

The Turning Point of the Vietnam War and Johnson's Legacy

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The Lyndon Baines Johnson presidency from 1963 to 1968 was a defining era for America and the world and left a lasting legacy. The crowning achievement was the domestic reform with the creation of the Great Society, which served to reduce poverty and racial injustice. Yet, the Vietnam War tarnished his legacy, and its aftermath left permanent scars on the nation's psyche. Following his election in 1964, Johnson was at the peak of his political power. He had just won over Barry Goldwater in a landslide and had a receptive Congress controlled by his fellow Democrats who were aligned with his vision of domestic reform. In July 1965, Johnson made the momentous decision to dramatically intensify the Vietnam conflict by significantly increasing the number of ground troops. His choice was the final step in America shifting from an advisory and supporting role to the foremost active participant. From that moment onwards, it became an American conflict and by default, Lyndon Johnson's war. It was a pivotal point that consumed the rest of his presidency and eventually led him to not seek reelection in 1968. The July 1965 escalation had a very complex and multifaceted background. The main factors were the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, a Cold War mentality with the deep-rooted belief in containing communism, and America's credibility in the

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world. Johnson did not make this determination lightly as he was rightfully concerned about the impact of war on his national programs. He voiced doubts about the successful conclusion of the war and the continued public support for a prolonged conflict. The expanded war also curtailed Johnson's ambitious domestic agenda, and he left with an ambiguous reputation associated with national reform, millions of people dead, and a more negative perception of America.

Johnson's heavy pursuit of domestic reform stemmed from a heart attack he suffered in 1955. He was a self-made politician who had risen through the ranks, starting as a congressional aide in 1931 and becoming the Senate Majority Leader 24 years later. After his illness, he wondered what he would be remembered for and became conscious of his mortality. Soon after he recovered, he pushed for civil rights reform in the Senate and maintained his sincere desire for a legacy while president.¹ When Johnson became President in November 1963, he had limited foreign policy experience and decided to continue with predecessor John F. Kennedy's strategies of containing communism.² In his brief presidency, Kennedy expanded the American commitment by increasing the military and economic assistance and the number of advisors to 16,000. Cognizant of his lack of foreign policy experience, Johnson kept most of Kennedy's advisors and told his national security team, "I need you more than he did."³ Among Johnson's advisors, there was generally a hawkish viewpoint that advocated a more aggressive

¹ David Smith, *'Trump doesn't measure up': Doris Kearns Goodwin on Leadership*, *The Guardian*, Oct. 7, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/07/doris-kearns-goodwin-leadership-in-turbulent-times-trump>.

² Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War* (1996; reis., New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 76, 78.

³ David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

foreign policy which aimed to deter the spread of communism.⁴ His dependence on pro-war advisors prompted more immersion in Vietnam.

Johnson believed that Vietnam succumbing to communism would be damaging to America's world standing and democracy's appeal. The Cuban Missile Crisis had occurred one year prior and was still fresh in the public's mind. Also, the domino theory was widely accepted. It was first articulated by Dwight D. Eisenhower when discussing communism in Indochina. He said, "You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So, you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."⁵ Under Johnson's watch, the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating, and the world's most powerful military could not defeat guerrilla fighters. Despite all the economic and military aid, the news continued to grow worse. There were constant coups after South Vietnamese president Ngo Diem was assassinated with implicit American approval. The counterinsurgency offensive was struggling, and the Vietcong continued to make inroads.

Perhaps the most significant event leading to the escalation in Vietnam was the Gulf of Tonkin incident. In August 1964, three North Vietnamese torpedoes allegedly attacked the *USS Maddox*, and there was another disputed attack two days later. These instances led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was unanimously passed in the House and with an 88-2 vote in the Senate. The nearly unanimous passage was another indication of the prevailing sentiment in the country that communist actions

⁴ Jurek Martin, *Decision-making echoes LBJ's 1965 escalation*, Financial Times, Nov. 30, 2009, <https://www.ft.com/content/7291bfe2-ddd2-11de-b8e2-00144feabdc0>.

⁵ *The Quotable Quotes of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/features/eise/jrranger/quotes2.htm>.

in Southeast Asia needed a forceful American response. This resolution was used by Johnson to justify the war. It essentially allowed him to bypass the need for Congressional approval and he could wage war against North Vietnam how he saw fit.⁶

According to Francis Bator, Johnson's deputy National Security Advisor, Johnson's overarching domestic priority was the Great Society, but he was acutely aware that showing weakness in Vietnam or admitting defeat would diminish his presidency and legislative agenda.⁷ Johnson was not initially seeking to bomb Hanoi. He was hoping that with continued American economic and logistic support, Saigon could fight the North. Johnson also did not want Vietnam to derail the Great Society. He had already pushed several reforms and desired to accomplish more after the 1964 election.⁸ Further, Johnson tried to not seem like a warmongering candidate, but rather, a middle ground one. He even portrayed Goldwater as a risky nomination who could lead the country to a nuclear war. He hoped to avoid confrontation with China in Vietnam as well, as the nation had done so in Korea and did not wish to fight the Soviet Union. When discussing the situation in Vietnam, Senator Richard Russell, a mentor to Johnson, said that China's involvement would be "Korea on a much bigger and worse scale."⁹ Global and international episodes shaped the situation for Johnson to eventually increase American activity within Vietnam.

Just after winning the election in November 1964 Johnson created an interagency task force chaired by William P. Bundy to

⁶ *A Vietnam War Timeline*, University of Illinois,

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/timeline.htm>.

⁷ Francis Bator, *No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection*, Wiley Online Library, May 8, 2008,

https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00691_1.x.

⁸ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 83-84.

⁹ Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 367.

review the Vietnam policy and settled on a graduated response.¹⁰ It entailed a slow increase in military intensity to pressure Hanoi into ending the insurgency. Johnson wished that an approach of limited bombing and ground troops would convince North Vietnam it could not win and then be receptive to negotiations. The first phase of escalation was Operation Barrel Roll and began by air bombing of enemy targets and supply lines in the summer of 1964.¹¹ Despite the use of unchallenged air power, it did not have the desired effect. Also, the situation on the ground continued to worsen and led Johnson to consider a more aggressive action.¹² In early 1965, a campaign of sustained bombing of the North, known as Operation Rolling Thunder, was launched. The military plan again was aimed to convince, rather than force, Hanoi to end its attacks.¹³ However, Johnson and his advisors misread Hanoi's resolve, as the communist regime was willing to accept the consequences of the war.¹⁴ Moreover, the government in Hanoi was encouraged by the instability in the South and did not believe America would pour endless supplies there.¹⁵ The ground war in Vietnam was starting to emerge when General Westmoreland reported a worsening situation. Johnson responded by first sending 3,500 Marines in February 1965 and then sent more in April while approving offensive attacks. He gave a speech at John Hopkins University filled with Cold War platitudes such as fear of appeasement and American commitments to freedom. At the

¹⁰ David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

¹¹ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 82-83.

¹² David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

¹³ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 90-91.

¹⁴ Kent Germany, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Foreign Affairs*, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/foreign-affairs>.

¹⁵ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 85.

time he gave the speech, it was clear he was leaning towards a full-scale war against Vietnam.¹⁶

In early June 1965, General Westmoreland asked for a significantly expanded US military force to stop communism from spreading to the South which was a crucial moment in Johnson's presidency.¹⁷ It forced him to decide whether to raise the war to a new level and commit the nation to a protracted overseas conflict. Despite the increased intensity of bombing, the North was unwilling to concede. Also, there was political instability in the ruling regime of South Vietnam, demoralized forces, and continued communist pressure. Before making this choice, he undertook deep and extensive deliberations. Johnson sought widespread counsel from his advisors, congressional colleagues, and outside groups. He reached out to journalists, civilian and military groups, congressional leaders from both parties,¹⁸ and even Eisenhower, who advised to "go ahead with the plan" of escalation.¹⁹ Johnson sent Robert McNamara to Vietnam for a firsthand assessment of the ground realities. He did receive private warnings from Democratic senators who were all concerned about the predicament in Vietnam and the loss of public support. In December 1963 and January 1964, Senate Majority leader, Mike Mansfield, warned that the American people would not support "'with blood and treasure' a wider war in defense of an unpopular regime."²⁰ Despite these misgivings, the broad consensus in Congress and amongst his

¹⁶ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 92-93.

¹⁷ David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

¹⁸ David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

¹⁹ *Lyndon Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower on 2 July 1965*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002518>.

²⁰ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 102.

close advisors was that he should support Westmoreland's request.

In making his judgment, Johnson weighed personal, domestic, and international affairs. He felt pressure from public optics because up to this point, no US president had been remembered for losing a major war. His concern is evident when he asked Senator Russell, "Well, they'd impeach a president though that would run out, wouldn't they?"²¹ In another instance in May 1964, Johnson seemed frustrated and said to Bundy, "What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?"²² Even later when the war was going poorly, he was reluctant to admit defeat. In February 1966, he told Senator Eugene McCarthy, "I know we oughtn't to be there, but I can't get out, I just can't be the architect of surrender."²³ The war against communist aggression also enjoyed broad public and congressional support.²⁴ He had to consider his national agenda and the future of the Great Society. While the war would drain much-needed resources from the domestic priorities, accepting defeat could have led to more challenges to accomplish the Great Society and a weakened presidency.²⁵ Johnson and his team understood the risks of expanding the war and had clear objectives of forcing the Hanoi regime into a negotiated peace. He could either continue with the status quo of limited engagement and slowly lose or double down with extensive troop engagement and try to salvage the fight. The Dominican Republic crisis from April to May 1965

²¹ Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 369.

²² Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 370.

²³ David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

²⁴ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 98-100.

²⁵ Francis Bator, *No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection*, Wiley Online Library, May 8, 2008, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00691_1.x.

influenced his conclusion too as he was successfully able to use military intervention to defeat communist forces. Johnson knew that denying Westmoreland's request would have meant accepting defeat and it was a very unappealing option so early in his presidency.

In the end, Johnson made the fateful choice to meet the Westmoreland request but attempted to keep the public in the dark about his decision. He raised the number of soldiers from 75,000 to 175,000 and increased the draft quota from 17,000 to 35,000 and said he would send more forces as needed.²⁶ This commitment intertwined the fate of Johnson's presidency to the war's outcome. Once he elected to escalate the war, he deliberately tried to downplay the magnitude of his decision as he did not want to signal that Vietnam was a major war and risk losing support from the American public. He avoided full mobilization by not increasing taxes or calling the national guard, but rather, relying upon the draft. Even the announcement was in a midday press conference, and he mentioned how it was "agonizing" and "painful" to send "our finest young men, into battle." Given the economic boom, he felt that the country could simultaneously afford military expansion along with social welfare and reform.²⁷ Johnson did not seek new congressional approval because he astutely recognized that an open debate on the merits and costs of a large-scale war would impede his domestic reform agenda. He also feared that too much public attention could lead to an anticommunism frenzy that might influence the country into a broader and perhaps a nuclear war or give rise to another form of McCarthyism. Nevertheless, Johnson knew that the public support for the war would erode if it became a sustained campaign with high costs

²⁶ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 98.

²⁷ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 98-99.

and many American lives lost. He had seen the public initially support the Korean War, only to sour on it later as it continued. Johnson took a calculated risk by downplaying the start of a significant conflict, and this approach initially allowed him to maintain public and congressional support but came at the steep price of credibility later as the war wore on without the desired results.

Pouring combatants into Vietnam did not equate to signs of victory. Even after increasing the military strength to 184,000 troops, the ground situation remained tenuous. Hanoi was unrelenting and refused to come to the negotiating table.²⁸ Once Johnson had decided to escalate with ground forces, there was no end, and over the next three years, there was a steady growth in the number of American fighters, reaching a peak of around half a million in 1968.²⁹ Even with the massive build-up, there was no victory in sight, and the war was headed toward a stalemate towards the end of Johnson's first term. Young Americans were drafted to meet the large soldier amount, and there was a steady rise in American casualties. Nearly 36,000 Americans had lost their lives by the end of his first term.³⁰ The cost of this foreign war also impacted the American economy with the resurgence of inflation. To sustain the war, Johnson had to introduce an income tax surcharge. The Great Society expansion was limited as domestic spending had to be curtailed to support the war costs.³¹ As a result, there was a steady erosion in the public support, and Johnson's approval ratings declined from 77 percent when he was elected to 34 percent towards the

²⁸ David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War*, University of Virginia, 2014, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam>.

²⁹ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 109.

³⁰ *Vietnam War Casualties (1955-1975)*, Military Factory, <https://www.militaryfactory.com/vietnam/casualties.asp>.

³¹ Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 113.

end of his first full term in 1968.³² His decline in popularity prompted him to not run for re-election. Public dissatisfaction with the magnification and conducts of the war led to the resurgence of the conservatives and ultimately resulted in Nixon, who ended up axing much of the Great Society expansion plans, winning the election. More than anyone else, Johnson was mindful of his war choices and the damage it had done to his presidency and beyond. He was delightful and proud when discussing the Great Society, but his mood would significantly darken if the topic shifted to Vietnam. Johnson was regretful about not having done enough social reform and was aware of the damage that Vietnam had done to his precious legacy.³³

Throughout his time in office, Johnson had to make a series of difficult verdicts regarding Vietnam. He was never an enthusiastic supporter of intervention, but at the time of assuming his presidency, America was already deeply entrenched and committed to fighting communism there. Despite all of Johnson's and his national security team's planning and efforts, the situation in Vietnam continued to become worse. Even though he was hesitant to amplify a war and understood the risks of an extended conflict, his only other option was to abandon Vietnam and accept defeat, which is not easy for any President to endure. Concerning his reputation, Johnson was very successful as his domestic reforms transformed the role of government in people's lives. He accomplished his dream of the Great Society that lifted millions out of poverty, reduced racial injustice, championed civil rights,

³² *Presidential Job Approval*, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval>.

³³ David Smith, *'Trump doesn't measure up': Doris Kearns Goodwin on Leadership*, The Guardian, Oct. 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/07/doris-kearns-goodwin-leadership-in-turbulent-times-trump>.

and created lasting federal healthcare and educational programs for the country. However, his legacy is also permanently tainted by his decisions to continue and escalate the war in Vietnam that cost millions of lives, damaged America's standing in the world, and did not achieve the desired outcome.