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Master of Defence Studies

Escalation of Commitment - Vietnam, 1965

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by reviewing the political context in the early 1960s. It then focuses on the steady increase of commitment to Vietnam. Then turning to the initial direction taken by Lyndon Johnson it establishes the domestic circumstances which affected his early decisions. A review of the key issues surrounding the decision to increase the level of US commitment to supporting South Vietnam in late 1964 and early 1965 will establish the context in which Johnson had to make his decision.

A brief review of theoretical decision models then establishes a framework in which to consider the critical decisions of 1965. These models provide a structure on which to base an explanation for the expansion of US involvement in the Vietnam conflict despite consistently negative assessments and Johnson's reluctance to increase involvement at the expense of his domestic programs.

This examination of the Johnson decision to dramatically increase force commitments to Vietnam shows that it was taken in a very complex environment given the simultaneous challenges he faced. It concludes that given domestic and international constraints, or at least those as perceived by Johnson and his advisors, there would have been little choice for Johnson but to increase US involvement in Vietnam. Not doing so could have put his domestic programs in jeopardy, and potentially affected US standing in the world. Lessons for policy makers are provided in the conclusion.

Escalation of Commitment - Vietnam, 1965

"And who are the young men we are asking to go into action against such solid odds? You've met them," he says. "You know. They are the best we have. But they are not McNamara's sons, or Bundy's. I doubt they're yours. And they know they're at the end of the pipeline. That no one cares. They know."¹

- Anonymous general quoted in James Webb's "Fields of Fire"

INTRODUCTION

President Lyndon Johnson has been criticized for failing to consider the consequences of escalating US involvement in a country with only a small probability of successfully emerging from the conflict in Southeast Asia. While the decision to significantly increase forces ultimately proved a failure, in the context of the mid-1960s, Johnson and his advisors had to deal with pressures both international and domestic. Concerned about communist advances elsewhere, they saw Vietnam as the next step in a global competition for dominance between an authoritarian regime and democracy. A review of the key issues surrounding the decision to increase the level of US commitment to supporting South Vietnam in late 1964 and early 1965 will establish that he had no choice but to expand US involvement in the conflict in Vietnam. Johnson chose to resist the temptation to simply walk away from what Robert McNamara characterized as being a situation much worse than the one Kennedy had inherited.² Given the circumstances and the advice he received, Johnson had no option but to escalate the level of US forces engaged in Vietnam.

Beginning with a review of the political context in the early 1960s, the paper establishes the steady if measured increase of commitment to Vietnam before Johnson became president. It then examines the initial direction taken by Johnson and the domestic circumstances which affected his early decisions. A brief review of theoretical decision models including bounded rationality, group-think, the impact of a policy advocate inside the core group, and the use of quantitative indicators to simplify

¹ James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1978), 1.

² Robert S., McNamara and Brian Ven DeMark. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 100.

decision-making will establish a framework in which to consider the critical decisions of 1965. Finally, these models are used to explain the decision to escalate in the summer of 1965 despite consistent analysis that indicated that there would be no success in Vietnam.

Theoretical models of decision-making processes provide a structure on which to base an explanation for the expansion of US involvement in the Vietnam conflict despite consistently negative assessments during the period of late 1964 and early 1965, despite Johnson's strong desire to focus on domestic reform.³ Much as Allison and Zelikow's study of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis revealed the complexity and challenges of strategic decision-making in a time of crisis, this examination of the Johnson decision to dramatically increase force commitments to Vietnam will show that it was equally complex given the domestic and international challenges he faced.⁴ While authors such as H.R. McMaster and Neil Sheehan⁵ condemned that decision in fairly simple terms, Johnson faced tremendous domestic and global challenges simultaneously and made his choices within that environment. While Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy began to steadily increase levels of commitment, it fell to Johnson to make the hard decision on the way ahead regarding a conflict that was not directly linked to the national survival of the US.

During and since the US involvement in Vietnam, critics such as McMaster and Sheehan either ignored or dismissed the complex circumstances in which Johnson and his advisors found themselves.

³ Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147. See also: Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 40. On Monday 25 November, 1963, in conversation with Special Counsel, Theodore Sorenson, newly installed President Johnson clearly outlines his top priorities for the session of Congress beginning in the New Year – and neither has to do with Vietnam “...I don't know whether we ought to ask for civil rights and [reduced] taxes with any given date ...[or] we're going to fall on our face...[and] they'll say the Kennedy program has been defeated and then, since we've repudiated him, let's don't take it up any more...I want to keep it alive” Johnson was indicating clearly that he was focussed on the domestic agenda to the man drafting his address to Congress. See also Jeffrey W. Helsing, *Johnson's War/Johnson's Great Society: The Guns and Butter Trap* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000), 9.

⁴ Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision* (Don Mills: Longman, 1999).

⁵ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 73. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1985), 538.

Not only was Johnson engaged in the policy of containment, he was also dealing with instability in parts the Caribbean, expansion of communist influence in the Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and racial unrest in the southern United States. He and his advisors were also strongly influenced by the legacy of their own historical experience that shaped their views. Sociologist Morris Massey described the tendency of people to perceive the meaning of situations based on the environment in which they developed their most crucial understanding of the world.⁶ Johnson and his key advisors - McNamara, Dean Rusk, Walter Rostow, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, General Maxwell Taylor, and General Earle Wheeler - had all grown up during an era of economic collapse, a retreat to isolationism and of appeasement. As a group they wanted to prevent repetition of what they had seen result from the growth of NAZI Germany, given what they perceived as an imminent threat from an aggressive global communist movement. How valid that threat was will not be considered in this paper, but it was a factor in the decisions made at the time.

As Scott Gartner, author of *Strategic Assessment in War* points out, “[i]nstead of a score, in war there are many measures of performance, all of which provide confusing and competing indications of strategic performance. After the fact it might be clear what measures were the right ones to make choices....”⁷ But when a decision is required, information is often still unclear. The Johnson administration was criticized for ignoring the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) regarding the conduct of the war in Vietnam, the JCS for failing to effectively assert their position for more troops, and Johnson’s advisers for failing to heed the advice of experts.⁸ Such criticism can ignore the consideration of non-military factors that weigh on a decision-maker in a democracy. Strategic decisions in the conduct of a “small war” can be more complex than the relatively straightforward decisions confronting Western leaders during the two World Wars and the Cold War.

⁶ Morris Massey, “*What You Are Is Where You Were When*”, video, originally released 1976 and used in the Canadian Forces Staff School as a means to increase individual awareness of the sources of personal bias.

⁷ Scott Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War* (Binghamton, NY:Yale University, 1999.), 8.

⁸ McMaster, *Derelection of...*, 4.

While Canadians were engaged in counter insurgencies during the Fenian raids of the mid-19th century, the Northwest Rebellion and the Boer war, the lessons of those campaigns have long been forgotten. The focus in Western militaries has been on re-learning or developing the lessons of the conduct of counter-insurgency operations in the modern era of mass digital communications, global conflict and heightened public awareness of ideological divides. There has not been much consideration regarding the reasoning behind decisions to engage in wars that are of no direct immediate national consequence such as Afghanistan and Vietnam. As the release of formerly classified papers permits examination of advice given and, in some cases, a sense of the motivation behind key decisions, Vietnam provides a wealth of information to examine.⁹ The context will provide useful lessons for governments engaged in current and future counter-insurgencies.

⁹ US government websites such as the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*) provide a wealth of original source documents including records of cabinet meetings and conversations, telegrams from ambassadors, military reports and memorandums of advice to the presidents. These documents offer tremendous insight into the pressures, information, and context affecting the decisions of US presidents, especially those in power during the era of the Vietnam War; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/FRUS.html; Internet. Multiple accesses listed in the footnotes.

CHAPTER 2

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

I. Dominoes and Commitment

“...exhibitions of indecision, disunity and internal disintegration within this country have an exhilarating effect on the whole Communist movement.”

– George F. Kennan¹⁰

This chapter will outline the circumstances under which first Kennedy, and then Johnson became involved in Vietnam. Deeply affected by their experiences during the Great Depression, the Second World War and the early events of the Cold War, such as the fall of Eastern Europe to Soviet influence, they were also influenced by writers such as George Kennan and Stewart Alsop, opinion leaders in their own right. Vietnam was to be the next bulwark against the expansion of what they perceived as a totalitarian threat. It will also summarize the transition between Kennedy and Johnson, showing that there was little change in policy once Johnson assumed power.

Before considering the specific circumstances of the decision to escalate, it is necessary to set the stage upon which Johnson assumed the presidency after the assassination of John Kennedy in November 1963. A glimpse into the perceptions of the time regarding the intentions of the Soviet Union is provided by George Kennan. In a highly influential article, Kennan argued that the US had to lead the defence against Communist expansion through containment and not retreat again into isolationism as it had after World War I. Kennan referred to the Soviet Union and its allies in his article as being police states, ruthlessly using the tools of government to suppress dissent. He described the effects of the increasingly centralized communist party and explained why, despite its positive origins, the Soviet revolution had become corrupt. He also suggested that it would not find be possible to establish a close relationship with an insecure Soviet regime dominated by the paranoia of centuries of warfare and internal rivalries.¹¹

¹⁰ George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 65, no. 4 (1987): 852-868; 868. EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed 31 December 2008.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 857-866.

While we now know that Kennan's assessment of a monolithic and aggressive communist alliance was off the mark, he argued at the time that indications of disunity on the part of the West would result in encouragement to the Soviet regime that their policies were succeeding.¹² This premise received wide acceptance amongst opinion leaders and politicians such as Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson. It laid the foundations for US security policies of containment in reaction to global events.¹³ The fall of China to the communists in 1949 had been a severe shock to the US, and left a population that had generally focussed inward ill prepared to deal with another attack on a friendly ally. The traumatic experience of the Korean War contributed to the shaping of US attitudes regarding the situation in Asia and made US intervention in Indochina almost inevitable. Seen as a Soviet directed attack on a democratic ally of the United States, the attack on Korea was perceived as a direct threat to US vital interests in the Western Pacific.¹⁴ Worse, it appeared to confirm a broadly formed assault on a loose alliance of "...free states ...across the globe by a seamless international conspiracy" that needed to be stopped.¹⁵ This perception deepened following the Berlin airlift, the fall of Cuba and unrest in the Caribbean.¹⁶ For Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, US policy in Vietnam was shaped by "...the expansion of 'International Communism' presented everywhere, and in nearly every form, [as] a direct

¹² Kennan, "The Sources...", 868.

¹³ Jeffery W. Helsing, *Johnson's War/Johnson's Great Society: The Guns and Butter Trap* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000), 6-7.

¹⁴ Beschloss, *Taking Charge...*, 213.

¹⁵ Townsend Hoopes, "Legacy of the Cold War in Indochina," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no.4: 601-616; EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed 15 January 2009.

¹⁶ *FRUS* vol XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana, document 23. Telephone conversation between the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Mann) and President Johnson Washington, April 27, 1965. Also see document 24, Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Dominican Republic Washington, April 27, 1965; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/johnsonlb/xxxii/44733.htm>; Internet; accessed 27 March 2009. Throughout the crisis in the Dominican Republic concern is expressed about the potential for a Communist takeover and the need to prevent such an occurrence. In hindsight there wasn't much risk but certainly Johnson and his advisors thought there was at the time, based on the information they were being given.

menace to US security that had to be stopped – in the last resort by whatever means were necessary.”¹⁷

Columnists such as Stewart Alsop and Robert Oliver wrote that the Soviets needed to be convinced that the US was “crazy enough” to fight for Berlin and the free world, as Khrushchev believed the Americans were too liberal to fight a distant war.¹⁸

After the withdrawal of the French, Indochina seemed the next logical place for communist aggression and US Secretary of State Dean Acheson announced in May 1950 that the US would provide economic and military aid to Indochina and France to assist in the defence of Southeast Asia.¹⁹ To counter the threat to Indochina, then President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State Dulles, moved to demonstrate concrete economic and military support to South Vietnam and in, 1954, to form the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to protect Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam.²⁰ While troubled by the situation in Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration continued to provide support until handing over to Kennedy in 1961. The impression the newcomers gained at their handover meeting was that the outgoing Republican administration was quite happy to be laying a complex and likely insoluble problem in the hands of the Democrats.²¹ There seemed to be an expansionist Soviet ambition at work and it would be the inexperienced Democrats who would need to manage the challenge.

Kennedy highlighted his determination to resist that expansion in his January, 1961, inaugural address when he declared “...we shall pay any price, we will bear any burden... and oppose any foe...” in

¹⁷ Hoopes, “Legacy of...,” 609-610.

¹⁸ Stewart Alsop, “Our New Strategy The Alternatives to Total War,” *Saturday Evening Post*, (December 1962), 13-17, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost; Internet (accessed January 15, 2009) and Robert T. Oliver, “American Foreign Policy In The Midst Of The World Revolution,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 28, no. 4 (December 1961), 101. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost ; Internet; accessed January 15, 2009.

¹⁹ Hoopes, “Legacy of ...,” 603-605. EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed January 15, 2009. See also McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 214. “Kennan’s containment strategy was a significant factor in our commitment to South Vietnam’s defence....”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 605. Collectively known as Indochina, the three countries were believed to be pivotal to the concept of the ‘domino theory’ in the region.

²¹ McNamara and Demark, *In Retrospect...*, 35-36.

the defence of freedom.²² He indicated his commitment to helping “new states...to the ranks of the free, we pledge...that one form of colonial control [will not] be replaced by a far more iron tyranny.”²³ In the context of Sputnik, the fall of Cuba and China to communist leaders, the Korean War and pressure on West Berlin, the US administration felt besieged. While some foresaw the divisions between the various communist states and recognized there was in fact no hegemonic enterprise at work, in the 1960’s, the events described above appeared to indicate a program to defeat the Western way of life. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara would later write that many of his peers accepted the premise of Kennan’s article and that the US would have to demonstrate leadership of the free world to contain Soviet aggression.²⁴ As figure 1 and 2 demonstrate below, to some, the West faced a widening threat that expanded well into the 1980’s.

The generation that had grown up with the conflicts in Europe was not going to easily accept the rise of powerful states with ambitious plans to expand their influence and control with a system of authoritarian subjugation. Robert Kennedy would write about the need to resist communism: “This struggle will be long, costly and will require dedication and hard, unglamorous work, it has already taken many lives and it will take more. It can be won, but it can also be lost. The decision is ours.”²⁵ This declaration of determination was repeated often and clearly and was shared by the key members of the Kennedy cabinet, including Vice President Johnson. Kennedy’s “Ich bin ein Berliner speech” was one more example of his intent.²⁶

²² John F. Kennedy, “Inaugral Address”: 20 January, 1961; available from <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset+Tree/Asset+Viewers/Audio+Video+Asset+Viewer.htm?guid={98A70DC5-1114-498C-B637-D0C441B57E0B}&type=Audio>; Internet; accessed 15 January 2009.

²³ John F. Kennedy, “‘For Each Other’: Responsibility to Deter War as well as to Fight it.” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 28, no. 18 (July 1962): 546. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed January 15, 2009.

²⁴ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 30.

²⁵ Robert F. Kennedy, “The World Needs The Truth About America,” *Saturday Evening Post* 235, no. 30 (August 25, 1962): 17-21. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed January 15, 2009.

²⁶ John F Kennedy “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech 26 June 1963; available from <http://jfklibrary.org/Asset+Tree/Asset+Viewers/Slide%20Show+Viewer.htm?guid={E20D9F62-D997-4F51-838B->

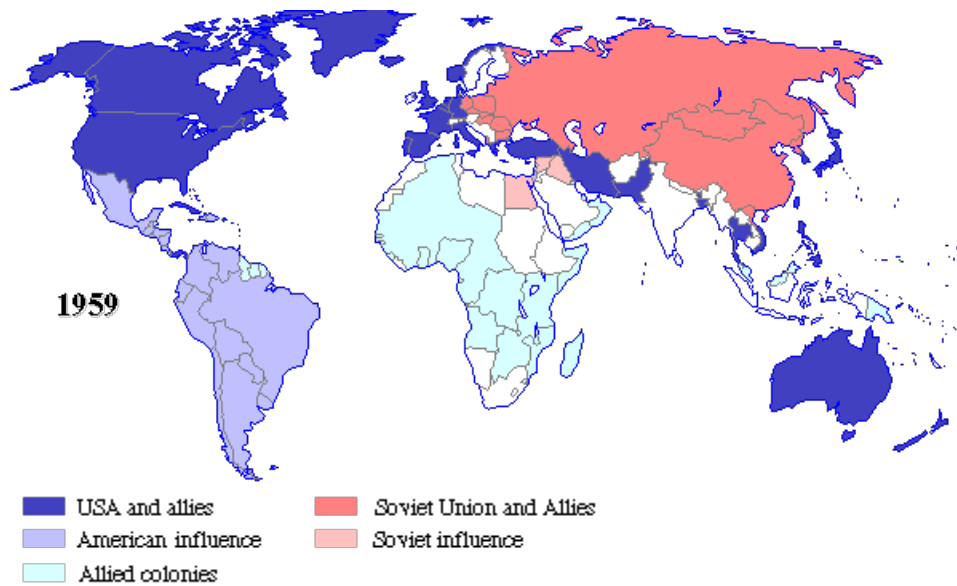


Figure 1 the world in 1959 ²⁷

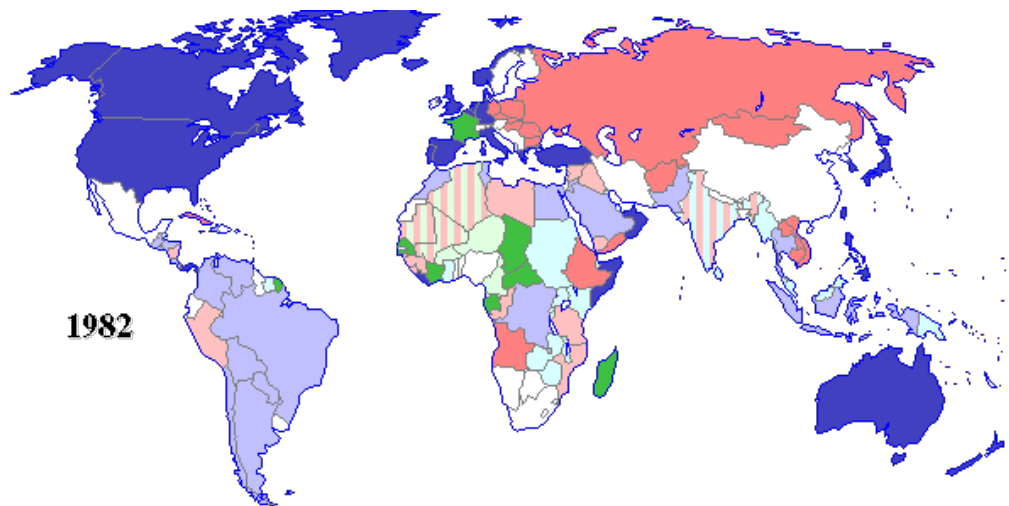


Figure 2 An American view of an expanded communist world.²⁸

[6CD9519CCB3F}&type=slideshow](#); Internet; accessed 4 March 2009.

²⁷ Maps available from Historical Atlas of the Twentieth Century; available from <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/coldwar1.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009.

²⁸ Maps available from Historical Atlas of the Twentieth Century; Available from <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/coldwar2.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009. This provider also offers an interesting perspective demonstrating constant expansion with an evolving map; available from http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/images/communi2.gif&imgrefurl=http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/communis.htm&usq=__f62SHu7TxOrmTuhe04zIVN4NXAA=&h=285&w=600&sz=10&hl=en&start=18&um=1&tbnid=hROYgxIJXrTbaM:&tbnh=64&tbnw=135&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dcommunist%2Bmap%2B1960%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26um%3D1; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009.

II. 1961-1962 - Kennedy enters Vietnam

To resolve his doubts about the handover he had received from Eisenhower, Kennedy sent Johnson to Southeast Asia in May, 1961 on the first of several fact finding missions he would order his staff to undertake. He also wanted the visit to emphasize to President Ngo Dinh Diem the importance Kennedy placed on the relationship with Vietnam as an ally and friend. During the visit Johnson developed a personal affinity for the beleaguered Diem. When Johnson reported back to Kennedy he, in essence, indicated the US would have to decide either to commit to a heavy burden in terms of money, effort and prestige or to walking away. Johnson later recalled that “Kennedy...regarded our commitment to Southeast Asia as a serious expression of our nation’s determination to resist aggression.”²⁹ By November of 1961, Kennedy had begun the slow process of increasing US obligations to support South Vietnam.³⁰ In a memorandum from Walter Rostow, Counselor and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council, Kennedy was warned that he needed to “...mentally accept the ultimate deployment of [at least] 205,000...” men to Vietnam.³¹ Even as early as November, 1961, senior advisors recognized the likelihood of continued growth in resources to the problem of Indochina.

In the fall of 1961, the Special Military Advisor to the president, General Maxwell Taylor, was asked to review the situation in Vietnam. In a comment reflective of strategic thinking at the time, General Taylor reported that, in their professional opinion he, and the other members of the study team, felt the United States was being forced to make a geo-political decision regarding its position in the world:

²⁹ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 54.

³⁰ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 39.

³¹ *FRUS 1961-1963, Vietnam 1961*, vol I, documents 214, 222, 227, 228 and 233. These particular items are a series of memorandums from Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and Assistant National Security Advisor Rostow highlight increasing acceptance of the stark choice facing the US government to prevent the fall of Vietnam to communism, as well as the need to accept that if a decision was made in favour of making Vietnam a firm line, 205,000 men was the minimum estimated number to do the job. That number was established before the US had fully engaged and learned the realities of conducting an ant-guerilla war which would reveal a far higher requirement than anticipated; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i_1961/index.html; Internet; accessed 16 March 2009.

“It is my judgment and that of my colleagues that the United States must decide how it will cope with Khrushchev's “wars of liberation” which are really proxy-wars of guerrilla aggression.... [T]he time may come in our relations to Southeast Asia when we must declare our intention to attack the source of guerrilla aggression in North Vietnam.”³²

Taylor had articulated the course for deepening intervention as the White House strove to impose stability and maintain its commitment to what it had decided was a key security partner in Southeast Asia.³³

With strong communist movements throughout the region, the perception in Washington was not that there were simultaneous and independent movements of national liberation, but rather an integrated communist campaign that would ultimately threaten security of trade and freedom in the region. Having committed to protecting the region through SEATO, Kennedy declared that the US could not abandon the country he had earlier referred to as the “finger in the dike.”³⁴ Vietnam was seen as a proving ground for democracy in the region and a test of American willingness to accept responsibility for its offspring. Facing international and domestic pressure regarding Cuba, Berlin and Southeast Asia, the theory of dominoes falling seemed reasonable and the decision to increase the US effort in Vietnam a logical conclusion.³⁵ Kennedy would not hesitate to reinforce his argument that engagement in Vietnam was critical.

³² *FRUS* 1961-1963, Vietnam 1961, vol I, document 210. United States Government Consideration of the Taylor Mission Report November 3-15, 1961, Letter From the President's Military Representative (Taylor) to the President Washington, November 3, 1961 and subsequent documents. This document became known as the Taylor-Rostow report; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i_1961/u.html; Internet; accessed 16 Dec 08.

³³ US Government, Department of Defense, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, Part I through III*. Historical Division Joint Secretariat Joint Chiefs of Staff. Part 1, 3-11; available for PDF download from http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/vietnam_SEAsia; Internet; accessed 6 January 2009. This document indicates that at about this time, McNamara ‘assumed personal command of the US effort in Vietnam...’ McNamara began making decisions on all issues, even those that had normally been within the purview of Commander in Chief Pacific or even more junior commanders. McNamara was to have considerable influence on the conduct of the war during over the next six years. Note page numbering in these documents indicate chapter and page as in Chapter 3 page 11.

³⁴ John F. Kennedy, Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon in the Hotel Willard, Washington, D.C., June 1, 1956. From the JFK Memorial Library and Museum; available from http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/JFK+Pre-Pres/1956/002PREPRES12SPEECHES_56JUN01.htm; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009.

³⁵ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 31 -32.

When addressing Congress on the subject of Vietnam, in January 1962, Kennedy stated, "...[t]he systematic aggression now bleeding that country is not a 'war of liberation' – for Vietnam is already free. It is a war of attempted subjugation – and it will be resisted."³⁶ Kennedy was articulating his intent to assist South Vietnam as an issue of national security. During an interview with CBS in September 1963, on being asked about Vietnam Kennedy remarked, "...I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. That would be a great mistake..."³⁷ On the cusp of a US sponsored coup to remove Diem from power in Saigon for failing to improve the level of democracy and security, Kennedy remained committed to US engagement.

At about the same time as Kennedy was articulating the rationale for remaining involved in Vietnam, McNamara began a continuous pattern of summing up reports from the military in Vietnam as generally positive, and would focus on indicators that demonstrated the South Vietnamese were inflicting more damage than they were receiving. Half way through 1963, McNamara and his military staff felt they "were on the winning side" based on assessments derived from field reporting.³⁸ The CIA was less sanguine about prospects for Vietnam and delivered clear assessments to that effect, arguing that the reports from the field were inaccurate but had difficulty convincing the inner circle of the validity of their assessments. While the CIA has had its darker moments, in hindsight, given the accuracy of the assessments produced by the analysis teams, there should have been more weight given to this organization which worked hard to provide independent non-policy related advice to government. Perhaps the failure of the Bay of Pigs affected its influence, but that issue will not be discussed in this paper.³⁹ Given the conflicting reports from the CIA, State Department and the military, the greater weight

³⁶John F. Kennedy, *Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union*, January 11, 1962; available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9082>; Internet; Accessed 27 February, 2009. Oral recording available from <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/Speeches+of+John+F.+Kennedy.htm>; Internet; accessed 27 February 2009.

³⁷ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 61.

³⁸ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 47.

³⁹ Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962-1968. Episode I*; available

of opinion was granted to military and State Department reports than the more negative assessments produced by the CIA. The commitment of the president to Vietnam and the tendency on the part of field officers to demonstrate success combined to cast more favour on positive reporting.⁴⁰

US commanders also indulged their belief that the conflict was primarily a military one and focussed on measures of success that would demonstrate that they were heading towards a positive result – “we are definitely on the winning side” reported the US commander of forces in theatre at the time, and then, remarkably, went on to describe the areas of weakness that needed support.⁴¹ The Pentagon Papers assessed that “...[t]he intelligence and reporting problems during this period cannot be explained away.... In retrospect [the estimators] were not only wrong, but more importantly, they were influential.”⁴² Reliance on flawed statistics would accentuate poor analysis. While it was the presidents and their advisors that would ultimately be assigned the blame, “...[t]he intelligence and reporting systems for Vietnam during this period must bear the principle responsibility...” for the over optimistic forecasts and assessments.⁴³ In July, 1962 when McNamara asked at the conference in Honolulu for an estimate of how long it would take to reduce the Viet Cong to irrelevance once the Armed Forces of South Vietnam became effective he was told about a year. He received continuously optimistic reports from military

from <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/cia-and-the-vietnam-policymakers-three-episodes-1962-1968/index.html>; Internet; accessed 6 May 2008. Well researched by Harold P. Ford, first a scholar later a CIA official and finally an academic at Oxford, this CIA history emphasizes how accurate the analysis was and how close minded the decision-makers were to its advice. The three episodes described are available on line from the same website.

⁴⁰ Ford, *CIA...Episode 1*.

⁴¹ *FRUS* 1961-1963, Vietnam, Vol II, document 248. Record of the Sixth Secretary of Defense Conference Camp Smith, Hawaii, July 23, 1962; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii_1961-63/v.html; Internet; accessed 27 February, 2009.

⁴² Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, History of Decision-making on Vietnam (The Pentagon Papers) Book 3*, IV-B-4, “Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, 1962-1964,” p. vii. Quoted in Ford, *CIA...Episode 1*; Internet; accessed 6 May 2008. Pentagon Papers (officially titled United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, were top-secret history of the United States' political-military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. Commissioned by McNamara in 1967, the study was completed in 1968 and formally leaked to the public by Senator Gravel on the Senate floor to prevent prosecution of one of the drafters, Daniel Ellsberg and a friend who had initially passed a copy to *New York Times* reporter, Neil Sheehan. Hereafter, PP

⁴³ *Pentagon Papers*. The Department of Defense, *History of Decision-making on Vietnam*. Senator Gravel Edition. Vol II. Boston: Beacon Press, undated – likely 1971, (held in the CFC Library), 164.

channels throughout the critical period of 1964-65. He would present that view to first Kennedy and then Johnson until resigning in 1967.

III. Vietnam 1963 – “...the US will be forced to use force...”⁴⁴

US reporting through the summer and early fall of 1963 would show that a withdrawal was likely to be impossible as the situation continued to deteriorate both politically and militarily. There was growing recognition among the civilian leadership that the conflict was less a military one than a political one and that the continuing instability in the government of South Vietnam was becoming a significant challenge. There was also increasing divergence between the intelligence assessments and those of the military commander in the field, General Paul Harkins, and the ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, with the latter two being typically more positive.⁴⁵ More than one member of the mission in Saigon suggested that as the situation continued to worsen, the U.S. would have to use more military power and that it would be better to make that decision sooner although it would be “unpalatable.”⁴⁶ While the French and British, also signatories to SEATO, did not believe that a neutral Vietnam would affect their national security, the US administration never doubted that it did. Rusk and Taylor argued in the early fall of 1963 that withdrawal would cause a near immediate collapse in the rest of the region.⁴⁷

By early October, 1963 the administration appeared to have developed an internal consensus on

⁴⁴ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December, document 81. Memorandum From the Counselor for Public Affairs of the Embassy in Vietnam (Mecklin) to the Director of the United States Information Agency (Murrow) En Route to Washington, September 10, 1963; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12647.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009.

⁴⁵ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963. For examples see documents 78 Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of the State/1/Saigon, September 9, 1963 Ambassador Lodge, 80 Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency Station in Saigon to the Agency/1/ Saigon, September 10, 1963, and 83 Memorandum of Conversation regarding the situation in Vietnam (White House) Washington, September 10, 1963, 10:30 a.m.; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12647.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009.

⁴⁶ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, document 81. Memorandum From the Counselor for Public Affairs of the Embassy in Vietnam (Mecklin) to the Director of the United States Information Agency (Murrow)/1/En Route to Washington, September 10, 1963; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12647.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009.

⁴⁷ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 63.

the way ahead; that the war was Vietnam's to either win or lose, at least from the view in Washington. It also wanted to see improving signs of military capability and democratic reforms from the South Vietnamese. There remained a lack of consensus as to how close the US was to meeting its objectives in Vietnam. While the military felt that there had been progress, others disagreed.⁴⁸ In order to gain some clarity on the situation, Kennedy ordered his special advisor on National Security, McGeorge Bundy, to convene a conference at the military headquarters in Hawaii. Although the meeting did not effectively change the trend in the direction of US engagement, Bundy's impression of the Hawaii conference of 20 November, 1963 was interesting: "...the briefings of McNamara tend to be sessions where people try to fool him, and he tries to convince them they cannot..."⁴⁹ This comment highlights the challenge of getting a clear picture of the situation in Vietnam.⁵⁰ The meeting, held shortly after the coup that removed Diem, produced a perceptive assessment of the instability likely to follow. The US would subsequently deal with a revolving parade of leaders in Saigon and despite a desire to limit their own engagement, face difficult choices regarding the way ahead for ensuring the security of Indochina.

Robert McNamara later wrote that the Kennedy administration failed to wrestle to ground two contradictory premises "...that the fall of South Vietnam to Communism would threaten the security of the United States and the Western world and the other was that only the South Vietnamese could defend their nation, and that America could limit its role to ...training and logistical support."⁵¹ To try and force the South Vietnamese to take ownership, Kennedy indicated that the US would withdraw 1,000 military personnel by the end of 1963, although there was initially to be no public announcement to that effect in case the situation deteriorated and the decision had to be reversed.⁵² Any withdrawal was "... adamantly

⁴⁸ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 79.

⁴⁹ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, document 322. Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting Washington, November 22, 1963, 8 a.m.; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjfv/12672.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009.

⁵⁰ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 87.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵² *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, document 179. Memorandum for the Files

opposed by those who believed it could lead to the loss of South Vietnam...” and the rest of Asia.⁵³ It appeared the US could not abandon South Vietnam; the North was being supported by both China and Russia and the South was not capable of defending itself.⁵⁴

A summary of the divergent views amongst the official US representatives in Saigon was provided to Kennedy in early October, 1963 at McNamara’s request. Assistant to the Secretary of State W.H. Sullivan wrote:

“... the military and the civilian components of the Country Team approach the same set of data from different perspectives. They fall almost inevitably into the classic postures of the two men who look at the same glass of water--one sees it half full, the other sees it half empty. All honest US observers admit that there are great margins of tolerance and doubt in the statistics on which they base their conclusions. Therefore, there is an opportunity for a great deal of subjective interpretation in deriving a conclusion from a given set of ‘facts’”.⁵⁵

Given this divergence of information from theatre sources, the administration had to make its own assessments. As it was beginning to grasp the true complexity of the situation, on the 22nd of November, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated and the problem of Vietnam suddenly became Johnson’s to carry alone.

Johnson felt the weight of assuming the mantle of Kennedy and keenly appreciated the commitments Kennedy had made. Johnson later wrote that “...rightly or wrongly [he] felt from the very first day in office that [he] had to carry on for President Kennedy.”⁵⁶ Shortly after assuming the Presidency, Johnson outlined his top priorities for the new session of Congress and neither had to do with Vietnam:

of a Conference with the President, Washington, October 5, 1963, 9:30 a.m.; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12651.htm>; Internet; accessed 20 January 2009. Also see document 181. Instructions to Ambassador Lodge from Secretary of State Rusk regarding the way forward issued Washington, October 5, 1963, 5:39 p.m; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12651.htm>; Internet; accessed 20 January 2009.

⁵³ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 29.

⁵⁴ *History of the Joint Chiefs...*, part 1, 8-17

⁵⁵ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, document 183. Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs' Special Assistant (Sullivan) Washington, undated; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12651.htm>; Internet; accessed 20 January 2009.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 19.

“...I don’t know whether we ought to ask for civil rights and [a reduction in] taxes with any given date ...(or) we’re going to fall on our face...(and) they’ll say the Kennedy program has been defeated and then, since we’ve repudiated him, let’s don’t take it up any more...I want to keep it [Kennedy’s program] alive.”⁵⁷

Johnson had committed himself to a very ambitious program that he felt was important to the nation. He was determined to focus on improving the lives of the poor, blacks and other disadvantaged groups and would make every effort to do so.

IV. Of Civil Rights and Poverty

Johnson inherited an America in transition, from the images of the stereotypical 1950’s television series, *Leave it to Beaver* with the nearly perfect family of four, to the race riots of the mid- to- late 1960’s, the protests over Vietnam, the economic turmoil of inflation, the end of the cotton economy in the south, the end of black subjugation and the migration of large numbers of disenfranchised blacks to the urban north.⁵⁸ As the situation in Vietnam worsened, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were also faced with a slowing economy which increased pressure for a tax cut.⁵⁹ Domestic issues were sharing centre stage with an equally crowded international agenda and it would require careful balance to manage both. Johnson favoured an activist domestic agenda and set out to accomplish as much as he could as quickly as possible.

Between the assumption of the Presidency and the 1964 election, Johnson associated himself with Kennedy “...because he saw Kennedy’s unfinished liberal agenda as essential to the national well-being.”⁶⁰ This included both civil rights legislation and an 11 billion dollar tax cut that was viewed as an essential economic stimulus. The continuation of the anti-poverty program was consistent with ideas

⁵⁷ Beschloss, *Taking Charge...*, 40.

⁵⁸ Allen J. Matusow, *The Unravelling of America; A history of Liberalism in the 1960’s* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), x-xi.

⁵⁹ C. Dillon, “Should The Level Of Federal Spending Proposed In The Fiscal 1964 Budget Be Substantially Reduced?” *Congressional Digest* [serial online]. May 1963;42(5):141. Available from Ebscohost; Internet; accessed March 28 2009.

⁶⁰ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 147.

formed during the New Deal era under FD Roosevelt, and shaped by the anti-poverty programs which he had helped to implement in the 1930's as a young politician. Johnson wanted to make progress and intended to exploit the sympathy felt for Kennedy's agenda which was so great that he felt he could accomplish a great deal very quickly and with little real resistance. He believed that the time was right for an aggressive liberal program and that the US was ready to turn a page and embrace a new future.⁶¹ Robert Kennedy described Johnson as someone who "... never failed to spend [his huge popularity] in the pursuit of his beliefs or in the interest of his country."⁶² Johnson set himself an ambitious agenda, and achieved a great deal in the first months of his presidency. A bill to reduce taxes accompanied civil rights, *Farm and Anti-Poverty Bills*, all signed into law before the presidential campaign got under way in August 1964.⁶³

From the outset Johnson decided to put the weight of his legislative effort behind civil rights. Although he knew it was likely to generate considerable controversy, especially in the south, he did so against the advice of political advisors as he recognized the power of the presidency. He felt he had a unique opportunity to risk the prestige of the presidency for the greater good. Declaring "[w]hat's it for if it's not to be laid on the line?" his decision alienated him from the South and cost the Democratic Party its southern base.⁶⁴ He believed "...that a huge injustice had been perpetrated for hundreds of years on every black man, woman and child in the United States..." and that had to change to ensure the viability of the country.⁶⁵ Although blacks and whites supporting civil rights felt bereft at the loss of Kennedy,⁶⁶ those

⁶¹ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 148-149.

⁶² Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 110.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁴ McNamara, *In Retrospect...*, 199.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 33.

⁶⁶ Matusow, *The Unravelling...*, 63-64. Recognizing his weak power base, in January of 1961, Kennedy met with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP to explain why he would not sponsor a bill on civil rights based on southern rejection and the impact of negative vote on his other programs. He argued that he would be able to accomplish as much through executive orders and avoid the expected clash with Congress. Kennedy's advisors warned of a backlash and Kennedy opted not to sponsor a bill, issue an executive order or attack segregation. He decided to

black leaders who knew Johnson realized he would finish the work begun by Kennedy, not reverse it. He had the southern credentials and political skills developed by a lifetime in politics that would see his initiatives through.⁶⁷ Whereas Kennedy had lacked a personal understanding of the problem, Johnson had grown up poor in the south and was to embrace his opportunity to right the wrongs of generations.⁶⁸

The other major policy initiative that was to capture Johnson's attention was the "War on Poverty." With the nation grieving Kennedy, Johnson felt he could gain the support of the electorate for a fundamental adjustment of wealth distribution unparalleled since the New Deal of FDR. Johnson expended considerable effort during his administration on his program to alleviate the affects of poverty on Americans.⁶⁹ Johnson sought to expand his liberal approach to state welfare, to end poverty, and to eradicate racial discrimination in housing, voting, jobs and schooling.⁷⁰ Having outlined the program at the beginning of 1964, Johnson successfully campaigned for approval in both houses by July of that year.⁷¹

Determined to win the 1964 election by a historic margin and secure his legacy, he aimed to

focus on providing jobs on federal programs and projects and providing blacks with an increasing, if incremental, opportunity to be full participants in US politics, education and the economy.

⁶⁷ Matusow, *The Unravelling...*, 94.

⁶⁸ Ball, *The Past Has...*, 165. Kennedy had lacked a true personal commitment and approached Civil Rights as a matter of politics not morals. "[Kennedy] spoke of that 'goddamned civil rights mess' considering it more an embarrassing problem than a serious cause that had gained many proponents." He hoped to deflate racial passions and delay a show down between blacks and white southerners, knowing that there was potential for large scale civil unrest and recognizing he lacked the influence to ensure a positive outcome. He saw it as an issue that needed to be managed to avoid splitting the northern Democrats from the southern. The time for compromise ended during his term in office. The loss of the cotton farms in the south had allowed both poor whites and blacks to become mobile and they began to move to the cities. For blacks the result was tremendous change – better wages, schooling, and ultimately anonymity – no longer beholden as serfs to landowners. With that change came the desire for full participation in American life. As they could vote in the north, blacks increased their influence in the northern caucuses of the Democratic Party while in the south white Democrats continued to hold fast against change. See also Matusow, *The Unravelling...*, 60-61. Johnson embraced the civil rights movement, having been a witness growing up and throughout adulthood to the effects of discrimination on other human beings, and was determined to improve the lives of black Americans.

⁶⁹ McNamara, *In Retrospect...*, 199.

⁷⁰ Matusow, *The Unravelling...*, x-xi.

⁷¹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 70 -81.

ensure his legitimacy with the largest possible majority to ensure his mandate would be clear. He was helped in his campaign by the Republican choice of the contrarian Barry Goldwater as his opponent. Goldwater campaigned in retirement areas like Florida against Medicare, in poor regions against the War on Poverty and everywhere in favour of the need to defeat communists around the world by any means and any cost.⁷² On Vietnam, the topic which caused Johnson the most concern given his limited foreign affairs experience, Goldwater attacked what he viewed as a weak response to Communist aggression, leaving Johnson in the position of defending a limited commitment to a far away conflict.⁷³ Johnson was easily able to position himself as a moderate Democrat with a strong interest in keeping taxes down, helping the less fortunate and promoting peace.⁷⁴ Johnson won 61 percent of the vote and 44 of 50 states in the Electoral College, losing only in the South as he had expected given his stance on Civil Rights.⁷⁵ He achieved majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives and created the opportunity to champion his policies.⁷⁶

V. November 1963 - The Guard Remains the Same

Apprehensive about the impact of a US failure on security guarantees and how that would affect other alliances, Johnson was also concerned about expanding Soviet and Chinese influence throughout the

⁷² Matusow, *The Unravelling...*, 133 -151.

⁷³ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 183.

⁷⁴ A terrific television advertisement was developed and proved so powerful that rather than risk overkill the Johnson campaign only ran it once. It is remarkable for the imagery it uses and the effect it has on perceptions of the unnamed opponent – Goldwater – clearly implied in the commercial to be dangerous without saying so. Available from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/av.hom/streaming-index.shtm>; Internet; accessed 5 March 2009.

⁷⁵ From the beginning of his Presidency Johnson indicated his commitment to civil rights, clearly indicating in his State of the Union address on 8 January, 1964 that the benefits of living in the US must include “...Americans of every color”. Available from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640108.asp>; Internet; accessed 5 March 2009. See also comments at the University of Michigan on 22 July 1964; available from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640522.asp> Internet; accessed 5 March 2009 and his remarks on signing the initial *Civil Rights* bill on 2 July, 1964; available from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640702.asp>; Internet; accessed 5 March 2009. Finally his remarks before the Joint Session of Congress on 27 November, 1963 during which he also laid out his commitment to security from “...South Vietnam to West Berlin;” available from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/631127.asp>; Internet; accessed 5 March 2009.

⁷⁶ Matusow, *The Unravelling...*, 151-152.

globe. He believed that South Vietnam was likely to be just another step along their path to regional hegemony. "...[O]f course domestic politics was always at the forefront of [Johnson's] mind, and yes, he feared the domestic political consequences of appearing weak."⁷⁷ Johnson ordered many visits by some of his closest advisors to the country as he too attempted to develop a clearer picture of the situation before making his most critical decisions.⁷⁸ He could not afford to appear to lack commitment on security and still drive an aggressive domestic agenda forward. Allowing South Vietnam to fall could have cost him legislative support.

Johnson sought to keep Kennedy's advisors in place to ensure continuity and stability in policy direction.⁷⁹ The advice they provided was consistent with that they given to his predecessor. Described as war-hardened and brilliant realists, only Kennedy had actually seen combat in World War II. Preferring their own company to that of others, and well aware of their own intelligence, they formed a closed circle of opinion which likely led to a tendency towards "group-think." While Johnson admired their credentials and intellect, his friend Sam Reyburn was not as positive: "[w]ell...you may be right and they may be every bit as intelligent as you say, but I'd feel a whole lot better about them if just one of them had run for sheriff once."⁸⁰ This closed circle was to have tremendous influence on decisions about Vietnam as the crisis deepened.

A survey of documents now available reveals the wide range of issues that confronted the new

⁷⁷ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 102.

⁷⁸ Examples of this reporting are available via *FRUS* documents such as: *FRUS* 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, document 324. Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to President Johnson, November 23, 1963; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjif/iv/12673.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009. Document 360. Memorandum re McNamara visit to Vietnam From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson December 11, 1963; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjif/iv/12674.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009. Document 370. Memorandum of Conversation McNamara and several US and Vietnamese figures Saigon, December 20, 1963, 3:45 p.m.; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjif/iv/12675.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009. Also see - Rusk, Taylor, McNamara visits in March – July 1964. Available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/index.html.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 19.

⁸⁰ Halberstam, David, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 39-41.

President. From Cyprus to Berlin, the Middle East to South and Central America, foreign policy issues consumed a considerable amount of Johnson's time. The Congo erupted once again shortly after he took office, Cyprus continued to affect not just relations between Greece and Turkey but threatened the stability of NATO, there were crises in the Dominican Republic, in Panama, and of course Southeast Asia.⁸¹ Johnson was forced to deal with most of these concurrently or in rapid succession from late 1963, through 1964 and into 1965. In addition, President de Gaulle of France provided notice of his intent to leave NATO, while the British leaked secret (and tentative) agreements to cause the commitment of US forces to assisting in the re-establishment of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸²

In the year that followed his inauguration, Johnson achieved tremendous legislative success. He was pre-occupied by civil rights issues, under pressure from the black leadership and the challenges of moving ahead on critical issues such as voting rights in the southern US.⁸³ He saw these reforms as essential to bringing the South into the Union, leaving behind the restrictions imposed on it by segregation. Only by doing so did he believe the South would finally become a full partner in the prosperity and development of the nation.⁸⁴ He had achieved considerable success in his campaign to create a nation that protected the weak and offered opportunity for all. But Vietnam would not remain quiescent to suit his preference for domestic issues. Johnson signed the *Voting Rights Act* into law in 1965 at about the same time he made the decision to increase the US commitment in South Vietnam.

⁸¹ *FRUS Johnson Administration Index*; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/johnsonlb/index.htm>; Internet; accessed 31 March 2009.

⁸² Ball, *The Past Has...*, 323-331.

⁸³ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 202-204. In 1964 less than 1 percent of black voters were registered in the state of Georgia as a result of very restrictive rules allegedly based on literacy. A series of demonstrations led to an increasingly violent response on the part of the police in Selma and culminated in beatings, tear gas and the use of mounted police to prevent the progress of demonstrators. Eventually a protestor was killed and the national press inflamed opinion. Momentum shifted to be clearly on the side of the advocates of voting rights. Johnson announced his intent to bring a bill to Congress and he applied considerable pressure on Gov George Wallace, invoking their place in history and coming to arrangement to allow deployment of the National Guard to restore peace. He delivered a powerful speech to Congress on 15 Mar 1965 that set the stage for a broadening of voter rights. Johnson was defined by his experiences but committed to fairness.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

Chapter 3

Johnson and Vietnam 1964 – Setting Course

*“I’ve got a little old sergeant that works for me...and [when] I think about sending that father of six kids in there ...and what the hell are we going to get out of his doing it? And it just makes the chills run up my back”.*⁸⁵

- Lyndon Johnson, May, 1964

This chapter will outline the direction Johnson established for Vietnam as he began to wrestle with the problem. To focus on the ambitious domestic program he had set for himself, Johnson retained three powerful and intelligent foreign and defence advisers in Rusk, McNamara and Bundy. Despite their strong positions and academic credentials, Bundy would later say that it was quite clear who was in charge: “...[W]e were working for a President...who insisted on making his own decisions.”⁸⁶ Johnson, in McNamara’s estimation, had inherited an even greater mess than had Kennedy, with no clear answers to the problems confronting him.⁸⁷ Continuity was critical to maintaining stability in a time of crisis. To foster that sense, as Kennedy had committed to honouring security arrangements established by previous administrations, Johnson echoed his intent, pledging to Congress on the 27th of November, 1963 to “...keep our commitments from South Vietnam to West Berlin.”⁸⁸

I. Foreign Policy, Assessments and Elections

There was good reason to keep Vietnam off the front pages in 1964 as an election year. The military and democratic reform campaigns in Vietnam were not going well and Indochina produced recurrent bad news. Ball wrote that “...[his] Cabinet level colleagues were becoming increasingly

⁸⁵ Beschloss, *Taking Charge...*, 369.

⁸⁶ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 159.

⁸⁷ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 101.

⁸⁸ Text of Johnson’s Address to the Joint Session of Congress on 27 November, 1963; available from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/631127.asp>; Internet; accessed 5 March 2009.

obsessed with Vietnam during the last 18 months of the Kennedy Administration...” and wanted to produce something good out of region.⁸⁹ The archives of the State Department show the growing concern about the situation, assessments regarding the potential impact on US prestige, and the frustration with the government in Saigon. They also show there was little change between the two administrations.⁹⁰ Johnson “... followed the strategy of ‘flexible response’ faithfully in Vietnam, perhaps more so than Kennedy ... might have done.”⁹¹ Johnson declared that “[t]he challenge that we face today in Southeast Asia is the same challenge we have faced with courage and that we have met with strength in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin and Korea, in Lebanon and in Cuba...wherever we have stood firm, the aggression has ultimately been halted.”⁹² Johnson had drawn his line in the sand but would have to deal with competing interests and inconsistent assessments on Indochina.

Kennedy had remarked on these differences during the period leading up to the execution of Diem and sought to resolve them by sending a number of joint evaluation teams to Vietnam. General Victor Krulak of the JCS and Joseph Mendenhall of the State Department were dispatched in September 1963 to assess the situation on the ground. While Krulak returned with a remarkably positive assessment of the situation, Mendenhall reported the opposite stating that the South Vietnamese were losing ground. His view was supported by observers from US aid agencies. Krulak provided a rather weak explanation for their differences, but the military perspective appears to have been accepted.⁹³ Ambassador Lodge remarked on the discrepancy saying that “...[he did] not doubt the value of the answers which are given by young officers to direct questions by generals—or for that matter, by Ambassadors. The urge to give

⁸⁹ Ball, *The Past Has...*, 369.

⁹⁰ *FRUS* available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/johnsonlb/index.htm>; and <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/>; Internet; accessed 29 March 2009.

⁹¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: a critical appraisal of postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 238.

⁹² Transcript from The Presidential Timeline of the Twentieth century Remarks of President Lyndon Johnson at Syracuse University; available from <http://www.presidentialtimeline.org/html/record.php?id=246&transcript>; Internet; accessed 3 February 2009.

⁹³ *History of the JCS...*, part 1, 7-4.

an optimistic and favourable answer is quite insurmountable—and understandable.”⁹⁴ The pressure to provide the answer the subordinate thinks is correct can be very strong even if the senior officer asks for candid remarks.

As he began to focus on Vietnam, Johnson sensed the discord amongst the various agencies as the State Department, the CIA, and Defense each developed and implemented independent options. In his assessment of the situation in January 1964, General Wheeler reported the military situation greatly improved since his previous report of 1962. On the other hand, a State Department report issued a few weeks later by Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, Roger Hilsman, indicated that the war was likely to last longer, cost more in lives and money and create a longer window of vulnerability for the US than had been expected.⁹⁵ In response to his advisors early recommendations, Johnson issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273 reiterating the government’s commitment to the protection of South Vietnam and to the withdrawal of some troops by the end of 1963 if conditions were right.⁹⁶ In NSAM 273 Johnson also attempted to direct a more unified approach amongst the various departments engaged in Vietnam, clearly aware of the challenges facing the Vietnamese and US civilian and military personnel engaged in assisting the government of South Vietnam. In creating a unified approach he was, however, to have only limited success.

While McNamara later admitted the shallowness of their analysis, Johnson had to rely on the advice of those he designated as his ‘experts’ on foreign policy and defence.⁹⁷ Given the differing points

⁹⁴ *The History of the JCS ...*, Part 1, 7-6 to 7-7. Note, the JCS documents use standard military page numbering – the first number representing the chapter number. Available for PDF download from http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/vietnam_SEAsia; Internet; accessed 6 January 2009.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Part I, page 5-31.

⁹⁶ *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, document 170. Record of Action No. 2472, Taken at the 519th Meeting of the National Security Council; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12651.htm>; Internet; accessed 27 January 2009. *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, document 331. National Security Action Memorandum No. 273 available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/iv/12673.htm>; Internet; accessed 27 January 2009.

⁹⁷ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 106.

of view Johnson had to reconcile their advice to create a consensus on the way ahead. Notwithstanding the differences of opinion in the briefings he received, Johnson's NSAM 273 sought to continue Kennedy's policies in Vietnam and included the statement that "[i]t remains the central objective of the United States in Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win..." against the conspiracy being directed against a US ally.⁹⁸ Johnson saw Vietnam as a test of American resolve abroad, especially in the early months of his presidency. "Given existing assumptions about the Cold War - about a long term struggle between capitalism and Communism - and public feeling..." about meeting the challenges from Russia and China, it would have been very difficult for him to turn his back on a crisis that might affect US prestige abroad and pride at home.⁹⁹ As an unelected and unproven President in 1964, he was in a difficult position and needed as much support for his ambitious domestic programs as he could get. Being strong on national security would help ensure bipartisan interest.

By the end of January, 1964 the JCS had begun to use NSAM 273 as evidence of Johnson's commitment to victory.¹⁰⁰ Although it was primarily intended to indicate continuity in US policies, the JCS responded with an aggressive proposal to support the objectives of the memorandum. They suggested that, to achieve the goals outlined in the memorandum, the US would have to consider far greater and longer involvement in South Vietnam to ensure defeat of what they felt was a communist war of aggression disguised as one of national liberation.¹⁰¹ By the end of February they indicated that US had to make a decision, either to leave Vietnam or stay, thereby committing sufficient US resources to win, as they had earlier in Lebanon, the Taiwan Straits and the Cuban missile crisis.¹⁰² While the military had a clear sense of the direction it wanted to take, there remained confusion in other agencies regarding how to

⁹⁸ *FRUS* 1961-1963, vol IV, Vietnam, August-December, 1963, document 331. National Security Action Memorandum No. 273 Washington, November 26, 1963; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyj/iv/12673.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 January 2009.

⁹⁹ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 160.

¹⁰⁰ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 107-108.

¹⁰¹ *History of the JCS...*, part 1, 8-28.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, part 1, 9-3

achieve US goals in Vietnam.

As part of the effort to rationalize efforts on Vietnam, a National Security Council directive of 14 February, 1964 established a Vietnam Task Force under William H. Sullivan.¹⁰³ By early March, the working group had assessed that US actions as planned were not likely to cause Hanoi to cease operations in the south, nor would they cause an improvement in the government in Saigon. Although they suggested that North Vietnam would cease its subversive activity if confronted with a strong demonstration of resolve, the administration chose a more moderate course of escalation.¹⁰⁴ Despite continuing deterioration of the situation, other factors would come into play, including concerns about the potential involvement of China and the impending election in the United States. As wary of engagement in Vietnam as Johnson was, Ball felt that "...only a leader supremely sure of himself..." could have made the decision to overrule his expert advisors and order a withdrawal regardless of the consequences.¹⁰⁵

As Vice-President, Johnson had disagreed in 1961 with the decision to increase involvement in Vietnam, telling Kennedy that American combat troop involvement was not desirable because of the risks associated with an unstable environment and knowing the harsh experience of the French in the region.¹⁰⁶ By early 1964, Johnson faced a deteriorating situation in Vietnam, a presidential campaign in which he could not be "soft" on Communism and a domestic program that required Congressional support.¹⁰⁷ Johnson remarked early on that he could either leave and let Southeast Asia fall, or stand by US allies and

¹⁰³ *FRUS* 1964-68, vol 1, Vietnam, 1964, document 46. National Security Action Memorandum No. 280 Washington, February 14, 1964; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/28_69.html; Internet; accessed 9 April 2009.

¹⁰⁴ Ford, *CIA... Episode 2*.

¹⁰⁵ Ball, *The Past Has...*, 375.

¹⁰⁶ *FRUS* 1961-63, vol I, Vietnam, 1961, document 60. Report by the Vice President, undated. A copy of this report was sent to Nolting by Cottrell as an enclosure to a letter dated May 29, along with the memorandum to the President, dated May 23; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i_1961/f.html; Internet; accessed 29 March 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Ford, *CIA... Episode 2*.

demonstrate resolve.¹⁰⁸ He was certainly not entering into the conflict with his eyes closed, but he clearly felt constrained to stand firm.

Not comfortable with continue to increase the commitment to Vietnam, Johnson asked Bundy to consider drafting a paper seeking Congressional support. On 25 May, 1964 Bundy provided a memorandum to the president outlining a series of recommendations, including the need for a Congressional Resolution on Vietnam regarding measured but increasing levels of force to prevent the loss of Vietnam.¹⁰⁹ The memorandum also recognized that such a resolution should not be brought forward until the *Civil Rights Bill* had passed but before the Republican convention scheduled for August, likely to minimize the political impact.¹¹⁰ Clearly, the priority remained civil rights but there was growing recognition that the time for a decision on Vietnam, forecast in the Taylor-Rostow report of 1961, was approaching.¹¹¹ The US would not be able to avoid commitment of more forces if the policy goal remained the defence of a non-communist South Vietnam as Kennedy had declared in 1962.¹¹² As the pressure for a decision rose, Johnson did not wrestle lightly with the issue. Ball described Johnson's mood in late May, 1964 as being very low as he was concerned about the impact it would have on US

¹⁰⁸ Beschloss, *Taking Charge...*, 213. “[he had] opposed [involvement in Vietnam] in '54. But we're there now, and there's one of three things you can do. One is run and let the dominoes start falling over. ...Nixon is raising hell about it today. Goldwater too. You can run or you can fight...or you can sit down and agree to neutralize all of it. ... And so it boils down to one or two decisions – getting out or getting in. ...But we can't abandon it to them (the communists). And we can't get them to agree to neutralize North Vietnam...Long-range over there, the odds are certainly against us.” Johnson replies “Yes, there is no question about that. Anytime you got that many people against you that far from home base, it's bad.”

¹⁰⁹ The original resolution available from <http://www.footnote.com/viewer.php?image=4346698>; Internet; Accessed 20 April 2009.

¹¹⁰ *History of the JCS...*, part 1, 10-14 to 10-16.

¹¹¹ *FRUS* 1961-1963, vol I, Vietnam, 1961, document 210. United States Government Consideration of the Taylor Mission Report November 3-15, 1961- Letter From the President's Military Representative (Taylor) to the President Washington, November 3, 1961; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i_1961/u.html; Internet; Accessed 20 April 2009.

¹¹² Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 58. General Maxwell Taylor to Kennedy 3 November 1961 - “...the time may come...when we must declare our intention to attack the source of guerrilla aggression in North Vietnam and impose on [them] a price...” for supporting subversion and instability in the South. In January 1962 Kennedy said, “The systematic aggression now bleeding that country is not a ‘war of liberation’ – for Vietnam is already free. It is a war of attempted subjugation – and it will be resisted”

prestige and on domestic issues.¹¹³ Johnson was in no rush to commit American lives to a far away conflict, fully aware of the domestic problems facing the US, as well as historical domestic preference to avoid dangerous foreign entanglements.

The rest of the spring and early summer was taken up with the domestic program and a steady pace of increasingly negative diplomatic and intelligence reporting about prospects for success in South Vietnam. A glimpse of Johnson's thinking at this time is revealed in a conversation with his close friend Senator Richard Russell about Vietnam. Both Russell and Johnson expressed their doubts about the likely outcome of the conflict in Vietnam with Johnson concluding "...I don't think the people...know much of Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less."¹¹⁴ While he closed with a comment that he didn't believe the US would have any success in Southeast Asia, he was well aware of the pressure being applied by hardliners such as Nixon, Rockefeller and Goldwater "...all saying let's move, let's go into the north..."¹¹⁵ Despite several efforts by Johnson to get Russell to agree that it would look bad if the US left, Russell points out "...we don't look too good right now..." as if to say it would make little difference one way or the other.¹¹⁶ While Johnson had worked hard to convince his normally supportive ally of the

¹¹³ *FRUS* 1964-68, vol I, Vietnam, 1964, document 185, Letter From the Under Secretary of State (Ball) to the Secretary of State/1/ Washington, May 31, 1964; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/181_225.html; Internet; accessed 15 February, 2009. "Dear Dean: Wednesday afternoon the President asked me to participate in a discussion with Walter Lippmann. The others involved were Bob McNamara and McGeorge Bundy. The President sat in on part of the discussion and after Lippmann had left, he talked further to the three of us for almost an hour..."

He said that he had not slept more than a few hours the night before. How could he maintain his posture as a man of peace in the face of the Southeast Asian crisis? How could he carry a united country with him if we were to embark on a course of action that ... the rest of the world would regard ... as wrong"

¹¹⁴ Beschloss, *Taking Charge...*, 367.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 368. Russell - "Frankly Mr. President, if you were to tell me that I was authorized to settle it as I saw fit, I would respectfully decline and not take it...its the damn worst mess I ever saw...I don't see how we're ever going to get out of it without fighting a major war with the Chinese and all of them down there in those rice paddies and jungles..."

Johnson: "that's the way that I've been feeling for months."

Johnson then comments on the extensive time he spends with his most important foreign policy advisors: "I spend all my days with Rusk, Mcnamara, Bundy and Harriman and Vance...and I would say that it pretty well adds up to them now that we've got to show some power and some force, that they do not believe - they're kinda like MacArthur in Korea - they don't believe that the Chinese Communists will come into this thing. But they don't

necessity of addressing the situation in Vietnam from the perspective of national prestige he would never succeed in changing Russell's mind.

II. Watershed - The Tonkin Gulf Incident

During this period the US conducted two different types of naval operations along the coast of North Vietnam. Since 1962, intelligence collection missions involving destroyers with strap-on Signals Intelligence collection equipment and personnel known as DE SOTO patrols had been conducted sporadically along the Vietnamese coast. The second type of operations, approved in early 1964, were designed to demonstrate the US claims to freedom of the navigation on the high seas and support covert operations by South Vietnamese forces. Both types of patrols were directed to remain in what were considered, by the US, at the time as international waters, beyond 11 nautical miles from the main coastline. Given the heightened anxiety surrounding the intelligence collection missions along the coast of North Vietnam as well as the OPLAN 34A patrols designed to harass North Vietnamese coastal supplies, the administration vigorously defended its response to what was interpreted as two attacks on US destroyers off the coast of Vietnam in on the 2nd and then the 4th of August, 1964.¹¹⁷

During the night of 2 August, two destroyers each on concurrent but distinct missions coincidentally ended up in the same location. A North Vietnamese patrol boat commander assumed they intended to conduct an attack and took what he thought was pre-emptive action. The destroyers interpreted the incident as a deliberate attack and when two days later a similar confluence of events occurred it was reported once again as an attack. The White House convened a meeting and discussions ensued regarding the best means of response. As it happened, the resolution seeking Congressional support regarding operations in Vietnam had been under development since May, and it was decided that

know and nobody can really be sure. And in any event that we haven't got much choice, that we are treaty-bound...that this will be a domino that will kick off a whole list of others, that we've just got to prepare for the worst...I don't think the people...know much of Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less."

¹¹⁷ *FRUS* 1964-68, vol I, Vietnam, 1964, document 266. Memorandum From the Chairman of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee (Forrestal) to the Secretary of State August 3, 1964; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/255_308.html; Internet; accessed 16 March 2009.

as most of the domestic legislative agenda had been completed, it could now be brought forward.¹¹⁸

Formerly classified information, released in 2005, reveals that the National Security Agency (NSA) maintained its position that a second attack on the 4th of August had occurred, in part due to a reluctance to reassess the initial analysis. It also revealed that a large quantity of information was mishandled resulting in the erroneous confirmation to Washington late on the 4th of August that a second attack had occurred.¹¹⁹ In this case the initial reports were held to be true, that information was passed to Johnson and his counsellors and based on that data they proceeded to Congress with what became known as the Tonkin Gulf resolution.¹²⁰ However, Johnson had wanted a resolution and this incident provided an excellent opportunity to get unanimous support from Congress.

The “Tonkin Gulf” resolution was quite clear, was defined in accordance with previously approved international agreements and, when asked, Congress authorized the President to “...take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member...” of SEATO and to ensure peace and security in the region. It also indicated that the resolution would expire when the President determined that peace and security of this “vital region” had been assured.¹²¹ Johnson, in his memoirs and records of discussions, revealed a reluctance to act at all, and once the decision was taken to do something, sought to react “in kind” to avoid escalation or a broadening of the war.¹²² Given that US

¹¹⁸ *History of the Joint Chiefs...* part 1, 10-35 to 10-38

¹¹⁹ Robert J. Hanyok, *Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds and the Flying Fish; The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery*, 2-4 August, 1964, 48. National Security Agency Study; available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 March 2009. This document was declassified 1 December 2005 and reveals the errors in judgement, and self censorship, made at lower levels that led to the conclusion in Washington that the North Vietnamese had attacked US ships a second time. The reported attack resulted in overwhelming support for Johnson’s resolution seeking Congressional support for the war in Vietnam.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49. Hanyok in his extensive analysis suggests that the decision was based on the information available at the time and was not the result of a concerted effort to precipitate a crisis.

¹²¹ The original resolution is available from <http://www.footnote.com/viewer.php?image=4346698>; Internet; accessed 20 April 2009.

¹²² Johnson Tapes on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident - source: John Prados, *The White House Tapes* (New York: The New Press, 2003) available at George Washington University, National Security Archive; available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 March 2009. See also *History of the JCS...*, part 1, 11-21 which indicates the instructions by the President were actually quite limiting and

forces had apparently been attacked, Johnson should have had no choice but to be seen to do something to protect US forces but instead of doing so, he in fact reduced US activity levels. The pattern of doing something to demonstrate resolve without actually increasing the commitment would continue into 1965 as Johnson continued to prevaricate. He feared the right wing of American politics would push the US into ever deeper involvement in conflicts worldwide. At the same time he had to balance those who favoured isolationism. During the election and after, to counter pressure from hawks such as Republican Barry Goldwater, he sometimes made statements designed to contain criticism that he was soft on security or too eager to use American forces. While the impending election had a restraining effect on his decision making, he was no hurry to commit US forces to an irrevocable course of intervention knowing that victory would be difficult to achieve.¹²³ Nevertheless, the “Tonkin Gulf” resolution had authorized whatever measures the president might decide were necessary.

To the disappointment of the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and now Ambassador to Saigon, General Taylor, Johnson declined to continue the intelligence collection and the patrols in support of South Vietnamese covert action along the North Vietnamese coast. He did not want to be accused of deliberately seeking the opportunity to conduct bombing of North Vietnam after receiving Congressional approval. Taylor was disappointed as he felt it important to continue these patrols to discourage North Vietnamese aggression and to continue to support Vietnamese morale.¹²⁴ Although Taylor’s request was received only a day after receiving approval of the Congressional Resolution on the 10th of August, Johnson was still not willing to escalate the situation, particularly in light of his relatively low key

designed to avoid further escalation.

¹²³ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 135. Four years after the fact, at congressional hearings in 1968, then deputy director of the National Security Agency, Louis Tordella testified that the intercept reporting North Vietnamese orders to conduct a second attack had in fact referred to the event on the 2nd of August not the 4th as reported by the NSA and CINPAC. Also see McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 145. “If Lyndon Johnson had a plan to escalate the war he never told me. And I believe he had no such plan. He never indicated to me or to the Joint Chiefs that he wanted us to hold back in Vietnam because of the election [in 1964]. In fact, there was still no consensus among his advisors about what to do.” McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, 147.

¹²⁴ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol I, Vietnam, 1964, document 310. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State/1/ Saigon, August 11, 1964--6 p.m; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/309_338.html; Internet; accessed 16 December 2008.

campaign regarding Vietnam. Johnson was still not confident that the reports in August were ever verified and he was not going to be pressured by the military into escalatory action.¹²⁵

From August-October 1964, a significant policy debate on the next steps took place, in what must have seemed a surreal atmosphere as the military agitated for immediate decisions during an election campaign in which Johnson was the candidate for peace.¹²⁶ At the same time the US cabinet was being forced to deal with the fall of Soviet Premier Khrushchev, Communist China's detonation of a nuclear device, crises in Africa, and, not least, Johnson's race against "the war candidate," Senator Barry Goldwater. Johnson and his cabinet were faced with an ongoing series of crises that would continue to affect their ability to carefully deliberate the positive and negative aspects of every major decision.

Throughout the transcripts of his conversations, Johnson demonstrates his focus on the election and his preference for his domestic programs.¹²⁷ Even after his overwhelming victory in November Johnson was in no hurry to escalate US action in Vietnam. Despite the Christmas Eve 1964 bombing of US barracks in Saigon, Johnson resisted calls for a significant escalation of force and even immediate retaliatory strikes. He was concerned about possible Russian or Chinese reaction, the continued presence of US dependants, and the infirmity of the Government in the South. There was concern the South could not resist a full assault by the North and would collapse should the North decide to invade with regular forces in reaction.¹²⁸ The year 1964 was not ending on a positive note and Johnson's sense of doom was increasing. Despite the open-ended text of the Tonkin Gulf resolution there is no evidence that the results of the election gave Johnson the sense that, should he choose to do so, he would be free to escalate the conflict. He had the authorisation he needed, yet he hesitated to make significant changes to the extent of US involvement. The process of the decision to escalate and to do so will be examined in the next two chapters.

¹²⁵ Michael R. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 38-39.

¹²⁶ Ford, *CIA...Episode 2*. See also *History of the Joint Chiefs...* part II, 12-10.

¹²⁷ See Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...* throughout.

¹²⁸ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 121.

Chapter Four – Strategic Decision Making

“When a President makes a decision, he seeks all the information he can get. At the same time, he cannot separate himself from his own experience and memory.”¹²⁹

- Lyndon Johnson

“One thing about the presidency is that you can only make decisions based on the information at hand. You don’t get to have information after you make the decision – that’s not the way it works.”¹³⁰

- George W. Bush January, 2009

This chapter will focus on the decision models that best describe the mechanism by which Johnson was forced to make his final decision on escalation in the summer of 1965. While there is no single decision making model that completely frames the way Johnson made his decisions regarding Vietnam, those described below, when applied in combination help to explain the development of the decision taken by Johnson.

When military operations go wrong, the favoured scapegoat of the military tends to be a politician (if not military leaders who are deemed as having been “too political”). From a military perspective this is an easy thing to do. In the eyes of the military personnel involved, the mission should have been the most important item for the government to deal with. Unfortunately this is rarely true. Governments, whether authoritarian or democratic, must always deal with multiple concerns, conflicting interests and most importantly from a politician’s perspective, the domestic political situation. Not being in power means the end of programs designed to improve a country. Politicians have little interest in adopting policies that will cost them power and will focus on delivering what will best serve their ability to be re-elected.

McMaster, in his assessment of the prosecution of the US war in Vietnam condemned the Kennedy approach to decision making, suggesting that when the JCS presented potentially war winning

¹²⁹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*,46.

¹³⁰ George W. Bush, Final Press Conference, 12 January 2009 as reported on CNN; available from www.cnn.com/2009/politics/01/13/rollins.obama/index.html; Internet; accessed 13 January 09.

options (including the use of nuclear weapons),¹³¹ they were systematically replaced with more compliant officers.¹³² He argues that the military was betrayed by politicians who failed to provide the tools and support necessary to achieve victory in Southeast Asia. Given the imaginations that proposed the use of nuclear weapons to support the conduct of a counter-insurgency campaign it is perhaps not surprising that the service chiefs were eventually removed.

While the average person expects that decisions by government leaders can be explained by the rational actor model, more often, major decisions are more complex than a straightforward “if this was true then this must be why” explanation. Governments are large organizations and leaders of government must deal with advisors representing the various components and constituencies of the government. Important decisions are rarely, if ever, made in isolation and a president will invite input from many different trusted sources, both in and out of government. Foreign policy decisions are made neither as a straight forward choice of options, nor as part of a demonstrated series of outputs.¹³³

The organizations that worked below the cabinet operated within the boundaries of organizational behaviour and were constrained by institutional norms.¹³⁴ The men at the top developed their perspectives through their own lenses and worked to benefit their organizations, none more strongly than Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the various Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs, the US Ambassadors in Vietnam and National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy. While Johnson also sought advice external

¹³¹ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, Laos Crisis, document 67. Memorandum of Conversation; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/kennedyjf/53932.htm>. Internet; Accessed 9 April 2009.

Washington, April 29, 1961

¹³² McMaster, *Dereliction of...*, 8.

¹³³ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of... Decision* (Don Mills: Longman, 1999), 5-7.

¹³⁴ The most extreme example is explained in Robert J. Hanyok, *Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds and the Flying Fish; The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August, 1964*. In this incident, very low level officers decided not to forward information which would have indicated a very confused tactical picture in the Gulf of Tonkin. While it might have made no difference, in this instance institutional mechanisms and procedures denied information to the White House that might have resulted in a different decision. Ultimately, it is unlikely the information would have made any difference, the die so to speak, having been cast; available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 March 2009.

to this group of counsellors, it was the effect of consistent advice from within his Cabinet made up of David Halberstam's "best and the brightest" that ultimately would sway his decision on escalation. As Allison explains, a rational actor will go to war when the outcome is likely to be positive. Throughout 1964-65, Johnson and his key advisors knew the outcome was likely to be the opposite.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, he accepted military and cabinet advice to move ahead with escalation in a complex environment.

Given competing interests, one person can only absorb so much information, make decisions and continue to function in a balanced manner. To simplify their environment, decision-makers will establish boundaries regarding the types and sources of information they will accept. Those boundaries will always be defined individually. Presidents do not rule by fiat – they are forced to bring various players together and develop consensus on decisions and what is done is "...best understood by examining the skill of the president...as he probes the demands, the risks and the threats to his personal influence as he persuades, cajoles and spurs other members of the government to act accordingly."¹³⁶ Consequently there will normally be considerable discussion before major decisions are undertaken. They will attempt to frame the information they are receiving within the frame of reference they have established.

Referred to as bounded rationality, this model recognizes the "...limitations of knowledge and computational limitations..." of the actor and accepts their point of view regardless of their accuracy.¹³⁷ Bounded rationality is a circumstance in which "...decision-makers do not choose their optimal alternative, but instead choose a policy that meets a threshold of satisfactory performance."¹³⁸ This need to define their decision and limit inputs results from limited (or biased) information, time pressures, and a limited cognitive capacity that affects the ability to process the information available in the context of an environment that demands decisions on multiple policies, often concurrently. For example, Johnson would have to negotiate the *Voting Rights Act* through Congress while also finalizing his decision on

¹³⁵ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 46.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁸ Gartner, *Strategic Assessment...*, 33.

Vietnam.

While competing advisors could provide overwhelming volumes of information and advice, ultimately Johnson had to end the search for answers and make a decision that met most of his requirements.¹³⁹ McNamara later wrote that “...one reason the Kennedy and Johnson administrations failed to take an orderly, rational approach to the basic questions underlying Vietnam was the staggering variety and complexity of other issues we faced. [We]...faced a blizzard of problems, there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and ... often [we] did not have time to think straight.”¹⁴⁰ Given the relatively few negative assessments they received regarding the situation in theatre and the more frequent and positive stance from respected military, political and diplomatic advisors, the tendency would have been to accept the more upbeat outlook. To try and simplify their assessments of the situation, Johnson and his advisors also developed parameters against which to measure progress, as most organizations do.

Organizations constantly assess their environment to measure progress or failure of an approach and will then modify their behaviour. One of the mechanisms for monitoring performance is the use of quantitative indicators measuring different factors in a specific time period. Using these indicators decision-makers will make predictions and derive conclusions regarding their policies. These indicators can be considered to be cognitive shortcuts designed to deal with very complex situations facing the decision-maker. Modern warfare is very complex, and decision-makers are forced to select what they will consider to be reasonable and measurable criteria against which to gauge the success or failure of policies. While there is risk in adopting too simple an approach, it is clearly impossible to utilize all possible measures of effectiveness as to do so would be overwhelming.¹⁴¹ Information reaching a decision-maker will of necessity need to be limited to the level believed necessary to make an informed decision.

¹³⁹ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 20.

¹⁴⁰ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, xi.

¹⁴¹ Gartner, *Strategic Assessment...*, 42-44.

Major decisions, such as those made regarding US involvement in Vietnam, are often made in small groups which will drive an increasing desire for cohesion and thus consensus. Conflict within the group will increase hesitation, vacillation and increasing levels of stress as the decision comes closer. To compensate, the group will begin to emphasize the likelihood of positive outcomes, reduce the potential downside and strive for conformity. As Johnson discovered with Vietnam, seeking a wide variety of internal and external opinions resulted in no clearer a solution, but instilled growing consensus on the way ahead that involved increased resource commitments.¹⁴² As will be shown in the next chapter, the core group around Johnson became ever more convinced as time passed that there was only one potential solution.

The advice a decision-maker receives is critical and the agents of that advice will often have an agenda or goal in mind. The JCS and Johnson's Cabinet, even while uncertain as to the outcome of the conflict in Vietnam, all intended to provide the best professional advice they could. Johnson had to rely on the experts knowing that they each held their own bias. The State Department had one view, the JCS another. McNamara was generally loyal to the JCS and McGeorge Bundy was concerned about ensuring the protection of US interests, as he saw them. Given their preferences, they presented information as it favoured their perspectives.¹⁴³ While sometimes divided in their internal discussions, the JCS presented a united front to the McNamara and to the president in Cabinet deliberations. This contributed to the "group-think" effect prevalent in the final discussions regarding escalation in Vietnam as the weight of opinion coalesced around a common view.¹⁴⁴ Actors with a significant personal investment in the outcome of a policy will be reluctant to accept evidence that it will not be successful. Given the stakes at play in Vietnam it should not be surprising to note that of Kaufman's four classes of interest –

¹⁴²Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 283-84.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁴⁴ *History of the JCS...*, part II, 17-1, 19-14 and 21-2. As described in Part II, there was little inclination on the part of the Joint Chiefs to incrementally increase forces. Given direction to stabilize the situation, they assessed that the need was to rapidly increase security forces and secure facilities. There was no wavering from within the JCS, they were focussed on achieving their mission.

“...conception of the national interest, class, institutional, party or factional interests, personal career or reputation, and emotional needs...”¹⁴⁵ at least three were present within the Cabinet of Johnson.

McGeorge Bundy consistently took the position that he had the interests of the nation at heart while at the same time he had become a policy advocate for an ever increasing commitment and few opposed him.¹⁴⁶

Johnson had to rely on his experts regarding the conduct of the war, and those experts invariably delivered split verdicts, while some argued for more force, others would mitigate those recommendations, but not in such a way as to oppose the recommendations of the other advisors. Collectively, they were biased towards proactive measures to stabilize or improve a deteriorating situation.

Because political decision-makers face “...an agenda fixed by hundreds of important deadlines, reasonable players must make difficult policy choices in much less time and with much less agonizing than an analyst or observer would.”¹⁴⁷ Given the best information available, as presented by trusted advisors and feeling pressures both domestic and international, Johnson was driven to make choices that would later be severely condemned. The president of the US “...will seldom, if ever, choose forceful action without solid support from...” the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor.¹⁴⁸ Decisions about the use of force will normally occur in the context of a large plurality amongst the advisors not a simple majority and they will not be taken lightly. Given that nearly all his advisors repeatedly favoured a decision to first incrementally and later substantially increase military support to South Vietnam, Johnson concluded there was consensus on

¹⁴⁵ Kaufman, “Out of the Lab...,” 562-63.

¹⁴⁶ *FRUS* 1964-1968, Vietnam, vol II, January-June 1965, document 143. Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, Washington, February 19, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/136_146.html; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009. Also *FRUS*, Johnson, Vietnam, vol II, document 183. Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/181_188.html; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 309.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 311-312.

the way ahead.¹⁴⁹ While decision-makers will accept a steady rate of negative indicators they will likely react to accelerating negative results and seek to change the potential outcome.¹⁵⁰ Johnson was forced to make decisions more quickly than he wanted as the situation worsened in the spring and early summer of 1965.

Three broad models can be used to define the mechanics of decision making: the rational choice, motivated bias and cognitive bias. Because “authority in foreign policy decisions is often highly concentrated, so that the beliefs of one or a few individuals can determine momentous decisions...” if one advisor in the group holds a particularly strong position, then their view can win out, especially if the others begin to see the situation in a similar way.¹⁵¹ The information environment will often be so muddled as to make the development of unbiased assessment difficult. If many advisors share a common point of view, it can be very difficult to take an opposing perspective.

Many foreign policy decisions are made by groups of professionals with long experience in foreign policy and long standing relationships with each other. The top level of advisors will be familiar with important events affecting their nation. Differences amongst them will normally be minor, and given that they will often interact, their level of exposure to various sources of information and

¹⁴⁹ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December, 1965, document 93. Summary Notes of the 553d Meeting of the National Security Council. Washington, July 27, 1965. Also document 94. Memorandum of Meeting With the Joint Congressional Leadership Washington, July 27, 1965, 6:30 p.m; Available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/090.html; Internet; accessed March 28 2009. Document 76. Notes of Meeting (JCS and President) Washington, July 22, 1965, noon-2:15 p.m; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed March 28 2009.

¹⁵⁰ Gartner, *Strategic Assessment...*, 52 and 76-80. An example of this occurred in April 1917; two months after Germany commenced unrestricted submarine warfare. As British shipping losses skyrocketed, Prime Minister Lloyd George was forced, against the advice of the very formidable First Sea Lord, Jackie Fisher and his admirals to direct the implementation of the shipping convoy system in an effort to reduce losses. As it happened, he was right and they were wrong. Their preference was to focus on the destruction of submarines, an action that had statistically been increasingly successful from 1916. While the admirals were focussed on the success of their Anti-Submarine Warfare campaign, they resisted the significance of the negative indicators resulting from an accelerating loss of shipping, a factor that could have lead to the defeat of Britain.

¹⁵¹ Chaim D. Kaufman, “Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision Making,” *International Studies Quarterly* (1994) 38, 559; EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed 7 January 2009.

interpretations thereof will become similar over time.¹⁵² The effects of this type of interaction will be demonstrated in the next chapter describing the decision to increase the levels of support to the government of South Vietnam.

While there is a desire to ascribe to political leadership very high levels of perspicacity on foreign policy issues, the reality is that they must, in the end rely on their top advisors. Those counsellors in turn will rely upon subject matter experts with varying degrees of bias and ability. All will rely on the delivery of information from far distant capitals, or battlefields, to support the development of assessments regarding the current situation, the effects of earlier decisions and weigh this information against competing demands. These demands could be international, such as the perceived need to demonstrate resolve in the face of pressure elsewhere, such as Soviet pressure against Berlin, or domestic pressure such as civil rights unrest, pretty much throughout the US. In the face of such pressures, decision-makers will have to deal with their own bias, that of their advisors, the need to discriminately expend resources on international or domestic challenges and, often, deal with various emerging crises. The strain can be so great on decision-makers that, no matter their desire to seek out the best advice and make the “best” decision, they will unconsciously impose cognitive short cuts to simplify the scenario they face and build a coherent picture of the situation. Some models suggest that the decisions made by political or military leaders will be based on biases inherent in the individuals concerned. The creation of these shortcuts will inherently impose a bias in the process of their formulation. Regardless of the causes of biased decisions, the result is a divergence from the “perfect” standard of purely rational decision making.¹⁵³

The Johnson cabinet was a single, relatively unified organization. While any one of the models described in this chapter can partially explain Johnson’s decision, it requires a combination of all models to explain why he made the choice to go big on the advice of his experts, but against the weight of

¹⁵² Kaufman, “Out of the Lab...,” 565.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*,”560.

evidence he, and they, received. Johnson solicited advice from intelligence, military and foreign policy advisors, cabinet members and elected representatives as he approached the decision to support South Vietnam with substantial forces. He also considered the legacy of his predecessors, commitments made by treaty, and the state of foreign and domestic circumstances as he perceived them but regardless of a desire to put off this major decision, he ultimately had to make it. The next chapter will consider the critical first half of 1965 and assess the rationale for the decision to escalate.

Chapter 5

Going Big in Vietnam

*“Lyndon summed up [the situation about Vietnam] quite simply – ‘I can’t get out, and I can’t finish it with what I have got, and I don’t know what the hell to do.’”*¹⁵⁴

– Diary of Lady Bird Johnson, March 7 1965

I. Spring and Summer 1965

Throughout the winter and spring of 1965 Johnson was focussed on multiple agendas. Domestically he was driving Congress to approve the *Voting Rights Act*, the anti-poverty programs, Medicare and various urban renewal projects. Internationally, he continued to support the defence of freedom, aid to emerging countries and the pursuit of peaceful engagement with the Soviet Bloc.¹⁵⁵ He had an ambitious agenda and intended to make full use of the advantage his large majority had given him. By the end of the summer he had signed into law the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the *Medicare Act* and the *Voting Rights Act*. He had also increased the number of US forces in Vietnam to over 100,000 and had approved the deployment of even more.

In 1964, the Cabinet had directed interagency war games on Vietnam take place. The first one, was identified as SIGMA I and projected no positive outcome for US policies or intervention in Vietnam.¹⁵⁶ A second war game resulted in a similar outcome and anticipated that bombing would have no effect on Hanoi’s decisions. Nevertheless, SIGMA II had no apparent dampening effect on the “...certainty that the way to save South Vietnam was to bomb the North and employ US combat forces in the South.”¹⁵⁷ Further, McGeorge Bundy commissioned an interagency assessment of Office National

¹⁵⁴ Beschloss, *Reaching for...*, 216.

¹⁵⁵ Lyndon Baines Johnson Memorial Library, Short Biography of Lyndon Johnson available from http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/biographys.hom/lbj_bio.asp#1960; Internet; accessed 16 March 2009.

¹⁵⁶ SIGMA was not an acronym; it appears to actually have been the name of the game. Some sources use “Sigma” but I have chosen to stay with the format used in the CIA references.

¹⁵⁷ Ford, *CIA and...Episode 2*.

Estimates reports that suggested that bombing the North would probably not work and might even strengthen Hanoi's resolve. Notwithstanding the work of these intelligence experts, momentum for increasing US involvement continued to build. Logic should have dictated a withdrawal, acceptance of defeat in a relatively unimportant part of the world and renewed focus on US domestic issues and international problems closer to home. North Vietnam's economy was almost entirely based on farming and consisted primarily of thousands of small village such that bombing had little impact.¹⁵⁸ State Department documents, the memoirs of Ball, McNamara and Johnson and the commentary of the CIA history reveal broad awareness of the likelihood of failure.¹⁵⁹ Why, then, the decision to increase the level of bombing, to deploy more aircraft and security forces and ultimately to support the direct intervention of US combat forces? This chapter will define the reasons for that decision and demonstrate that Johnson felt he had no other option.

Johnson considered that Vietnam was not worth risking a clash with China or Russia, so he ruled out options recommended by his military advisors such as mining of Haiphong Harbour, destroying dikes, bombing downtown Hanoi, or conducting an outright invasion of North Vietnam. He aimed to conduct a limited war with limited objectives and was concerned that every recommendation from the JCS appeared to suggest the need for large scale bombing. George Ball wrote "[a]mong all the top command, I found President Johnson the most reluctant to expand America's involvement...wary among other things of repeating MacArthur's error of attacking too close to the Chinese border..." and Johnson did not want to fight the Chinese directly again.¹⁶⁰ As the situation continued to worsen, recommendations for increased military involvement became stronger as a means to shore up South Vietnamese morale and to teach a

¹⁵⁸ Ford, *CIA and...Episode 2*.

¹⁵⁹ *FRUS Vietnam, 1964-68, vol II, Vietnam, 1965, document 126. Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Green) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Bundy) Washington, February 16, 1965. Available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/121_135.html; Internet; accessed 25 March 2009. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 282-83. See also Ford, *CIA...Episode 2*.*

¹⁶⁰ Ball, *The Past Has...*, 376-377.

lesson to the North.¹⁶¹ Recognizing that bombing alone would not win the war, Johnson was becoming more comfortable with the notion of increasing the involvement of US ground forces even though an outright victory was unlikely.¹⁶²

II. Critical incident - Attack at Pleiku

A key factor causing strategic decision-makers to narrow the search for solutions to complex problems can be a significant event that forces them to make an immediate decision. Under the organizational behaviour model a dramatic performance failure will cause an organization to adjust its efforts.¹⁶³ The mission, objectives and methods can be almost immediately redefined in response to a crisis. Resistance to change diminishes and those seen to embrace the new approach assume greater prominence. More recently the attacks on the US in September, 2001 highlight the rapidity with which the operational environment can shift as critical indicators reveal that a current program or policy is no longer valid.¹⁶⁴ This can be especially true in an environment which leaves the final decision to one individual.

In December, 1964 and January, 1965 the growing sense of doom regarding Vietnam weighed on Johnson and his principle advisors. State Department documents indicate that the US knew that despite another change in government in Saigon, there was unlikely to be long term stability given continuing pressure from the Viet Cong, unrest amongst the Bhuddist leadership, disputes between the South

¹⁶¹ *FRUS* Vietnam, 1964-68, vol II, Vietnam, 1965, document 112. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State February 12, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/109_120.html; Internet; accessed 16 March 2009.

¹⁶² *FRUS* Vietnam, 1964-68, vol I, Vietnam, 1964, document 477. Telegram From the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor) Washington, December 30, 1964--11:15 a.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/441_479.html; Internet; accessed 16 March 2009.

¹⁶³ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 172.

¹⁶⁴ The author was in the midst of an intelligence briefing regarding the ongoing crisis in Macedonia in the Canadian Joint Headquarters when the first aircraft strike on the Twin Towers in New York was reported. We had dispatched a small team to support the NATO efforts at pacification in that country and had been continuing to provide direct support to theatre. Despite the ongoing crisis in Macedonia, within days our support ceased as we began to focus on Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and deploying ourselves. Within a few weeks all key planners had gone to US Central Command.

Vietnamese military leaders and agitation from other opposition groups.¹⁶⁵ Even as the situation remained unstable and the Viet Cong forces gained strength and ability, the US continued to hope for negotiations that would result from a strong but graduated escalation of force.¹⁶⁶ There was recognition that things were bad and likely to deteriorate but, as the implications of leaving appeared worse, there was little incentive to leave.¹⁶⁷ Deliberations in Washington continued to fluctuate between small and large scale responses while trying to find a way to stabilize the government in Saigon. The Viet Cong, for their part, had no reason to prevaricate.¹⁶⁸ They were about to create the impetus for an increased tempo for US military operations by increasing their own level of operations.

Decision-makers will react to significant events that rapidly increase awareness that policies are not working when measured against their key indicators. For Johnson, the Viet Cong attack on the US

¹⁶⁵ For disputes see *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, January-June 1965, document 64. Memorandum of Conversation Saigon, February 4, 1965 or document 69. Special National Intelligence Estimate NIE 53-65; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/56_70.html; Internet; accessed 11 March, 2009. See also document 1. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State Saigon, January 2, 1965, 3 p.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/01_09.html; Internet; accessed 11 March, 2009. For agitation see *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol I, Vietnam, 1964, document 444. Memorandum From Chester L. Cooper of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) Washington, December 10, 1964, 448; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/441_479.html or *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, document 9. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State Saigon, January 6, 1965, 11 a.m. or *FRUS* 1964-68 vol II, Vietnam January-June 1965, document 15. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Bundy) to Secretary of State Rusk Washington, January 6, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/10_18.html; Internet; accessed 11 March, 2009.

¹⁶⁶ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, document 32. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State/1/Saigon, January 22, 1965, 1 p.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/31_45.html; Internet; accessed 11 March, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Gaddis, *Strategies of...*, 260. See also *FRUS* 1964-68, vol I, Vietnam 1964, document 449. Letter From the President to Senator Mike Mansfield Washington, December 17, 1964. See also 477. Telegram From the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor)/Washington, December 30, 1964--11:15 a.m. in which Johnson states "I continue to feel very strongly that we ought not to be widening the battle until we get our dependents out of South Vietnam. I know that you have not agreed with this view in the past, and I recognize that there are some agencies which may face recruiting difficulties if dependents are removed, but no argument I have yet heard overrides the fact that we are facing a war in Saigon and we are considering actions which may bring strong communist reaction, if not by air, at least by a concentrated VC effort against Americans...my own readiness to authorize larger actions will be very much greater if we can remove the dependents..."; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/441_479.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁶⁸ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, document 37. Memorandum From Chester L. Cooper of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) Washington, January 26, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/31_45.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

airbase at Pleiku on the 6th of February 1965 was such an event. The attack caused several American deaths and more than one hundred wounded.¹⁶⁹ Although there had been discussion of more effective reprisals in response to attacks on US forces since the Tonkin Gulf incident, Pleiku highlighted the need for rapid decisions and a new approach to security for US forces. The South Vietnamese had proven they were not capable of ensuring the protection of US facilities. Almost unanimously, the National Security Council endorsed the way ahead including increased bombing of the North and the deployment of more ground forces for security.¹⁷⁰ This decision would also lead to the withdrawal of US dependant families from Vietnam, removing what had been a key restraint on US forces.¹⁷¹

Despite advice from Senator Mike Mansfield to take a cautious approach to Vietnam,¹⁷² Johnson revealed his new approach after Pleiku stating: "...he had kept the shotgun over the mantle and the bullets in the basement for a long time now, but ... the enemy was killing his personnel and he could not expect them to continue their work if he did not authorize them to take steps to defend themselves."¹⁷³ Johnson was also concerned that being overly cautious could lead to a wider threat if the Soviet and Chinese leadership did not clearly understand his commitment to defending US allies. His views on the causes of the two World Wars indicated that he felt that courage and a demonstration of resolve could have prevented both. He and his advisors were strongly affected by the lessons of appeasement and saw this

¹⁶⁹ *History of the JCS...* part 2, 17-17.

¹⁷⁰ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, document 77. Memorandum for the Record Washington, February 6, 1965, 7:45-9 p.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/71_80.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁷¹ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January – June 1965, document 80. Summary Notes of the 546th Meeting of the National Security Council Washington, February 7, 1965, 8-9:45 a.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/71_80.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁷² *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January- June 1965, document 334. Memorandum From Senator Mike Mansfield to President Johnson Washington, June 5, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/331_335.html; Internet; accessed 1 April 2009. Mansfield in this letter tells Johnson that he sees no strategic reason for the US to make Vietnam a critical national security issue.

¹⁷³ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January- June 1965, document 77. Memorandum for the Record Washington, February 6, 1965, 7:45-9 p.m. and document 76. Summary Notes of the 545th Meeting of the National Security Council Washington, February 6, 1965, 7:45-9 p.m; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/71_80.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

situation in a similar light. As described in the previous chapter, crisis environments will often cause decisions to be made by a small group. Basing their assessments on a common view of acceptable measures, they will tend to short-cut research and debate in favour of decisions that attempt to rapidly stabilize a crisis. This tendency was growing within the key group of advisors on Vietnam.

While he continued to try to understand the situation and adopt a balanced approach to decisions on Vietnam, there was simply too much to do and too much information.¹⁷⁴ Overloaded with data, Johnson was forced to circumscribe development of alternatives and simplify the assessment of the situation. Unfortunately while he was wrestling with the attack on Pleiku, at home civil rights demonstrations in Georgia continued and Johnson was distracted by the need to find a way to de-escalate the environment of domestic crisis.¹⁷⁵ Issues regarding civil rights were reaching a critical point, and Johnson was forced to pay attention to serious problems in both Georgia and Vietnam simultaneously. The requirement for full support in Congress for his domestic program played a key role in shaping Johnson's decision to escalate.¹⁷⁶ Sensing the pressure to act, knowing that stability in the southern US was at risk if his civil rights and poverty programs did not pass, Johnson sought a decision that he hoped would produce a satisfactory though not necessarily the best result. As indicated earlier in this paper, constrained by time, Johnson and his advisors could only make decisions based on the information they had available assessed within a time frame acceptable to trying to achieve a at least a minimally satisfactory result.

III. Spring 1965 – The Crisis Grows

As the spring of 1965 wore on, the situation in Vietnam continued to worsen and the JCS continued to recommend increasing the levels of force to help stabilize the situation and free up

¹⁷⁴ McNamara and DeMark, *In Retrospect...*, xi.

¹⁷⁵ Michael R. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 172.

¹⁷⁶ Helsing, *Johnson's War...*, 9. Johnson admitted he wanted to achieve both his foreign policy objectives and more importantly his domestic ones; Helsing writes that McGeorge Bundy acknowledged that Johnson's desire to 'protect his legislative program' played a key role in shaping his decision to escalate in July 1965.

Vietnamese combat forces. Ignoring the results of the SIGMA war games and CIA assessments, the JCS assessed that the commencement of a sustained and escalating bombing program would demonstrate to Hanoi that the policy of stimulating unrest and chaos would result in significant consequences. As the crisis intensified, the small group of advisors turned more often to proposing solutions that required more resources. Recommendations to increase the level of ground forces also continued.¹⁷⁷

While Ball advised in a memorandum to Johnson that the risks were high and the chances of success low, his was the lone dissenting voice within the inner circle.¹⁷⁸ As early as February, his contrarian perspective was being squeezed out and he summarized the positions of Johnson's principal advisors during a meeting, placing Bundy and McNamara in the pro-escalation camp, along with Taylor. Ball argued that even the deployment of ground forces would not change Hanoi's position.¹⁷⁹ After a lengthy discussion of the memo with Bundy, Ball and McNamara, Johnson decided to increase the level of direct action against North Vietnamese targets until attacks in the South were halted.¹⁸⁰ Concurrently, there was considerable argument against any public discussion of negotiations for fear of further weakening the fragile situation in Saigon and affecting support from Thailand. The fear expressed by Bundy was that weakness could discourage key players in the South while others were concerned about affecting US stature around the world.¹⁸¹ As a policy advocate Bundy was gaining strength and his

¹⁷⁷ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January- June 1965, document 109. Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara JCSM-100-65 Washington, February 11, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/109_120.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁷⁸ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January- June 1965, document 113. Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Ball to President Johnson, Washington, February 13, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/109_120.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁷⁹ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January- June 1965, document 120. Memorandum of Conversation Washington, February 15, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/109_120.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁸⁰ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam January – June 1965, document 114, Diary Entry by the Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Bruce) Washington, February 13, 1965. See also document 116. Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State Saigon, February 14, 1965, 11 a.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/109_120.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁸¹ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January – June 1965, document 87. Summary Notes of the 547th Meeting of the National Security Council Washington, February 8, 1965, 10:30 a.m.; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/87_95.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009. See also

position, always strong, was becoming unassailable.

Pressure for a single, focussed effort was beginning to build and while he had previously been more balanced in his assessments, Bundy was becoming one of the key instigators for increased force levels as the situation worsened.¹⁸² Bundy had considerable influence and was actively lobbying for a significant increase in US forces on the ground. He had in effect become a player in the game, advocating his own agenda rather than simply presenting a balanced assessment to other members of the team.¹⁸³ No longer neutral he had become a policy advocate and began to support a series of decisions that individually did not appear to indicate a significant shift, but began to move the US inexorably towards a major deployment of forces. Bundy's views would be reinforced at a 17 February meeting at which Eisenhower argued against negotiating from a position of weakness. He recommended taking such military action as necessary to support the commander on the ground to ensure a position of strength.¹⁸⁴ Recognition that something had to be done to stabilize the situation was clear. The solution was becoming the commitment of more resources.

Simultaneously Johnson began to indicate that the public face of the Cabinet had to be united in their position regardless of the diversity of internal discussions.¹⁸⁵ He was cementing a climate in which group-think was becoming more likely. Grappling with domestic issues as well, Johnson was probably trying to ensure he and his team presented a united front. Increasingly unwilling to accept alternative

document 122. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Bundy) to Secretary of State Rusk/1/ Washington, February 15, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/121_135.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁸² *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January – June 1965, document 124. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson Washington, February 16, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/121_135.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁸³ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 273.

¹⁸⁴ *FRUS* 1964-1968, Vietnam, 1964-68, Vietnam, vol II, January – June 1965, document 133. Memorandum of a Meeting With President Johnson Washington, February 17, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/121_135.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

¹⁸⁵ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 184-86.

points of view, by mid-February some key supporters of negotiations such as Senator Dick Dirksen and Vice-President Hubert Humphrey were being marginalized. Anxious about making the decision to increase the participation of US forces, he and his advisors exaggerated favourable results such as improved stability and downplayed negative reports from Saigon or negative assessments such as the National Intelligence Estimates. Conformity was beginning to dominate and those not aligned with the consensus or able to articulate an alternative viewpoint were likely to be closed out.¹⁸⁶

Even the Joint Chiefs of Staff, while willing to engage in vigorous disputes internally, demonstrated a united front and produced a continuous stream of recommendations to increase the level of forces in Vietnam.¹⁸⁷ Unable to come to agreement on how to successfully end the war, they ultimately focused on reducing their collective risk by asking for increasing levels of resources.¹⁸⁸ As the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate to the point that even those in the National Security Council began to doubt there was any chance of reversing the situation,¹⁸⁹ the JCS continued to submit a steady trickle of

¹⁸⁶ Chester L. Cooper, cited in Ford, *CIA and...Episode 2*. Johnson “seemed to have a blind mind-set which made him pay attention to people who said that (a) he was right, (b) there was a way out, and (c) there were no other alternatives to what he wanted to do.”

¹⁸⁷ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of...*, 284-85.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 286-87.

¹⁸⁹ See for example *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January - June 1965, document 183. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson Washington, March 6, 1965. “Two of the three of us think that the chances of a turn-around in South Vietnam remain less than even; the brutal fact is that we have been losing ground at an increasing rate in the countryside in January and February. The air actions have lifted morale, but it is not clear how much, and there is no evidence yet that the new government has the necessary will, skill and human resources which a turn-around will require.”; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/181_188.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009. Also see *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January - June 1965, document 189. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson Washington, March 8, 1965 attachment Memorandum by the Presidential Consultant on Vietnam (Lodge) Washington, March 8, 1965 Recommendations for Vietnam. “While the pacification record in North and South Vietnam is bad, progress in the key (so-called “Hop Tac”) area surrounding Saigon appears encouraging. According to the weekly CIA report of February 24,/4/ ten more hamlets were pacified during the week, bringing the total to 309 (out of a total of 1,146 hamlets in this area) in two and half months and leading to “...positive actions by hamlet chiefs to help the people...” which “...has rapidly motivated the people to supply the Government with information.” In the report for March 3, the figure was raised to 322 hamlets, meaning that some 870,000 people are now reckoned to be living in secure areas and some 448,000 in areas in the process of being secured.” It is interesting to note that despite the increase in the number of people in secure hamlets, the situation outside Saigon continued to deteriorate. Available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/189_191.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009.

requests for deployment of relatively small forces to enhance security at US airfields and other bases.¹⁹⁰

This trickle had the effect of slowly increasing the number of US ground forces without raising immediate concern about troop levels. By keeping the requirements to battalion strength and below, it appeared that there were no large scale changes occurring and made the decisions approving individual unit deployments easier. By not raising a red flag with large scale troop requests they avoided triggering what should have been a key indicator, the rising number of troops on the ground.

By the end of April, McNamara, Taylor and Westmoreland agreed that bombing would not win the war and they asked Johnson to think about a substantial increase in the number of troops. They also came to the conclusion that the Chinese would not intervene directly so increasing the US footprint would not be an issue. There was confidence within the team dealing with Vietnam that within six months, "... they can sufficiently stiffen the South Vietnamese and strengthen their forces to show Hanoi that Hanoi cannot win in the South. It won't be that the South Vietnamese can win. But it will be clear to Hanoi that Hanoi can't win."¹⁹¹ McNamara also indicated that there had been a levelling off of the downward slide with a possibility of improvement in the situation. He again raised the need to protect large US concentrations as part of the rationale for increasing forces while releasing Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops to combat. In addition, the US electorate strongly supported the government's Vietnam policies so Bundy felt there would be little risk in taking firm action in Vietnam.¹⁹² Johnson continued to be focussed on his domestic program, and knowing that there was strong support for the ongoing defence of an ally he was being persuaded that he would have to follow the policy advocated by Bundy and others.

Indicators for Vietnam continued to deteriorate and through May and June 1965 "... the ARVN

¹⁹⁰ *History of the JCS...* Part II pp19-2 to 19-5

¹⁹¹ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 282-83.

¹⁹² *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December 1965, document 33. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson Washington, June 30, 1965. "The latest Harris Poll (June 28) shows that 62% of the public expresses overall approval of the President's handling of the Vietnam crisis. Well over 70% of the people believe that Southeast Asia will go Communist if we do not stand firm in Vietnam, and they approve the President's call for unconditional negotiations."; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/030.html; Internet; accessed 28 March 2009.

suffered a series of near catastrophic events that were instrumental in causing the Johnson Administration to act on General Westmoreland's recommendation for a greatly expanded US ground combat role in the war."¹⁹³ Several attacks by Viet Cong that resulted in the decimation of ARVN forces appeared to confirm that the forces of South Vietnam were not improving their capabilities and could not successfully counter the Viet Cong on their own. Further to assessments in March, it was becoming clearer that the South Vietnamese would be in no position to defeat the Viet Cong on their own,¹⁹⁴ but also that there was a strong desire on the part of the US to negotiate from a position of strength.¹⁹⁵ Contradictory information continued to flow with a briefing by Bundy at the 1 April, 1965 National Security Council meeting indicating that there had been progress with South Vietnamese security forces and implying that more resources would demonstrate to North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union that they could not win.¹⁹⁶ This briefing also recommended an immediate force increase of 18-20,000 men to "flesh out" units in theatre and to plan for the further deployment of another two divisions of 30,000 men. The proposal was approved as yet another incremental adjustment, once again avoiding the immediate raising of anxiety regarding force levels.

In May, as Johnson weighed the issue of increasing forces in Vietnam, a coup occurred in the Dominican Republic. This event was to deepen the sense of concern the Cabinet had regarding an

¹⁹³ PP vol 2, 472.

¹⁹⁴ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January - June 1965, document 193. Paper Prepared by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (McNaughton) Washington, March 10, 1965 see also document 194, Memorandum From Chester L. Cooper of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) March 10, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/192_194.html; Internet; accessed 11 March 2009

¹⁹⁵ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, document 198. Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara JCSM-180-65 Washington, March 15, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/195_198.html; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009.

¹⁹⁶ *FRUS* 1964-1968, vol II, Vietnam January-June 1965, document 228, Memorandum by the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) Washington, April 1, 1965; available from, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/221_240.html; Internet; accessed 15 March 2009.

aggressive communist program.¹⁹⁷ Whether or not it existed, Johnson had to deal with the perception that there was such an action plan. While Johnson was initially concerned with protecting US citizens, the issue became clouded by an assessment that Communists were behind the conflict. This was based on a report from the Ambassador in Santo Domingo that “Castro type” elements were involved. In the White House, the greatest anxiety was that a second island nation was on the verge of falling to the Communists.¹⁹⁸ Johnson was being forced to deal with multiple, and sometimes fast changing, situations.

Johnson was forced to more clearly define his intentions in Vietnam as the situation deteriorated. At a June, 1965 meeting he had McNamara outline the goals for Southeast Asia to the cabinet. He outlined the key objective as being to: “...move towards a stalemate, convincing the communists that the situation in the south will not lead to a military victory, that they can’t win while the stalemate continues...The basic question is how we can accomplish a stalemate...and how we can move [to] a situation in which they see that there is no hope for...victory....”¹⁹⁹ The leadership in Washington understood they would not be holding a ticker tape parade to celebrate, but continued to wrestle with the means of achieving their now limited goal. As they were grappling with this realization, more information arrived from Vietnam that, in contrast to the hope expressed only weeks earlier by McNamara, things were in fact about to get much worse. The only solution appeared to be the commitment of large numbers of US ground forces to combat operations. With few insiders questioning the demands from theatre for more forces, Johnson believed that there was a growing consensus to introduce large numbers of combat forces.

Hesitant to do so, Johnson reacted with increasing anxiety as reports from Ambassador Taylor in

¹⁹⁷ *FRUS* 1964-68, Volume XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana document 23. Telephone Conversation Between the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Mann) and President Johnson Washington, April 27, 1965; available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/FRUS/johnsonlb/xxxii/44733.htm>; Internet; accessed 28 March 2009.

¹⁹⁸ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 289.

¹⁹⁹ Helsing, *Johnson's War...*, 43.

Saigon indicated there appeared to be no other choice as the Vietnamese army continued to collapse.²⁰⁰ In discussions with friends, he expressed growing pessimism about the future and suggested that the military would continue to request ever increasing numbers of forces to try and stabilize the situation. He expected that if he approved the 75,000 requested in early June, they would then want another 75,000 and then a further doubling.²⁰¹ He was warned to expect increasing opposition in Congress should he keep increasing force levels and his concerns about Vietnam derailing his domestic program appeared to be gaining validity. By 10 June, the US commander of military forces in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, had asked to bring total numbers up to 175,000 by the end of the summer.²⁰² McNamara informed Johnson that the JCS had debated and supported Westmoreland's request.²⁰³ He also outlined what he felt was a considerable increase in risk as most of the troops requested were combat forces. Johnson was also concerned about the potential impact increasing military expenditures would have on his "Great Society" legislation.²⁰⁴ Torn by the need to focus on Vietnam and the threat it posed to his programs he continued to vacillate but the time remaining to do so was running out.

IV. The Last Debate

By early July Johnson realized he had to make a choice to order substantial increases in forces in Vietnam, to negotiate a withdrawal or to simply maintain the status quo in the hopes that Hanoi would stop. Recalling the 1964 debate regarding whether or not to seek a Congressional resolution on the war, he said to McNamara:

“...we know ourselves in our own conscience, that when we asked for this resolution [Tonkin Gulf August 1964] we had no intention of committing this many ground troops. We're doing so now, and we know it's going to be bad...I don't know if those Pentagon men have ever [calculated] whether we can win with the kind of training we have, the kind of power, and

²⁰⁰ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 343-44.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 345-47.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 348-51.

²⁰³ McNamara, *In Retrospect...*, 192.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

...whether we can have a united support at home.”²⁰⁵

He clearly retained his sense of unease regarding the entire endeavour while Eisenhower continued to advise Johnson to heed the advice of the military experts. His cabinet was coming round to the same view and even Martin Luther King provided something of a lukewarm endorsement in the context of the potential risk to the *Voting Rights Act* should Johnson lose support in Congress.²⁰⁶ Johnson would state more than once that given unanimity on the part of his advisors he had no choice that would make things easier or better, he was running out of options.²⁰⁷ He was going to have to jump out of the airplane and accept the consequences.

Discussions from the middle of July onwards indicate a sense of inevitability.²⁰⁸ Finally, with the situation in Saigon reported to be dire, three pivotal meetings occurred on the 21st of July. At the first meeting, Ball articulated good reasons to withdraw US forces as soon as possible and to acknowledge that the war was in the hands of the government of South Vietnam. Otherwise, the US faced a long and costly

²⁰⁵ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*..., 381-82.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 383 -84 and 387.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 390. 8 July 1965, Lady Bird Johnson diary – “...he told me today [regarding Vietnam] “things are not going well here...Vietnam is getting worse everyday. I have the choice to go in with great casualty lists or to get out with disgrace. It’s like being in an airplane and I have to choose between crashing the plane or jumping out. I do not have a parachute.” He would express to television anchor John Chancellor his great disappointment that despite progress on his domestic programs the focus of media reporting was frequently the bad news from Vietnam - see Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*..., 407.

²⁰⁸ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June – Dec 1965, document 71 through 109; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/index.html; Internet; accessed 27 March 2009. Notes in *FRUS*: “meeting was held in the Cabinet Room of the White House. The notes were originally handwritten by Valenti and later transcribed. They are quoted extensively in Valenti, *A Very Human President*, pp. 319-40. For another account of this meeting, see Document 72; more information on attendance is in footnote 1 thereto. For other first-hand accounts of the White House meetings on Vietnam on July 21 and July 22, see Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 147-148; and Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 399-403. William Bundy also wrote an account of the meetings. (Johnson Library, Papers of William P. Bundy, Ch. 27, pp. 30-33).” Participants at the meeting included: McNamara (Sec Def), Rusk (Sec State), Cyrus Vance (Deputy Secretary of Defense), Mac Bundy (President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs), Gen. Wheeler (CJCS), Geo. Ball (Under Secretary of State), Bill Bundy (Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs), Len Unger (Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and Chairman of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee), Richard Helms (Deputy Director of Central Intelligence), William Raborn (Director of Central Intelligence), Lodge, Rowan, McNaughton, Bill Moyers (Special Assistant to the President and Press Secretary), Jack Valenti (Special Assistant to the President) and President Johnson.

war that would weaken the US globally, with the best result a stalemate favourable to the North Vietnamese. He also indicated that if the decision was to go ahead he would support that decision fully.²⁰⁹ This was essentially the last clearly expressed opposition to the escalation of forces. Group-think had taken hold.

Johnson then requested a detailed discussion including all points of view and wanted good reasons to go ahead before making up his mind. Bundy, McNamara, the Chief of the JCS General Wheeler and Lodge argued in favour of a rapid build up; believing that a diplomatic solution would not develop unless Hanoi realized the US was committed to a long campaign. McNamara suggested that by mid-1966 the US would have mobilized 600,000 reserves to replace the regular forces already in Vietnam. Several participants stated concerns that if the US withdrew it would leave the impression that the US was a paper tiger and would not stand by its allies. Further, Rusk argued that the US had not done enough between 1954 and 1961 to assist Vietnam, which had caused the situation to deteriorate. Johnson became frustrated with the lack of choices available but feared that pulling out was more dangerous in the long run than deploying more forces. McNamara and Wheeler explained the rationale for deploying so many more troops, which caused Johnson to ask why they thought that Ho Chi Minh wouldn't simply increase his own force levels. Wheeler simply argued that more enemy forces would mean more targets. Not satisfied, Johnson asked that alternatives be more clearly presented at a follow up meeting to be held a few hours later.²¹⁰

At the second meeting with the same advisors much of the previous discussion was repeated, although alternatives were perhaps more clearly articulated. Ball added that the situation might be different if they were assisting a stable government that clearly had the support of the population. Bundy would yet again make the case that Ball's arguments were weak and continued to be the stalwart advocate

²⁰⁹ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June – Dec 1965, document 71. Notes of Meeting Washington, July 21, 1965, 10:40 a.m. Available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2009.

²¹⁰ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June – Dec 1965, document 71. Notes of Meeting Washington, July 21, 1965, 10:40 a.m. Available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2009.

of more force. He suggested that Ball failed to recognize losses already inflicted on the North, implying that more combat would ultimately demonstrate Hanoi could not achieve its aims through conflict. Rusk and Lodge argued that if the US failed in Vietnam there was no way to determine where the “Communists would stay their hand” and that the dangers of World War III would become even greater. According to Lodge, it would be a “repeat of our indolence at Munich.”²¹¹ Bundy felt that it would be better to stay the course than to withdraw and risk US standing on security. There was little new at this point and the meeting adjourned with Johnson expressing concern that there was too much attention in the press on Vietnam and not enough on the domestic reform agenda.²¹²

On the 22nd of July, Johnson held a meeting with the JCS at which he articulated the three options discussed the previous day. All the service chiefs came out in favour of deploying more troops and rejected withdrawal as it would weaken the US position globally. When Johnson asked why bombing and ground operations had not been effective, the Air Force argued that target approvals had been too restrictive and the Army and Marines that they had not yet deployed enough troops.²¹³ All recognized they were entering into a protracted conflict requiring as many as 500,000 men and at least five years of combat operations but remained committed to the mission. While the JCS and other advisors were quick to criticize the North Vietnamese as being creatures of habit, they had difficulty recognizing their own tendency to follow the same pattern of requests for resources rather than seeking alternate solutions.²¹⁴

On the 27th of July, Johnson held a final consultation with the full National Security Council

²¹¹ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June – Dec 1965, document 71. Notes of Meeting Washington, July 21, 1965, meeting resumed 14:30; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2009.

²¹² *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June – Dec 1965, document 72. Memorandum for the Record/1/ Washington, July 21, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2009.

²¹³ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June – Dec 1965, document 76. Notes of Meeting; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2009. Valenti recalled that before this meeting, President Johnson told him: “All these recommendations seem to be built on a pretty soft bottom. Everything blurs when you get almost to the gate.”

²¹⁴ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December 1965, document 75. Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Busby) to President Johnson, July 21, 1965, 10 pm; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/070.html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2009.

during which he re-stated the commitment made by Eisenhower, Kennedy and himself to South Vietnam and the need to support the troops in combat. He once again sought out the Congressional leadership before making the final decision to escalate.²¹⁵ Although not normally part of the inner circle Senators, both Democrats and Republicans, re-assured him that as this was an issue of national security they would support him whichever course of action he adopted, as long as the aim was to defeat the communists.²¹⁶ For Johnson this was critical as he was still concerned about support for his domestic agenda. Containment as a bipartisan agreed upon framework for foreign and defence policy introduced its own form of group-think. The bipartisan agreement on Vietnam provided him with the assurance that he would not lose support on foreign policy.²¹⁷ Johnson was now ready.

On the 28th of July, 1965, Johnson announced publicly that the US was escalating its involvement in Vietnam for the purpose of demonstrating resolve against aggression. It wasn't the only initiative. Johnson also authorized secret talks with the North Vietnamese in the hopes of rejuvenating peace talks.²¹⁸ Ultimately those talks would not bear fruit and Johnson's legacy would be negatively affected by

²¹⁵ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December, 1965, document 93. Summary Notes of the 553d Meeting of the National Security Council Washington, July 27, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/090.html; Internet; accessed 24 March 2009.

²¹⁶ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December, 1965, document 94. Memorandum of Meeting With the Joint Congressional Leadership Washington, July 27, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/090.html; Internet; accessed 24 March 2009.

²¹⁷ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December, 1965, document 93. Summary Notes of the 553d Meeting of the National Security Council Washington, July 27, 1965; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/090.html; Internet; accessed 24 March 2009. In his memorandum of the meeting, prepared on November 2, 1968, from his handwritten notes dated July 27, 1965, McGeorge Bundy included the following statement: "The notes also record my own feeling that while the President was placing his preference for alternative five [e.], as against alternative four [d.], on international grounds, his unspoken object was to protect his legislative program--or at least this had appeared to be his object in his informal talk as late as Thursday and Friday of the preceding week--July 22, and July 23."

²¹⁸ *FRUS* 1964-68, Vietnam, vol III, June-December, 1965, document 112. Editorial Note; available from http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/109.html; Internet; accessed 12 March 2009. On August 6, 1965, the United States established direct contact with North Vietnam through the North Vietnamese representative in Paris, Mai Van Bo. In response to suggestions from Mai Van Bo, passed through the French Government in May (see *Foreign Relations*, 1964-1968, volume II, Document 313) and through Urah Arkas-Duntov of the Dreyfus Fund in July (see Document 98), an authorized but unofficial U.S. representative was dispatched to Paris to explore with Bo the possibility of negotiations with North Vietnam. The U.S. representative was retired Ambassador Edmund Gullion, former Deputy Chief of Mission in Saigon. The decision to pursue the negotiating track was very tightly

the impressions left by the war in Vietnam rather than the reformation of American society. He would later note that while most of Congress was against his poverty programs, they were fully behind the war in Vietnam.²¹⁹ His hand was forced, regardless of his natural reluctance to engage more fully in a war he knew he could not win. In order to continue to deliver progress at home he could not withdraw. The only option, then, was to go big.

While the theories described in the previous chapter are useful for describing the various mechanisms that individuals may use to manage vast amounts of information in a complex operating environment, they are not enough to explain a seemingly illogical decision. Bounded rationality suggests that the decision was made within the context of Johnson's own biases and previous experience when, in fact, he remained cognizant of other issues and was hesitant to become too deeply involved in a foreign conflict. Although McGeorge Bundy acted as a policy advocate, particularly as the time for a decision on escalation approached, other voices, such as Ball's provided alternative points of view, and sometimes made their own submissions. While group-think had a role to play, Johnson was clearly his own man as indicated by Bundy and the diary entries of Lady Bird Johnson. While critical indicators on Vietnam were generally negative, an alternative choice would have been to leave. Yet Johnson did not choose to do so.

Ultimately choices are made by human beings influenced by those around them and likely as the result of a combination of decision-making processes. In this case, the increasingly negative indicators, the entrenched policy of containment, the steady movement towards consensus on Vietnam, most importantly amongst Rusk, McNamara, Bundy the Joint Chiefs, the Director of the CIA and, eventually even Ball, would have left Johnson with little choice. To compound his difficulty, he was restricted in his

held, and for reasons of security Gullion was referred to in documents relating to the Paris contacts as X, and Mai Van Bo was referred to as Rupert. For records of the four meetings between Gullion and Mai Van Bo, which took place between August 6 and September 1, see Documents 113, 120, 122, and 133.

²¹⁹ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory...*, 445. In an interview for his library transcribed by his aide Harry Middleton, Johnson recalled that "85% of Congress were against the poverty program but they were sure behind [him] on Vietnam." In part because the fear was "[I]f we get out it's going to be tragic for this country...If we let them take Asia, they're going to try to take us...If you let a bully come in and chase you out of your front yard, tomorrow he'll be on your porch, and the next day he'll rape your wife in your own bed."

ability to manoeuvre by the need to maintain the support of Congress for his domestic legislative programs which saw as his true legacy. He wanted to ensure that every child had the opportunity for education, the right to vote and equal rights.²²⁰ Fearing that appearing weak on national security would cost him support, he opted to be strong in Vietnam and hoped for a quick end to combat through a massive increase in forces. While it proved to be an unsuccessful gambit, in the summer of 1965, it seemed a reasonable one.

²²⁰ Johnson, *The Vantage Point...*, 154-55. Johnson liked to retell stories of the travails of his black cook and driver, husband and wife, as they travelled to and from Washington. The pair was often unable to use washrooms and wouldn't take the Presidential dog for fear it would make it more difficult for them to find a place to stay at night.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

“...I woke to hear Lyndon say, almost as if he were in the middle of a sentence but...had been interrupted, “I don’t want to get in a war and I don’t see any way out of it. I’ve got to call up 600,000 boys, make them leave their homes and their families.”²²¹

- *Lady Bird Johnson Diary 22 July 1965*

Johnson has long been criticized for failing to consider the consequences of escalating US involvement in a country with no viable government, a weak military and no real link to national security. This criticism has focussed primarily on his willingness to support continued military requests for resources, although McMaster describes how not enough were provided and the Joint Chiefs at the time often wanted even more. He was considered by many to be more interested in waging war than finding a road to peace, yet the diary entries of his wife and the conversations recorded on White House tapes reveal he felt considerable anxiety regarding the issue and was not at all keen to spend American resources on a doubtful outcome. Why then did he make the decision in late July 1965 to “go big”?

First, a highly trusted advisor Bundy, was an articulate advocate for a strong defence in Southeast Asia and was supported by the military and even the diplomatic community. While Johnson remained wary of a long term commitment to Vietnam, his resistance was defeated by the steady pace of Bundy’s arguments. Although Johnson received contrary advice from others such as Ball, Dirksen and Galbraith, faced with an overwhelming majority of advisors who felt it the right thing to do, he ultimately felt he had no choice if he wanted to protect other weak allies, and to ensure political support at home for his legislative programs.

Second, Johnson had constrained his decision making framework with what he viewed as the need to reform American society while protecting US allies abroad. His decisions would have to fit within those guidelines. While he could have continued to search for alternatives, the gradually escalating decisions he made on Vietnam helped to keep the major decision at bay while he served his

²²¹ Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*,... 403.

first year as president, fought an election and delivered an ambitious legislative program. Perhaps because the escalation was incremental, and always in response to a crisis in Vietnam such as the collapse of another government, the attack at Pleiku or reports of a failing Vietnamese military, the July, 1965 decision became inevitable. Inevitable because such large numbers of troops were already committed that it might have appeared they were already fully engaged and as casualties rose, leaving would become even harder.

Third, the extremely high volumes of information being processed by Johnson and his advisors forced them to limit their examination of the situation and to consider the value of taking their lumps and leaving. Concerned about communist advances elsewhere, they saw Vietnam as the next step in a global competition. That there was no master plan on the part of the various communist governments was not apparent to people who had only recently watched Eastern Europe fall to Soviet influence, watched China fall, had seen communists take power in Cuba and supported Berlin through a Soviet blockade. Because they had framed their view such that they always evaluated circumstances through the lens of containment, US policy makers could not see the situation as anything but communist expansion rather than national movements of self-liberation. The US dramatically underestimated the diversity of the second world and the extent to which the communist bloc was not unified, especially after the 1960 Sino-Soviet split.

Finally, as the situation worsened in Vietnam, Johnson and his Cabinet realized their program of incremental increases was not going to work and a dramatic change of course would be required. Ball identified the two real options available, withdraw immediately or later. Regardless of force levels he correctly identified the end result would be the same and the US reputation tarnished whichever choice was made. Immediate withdrawal would only be less costly, not less negative. Given increasing levels of anxiety regarding the situation, the decision-makers began to identify the more positive prospects for Vietnam and disregarded the negative reports from theatre. Although Johnson remained sceptical until 21 July, he did not consider himself an expert in either military affairs or foreign policy and like a patient with a doctor, relied upon his advisors to deliver their best advice. With the embassy in Saigon reporting

the imminent collapse of the Vietnamese army, time ran out for further deliberations.

Although there were personal and professional agendas at stake through the spring and summer of 1965, Johnson did try to balance them against one another. Ball against Bundy, McNamara and Rusk and Johnson would also often draw upon the Congressional leadership for advice. It seems likely that because Vietnam was seen as an issue of national security, the bias would always have been in favour of escalation despite clear indications that there would be no positive outcome. Although the minority voices were able to make themselves heard until the moment of decision, once made, they were all united in support of the policy direction taken by Johnson.

A few lessons for today's leaders can be drawn from Johnson's decision on Vietnam:

First, it is very easy to make smaller incremental decisions that while not initially large enough to raise alarms over the commitment of resources may create a circumstance from which it is difficult to withdraw. To avoid making decisions with unintended consequences, political leaders must establish clear and firm boundaries regarding the commitment of resources. When those thresholds are breached then they must intervene to reinforce government policy and limitations on commitment;

Second, no matter how reliable a group of internal advisors, they will tend to develop a common viewpoint thereby placing the decision-maker in jeopardy of making a decision based on group think rather than a true debate. Although sometimes difficult to do, policy makers should identify trusted outsiders and provide them access to critical information and discussions so as to allow the development of alternative opinions. Most important, these trusted outsiders, or nay-sayers, must be listened to and every argument carefully rebuked before proceeding. Countries such as the US with a predilection for a unified position on foreign and security policies will be especially susceptible to adopting a common position without being particularly critical of high risk activity, such as war. Not maintaining awareness of the need for other opinions risks permitting the expansion of a tendency to group-think ;

Third, pressure to maintain support for domestic programs may make it necessary to create unity regarding foreign policy initiatives to ensure passage of critical legislation, especially when reliant on support from opposition parties. This is particularly true in the US system of government that relies upon

negotiated agreement on legislation to overcome the realities of the system of checks and balances within their government. It can also be true of coalition or minority governments as they seek consensus across multiple policies to permit advancement of their primary agenda ;

Finally, professional military leaders will invariably work to get the job done once tasked. They will hesitate to oppose a policy initiative and will focus instead on determining how best to achieve the aim established by the government. It is the role of the generals, once a decision is made by government, to get on with accomplishing the mission. Rather than continuing to question the policy decision, military officers will focus on obeying, to the extent possible, the direction they receive from government. In Vietnam this meant ever increasing demands for resources as the generals tried to win the war, or at least to achieve an acceptable stalemate.

In Afghanistan, there will be similar increasing demands unless governments decide that there is a maximum size and duration of commitment that is acceptable for domestic and foreign policy reasons. Canada would do well to carefully manage its commitment given the open ended nature of the conflict there. It will be worth a separate study of Cabinet and military documents and records of conversations to determine how decisions were made in Canada to first go to Afghanistan, and later how other decisions were made regarding selection of operating areas, types of forces to be deployed, interaction amongst government departments and aid groups and the effects of competing agendas.

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