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Vietnam and the 1964 Election: A Defense of Lyndon Johnson*

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Abstract

Although Lyndon Johnson emerged from the presidential election of 1964 with an almost unprecedented victory, his second term rapidly disintegrated as the Vietnam war overshadowed his "Great Society." Traditional historical scholarship has argued that this collapse stemmed from his deceitful handling of the war during the 1964 election campaign. Johnson, most historians charge, concealed his plans to escalate American involvement in the war in order to win re-election. Through an examination of Johnson's public statements and actions throughout the campaign, this paper will argue that he attempted to make his intent clear, but was ignored by the American electorate. Further, by examining the climate surrounding this election, the American public will be shown to be neglecting the war in favor of more local concerns. The results of this ignorance was an unwarranted shock at LBJ's subsequent actions in Vietnam, and a public outcry that unfairly derailed his second term. The historical appraisal of Johnson has sustained this fallacy, and even today, vitiates an accurate assessment of the Johnson presidency.

When Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as America's thirty-sixth president, he inherited a position fraught with potential electoral disaster. He not only faced the unenviable chore of replacing the popular John Kennedy, but confronted countless potential problems, notably civil rights, the Cold War, Cuba, and the escalating conflict in Vietnam. Further complicating his ascension was the timing; having assumed office less than one year prior to the next election, Johnson had to exercise extreme care in handling these sensitive issues or face the prospect of finding himself unemployed in 1965. Perhaps the greatest potential for electoral disaster lay in Vietnam, where American involvement was growing steadily. Johnson's handling of this delicate issue during the 1964 election campaign was to have a lasting impact not only on the election, but on his presidency as well.

The election was decided more by personalities than specific issues, as Kennedy's martyrdom and Goldwater's conservatism emerged as the dominant themes. The Arizona Senator's bellicose rhetoric and ill-timed statements gave a warlike and frightening temper to his public image; displaying his renowned political acumen, Johnson presented himself as the peaceful and rational alternative to his militant opponent. From a short term perspective, his maneuvers proved brilliant. He received

a greater total vote (43,129,566), a greater percentage of the vote (61 percent), and a greater margin of victory (16 million votes) (than any previous American president, on his way to an electoral vote total of 486. Although it is difficult to specify any single factor as decisive in such an overwhelming victory, the equation of Johnson with peace and Goldwater with war played a significant role. An October 1964 poll found that 44 percent of the American public believed the chance of nuclear war would increase under Goldwater; only 8 percent believed the same under Johnson.¹ A post-election poll revealed that when asked which issues had a great deal of influence on their voting decision, 82 percent of the voting population responded, “world peace.”² On the wings of this perception, Johnson soared triumphantly to a second term.

This image that fueled Johnson’s victory soon presented a dark side. As the Vietnam war expanded in 1965, his self-portrayal as the “peace” candidate was bitterly flung back at him. His popularity plummeted as the war grew; his Gallup approval rating fell from 70 percent in mid-1965 to 50 percent in June 1966, and below 40 percent in 1967.³ The signs of his declining political influence appeared as early as 1965, when Republican Congressmen Gerald Ford and Melvin Laird began calling for an additional 1 to 2 billion dollars in defense spending, and Democrat John Stennis, Chairman of the Armed Services Preparedness Subcommittee, criticized Johnson for financing Vietnam from a peacetime budget.⁴ Although 1965 saw the passage of such significant legislation as the Voting Rights Act and the Medicare Bill, the ever-growing economic strains of the war significantly curtailed subsequent domestic legislation. Between 1964 and 1967 only 6.2 billion (less than 1 percent of the Gross National Product) were devoted to LBJ’s war on poverty,⁵ yet expenditures to Vietnam amounted to over 21 billion for fiscal year 1967 alone.⁶ The guns-or-butter dilemma peaked in 1967, when Johnson, in order to obtain the tax increase from Congress necessary to finance the war, was forced to cut 6 billion in domestic spending from the budget.⁷ In both 1966 and 1967, attempts to pass legislation ending discrimination in housing and employment were defeated; even a small appropriation for rodent control in slums was denied by the House. By 1968 the Johnson administration was in shambles as LBJ, unsuccessfully trying to fund a war against Communism in Asia and a war against poverty at home, watched his carefully woven constituency unravel.

Although the presence of American troops in foreign combat played a role in Johnson’s rapid popularity decline, much of his demise stemmed not from the actual combat but from the disparity between the peaceful image he fostered during the campaign, and his subsequent decision to increase American involvement in Vietnam. In retrospect, many Americans concluded that Johnson intended to escalate the war throughout the 1964 election campaign, but concealed it to win the election. Thus, Gallup reported in 1967 that almost 70 percent of the American population felt that the administration had not been completely honest about Vietnam,⁸ and a Harris Survey of the same year attributed his declining popularity primarily to doubts about his credibility, concluding, “that he has too often raised false hopes that the war would be ended and that he was not honest about sending troops to Vietnam.”⁹

Even members of his own party questioned his veracity; running to succeed Johnson in 1968, Senator Eugene McCarthy claimed, “The Democratic Party in 1964 promised ‘no wider war’.”¹⁰

As time evolved, historians not only accepted this machinistic view of Johnson, but have been among its leading proponents. Stanley Karnow, for example, criticizes LBJ because he “manipulated the news media, evidently presuming that his measures would not be noticed. . . . Whatever his motives, he refused to admit that he was going to war.”¹¹ John Gaddis echoes similar thoughts, concluding that LBJ, “publicly discounted the prospect of a direct American role in the war prior to the 1964 election, despite the fact that his advisors expected it.”¹² Similar comments can be found in the works of Brian VandeMark, Gabriel Kolko, and Doris Kearns.¹³ Yet, a close look at the evidence reveals that this charge is unwarranted, as historians have perhaps too willingly found deceit where none actually existed. Statements by Johnson and his staff during the campaign provided ample evidence of their determination to honor the American commitment in South Vietnam, at whatever cost was necessary. The public’s failure to observe these warnings can not be blamed on LBJ.

Johnson first enunciated this commitment to South Vietnamese independence in his Congressional Addresses. Within a week of Kennedy’s death, he promised, “This nation will keep its commitments from South Vietnam to West Berlin.”¹⁴ On December 14 he attacked a proposed reduction in foreign aid, warning that “the amount proposed . . . would not suffice to cover program plans and commitments in several of the countries where U.S. political and security interests are most seriously threatened—including Vietnam.”¹⁵ Signing the Foreign Assistance Bill two days later, LBJ cautioned, “We cannot oppose the spread of communism and promote the growth of freedom by giving speeches. A policy of weakness and retreat . . . can not be justified by the needs of our security, the financial strength of our nation, or the attitude of our citizens.”¹⁶

The year 1964 began with the expression of similar sentiments. A New Years message from Johnson to General Minh, Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council of South Vietnam, stated:

This New Year provides a fitting opportunity for me to pledge on behalf of the American Government and people a renewed partnership with your government and people in your brave struggle for freedom. The United States will continue to furnish you and your people with the fullest measure of support in this bitter fight. We shall maintain in Vietnam American personnel and material as needed to assist you in achieving victory.¹⁷

These themes, a commitment to provide financial, material, and personnel support, and a determination to see the war through to its end, marked Johnson’s public comments over the next twelve months. Appearing on a television and radio interview on March 15, for example, he told a reporter that the problem in Vietnam, “cannot be ignored, we must do everything we can, we must be responsible, we must stay there and help them, and that is what we are going to do.”¹⁸ In May, Johnson

informed Congress that since South Vietnam planned to increase its anti-Communist campaign, “*our more direct support of the expanded Vietnamese military and civil operations also must keep pace with the intensified Vietnamese effort.* By our words and deeds in a decade of determined effort, we are pledged before all the world to stand with the free people of Vietnam.”¹⁹ (italics added) Similar statements made to Congress in June ruffled some feathers on Capitol Hill, as *The Washington Post* reported that some unnamed Congressional leaders were unhappy with recent policy statements, since they “meant a broadening of the war in the Pacific.”²⁰

In April LBJ reiterated this commitment to an Associated Press luncheon, warning that, “Our own freedom depends on the freedom of others, our own protection requires that we help protect others, that we draw increased strength from the strength of others. Thus to our allies we are the most dependable and enduring of friends, for our own safety depends upon the strength of that friendship.” Although like most campaign rhetoric, these comments were cloaked in generalities, Johnson later added:

Armed Communist attack on Vietnam is today a reality. The fighting spirit of South Vietnam . . . is a reality. The request of a friend and an ally for our help in this terrible moment is a reality. . . . To fail to respond to these realities would reflect on our honor as a nation, would undermine worldwide confidence in our courage, would convince every nation in South Asia that it must now bow to Communist terms to survive.

He concluded, “The situation in Vietnam is difficult. But there is an old American saying that ‘when the going gets tough, the tough get going.’ *So let no one doubt that we are in this battle as long as South Vietnam wants our support and needs our assistance to protect its freedom.*” (italics added)²¹

The summer brought little moderation to Johnson’s statements. In a June speech he told a Minneapolis crowd, “In Vietnam we are engaged in a brutal and a bitter struggle trying to help a friend. . . . We will stand firm to help maintain their own freedom.”²² A July 23 statement released by LBJ and the Prime Minister of Malaysia told the press, “The president made clear that all Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, could rely on the firm intent of the United States to resist Communist aggression against Free Asian nations.”²³ The following day he told a press conference:

For ten years and in three different administrations, the United States has been committed to the freedom and independence of South Vietnam, helping others to help themselves. In those ten years, we have taken whatever actions were necessary, sending men and supplies for different specific purposes at different times. We shall stick to that policy and we shall continue our efforts to make it even more effective.²⁴

Not only did Johnson clearly reveal his commitment to Vietnam, but he made no attempt to conceal the risks entailed by such a policy. In June, he told a Minneapolis audience, “Today, if a nation is to keep its freedom, it must be prepared to risk

war. When necessary, we will take that risk.”²⁵ In a June 23 news conference he warned, “there is danger in Vietnam. It is a danger brought on by the terrorism and aggression so clearly, if secretly, directed by Hanoi.”²⁶ The clearest example of Johnson’s willingness to risk war lies in a March 19 message to Congress concerning foreign aid. He cautioned, “There are no easy victories in this campaign. But there can be sudden disasters. Yet,” he continued, “we cannot ask for a reprieve from responsibility while freedom is in danger. The vital interests of the United States require us to stay in the battle. We dare not desert. Economic and military assistance, used at the right time and in the right way, can provide indispensable help to our foreign policy, in enabling the United States to influence events instead of merely reacting to them.”²⁷

As the election drew closer, Johnson slightly diminished the frequency of his Vietnam statements, and spoke more in general terms about peace than about specific conflicts. However, he still made no attempt to hide his true intent from the public; in fact, his administration recognized the public’s lack of awareness, and made a conscious effort to display future plans. A memo from Chairman of the State Department Policy Planning Council Walt Rostow to McGeorge Bundy stated:

Recent trips out of Washington have impressed me with the depths of public confusion about both the U.S. stake in the outcome in Vietnam and the character of the conflict . . . it may be wise to consider whether a low key campaign of public information may, even now, be in order . . . I believe such a concerted program would strengthen our hand in pursuing current lines of policy as well as laying a firmer base for action against the North, should that course be judged necessary at a later time.²⁸

In conjunction with this recommendation, an address at Syracuse University on August 5 was intended to demonstrate Johnson’s resolve in Southeast Asia.²⁹ The speech thoroughly described the events in Vietnam from the 1954 sovereignty agreements to recent actions in the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson then listed the American objectives, “That the governments of Southeast Asia honor the international agreements which apply in the area; that those governments leave each other alone; that they resolve their differences peacefully.” Johnson continued, “The government of North Vietnam is now willfully and systematically violating these agreements . . . There can be no doubt about the responsibilities of men and the responsibilities of nations that are devoted to peace.” In case any were unsure (and many were) of exactly what these “responsibilities” were, Johnson articulated them, “Peace requires that we and all our friends stand firm against the present aggressions of the government of North Vietnam. . . . To any who may be tempted to support or widen the present aggression I say this; there is no threat to any peaceful power from the United States of America. But there can be no peace by aggression and no immunity from reply.”³⁰

Similar themes were repeated throughout the next three months. On September 25 in El Paso, Johnson told a crowd:

Strength must be matched by courage and wisdom if it is to protect freedom. And where freedom has been under attack, the United States has moved to meet those attacks. We have never rattled our rockets, we have never played the part of the bully, we have never taken reckless risks. We have never pressed our adversaries to the point where nuclear assault was their only alternative. But America has always and will always stand firm.³¹

Three days later, Johnson told the Members of the New Hampshire Weekly Newspapers Editors Association:

Don't get the idea that strength alone will deter an aggressor. Our adversaries must also be convinced that we have the will and the determination, and we maintain and intend to at all times in all places defend American interests. We do not rattle our rockets and we don't throw our bombs around lightly. But we have never given them cause to doubt that America has the will. In the Gulf of Tonkin, the Johnson administration acted, and will continue to act to halt Communist aggression. . . . We must stand firm when the vital interests of freedom are under attack.³²

During the final month of the campaign, there was a noticeable decline in the emphasis Johnson placed on his commitment to Vietnam. Instead of overtly declaring his intent, he spoke more in generalities, jabbing at Goldwater's reputation as a warmonger. Yet, even in this crucial period Johnson reiterated his plans to maintain American commitments abroad. On September 30, he declared, "Our aim is to defend freedom with the most rational and appropriate force. *Let no one doubt that we will use our full force if necessary*" (italics added).³³ On October 5, LBJ toasted President Macapagal of the Philippines, saying, "None can know just how long the fight for freedom in Southeast Asia will take, but we of the United States are resolved not to falter or grow weary in the struggle."³⁴ In a press statement on October 20, three weeks before the election, he said, "We are prepared to defend peace and freedom, and do it promptly against any act of hostility or aggression anywhere. We face the future hopefully in the confidence of the strength that we have built together. But we face the future with a full sense of responsibility for the trust that we are privileged to bear for the cause of humanity and the cause of freedom everywhere."³⁵ Certainly, such statements are more general than those made earlier in the campaign; this can be attributed to Johnson's desire to capitalize on the opportunity accorded by Goldwater's bellicosity. However, even these indefinite comments in no way promise to keep Americans out of combat. Instead, they accurately portrayed Johnson's outlook towards Vietnam; hopeful of a bloodless victory, but more dedicated to a victory than to bloodlessness.

Even if many Americans chose not to listen to Johnson, members of his administration were making similar points. Appearing on "Face the Nation" on March 22, Dean Rusk told his viewing audience:

We are determined to assist South Vietnam to resist the attempt to undermine their security and their national independence . . . we have a deep commitment,

a deep interest in the ability of these countries to resist aggression from the north. So we are helping them do it.³⁶

Four months later, on “Issues and Answers,” Rusk concluded, “we have to stay with this and take the measures that are necessary to insure the security and the freedom and the independence of South Vietnam.”³⁷ In September, he told the Economics Club of Detroit, “We do not intend to withdraw from South Vietnam or to negotiate any bogus neutralization . . . this is a difficult course. It is costing us the lives of American fighting men. . . . It taxes our ingenuity and tries our patience. But it is the policy of wisdom and, if we stick to it, of ultimate success.”³⁸

William Bundy, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, was also open about American policies. Appearing on the “Voice of America” on August 15, he described American policy as “seek(ing) no wider war. We intend no rashness, but we are determined to use our strength. Now similarly, we have made it clear that we cannot exclude the possibility that wider action against the North might become necessary.”³⁹ One month later, he told the Research Institute of Japan:

To prevent a Communist takeover we are pursuing within South Vietnam a counterinsurgency approach—involving economic and political measures quite as much as military . . . Expansion of the war, while not the course we want or seek, could be forced upon us by the increased external pressures of the Communists . . . In short, our resolve to help defend the nations of Southeast Asia, and of east Asia as a whole, is unshakable.⁴⁰

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara agreed. On March 25, he told the National Security Industrial Association in Washington, D.C. that “The Vietnamese have asked for our help. We have given it. We shall continue to give it . . . We will not let this member of our family down, regardless of its distance from our shores.” He then addressed the possibility of expanding the U.S. role, and stated that:

We have learned that ‘peace at any price’ is not practical in the long run and that the cost of defending freedom must be borne if we are to have it all. The road ahead in Vietnam is going to be long, difficult, and frustrating. It will take work, courage, imagination, and perhaps more than anything else patience to bear the burden of what President Kennedy called a ‘long twilight struggle.’⁴¹

Undersecretary of State Averell Harriman told “Face the Nation” on February 9, that “Our policy is very clear. That is, we are going to stay as long as it is necessary to help the South Vietnamese win their struggle against these terrorists.”⁴² Senate Majority Whip Hubert Humphrey appeared on August 2, and told viewers, “we have made a commitment that we are going to sustain. We are not going to withdraw; we are not going to let this part of the world be overrun by the Communist aggressor.”⁴³ In California on August 17, Humphrey delivered a major foreign policy speech at the request of the president.⁴⁴ He explained:

What should our policy be? We must stay in Vietnam—until the security of the South Vietnamese people has been established. We will not be driven out.

We have pledged our support to the people of Vietnam — and President Johnson has shown that we intend to keep it. . . . To be sure, it will take a great deal of time and effort and patience and determination — and the cost will be heavy in money, in lives, and for some, in heartbreak. But in Asia as elsewhere for the leader of the free world, there is no comfort or security in evasion, no solution in abdication, no relief in irresponsibility.⁴⁵

Johnson's determination to prevent South Vietnam from falling to the communists should also have been apparent by his actions. In July 1964, he sent five thousand additional American troops to Vietnam. Had Johnson truly been trying to hide the extent of his commitment, as many of his critics suggest, it is doubtful that he would have so drastically increased the number of American troops in the conflict less than two weeks after the Republican National Convention. The fact that such a shrewd politician was willing to take such a step with the election only five months away flies in the face of those who charge him with hiding his commitment in order to maintain his position.

Other actions should have illustrated Johnson's commitment as well. Hoping to strike at the source of the insurgency, he approved an extension of reconnaissance flights over Laos in the spring of 1964. William Bundy explained this maneuver to the press in a June press conference, and readily admitted to the consequent loss of U.S. pilots and planes this strategy entailed.⁴⁶ Again, such obvious expansion of the American commitment so close to the election does not fit with the perception of Johnson as attempting to hide the war for political reasons.

Even Johnson's handling of the Gulf of Tonkin incident should have reflected his determination in Vietnam. Certainly, his failure to provide accurate details about the incident reflects poorly on his veracity, and on this point, he deserves the criticism he has received. Yet, often he is charged with rushing the resolution through Congress in order to disguise his true intent.⁴⁷ Many members of Congress later encouraged this perception; even its sponsor William Fulbright argued that Congress would not have given such authority had they been allowed time to hold hearings.⁴⁸ The perception of Johnson scheming to trick Congress into endorsing something that held unknown implications has contributed to the image of Johnson as a manipulator. Yet, as a thorough examination of the debates of the resolution shows, Congress was fully aware of what it was endorsing when it voted on August 7.

The meaning of the resolution was first debated on the afternoon of August 6. Those who claim that Congress might have voted differently had they more time to hold hearings or debates need only examine the exchanges that took place on the Senate floor to realize exactly how fully Congress understood the resolution. With Fulbright answering the concerns of his colleagues, the extent of the power given to the president was made apparent:⁴⁹

Senator Brewster: (Maryland): My question is whether there is anything in the resolution which would authorize or recommend or approve the landing of large American armies in Vietnam or China?

Senator Fulbright: The language of the resolution would not prevent it. It would authorize whatever the Commander in Chief feels is necessary. It does not restrain the Executive from doing it. . . .

Senator Cooper (Kentucky): Are we now giving the president advance authority to take whatever action he may deem necessary respecting South Vietnam and its defense?

Fulbright: I think that is correct.

Cooper: Then, looking ahead, if the president decided that it was necessary to use such force as could lead into war, we will give that authority by this resolution?

Fulbright: That is the way I would interpret it. . . .

Cooper: Under Section 2, are we now providing the president, if he determines it necessary, the authority to attack cities and ports in North Vietnam, not primarily to prevent an attack upon our forces, but, as he might see fit, to prevent any further aggression against South Vietnam?

Fulbright: The provision is intended to give clearance to the president to use his discretion. . . .

Senator Nelson (Wisconsin): I would be most concerned if the Congress should say that we intend by this joint resolution to authorize a complete change in the mission which we have had in South Vietnam for the past ten years and which we have repeatedly stated was not a commitment to engage in direct land confrontation.

Fulbright: In all frankness, I cannot say to the Senator that I think the joint resolution would in any way be a deterrent, a prohibition, a limitation, or an expansion of the president's powers to use the armed forces in a different way or more extensively than he is using them now.

When Congress met again on August 7, the two Senators who later opposed the resolution voiced their objections. Wayne Morse of Oregon warned:

Here we are, about to authorize the President of the United States to do whatever he wishes and use any armed forces he likes, not in the Gulf of Tonkin, but anywhere in Southeast Asia . . . in my judgment, this resolution, no matter what semantics are used, spells out the ugly words 'undated declaration of war power to be vested in the president of the United States.'⁵⁰

Senator Gruening of Alaska agreed, calling the resolution, "In effect, a predated declaration of war, if and when the Executive chooses."⁵¹ In spite of all these concerns and warnings, Congress overwhelmingly approved the resolution. To claim, therefore, that LBJ schemed his way into obtaining a declaration of war without making clear his commitment to South Vietnam is clearly unmerited.

Through such statements and actions, Johnson openly expressed his intent to the American public. Charges of electoral deception are clearly unwarranted; Johnson's determination to prevent the fall of South Vietnam was offered to the American voter, who chose not to listen. In retrospect, Johnson perceived this problem, and defended himself as the victim of selective hearing. In *The Vantage Point*, he argued:

On several occasions I insisted that American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves . . . I did not mean that we were not going to do any fighting, for we had already lost many good men in Vietnam. I made it clear that those who were ready to fight for their freedom would find us at their side if they wanted and needed us. We were not going

to rush in and take over, but we were going to live up to the commitments we had made. . . . A good many people . . . decided that I was the 'peace' candidate, and that he (Goldwater) was the 'war' candidate. They were not willing to hear anything they did not want to hear. Certainly I wanted peace. . . . But I made it clear from the day I took office that I was not a 'peace at any price' man.⁵²

This lament was accurate. Frequent public statements illustrated LBJ's determination to uphold his Vietnam commitment at all costs. In spite of this, by 1967 the majority of Americans felt that Johnson had lied to them. This unwarranted belief helped sabotage Johnson's second term, and still vitiates appraisal of the Johnson administration. The question that then must be answered is why this misconception began.

To a small extent, Johnson must accept some part of the blame. His public statements were designed to define himself as a candidate of peace; accordingly, he placed more emphasis on this aspect of his campaign than was appropriate. This emphasis was especially pronounced after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, when his quick military response left his opponents unable to charge that he was soft on Communism. Safe from political attack on the right, he used the last few months to shore up his base on the left. When Johnson attacked his opponent for creating the "illusion that force or the threat of force, can solve all problems,"⁵³ or warned that "one miscalculated, impulsive, reckless move of a single finger could incinerate our civilization and wipe out the lives of 300 million men before you could say scat,"⁵⁴ he solidified his own image by playing on the fears of the populace about Goldwater's reputation. In doing so, he stressed an image, and avoided specifics. Years later, people remembered the image, and provided their own specifics.

Some critics claim that Johnson's late statements blatantly dismissed any intent of increasing the war. They cite comments such as, "As far as I am concerned, I want to be very cautious and careful, and use it (force) only as a last resort, when I start dropping bombs around that are likely to involve American boys in a war in Asia with 700 million Chinese,"⁵⁵ and "We are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves"⁵⁶ as specific promises not to increase the American commitment. Taken out of context, such statements imply that Johnson was not going to expand the war. However, most of these comments were not definitive promises but expressions of reluctance and caution. Hence, when Johnson asserted that "I want to be very cautious and careful, and use it (force) only as a last resort," he was not promising not to expand the war, only that he would do so cautiously. It is important to remember Johnson's anguish at sending Americans into combat. Dean Rusk described:

Beyond the men and women and their families who carried the battle for us, I don't know anyone who agonized over Vietnam more than Lyndon Johnson. We couldn't break him of the habit, even for health reasons of getting up at 4:30 or 5:00 every morning to go down to the operations room and check

out the casualties from Vietnam, each one of which took a little piece out of him.⁵⁷

This personal grief at sending American troops into combat was articulated in these numerous statements stressing his reluctance to do so. However, these were not policy statements or specific promises; they were meant only to express the care that he would give to military intervention.

In a few instances, Johnson's statements appear irrefutable, yet, these are also often taken out of context. For example, the comment that he would "not send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves" seems a clear promise to reject intervention. However, an examination of the whole speech shows Johnson to be warning of the likelihood of a quick intervention under Goldwater. The whole paragraph of this statement reads; "Sometimes our folks get a little impatient. Sometimes they rattle their rockets some, and they bluff about their bombs (read: Goldwater). But we are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." In the same speech, Johnson said "We are going to assist them (South Vietnam) against attack as we have. We will work to help them achieve progress and self-confidence. We will not permit the independent nations of the East to be swallowed up by Communist conquest."⁵⁸ Thus, a full reading of this speech and a bit of contextualization indicates that Johnson's true message was not that we would absolutely keep America out of Vietnam, but that he, unlike his opponent, would expand involvement carefully and reluctantly, and only with active South Vietnamese support. Of course, this does not fully exonerate him; such statements do imply much less chance of war than actually existed, and fail to enunciate his own plans clearly. However, such comments were as infrequent then as they are today overemphasized. The vast majority of Johnson's statements, like those of his staff, should have left little doubt in the mind of an attentive listener.

Others assail Johnson by only looking at partial statements, often insisting that Johnson made numerous "we seek no wider war" promises.⁵⁹ Such analysis is deceptive; although Johnson frequently admitted that America did not wish to expand the war, these comments were often accompanied by qualifying statements indicating a determination to win freedom in South Vietnam through whatever means necessary. By looking at only half-statements, such critics overlook much of the message LBJ was trying to convey. At a June 23 news conference, for example, he told reporters, "The U.S. intends no rashness, and seeks no wider war. *But the United States is determined to use its strength to help those who are defending themselves against terror and aggression.*" (italics added)⁶⁰ On July 2, at the swearing in ceremony for Ambassador Taylor, he declared, "Our first purpose, or constant purpose in everything we seek to do, is honorable peace." Yet, he later added, "We stand with those who stand in defense of their own freedom and independence."⁶¹ On August 12 he told the American Bar Association:

First, . . . the South Vietnamese have the basic responsibility for the defense of their own freedom. . . . Second, we will engage our strength and our

resources to whatever extent needed to help others repel aggression. . . . Some say that we should withdraw from South Vietnam, that we have lost almost 200 lives there in the last 4 years, and we should come home. But the United States cannot and must not and will not turn aside and allow the freedom of a brave people to be handed over to communist tyranny.⁶²

In a letter written to the President of Brazil on August 25 (released to the press on September 5), Johnson asserted, “We want no wider war, as I have said repeatedly. But . . . there comes a point at which countries such as the United States and Brazil firmly committed to the peaceful solution of problems, must exercise their basic right of self defense.”⁶³ By examining these statements in their entirety, it becomes apparent that the Johnson administration does not deserve the charge of public deception that it is often assigned. The commitment to the preservation of an independent South Vietnam, even at the risk of direct American involvement, was readily apparent for anyone who chose to see it. The failure of the American public to understand this message can not be blamed on Johnson.

To assign responsibility for this misperception, one must look no further than the American public, which largely ignored Vietnam during the 1964 campaign. A Gallup public opinion poll of May 27 reported that 63 percent of the American public was giving no attention to developments in Vietnam.⁶⁴ In June, a Gallup Poll asked respondents to identify the most important issue facing the country, and divided the answers by region. In no area of the country did the Vietnam conflict emerge among the top five concerns. In late August, a poll placed the number of Americans with no opinion concerning future actions in Vietnam at 30 percent while another fall poll cited 15 percent with no opinion, and 18 percent with no interest.⁶⁵ Even a post-election poll revealed that 23 percent of those surveyed had no opinion of American involvement in Vietnam, and only 30 percent were opposed. Reflecting this lack of public interest, as late as the spring of 1965, only five American news organizations maintained staff correspondents in Saigon.⁶⁶

Since many Americans were largely ignorant of the conflict in 1964, Johnson’s 1965 escalation caught them unprepared. When the war soured later in Johnson’s term, many voters correctly recalled their surprise at the escalation. They concluded that Johnson must have hidden his true intent, since the image from the campaign most remembered was the correlation of Johnson with peace. As the credibility gap grew in 1967, more and more Americans ignored their own negligence, and found a convenient scapegoat in Lyndon Johnson.

Public opinion polls of 1965 reinforce the fact that the American people were largely unaware of Vietnam in 1964. When Johnson escalated American involvement in the middle of 1965, the opinion polls registered a decline in those opposed and those without opinions, and a corresponding jump in those who approved. Nine months after the post-election poll cited above, opposition to the war fell to 24 percent, and “no opinions” fell to 15 percent; meanwhile, those in favor rose to 61 percent.⁶⁷ This is clear evidence of the “Rally-Round-the-Flag effect.” Historically, when the American public first becomes aware of a foreign crisis, they largely support the president’s actions. The direct correlation between the decline in the number

of Americans with no opinion and the rise of those supporting Johnson in 1965 indicates that many Americans only became seriously aware of Vietnam after the 1965 escalation.

That this was a “Rally-Round-the Flag” effect is further evidenced by the public reaction in 1966 and 1967. Traditionally, after the initial rush of patriotism dissipates, the public gradually reevaluates the situation, and in a prolonged conflict often grows to oppose the policies. This was the case with Vietnam. By and large, the American people supported Johnson’s policies throughout 1965, but began to change their minds in 1966. Between March 1966 and March 1967, public support of his policies fell 19 percent, while opposition rose 25 percent.⁶⁸ Had Vietnam been central to the American consciousness during the 1964 election campaign, the rapid rise in approval of these policies that took place in 1965 would have occurred in 1964; correspondingly, the decline in approval that began in 1966 would have started earlier.

Having concluded that the American people largely overlooked LBJ’s true Vietnam message, the obvious question is why so many people could have misunderstood what, in retrospect, seems so clear. As has already been mentioned, the presence of the militant Barry Goldwater as Johnson opposite during the 1964 campaign clearly played a part. Ironically, had a more moderate and less controversial Republican such as William Scranton won the nomination, more attention would likely have been given to the specific differences between the candidates’ stances on the issues. Correspondingly, Johnson would likely not have won by such a large margin, but would not have had such later problems with his Vietnam image.

Another factor contributing to the tendency to overlook the specifics of the war was the complexity and distance of the Vietnam situation. With cultural, political and historical traditions vastly different from America’s, events in Vietnam were difficult for the average man-on-the-street to follow. This was especially true considering the guerrilla nature of the war, so unlike traditional American conflicts.

Although the presence of Goldwater and the nature of the conflict contributed to America’s inattention towards Vietnam, the most significant factor was the domestic upheaval taking place during the 1964 campaign, rooted in the emerging civil rights conflict. Prior to the early 1960’s, black discontent had largely been considered a Southern problem.⁶⁹ However, as the civil rights movement began to attract national attention through such events as the 1961 Freedom Rides and the 1963 March on Washington, American racial problems were finally understood to be a national crisis. In 1964, Johnson, in an attempt to address the long overdue inequalities that marked the lives of American Negroes, introduced his now famous civil rights legislation.

Much of the country watched anxiously as the Senate filibustered the Civil Rights Bill, and Goldwater’s repeated votes against cloture helped to emphasize the differences between the two candidates on this vital issue. For Americans on both sides of the struggle, the debate over this bill demonstrated the significance this election would have on the future of the civil rights movement. Fears of violent racial conflicts were reinforced on July 18, 1964, during a Harlem rally to protest

the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi, and the killing of a black teenager by a white policeman in New York. The rally turned violent, precipitating four days of bloody rioting, which television carried to the homes of middle class Americans. Soon afterwards, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party brought the racial conflict directly into the political process, testifying about the violent measures used in their state to prevent the registration of black voters. Meanwhile, civil rights activism found an eager audience on college campuses. The September demonstrations in Berkeley quickly spread to other universities, bringing the full force of the conflict to white middle-class America. This racial conflict dominated American consciousness, and precluded all but a cursory glance at Johnson's statements about Vietnam. Americans, as Theodore White wrote of that election summer, were in "a revolt against the nature of life in the American city."⁷⁰

Although Johnson and Goldwater did not make a major issue of the racial conflict, it nevertheless dominated the political landscape. As early as March of 1964, the *Atlantic Monthly* predicted that, "No other issue can tear the country apart or arouse such deep emotions as Civil Rights."⁷¹ T.R.B. of the *New Republic* warned in July of the electoral "X-Factor," the condition of Negroes in society that was overshadowing all other aspects of the campaign.⁷² On September 11, a *Time* article entitled "Some of the Issues are Missing," observed that civil rights and personalities, not secondary issues like foreign policy, were dominating the electoral landscape.⁷³ The clearest example of civil rights overwhelming other factors can be found in the June Gallup Poll (cited above) which divided America's problems by region. As mentioned earlier, Vietnam was not considered a major problem anywhere in the country, but integration was viewed as one of the most important issues everywhere.⁷⁴ Another Gallup poll, at the end of July, revealed that 47% of Americans considered civil rights to be the most important problem facing the country. The conclusion seems obvious; how could Americans focus on Johnson's Vietnam references when violence, or the threat of it, was all around them? The answer is that they could not.

With the significance of civil rights, the complexity of Vietnam and the militaristic perception of Goldwater contributing to a general lack of public awareness of the war, it seems much more understandable that Johnson's message was misinterpreted. Americans were too preoccupied with domestic problems to pay close attention to Johnson's statements about a small Asian nation which many had never even heard of. It was much easier to apply a general rule for foreign affairs to the two candidates; Goldwater = war, Johnson = peace. Those who turned against the war in 1966 and 1967 felt that they had been fooled by Johnson's devious practices, a belief that the evidence shows to be false. Although it seems understandable that Americans would be more concerned with conflicts in Harlem than Hanoi, any blame for American ignorance in 1964 should be accorded to the American people, who largely overlooked what Johnson was saying. To do otherwise, as is often the case, is to do a great disservice to President Johnson.

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