bundy's recommendations in February 1965 carried great weight with the President. He wrote " it may be that what Bundy cabled, moved Johnson more

25 Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1963-1966 McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, Maryland, 1985) letter from Bundy to Schlesinger May 12 1964

26 D. Halberstam, 'The Very Expensive Education of McGeorge Bundy' Harper's Magazine (1969) pp.21-42

27 Personal Interview with Jim Bill 21st February 1997

than would have been normal. Bundy was an impressive man."²⁸ By July 1965, Bundy's star was on the rise in the White House, and his advice was clearly having a significant impact on the President.

28 D. Barrett, quoting H. Humphrey in Uncertain Warriors. Lyndon Johnson and his advisers (Kansas, University of Kansas Press, 1993) p.17

' Hardworking and loyal as a beagle ' : Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

Dean Rusk was a believer in the existence of a Communist threat. Rusk had an almost Dulles-like conception of the world. There were the evil forces of tyranny seeking to spread their revolution to every part of the globe, and there were the forces of righteousness who were willing to fight them to ensure the future of democracy. It was a view which Rusk had held since his days in the Truman administration. Rusk had been Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs in the Korean war. The Korean war had shaped his outlook in foreign affairs. Rusk had left government in 1953 firmly convinced in the existence of a monolithic Communist bloc which sought world hegemony. His fiery speeches which referred to a godless, evil country seeking to dominate the world reflected his convictions. It was not surprising that Dean Rusk was one of the few individuals in the Truman administration who John Foster Dulles, had not roundly condemned in the 1952 election campaign. Indeed it had been Dulles who had recommended Rusk for the position of President of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1953.²⁹ When Johnson became President, he acquired a Secretary of State whose convictions were unshakeable. Whilst Rusk was by nature a cautious individual, he never expressed any doubts to the President about the US position in Vietnam.

Rusk believed that his advice to the President was not a topic for discussion. Consequently he rarely wrote memoranda to the President, and he reserved his counsel for private meetings with the President. Rusk's advice was invariably the same on each occasion which he met with the President. The Communists were trying to spread their revolution to all

²⁹ D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York, Random House, 1972)p.343

parts of the globe, and the United States was the only nation equipped to face down this threat. In his first memorandum to the President he sought to quash any talk of the neutralisation of Vietnam. Neutralisation, he wrote would lead to the creation of a regime which "would be prey to a Communist takeover."³⁰ Vietnam represented an opportunity for the United States to thwart the activities of the Communists. In February 1964 he wrote to Defense Secretary McNamara, that the United States "must demonstrate to both the Communist and non-Communist worlds that the wars of national liberation formula now being pushed by so actively by the Communists will not succeed."³¹

Rusk was a careful man and was not as eager as some of his colleagues to embark upon a full scale attack against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. At a National Security Council meeting in May 1964 Rusk argued that if the administration became more deeply involved in Vietnam it would be, "open to accusations of colonialism."³² The Secretary later wrote that the United States should continue in its advisory capacity in South Vietnam. When NSC adviser and Defence Secretary McNamara pressured the President to escalate the commitment in Vietnam, Rusk was skeptical about becoming more involved in the murky waters of Vietnam. McGeorge Bundy concluded his memorandum of January 27 1965 by stating that "Dean Rusk does not agree with us. He does not quarrel with our assertion that things are going badly and that the situation is unraveling...what he does say is that the consequences of both escalation and withdrawal are so bad that we simply must find

30 FRUS. Vietnam 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.10 Memo from Rusk to LBJ January 8 1964

31 *ibid.* p.63 Memo from Rusk to McNamara February 5 1964

32 Declassified Documents.Department of State Record of meeting May 16 1964

a way of making our present policy work."³³ Rusk was also noticeably absent when LBJ made the decision to launch an aerial campaign against North Vietnam. But the Secretary of State did not dissent for long. His perception of world politics left him little choice but to agree with his colleagues and support the escalation of the US commitment..

In February 1965, just after the President had authorised the retaliatory strikes against the North Vietnamese, Rusk sent the President one of his rare memoranda. In it Rusk repeatedly emphasised his fear of the consequences of a Communist victory in South Vietnam. The concerned Secretary informed the President that he was "convinced that it would be disastrous for the United States and the free world to permit Southeast Asia to be overrun by the Communist North. " He then went further than most of his civilian colleagues by recommending that the President send US ground troops to the region. There could be no doubts about his position now. He now recommended to the President that he dispatch one battalion to the Da Nang airbase, and allow US forces to wage an aerial campaign against the enemy.³⁴ Most of Lyndon Johnson's advisers knew that he did not like this war in Asia. He had told them that he wanted to get out, but was unsure how to do so. Rusk whose understanding of world politics was still set in 1950, scoffed at the idea of a deal with the Communists. His opposition to such a plan was emphatic; he maintained that "negotiations as a lever for the abandonment of Southeast Asia to the Communist North cannot be accepted. "³⁵

33 Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications America, Maryland, 1985) Memo from Bundy to LBJ January 27 1965

34 FRUS. Vietnam January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) pp.355-358 Memo from Rusk to LBJ February 23 1965

35 *ibid.* p.358 Memo from Rusk to LBJ February 23 1965

Moreover, the Secretary of State firmly believed that the United States had made a pledge to the South Vietnamese in 1954. The word of the United States had been given. Even though it might be a dubious commitment the United States must fulfil its pledges. Rusk warned the President that one failure would embolden the Communists and encourage them to spread their revolution throughout the world. And if the South Vietnamese were failing, the United States would have to enter the fray. In July of 1965, Rusk used this argument to justify his recommendation to the President to increase the amount of US troops serving in South Vietnam. He told the President " there can be no serious debate about the fact that we have a commitment to assist the South Vietnamese to resist aggression from the North."³⁶ Having reminded the President of US obligations, he then warned him of the dire consequences of failing to help the South Vietnamese; " the integrity of the US commitment is the principal pillar throughout the world. If that pillar becomes unreliable, the Communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin."³⁷ Like his other cabinet colleagues Rusk then urged the President to increase the US forces in South Vietnam.

Dean Rusk's advice to his chief executive was also heavily shaped by his experiences as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs during the Korean War. In Rusk's opinion the US police action against the Communists had been a success. Admittedly there had been the small matter of the tactical reverses suffered by MacArthur, but the police action had saved South Korea from falling to the Communists, and had shown them that they would

36 FRUS. Vietnam June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO 1996) p. 104

37 *ibid.* p.105 Memo from Rusk to LBJ July 1 1965

face American might wherever they tried to spread their revolution. And initially, the US prospects there had looked extremely gloomy. Consequently, Rusk was confident that South Vietnam could be rescued from the clutches of the Communists. It might require more effort, but in no circumstances could the United States withdraw. When his Under Secretary George Ball suggested that the United States did not have a commitment to the South Vietnamese because there was effectively no government, Rusk invoked Korea to justify the US role in Vietnam, and tersely told Ball "don't give me that stuff..." He lectured Ball "you don't understand that at the time of the Korea that we had had to go out and get Syngman Rhee [the South Korean leader] out of the bush where he was hiding." The Secretary continued that "we're going to get some breaks and this thing [the US commitment to South Vietnam] is going to work."³⁸ (emphasis added)

Lyndon Johnson had also inherited a Secretary of State who was occasionally overly deferential to the recommendations of the Secretary of Defence and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Yet again Rusk's attitude towards to the Defence Department was shaped by his experiences as the Assistant Secretary of State. He had witnessed the feud between the Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of Defence Louis Johnson under Truman. There would be no such battles under Dean Rusk. He was determined to create a strong working relationship with Robert S. McNamara. Some of his subordinates in the State Department, including Under Secretary Ball felt that the relationship between Rusk and the Defence Secretary was

38 D. Di Leo, George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991) p.101

perhaps a little too close, too harmonious. In their opinion, Rusk was deferring too readily to the opinions of the military and the Defense Secretary.³⁹ Rusk himself had been a former military officer in the Far Eastern theatre in World War II, and had great respect for the judgements of the US armed forces. He certainly did not ask them any searching questions during the period in question. In April 1965, in a telegram to the US ambassador to Saigon, Maxwell Taylor, Rusk noted that the " JCS...consider it necessary to reinforce GVN ground forces with about twenty battalion equivalents...since these forces cannot be raised by the GVN they must inevitably come from US sources..." This was a significant new request, but the Secretary of State did not even question the assumptions of the armed forces. Instead, he informed the US ambassador that he would be readily acquiescing in the demands of the armed forces.⁴⁰ Rusk's view of the world and his deeprooted respect for the military caused him to urge the President to widen the US commitment to the region.

Dean Rusk's advice was perhaps the most important because of his position in the Johnson White House. Like LBJ, Rusk had felt out of place in the Kennedy administration. He had felt ill at ease in this world of cocktail parties and East Coast intellectuals. Most of all he had despised Kennedy's freewheeling style in government. There were even rumours that Kennedy planned to replace Rusk after the 1964 election. When Lyndon Johnson became President in November 1963, Rusk suddenly became an important figure. LBJ liked and respected Dean Rusk. He and the Secretary of State had already struck up a good working

39 D. Di Leo, *George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment* (Chapel Hill, UNC, 1991) p.102

40 FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.603 Telegram from Rusk to Taylor April 22 1965

relationship during Johnson's years in the wilderness of the Vice Presidency. Rusk had assigned the Vice President a Foreign Service Officer so that he would receive briefings on foreign affairs. LBJ also shared Rusk's hatred of the Kennedy management style.⁴¹ One of his first acts was to fire the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Roger Hilsman, who Rusk particularly disliked because of his disdain for bureaucratic channels and the chain of command. Moreover, the two men shared a common background which brought them closer together. Rusk had risen from an extremely humble background in Cherokee County Georgia, and the President also came from a modest background in Texas. Two southerners in this world of East Coast intellectuals, they formed an extremely close personal friendship. Rusk recalled that, " we often reminisced about our southern upbringings and our rural pasts."⁴² The President often stated, " I love that Dean." Rusk himself admitted that " our official relationship was reinforced by personal friendship."⁴³ But the President had tremendous respect for the Secretary's credentials. Dean Rusk had won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford as a young man. And Lyndon Johnson who had been educated at San Marcos State Teachers college in Texas was impressed by such a qualification. Even more importantly , the Secretary was loyal to the President. There would be no leaks and no criticism of the President from Dean Rusk. And LBJ prized loyalty. Rusk was undoubtedly the man who was closest to the President, and his advice had perhaps the greatest impact on the President. Walt Rostow who would later succeed McGeorge Bundy as the President's National Security

41 T. Schoenbaum, Waging Peace and War. Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy and Johnson administrations (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1988) p.410

42 D. Rusk, As I saw It (New York, Norton and Co. 1990)p.337

43 *ibid.* p.327

Adviser, stated in his memoirs that Rusk was " primus inter pares."⁴⁴ When Rusk suggested that US troops be sent to the Da Nang airbase in late February 1965, Johnson agreed to send US troops only days later. Bill Bundy, the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs under Johnson later claimed that that Rusk's recommendations in June and July 1965 that the United States must honor its commitment and dispatch troops to the region carried the most weight with the President.⁴⁵

44 W. W. Rostow, The Diffusion of Power. An Essay in Recent History (New York, Macmillan, 1972) p.358

45 T. Schoenbaum, Waging Peace and War. Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy and Johnson administrations (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1988)p.441

' The Man from Ford with the Stacomb.' : Secretary of Defence Robert S.**McNamara**

In the early months of the Johnson administration Robert S. McNamara was the individual in the public mind most closely associated with the Vietnam war. The press had renamed it McNamara's war. It was not a misnomer. The brilliant Secretary of Defence was the cabinet official most heavily involved in the decision making process and the most forceful advocate of the US role in South Vietnam. McNamara shared his colleagues belief in the existence of a Communist threat. For McNamara the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam, was part of a wider plot of the Chinese Communists to overrun the whole of Southeast Asia and ultimately threaten the security of the United States. The Defence Secretary was also a believer in the superiority of American technology; his years at the Ford Motor Company had left him with an abiding belief in the effectiveness of American technology. McNamara was also a statistician by training. The war could be viewed in terms of numbers and figures. If the North Vietnamese inflicted heavy losses on the South more troops could be sent in to counter the increased size of the North Vietnamese forces. Together these three beliefs caused the Secretary of Defence to support the growing US commitment to South Vietnam and to strongly recommend a massive escalation of the war throughout 1965. Bundy have had his own personal doubts. McNamara did not have any in 1965. Throughout the period he deployed all the figures and arguments he possessed to persuade the President to widen the war.

In late 1963 and throughout 1964 there was talk of neutralisation in government

circles, and the Secretary of Defence acted quickly to quash it. Mike Mansfield's memorandum of January 1964 arguing for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam and neutralisation produced a visceral reaction from McNamara. Neutralisation in McNamara's world would lead to the creation of a Communist controlled state. He warned the President that the neutralisation of South Vietnam would inevitably lead to the formation of a government run by Communists.⁴⁶ In March of 1964 he contemptuously dismissed the plan for neutralisation put forward by French President Charles De Gaulle. De Gaulle's ideas, he warned, would allow the Communists to entrench themselves in power in South Vietnam.⁴⁷ The Secretary of Defence clearly found such an idea unpalatable. He was convinced that conceding South Vietnam to the Communists would only encourage them to continue their activities in Asia. His memorandum of January 1964 reflected his fears. In it he declared that "the consequences of a Communist dominated Vietnam are extremely serious for the rest of Southeast Asia and the US position in the rest of Asia..."⁴⁸

Throughout the period, the Defense Secretary vigorously fought any suggestions for the withdrawal of US forces. Once he had made a decision he hated to be contradicted or challenged. He had examined the facts and the figures, and was convinced of the rightness of his course. Dissent tended to incur McNamara's wrath. When George Ball sent McNamara a copy of his first memorandum which questioned the presence and the role of the United States in South Vietnam, the Defense Secretary was apoplectic. Ball recalled that he " was

46 FRUS. Vietnam. 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1992)p.13 Memo from McNamara to LBJ January 7 1964

47 ibid. p.158 Memo from McNamara to LBJ March 16 1964

48 ibid. p. 13 Memo from McNamara to LBJ January 7 1964

absolutely horrified and treated the memorandum like a poisonous snake." McNamara was clearly infuriated by such opposition to a policy which he had given his seal of approval to. Ball in his opinion was "out of line."⁴⁹ During the July meetings when the administration was considering the massive increase in US forces, McNamara was clearly disturbed by Ball's suggestion that the United States should cut its losses and leave Vietnam. At the July meeting McNamara argued that the Under Secretary was seriously underestimating the effect of withdrawal from Vietnam. He strongly supported the position of the Secretary of State.⁵⁰

McNamara was also an extremely active man by nature, a trait which he shared with the President. This proclivity for action manifested itself in the Defense Secretary's eagerness for action in South Vietnam. In December 1963, Johnson who was becoming aware of the mess which he had inherited from Kennedy sent the widely admired McNamara on a fact-finding mission to South Vietnam. McNamara had noticed that the South Vietnamese seemed incapable of waging war effectively. The energetic Defense Secretary immediately began to consider some form of action to bolster the South Vietnamese. He suggested to the President that the administration should be "preparing for more forceful moves if the situation does not show early early signs of improvement."⁵¹ In March 1964 McNamara's position on Vietnam was becoming increasingly hawkish. He recommended that planning for a graduated bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese in which US forces would participate

49 J. Bill, George Ball. Behind the scenes in US Foreign Policy (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997) p.162

50 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.196 Memo of meeting by C. Cooper July 21 1965

51 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971)p.496 Memo from McNamara to LBJ December 21 1963

should begin. Admittedly the Secretary did express his opposition to the idea that US ground troops should be sent to South Vietnam. As mentioned earlier, he believed that it would have a damaging psychological effect on the South Vietnamese war effort because it would contradict the statements of the US government that the South Vietnamese were winning the war.

The incompetence of the South Vietnamese army and government intensified the Secretary's fears. By January 1965, he was urging the President to change course in Vietnam and embark upon a sustained bombing campaign. The Secretary acknowledged that such a campaign would have little military impact. It was designed to help boost the morale of the South Vietnamese. When the air campaign failed to have any effect on either the South Vietnamese or the North Vietnamese, McNamara's thoughts began to drift towards deeper involvement. At a meeting of the National Security Council on April 1 1965, he "agreed that we could not force the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese to change their policy through the present program alone."⁵² One of the President's most important advisers had now signed on to a plan to send troops to South Vietnam. In April 1965 only days after LBJ had agreed to change the mission of the marines in South Vietnam, McNamara met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and General Westmoreland to discuss their demands for more troops. The Secretary yielded to almost all their demands. At the meeting, McNamara argued that the introduction of US troops might have an impact on the war against the Viet Cong.⁵³ He returned to Washington, and sent a memorandum to the President, telling him that neither he nor any of

52 R. McNamara, *In Retrospect. The Tragedy and the Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, Random House, 1995) p.143

53 FRUS. *Vietnam January-June 1965* (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p.578 Record of meeting at Honolulu April 21 1965

his military advisers "expects the DRV/VC to capitulate."⁵⁴ LBJ's advisers all suggested that 82,000 troops be sent to South Vietnam.

In late June LBJ asked of all of his advisers for their opinions and recommendations. McNamara's memorandum advocated a massive increase in the number of US forces serving in South Vietnam, and mining the North Vietnamese harbours. The Secretary of Defense argued that the war was clearly becoming a conventional war, and that in such a situation, US forces would have few difficulties in locating and than fighting the enemy. In July 1965 he paid a visit to Vietnam to establish General Westmoreland's requirements⁵⁵ McNamara did not ask the US Commander if his strategy would work or if US troops could fight in the jungle effectively.

On his return, he sent a memorandum to the President outlining his recommendations. The memorandum was carefully phrased to give the President the impression that he had little choice but to escalate the war. McNamara gave the President three options in Vietnam. The President could either withdraw, continue in Vietnam at existing levels or escalate the war against the Viet Cong.⁵⁶ Yet his analysis of the first two options effectively left the President with only one option. Withdrawal, he argued would be "very damaging" to the United States', " future effectiveness on the world scene." Staying in South Vietnam in an advisory role would not solve any of the problems which now faced the US President. The situation in Vietnam was now desperate, and Westmoreland would ask for more troops soon. By then it

54 *ibid.* p.575 Memo from McNamara to LBJ April 21 1965

55 *FRUS. Vietnam June-December 1965* (Washington, US GPO, 1996) Telegram from McNamara to Ambassador Taylor July 11 1965

56 *ibid.* p.174 Memo from McNamara to LBJ July 20 1965

might be too late for US troops to have an impact on the war, and one of the dominoes would have fallen.⁵⁷ Bill Moyers, Johnson's young aide, later stated the Secretary's analysis "presumed rejection," of the first two options.⁵⁸ The Defense Secretary then urged the President to send a further thirty four battalions to the region. The Secretary of Defense was convinced that American firepower would produce the results the administration sought. His plan he confidently stated stood " a good chance of achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time in Vietnam."⁵⁹

Robert McNamara's recommendations had added force because of the close relationship he enjoyed with the President. In the early years of the Johnson administration McNamara was ascendant. McNamara was renowned in government circles and in the press for his prodigious memory and his powerful intellect. If Bob McNamara was directing a war, it could not possibly go wrong. The fact that McNamara had never failed in any of his jobs must certainly have made an impression on the President. In any case, Lyndon Johnson had been in awe of him from his very first cabinet meeting in 1961. After watching all these bright men sitting round the cabinet table, he had rushed back to tell his mentor Sam Rayburn about them, especially "the man from Ford with the stacomb." Later on, when Johnson had lost confidence in his Secretary of Defence, he would become just the, " man who had headed Ford for a week."⁶⁰ But in 1964 and 1965, Johnson was enamoured with his Defense Secretary.

57 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p. 174 Memo from McNamara to LBJ July 20 1965

58 PBS Television Documentary. Vietnam (1983)

59 FRUS. Vietnam. July-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO,1996)p.179 Memo from McNamara to LBJ July 20 1965

60 D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York,Random House, 1972)p.305

According to Jack Valenti, Johnson's aide, the President trusted McNamara implicitly.⁶¹ Valenti later stated that LBJ, thought "that McNamara was divinely inspired at times because his mind had computer-like serenity."⁶² Indeed, the President was so in awe of McNamara's abilities that he even asked him to be his running mate in the 1964 election. McNamara was the cabinet official invited the most to spend weekends at Camp David with the President. Moreover McNamara was loyal to Johnson. He never cultivated relations on Capitol Hill and relied on the President to protect him. Johnson was obsessed that all his advisers were "in bed with the Kennedys." McNamara was identified with the Kennedy clan, but he showed a fierce commitment to the President. At meetings McNamara was also extremely impressive. He overwhelmed his colleagues with his mastery of facts, details and figures. And he used these figures extremely skilfully to support his arguments. George Ball always feared McNamara because his use of ratios and percentages would make Ball's own arguments appear to be superficial and implausible. Indeed Ball later came to believe that McNamara had manufactured these details to support his arguments. McNamara's demeanour at these meetings gave more credibility to his arguments. The Secretary of Defence would not make his statements with the quiet assurance which was so characteristic of Dean Rusk. He would put his case across with force and would unleash a torrent of arguments and numbers to undermine his opponents. An argument put forward by Bob McNamara was expressed with such authority, such conviction, such clarity that it was almost impossible not to be swayed by

61 J. Valenti, A Very Human President (USA, Vai Ballou Press, 1975)p.325

62 D. Di Leo, George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment (Chapel Hill, University of North Craolina Press, 1991)p.131

it. Considering that Johnson viewed McNamara's recommendations in an extremely uncritical light, it is clear that McNamara's opinion was clearly valued by the President and persuaded him to launch an aerial campaign and to send troops to South Vietnam.

'No liberal egghead intellectual' : Under Secretary of State George Ball

George Ball was the one individual who consistently opposed the plans to escalate the war in Vietnam. Ball was a savvy lawyer, with a sharp iconoclastic mind. Although he was Under Secretary of State and a Europeanist by inclination, Vietnam did not escape his attention. In the 1950s Ball had been a legal counsel to the French government and had witnessed the desperate efforts of the French to maintain its hold on its colony of Indochina. Ball had seen how the war had sapped French morale and provoked domestic criticism. The Under Secretary remained extremely wary of any attempts to become further involved and throughout the period fought against the US commitment to Vietnam. He was vehemently opposed both to the aerial campaign and the decision to send US ground forces to the region. In June of 1965 he audaciously suggested that the United States should withdraw its support and seek a negotiated settlement. Every possible argument was deployed to persuade President Johnson that Vietnam was a death trap for the United States. Some of his arguments bordered on heresy. Ball dismissed the contention that Vietnam was essential to US national security, and rejected the domino theory in Southeast Asia. He also suggested that the United States armed forces would not be successful in fighting a guerilla war in South Vietnam. Knowing that Johnson's priorities lay in domestic policy, he argued that mounting casualties in South Vietnam would arouse domestic opposition and undermine the President. The Under Secretary also tried to convince LBJ and his advisers that America's allies did not think highly of the United States for becoming involved in Vietnam.

The Under Secretary was extremely skeptical about the bombing campaign which

Bundy, Rusk, Taylor and McNamara seemed to be advocating so enthusiastically. A former member of the Strategic Bombing Command in World War II, he believed that bombing actually tended to increase the morale of the enemy.⁶³ A war game played by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in April 1964 appeared to support his thesis. In May 1964, clearly worried about the direction of US policy in Vietnam, he asked his superior Dean Rusk "Why are we contemplating an air action against the North in the face of a recently played war game which demonstrated the ineffectiveness of such a tactic?"⁶⁴ Ball's question went unheard and unanswered.

In 1965 most policymakers still accepted the domino theory unquestioningly. But not George Ball. He once wrote that "the great captains of history drew their lessons from complex chess, not simple dominoes."⁶⁵ Bundy, Rusk, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs had in Ball's opinion rushed headlong into a course of action without any discussion of the assumptions which were guiding US foreign policy. He was not convinced that the loss of South Vietnam would lead to the fall of the rest of Southeast Asia. Ball did not even view the war in Vietnam as part of an international conspiracy. It was the legacy of years of domination by foreign countries. From May 1964 to July 1965, Ball raised searching questions about the importance of South Vietnam to the United States and suggested that the United States reach a compromise settlement and withdraw. In an undated memorandum to the President in July

63 PBS Television Documentary (1983)

64 FRUS. Vietnam, 1964 (Washington, US GPO 1992)p.404 Personal letter and Memo from Ball to Dean Rusk May 31 1964

65 D. Di Leo, George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991)p.64

1965 he suggested that "we have tended to exaggerate the losses involved in a compromise settlement in South Vietnam." According to Ball, US influence would not decline if South Vietnam were to fall. He noted that " a compromise settlement in South Vietnam should not have a major impact on the credibility of our commitments around the world. "⁶⁶

In Bundy's and McNamara's opinion, America had the best trained, and best equipped forces in the world. It was inconceivable in their minds that the United States might actually lose in Vietnam. Remembering the experiences of the French in the 1950s who had been backed by the United States, Ball was not so sure. The Vietnamese were an enemy with a cause, and no amount of guns, men and helicopters could persuade them to end the insurgency. In a private memorandum to Dean Rusk in May 1964, he informed him that "the history of the Viet Cong has been that of carrying on underground when necessary...they did not give up a plan that has now been in existence for more than two decades..."⁶⁷ The Under Secretary was also extremely uncertain that the Viet Cong would be accommodating enough to wage a conventional war against the US armed forces. At the important July meetings in 1965, he pointedly asked the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle Wheeler "isn't it possible that the VC will do what they did against the French - stay away from confrontation and not accommodate us ? "⁶⁸ While the rest of Johnson's advisers were anticipating US victories in the field, George Ball was contemplating the type of terrain which US troops would have fight on, and if they could achieve the successes predicted by the confident Bundy and Rusk. In April

⁶⁶ FRUS. Vietnam June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO,1996)p.108 Memo from Ball to LBJ undated

⁶⁷ FRUS. Vietnam 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1992)p.403 Memo from Ball to Rusk May 31 1964

⁶⁸ FRUS. Vietnam June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO 1996) p.192 Record of meeting July 21 1965

1965 when Johnson was beginning to consider the possibility of sending troops to South Vietnam, Ball warned the President that summer in Vietnam was the rainy season and suggested that the Viet Cong would prosper since they were not reliant on motor transport in the way that the Americans and South Vietnamese were.⁶⁹ In June 1965, seeing that the escalation was gaining momentum, the Under Secretary urged LBJ not to make an open ended commitment to South Vietnam. They needed to have evidence that American troops would "not bog down in the jungles and rice paddies..." He continued to emphasise this point; in a later memorandum the Under Secretary told the President "we would run the grave risk of bogging down an indeterminate number of American troops in a protracted and bloody conflict."⁷⁰ And once US forces were committed, Ball noted it would be extremely difficult for the United States to extricate itself from the imbroglio in South Vietnam. Ball warned the President "the more forces we deploy the harder we shall find it to extricate ourselves without unacceptable costs if the war goes badly."⁷¹

George Ball was a shrewd individual. He knew that he that he could not hope to attract Lyndon Johnson's attention by making an argument based on moral grounds. And so he used ideas which would make an impact on the President. Ball knew that Johnson was a skilled domestic politician. He warned the President that the American people would not tolerate a long drawn conflict and would oppose him if US casualties mounted. Ball even invoked the example of the Korean war to convince the President that another war in the Far

69 FRUS. Vietnam January-June 1965 (Washington,US GPO, 1996)p.591 Memo from Ball to LBJ April 21 1965

70 FRUS. Vietnam June-December 1965 (Washington,US GPO, 1996)p.18 Memo from Ball to LBJ June 18 1965

71 *ibid.* p.19 Memo from Ball to LBJ June 18 1965

East would create domestic opposition just as it had done for Harry S. Truman in 1952. The ultimate domino in the domino theory was the Presidency itself. Ball was clearly determined to shock the President. In ominous language he argued in his memorandum of October 1964, that "the frustrations and anxieties [of the American people] that marked the latter phase of the Korean war would be recalled and revived - and multiplied in intensity."⁷² In April 1965 he told the President that he doubted that the American people would tolerate massive casualties if the war was not ended swiftly.⁷³ And Ball was not convinced that American power would rapidly put an end to this particular war.

Most of George Ball's colleagues believed that the United States prestige and reputation was at stake in Vietnam. In their scenario Uncle Sam would lose credibility in the eyes of her allies if she failed to meet the Communist threat in Vietnam. Ball did agree with his colleagues that American prestige was at stake in South Vietnam. But his logic differed from his colleagues. From his extensive contacts with America's European partners, Ball had discovered that they were not particularly impressed by America's show of power in South Vietnam. Indeed Ball was fearful that America might be seen as the aggressor in this conflict. In his first memorandum in 1964, he forecast that the United States "could well find ourselves in a position not wholly dissimilar from that of Britain and France at Suez. World opinion could well be against us."⁷⁴ In July 1965 he was even more explicit. He informed the President that "the principal anxiety of our NATO allies is that we have become too pre-occupied with

72 J. Bill, *George Ball. Behind the Scenes in US Foreign Policy* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1997)p. 165

73 FRUS. *Vietnam, January-June 1965* (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.591 Memo from Ball to LBJ April 21 1965

74 FRUS. *Vietnam. 1964* (Washington,US GPO, 1992) p.404 Memo from Ball to Dean Rusk May 31 1964

an area which seems to them an irrelevance..." According to the Under Secretary they were more than willing to accept a settlement in Vietnam. He strongly contended that America's European friends would actually respect the United States more for negotiating a settlement.⁷⁵

The distinct lack of a stable, coherent government in South Vietnam seemed to George Ball an extremely good justification for American withdrawal. The United States had made a commitment to the government of the Republic of South Vietnam. In Ball's opinion, the United States was now effectively backing an army not a country. In July 1965 Ball in his typical forthright way declared in one of his memoranda " by and large the world knows that the government in Saigon is a joke..." No-one in his sane mind according to Ball would interpret a US withdrawal from Vietnam " as a failure to keep its commitments."⁷⁶ In one last desperate attempt to persuade the President to seek a way out of Vietnam, he told him that the Vietnam war was in effect a lost cause. He caustically remarked " the government in Saigon is a travesty. In a very real sense, South Vietnam is a country with an army and no government...a deep commitment of American forces in South Vietnam...would be a catastrophic error."⁷⁷

George Ball failed in his quest to stop the bombing campaign and the commitment of US ground forces in action. Yet he had not failed because Lyndon Johnson despised dissent against an established policy. LBJ tolerated and later encouraged Ball to develop his thoughts. The President had come to respect this astute individual who had succeeded in the cut-throat

75 FRUS. Vietnam June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) p.112 Memo from Ball to LBJ undated

76 *ibid.* p.66 Memo from Ball to LBJ June 18 1965

77 *ibid.* p.115 Memo from Ball to LBJ undated

world of lawyers and international statesmen. And besides, Dean Rusk liked and supported Ball. That gave Ball's position in the White House added credibility. Nor was Ball afraid to speak his mind, and LBJ admired that quality. Jack Valenti recalled that " there were two things about Ball which Johnson admired. One was that he had great courage and the other was that he was a man of literate grace."⁷⁸ Finally, Ball was extremely loyal to the President. Whilst he was willing to argue against the policy favoured by most of the President's advisers, he would not make his dissent public. Indeed he often defended US policy in Vietnam in speeches and interviews.

Some historians have suggested that the Under Secretary's dissent and the meetings in July 1965 were part of an elaborate charade on the part of Lyndon Johnson to show to historians that he considered all possible options before going to war. Ball himself hotly refuted this idea. His dissent was original thought. Lyndon Johnson did not even see Ball's May and October memoranda of 1964. Admittedly, immediately before the July meetings Cyrus Vance, the Deputy Secretary of Defence had cabled Robert McNamara in Vietnam informing him that he had met with the President to discuss future policy in Vietnam. He reported "it is his current intention to proceed with the 34 battalion plan."⁷⁹ However, George Ball had known that Lyndon Johnson had altered his decisions on occasions in the past, and the cable indicated that it was LBJ's current intention to send the thirty four battalions. When asked by his biographer if the July meetings were a charade, Ball replied that the President and

78 D. Di Leo, George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991)p.126

79 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.38 Cable from Vance to McNamara June 19 1965

his officials were extremely busy people. They simply did not have time, in his words "to play games."⁸⁰

Ball's recommendations did appear to make an impression on the President. Bill Moyers who finally passed Ball's October memorandum to the President in February 1965 told Ball that the President was impressed by some of Ball's arguments.⁸¹ In April 1965 the President asked Ball to investigate all possible means of withdrawal from Vietnam. In his sessions with the military, he asked the very same questions which Ball himself had raised on numerous occasions. But Ball - the one man in the administration who appeared to have long term vision - went unheard. Ball's failure was in part due to the opposition to his plans on the part of the three White House heavyweights, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara. In addition although he was an influential figure, he did not hold cabinet rank, and this worked against him. Dean Rusk was still the US Secretary of State and his opinion carried more weight. Bill Bundy the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs noted that "if Ball had been secretary...McNamara would have paid more attention and I dare say so would the President."⁸²

Ball often used the failure of the French in 1954 to support his contention that the United States could not win in Vietnam. Unfortunately his colleagues soon wearied of the French analogy, and dismissed his views. Besides, relations between France and the United States were at an all time low. Vetoing Britain's application to the EEC and developing a force

⁸⁰ Personal interview with Jim Bill February 21 1997

⁸¹ D. Di Leo, *George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991)p.115

⁸² *ibid.* p.111

de frappe had not endeared them to the Americans. Comparing the United States to France irritated his colleagues in government. Bill Bundy recalled "every now and then he overdid the comparison in a setting when we were so cross with the French for so many other reasons. Sometimes it became quite irritating to hear that argument."⁸³ Lyndon Johnson ultimately rejected the advice offered to him by his Under Secretary of State, but he did so after careful consideration and much thought.

⁸³ D. Di Leo, George Ball, Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991) p.121

The Ambassador: General Maxwell Taylor

Max Taylor had gone to Saigon in August 1964 to replace Henry Cabot Lodge. Taylor was the individual who argued in the 1950s that Dulles and Eisenhower had erred in their reliance on nuclear weapons and the doctrine of massive retaliation. The United States should be prepared to fight local wars according to Taylor. The situation in Saigon appeared to be extremely precarious when Max Taylor had left. If anyone could bring order out of the chaos in South Vietnam it was Maxwell Taylor. Yet even the cool efficient Taylor struggled in the midst of plots, conspiracies and riots. This was not the sort of war which American soldiers should be fighting in. Moreover, the South Vietnamese did not seem to Taylor even willing to fight the Viet Cong. The Ambassador believed that airstrikes against the North might encourage the South Vietnamese to continue the war, but he was extremely suspicious of sending US troops into this quagmire. It would encourage the South to slacken their efforts and allow the United States to wage the war. Taylor strongly objected to the demand of the military for US troops, but by July 1965 he had lost the battle and had concurred in the recommendation of the JCS to escalate the war.

The Ambassador was not recommending an aerial campaign against the North in the first six months of his stay in Vietnam. He recommended airstrikes in response to specific atrocities committed against American forces. Maxwell Taylor arrived in Saigon at a time when the Viet Cong appeared to be stepping up their campaign. On several occasions US bases were the subject of their attacks. Just before the November election the Viet Cong had attacked the base at Bien Hoa, and immediately before Christmas, the Brinks hotel was

bombed. Max Taylor was reportedly infuriated by such an attack; for him this was an insult to the American flag. On both occasions he recommended swift retribution in the form of airstrikes against the North Vietnamese. On both occasions the Johnson administration rejected his recommendations.

Taylor was witnessing firsthand the political squabbles and factionalism in the Saigon government. He wanted to use American power against the North, but he was suspicious of the depth of the South Vietnamese commitment to the war, and he urged the President not to escalate the war any further. At a meeting in Washington in September 1964 the Ambassador, accepted that the United States "would have to act more forcefully against the North." He added that he was not convinced that the time was propitious to begin such a campaign.⁸⁴ In November 1964 he again stressed that the political infighting must cease before the United States would embark upon any campaign. For Taylor, this would be an indication that the South Vietnamese were committed to the war. In a telegram to the Department of State he wrote "it is highly desirable to have...minimum government before accepting the risks inherent in any escalation programme."⁸⁵

But like so many others who experienced Saigonese politics, Taylor soon came to despair of the willingness of the South Vietnamese to create an orderly stable government. In late December when the South Vietnamese had overthrown one in a long line of civilian governments Max Taylor could restrain himself no longer. Summoning the heads of the South

⁸⁴ FRUS. Vietnam, 1964 (Washington, US GPO, 1992) Record of meeting September 9 1964

⁸⁵ Declassified Documents. Department of State Cable from Taylor to Rusk November 10 1964

Vietnamese military he unleashed his fury, and dressed them down as if they were lowly cadets. He warned them "we cannot carry on forever if you do things like this."⁸⁶ His frustration with the situation manifested itself in his final telegram of 1964 where he even contemplated disengagement from South Vietnam. This though was an unusual telegram from the Ambassador. Taylor was no George Ball. He firmly believed in the US role in Vietnam and in the theory of containment. Rather than using the shambles in Saigon as an excuse for withdrawal Taylor now began to press for an aerial campaign to bolster an ailing government and help raise its morale. In November 1964 Taylor had had told Secretary Rusk that "an attack [against the North] would...give pulmotor treatment for a government in extremis."⁸⁷ Political exhortations were clearly ineffectual. In January 1965 Taylor sent an extremely pessimistic cable to Washington, informing them that there was constant political infighting in both the government and the armed forces. The United States could not expect anything more "than marginal government...with continued decline of national morale-unless something new is added to make up for those things we cannot control." Something new was an aerial campaign against North Vietnam. Taylor harboured no illusions about the strategic impact of airstrikes. He hoped that a campaign would halt the decline in South Vietnam and perhaps convince the North Vietnamese to end their support of the insurgency. In the cable he admitted to the President that he agreed with him that " this guerilla war cannot be won from the air."⁸⁸ But still LBJ procrastinated. When McGeorge Bundy was present in South

⁸⁶ Declassified Documents. Department of State. Cable from Taylor to Rusk December 27 1964

⁸⁷ *ibid.* Cable from Taylor to Rusk November 10 1964

⁸⁸ FRUS. Vietnam January-June 1965 (Washington,US GPO, 1996)p. 6-11

Vietnam at the time of the bombing at Pleiku in February 1965, Taylor saw his opportunity. The Ambassador hoped to use the incident to launch a sustained bombing campaign. He cabled Washington stating that he would appreciate prompt decisions...for reprisal attacks." He suggested that the United States should not simply respond to specific atrocities committed by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese any longer. The administration should now launch the full scale aerial campaign against the North Vietnamese in response to general actions of the Viet Cong. Taylor noted that " it would be tantamount to the so-called Phase II escalation..."⁸⁹

Lyndon Johnson finally acted on Taylor's advice and implemented Operation Rolling Thunder in late February 1965. However, Taylor's policy had significant repercussions. American troops would be needed to protect the planes. William C. Westmoreland the US Commander in Vietnam had a low opinion of the South Vietnamese, and did not think them able to provide the security for the US airbase at Da Nang. Taylor understood why US troops would be needed at Da Nang, but feared that sending one battalion would create an inexorable movement to send more troops to the region. He fired off a cable expressing strong opposition to the introduction of American troops. He argued that "Once this policy is breached, it will be very difficult to hold the line..." The Ambassador was certain that the mere presence of US soldiers in South Vietnam would encourage the South Vietnamese to allow the United States to bear the burden in South Vietnam.⁹⁰ Westmoreland's request was granted

89 Declassified Documents. Department of State Cable from Taylor to Rusk February 9 1965

90 FRUS. Vietnam. January -June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) Cable from Taylor to Rusk February 22 1965

in spite of his opposition. And just as Max Taylor had forecast, a momentum for further escalation appeared to be building up. In April LBJ had approved the change of mission for the existing marines in South Vietnam. The ambassador was clearly unhappy; on April 17 he cabled McGeorge Bundy that the decision to use US troops in combat missions showed "a far greater willingness to get into the ground war than I had discerned in Washington." Taylor did not attempt to hide his opposition, telling Bundy "I would regard such a change in policy as disastrous in its likely effects."⁹¹

But Max Taylor could not fight the combined opinions of his colleagues. The JCS, CINPAC, and General Westmoreland were all becoming annoyed at Max Taylor's refusal to accede to their demands. And they would not secure the troops they needed unless Taylor climbed aboard. As the US ambassador, he could prevent further troop deployments arriving by refusing to clear them with the South Vietnamese. McNamara met with Taylor and the JCS at Honolulu in April 1965. At Honolulu Max Taylor lost the battle. His former colleagues on the JCS were ascendant. William C. Westmoreland in particular dominated the conference and secured some of the troops he requested. The generals had effectively worn down Taylor's resistance. From this point on Taylor was as committed as McNamara, Bundy, Rusk and Westmoreland. By May the Ambassador was supporting the opinion of the US Commander. In a telegram to the State Department in May he argued that an air assault supported by an effective campaign on the ground could alter the course of the war.⁹²

Lyndon Johnson did not like or trust the generals who served him. But Max Taylor

91 Declassified Documents. Department of State Cable from Taylor to Bundy April 17 1965

92 *ibid.* Cable from Taylor to Rusk May 16 1965

was different. He appeared to be universally admired in government circles. It was not just that he had a distinguished record in World War II. He was a general who appeared to understand the difficulties which faced the civilians in government. And he appeared to believe in civilian control of the military structure. The Joint Chiefs were rather suspicious when he had become Chairman under Kennedy. Quite simply, he was not one of them. And this suspicion endeared him even more first to John F. Kennedy, Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and then to Lyndon Johnson.⁹³ LBJ clearly had respect for the former general. Even after he had completed his stint as ambassador in South Vietnam the President continued to call upon him for advice. Taylor's conversion to the more hawkish position pushed by the military and most of Johnson's civilian advisers would have had an impact on the way the President viewed the situation in Vietnam.

93 D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York,Random House, 1972)pp.486-489

The Fringes of Power : Senator Mike Mansfield, Clark Clifford and General Dwight Eisenhower

In Congress, Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Montana), who took a particular interest in Asian affairs consistently expressed his opposition to the policy of the Johnson administration. He had begun to seriously question the US presence in Vietnam under John F. Kennedy, and his dissent continued when his old friend Lyndon Johnson became President. Mansfield had come to subscribe to the view of the French President, Charles De Gaulle that Vietnam was a "rotten country." In 1964 he gave endorsements to De Gaulle's call for the neutralisation of Vietnam and in 1965 fought the plans to escalate the war. Like George Ball, Mansfield was unconvinced that Vietnam was important to US national security, and was even more unsure of the US ability to achieve a victory in this situation. The Senator had prophetically argued that as each day passed without any sign of a willingness to leave, the United States would be drawn into a full scale war.

Mansfield had been urging Kennedy to tread extremely carefully in the quagmire in Vietnam throughout 1962 and 1963. When his former Senatorial colleague ascended to the Presidency on Kennedy's death, Mansfield did not wait long before sending his opinions to the new President. Clearly hoping to influence LBJ, he fired a volley of memoranda at him in December 1963 and January 1964. The Senator was launching a full scale assault on the convictions and ideas which underpinned US foreign policy. The thoughtful Senator did not believe that the loss of South Vietnam represented a serious threat to US national security. In his first memorandum, he pointedly asked the President "what national interests in Asia

would steel the American people for the massive costs of an ever deepening involvement...?"⁹⁴

In February, the Senator was even more blunt, telling the President "I see no national interest which would justify that plunge [in South Vietnam] and emphatically do not recommend it."

Up to this point, the war against the Viet Cong was the responsibility of the South Vietnamese. But Mansfield worried that the logic of the President and the men who surrounded him would cause America to take up the burden of the South Vietnamese. He pleaded with the President to give neutralisation of South Vietnam a chance. It might save the United States from becoming further involved in this debacle in South Vietnam. He urged the President to consider some of the ideas being put forward by the French government.⁹⁵ In May and June he publicly supported De Gaulle's call to reconvene the Geneva conference. It was "the last train out for peace in Southeast Asia."⁹⁶

Mike Mansfield's advice was being ignored by the White House. But the failure of the White House to heed the Senator's advice emboldened him to speak out more forcefully. Mansfield had noticed how the President's advisers appeared to be desperate to become involved in this war. And Mansfield was not sure that this war was worth fighting. The United States seemed more committed to the cause of an independent South Vietnam than the local population in South Vietnam. After the bombing of the US barracks at Pleiku in February 1965, the President had summoned the National Security to discuss a response. LBJ was in a particularly emotional state declaring that he would not leave American soldiers, his boys, to

94 Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, Frederick, 1985) Memo from Mansfield to LBJ December 7 1963

95 *ibid.* Memo from Mansfield to LBJ February 1 1965

96 G. Olson, Mansfield and Vietnam. A Study in Rhetorical Adaptation (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1995) p.132

fight this war unprotected. Mansfield who had remained silent as the members of the Council spoke, finally urged the President to reconsider his decision telling him "the attack has opened many eyes...It appears that the local populace in South Vietnam is not now behind us or else the Viet Cong could not have carried out their surprise attack."⁹⁷ Mansfield was determined to influence the President. Only days later he sent the President another letter again emphasising his belief that the South Vietnamese were not interested in fighting this war, and in all likelihood would not assist the United States in its campaign. In Mansfield's opinion, the United States should not help a country which was not willing to fight. He added "I am persuaded that the trend towards enlargement of the conflict...is not going to provide an answer."⁹⁸ The failure of South Vietnamese politicians to create an effective government heightened Mansfield's fears about the conflict which US troops seemed about to enter. In view of the desperate political and military situation, the Senator believed that US troops would be mired down in a war without end. On June 9th Mansfield sent yet another memorandum to the President telling him that the United States was "no longer dealing with anyone who represents anybody in a political sense." If the United States stayed the course in Vietnam, she might well be trapped there for decades. Once again he urged Johnson "to stop waiting for signals," and, "launch a powerful diplomatic peace offensive to try to get to a conference table."⁹⁹ To the end, Mansfield remained implacably opposed to any moves to escalate the war. In a meeting just before President Johnson announced that more troops

97 G. Olson, Mansfield and Vietnam. A Study in Rhetorical Adaptation (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 199) p.142

98 *ibid.* p.143

99 Memoranda of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. 1963-1966. McGeorge Bundy (University Publications of America, Frederick, 1985) Memo from Mansfield to LBJ June 9 1965

would be sent to Vietnam, he candidly told LBJ that the United States had no commitment to South Vietnam and should seek a negotiated settlement.¹⁰⁰

Mike Mansfield like George Ball had failed to persuade the President to change course in Vietnam. His relationship to the President was partly responsible for his failure to shape the course of events. The Senator might have been regarded in congressional circles as the expert on Far Eastern Affairs, but Johnson was not especially in awe of him in the way that he was of Kennedy's men. Mike Mansfield had been LBJ's protégé in Congress; the then Senator Majority Leader had appointed him to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the 1950s and when he had left Congress for the executive branch, he had championed Mike Mansfield's campaign to become Senate Majority Leader.¹⁰¹ The relationship between the two was far from equal. Mansfield owed his position to Lyndon Johnson and everyone knew it. When LBJ had left Congress in 1961, Mansfield allowed the Vice President to keep his office in the Senate. While the President listened to the opinions of the Senate Majority Leader in 1964 and 1965, he did not defer to his recommendations in the way that he did to Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara. These men towered above Mansfield in Johnson's world, and their recommendations almost inevitably carried more weight with the President.

The lawyer in the White House: Clark Clifford.

Bundy, Rusk and McNamara had all given their approval. But LBJ was seeking as many opinions as possible. He turned to Clark Clifford, servant and friend to two Democratic

100 FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO,1996)p.304 Record of meeting in the White House July 27 1965

101 G. Olson, Mansfield and Vietnam. A Study in Rhetorical Adaptation (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1995) pp.87-88

Presidents, for his opinion on this war in Vietnam. Clifford had been at the side of Harry Truman when the future of democracy in Europe and the Far East appeared to be facing a massive threat from the Soviet Union. Clifford however was, as Lyndon Johnson would find out, not in favour of US intervention in this particular crisis.

Clifford had come to realise that bombing alone would not persuade the Viet Cong to abandon their insurgency; only a massive influx of US ground troops could possibly have that effect, and Clark Clifford was unsure if they could fight in the jungles of Asia. Clifford had supported Truman's police action in Korea, but the terrain there was very different to that of Vietnam. When LBJ sought his opinion in late spring of 1965, Clifford was not afraid to question the assumptions of Johnson's main policymakers. In a letter to the President, he expressed considerable disquiet about the rush into this war. The confidence in American power which was so redolent of a Bundy or a Rusk memorandum was noticeably missing in this letter. His analysis was extremely gloomy. Clifford informed the President "this could be a quagmire. It could turn into an open ended commitment on our part that would take more and more ground troops without a realistic hope for victory." The US success in driving the Communists back in Korea did not automatically mean that the United States troops would sweep all before them. Vietnam was not Korea stated Clifford. The physical conditions, and the terrain were completely different.¹⁰² When the JCS confidently predicted that US troops would, "cream" the enemy, Clifford was not persuaded. He told the President "I don't think they are being straight with us."¹⁰³ Clifford had attracted the President's attention. He

¹⁰² FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.672 Letter from Clifford to LBJ May 17 1965
¹⁰³ C. Clifford, Counsel to the President. A memoir (New York, Random House, 1991)p.415

summoned him for one final consultation at Camp David in late July 1965. But Clifford faced a task of Herculean proportions. Robert S. McNamara was also present at the discussion, and Clifford had to defeat his arguments to win over the President.

Clifford tried to reassure Lyndon Johnson that the consequences of a tactical withdrawal in Vietnam were not as dire as Bundy, Rusk and McNamara were contending. Vietnam did not appear to be a major battleground in the Cold War in Clifford's opinion. And with Defense Secretary McNamara watching intently, he told the President that the United States' international prestige would not be damaged in the long term by a failure to fight in Vietnam. He advised the President to "pick the spots where the stakes are highest for us and where we have the greatest ability to prevail." If the President chose to approve McNamara's course, Clifford dramatically declared that he could not "see anything but catastrophe", for his country.¹⁰⁴

Like Bundy, Rusk and McNamara, Clifford enjoyed the President's respect and admiration, a privilege granted to few men. In addition Clifford was beholden to no man. He was a well established Washington lawyer and was independent of the President. But Clark Clifford, counsel to two former Presidents, had perhaps entered this bureaucratic battle too late to be able to influence the course adopted by the President. He himself noted that the President did not reply to his letter of May 1965 urging a withdrawal, and during his discussions with the President in late July, Lyndon Johnson had cut short the discussion. And although this elegant Washington lawyer described himself as a close associate of the

104 C. Clifford, Counsel to the President. A Memoir (New York, Random House, 1991)pp.419-420

President, he was not as close to LBJ as Bundy, Rusk and McNamara were. He simply did not have the access to the President needed to influence him. He had informed the President of his opinions on only two or three occasions. By contrast Bundy, Rusk and McNamara had numerous opportunities to influence the President. When Clifford succeeded McNamara as Secretary of Defence in 1968, he was instrumental in convincing the President to suspend the bombing and enter negotiations.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

As President, Dwight Eisenhower had ruled against intervention in Indochina in 1954 when the French were on the brink of collapsing. Eisenhower had been extremely careful during his tenure about sending US troops into combat. But he was also a patriot and a soldier. If the United States had made a commitment, the US government must fulfil that commitment. In two meetings with the President, Eisenhower urged him to send as many troops to the region to achieve a victory against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese.

Shortly after authorising the first retaliation strikes in February 1965 against the North Vietnamese, Lyndon Johnson met with the former President, to ask his opinions on Vietnam. Ike was after all the victor of campaigns in North Africa, and most famously Europe in 1944. And as President, he had presided over numerous foreign policy crises in Europe, the Far East and Africa. Eisenhower acknowledged that the situation in South Vietnam "was going to pieces, " and that it would take a monumental effort to rescue the region from the clutches of the Communists. But declared the former President, that was no excuse to leave the area. The United States government had committed the flag. And as Eisenhower himself had once said,

if you commit the US flag, you commit it to win. In Guatemala in 1954 he had authorised the use of American air power to support an American backed invasion, and in 1961 after the Bay of Pigs debacle, he had lectured the bewildered Kennedy for his failure to give air support to the invasion of the CIA trained force. In his meeting with LBJ, Eisenhower dispensed similar advice. He told the President "the US has put its prestige onto the proposition of keeping Southeast Asia free...we cannot let the Indo-Chinese peninsula go...when we say we will help other countries we must then be staunch." The former President expressed a hope that forces would not be needed, but if the situation called for US forces the President should deploy them.¹⁰⁵ Eisenhower warned the President that the air war could not defeat the North Vietnamese, but it could weaken the resolve of the Communists to continue the insurgency. It was almost the same view which LBJ had heard from his advisers. And this time it was coming from the victor of D-Day, a man who knew about war.

Johnson clearly valued the advice of the former President. In July 1965, when the momentum for an expanded war began to increase, LBJ needing guidance again turned to Eisenhower. LBJ who clearly had qualms about putting more troops in South Vietnam, asked him on the telephone if he was pursuing the correct course. Eisenhower was determined to stiffen Johnson's resolve, and repeated his February speech only this time with more emphasis. He lectured Johnson "when you once appeal to force in an international situation involving military help for a nation, you have to go all out. This is a war and as long as they (the enemy) are putting men there, my advice is do what you have to do..." Eisenhower had a large

¹⁰⁵ FRUS. Vietnam. January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.298-308 Record of meeting in the White House February 17 1965

personal investment in South Vietnam, having helped to create it in 1954, and he was certainly not going to allow Lyndon Johnson to abandon it. He declared "we are not going to be run out of a free country we helped to establish."¹⁰⁶

Dwight D. Eisenhower was a respected soldier, and a national hero. Lyndon Johnson both trusted and respected the opinions of the man who had presided over the Allied campaigns in North Africa and Normandy. In addition, Eisenhower had been in office during several international crises and had survived with his reputation intact. Consequently his advice carried great weight with a President who lacked Eisenhower's military experience, and was unsure of himself in the international arena. LBJ later wrote in his memoirs that he had tremendous respect for "the opinions of this wise and experienced man who knew so well the problems and burdens of the Presidency."¹⁰⁷ Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara were all talented men whose counsel the President actively sought. And Eisenhower's advice reinforced the recommendations of the civilians surrounding the President, and gave them added credibility in Johnson's opinion.

106 J. Burke and F. Greenstein, How Presidents Test Reality. Decisions on Vietnam 1954 and 1965 (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1989)p.209

107 L. Johnson, The Vantage Point. Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969 (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 197)p.130

The Military Advisers

Johnson's principal military advisers, the JCS, and General William Westmoreland did not like the way in which LBJ and his civilians wanted to fight this war. Fighting wars were their particular area of expertise, and they resented the restraints being placed upon them by the cautious Lyndon Johnson. If the United States would be in a war, then she would use all of her might and her power to humble her enemy. The military had come to believe that covert actions would have no effect in this troubled region, and throughout 1964 and 1965 they bombarded both Secretary of Defence McNamara and the President with memoranda urging that the administration embark on a full scale aerial campaign against the North Vietnamese. The air force was convinced that a dramatic show of American air power would have positive effects in Vietnam, while the army believed that an air war must be supported by an effective campaign on the ground. In any event they were all agreed on the use of force. Force would sap the morale and the will of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, and would persuade them to halt their activities in Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson was beginning to learn about the magnitude of the task which faced him in Vietnam in 1964. But he was a new President, untried and inexperienced in foreign policy, and so he preferred to pursue a more cautious policy in South Vietnam. The US State Department and the mission in Vietnam were ordered to make a greater effort by the President. But there was no change in policy forthcoming from the White House. The military chafed at his refusal to embark on a more vigorous policy. In January 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff complained that they were being impeded by unnecessary self-imposed restrictions. In

their opinion the US war effort was suffering because of the restraints imposed by the White House. The Joint Chiefs told the Secretary of Defence "these restrictions... all tend to make the task in Vietnam in the end more costly." The JCS argued that force would be the panacea to America's problems. They recommended a "reversal of attitude," and the adoption of a more aggressive course. They concluded by recommending that the President embark on a massive aerial campaign and commit US forces in support of the South Vietnamese units.¹⁰⁸

But the Chiefs did not have the ear of the President. They were becoming increasingly frustrated at the refusal of the civilians to unleash the forces at America's disposal. In March 1964 they sent another memorandum to the Defence Secretary arguing that "US intentions and resolve to extend the war as necessary should be clear immediately by overt military actions against the DRV."¹⁰⁹ The split between the civilians and the military revealed itself in war game in 1964 on Vietnam. The hawkish General Curtis LeMay was irritated at the limits being placed on the use of air power, and he told the President's representative, McGeorge Bundy, that the United States had to "bomb them into Stone Age," to change the course of the war. Bundy acidly replied to the general "maybe they're already there."¹¹⁰ When Max Taylor left the Pentagon for Saigon and suggested carrying out retaliatory 'tit-for-tat' raids against the North Vietnamese, the Joint Chiefs could not hide their disdain. Now one of their own members advocating the sort of campaign which was impeding the US effort in Vietnam. Earle Wheeler the Chairman of the JCS informed McNamara in November 1964 that "tit-for-

108 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971)pp 496-498

109 FRUS Vietnam, 1964 (Washington, US GPO,1992)p.117 Memo from the JCS to Secretary McNamara March 2 1964

110 D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York, Random House, 1972)p.462

tat," was restrictive, and would deny the United States any flexibility in their campaign against the Viet Cong.¹¹¹

In February 1965 LBJ had approved the bombing campaign against the North. But the army in particular was convinced that only a full scale air war combined with an effective campaign on the ground would cause the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese to end the insurgency in South Vietnam. In March 1965 Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson paid a visit to South Vietnam, and after conferring with General Westmoreland, recommended dispatching another American division.¹¹² In Saigon William Westmoreland was increasingly losing confidence in the ability of the South Vietnamese to wage an effective land campaign. He certainly did not entrust security of the US airbase at Da Nang to the ARVN, and cabled the JCS in February 1965 asking for US troops to be sent to protect the airbase.¹¹³ The Chiefs shared Westmoreland's lack of confidence in the competence of the South Vietnamese. In their view only US troops could stave off impending defeat in Vietnam. In March 1965 Wheeler sent a memorandum to McNamara urging him to dispatch US ground forces to the region. Wheeler warned the Secretary "if the present trends in South Vietnam are not reversed, the counterinsurgency campaign in South Vietnam will be lost."¹¹⁴

As the months passed, Westmoreland became more worried. The VC were stepping up their campaign and were sweeping all before them. In May 1965 they destroyed the town of

111 The Pentagon Papers (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971)p.628 Memo from JCS to Secretary McNamara November 14 1964

112 W. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (New York, Doubleday and Co, 1976)p.127

113 FRUS. Vietnam January-June 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.351 Cable from Westmoreland to Admiral Sharp CINCPAC February 23 1965

114 *ibid.* p.467 memo from JCS to Secretary McNamara March 20 1965

Song Be, and at Ba Gia in late May they routed an ARVN regiment.¹¹⁵ Defeat was looming. The US Commander cabled the JCS on June 7 1965 telling them that he saw "no course of action open...except to reinforce our efforts with additional US or third country forces." Westmoreland, like many of LBJ's civilian advisers, was extremely confident that US troops with their superior skills and equipment would reverse the tide. He wrote "I am extremely confident that US troops with their energy, mobility and firepower can successfully take the fight to the VC."¹¹⁶ In July when Johnson and his advisers were now seriously considering the commitment of US ground troops, the US Commander dispatched a final cable emphasising that the South Vietnamese could not resist the pressure from the VC without adequate support on the ground.¹¹⁷

Lyndon Johnson was extremely suspicious of the intentions of the US armed forces. He was convinced that they were seeking to drag him into a war in Vietnam. He once told his advisers "they're trying to get me into a war over there. It will destroy me. I turned them down three times last week."¹¹⁸ The President grew irritated at their insistence that he wage a massive aerial campaign in Vietnam. In March 1965, he summoned the Army Chief of Staff, Harold K. Johnson and dressed him down, telling him "you're not giving me any solutions for this damn pissant little country...I want some answers."¹¹⁹ Indeed Johnson did his utmost to keep the JCS as far away as possible. He did not wish to be seen with them and until 1965

115 W. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York, Doubleday and Co, 1976)p.136

116 FRUS. *Vietnam January-June 1965* (Washington, US GPO, 1996) pp.733-735 Cable from Westmoreland to JCS June 7 1965

117 FRUS. *Vietnam July-December 1965* (Washington, US GPO, 1996)p.1

118 L. Gardner, *Pay Any Price. Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, I. R. Dee, 1995)p.119

119 D. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, Random House, 1972)p.564

excluded them from meetings.¹²⁰ Yet the demands of the military for a bombing campaign and the use of US ground forces were all granted. The military had succeeded mainly because they had won Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara over to their point of view. McNamara had become known in Washington for his duels with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He had fought them over the military budget and the Test Ban Treaty, and had won. But this time, McNamara had not been quite as critical of the Chiefs recommendations as he had been in the past, and had accepted their advice.¹²¹ Convincing McNamara of the validity of their opinions had been a major coup for the military. McNamara, as has been seen, was a powerful member of the cabinet with influence over the President. In addition, both Mac Bundy and Dean Rusk had supported the programme of the military. The support of these important policymakers had given a large amount of credibility to the advice of the Chiefs, and ensured that the President ultimately implemented the proposals they had long been demanding.

120 C. L. Cooper, Lost Crusade. America in Vietnam (New York, Dodd, Mead, 1970)p.275

121 D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York, Random House, 1972)p.248

CONCLUSION

Vietnam has been explored, debated and scrutinised by historians for the past three decades. On the debate over the administration's failure to inform the public that the United States was at war, historians have traditionally tended to ascribe more emphasis to the role which domestic politics played in the President's decision to stifle discussion and debate. This thesis has shown that international politics was as important as domestic politics in shaping the course pursued by the administration. Historians have also tended to approach this subject chronologically. This thesis has examined this issue thematically. A thematic approach helps to clarify the main argument, and reveals the complexity of the decision making process which might become submerged in a chronological narrative on the topic. The thematic approach has also revealed the primacy of ideology in the policymaking process. Furthermore, it has shown the wide range of opinions and advice which contributed to the formulation of US foreign policy. The ultimate aim of this thesis was to demonstrate that the decision making process *is* complex.

Clearly Lyndon Johnson had not devised a pre-planned scheme to take his country to a long-drawn and debilitating conflict. This thesis has shown that a combination of different reasons had caused the President to feel that he had no choice but to escalate the war. It might be easy in hindsight to dismiss Johnson's and his advisers notions of a world wide Communist conspiracy as being somewhat fanciful, but in 1964, the President and his officials did believe

in such a threat. Very few people in government were willing to seriously question containment or the domino theory. Even more importantly Johnson and his advisers espoused the argument of NSC 68 that it was the responsibility of the United States to thwart this threat. It was this menace which caused them to look upon the situation in South Vietnam with concern. However, it was also the sheer incompetence and inability of successive South Vietnamese regimes to deal with the Viet Cong which actually prompted the administration to abandon their advisory role in Vietnam, and to adopt a much more active position there. But it is important to understand that the Cold War ideology outlook of the administration and the situation in South Vietnam were intertwined. If the United States had not been convinced about the existence of an international Communist conspiracy, they would not have intervened when the South appeared to be on the point of collapse in June 1965. Johnson and his advisers had followed an essentially reactionary policy: the action over the incident at the Gulf of Tonkin was taken in response to a perceived attack. Moreover, the decision to bomb the north was taken in response to the disastrous situation in the South, as was the situation to place troops in the region. However, the aerial campaign sucked the President ever deeper into the morass in Vietnam. Planes needed protection, and only US troops could provide it. And once US troops waded ashore at Da Nang, the momentum for escalation increased. Mike Mansfield once cautioned the President that "escalation begets escalation." He was proved to be right in Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson, though derived no pleasure from being a war President. He was a domestic politician par excellence, and the war was deflecting attention away from the Great Society he so desperately wanted to build. Ultimately the prevailing ideologies of US foreign

policy were too entrenched to challenge, and Lyndon Johnson believed that he had no choice but to escalate.

The President's pre-existing beliefs were buttressed both by the advice rendered by his principal advisers, and by his own personality. In 1964 and 1965, Bundy, Rusk and McNamara were still seen by LBJ as Kennedy men serving him. Lyndon Johnson had not yet put his personal stamp on them, made them his men. And LBJ was much more critical, and some would say, merciless to those he considered to be Johnson men. In addition, his three main advisers were by far the most able men he had ever met. Bundy was arrogant, and condescending. Yet at the same time he was so lucid, so incisive, so sharp that Johnson could not help but admire him. Dean Rusk's analyses were so methodical, and so assured that they must be correct. And Bob McNamara was efficient, intelligent and ruthless. Johnson showed them more respect and deference than he would have done to his own men. He had perhaps accepted their advice too uncritically. Johnson would later remark that perhaps his greatest mistake was to have retained Kennedy's men in 1963. But in 1964 and 1965 all three had established a close working relationship with the President and were able to influence him. The advice of these men reinforced what Lyndon Johnson already believed; that the Communists were determined to achieve world hegemony, and that only the United States could meet and defeat this threat to the free world. And if men of the calibre of Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, and Mac Bundy believed in the domino theory, then it had to be true in LBJ's view.

The most important of these advisers was the Secretary of State. He had formed a close personal friendship with the President which neither Bundy nor McNamara had. Rusk

was also the most fervent believer in the US role in Vietnam. In later years, Bundy would recant his earlier views on Vietnam and McNamara would leave the Defense Department in 1968 tormented by the war.¹ But Dean Rusk did not have regrets. Although the Secretary was initially worried about using US troops, he never questioned the assumptions underpinning the US commitment to Vietnam, and he accepted the recommendations of the military. Those men who argued against escalating the war needed to win over the Secretary to persuade the President to leave Vietnam. But Bundy and McNamara also played a pivotal role in the decision making process. Bundy had not exposed the President to the full range of dissent within the administration, and had become a strong advocate of using force in Vietnam. McNamara's mastery of facts and figures and his staunch support for escalation during the debates also impressed the President.

Only George Ball seriously questioned the fundamental assumptions underlying US foreign policy. Max Taylor had raised questions about using US ground troops in Vietnam, but he was a firm believer in the Communist threat and in the presence of the United States in Vietnam. Bill Bundy, the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs had come to believe that there was some validity in Ball's argument that the United States might become bogged down in a protracted conflict, and he wrote a memorandum in June 1965 entitled "a Middle Course in Vietnam." In it he suggested that the President should not send more than 85,000 troops because the administration had no proof that American troops could fight in the Asian jungles.² But Bundy was not questioning the importance of South Vietnam to US national

¹ Almost twenty five years later McNamara would admit in his memoirs that he and his colleagues had erred in escalating the Vietnam war.

² FRUS. Vietnam. June-December 1965 (Washington, US GPO, 1996) pp. 113-115 Memo from Bill Bundy to LBJ July 1 1965

security or the presence of the United States in Vietnam. Ball was the only member in Johnson's inner circle who was willing to think the unthinkable; that Vietnam was not crucial to US security, and that the United States should withdraw. But because Ball was a Europhile, some members of the administration argued that he was not interested in the plight or the battles of the poor and underprivileged in Vietnam. It should also be remembered that Ball was responsible for relations with the European powers at the State Department, and he worked on the US position in Vietnam in his spare time. Clark Clifford formed an alliance with the Under Secretary and urged LBJ to seek a way out of the war. But Clifford was not a White House insider at this point, and he was not involved in the bureaucratic battles over Vietnam. Since his access to the President was limited, it was difficult for him to sway Johnson.

There was also an element of machismo in Lyndon Johnson which shaped his handling of the Vietnam war. Lyndon Johnson was President of the most powerful nation in the world, and he was not going to allow a "damn pissant raggedy ass" fourth rate country like North Vietnam to dictate to the leader of the free world. The North Vietnamese were not going to defeat Lyndon Johnson. He would demonstrate to them that that he would not abandon South Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson of Texas and the United States was not a coward, was not afraid to fight those who threatened the free world.³ And Johnson's determination to show to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong that he would not be dictated to made it harder for him to disengage from this conflict which was an irritant and a hindrance to his Great Society.

And so it came about that in the summer of 1965, Lyndon Johnson stumbled into a

3 D. Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York, Random House, 1972)p.531

conflict which would destroy his Presidency. The Time correspondent, Charley Mohr once wrote that Vietnam was "a graveyard of lost hopes, destroyed vanity, glib promises, and good intentions."⁴ It proved to be precisely that for Lyndon Baines Johnson.

⁴ W. Prochnau, Once Upon A Distant War. David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett- Young War Correspondants and their early Vietnam Battles (New York, First Vintage Books, 1995) opening remarks

APPENDIX

Dramatis Personae

Lyndon Baines Johnson. President of the United States 1963-1969. Approved the increase in troops to Vietnam in July 1965. Former representative in the House for Texas, and Senator Became Senate Majority Leader. Famed for his manipulative skills and ability to reach a compromise. Selected as John F. Kennedy's running mate in 1960 and ascended to the Presidency in 1963 on his death.

Robert Strange McNamara. Secretary of Defence 1961-1968. Fully supported the President's decision to escalate the conflict in July 1965. Graduate from Harvard Business School. After serving in the war effort, he was one of a group of young men known as the 'whiz kids' hired by Henry Ford to re-invigorate his company. Elected President of Ford Motor Company in 1960. Thirteen weeks later, JFK asked him to be Secretary of Defence. Known for his ruthlessness, efficiency and sharp analytical mind.

David Dean Rusk. Secretary of State 1961-1969. Urged LBJ to become more deeply involved in Vietnam in the summer of 1965. A former academic, he served in World War II in Far East and worked in the State Department after the war. Was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs after the war. Afterwards, became, President of the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1960 he was appointed Secretary of State by President Kennedy. Was highly valued by LBJ for his loyalty, and commitment.

Maxwell Davenport Taylor. Chairman of the JCS and Ambassador to South Vietnam 1964-1965. Served in World War II, and climbed the hierarchy to become Army Chief of Staff. Kennedy appointed him as his special military aide, and later as chair of the JCS. When Ambassador Cabot Lodge left Saigon to run for the Republican nomination, LBJ nominated him for the ambassadorship to South Vietnam.

McGeorge Bundy. Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs 1961-1966. After serving in the war, helped former Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson write his memoirs, and entered academic life at Harvard. By the time he was thirty four he was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. Appointed by Kennedy, he was retained by Johnson who admired his powerful intellect and his analytical skills. Strongly urged an escalation of the conflict.

George Wildman Ball. Under Secretary of State 1961-1966. Served in World War II on the Strategic Bombing Command. After the war worked as a counsel to the French government. John F. Kennedy appointed him Under Secretary of State. He stayed on after Kennedy's death, and struck up a good working relationship with the new President. Was the only one of Johnson's main advisers to urge the President to seek a negotiated settlement in Vietnam.

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