

NO GOOD CHOICES

LBJ and the Vietnam/

Great Society Connection

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# NO GOOD CHOICES

## LBJ and the Vietnam/ Great Society Connection

FRANCIS M. BATOR

During the spring and summer of 1965, Lyndon Johnson set the stage for three years of legislation that completed the social transformation of the United States begun thirty-three years earlier with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. At the same time, he turned a North-South and civil war in Vietnam into an American war that dragged on for seven years and ended in failure.

The war deprived the Great Society reforms of some executive energy and money. *But Johnson believed—and he knew how to count votes—that had he backed away in Vietnam in 1965, there would have been no Great Society to deprive. It would have been stillborn in Congress.*<sup>1</sup>

There are people who think that Johnson's mistake in Vietnam was not trying to win the war by making it bigger. Or that the "Great Society" legislation produced mainly "waste, fraud and abuse." Others discount LBJ's role in getting that legislation enacted as reflecting merely his mastery of *inside* Senate politics—believing, as Robert Caro did in 2003, that Johnson was "unsuited" to the "moral . . . bully pulpit" leadership a president needs "to rally people."

But what if you believe that Americanizing the war was a huge mistake, yet share Caro's more recent judgment of Johnson as a "great leader?" Or Samuel Freedman's assessment, in his review of Nick Kotz's *Judgment Days*: "a man of moral courage and political acumen, at his zenith the equal [of] Roosevelt during the Depression, and Churchill during World War II?" Caro speaks eloquently about Johnson's "utter realism, his ability to look facts—even very unpleasant facts—in the face. . . . Lyndon Johnson never fooled himself."<sup>i</sup>

*Why then did he lead the country into what he knew was quicksand in Vietnam?*

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Endnotes identified by Roman numerals contain references, further evidence, and observations elaborating on but not essential to the flow of the argument. They are not intended to be read side-by-side during a first reading of the text. Many of them can be read on their own.

1. It has even been suggested, to take a recent example, that "LBJ's decline in credibility [. . . and] Vietnam's spiraling costs ultimately *undid* both his Presidency *and the Great*

## NO GOOD AT FOREIGN POLICY?

Daniel Schorr has summed up the common explanation: “Johnson never was really deep into understanding foreign affairs.” Paraphrasing Schorr: he didn’t read books, didn’t travel, didn’t really know what was going on in the rest of the world. Robert Dallek wrote of LBJ’s “uncertainty about . . . challenges pressing in on him from all over the world [that] made him dependent on JFK’s foreign policy advisers. . . .” It was not a new idea. There was always a whiff of “Who is this Texas pol to tell us about high diplomacy” in the air whenever Johnson overruled his senior diplomatic advisers.<sup>2 ii</sup>

I personally observed LBJ make foreign policy. As his deputy national security advisor, I was directly involved in his dealings with Europe and the Soviet Union. I did not play a direct role in Vietnam, but was and remained close to his then national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, and have spent months studying Bundy’s private papers on Vietnam. I have discussed Johnson many times with my late colleague and friend, presidential historian Richard Neustadt, a one-time consultant to Johnson. We were in accord about what made LBJ do what he did in 1965.

I believe the view that Johnson was no good at foreign policy is simply wrong. So is the related idea that he acted as he did in 1965 because he was under the thumb of his inherited advisers.<sup>3</sup>

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*Society*” (VanDeMark, emphasis added). The part about the Great Society is hard to square with the great civil rights reforms of 1965–1968, or the host of other civic institutions we now take for granted that were created with Johnson’s leadership: Medicare/Medicaid, Head Start, Food Stamps, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Freedom of Information Act, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the Environmental Protection Agency. . . . The list goes on and on. (Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 214.)

2. Historians polled by C-Span in 1999 ranked Johnson second only to Lincoln among 41 presidents in “pursuing equal justice for all.” In “international relations,” they ranked him 36th. A year earlier, fifteen of thirty-two historians thought Johnson a “near great” president; twelve thought him “average,” and five “below average to failure.” While understanding the “failures,” Johnson would have hated being thought average. “How do you strike an average between voting rights and Vietnam?” he might have grumbled. He disliked the Great Society label, but it stuck. (I have not tracked down the poll, but it’s a fair bet that no other president rated near great by so many also drew a lot of failures.)

3. To test my recollections and opinion, six years ago I studied the files and wrote a detailed description of Johnson managing policy towards Europe and the Soviets. I believe that the evidence confirms not merely that those policies were notably successful (on Soviet relations, see fn. 19), but that LBJ’s active involvement and good judgment made them so. (“Lyndon Johnson and Foreign Policy: The Case of Western Europe and the Soviet Union,” pp. 41–78 in *Presidential Judgment: Foreign Policy Decision Making in the White House*, ed. Aaron Lobel, Hollis Publishing Company, 2001.)

Granted, my opinion is suspect: I was a participant, became fond of President Johnson while working for him, and still feel affection for him. But consider the verdict of distinguished historians commenting on a recent study of Johnson's European and Soviet policy by Vanderbilt University historian Thomas A. Schwartz—the only comprehensive study yet published:<sup>iii</sup>

*Ernest May*: “[T]urns on its head the conventional picture of an LBJ who was . . . out of his depth in foreign affairs. In fascinating detail, Schwartz shows LBJ personally managing relations with Western Europe and the Soviet Union with skill and insight unmatched by either Kennedy or Nixon and Kissinger. A blockbuster reinterpretation.”

*Lloyd Gardner*: “Stereotypes fall by the wayside . . . shows a president with imagination and tact dealing with the tangled issues of German aspirations, Gaullist pretensions, nuclear proliferation, and the developing woes of the dollar crisis.”

*Michael Beschloss*: “[W]e can now fully understand how crucial LBJ's approach to Europe turned out to be . . . will change the way that scholars write about Johnson, his foreign policy, and his performance as diplomat-in-chief.”<sup>iv</sup>

Johnson's handling of his Vietnam field commander, General William Westmoreland, during June and July 1965 caused McGeorge Bundy to describe LBJ as a “very majority-leader-like commander in chief.” As Schwartz's book shows, Johnson was in fact a very commander-in-chief-like manager of foreign policy: he overruled his cabinet officers and staff whenever he thought we were mistaken. But I believe that Johnson did think of his foreign counterparts—German chancellors Ludwig Erhard and Kurt Kiesinger, British prime minister Harold Wilson, French president Charles De Gaulle, and even Kremlin chiefs Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin—in somewhat the way he as Senate majority leader had thought of his senior congressional colleagues and committee chairmen. He was a formidable bargainer. Striking deals across the entire range of issues on and off the table—thinking about what was and was not bargainable, what those on the other side of the table needed, what would induce them to help him with what he needed—was second nature for him. It irked him when, as often, his most distinguished senior advisers didn't quite get it.

It helped, of course, that, as Bundy put it, “He had a very, very big and tough mind.” The whole idea that Johnson felt outgunned “by the Harvards” is just plain silly. He respected brains and regretted that he didn't have a highbrow education, but he knew perfectly well that he was as smart as anyone around—not just shrewd, but analytically smart. And he was irritated by some of the patronizing nonsense to

the contrary written about him. A six-foot, four-inch near giant with huge features and an uncanny ability to size up people—quick witted, inventively bawdy, a natural mimic—he dominated any room he entered, all the more so as president. There were no “peers” in the administration: not Robert McNamara, not anyone. His old Senate colleagues—Richard Russell, Everett Dirksen, and Russell Long—were the peers.<sup>v</sup>

All the same, international politics wasn’t where Johnson’s mind was, except when it had to be. When it mattered, as the Europe and Soviet stories suggest, he could be very good at it, often better than many of his more expert advisers. But if he could have spent all his time on domestic policy, I am sure he wouldn’t have minded, whereas John Kennedy would have been bored stiff. In fact, I think the key to what LBJ did in Vietnam lies precisely in his passion for his beloved “domestic business.”

I don’t think one can understand Johnson’s Vietnam choices in July 1965 without taking into account that on June 30 his rent subsidy bill for needy families was almost defeated, that the voting rights bill and the legislation creating Medicare were due for conference at the end of July, that proposals from fourteen task forces he had commissioned—on education, the environment, poverty, the cities, the entire Great Society agenda—were sitting on his desk. And the cities were about to burn.

#### INTERPRETING LBJ

Many people are searching the recently released telephone tapes for evidence to support their own theories of Johnson’s Vietnam choices. *Caveat emptor!* As Mac Bundy said more than once, LBJ hated being understood. For Johnson, more often than not, the purpose of talk was to persuade, entertain, tease, and often just to let off steam.

A marvelously original and funny talker, LBJ used what I came to think of as “Act 1” talk the way FDR used his cocktail hour and stamp collection, and Dwight Eisenhower putted golf balls on the Oval Office rug wearing cleated golf shoes. For nervous relief, Johnson talked. Act 1 talk was full of extravagance and razzmatazz, sometimes emotional and even intemperate, and, when he felt especially beleaguered, full of communists under the bed and imaginary Bobby Kennedy plots—he was almost as prone to paranoia about RFK (and with more cause) as RFK was about him. In any case, when in Act 1 mode, literal truth was not the point—and he expected you to understand that. If you didn’t, he thought you a bit of a fool.<sup>4</sup>

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4. See Kent Germany’s description and selections from the Presidential Recordings Project in “‘I’m Not Lying About That One’: Manhood, LBJ, and the Politics of Speaking Southern,” *Miller Center Report* (Vol. 18, No. 3). For more on LBJ and Act 1/Act 2, see also Bator in *Presidential Judgment*, pp. 66–69.

That said, during almost three years of dealing with Johnson, I never saw him make a serious decision without an “Act 2” phase as well: focused, tight-lipped, questioning a lot (“and?” “how?” “so?”) but, once again, only rarely revealing what was really on his mind. As Bundy observed, “[He] masked his process of choice because by long experience he had come to believe in lonely choice by a lonely process.”<sup>5 vi</sup>

## TWO QUESTIONS

*Why did Lyndon Johnson in July 1965 approve his field commander’s recommendation for an open-ended escalation and rules of engagement that turned the war into an American war of attrition—his war to win or lose?*

*And why did he refuse to level with the country about what he was up to—a failure of candor that led to a widespread feeling later that the president had lied to us, that we had been, in Bundy’s phrase, “bamboozled into war”?*

What was going on in Johnson’s head is of course unknowable. But there is powerful evidence that he knew a decent outcome in Vietnam was a long shot, and that he had already made up his mind that he would never try for an outright win by invading the North, thus risking another Korea. There is evidence, too, that he did not think the U.S. stake in an independent South Vietnam as such—*de novo*, as it were—was all that great. He was much too empirical and contingent-minded to believe in some automatic theory of “dominoes.” “It did not govern at the White House. . . . It’s never the real reason for action,” Bundy wrote in 1996. (The dominoes Lyndon Johnson worried about when he thought about the consequences of quitting in Vietnam, Bundy suggested, were the dominoes that would come rolling down from General Eisenhower’s Gettysburg farm, toppling over senators on their way. Eisenhower had become a determined “must win” hawk.)<sup>vii</sup>

I emphasize June and July 1965 because, up until then, U.S. actions can be fairly described as the minimum needed to honor the Eisenhower-

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5. LBJ’s response to the April 1965 coup in the Dominican Republic—I was not a first-hand witness—may have been a counter-example to the observation that an Act 2 phase invariably preceded significant decision. Though in the end things turned out quite well, his (later self-acknowledged) over-reaction persuaded some close observers that Johnson was at heart an ideology-driven hawk. I believe that’s a misdiagnosis. What I think drove LBJ a little crazy at the time was the thought that the Dominican Republic might become *his* Cuba—a Caribbean nation that turned communist on his watch—and thus a costly political liability. (Think of the disproportionate response of Eisenhower and especially the Kennedy brothers to Castro in relation to the actual threat to the United States that he represented—aside, that is, from the political muscle of the anti-Castro Cuba lobby.)

Kennedy commitment to help South Vietnam maintain its independence. A lot of South Vietnamese had bet their lives on that commitment. Just before the Kennedy assassination, a cabal of generals in Saigon had taken over the government in a coup encouraged by some senior U.S. officials, though not by a hesitant JFK. “Let us continue” was, for good reason, a leitmotif of Johnson’s presidency. There was a treaty. American credibility did matter. So it was important to be a “good doctor,” not to quit until you had made a serious try. Domestically, the country was inattentive to mildly supportive.

Suppose we had stopped where we were in early June 1965. There were then about 75,000 American soldiers in place to train and advise the South Vietnamese army, 20,000 of them in combat echelons to help protect Saigon and the bases from which we bombed the southern part of North Vietnam. With U.S. casualties kept very low, there would have been no American war in Vietnam as we came to know it. The war would have remained for Saigon to win or lose.<sup>viii</sup>

But then—with the South Vietnamese army having taken a couple of bad beatings, and evidence of growing numbers of North Vietnamese regulars crossing the border—General Westmoreland in a June 7, 1965, cable asked for a large open-ended build-up of U.S. combat units and a change in the rules of engagement. In effect, it was a proposal to Americanize the war and turn it into a war of attrition. Years later, Robert McNamara called the cable a “bombshell.” Bundy in a June 30 memorandum to McNamara described the Westmoreland plan (by then approved by McNamara) as “rash to the point of folly.” Johnson’s second-level civilian advisers, led by Mac’s brother, William Bundy, proposed a small, incremental increase instead, with an overall ceiling of 100,000, designed to hold the line and test how U.S. troops would perform. As late as June 21, Johnson told Bill Moyers: “I don’t think I should go over 100,000 . . . but I think I should go to that number and explain it. . . . I told McNamara . . . not to assume that I am willing to go overboard on this. I ain’t.”<sup>ix</sup>

## THE CHOICES

Following Westmoreland’s June 7 cable, LBJ was confronted, broadly speaking, by four choices:

- Try for victory by invading North Vietnam, which is what the Joint Chiefs wanted.
- Approve Westmoreland’s plan for deployment of 44 battalions, with an interim target of 175,000 men on the ground by Christmas, a continuing buildup as needed thereafter, and new rules of engagement: search out and destroy enemy forces within South Vietnam faster than the enemy can replace them. To



make the politics and economics work, ask the Congress for a new resolution, for authorization to call up the Reserves, for a large supplemental appropriation, and (to prevent a speedup of inflation) for a tax increase. Consider declaring a national emergency. Explain all this in a prime-time TV speech followed up by a lot of fireside chats. Lead a low-key but extended campaign to line up support.

- Hold the line pro tem with the “see-how-it-works” William Bundy plan involving a force of 100,000 men, with limited offensive operations to test how American troops would perform. This is what Mac Bundy and most of the second-level civilians wanted.
- “Head for the exit” with some sort of Geneva negotiation as a fig leaf—the course that Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Under Secretary of State George Ball, and, America’s most highly respected newspaper columnist, Walter Lippmann, favored.<sup>x</sup>

After lots of meetings and lots of talk, Lyndon Johnson rejected all four options, and contrived a fifth of his own making—call it “Westmoreland Redux”: Troop deployments only marginally lower than the original Westmoreland recommendation (the smallest number McNamara could persuade Westmoreland to support publicly). Westmoreland’s rules of engagement. But no declaration of national emergency, no reserve call-up, no tax increase, no new Senate resolution, no prime-time speech, and only a minimal supplemental appropriation.<sup>xi</sup>

Instead of a prime-time speech, Johnson announced the new deployments—understating the numbers—at a mid-day press conference during which he also announced that he was nominating Abe Fortas to be associate justice of the Supreme Court and John Chancellor to be head of the United States Information Agency. As he put it: “I’ve asked the Commanding General, General Westmoreland, what more he needs to meet this mounting aggression. He has told me. We will meet his needs.” When asked if there was “any change in the existing policy of relying mainly on the South Vietnamese to carry out offensive operations and using American forces to guard American installations and to act as an emergency backup,” Johnson replied, “*It does not imply any change in policy whatsoever. It does not imply any change of objective.*” [Emphasis added.]<sup>xi</sup>

#### THE DOG THAT DID NOT BARK

More revealing, I think, than his choosing to Americanize the war was Johnson’s decision—carried out over a six-week period with almost no explanation—to strip from the Westmoreland option *each and every action that would have required him to acknowledge that he was turning the war into an American war.*

There was really only one big difference between the Westmoreland option and what I have called “Westmoreland Redux”: the first called for leveling with the country about the Americanization of the war, the second attempted to disguise it. *By choosing “Westmoreland Redux,” Johnson revealed that he was prepared to pay a huge price to disguise it.* He put mostly draftees at risk. He courted faster inflation. Above all, despite strong contrary advice from his closest advisors, he went to war without the protective shield that a credible Senate resolution and full disclosure of the unvarnished truth would have provided when, as he expected, the war turned nasty.

Had Johnson explained what he was doing—disclosing all the hazards, the limited stakes, the 60/40 nature of the decision—we would probably still have had an ugly and ultimately unsuccessful war. But very likely there would have been no credibility gap. Candor in 1965 would have made it much easier to keep leveling with the public during 1966–1968, when things went wrong. And only *probably* a long war because disengaging during 1967–1968 would have been politically much easier. The world would be different.<sup>6</sup>

I say that Johnson paid that price *knowingly*. As he put it on the telephone to McNamara on July 2: “Even though there’s some record behind us, we know ourselves, in our own conscience, that when we asked for this [the Gulf of Tonkin] resolution, we had no intention of committing this many ground troops. We’re doing so now, and we know it’s going to be bad. And the question is, do we just want to do it out on a limb by ourselves?”<sup>xii</sup>

The day before, Johnson had told Moyers about a conversation with Mac Bundy about whether to ask the Senate for a new resolution. Bundy—who had been pressing the president all spring to explain the choices in Vietnam—was urging Johnson to accept Senator Jacob Javits’s proposal of a full-dress debate in the Senate. Speaking about Bundy, Johnson said, “He’s had to be sat down a time or two. . . . The other day . . . he insisted on bringing up the Javits Resolution. I said, ‘No I’ll think about that.’ He said, ‘we’ve got to decide it.’ . . . I just had to finally just really embarrass him and say, . . . ‘I told you two or three times, quit that!’ . . . It was rather rough.”<sup>xiii</sup>

This was a man who kept saying that Truman’s great mistake in intervening in Korea was not to have asked Congress for a declaration of war, who kept cautioning his advisers that above all they must be “prudent”: that his landslide win over Goldwater had been a “fear election,” not a “love election.” I think Johnson deeply believed that

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6. To be sure, candor would have demoralized Saigon and reduced our bargaining power vis-à-vis Hanoi. The price would have been well worth paying.

a president who loses the confidence of the Senate cannot govern effectively.<sup>7</sup> <sup>xiv</sup>

#### ANOTHER HUGE PRICE

As it turned out, LBJ paid another price—this time unknowingly, though not without warning—for trying to go to war invisibly. Apart from confining ground action to South Vietnam, he left the critical choice of ground strategy entirely up to General Westmoreland. In the goldfish bowl that is the American government, a president who wants to disguise the fact that he is leading the country into war cannot engage his field commander in an argument about how to fight it.

Johnson is often faulted for having micromanaged the Vietnam War.<sup>xv</sup> I believe the opposite is true. Granted, he kept a tight leash on bombing and, minor covert operations aside, constrained ground operations to South Vietnam, thereby probably dooming “search and destroy.” Worried about another Korea, he didn’t want to take a chance on provoking a Chinese intervention; hardly a technical military decision, it was surely his call. Where he failed was in not forcing a debate on Westmoreland’s proposed ground strategy in South Vietnam, and, if need be, replacing Westmoreland. As McGeorge Bundy put it in 1995, “The president was engaged in bureaucratic bargaining over a number, not over a use.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Had Johnson instead followed his usual practice—in Bundy’s words, “He could be a formidable examiner when he chose”—he would have discovered that many of Westmoreland’s most highly respected army colleagues thought that Westmoreland’s “body count” strategy of attrition (track down and destroy enemy forces faster than the enemy can replace them) was a loser, especially with “hot pursuit” into North Vietnam ruled out. Army chief of staff Harold K. Johnson, his deputy Creighton Abrams, and deputy operations chief Bruce Palmer all thought

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7. The suggestion that Johnson avoided public debate about going to war because he feared that he might lose in the Senate and/or that the public wouldn’t back him seems to me—in light of the evidence on the balance of opinion in 1965—untenable. (At an informal lunch for all the president’s senior civilian Vietnam advisers hosted by Secretary of State Dean Rusk on Saturday, June 5, Johnson said, according to William Bundy’s notes, that he thought he could count on a 70/30 or 60/40 margin in the Senate for a resolution along the lines of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 1964 that passed with only two negative votes. But in June-July 1965, the senators would have known that—unlike a year earlier—they really were voting for war. William Bundy, *MS*, Chapter 26, p. 15.)

that instead of Westmoreland's "war of big battalions" sweeping through the Vietnam jungles, American troops should be deployed mainly in small units to clear, make secure, and then hold South Vietnam's villages and hamlets, where most of the population lived.<sup>xvii</sup>

The main burden of the fighting in the jungle, Abrams and the others thought, should be born by the South Vietnamese army—trained, equipped, and backed up from the air by the United States. It was the strategy that General Abrams adopted when he took over from Westmoreland in April 1969. Some knowledgeable observers believe to this day that from 1969 to 1972, Abrams, together with U.S. chief of mission in Saigon Ellsworth Bunker and the CIA's pacification chief, William Colby, did in fact turn the war around, while American forces in Vietnam were drawn down from 543,000 in early 1969 to 49,000 a little over three years later. If true—in light of Saigon's divisiveness and the fierce determination shown by the Communists, surely a very big if—it was too late. By 1973–1975, anti-war sentiment at home prevented a dishonored president—and then his sober, none-too-eager successor—from responding to Hanoi's violation of the 1972 cease-fire agreement by credibly threatening to unleash the U.S. Air Force.<sup>xviii</sup>

In McGeorge Bundy's opinion thirty years later, next only to Americanizing the war in July 1965, trying to do so surreptitiously was Lyndon Johnson's cardinal error. It carried with it a third fateful error: Johnson's failure to drive home the "can-you-win/will-attribution-work" question to his generals.<sup>8 xix</sup>

Observing LBJ after President Kennedy's assassination, Richard Neustadt (briefly a consultant to Johnson) described him as the quintessential president in *Presidential Power*: fiercely attentive to keeping his options open and to the consequences of current choices for his future options, someone who hated (Neustadt might have added, paraphrasing Bundy) anything that didn't work. *Yet Lyndon Johnson knowingly bet his presidency on an unexamined strategy in an unexplained war that he knew to be a poor gamble. Why?*

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8. The Joint Chiefs and Westmoreland failed in not saying to the president—repeatedly and firmly—that, given his ground rules, they could promise only a stalemate. At the least, they should have insisted on a change in strategy along the lines favored by Abrams. I suspect that they kept hoping that Johnson would change his mind about not invading North Vietnam when he realized that we were stuck in an unwinnable war of attrition.

## THE DOMESTIC CONNECTION

I believe there was nothing that LBJ cared more about in July 1965 than completing and extending the old Roosevelt program that had stalled in 1938. With forty extra northern congressional seats in 1964, he thought he had a two-year window of opportunity. His proposals for voting rights and Medicare were headed for conference. Much of the Great Society legislation—on education, poverty, cities, the environment, and the rest—had either only just started wending its way through the Congress or was still on the drawing board.

Johnson knew how to count votes. He knew that an honest discussion of the Westmoreland plan would provoke a coalition of budget balancers and small-government Republicans, who balked at the high cost of guns and butter, and Deep South senators, who were determined to block civil rights legislation. They would need only 34 votes out of 100 to block cloture—20 Deep South senators plus 14 conservative Republicans. (Mike Mansfield, LBJ's successor as majority leader, refused on principle to resort to what he called rough tactics to beat down filibusters.)<sup>xx</sup>

*And so—to avoid a Vietnam versus Great Society debate that might destroy his social and civil rights legislation—Johnson (shutting Bundy up) signed off on Westmoreland's minimum numbers, but sidled into war with minimum fuss: no prime-time speech, no new resolution, no call-up of reserves, no tax increase, no drumming up of support. Announce at noon: "No change in policy."<sup>9</sup>*

Evidence to support this hypothesis is scarce by its nature: a president cannot comfortably acknowledge, even to his advisers, that he intends to mislead the country about going to war to protect Medicare and fair housing. As Neustadt put it, "[It] would have struck every Pentagon adviser, and most of the State Department, as 'playing politics with national security,' a charge which, in itself, would hit LBJ particularly hard and could set off, all by itself, the dreaded anti-Johnson coalition on the Hill."<sup>xxi</sup>

Still, even a cursory search turns up a number of clues.

- In mid-July 1965, Johnson sent McNamara back to Saigon to "dicker" with Westmoreland, "feeling for his minimum." Cyrus Vance—McNamara's deputy, deeply trusted both by him and by

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9. That Richard Neustadt, an occasional consultant to LBJ in 1965, held similar views has greatly enhanced my confidence in this. See especially the text of his lecture given at Essex University in 2000, *Clinton in Retrospect*. As Dick said in the lecture, he and I talked a lot about what Johnson may have been up to during that spring, and came to the same conclusion. A copy of the typescript of Neustadt's Essex lecture is in my files. (See also footnote 12.)

LBJ—summarized a conversation with Johnson in a “literally eyes only” July 17 back channel cable to McNamara: “Yesterday I met three times with highest authority [the president]. . . . In summary, he stated (1) It is his current intention to proceed with 34 battalion plan. (2) It is impossible for him to submit supplementary budget request of more than \$300–400 million to the Congress before next January. (3) *If a larger request is made to the Congress he believes this will kill domestic legislative program. . . .*” [Emphasis added.]<sup>xxii</sup>

- According to Bundy’s contemporaneous longhand notes of the July 27 National Security Council meeting: “. . . while the President was placing his preference for alternative five [my “Westmoreland Redux”] as against alternative four [my “Westmoreland option”] 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 talks as late as Thursday and Friday of the preceding week—July 22 and July 23.” [Emphasis added.]<sup>xxiii</sup>
- William Gibbons, author of what is, I think, still the best documentary history of the U.S. government’s role in the Vietnam War, writes: “. . . in the draft of his report McNamara recommended a tax increase, was rebuffed by the President, and removed the recommendation from his final July 21 report. As the story has been told, McNamara took the position that without a tax increase the costs of the war would . . . stimulate inflation. This was said to have been Johnson’s reply: You know so goddam much about it, you go up there and you get it and you come back down here and give me the names of the people who will vote for it. Obviously you don’t know anything about politics. I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. *We’ll put it forward, they are going to turn it down. But in the course of the debate they’ll say, ‘You see, we’ve been telling you so. You can’t have guns and butter, and we’re going to have guns.’*” [Emphasis added.]<sup>xxiv</sup>
- In a half page July 19 “talking paper” for the president’s use (prepared at LBJ’s request), Bundy listed Johnson’s five reasons for not asking Congress for the entire billion dollar appropriation needed to cover the first-year costs of the Westmoreland plan. The third reason states: “*It would create the false impression that we have to have guns not butter—and would help the enemies of the President’s domestic legislative program.*” According to Foreign Relations of the United States, the official State Department history, “The President put a line through the entire memorandum, crossed out the third point, and wrote at the bottom, *Rewrite eliminating 3.*” Bundy submitted the rewritten memorandum,

identical except for the omission of 3, on July 23. [Emphasis added throughout.]<sup>10</sup>

- Beschloss: “At the 11:35 A.M. meeting [on July 2] with Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Ball, Johnson said he would hold off a final decision on Westmoreland’s request until the end of the month, when Congress was expected to vote on the Medicare and Voting Rights bills.”<sup>xxv</sup>
- Bundy in a personal letter to historian Larry Berman, author of a fine early history of Johnson’s 1965 Vietnam decisions: “The President had known when he sent McNamara to Saigon that the purpose was to build a consensus on what needed to be done to turn the tide . . . but his own priority was to get agreement, at the lowest level of intensity he could, on a course that would meet the present need in Vietnam and *not derail his legislative calendar.*” [Emphasis added.]<sup>xxvi</sup>
- And finally, there is this anecdote from an oral history interview with Wilbur J. Cohen, then Assistant Secretary and later Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, a highly respected member of the Johnson administration:

Now I am going to tell you a very important story. It’s one of the most important I know about Johnson. At the end of January 1965 . . . Johnson called a meeting of the so-called congressional liaison officers of the various departments . . . . He talked extemporaneously, and what he said was a three-hour credit course in American political history. He said, “Look, I’ve just been elected and right now we’ll have a honeymoon with Congress. With the additional congressmen that have been elected, I’ll have a good chance to get my program through. Of course, for that I have to depend on you, the twenty or thirty people in this room. But after I make my recommendations, I’m going to start to lose the power and authority I have because that’s what happened to President Woodrow Wilson, to President Roosevelt, and to Truman and to Kennedy . . . .

*“Every day that I’m in office and every day that I push my program, I’ll be losing a part of my ability to be influential, because that’s in the nature of what the president does. He uses up his capital. Something is going to come up . . . something like the Vietnam War or something else where I will begin to lose all that I have now. So I want you guys to get off your asses*

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10. Avoiding “a belligerent challenge to the Soviets,” not “play[ing] into their hands at Geneva,” not stirring up talk at home of inflation and controls, and not needing the money, were the four remaining reasons Bundy listed. FRUS, *Vietnam June-December 1965*, p. 165.

*and do everything possible to get everything in my program passed as soon as possible, before the aura and the halo that surround me disappear. . . . Don't waste a second. . . .*" And I think he had a correct historical evaluation, much better than Wilson, who was a great historian, and certainly better than Kennedy, who was cautious because he thought Goldwater would run against him in 1964 and that he'd beat him and then he could do what he wanted. . . . Johnson . . . [had] . . . a more correct evaluation of the historical forces affecting the president than almost anybody else. [Emphasis added.]<sup>xxvii</sup>

Once when people fussed at Johnson about sending up too many bills, starting too many programs, I recall hearing him say (I paraphrase): "Nothing has moved in this country since the New Deal ground to a halt in '38. The Fair Deal was small potatoes. Ike sat on his hands for eight years. Jack couldn't get the Congress to pass the time of day. I have two years to move the country into the twentieth century."

No smoking guns here. Yet why else, if not to protect his dreams of social reform, would Johnson pay the enormous price of marching into a war that "is going to be bad . . . out on a limb by ourselves?" Why else, when angry about the choice he faced, would he describe the social legislation as "my beautiful lady," and Vietnam as "that ugly bitch"? Why did he flatly turn down his Treasury Secretary's repeated recommendation during 1966 and 1967 that he prevail on the House Ways and Means Committee to pass the tax bill by calling it a "war tax"? Why in the midst of the frantic churning just two hours before the Tonkin Gulf retaliation did he phone his senior aide for congressional relations Lawrence O'Brien: "What effect is our asking Congress for a resolution to support us—South East Asia, and bombing the hell out of the Vietnamese tonight—what effect will that have on this [the poverty] bill? Will it kill it or help us?"<sup>xxviii</sup>

Bundy, who perhaps pressed Johnson hardest during June-July 1965 to explain to the country that he was leading it into war, recalled the president saying to him, slowly: "I see what you mean . . . You mean if your mother-in-law—your very own mother-in-law—has only one eye, and it happens to be right in the middle of her forehead, then the best place for her is in the 'livin' room with all the company!"

Bundy remembered being unable to answer: "[M]y mind, racing into reflexive self-defense, focused only on the thought that my real mother-in-law was a famous beauty with two clear blue eyes just where they ought to be. This thought was comforting but not immediately useful in reply."<sup>xxix</sup>



## THEN WHY NOT EXIT?

If protecting the Great Society legislation was what mainly drove Lyndon Johnson in June-July 1965, why did he not defuse concern about guns versus butter by “heading for the exit”? Or contain the problem by choosing the William Bundy option?

Start with “exit.” Could LBJ have backed away in Vietnam without sacrificing his legislative program? Or, as the “no good choices” in my title suggests—and as I think he believed—would his quitting Vietnam (even with a Geneva “cover”) have incited a bitter “Who lost Vietnam?” debate that would have so weakened him as to invite failure in the Congress?

Democratic politicians of Johnson’s generation were traumatized by what “Who lost China?” had done to Truman. I would guess that Johnson feared that reneging on the Eisenhower/Kennedy commitment would destroy his presidency as Truman’s had been destroyed, and destroy the Great Society program with it. As he put it to Richard Russell in a bit of Act 1 fancy that is nevertheless revealing of his state of mind (and Russell’s, too): “Well, they’d impeach a president though that would run out, wouldn’t they?”<sup>xxx</sup>

In his book *Choosing War*, Fredrik Logevall asserts that, on the contrary, had LBJ backed away he would “*without question*” . . . “have had strong support among the majority Democrats on Capitol Hill. . . .” “*Almost certainly*” . . . “could . . . have used his unsurpassed skills at persuasion to convince many skeptical Dixiecrats [!] and moderate Republicans to go along. . . .” Could “*undoubtedly*” . . . “have sold the general public . . . utilizing the help of respected figures such as Richard Russell, William Fulbright, Mike Mansfield, James Reston, Walter Lippmann, Drew Pearson, and Joseph Kraft . . . awesomely powerful voice[s] in any national debate . . . [with] support . . . from [Hans] Morgenthau and other Realist heavyweights such as George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr . . . [and] from editorial writers at a large number of newspapers across the country.” [Emphasis added throughout.]<sup>xxxii</sup>

Logevall is too confident in his counter-factual rear-view predictions.<sup>11</sup> In any case, it is important to see the 1965 story through

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11. Asking yourself whether you would *really* bet Saint Peter your grandchildren’s bread and board on some counter-factual prediction or inference, the truth of which he could ascertain by looking up the answer, is generally a sobering experience. I think of my conclusions as hypotheses—*not* as a pretense to scientific rigor, but to remind myself of Paul Valery’s cryptic warning that “History is the science of things that never happen twice.”

It is striking that Logevall asserts the undoubted, nearly certain, etc., invulnerability of the legislative program in a 529-page book whose index contains two single-page references to the Great Society, none to Voting Rights, Medicare, or any other piece of domestic legislation, or to vote counts in the Senate, filibuster, Montgomery, or Selma. (See endnote xxxvi about historiography and specialization.)

Johnson's eyes. LBJ knew that powerful voices of reason had failed to shield President Truman, General George Marshall, and Dean Acheson from the depredations of what Logevall calls "the Nixon crowd." Johnson remembered the firestorm Truman ignited by firing General MacArthur. He knew that, in 1950, Marshall and Acheson stood quietly by, each hoping that the other would intervene to stop the general from provoking China by marching on the Yalu.<sup>xxxii</sup> He knew that until Joseph McCarthy took on the U.S. Army, even President Eisenhower (who in 1965 would have quietly encouraged the attack on Johnson) chose to duck, going along with John Foster Dulles's rhetoric of "liberation," the travesty of the suspension of Robert Oppenheimer's security clearance, even traveling to Indiana to support Senator William Jenner, who had called George Marshall, Eisenhower's mentor and idol, a "living lie . . . a front-man for traitors."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

No doubt LBJ was impressed also by President Kennedy's assessment only three years earlier of the power of the anti-communist right wing when, responding to baiting by Republican Senators Homer Capehart and Kenneth Keating, JFK drew the line in the sand that led to the Cuban missile crisis. And impressed, too, that Kennedy refused to consider backing away—choosing instead, in part for domestic political reasons, a nuclear confrontation with Moscow—despite McNamara's reminder that, minor technical quibbles aside, the likely damage caused by a missile launched from Cuba was no different than the damage caused by one launched from Siberia, that a missile is a missile. And, finally, Johnson was surely further impressed by Kennedy's insistence on making the offer that probably prevented war—his offer to withdraw the U.S. missiles in Turkey if Khrushchev withdraw the Soviet missiles in Cuba—contingent on its remaining secret from the American people.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Johnson thought that hawkish Dixiecrats and small-government Republicans were more likely to defy him—by joining together to filibuster the civil rights and social legislation that they and their constituents detested—if he could be made to appear an appeaser of communists who had reneged on Eisenhower's and Kennedy's commitment of U.S. honor. (George Ball once said that Kennedy's language made the Vietnam commitment sound like a "sacred oath.") And he thought the attack on him by the right wing of the Democratic Party would probably be joined by Robert Kennedy, who had once suggested that failure in Vietnam would put in question the U.S. commitment in Berlin, and who in the spring of 1965 might have welcomed any weapon with which to damage Johnson. Explaining why Johnson in 1965 and 1966 would have dreaded the domestic political consequences of quitting in Vietnam, Richard Neustadt used to tell his

classes that he suspected that LBJ was haunted by the specter of Robert Kennedy rising in the Senate to read the roll of martyred South Vietnamese Roman Catholic nuns.

Logevall makes much of McGeorge Bundy's answer, in a personal interview, that ". . . if [Johnson] had decided that the right thing to do was to cut our losses, he was quite sufficiently inventive to do that in a way that would not have destroyed the Great Society." Logevall assures us that (for once?) ". . . here Bundy had it right." But Bundy was of two minds, it seems. In a 1995 note he suggested that, whereas JFK in 1965 would have had ". . . nothing to fear in leaving it up to South [Vietnam]; *LBJ does—his whole legislative program.*" [Emphasis added.] And ". . . no serious contender for political office can propose letting go of Vietnam. . . . That's not . . . because dominoes will fall, but because *Vietnam* must not fall. . . ." Also, rhetorically: "Have we [Americans] gotten in the habit in the Truman-Eisenhower years that *we* don't lose where *we* draw the line?" [Emphasis in original.]<sup>xxxv</sup>

In any case, Bundy would have been the first to say that American legislative politics of the 1960s was not his strong suit. "Remember you are not an expert here," he reminded himself in another note under the heading "Congress and War." He had worked sixteen-hour days orchestrating Johnson's foreign policy. Division of labor, reinforced by professional specialization, governs what senior officials attend to (as it governs the research and competence of historians). Exposed to the contrary reasoning of, say, Richard Neustadt—or the circumstantial evidence about what LBJ himself thought—Mac would, I suspect, quickly have discounted his own answer to Logevall. Ready open-mindedness to evidence-based rebuttal was one of his many attractive qualities. (Great Society politics receive almost no mention in Bundy's Vietnam writings, beyond his acknowledging that they may have accounted for the president's refusal to explain publicly what he was up to—the issue that divided them most sharply. The comment about LBJ's legislative program in the previous paragraph is an exception.)<sup>12 xxxvi</sup>

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12. I think of Neustadt because, as he explained in his lecture at Essex, he and I talked a lot about what LBJ may have had in his head in 1965, and tried to come up with plausible counter-factual stories: e.g., what if (a Neustadt suggestion) McNamara and Bundy had offered to shield LBJ by offering to say publicly that JFK and they had been wrong in 1961–1963 to entangle the United States. We concluded that Johnson wouldn't have thought McNamara and Bundy a robust enough shield, agreeing with Bundy's self-deprecating description of himself as a "political zero," and thinking the same of McNamara.

I regret that the following absurd fantasy didn't occur to me until after Dick N. died—I would have loved his laughter; he loved to laugh. Suppose that sometime during the spring of 1965, Robert Kennedy had said to Lyndon Johnson that his brother's com-

Recall that, in the spring of 1965, few people in public life were prepared to say out loud that we should simply let Vietnam go—not Lippmann, not Mansfield, not Arthur Schlesinger.<sup>13</sup> “Negotiate” was the dove’s code word. But as Bundy put it in a note to himself thirty years later, written five days before he died: “The absence of a peaceful path to an agreed result will be noted, and in particular we will note that the absence was a centrally *Vietnamese* reality. It has the important consequence that there was no way for the Americans to be the leaders in a peaceful compromise: what Hanoi would accept would never satisfy Saigon, and vice versa. In particular the United States could not—if only for its own political reasons—force the Saigon government to accept a [policy] that led only to early collapse. Better simply to go home.” Also: “I deeply believe that peaceful compromise was never available—to *accept* defeat or negotiate it not our role.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In a meeting in June 1964, North Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong had told the Canadian member of the International Control Commission (whom the Johnson administration had asked to sound out Hanoi) that reunification of Vietnam was for Hanoi essentially non-negotiable (“*drame, national, fundamental*”). Preventing that outcome was for Johnson—as it had been for Kennedy and Eisenhower, and as it appeared to remain well into 1966 for at least a thin majority of attentive Americans—non-negotiable. It was a case of “opposing purposes.” As Johnson put it, “If I were Ho Chi Minh, I would never negotiate.”<sup>14 xxxviii</sup>

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mitment in Vietnam had been a mistake, that the situation was a hopeless mess, that to help Johnson extricate the country he, Robert Kennedy, would be willing to say so in public and join Johnson in explaining that the U.S. interest simply did not justify deeper involvement. Further, that he was confident that, if asked by the two of them, Bob McNamara and Mac Bundy would be willing to join in such an explanation. At the least, it would have altered Johnson’s slate of options. (Being hammered by the late president’s brother for a mess that was in part of JFK’s making had, I suspect, a lot to do with the intensity of LBJ’s anger at Robert Kennedy during the winter and spring of 1968.)

13. Not even the young David Halberstam, who, in the first edition of *Making of a Quagmire* in early 1965, characterized *all* the basic alternatives (withdrawal, neutralization, escalation) “a nightmare.” For Halberstam’s judgments at the time, and Schlesinger’s and Lippmann’s public positions that spring and summer, see endnote xxxviib. It should be said that Hans Morgenthau, then perhaps the leading international relations theorist in the United States, came close to being an exception (Logevall, p. 406).

14. For more on Hanoi’s intentions, see endnote xlv. On where the American public stood on Vietnam in 1965–1966, my inexpert and tentative inference is based on a reading of John Mueller’s *American Political Science Review* articles “Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam” (1971) and “Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson” (1970). I have not studied the enormous literature on the subject, and have no idea whether Mueller would agree with the inference. (I have also benefited from reading Bruce Altschuler, *LBJ and the Polls*, University of Florida Press, 1990.)

## HOLDING THE LINE

Suppose that I am right in thinking that Johnson believed that letting Vietnam sink in 1965, even with a Geneva cover, would destroy his presidency and the Great Society with it. Why then did he not choose William Bundy's proposal? Incremental and experimental, it would have left LBJ's options open, and that always appealed to him. It would have weakened the guns versus butter opposition, at least temporarily. It would have enabled him to force debate about "what use" and "can you win," instead of passively going along with Westmoreland's pig-in-a-poke strategy of attrition. It was Mac Bundy's first choice, and the first choice of many of the second-level civilians. And it was about where LBJ and McNamara thought they could stop as late as mid June.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Did Johnson think the William Bundy plan neither fish nor fowl, a profitless holding action that merely postponed the inescapable choice between, as he put it, getting out and getting in? Or—as I believe, and Dick Neustadt believed—did he think that if he turned Westmoreland down, the Joint Chiefs and the general, egged on by Ike, would do to him what MacArthur did to Truman: start a big row by bitching to their friends on the Hill that the Commander-in-Chief was hunkering down, failing the soldiers already in the field, risking American lives on a strategy calculated to lose? It would have been a different row and a different coalition from the row he ducked and the coalition that never coalesced because he went to war "invisibly," but it would still have been noisy and powerful enough to put his domestic legislation at risk. Is that why he turned down the civilians' plan and instead sent McNamara to Saigon to feel out Westmoreland's bottom line? Recall Bundy's description of Johnson as a very majority-leader-like commander in chief. I suspect it was Johnson's effort to satisfy Westmoreland in June and July 1965 that made Bundy think so.

## WHAT IF THERE HAD BEEN NO GREAT SOCIETY LEGISLATION TO ENACT?

To say that LBJ's fierce resolve that Congress enact his social reforms would probably have sufficed to deter him from backing away in July 1965, or even from turning down Westmoreland, is not to argue that, but for the Great Society, he would have "headed for the exit." I myself doubt that, but not—as the common story has it—because he was a reflexive Cold Warrior hawk who believed in dominos (he wasn't and didn't), or was bullied into it by hawkish advisers (he ran his own show), or was no good at foreign policy (that's nonsense).<sup>xl</sup>

Rather, he would have stuck with it partly because the foreign policy stakes—commitment/credibility/"good-doctor"/doing enough—

mattered to him, as they would have to any American president. And partly because, to risk crippling his presidency so early in his first full term—as I believe he thought quitting in Vietnam would cripple it—is not in the nature of anyone ambitious and determined enough to be elected president.

At the same time, I believe that, had it not been for the Great Society, Johnson would at a minimum have asked the Senate for a new war resolution, launched a serious campaign to drum up support, and faced all the doubters with “Do you really want me to renege on Ike’s and JFK’s promise?” and “What would you do if *you* had to decide?” And he would have told it straight: “It will be long and nasty. And if the South Vietnamese don’t shape up, it may not work.” No one could then claim later that (to use Bundy’s vivid phrase) he had been “bamboozled into war.”

Alternatively, *and just possibly*, with no Great Society legislation to protect, Johnson might have been willing to risk a public row with the Joint Chiefs and the civilian hawks (and, in the background, Ike), to deny Westmoreland’s request, and to accept instead the second-level civilian/William Bundy package: a ceiling of, say, 100,000, with maybe 22 combat battalions deployed defensively around the coastal cities (Taylor’s enclaves) to minimize casualties. Then, in time, he could have constructed for himself a way out by emphasizing that in the end it was Saigon’s war to win or lose, that we couldn’t do it for them, and that America’s national interest reached just so far.

#### “THE HISTORIAN AS DETECTIVE”<sup>15</sup>

The Vietnam War, it is said, deprived the Great Society social reforms of executive energy and money. But if Johnson had not stayed the course in Vietnam by escalating in 1965—or so he believed—there would have been no reforms: the legislation would have been “dead on arrival” in Congress. That’s not a story that is subject to open-and-shut confirmation: as I keep reminding myself, what was going on in LBJ’s mind is, strictly speaking, unknowable. But I know of no other story that fits the facts, and I think this one does. Whether it has the ring of truth—the ultimate test of inductive inference—I’ll leave to the reader to judge.

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15. Borrowed from Robin Winks’s ingenious book whose title it is. Winks, *The Historian as Detective*, Harper & Row, 1968.

## REFLECTIONS

When I once suggested to a very able young lawyer that I thought Lyndon Johnson went to war surreptitiously in 1965 to safeguard his domestic legislation, he said something like, “It cannot have been that bad.” Clearly he thought that sending marines into harm’s way for *domestic* political reasons was outrageous on its face.<sup>16</sup>

I told him I did not agree. Ultimately, all foreign policy has to be judged by its consequences for the viability of the United States as a decentralized, open, and by-design inefficiently governed democratic republic. *Specific cases aside*<sup>17</sup>—at the level of first principle—it seems to me not at all obvious that maintaining an independent Kuwait or Berlin or South Korea is a qualitatively more legitimate consideration when making calculations *at the margin* for or against going to war—51/49 calculations—than is the likely effect of a war or peace decision on, say, the scandalous disenfranchisement of 13 percent of American citizens on grounds of race.

I repeat, “At the margin!” Obviously, the argument would not justify invading Canada, say, “out of the blue,” even if that were necessary and sufficient to secure passage of the Voting Rights Act. Even in the narrowest, most self-interested “national interest” calculus, consequences for “world order” matter a great deal on grounds of self-serving prudence. So do considerations of constitutional due process. But even due process should not govern in all cases. FDR blatantly violated the Neutrality Acts during 1940 to assist a beleaguered Britain, and thank heaven he did. Or think about Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase. It depends on the situation. We elect presidents to make some unmentionable tradeoffs.

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16. Another not-infrequent response is that I am trying to whitewash Johnson. About that let it suffice that Johnson’s motives are of interest, not mine. In any case, trying to understand (in the sense of *comprehend*) is not the same as condoning. The distinction is between *is*-statements and *should*-statements, description versus prescription, hypothesis testing (a matter of evidence and inference) versus normative evaluation (a matter of ethics, good and evil, virtue and sin).

17. Until our recent reckless misadventure in Iraq—as I have tried to make clear in the text above—I shared Bundy’s 1995 opinion that getting entangled in Vietnam was the greatest foreign policy mistake we have made since sitting on our hands during Hitler’s rise in the late 1930s. (For my prewar view about the folly of making war on Iraq, see *The New York Times*, Letters, March 13, 2003.)

In private conversation a few years ago Thomas Schelling suggested that the failure of Truman, Marshall, and Acheson to stop MacArthur from marching to the Yalu in 1950 may have been an even greater mistake than Vietnam. (The Chinese-American war that resulted from MacArthur’s folly contributed to the China-phobia that had a good deal to do with our entanglement in Vietnam.)

Beyond ensuring the survival and territorial integrity of an independent, self-governing United States, how we govern ourselves when measured against the defining ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights is integral to the American national interest. All in all, whether a foreign policy is in our national interest depends not only on how it affects our relations with the rest of the world, but also on its consequences at home.<sup>18 xli</sup>

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If Johnson did not believe in dominoes, why did he not back away in 1966–1968 when it became increasingly clear that, with ground combat confined to South Vietnam, the war—a war of attrition with an open frontier—was probably not winnable? To paraphrase Anthony Lewis: “He still could and should have fessed up to the public about the realities in Vietnam long before March 31, 1968. Or do you think he actually believed to the end that we could win?”<sup>xlii</sup>

I have not studied in detail Johnson’s Vietnam decisions after July 1965, and, at the time, was too busy staffing him on Europe and on foreign economics to pay much attention. But for what it’s worth:<sup>xliii</sup>

I don’t think LBJ thought we could win outright. But backing away, he feared, would ignite a political row that would damage his domestic program and kill support for his attempt to “thaw the Cold War.”<sup>19</sup> If he could convince Hanoi that they couldn’t win outright either—that, head to head, he wouldn’t quit, no matter what—they might opt instead for trying to win slowly, via Geneva. He wanted to persuade the *native* Northerners in Hanoi who dreaded the destruction of their part of the country (“If that crazy Texan invades we’ll have a million Chinese on our necks”) that their better, safer bet would be to aim at a gradual takeover in the course of a post-Geneva political process.<sup>xliv</sup>

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18. That Johnson took into account the “potential impact [of his Vietnam decisions] on the election, and [that he] obsessed [*sic*] about erecting a Great Society,” does not *per se* belie (contra Logevall, p. 314) his boast that his Vietnam policy was governed by the national interest. Because, and to the degree that, politics—even “party politics”—affects policy, it should *not* stop at the water’s edge. (Johnson’s claim that party politics did not affect his foreign policy was wrongheaded in principle, as well as obviously not true.)

19. The Johnson “bridge-building” policy produced the Nonproliferation Treaty, helped encourage Bonn’s shift from a rigid “reunification or nothing” stance vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact countries to West German chancellor Willy Brandt’s ameliorative *Ostpolitik*, led to the LBJ-Kosygin summit in Glassboro, and—had it not been for the Soviets’ panicky military response to the Prague Spring—would have culminated in a full-fledged summit in the fall of 1968, in Leningrad, that might have stopped ABMs sooner and MIRVs altogether. (For all this, see Schwartz; Bator, *Presidential Judgment*, esp. pp. 42, 64–65; and Johnson’s remarkable October 15, 1966, speech before the Editorial Writers.)



No doubt in optimistic moments Johnson hoped that by then the South Vietnamese would have pulled together enough to resist internal takeover. But even if they hadn't, we would have "done enough," been a "good doctor" to those who had bet their lives on our remaining steadfast. He hoped for a deal with Hanoi akin to a lottery ticket with the odds on the outcome written in invisible ink—odds that he hoped would provide Saigon at least a chance for continued independence, but in any case odds invisible enough to provide the political protection he felt he and America needed against the "right-wing beast."

It wouldn't work if he showed any sign of weakening. So he needed to be seen as the big hawk, fighting off a softening McNamara, Clifford, bombing pauses, negotiations. (It's too long a story now, but I have reason to believe that Johnson knew exactly what he was getting when he replaced McNamara with Clifford.)<sup>20</sup>

The great double mistake was thinking that the bombing and the threat of escalation would strengthen the "negotiate them out" North Vietnamese leaders who didn't want to risk the destruction of their half of the country. We underestimated the post-1963 dominance in Hanoi of communists born in the South whose first priority was to "liberate" the South, no matter what the cost in destruction to the North. And we underestimated, too, the stiffening effect of the bombing on their will to persevere. It was the "hammer" we had, so everything had to be a nail. More accurately: the other hammer—going North—was only for the "crazies" ready to risk another Chinese war.<sup>21</sup> xliv

In short, this is the only story that squares with all I learned about Johnson in three years of working with him. The locked-in Cold Warrior hypothesis is flatly contradicted by the Soviet and arms-control evidence; even on China, he and Richard Russell talked about what a mistake non-recognition had been. The "dominated by McNamara, Bundy et al" explanation won't work: Johnson ran his own show.<sup>xlv</sup>

One lesson for presidents: because limited war—"limited" in the means you are willing to use—entails bluffing, it is hazardous to your political life. "I was bluffing, I was right to do so, too bad it didn't work" will ruin you, especially if you have another election to win.

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20. In a letter to Clark Clifford in March 1990, I wrote down the story that makes me think so. Clifford's reply confirms the facts of the story. Because he wouldn't have enjoyed it, I did not in my letter mention the inference I draw from the evidence. Copies of the letters are available in my files in the LBJ Library and in Cambridge.

21. The statement unfairly brackets advocates of an outright large-scale ground attack on North Vietnam accompanied by heavy bombing near the Chinese border, and the many people who proposed the discriminating use of ground forces somehow to "cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail." (One problem with that idea was that it was nothing like what one thinks of as a trail.)

If the Diem coup had come after JFK had won his *second* election, he might have used it as an excuse to get out. As it was, he waffled, and left Johnson with what could be made to appear as a Saigon government made in Washington, and a two-part policy: not to let Hanoi win in South Vietnam, and, *sotto voce*, not to Americanize the war. As Bundy pointed out twenty years later, those two propositions “couldn’t have coexisted in 1965.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

Johnson had his second election still ahead of him. *He* had not (appeared to have) made Khrushchev blink. And unlike Kennedy, he would bet the store to get his domestic legislation through.

A story: Stupidly, I once wrote the president a memo about letting more of his tentativeness show, as a way of making clear that he wasn’t a gung-ho warrior. A couple of weeks later, at a meeting with British prime minister Harold Wilson and his entourage—I was sitting at the far end of the cabinet table—LBJ pointed a finger and said, in his broadest Texan, something like “Young fella there wants me to do some aa-go-niiziz in on teelevision.”<sup>22 xlvi</sup>

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22. “Memorandum for the President: Reflections on lunch yesterday with the academics in Government.” May 19, 1967, Box 5, Francis Bator Personal Papers, LBJ Library. Johnson had given a lunch for the dozen and a half or so ex-academics in his cabinet and sub-cabinet to ask for advice, as Max Frankel put it in his *New York Times* story (May 21, 1967) about “why he was having trouble communicating with the country’s . . . intellectuals. . . . Perhaps, the President is said to have remarked, intellectuals really wanted him to do something he did not think a President could do and something that most other citizens would not want him to do: to agonize about his problems in public.”

## Origins and Acknowledgments

That Great Society legislative prospects may have played a large and perhaps even decisive role in LBJ's 1965 Vietnam choices first occurred to me during the late 1960s. I knew from my own experience with him during 1964–1967 that the usual explanations—no-good-at-foreign-policy/under the thumb of McNamara et al/knee-jerk hawk—were mostly nonsense. Having been responsible for his work also on international economic matters—trade, balance of payments, the dollar, issues that called for close collaboration with economists in the Administration working on domestic policy, many of whom happened to be personal as well as professional friends of long standing—I was more directly exposed to his Great Society preoccupations than my NSC colleagues who spent sixteen hours a day helping the president manage purely political foreign policy.

Still, I didn't begin thinking about the idea systematically until the meeting in Hanoi during the summer of 1997 of former North Vietnamese and American senior officials and historians organized by Robert McNamara. As one of six American ex-officials—and the only one whose responsibilities had not involved Vietnam—I listened hard for three days to conversation and debate among men on both sides who had been deeply involved with the war or had professionally studied the record.

Shortly after returning from Hanoi, I explained the theory in an interview published in the *Providence Sunday Journal* (November 9, 1997, pp. A 21–23). Participation in work on McGeorge Bundy's private Vietnam papers during 1998–2001 afforded an opportunity to confront the evidence in the primary record. (It was about then that I discovered that my late friend and colleague Richard Neustadt was thinking along the same lines.) After discussing the main points in the course of many talks about Johnson and Europe, and explaining them briefly in the piece in *Presidential Judgment*, I spelled out the argument in a talk at the John F. Kennedy School Leadership Center in May 2005, and again in an American Academy of Arts & Sciences Presidents' Week Lecture in February 2006. This paper is the first rigorously formulated version in writing.

My debts are legion. In pride of place, for permission and encouragement to make continued use of McGeorge Bundy's unpublished Vietnam papers, I am deeply grateful to Mary L. Bundy. The many references and attributions in the body of this paper attest to the singular pleasure, stimulation, and learning Mac's papers have afforded.

I have profited especially from his marvelous descriptions of Johnson, many of them quoted in the paper, and from his insistence on the significance of non-explanation.

The work of organizing and indexing the unpublished Bundy papers was done by and under the supervision of Dr. Gordon Goldstein during his tenure first as Bundy's research assistant and then as editor of the papers. I thank him also.

I owe a continuing debt for help and patience throughout the years to the remarkable team of archivists at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, especially Regina Greenwell, Jennifer Cuddeback, Ted Gittinger, and John Wilson. Their scholarship would do any university proud.

For conversation and helpful suggestion about Johnson and Vietnam over the years I am indebted to far too many friends to list them all here. Suffice it to acknowledge the special benefit and reassurance I received from Dick Neustadt's formulations, especially in his Essex lecture, and from the comments and suggestions over the years of my long-suffering partner in the work on the Bundy papers, Carl Kaysen, and my historian colleague Ernest May, good friends both, and deeply knowledgeable about these matters. For wise critical comment, editorial improvement, and encouragement throughout it is a pleasure to acknowledge especially Donald Blackmer, Jae Roosevelt, Robert Solow, Edith Stokey, and Evan Thomas. Jean Martin's meticulously sharp-eyed after-hours copy editing has been a source of both reassurance and learning.

Finally, at the American Academy, I am indebted to Leslie Berlowitz for suggesting that I expand what was going to be an informal talk into a Presidents' Week Lecture; Martin Malin for thoughtful advice about the lecture; Mary Brandt and Diane Vratos for the hard work of organizing the lecture; and Phyllis Bendell for the skill and cheerful patience with which she prepared the typescript for publication. I thank them all.

## Endnotes\*

\* “z/y” signifies that endnote “z” refers to material found on page “y.”

i/1. Or take George McGovern’s surprising recent conclusion that “with the exceptions of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt—and perhaps Theodore Roosevelt—Lyndon Johnson was the greatest president since Abraham Lincoln” (*New York Times* Op-Ed, December 5, 1999). For Freedman, see his February 6, 2005, *New York Times* review. Nick Kotz’s book, *Judgment Days*, Houghton Mifflin, 2005, a marvelous new double portrait of Johnson and Martin Luther King, is a “must read” for anyone interested in the civil rights revolution they led. For Caro, see *The Theodore H. White Lecture with Robert A. Caro*, Shorenstein Center, JFK School, Harvard University, 2003, p. 52, and, especially, “Lessons in Power: Lyndon Johnson Revealed, A Conversation with Robert Caro,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2006. Also, endnote xlvii.

When he made his 2003 comment, Caro had apparently just started working on Johnson’s vice presidency. It surely does him great credit—though in light of the thoroughness of his research, it’s not a surprise—that he changed his mind when he discovered countervailing evidence in the post-1961 record. (I confess that I too have changed my mind. After Caro’s first two volumes I had decided not to read the rest of what I thought would end up a prejudiced hatchet job. I now find myself looking forward to his volumes on LBJ’s vice presidency and the presidency. I hope before he completes the last he’ll read this paper.)

ii/2. For Schorr, see the Harvard Shorenstein Center booklet, *The Theodore H. White Lecture with Robert A. Caro*, 2003, p. 60; for Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 87. The assertion has become dogma. According to Maureen Dowd, writing about the Michael Beschloss edition of the Johnson telephone tapes, “Beschloss says that we might have avoided Vietnam if Lyndon Johnson had been as secure in foreign policy as he was on domestic policy. He might not have been as easily swayed by misguided Kennedy holdovers like Robert McNamara.” And George Stephanopoulos, also on the Beschloss tapes: “dealing with domestic policy he [Johnson] gives orders; on foreign policy he seems to take them.” Or Eric Foner in his *New York Times* review (May 8, 2005) of *The Presidential Recordings*, ed. Philip Zelikow et al., W. W. Norton, 2005: “. . . Johnson came into the White House with little experience in foreign relations, and listened primarily to those who agreed with him.” Or James Reston in *Deadline: A Memoir*, Random House, 1991, p. 305: “Paradoxically [Johnson] failed in Vietnam in large part because he followed the advice of the intellectuals he inherited from Kennedy.” An article in a recent *Harvard Crimson* about Berkeley law professor John Yoo—newly notorious for his 2002 Justice Department memoranda on the treatment of pris-

oners and on the “unitary executive”—quoted Yoo’s undergraduate thesis: “. . . Johnson . . . conscious of his ignorance [in foreign affairs] decided to rely on his advisors.”

The hypothesis that sheer ignorance of foreign affairs made Johnson go wrong in Vietnam is peculiar on its face. There are too many counter-examples: people knowledgeable about foreign policy but mistaken about Vietnam before the fact, and vice versa. (Even statistically, would members of the Council on Foreign Relations, or Foreign Service officers, or professors of international relations, or journalists specializing in foreign affairs have been smarter about Vietnam in 1965 than members of an age/income/education/party-affiliation adjusted control group drawn from the population at large? I don’t suppose there exist appropriate polling data for a statistically competent young historian or political scientist to try to answer the question.)

iii/3. Thomas A. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*, Harvard University Press, 2003.

iv/3. Or J. P. Dunn: “Schwartz challenges the dominant view . . . that . . . Johnson, the domestic politics guru, was uninterested, inept, incompetent, and ineffective in foreign policy, a perception enhanced by his Vietnam quagmire. Schwartz contends that Johnson did not separate domestic and foreign policy but always saw the two as part of the same whole, and that he became increasingly adept at shaping and controlling policy on the world stage. . . . This is a first class piece of scholarship and writing, a very important contribution. . . .” Or Mark Trachtenberg: “. . . A perceptive and intelligent study . . . important topic . . . largely ignored . . . a very serious, highly professional and exceptionally honest analysis of the evidence.” Or Tony Judt in his *New York Review of Books* review of the new history of the Cold War by John Lewis Gaddis: “For a corrective, see Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*. . . . This important book is missing from Gaddis’s bibliography.”

Gaddis is not alone: the Johnson/Europe story is missing in much of the Johnson literature. To cite only one telling example: in the index of Robert Dallek’s 754-page second volume on Johnson, there are 59 mostly multi-page entries on Vietnam but *no* entries on Europe, Western Europe, the U.K., Bonn, London, NATO, the EEC; there is/are one entry on Germany, 3 on Great Britain, 1 on Harold Wilson, 2 on Adenauer, 3 on Erhard, 1 on arms control. . . . I could go on. And Dallek, unlike many, works hard to present a balanced view.

The May, Beschloss, and Gardner quotations are taken from the jacket of the book. I do not know Mr. Beschloss and Professor Gardner personally, but I have known Ernest May as a friend and close colleague for forty years. I have *never* known him to write a word that he didn’t mean.

v/4. Recall the story told about Lincoln: outvoted by his cabinet, 9 “nays” to his 1 “aye,” he is alleged to have brought the meeting to a close with a firm “The ayes have it.” About Johnson’s mind: many of the issues I brought him over three years were unavoidably technical as well as political. He never missed a beat, and would remember months later what one had said to him. If contrary lore makes you doubt it, remember that for many years, as Senate

leader, he maintained unprecedented mastery of ninety-five purposeful prima donnas, countless pieces of intricate legislation about complicated domestic and foreign issues, and procedural maneuvers that confound all but the experts. You don't do that unless you are both very smart and a master of detail (language from Bator, *Presidential Judgment*). The Bundy quotation, from his Oral History, is cited in the interesting essay by Waldo Heinrichs in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World*, ed. Warren I. Cohen and Nancy B. Tucker, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 24.

vi/5. Bundy, *Fragment* No 22, p. 2. Thirty years later, Texas governor and self-made Texas grandee, John Connally—LBJ's protégé and friend—described the “calm and almost somber” Act 2 Johnson: “I had not seen him before so deeply in this mood, but I would see it often after he became President. Normally, he dominated any conversation, and all his listeners. He was restless, confident, persuasive. But when faced with a great decision, he changed. He fell silent, almost brooding. He questioned without revealing his thoughts. All his energy appeared to be focused on the decision.” And my own observation, from a staff officer's perspective, writing about some European policy question: “I now think that LBJ's instincts were right. I only wish he had bothered to explain what he had in mind. But explaining his reasons to staff—especially when he thought them pretty obvious—was not in his nature. He expected you to figure it out on your own, and if you paid close attention he usually provided enough leads to make that possible. One learned to be a pretty good predictor of where he would come out on issues, and why.” (Bator, *Presidential Judgment*, p. 59; John B. Connally, *In History's Shadow*, Hyperion, 1993, p. 179.)

For trying to make out what Johnson may have had on his mind, the tapes are not of course useless. But to keep myself from cherry-picking, I try to subject inferences to “rules of interpretation,” and to deal head on with evidence contrary to my story.

vii/5. For the Bundy quotations on dominoes at the White House, see *Fragments*, No. 15 and No. 50, p. 4. On Eisenhower, see his long face-to-face conversation with Johnson on February 17, 1965 (Foreign Relations of the United States, *Vietnam, January-June 1965*, Department of State, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996, pp. 298–308); the Eisenhower-Johnson telephone conversation on July 2, 1965 (Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, Simon & Schuster, 2001, p. 383); and, especially, for the “must win” quotation, General Andrew Goodpaster's report of his conversation with Eisenhower—on LBJ's behalf—on August 3, 1965. Both men relied on Goodpaster as a deeply trusted go-between. (FRUS, *Vietnam, June-December 1965*, pp. 291–293.)

viii/6. The “no American War as we came to know it” phrase was Bundy's, but I have not been able to find the exact quotation. In his 1995–1996 *Fragments*, Bundy emphasized the deployment of mainline U.S. combat units in large numbers (“it's the big jumps”)—as distinct from the February 1965 decision to bomb North Vietnam—as the watershed decision. He acknowledged that the bombing led to what he called a “leakage” on ground troops for base protection (*ibid.*, No. 53, p. 5). But, as he put it, “Johnson

could have said [to Westmoreland]: look, I'll defend your airplanes, because I want the airplanes. But he didn't want that. He wanted Westy. . . . Westy's decision is not a problem of three thousand, ten thousand, a hundred and fifty thousand—it's that he wants to fight and win a war." (*Transcript*, September 22, 1995, p. 31.) Also: "Everyone from LBJ on down knew that the crucial decision of the summer of 1965 was the decision to put a large U.S. ground force—infantry and marine divisions—to fight and win some sort of ground war *themselves*" (emphasis in original) (*Fragments*, No. 100, p. 1).

ix/6. Quoted in VanDeMark, p. 166. The original source is George Ball's account of Moyers's report to him (Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, W. W. Norton, 1982, p. 396). See also chapter 26 in William Bundy's unpublished MS (on deposit at the LBJ Library). McGeorge Bundy's June 30 "Rash to the Point of Folly" memorandum—a remarkable forewarning of all that went wrong—is must reading for anyone interested in Bundy's role. (Item 35 in FRUS, *Vietnam, June-December 1965*).

x/7. I think I first saw the phrase used in a handwritten Bundy memorandum. Anyway, it sounds like Bundy.

xi/7. *Public Papers of the Presidents, LBJ, 1965 II*, U.S. Government Printing Office, pp. 794–803. For the classic documentary history of the U.S. government's Vietnam decisions during January–July 1965, see William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Part III, Princeton University Press, 1989. For an excellent, short account, see Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, W. W. Norton, 1982. Gibbons cites Berman as his source for the Bundy quotation in the third paragraph on p. 13 (see endnote xxvi), which I had discovered in Gibbons (op. cit., p. 371). While double-checking quotations, I discovered that the wording of my descriptions of LBJ's decision to underplay his war decision (pp. 7, 11) resemble Berman's construction ("not to mobilize the Reserves, not to seek a Congressional resolution or declaration of national emergency, not to present the program in a prime time address . . . [rather than an afternoon press conference] . . ." (p. 146). Since my copy of Berman reveals that, when I read it some 24 years ago, I heavily underlined most of the three pages that contain the passage, I have to conclude that my language (taken from my notes for the AAAS lecture a year ago) may well reflect a subliminal memory of Berman's 1982 formulation. If so, I thank him for it.

For a still shorter fine arm's length account, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3d ed., McGraw-Hill, 1996, especially "Decisions for War," pp. 150–157. Herring—widely regarded as the premier American historian of America's part in the Vietnam War—also thinks that Johnson's Great Society legislative preoccupations appreciably affected his 1965 Vietnam decisions. Last, for a superb *first-hand* account—not short—I would strongly recommend William Bundy's unpublished manuscript, on deposit at the LBJ Library. Utterly honest, totally unself-serving, it is a model of history writing by a participant. It's a great shame that it was never published.



xii/8. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, pp. 381–382, also p. 378. There is a lot of evidence that Johnson’s concerns about the draft and inflation contributed to his lament “. . . we know it’s going to be bad.” He was worried about the unfairness as well as the politics of the draft, with its privileged college deferments. And he had ample warning about inflation from his economists and McNamara. (He later abolished graduate draft deferments and created a lottery, knowing perfectly well that his action would further inflame anti-war sentiment among the articulate well-to-do.)

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 7, 1964, stated that “The United States regards as vital to its national interest . . . the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia” and authorized “the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to . . . prevent further aggression” (Gibbons, Part II, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 302). Passed by the Senate with only two negative votes, and unanimously by the House, it was, nevertheless, doubly flawed. Some of the facts of the naval incidents that provided the occasion for the resolution were uncertain, and the circumstances tainted. And, whatever the words said, no one at the time—not Johnson, not the Senators nor Representatives who voted for it—intended the resolution *really* to authorize the president to turn the war in Vietnam into a full-fledged American war. (About Johnson’s intentions at the time, Bundy wrote in 1996: “Not in itself proof of plan to escalate. . . . It was a desire to be free in future—to threaten future action—and most of all to look strong and decisive and careful in responding to visible attack. . . . It was cost free *standing tall*. . . . It’s not—though it later looks that way—a trick play. . . . He gets trapped in it before he knows it’s not a clear case.” Also: “Both for show in 1964, and for use any way he wants later”; and “The posture was what mattered three months before the election.” *Fragments*, Nos. 100, 53, 71.)

To try to sort out what went on in the White House during that first week of August 1964—“who knew what, and when did they know it”—I spent several months studying the documentary evidence. I hope eventually to publish the resulting paper. (Bator, “Tonkin Gulf,” 32 pp, 2003.)

xiii/8. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, pp. 379–380. Judged by context and language, in both conversations Johnson was unmistakably in his Act 2 mode (see pp. 4–5).

xiv/9. The LBJ quotations are from private letters from Richard Neustadt.

xv/9. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, HarperPerennial, 1997.

xvi/9. *Transcript of Meeting* (with Gordon Goldstein, Bundy’s then research assistant, later editor of his papers), November 9, 1995, p. 23.

xvii/10. Bundy, *Fragment* No. 61.

xviii/10. For the H. K. Johnson, Abrams, Palmer view, and its implementation during 1969–1972, see Lewis Sorley, *For a Better War*, Harcourt Brace, 1999. For the drawdown of U.S. forces in Vietnam during Abrams’s watch,

see esp. p. 346. (Strictly, forty months later: 49,000 was the number when Abrams turned over command to his deputy, General Frederick C. Weygand, during the last week of June 1972.) For the 1973–1975 denouement, see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam*, Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 669–684.

xix/10. On Johnson's failure in 1965 to force debate on "search and destroy," here is Bundy, writing in April 1996, five months before he died: "In the record of what was said and written when Johnson could hear or read it, there is no mention of the word attrition, and yet it was in fact exactly this war that resulted from his decisions of July 1965. With these new forces, and no extension of the area in which they could be used—no right of hot pursuit beyond South Vietnam and so no capacity to prevent the enemy from ending any battle by his own choice or withdrawal—the strategy of attrition could not be pressed to a conclusion.

"My own conclusion, drawn more from memory than from documents but not contradicted by any paper I have seen, or by the memoir of any participant, is that the question of the ways and means of victory—the level and cost of what it might take to *win*—was simply not addressed in any deliberation that can reasonably be called Johnson's. The discussion was about bits and pieces of this question: will our battalions give good account of themselves in this terrain against these opponents? The answer was that they would, and they did. Will we be able to man the forces we commit by draft and enlistment and without calling the reserves? The answer was that we could, and we did. Could we do all this before there was any collapse, and prevent battlefield defeat thereafter? We could and we did. Would that lead to victory? We did not really ask" (Bundy, *Fragment* No. 61). Also: ". . . To get U.S. combat troops into a war of attrition . . . is a major error, and we failed even to address it" (*ibid.*, No. 2).

xx/11. For all this see Nick Kotz (op. cit.). In the House, and until Johnson contrived to change the House rules in January 1965, then chairman of the Rules Committee Howard W. Smith of Virginia ("Judge Smith") would kill bills he didn't like by staying at home or going fishing (p. 37).

xxi/11. For the Neustadt quotation, see his Essex Lecture MS, p. 4. For more Johnson quotations that support all this, see especially Brian VanDeMark (op. cit., chapters 4–9)—an insightful narrative account of Johnson's struggle with himself over Vietnam during the spring of 1965. Oddly enough, in his introduction and conclusion, VanDeMark appears to ignore the evidence in the body of his book about the relevance of the Great Society legislation.

xxii/12. Westmoreland's 44-battalion plan called for 34 U.S. battalions and 10 Korean battalions, with 10 additional U.S. battalions in the event the Koreans reneged. (Gibbons, p. 381, FRUS, p. 153, fn 1, and p. 162.) The Neustadt quotations ("feeling for . . ." and "dicker") are from his Essex lecture (see footnote 9).

xxiii/12. There was a lot of talk in meetings about going in quietly so as not to arouse the Soviets and Chinese. But *they* saw what was happening. In any case, it wasn't a question of trumpets and flourishes, but of measured, calm, candid prime-time explanation. (The "fifth option" in Johnson's summary of the choices was what I here call "Westmoreland Redux," and McNamara identified as his Plan III in his July 23 exposition. Johnson's "fourth option" was the complete Westmoreland package: prime-time speech, new resolution, reserve call-up, tax increase, etc. On all this see Gibbons, pp. 425–426 and note 124.)

xxiv/12. *Congressional Record*, vol. 111, pp. 17146–17152; Gibbons, p. 389.

xxv/13. Beschloss, p. 384.

xxvi/13. Cited in Gibbons, p. 371 (op. cit.), citing Berman, p. 145 (op. cit.), citing personal letter from Bundy.

xxvii/14. Merle Miller, *Lyndon*, Putnam, 1980, p. 408–409.

xxviii/14. Michael Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 502. Another example, due to Nick Kotz: "I just hope we don't get too much information too quick up at the Senate before they pass that education bill," Johnson warned George Ball on April 9, 1965, after receiving news that Chinese fighters had shot down a U.S. plane over the South China Sea. (Kotz, p. 349, op.cit.)

xxix/14. Bundy, *Fragment* No. 48, p. 3.

xxx/15. May 27, 1964, Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p. 369. In response to Johnson's question, Russell had told LBJ that he didn't think Vietnam was "important a damn bit" (*ibid.*, p. 364). A few months later he told Johnson that he wished the CIA would "get somebody to run that country [who] didn't want us in there. . . . Then . . . we could get out with good grace" (November 9, 1964, Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, p. 137). But Russell also kept saying things like "We should get out, but I don't know any way to get out" (December 7, 1963, *Taking Charge*, p. 95); "I don't know what the hell to do . . . I do not agree with those brain trusters who say that . . . we'll lose . . . Southeast Asia if we lose Vietnam. . . . But as a practical matter, we're in there and I don't know how you can tell the American people you're coming out. . . . They'll think that you have just been whipped, you've been ruined, you're scared. It'd be disastrous" (June 11, 1964, *Taking Charge*, p. 403); "I wish we could figure out some way to get *out* . . . But I don't know how we can get *out*" (November 9, 1964, *Reaching for Glory*, p. 137). "We've gone so damn far, Mr. President, it scares the life out of me. But I don't know how to back up now. It looks to me like we just got in this thing, and there's no way out. . . . You couldn't have inherited a worse mess." To which Johnson replied, "Well if they'd say I *inherited*, I'll be lucky. But they'll all say I *created* it!" (March 6, 1965, *ibid.*, pp. 212, 213.)

Beschloss infers (*ibid.*, p. 137) from Johnson's failure to "seriously entertain" what Beschloss takes to have been Russell's "offer [*sic*] . . . [to] get the same crowd that got rid of old Diem . . . to get some fellow in there that said he wished to hell we *would* get out," that "Johnson's commitment to prevent North Vietnamese victory" could not have rested "merely on a fear of being called soft on Communism and damaging his effort to pass the Great Society"—that it proved "how seriously he takes what he considers to be a treaty commitment, inherited from Eisenhower and Kennedy, to defend South Vietnam." But Johnson knew perfectly well—as did Russell—that the CIA was in no position to fine-tune Saigon's palace politics. In any case, just what could LBJ have ordered the CIA to do or not do, *without exposing himself to the charge that, by omission or commission, he was in effect doing Hanoi's work for it?* (The "merely" in Beschloss' formulation is a straw man. See "What If There Had Been No Great Society Legislation To Enact?" p. 19 above.)

xxxi/15. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 407. Suppose that Logevall is right that by showing them "stacks of intelligence analyses" Johnson could have persuaded "skeptical Dixiecrats and moderate Republicans" that bombing would be useless, and that we could back away in Vietnam without causing dominoes to topple by "taking steps to strengthen the U.S. position in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia." Would that have sufficed to neutralize the many angry hawks and opportunistic conservatives determined to block his Great Society legislation? Logevall thinks yes. The balance of evidence suggests that Johnson thought not.

Logevall acknowledges that legislative concerns had a lot to do with *the way* (his phrase) Johnson went to war in 1965. But he appears not to have noticed that the huge price LBJ knowingly paid to protect the legislation by going to war surreptitiously is at least suggestive of the large part that safeguarding it may have played in Johnson's mind when he chose to escalate. Logevall wants to persuade the reader that what Johnson "really feared was . . . personal humiliation that he believed would come with failure in Vietnam . . . . [That Johnson] saw the war as a test of his own manliness" (p. 393). (For further comment on Logevall's theory about Johnson's motives, see endnote xlvii.)

xxxii/16. As Richard Neustadt put it—speaking of Marshall, Acheson, and also Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Omar Bradley—"No one went to Truman because everyone thought someone else should go." For the full sad story, see *Presidential Power*, p. 208 ff, especially pp. 212–214 in the 1976 edition, John Wiley and Sons. For a brief summary, see also David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War*, St. Martin's Press, 1964, pp. 150–151.

xxxiii/16. When double checking quotations, the Logevall phrase I succeeded in finding turned out to be "the Nixon-Alsop crowd" (p. 410). Because the story refers to 1948–1954, I omit "Alsop": at the time, columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop were among the staunchest opponents of Nixon, McCarthy et al. See especially their fierce condemnation of Robert Oppenheimer's accusers in *Harper's Magazine*, "We Accuse!" (the title consciously borrowed from Emile Zola's *J'Accuse*).

For an eyewitness description of Eisenhower (“smiling vapidly”) on the podium during Jenner’s campaign speech at Butler University in which “Jenner attacked George Marshall as a man ‘not fit to have worn the uniform of a general,’ and call[ed] him a traitor,” see Washington State University emeritus professor Edward Bennett’s letter in the Organization of American Historians (OAH) *Newsletter*, May 2003.

To be fair, Eisenhower did intervene to keep McCarthy from blocking James Conant’s nomination as U.S. High Commissioner in West Germany. (Conant, a member of the Atomic Energy Commission’s General Advisory Committee, had joined its then chairman Robert Oppenheimer in opposing the plan to try to build a hydrogen bomb.) And Eisenhower supported Conant when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, apparently feeling vulnerable despite his own impeccable anti-communist credentials, threatened to fire Conant as High Commissioner if Conant testified in favor of Oppenheimer at the hearings on the latter’s security clearance. See James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant*, Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 650 ff. and especially pp. 679–681. Also, Louis Menand, “The Long Shadow of James B. Conant,” in *American Studies*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, p. 99.

xxxiv/16. For evidence on Kennedy’s and McNamara’s views about the problems the Soviet missiles in Cuba posed (and did not pose) for the United States, see especially the revealing exchange between them on pp. 133–134 in *The Kennedy Tapes*, ed. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, Harvard University Press, 1997. Here is McNamara: “The question he [Secretary Rusk] asked me was: How does . . . the introduction of these weapons to Cuba change the military equation, the military position of the U.S. versus the U.S.S.R.? And, speaking strictly in military terms, it doesn’t change it at all, in my personal opinion. My personal views are not shared by the Chiefs. They are not shared by many others in the [Defense] Department. However I feel very strongly on this point, and I think I could argue a case, a strong case, in defense of my position.

“This doesn’t really have any bearing on the issue, in my opinion, because *it’s not a military problem we’re are facing*. It’s a political problem. It’s a problem of holding the alliance together. It’s a problem of properly conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves, *the problem of dealing with our domestic public*, all requires [*sic*] action, that in my opinion, the shift in military balance does not require. [Emphasis added throughout.]

“President Kennedy: On holding the alliance. Which one would strain the alliance more: this attack by us on Cuba, which most allies regard as a fixation by the United States and not a serious military threat? And you’d have to outline a condition you have to go in, before they would accept, support our action against Cuba, because they think we’re slightly demented on this subject. So there isn’t any doubt that, whatever action we take against Cuba. . . a lot of people would regard this as a mad act by the United States, which is due to a loss of nerve, because they will argue that taken at its worst, *the presence of these missiles really doesn’t change the balance. We started to think the other way, I mean, the view in America. But what’s everybody else going to think when it’s done to this guy [i.e., Castro]?*” [Emphasis added.]

For a foreign policy based 51/49 defense of Kennedy's decision not to back off in Cuba that hinges on its possible effect on Khrushchev's eagerness to confront us over Berlin, see my "Misuse of Presidential Power," Remarks at the Leadership Center, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (copy in my files).

xxxv/17. Logevall also cites William Bundy's view about Johnson's domestic freedom of action (p. 288). I am unpersuaded for the same reasons that I find unpersuasive McGeorge Bundy's reply to Logevall. (Mac Bundy confessed that he never really understood Johnson's reasons for refusing to level with the country in July 1965: "it must have had something to do with the legislative program." Many of Mac's descriptions of Johnson cited by Logevall pertain to the spring and summer of 1965, when Mac and LBJ were at sharp cross-purposes on public explanation. When it came to Vietnam in 1965, I believe that the "unsatisfactory" process of decision Mac describes was the direct result of LBJ's concern that an open process would risk igniting a divisive debate in the Congress that would damage his legislation. The decision-making process was not the cause of Johnson's decision to escalate but the result.)

References: Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 391; Bundy, *Notes*, p. 12; *Transcript*, November 9, 1995, pp. 15–16. ("Notes" refers to a typed sixty-page loose-leaf compilation of transcribed 1994–1995 Bundy jottings. The page numbers in the upper right hand corners are written and circled in ink. "Transcript" refers to "Transcription[s] of Meeting: McGeorge Bundy and Gordon M. Goldstein," transcribed by Bundy's secretary Georgeanne V. Brown. Goldstein was then Bundy's research assistant, later the editor of his Vietnam papers. Copies are in my McGeorge Bundy Vietnam Papers files.)

xxxvi/17. For a president—who in Bundy's phrase (I quote from memory) is president for both domestic and foreign affairs—the inescapable division of labor among advisers with differing professional specializations poses a puzzle about how best to organize his staff. For historiography, specialization and division of labor raise questions about how historians are trained. Evidence: In books about Johnson's choices on Vietnam, count the number of index entries for Selma, Montgomery, voting rights, fair housing—the domestic matters that were on top of his mind most of the time (cf. 2nd paragraph in footnote 11). And count how many books on his domestic accomplishments, apart from blaming Vietnam for the damage it caused the Great Society, even mention that Johnson may have thought that backing away in 1965 would ignite a political row that would sink the legislation at the start, leaving no Great Society to be damaged. (The Bundy "not an expert" quotation in the text is from *Notes*, p. 50.)

xxxvii/18. Also: "Not about peace we missed chances to get by negotiation"; "How the opposition—especially Ball—argued a poor case for a political road to peace. There was none, except de facto surrender, and LBJ wasn't having any"; "Ball's lament: he could not show how not to lose"; "The tendencies of doves to gloss over the real character of NVN regime . . . high-

ly relevant to LBJ is the pressure to negotiate, after 1965 when the hard question is negotiate *what* result. . . . The premise of appeals to negotiate is that a middle ground exists.” [Emphasis in original.] *Fragments*, Nos. 56, 53, 89, 50. For Hanoi’s position at the time, see comment and references in endnote xlv below.

xxxvii b/18 fn. 13. According to Walter Lippmann’s biographer Ronald Steel, during the spring and summer of 1965, Lippmann “[i]n an effort to find a way out short of ‘scuttle and run,’ which even he did not favor . . . urged a U.S. withdrawal to fortified enclaves along the coast as a ‘basis of influence’ while the Vietnamese negotiated, and an ‘honest and honorable way out of the war” (*Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Little, Brown, 1980, p. 570). At the national teach-in in Washington on May 17 and 18, 1965, according to Walter LaFeber, Arthur Schlesinger was “a chief apologist for the U.S. commitment . . . he urged that more U.S. troops be sent to give ‘much clearer evidence of our determination to stay’ until a political settlement could be reached” (see *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World*, op. cit., p. 37).

Hans Morgenthau, in contrast—in *Newsweek*, in January 1965—said he saw only “one alternative: to get out without losing too much face” (Logevall, p. 406). We should, he thought, get Saigon to invite us out; or quit and blame Saigon: “we can’t help people who can’t help themselves”; or agree to a Geneva conference aiming at an internationally guaranteed neutralization of South Vietnam, or all of Vietnam—an outcome that Johnson, agreeing with David Halberstam—see below—thought a sham (in Bundy’s phrase above, a “de facto surrender”).

In an powerfully affecting last chapter in *The Making of a Quagmire*, Random House, 1965—it deserves re-reading and quotation at length (and *not* because he honorably changed his mind in some respects soon after)—having characterized all the alternatives “a nightmare,” David Halberstam wrote about “withdrawal”: “Few Americans who have served in Vietnam can stomach this idea. . . . [T]hose Vietnamese who committed themselves fully to the United States will suffer the most . . . while we lucky few with blue passports retire unharmed. . . . The United States’ prestige will be lowered. . . . The pressure of Communism on the rest of Southeast Asia will intensify. . . . Throughout the world the enemies of the West will be encouraged to try insurgencies. . . .”

Neutralization, Halberstam wrote—he was more candid than most—“would create a vacuum, so that the Communists . . . could subvert the country at their leisure—perhaps in six months, perhaps in two years. . . . Blocking or bombing the Ho Chi Minh trail would not effectively alter the balance of power in the South. . . . The commitment of U.S. combat troops . . . would undoubtedly be even more frustrating than Korea. . . . Caucasians would be killing South Vietnamese. . . . If only 5 percent of the population in the South is committed to the Vietcong . . . U.S. combat units would probably make enemies out of fence sitters. Whatever [the] military gains . . . might soon be countered by the political loss. . . . Would begin to parallel the French experience. . . . A war without fronts, fought against an elu-

sive enemy, and extremely difficult for the American people to understand. . . . [Though] we are deeply involved in a very real war, we should think and prepare for a long, long time before going in with our own troops.”

“So, for the moment [Halberstam concluded] we are caught in the quagmire. . . . If and when it becomes a hopeless war . . . it will not be the Americans who will know this first; it will be the Vietnamese . . . who will and must decide that almost anything—even being ruled by a Communist government in Hanoi—is better than endless bloodletting. . . . In the meantime we are committed to playing our part . . . in a desperate hope that we have learned some of the lessons of Indochina. . . . Just conceivably . . . the dissenting forces in the country will band together when the imminent threat of a Communist takeover finally makes the enemy a common enemy. . . . There might be a strong enough base for a viable military approach. . . . But only an improvement in the military situation can make real negotiations possible. . . . These hopes are very frail.”

xxviii/18. For the LBJ quotation, see VanDeMark, *Into The Quagmire*, p. 114 (1995), who credits Eric Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, Knopf, 1969, p. 404. For the Pham Van Dong/Blair Seaborn exchange, see *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers*, ed. George C. Herring, University of Texas Press, 1983, p. 16 ff. Pham Van Dong spoke of a negotiation leading to American withdrawal and a neutral South Vietnam, followed by a peaceful reunification. (“We are in no hurry.”) Johnson thought that formula unacceptable for the same reason David Halberstam did (see xxxviib above).

xxxix/19. On LBJ’s inclinations in early and mid-June 1965, and the inclinations of his principal civilian advisers, one can’t do better than chapter 26 in William Bundy’s unpublished MS, especially pp. 4–18.

xl/19. For comment on Logevall’s theory that deep-seated personality disorder was a root cause of Johnson’s refusal to back away, see endnotes xxxi and xlvii.

xli/22. And not only because the consequences at home may affect our position in the world. (The argument is taken directly from Bator, *Presidential Judgment*, pp. 73–74.)

xlii/22. Quoted with permission from an April 7, 2006, email commenting on my “no good choices” draft.

xliii/22. A revised version of my email reply to Lewis.

xliv/22&23. For the conflicts over priorities among communist leaders in Hanoi, and the roles of Beijing and Moscow—and for the story of the decisive Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers Party in Hanoi in December, 1963 at which the hawks, after “heated debate,” carried the day—see William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, Westview Press, 1986 (esp. pp. 54–59); William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, Westview Press, 1981; and Robert K. Brigham,



*Guerilla Diplomacy*, Cornell University Press, 1999. Duiker quotes from the Resolution of the Ninth Plenum: “If we do not defeat the enemy’s military forces, we cannot overthrow his domination and bring the revolution to victory. To destroy the enemy’s military forces, we should use armed struggle. *For this reason, armed struggle plays a direct and decisive role*” (Duiker, p. 222).

For more, see also Stanley Karnow’s report in *Vietnam: A History*, Penguin, 1983, pp. 343–350. Karnow recounts his subsequent conversations about Hanoi’s 1964 intentions, and dispatch of troops to the South, with Pham Van Dong (North Vietnam’s Prime Minister at the time,) and, especially, with a senior North Vietnamese officer who was personally involved. According to the latter, Karnow recounts, “preparations to send North Vietnamese troops south had begun long before Lyndon Johnson seriously considered the introduction of American battalions into Vietnam. And the North Vietnamese were engaged in battle against Saigon government detachments months before the U.S. marines splashed ashore at Danang in March 1965.”

The Ninth Plenum, convened shortly after the Diem coup in Saigon, preceded the Tonkin Gulf incident by 7 months, U.S. bombing of North Vietnam by 14 months, and Johnson’s decisive war decision by 18–19 months. I do not know whether Johnson’s judgment in 1965 that there was no negotiable middle ground reflected any information about the Ninth Plenum. What did U.S. intelligence know at the time about the internal politics of Hanoi? If not common knowledge among professional historians of the war, it would be an important question for a young historian to explore.

xlvi/23. For evidence in the context of European and Soviet policy, see Schwartz’s book or my piece in *Presidential Judgment*.

xlvi/24. McGeorge Bundy, “Remarks at Hofstra University” (1985). Also Bundy, “Remarks to Massachusetts Historical Society” (1978).

xlvi/24. Except for endnote xxxi, I have left aside the theory advocated in Logevall’s *Choosing War* that Johnson’s decision to escalate, and then to stick with the war—and to a degree even Johnson’s determination to avoid a public debate (p. 298)—are in significant part explained by Johnson’s “profound personal insecurity and his egomania [that] led him not only to personalize the goals he aspired to but also to personalize all forms of dissent.” In Logevall’s view, for example, Johnson’s failure to order “extensive contingency planning for some kind of figleaf for withdrawal” during the spring of 1965, shows that Johnson was concerned, not “only with, or even primarily with, preserving *American* credibility and/or *Democratic* credibility,” but “personal humiliation” that “went deeper than merely saving his political skin” and was “fueled by his haunting fear that he would be judged insufficiently manly for the job, that he would lack courage when the chips were down” (pp. 298, 392–393).

But what if—to bring Occam’s Razor to bear—Johnson resisted extensive contingency planning for any kind of negotiated withdrawal, other than the informal planning by the small inner circle of Ball, Acheson, William Bundy, et al that did take place—because (1) leaked by hawks in the bureaucracy

(as it almost certainly would have been,) the mere fact of such planning would have caused panic in Saigon and risked a political tempest in Washington fanned by opponents of his legislation (see p. 16); (2) the only kind of planning relevant to what I think was for Johnson the decisive consideration—the one *binding* constraint—would have had to sort out the domestic political and legislative consequences. And on that subject, LBJ's own off-the-top-of-his-head calculations, probably ongoing and wistful, would have made any formal plan generated by the bureaucracy look like amateur hour. As Bundy pointed out, Ball could never show Johnson “a way not to get in and not lose . . . in terms of how it would look to his own country. And if Johnson couldn't do it both ways, no one could, because it couldn't be done.” *Transcripts “B”* (p. 18) and November 16, 1995 (p. 7).

In any case (however persuasive you find speculation about the emotional wellsprings of a man's choices, speculation that is not grounded in exhaustive study of the fellow's entire life history), is it likely that Logevall's Johnson—a man with an “intolerance of dissent” (p. 393), a “general aversion to unsolicited advice” (p. 401), a “craving for approbation [p. 401] . . . and for internal consensus” (p. 79), whose “dislike of conflict . . . need to create consensus and to avoid confrontation, remained unshaken,” (p. 298)—who (nevertheless?) “made his way in politics by intimidation” (p. 393)—*would have succeeded as arguably the most effective Senate leader in American history, or as the president who brought about the civil rights revolution of 1964–1968?*

Contrast Logevall's description of Johnson, with, say, Robert Caro's, who has devoted much of his adult life to studying Johnson and is not inclined to whitewash: A “great leader . . . [with a] strain of compassion . . . that . . . ran through his whole life . . . [whose] drive for power was inseparable from what he wanted power for. . . . He was both a pragmatist and an idealist. . . . [With] an ability to look facts—even very unpleasant facts—in the face and not let himself be deluded by wishful thinking.” Also, “in his use of power he had an almost unrivaled talent for personal relationships.” Also, “[a]n other element in his genius was his ability to find common ground. When there was no obvious common ground, he would work out how to create some.” [Emphasis added.] Or with Nick Kotz's descriptions in *Judgment Days*, or with the dozens of stories in Merle Miller's oral histories, or with Joseph Califano's description of Johnson as a “baker”—yes, baker—of decisions. . . . Or—in a very different vein—Kent Germany's description and selections from the Presidential Recordings Project in “I'm Not Lying About That One': Manhood, LBJ, and the Politics of Speaking Southern,” *Miller Center Report* (Vol. 18, No. 3).

Bundy warned himself in his 1995 notes not to seem “to be laying off the whole Vietnam tragedy on the personal characteristics of one guy.” Clark Clifford, who knew LBJ very well and for a long time, once wrote about him (in a private letter to the author): “[Y]ou and I already know, that Lyndon Johnson was one of the most complex human beings there has ever been.” And anyone sifting through the mountains of evidence—the stories, the stories about the stories—must keep in mind the Act 1/Act 2 puzzle.

## About the Author

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