

Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War: Introduction to the Digital Edition

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“I guess we’ve got no choice, but it scares the death out of me. I think everybody’s going to think, ‘we’re landing the Marines, we’re off to battle.’”

—*President Lyndon B. Johnson, 6 March 1965*¹

On 8 March 1965, two battalions of U.S. Marines waded ashore on the beaches at Danang. Those 3,500 soldiers were the first combat troops the United States had dispatched to South Vietnam to support the Saigon government in its effort to defeat an increasingly lethal Communist insurgency. Their mission was to protect an air base the Americans were using for a series of bombing raids they had recently conducted on North Vietnam, which had been supplying the insurgents with ever larger amounts of military aid. The raids were the first in what would become a three-year program of sustained bombing targeting sites north of the seventeenth parallel; the troops were the first in what would become a three-year escalation of U.S. military personnel fighting a counterinsurgency below the seventeenth parallel. Together, they Americanized a war the Vietnamese had been fighting for a generation.

The onset of that American war in Vietnam, which was at its most violent between 1965 and 1973, is the subject of these annotated transcripts, made from the recordings President Lyndon B. Johnson taped in secret during his time in the White House. Drawn from the months July 1964 to July 1965, these transcripts cover arguably the most consequential developments of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, transforming what had been a U.S. military assistance and advisory mission into a full-scale American war. From the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf in August 1964 to the deployment of forty-four combat troop battalions in July 1965, these months span congressional authorization for military action as well as the Americanization of the conflict. In between lie incidents of increasingly greater magnitude, including the decision to deploy the Marines and the shift from defensive to offensive operations.

A War Inherited

At the center of these events stands President Lyndon B. Johnson, who inherited the White House following the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The circumstances of Johnson's ascendance to the Oval Office left him little choice but to implement several unrealized Kennedy initiatives, particularly in the fields of economic policy and civil rights. But LBJ was equally committed to winning the fight against the Communist insurgency in Vietnam—a fight that Kennedy had joined during his thousand days in office. While Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower had committed significant American resources to counter the Communist-led Viet Minh in its struggle against France following the Second World War, it was Kennedy who had deepened and expanded that commitment, increasing the number of U.S. military advisers in Vietnam from just under seven hundred in 1961 to over sixteen thousand by the fall of 1963. Kennedy's largesse would also extend to the broader provision of foreign aid, as his administration increased the amount of combined military and economic assistance from \$223 million in FY1961 to \$471 million by FY1963.²

Those outlays, however, contributed neither to greater success in the counterinsurgency nor to the stabilization of South Vietnamese politics. Charges of cronyism and corruption had dogged the government of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem for years, sparking public condemnation of his rule as well as successive efforts at toppling his regime. Diem's effort to construct strategic hamlets—a program run by his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu—ended up alienating increasing numbers of South Vietnamese, arguably creating more recruits for the Communists instead of isolating them as the program had intended. The shuffling and reshuffling of military personnel also contributed to Diem's troubles, further undermining the counterinsurgency; indeed, by reserving some of the South's best troops for his own personal protection instead of sending them out to defeat the Communists, Diem contributed to the very incident—his forcible removal from power—he was trying to forestall.³ A poor showing against the Vietcong at the battle of Ap Bac in January 1963 sparked the most probing questions to date about those personnel shifts and about the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). But it was the attack by Diem's minions on parading Buddhists four months later that ignited the nationwide protest that would roil the country for the remainder of the year and eventually topple the regime. Both Diem and Nhu were killed in the coup that brought a military junta to power in early November 1963, ending America's reliance on its “miracle man” in Vietnam.⁴

Kennedy's own assassination three weeks later laid the problems of Vietnam squarely on Johnson's desk. Unhappy with U.S. complicity in the Saigon coup yet unwilling to deviate from Kennedy's approach to the conflict, Johnson vowed not to lose the war. If anything, he encouraged his closest advisers to work even harder at helping South Vietnam prosecute the counterinsurgency. Those officials included many of the same figures who had acquiesced in

Diem's removal, as the desire for continuity led him to retain Kennedy's presumed objectives as well as his senior civilian and military advisers.⁵ Uncertainty about his own foreign policy credentials also contributed to Johnson's reliance on figures such as Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, all of whom had been with Kennedy since the outset of that administration. "I need you more than he did," LBJ said to his national security team.⁶

That need was now more pressing because the counterinsurgency was deteriorating. The Diem coup had unleashed a wave of instability below the seventeenth parallel that Communist forces were only too eager to exploit. Raids by the local Communists—dubbed the Vietcong, or VC, by Diem—had picked up in frequency and intensity in the weeks following Diem's ouster. All signs were now pointing to a situation that was more dire than the one Kennedy had confronted.⁷

Or so it seemed. Compounding the new administration's problems was the realization that earlier assumptions about progress in the war were ill-founded. Although State Department officials had maintained in October 1963 that that statistical evidence pointed not to success but to mounting troubles against the Vietcong, Pentagon officials—both civilian and military—had rejected those arguments. By December, with attacks increasing in the countryside, a look back at those earlier metrics revealed that State Department analyses were indeed on the mark.⁸

Yet Johnson did not need that retrospective appraisal to launch a more vigorous campaign against the Communists, for his first impulse as the new president was to shift the war into higher gear. Meeting with his top civilian advisers on Vietnam, LBJ told them to forget about the social, economic, and political reforms that Kennedy had stressed. Victory in the military conflict became the new administration's top priority. Hoping to apply more pressure on the Communists, the administration began to implement a series of tactics it had adopted in principle within the first week of Johnson's presidency. These included a more aggressive propaganda offensive as well as sabotage directed against North Vietnam.⁹

But those enhanced measures were unable to force a change in Hanoi or to stabilize the political scene in Saigon. In late January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh overthrew the ruling junta, allegedly to prevent Diem's successors from pursuing the neutralization of South Vietnam. Washington was generally pleased with the turn of events and sought to bolster the Khanh regime. Nevertheless, it remained dissatisfied with progress in counterinsurgency, leading Secretary of Defense McNamara to undertake a fact-finding mission to Vietnam in March 1964. His report to LBJ was not a happy one, as signs pointed to a deterioration in South Vietnamese morale and an acceleration of Communist success. McNamara thus recommended, and Johnson endorsed, a more vigorous program of U.S. military and economic support for South Vietnam.¹⁰

Over the course of the next several months, American assistance to South Vietnam would play out against a backdrop of personnel changes and political jockeying at home and in Saigon. The U.S. general election that loomed in November altered the administration's representation in Vietnam as Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge resigned his post that June to pursue the Republican nomination for president. His replacement was retired Army General Maxwell Taylor, formerly military representative to President Kennedy and then, since 1962, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the signal that the United States was becoming more invested in the military outcome of the conflict could not have been clearer. Further indication of that resolve came the same month with the replacement of General Paul D. Harkins as head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) with Lieutenant General William C. Westmoreland, who had been Harkins's deputy since January 1964 and was ten years Harkins's junior.

A Congressional Mandate

Having already decided to shift prosecution of the war into higher gear, the Johnson administration recognized that direct military action would require congressional approval, especially in an election year. Of all the episodes of the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, the episodes of 2 and 4 August 1964 have proved among the most controversial and contentious. Claiming unprovoked attacks by the North Vietnamese on American ships in international waters, the Johnson administration used the episodes to seek a congressional decree authorizing retaliation against North Vietnam. Passed nearly unanimously by Congress on 7 August and signed into law three days later, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution—or Southeast Asia Resolution, as it was officially known—was a pivotal moment in the war and gave the Johnson administration a broad mandate to escalate U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Again and again in following years, Johnson would point to the near-unanimous passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in trying to disarm increasingly vocal critics of his administration's conduct of the war.

On 2 August, the USS *Maddox*, engaged in a signals intelligence collection mission for the National Security Agency (known as a Desoto patrol) off the coast of North Vietnam, reported that it was under attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Using its own defense measures and aided by aircraft from the nearby aircraft carrier USS *Ticonderoga*, the *Maddox* resisted the attack and the North Vietnamese boats retreated. Two days later, on the night of 4 August, the *Maddox* and another destroyer that had joined it, the USS *C. Turner Joy*, reported a new round of attacks by North Vietnamese military forces. In response, President Johnson ordered retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam and asked Congress to sanction any further action he might take to deter Communist aggression in Southeast Asia.

As real-time information flowed in to the Pentagon from the *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy*, the story became more and more confused, and as frustratingly incomplete and often contradictory reports flowed into Washington, several high-ranking military and civilian officials became

suspicious of the 4 August incident, questioning whether the attack was real or imagined. The tapes included in this edition show vividly a president all too aware of shortcomings of the deeply flawed information that he was receiving, and by the time of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, several senior officials—and apparently the President himself—had concluded that the attack of 4 August had not occurred. Within days of the attack, Johnson reportedly told State Department official George Ball that “Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish!”¹¹ The overwhelming weight of evidence supports the conclusion that the 4 August incident was fiction; whether it was imagined by flawed intelligence or fabricated for political ends has remained a vigorously contested issue.¹²

With vehemence that ultimately provided fodder for the administration’s harshest critics, and betraying none of these doubts and uncertainties, administration officials insisted in public that the attacks were unprovoked. But not wanting to get railroaded into large-scale military response by political pressure from hawks on the right in Congress, Johnson and McNamara privately and selectively conceded that classified sabotage operations in the region had probably provoked the North Vietnamese attack. It was a political strategy that worked, and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was passed with minimal dissent, a striking political victory for Johnson even as the 1964 presidential campaign got under way with a vengeance.

“Johnson’s War”

Johnson’s election as president in his own right allowed the administration to move forward in crafting a more vigorous policy toward the Communist challenge in South Vietnam. Just days before the vote, the U.S. air base at Bien Hoa was attacked by Communist guerrillas, killing four Americans, wounding scores of others, and destroying more than twenty-five aircraft. Johnson opted not to respond militarily just hours before Americans would go to the polls. But on 3 November—Election Day—he created an interagency task force, chaired by William P. Bundy, brother of McGeorge Bundy and chief of the State Department’s Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to review Vietnam policy. The working group settled on three potential policy strands: persisting with the current approach, escalating the war and striking at North Vietnam, or pursuing a strategy of graduated response. Following weeks of intensive discussion, Johnson endorsed the third option—Option C in the administration’s parlance—allowing the task force to flesh out its implementation. The plan envisioned a series of measures, of gradually increasing military intensity, that American forces would apply to bolster morale in Saigon, attack the Vietcong in South Vietnam, and pressure Hanoi into ending its aid of the Communist insurgency. The first phase began on 14 December with Operation Barrel Roll—the bombing of supply lines in Laos.¹³

The emergence of the William Bundy task force highlights a key dimension of the administration’s policymaking process during this period. Broad planning for the war often took place on an

interagency basis and frequently at levels removed from those of the administration's most senior officials. The presence of several policy options, however, did not translate into freewheeling discussions with the President over the relative merits of numerous strategies. Johnson abhorred the Kennedy practice of debating such questions in open session, preferring a consensus engineered prior to his meetings with top aides.¹⁴ Two of those senior officials, Secretary of Defense McNamara and Secretary of State Rusk, would prove increasingly important to Johnson over the course of the war, with McNamara playing the lead role in the escalatory phase of the conflict. Nevertheless, the State Department's influence in Vietnam planning was on the rise, as it had been since early 1963. William Bundy's role atop the Vietnam interagency machinery is indicative of that development—a pattern that continued for the remainder of the Johnson presidency as Rusk's star rose and McNamara's faded within Johnson's universe of favored advisers.

In fact, it was those advisers who would play an increasingly important role in planning for Vietnam, relegating the interagency approach—which never went away—to a level of secondary importance within the policymaking process. In time, LBJ would make his key decisions in the presence and on the advice of very few advisers, a practice that Johnson hoped would protect him from the leaks he so greatly feared would undermine his carefully crafted strategy. By spring of 1965, Johnson was holding impromptu lunch meetings with only a handful of senior officials on Tuesdays where they hashed out strategy. Those “Tuesday Lunches” would involve a changing array of attendees over the course of the next two years and, by 1967, would become an integral though unofficial part of the policymaking machinery.¹⁵

But the procedural issues of these months, as important as they were and would become, were constantly being overwhelmed by the more pressing concerns of progress in the counterinsurgency. No amount of administrative tinkering could mask the continuing and worsening problems of political instability in Saigon and Communist success in the field. The deterioration of the South Vietnamese position, therefore, led Johnson to consider even more decisive action. His dispatch of National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy to South Vietnam in February 1965 sought to gauge the need for an expanded program of bombing that the interdepartmental review had envisioned back in November and December. Bundy's presence in Vietnam at the time of the Communist raids on Camp Holloway and Pleiku in early February—which resulted in the death of nine Americans—provided additional justification for the more engaged policy the administration had been preparing. Within days of the Pleiku/Holloway attacks, as well as the subsequent assault on Qui Nhon (in which twenty-three Americans were killed and twenty-one were wounded), LBJ signed off on a program of sustained bombing of North Vietnam that, except for a handful of pauses, would last for the remainder of his presidency. While senior military and civilian officials differed on what they regarded as the benefits of this program—code-named Operation Rolling Thunder—all of them hoped that the bombing, which began on 2 March 1965, would have a

salutary effect on the North Vietnamese leadership, leading Hanoi to end its support of the insurgency in South Vietnam.

While the attacks on Pleiku and Qui Nhon led the administration to escalate its air war against the North, they also highlighted the vulnerability of the bases that American planes would be using for the bombing campaign. In an effort to provide greater security for these installations, Johnson sanctioned the dispatch of two Marine battalions to Danang in early March. The troops arrived on 8 March, though Johnson endorsed the deployment prior to the first strikes themselves. Like other major decisions he made during the escalatory process, it was not one Johnson came to without a great deal of anxiety. As he expressed to longtime confidant Senator Richard Russell (D-Georgia), LBJ understood the symbolism of “sending the Marines” and their likely impact on the combat role the United States was coming to play, both in reality and in the minds of the American public.¹⁶

The bombing, however, was failing to move Hanoi or the Vietcong in any significant way. By mid-March, therefore, Johnson began to consider additional proposals for expanding the American combat presence in South Vietnam. By 1 April, he had agreed to augment the 8 March deployment with two more Marine battalions; he also changed their role from that of static base security to active defense, and soon allowed preparatory work to go forward on plans for stationing many more troops in Vietnam. In an effort to achieve consensus about security requirements for those troops, key personnel undertook a review in Honolulu on 20 April. Out of that process came Johnson’s decision to expand the number of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam to eighty-two thousand.

The Dominican Crisis

In the late spring, developments closer to home offered striking parallels to the situation in Vietnam. From late April through June 1965, President Johnson spent more time dealing with the Dominican Crisis than any other issue.¹⁷ On the afternoon of 28 April 1965, while meeting with his senior national security advisers on the problem of Vietnam, Johnson was handed an urgent cable from the U.S. ambassador in Santo Domingo, W. Tapley Bennett Jr., warning that the conflict between rebels and the military-backed junta was about to get violent, especially now that the military had split into two factions, one of which was starting to arm the populace. With more than a thousand Americans seeking refuge in one of the city’s largest luxury hotels and the situation on the street deteriorating to the point of an evacuation becoming necessary, Bennett’s cable said that he and his colleagues were “unanimously of opinion that time has come to land the marines. . . . American lives are in danger.”¹⁸ With the concurrence of his national security advisers, Johnson immediately ordered four hundred U.S. Marines to the Dominican Republic, a deployment he announced in a brief, televised statement from the White House theater at 8:40 p.m. that evening. Announcing that the four hundred Marines had already landed in Santo Domingo, he said that that the Dominican government was no longer able to guarantee the safety of Americans

and other foreign nationals in the country and that he had therefore ordered in the Marines “to protect American lives.”¹⁹

Two days after his first order sending in the Marines, Johnson again went on television to announce a rapid escalation in the U.S. military intervention that, within three weeks, would have approximately thirty thousand U.S. troops in the island nation. In explaining why such a large deployment was needed—it was clearly far more than was needed for the protection of the Americans remaining in the nation’s capital after many had already been evacuated—Johnson now offered a markedly different justification that emphasized anti-Communism over humanitarianism, saying that “the United States must intervene to stop the bloodshed and to see a freely elected, non-Communist government take power.”²⁰ Privately, Johnson argued more bluntly that the intervention was necessary to prevent “another Cuba.” In the days following his address, a number of influential members of the American press and U.S. Congress questioned the basis for concluding that there was real risk of the Dominican Republic coming under Communist control. In coming weeks and months, questions and doubts about the necessity of the military intervention grew. Critics accused the Johnson administration of overreacting and lending too much credence to unsubstantiated claims of strong Communist influence amongst the rebel factions. Particularly critical was J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who, in the wake of the crisis, took the Johnson administration to task for a lack of candor with the American public.

In Santo Domingo, rebels sympathetic to the exiled liberal intellectual President Juan Bosch had launched an open, armed uprising against the military-backed junta. Elected to the presidency in December 1962, Bosch had proved popular with the general population. Although not a Communist himself, Bosch had raised the ire of the Dominican military through his accommodation with Communist factions and been forced out in a September 1963 coup. He had been in exile in Puerto Rico since. But leftist sympathizers continued to press for his return, and in the spring of 1965 the situation escalated to armed uprising. Convinced that Bosch was using and encouraging Communist allies, particularly those aided and abetted by the Cuban Communist leader Fidel Castro, the reactionary military-backed junta sought to crack down on pro-Bosch groups, moves that only served to provoke the Dominican population to take their activism to the streets. From the array of figures angling for power, two leading candidates for forming a provisional government emerged: General Antonio Imbert Barreras was put forward by an influential wing of the military, while the more liberal Silvestre Antonio Guzmán Fernández was championed by those more sympathetic to Bosch.

For the White House, which of the two to back was not immediately clear; both had their supporters within the administration and in the U.S. Congress. Johnson accepted the offer of his friend and confidant Abe Fortas to undertake a secret mission to Puerto Rico to negotiate with

Bosch, someone Fortas had come to know through mutual contacts. Operating under the code name “Mr. Davidson” and later “Mr. Arnold,” Fortas reported directly to Johnson by telephone. To preserve the secrecy of the mission and to protect against possible eavesdroppers on the telephone line, they adopted a kind of organic, impromptu code that sometimes served to confuse the speakers themselves.²¹ The Johnson-Fortas conversations from this period are replete with references to “J. B.” (Juan Bosch), “bang-bangs” (the military), “the baseball players” (a reduction from an earlier reference to “those fellows who play left field on the baseball team,” or the leftist rebels), and other references, some thinly veiled and some veiled to the extent that they are now almost completely obscured. Johnson also dispatched another trusted aide, State Department official Thomas Mann, to Santo Domingo and, later, his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy.

Fortas and Mann supported different paths to restoring stable government to the Dominican Republic, forcing Johnson to choose between divided opinion from his advisers. One faction, which included Fortas, McGeorge Bundy, and Assistant Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, favored the more leftist Guzmán, while Mann and Secretary of State Dean Rusk favored Imbert. Johnson ultimately decided to support Guzmán, but only with strict assurances that his provisional government would not include any Communists and that no accommodation would be reached with the 14th of July Movement. Only that way, he argued, could he sell the compromise to powerful members of Congress. By September, the Dominicans had agreed to a compromise.

Perhaps the most significant contribution the tapes make to our understanding of the Dominican Crisis is to show with much greater clarity the role the President himself played and the extent to which it consumed his time in the late spring of 1965.²² Fearful of “another Cuba,” Johnson was personally and heavily involved in managing the crisis. And as they do on so many other topics, the tapes reveal the uncertainty, flawed information, and doubts to which Johnson himself was frequently prone. Johnson himself confessed his own doubts and uncertainties about the wisdom of sending U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic to his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, at the peak of the deployment.

I have nothing in the world I want except to do what I believe to be right. I don't always know what's right. Sometimes I take other people's judgments, and I get misled. Like sending troops in there to Santo Domingo. But the man that misled me was Lyndon Johnson, nobody else. I did that! I can't blame a damn human. And I don't want any of them to take credit for it.²³

Such expressions of doubt and uncertainty contrasted starkly with the confidence administration officials tried to impart on their public statements. In documenting those private uncertainties, the Dominican Crisis tapes share characteristics with the tapes of what became a much larger and more serious crisis where U.S. intervention was simultaneously and rapidly escalating: Vietnam.

Growing Dissent

The cost requirements of concurrent military campaigns in both the Dominican Republic and Vietnam were now such that the administration approached Congress for a supplemental appropriation. Securing these funds—roughly \$700 million—raised the question of whether to seek a congressional authorization merely for additional monies or risk a broader debate about the policy course the administration had now set for Vietnam. Johnson rejected a legislative strategy that would have entailed open-ended discussion, preferring to obtain the funds under the authority Congress granted him via the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 1964—a move, he knew, that would further ratify that authority should he need to act even more boldly in the future.

As the bombers flew, the commitment expanded, and criticism of those policies mounted, Johnson sought to convince the American public, international opinion, and even the North Vietnamese that the United States had more to offer than guns and bombs. On 7 May, before an audience at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, LBJ outlined a program of economic aid for both South and North Vietnam, characterized by efforts to fund a \$1 billion project to harness the productive power of the Mekong River. He coupled that vision with rhetoric designed to highlight the administration's willingness "to discuss," if not negotiate, aspects of the conflict in Southeast Asia. North and South Vietnamese Communists declined to meet Johnson on his terms, one of numerous instances over the following three years in which the parties failed to find even a modicum of common ground. Nevertheless, in an effort to provide greater incentive for Hanoi to come to the bargaining table, Johnson sanctioned a limited bombing halt, code-named MAYFLOWER, for roughly one week in the middle of May. No interest on the part of the North Vietnamese was forthcoming.

While Johnson resumed the bombing and increased its intensity following the failure of MAYFLOWER, South Vietnam continued to suffer increasing strain from both political instability and pressure from Communists. Civilian rule in Saigon came to an end in mid-June as the "Young Turks"—military officials including Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky—rose to prominence at the head of a new ruling war cabinet. The spate of endless coups and governmental shake-ups vexed Johnson, who wondered how the South Vietnamese would ever mount the necessary resolve to stanch the Communists in the countryside when they were so absorbed with their internal bickering in Saigon.

It was in this context that General Westmoreland asked Washington in early June for a drastically expanded U.S. military effort to stave off a Communist victory in South Vietnam. Bombing had neither compelled Hanoi to halt its support of the Vietcong nor was it disrupting the flow of supplies to the insurgents; likewise, it had neither bolstered morale in the South nor stiffened Saigon's willingness to fight. Only an increased American presence on the ground, Westmoreland believed, in which U.S. forces engaged the Communists directly, could avert certain military and

political defeat. The size of those forces would be considerable: a total of 44 “free world” battalions, 34 of which would be American, totaling roughly 184,000 troops—a sizeable increase from the 70,000 then authorized for deployment to the South. Nor would this be all; Westmoreland regarded these forces as necessary merely to blunt the Communists’ current monsoon offensive. Many more would be required to regain the initiative and then to mount the “win phase” of the conflict.

Johnson’s consideration of the Westmoreland proposal, which promised a drastic expansion of the American commitment, led him to seek the counsel of outside advisers as well as a final review with senior officials of his options in Vietnam. In fact, Johnson sought the counsel of ad hoc groups and advisers during the escalation of the war. He frequently reached out to members of the business and journalistic communities, hoping to shape opinions as much as to receive them. This was particularly true of his conversations with broadcast and print journalists, with whom he spoke on a regular basis. These exchanges reveal Johnson’s acute sensitivity to press criticism of his Vietnam policy as he tried to reassure the electorate of his commitment to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves without conjuring up images of the United States assuming the brunt of that defense. Perhaps the most important of those informal advisers was Dwight D. Eisenhower. Johnson sought Eisenhower’s counsel not only for the value of the general’s military advice but for the bipartisan cover the Republican former president could offer. LBJ then widened that circle of support by turning to Eisenhower’s longtime aide General Andrew J. Goodpaster, who convened study groups on Vietnam.

Westmoreland’s request prompted Johnson to convene one of the more significant of these study groups that emerged during the war, and one that Johnson would return to at key points later in the conflict. Comprised of figures from the business, scientific, academic, and diplomatic communities, as well as both Democrats and Republicans, these “wise men” came to Washington in July to meet with senior civilian and military officials, as well as with Johnson himself. They recommended that LBJ give Westmoreland what he needed, advice that General Eisenhower had also communicated to the White House back in June. Prior to finalizing any decision to commit those forces, however, Johnson sent Secretary of Defense McNamara to Saigon for discussions with Westmoreland and his aides. McNamara’s arrival and report back to Johnson on 21 July began the final week of preparations that would lead to Johnson’s announcement of the expanded American commitment. A series of meetings with civilian and military officials, including one in which LBJ heard a lone, dissenting view from Undersecretary of State George Ball, solidified Johnson’s thinking about the necessity of escalating the conflict. Ball’s arguments about the many challenges the United States faced in Vietnam were far outweighed by the many pressures Johnson believed were weighing on him to make that commitment.

Those pressures were rooted in fears about domestic as well as international consequences. Political considerations that stretched back to the “loss of China” episode of the late 1940s and

early 1950s led Johnson, as a Democrat, to fear a replay of that right-wing backlash should the Communists prevail in South Vietnam. Concern over the fate of his ambitious domestic program likewise led Johnson deeper into Vietnam, fearing that a more open debate about the likely costs of the military commitment and the prospects for victory would have stalled legislative action on the Great Society. Worries about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to America's friends around the world also led Johnson to support Saigon, even when some of those friends had questioned the wisdom of that commitment. Concern about his personal credibility was also at work in Johnson's calculus. As he would say to U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge within two days of becoming president, "I will not lose in Vietnam." That personal stake in the outcome of the war remained a theme throughout his presidency, perhaps best embodied by his remark to Senator Eugene McCarthy in February 1966: "I know we oughtn't to be there, but I can't get out," Johnson maintained. "I just can't be the architect of surrender."²⁴

In a sense, Johnson was able to avoid the label he so greatly feared would be pinned to his name. His decision to step away from the presidency in March 1968 ensured that the endgame in Vietnam did not happen on his watch. But that endgame, when it did come during the administration of President Richard M. Nixon, was deeply contingent on the course that Johnson set, particularly as it flowed out of key decisions he took as president both before and after his election to office. As the transcripts included in this volume of taped conversations indicate, those decisions were often agonizing ones, conditioned by the perception that Vietnam was a war that he could neither abandon nor likely win. As he lamented to Senator Russell, "A man can fight . . . if he can see daylight down the road somewhere. But there ain't no daylight in Vietnam. There's not a bit."²⁵ Coming on the eve of Johnson's dispatch of the Marines to Vietnam, it was not a promising way to begin a war.

Notes

- [1] Conversation WH6503-02-7026, 7027.
- [2] Douglas C. Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development: South Vietnam, 1955–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 200.
- [3] See Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); and Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).
- [4] For a narrative of these events, see David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

- [5] Notably, Roger Hilsman, the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs and one of the officials most enamored of deposing Diem, had lost his job in the State Department within the first five months of the Johnson administration. Other anti-Diem policymakers, such as Michael Forrestal and Averell Harriman, would also move away from the center of power, with Forrestal leaving the White House for the State Department in 1964 and Harriman leaving the number three post at the State Department by March 1965.
- [6] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969, 1992), p. 298; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 76–79.
- [7] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 80.
- [8] Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 268, 291.
- [9] See NSAM 273, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963: Vietnam, August–December 1963*, ed. Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC: GPO, 1991), 4:637; Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 77; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 293–94.
- [10] NSAM 288, 17 March 1964, *FRUS, 1964–1968: Vietnam 1964*, ed. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, DC: GPO, 1992), 1: 172–73, and the accompanying “Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President,” 16 March 1964, in *ibid.*, 1:153–67. For a narrative of this period, see Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 136–42.
- [11] Quoted in George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 379. Johnson reportedly used similar constructions when describing the incident to others, substituting “whales” and “waves” for “flying fish” (Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* [Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995], p. 560 n. 40). See also Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp.198–99, and for broader suspicion about the attacks among administration personnel, see Edward E. Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 241–43.
- [12] See Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf*; Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 193–221; Robert J. Hanyok, “Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2–4 August 1964,” *Cryptological Quarterly*, Winter 2000/Spring 2001 Edition, vol. 19, no. 4 / vol. 20, no. 1; and John Prados, “The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 40 Years Later: Flawed Intelligence and the Decision for War in Vietnam,” National Security Archive, 4 August 2004 (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/>).
- [13] “Position Paper on Southeast Asia,” 2 December 1964, *FRUS, 1964–1968: Vietnam 1964*, 1: 969–74.
- [14] George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 32; Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.79.
- [15] David Humphrey, “Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Diplomatic History* 8 (January 1984), 1: 81–102; Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 14.
- [16] Conversation WH6502-02-7026, 7027.

- [17] Quoted in Randall B. Woods, "Conflicted Hegemon: LBJ and the Dominican Republic," *Diplomatic History*, 32, 5 (November 2008): 755.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p.753.
- [19] "Statement by the President Upon Ordering Troops Into the Dominican Republic," 28 April 1965, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966).
- [20] "Statement by the President on the Situation in the Dominican Republic," 30 April 1965, *Public Papers, Johnson*, pp. 615–17.
- [21] Alan McPherson, "Misled by Himself: What the Johnson Tapes Reveal about the Dominican Intervention of 1965," *Diplomatic History*, 38, 2 (2003): 130–31.
- [22] *Ibid.*, pp.127–46. The present Vietnam collection does not include all of the tapes related to the Dominican intervention, but transcripts of those tapes are planned as future additions to the collection.
- [23] See Conversation WH6505-29-7812, 7813, 7814, 7815.
- [24] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 77; Conversation WH6602-01-9602.
- [25] Conversation WH6503-02-7026, 7027.

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President Lyndon B. Johnson, 6 March 1965. On 8 March 1965, two battalions of U.S. Marines waded ashore on the beaches at Danang. Those 3,500 soldiers were the first combat troops the United States had dispatched to South Vietnam to support the Saigon government in its effort to defeat an increasingly lethal Communist insurgency. The tapes included in this edition show vividly a president all too aware of shortcomings of the deeply flawed information that he was receiving, and by the time of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, several senior officials—and apparently the President himself—had concluded that the attack of 4 August had not occurred. Johnson opted not to respond militarily just hours before Americans would go to the polls. Speaking to his special assistant for national security, McGeorge Bundy, in a May 27, 1964, recorded telephone conversation, President Lyndon B. Johnson expresses his worry that the war in Vietnam is turning into another Korea. Duration: 1m 12s. A+E Networks Our Family of Brands. HISTORY homepage. HISTORY Education. HISTORY Vault. President Lyndon Johnson escalated the war because he was utterly desperate and had no idea what else to do. It was clear that the U.S. wasn't winning the war by conventional means. But General Westmoreland kept asking for more troops and Johnson kept right on giving them to him. Johnson was determined not to be the first American president ever to lose a war! But Vietnam War was the "ruining" of Johnson. It broke his heart and prevented him from "perfecting" his Great Society. But the scariest thing of all is that we know from some recordings of his phone conversations that he always knew he couldn't win—even way back in 1964-65! It just makes no sense! How did he think it was going to end? The more I study Lyndon Johnson the more compelling and mystifying I find him. Lyndon B. Johnson (centre) and his advisers listen, 1968. U.S. Department of Defense. As each new American escalation met with fresh enemy response and as no end to the combat appeared in sight, the president's public support declined steeply. American casualties gradually mounted, reaching nearly 500 a week by the end of 1967. Fears of a general "race war" were in the air. The president responded by appointing a special panel to report on the crisis, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which concluded that the country was in danger of dividing into two societies—one white, one Black, "separate and unequal."