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# Johnson's War: How Vietnam Tarnished a Presidency

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November 22, 1963, is a date many people today may neglect. Most people nowadays do not realize that on this pivotal day, America would begin on a path of great turmoil, anger, and utter chaos throughout the remainder of the 1960s. A young, exciting, and driven man had become president and was then taken from the American people in the blink of an eye on this day in history. President John F. Kennedy prided himself a great deal on his knowledge in foreign policy. Foreign affairs were dominating the president at the time, with such events as the Bay of Pigs, Berlin, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Vice President Lyndon Johnson advised Kennedy on certain matters, but essentially acted as a figurehead with no authority in policy at all. Johnson had always been a staunch advocate for domestic policy and was certainly well versed in the subject. However, Johnson described his time in the VP role as a time of, “trips around the world, chauffeurs, men saluting, people clapping, and chairmanships of council “in short, “nothing.”<sup>1</sup> Little did he or the country know that on that dark day in Dallas, Johnson would be bestowed the highest honor in the nation, but be forced to recognize foreign affairs that were beginning to take a stranglehold on the nation.

Due to a severe rise in the threat of communism, Vietnam was portrayed as a major hot spot. The Cold War at the time was an inevitable fact that Johnson could not ignore. Johnson was considered a liberal internationalist. He was convinced that communism would only be able to thrive in regions of the world where the political system in place has failed to provide its people with basic economic and social security. Essentially, wherever, there was hunger, disease and homelessness communism would flourish. Men and women would always be willing to sacrifice their own liberty for food, shelter, and a better life for their children.<sup>2</sup> This is why Vietnam was

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<sup>1</sup>Vaugh Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson*, (Lawrence, KS. Kansas University Press, 1983), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Randall Bennet Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, (New York: Free, 2006), 75

such a great concern. A volatile country living in poverty, Vietnam was fighting a civil war that had the potential to spread communism very rapidly. Ultimately, Johnson knew he needed to come off as strong and ready to take action in all aspects of the presidency. However, the steps that his administration would take throughout the Vietnam War would result in the country turning its back on their leader and give Johnson a poor reputation as the leader of the free world. Steps taken during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Tet Offensive, and the reaction to growing opposition of the war from the public would all negatively affect his tenure as president and would cause the 1960s to be one of the most hostile periods in American history. Lyndon Johnson intended to be the answer the American people needed in the wake of tragedy, but due to the decisions made in regards to the Vietnam War, his presidency will forever be tarnished with failure and “what ifs.” Restricted bombing was tried and then halted consistently. The number of Americans entering Vietnam would continue to escalate. Attempting to strengthen the Saigon government would be tried, altered, and then abandoned. Civilian and military Vietnamese casualties would begin to rise rapidly. Media accounts from the battlefield was blended with propaganda from Vietnam to anger protesters in the United States to become even more ornery. Every single American misstep, miscalculation, and ultimate failure would be exposed to everyone.

Johnson was born into a politically involved family. His father, Sam Ealy Johnson, was a strong proponent of the Populist Party, which advocated strongly for government ownership of the railroads along with telephone and telegraph lines as well as government control of the financial system. He would even go on to run as the Populist candidate for his county’s seat in the state legislature.<sup>3</sup> Johnson was always known for being incredibly stubborn. Once an idea

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 12.

hatched there was no point in trying to tell him “no.” This stubborn attitude ran in his family. When his father won the seat for the state legislature, he was making very little money, but being a stubborn, Texan he consistently refused loans and handouts and he did not want to come off as weak or unfit to make change just because of economic status. Lyndon Johnson would adopt this attitude once he became president. Johnson was often not one to go back on decisions or to neglect ideas if they seemed to be heading into limbo. He would stick by his policies and insist that his administration not flip flop on decisions. Johnson wanted to set a precedent in everything he did. He wanted to show people that he could be successful based off of his confidence and ability to make things happen the way he wanted them to happen.

In a time of great discord, Johnson would need to stick by his hard-nosed mindset of taking action and creating results. The nation had just witnessed the death of their leader, communism was threatening to spread like wildfire, and the people of the United States were in fear for their lives due to the Cold War. Kennedy had taken a strict position when it came to Vietnam. He was adamant on containing communism and clearly stated during his presidency that he would continue the policy of President Eisenhower and support Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. He also strongly supported the “Domino Theory,” which stated that if the South Vietnamese fell to their Northern communist neighbors, soon other states within the region would begin to fall. Eventually, Kennedy would begin to lose faith in Diem’s ability to unite the South Vietnamese and would go on to order the CIA to overthrow him. Diem was killed in 1963, just three weeks before Kennedy would also be shot and killed. In the blink of an eye, the Vice President was being thrown into the helm of one of the most costly wars in American history. Now it was Johnson’s duty to handle this crisis.

Public opinion would weigh heavily on Johnson as he braced for the undeclared war. A great majority of the American people did not want to see a repeat of past wars like in Korea. They did not want to be held down in a land war in Asia and truly believed that Asians ought to be taking primary responsibility for battling communism. However, in the end Americans did not want to stand idly by while the South Vietnamese were overthrown by the Vietcong. A Gallup Poll taken in March in 1965 indicated that 66 percent of those questioned believed the United States was responsible for continuing its efforts to protect South Vietnam from the forces of communism. Johnson wanted to uphold Kennedy's mindset of a "limited war." Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara both were appalled at the idea of policymakers insisting on a limited nuclear war.<sup>4</sup> Although Johnson saw this as the country's safest and only option, the threat of nuclear confrontation lurked in the shadows. There was a lot more to the uncertainty of communism's ability to spread than just Vietnam. Johnson knew that China had 170,000 uniformed personnel in North Vietnam and that if the United States invaded the North, communist China would immediately intervene.<sup>5</sup> China and their reinforcements would catch the U.S. like a deer caught in headlights. The possibility of a nuclear war would play a major role in the Vietnam decision-making process throughout the course of the 1960s.

It can be strongly argued that the moment the war began to reach a major turning point was the morning of August 2, 1964, when the U.S. destroyer, *Maddox*, was blind-sided by three North Vietnamese patrol boats. However, the U.S. destroyer suffered limited damage with one bullet in its bow; it would not be until the next night when another North Vietnamese attack was conducted on American ships. This entire event is known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Following the second attack, Johnson knew that it was crucial to take action at that point. At an

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 511.

<sup>5</sup>Woods, 509.

NSC meeting that shortly followed, Douglas Dillon told Johnson, “There is a limit on the number of times we can be attacked by North Vietnamese without hitting their naval bases. It is at this point when the mistakes begin to occur. Johnson gave the order to retaliate, but it was ambiguous as to whether the second attack really even happened. Freak weather effects and possibly overeager sonarmen could have accounted for the misreading. With this information, Secretary of Defense McNamara would sit down with the Joint Chiefs in order to come to a conclusion on whether or not there was justifiable evidence that there indeed was a second assault by the Vietcong. Before a rational evaluation of the event could be completed, McNamara learned that a story of a second attack had already hit the press. Although there was still no definitive proof, it left Johnson’s administration in a conflict. Both Johnson and McNamara both concluded that after the release to the press there was no going back. If the administration were to take a position that claimed the evidence of the second attack was ambiguous and not follow up with retaliation, then Johnson would look like a coward and would open him to charges of deception.<sup>6</sup>

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorized the president to take “all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”<sup>7</sup> It seemed as though Congress was also willing to see U.S. involvement in Vietnam increase because the Senate passed the resolution with only two votes opposed, while the House of Representatives passed it unanimously. Not only did Congress support the motion, but it also hoped that passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution would force the president to return and seek its support if he wished to escalate the war any further. While there was great support from the

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<sup>6</sup>Woods, 514-515.

<sup>7</sup>Tonkin Gulf Resolution; Public Law 88-408, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, August 7, 1964: General Records of the United States; Record Group 11; National Archives.

public, as well as heavy approval from Congress, there were still plenty of criticisms, many of which eventually turned out to be true. For example, Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska severely attacked this resolution by saying it was a “predated declaration of war.” Perhaps the most intriguing criticism comes from George McGovern of South Dakota who asked why on Earth a tiny nation like North Vietnam would want to provoke a war with the greatest superpower in the history of the world.<sup>8</sup> By the time the resolution was enacted, Johnson’s public approval rating had risen to an astounding 72 percent, which ultimately helped put the nail in the coffin into his presidential opponent Barry Goldwater’s campaign. This public support gave Johnson the ability to make executive decisions in regards to how to keep the war limited, while trying to shape Vietnam in America’s vision.

When asked why the escalation of the war seemed necessary, Johnson would respond by saying, “We have three principle goals: to insure that aggression did not succeed; to make it possible for the South Vietnamese to build their country and their future in their own way; and to convince Hanoi that working out a peaceful settlement was to the advantage of all concerned.”<sup>9</sup> Johnson’s entire team seemed to have had three main assumptions when outlining its military policy. The first being that escalating military pressure would induce Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, to stop supporting the Vietcong, which it absolutely did not. Second, Johnson was confident that certain military actions and diplomatic signals could be coordinated in such a way as to send “messages” to the enemy. Third, there was the thought that the use of force could somehow be carefully controlled. Essentially, the Johnson administration felt that it could keep this war limited by turning military force on and off at will. This assumption proved to be misguided. It was simply too difficult to orchestrate a distant government system and its military

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<sup>8</sup>Woods, 519.

<sup>9</sup>Bornet, 253.



organization with such fine-tuning.<sup>10</sup> Johnson and his administration severely underestimated the goals and will of the enemy. The Vietcong proved to be very complex in their own organizational patterns, motives, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. The North Vietnamese goal of an independent and Marxist unified state was completely unshakable. What was considered “orchestrated escalation” proved to be a major failure overseas as well as at home, where opposition to the president began to grow with the United States. Protesting began as early as 1965 and reached its peak in 1968.

There is something utterly unique about the Vietnam War in that it was essentially the first major US war to be fought during a time when television was becoming increasingly popular. With the invention of television and the growing demand for U.S. citizens to have them, the action of Vietnam began to be displayed directly in people’s homes. For the first time ever, the American people had the means to see the fighting going on in Southeast Asia through their televisions. Johnson knew the immense power that the media held and was determined to win over the press. In the early months, Johnson associated himself with the press, trying to treat them like good friends. He often tried his usually effective charismatic conversations on them, not realizing that this sort of flattery only really worked in one-on-one settings, not in big groups. At times, it seemed as though he was pandering to the media, just saying what they wanted to hear. For example, on January 25, 1964, Johnson said, “I never enjoy anything more than polite, courteous, fair, judicious reporters; and I think all of you qualify.”<sup>11</sup>

However, at this point in the American presidency, television became a crucial part of life. The president was now being watched more strictly than ever and in the heat of a major war

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>11</sup>Ernest R. May, Timothy J. Naftali, and Max Holland, *The Presidential Recordings, Lyndon B. Johnson*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 425.

with no true end in sight, television was becoming detrimental to Johnson. Johnson was aware that he had to put on an act with reporters, showing them that he respected and admired them. In reality, he wanted to avoid press at all costs and was often a nervous wreck when it came to media coverage on his administration. Lyndon's brother, Sam Houston Johnson, said, "Lyndon often hinted the opposite from what he meant, made outright denials of things that were obviously true, needlessly kept the press guessing about certain things he planned to do, and often treated reporters as the enemy," These tendencies increased as his presidency went on.<sup>12</sup>

Vietnam was a problem that simply could not be surmounted by improving interpersonal relations with the media. There was a very basic gap: how Johnson viewed the war and how the media increasingly began to view it. By the late 1960s, there was a greater number of reporters who opposed the war than approved of it. He began to lose trust from the entire nation. He gravitated toward being secretive, and transcripts of talks and speeches were rarely trustworthy. Thus, as time went on the reporters, and through them the American people, felt deceived.<sup>13</sup> One can directly pinpoint exactly when the media began to portray the war as detrimental following certain military decisions like Operation Rolling Thunder or the Tet Offensive. Johnson took drastic measures in Vietnam by raising the number of air raids and bombings, as well as taking a hardnosed approach to what is known as the Tet Offensive. Operation Rolling Thunder was the title given to what was considered a gradual and sustained aerial bombardment campaign conducted by the US military against the North Vietnamese, which began on March 2, 1965, and lasted until November 2, 1968.

The goals that were implemented by the Johnson administration in regards to Rolling Thunder were as follows: first, to reduce the movement of supplies and enemy soldiers into

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<sup>12</sup>Bornet, 151.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

Southern Vietnam; then, to make the enemy pay a high cost for its invasions, to break North Vietnamese will, to force the idea of future peace talks, and to strengthen overall morale within the United States as well as Saigon. Little did Johnson know that implementing a massive series of bombings over a long period of time would not be as easy as predicted. There were problems facing the military during this sequence of bombings. The command structure among the U.S. military was discombobulated. The Air Force's 2nd Air Division was responsible for any aerial operations over North as well as South Vietnam. However, it was as though the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division was directly subordinate to the army of General William C. Westmoreland, who tended to see his role centered in the South. These complexities in command structure grew to be even more confusing with the division of the aerial effort into four competing areas (those in the South, North, and in Laos). This bizarre structure went against the grain of the Air Force, which ran a single air manager concept, which essentially said that there would be a single commander that would control and coordinate all aircraft within a theater of combat.<sup>14</sup> It was assumed that due to the great power the U.S. military possessed, that Northern Vietnam would eventually succumb to the idea of peace talks. Their tenacity and will to fight was completely underestimated by the Johnson administration, which thought that this Third World nation stood no chance and that eventually the threat of communism would be subdued. The Vietnamese were fighting on their own soil, which meant they knew the land a lot better than U.S. troops did. In addition, the Vietnamese would make bases and forts out of very cheap materials so when they were destroyed they could easily be rebuilt. What made the war such a challenge for the U.S. was the unique style of guerilla warfare that had never been seen by American troops before. Being completely blindsided by Vietnamese soldiers was common and hard to stop.

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<sup>14</sup>Frederik Logevall, "Presidential Address: Structure, Contingency, and the War in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 1 (2015):1-15.

Before the bombing even began, North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh told his people to expect the bombing and to expect great casualties. The Vietnamese stayed focused on their goal of independence and adjusted impressively to the U.S. attacks. Major northern Vietnamese establishments were being broken up and moved underground or in caves that were well hidden throughout the countryside. Entire villages even moved underground and created incredibly complex tunnels that proved difficult to navigate for the U.S. Something that the U.S. did not account for was how manageable it would be for the Vietcong to rebuild structures after they were destroyed by U.S. bombs. When Vietnam's transportation system came under attack, many destroyed facilities, bridges, and bases were repaired or replaced very quickly. The North Vietnamese system proved to be quite durable and efficient.<sup>15</sup> It was as if they were impossible to destroy. Although the North Vietnamese exceeded expectations of preparedness, it was their population that proved to be the biggest resource for them. In 1965, 97,000 North Vietnamese civilians volunteered to be full-time workers in repairing damages that were inflicted by the U.S. An astounding 370,000-500,000 worked part-time on the same tasks. The main slogan that kept them going was, "Each kilogram of good...is a bullet shot into the head of the American pirates."<sup>16</sup> By this point in Vietnam, it was the norm that the nation be governed by an outside entity. Throughout its history, Vietnam was subject to rule by other nations with more power. Vietnam had never even considered independence until the war had begun.

U.S. arguments made against the war varied. The war was deemed immoral by many, due to the fact that it indeed was a war and even the best war was said to solve absolutely nothing. It was specifically hated because television showed that innocent people like the elderly, women,

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<sup>15</sup>Woods, 533.

<sup>16</sup>"Can the U.S. Win in Vietnam?" *US News and World Report*, 1965, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Record Group 22.

and children were subject to the harsh violence that commenced day in and day out. The American people became very familiar with commodities, such as napalm and defoliant chemicals which in turn made modern technology and giant corporations key targets for the antiwar movement. Perhaps what was so intrinsically unappealing about the war was that it reminded many of the atrocities that occurred in World War II. Saigon's removal of villagers to compounds sounded all too similar to the idea of a concentration camp. Even major pop culture icons of the time were protesting the war. World renowned boxer Muhammad Ali resisted the draft, which put him in jail and even got him suspended from boxing for three years. Even Walter Cronkite, who was considered the most trusted man in America, returned to the states after visiting Vietnam and told the nation that there was no clear end in sight. Johnson knew that if he had lost Walter Cronkite then he would, in effect lose the American people. Key figureheads in America taking a stand against the fighting over seas was striking the American people. Certain aspects like this only made Johnson's job more difficult as his people grew frustrated and demanded a quicker solution to the problem.

Another important issue that was hindering any progress in Vietnam was race issues. Tension between black and white citizens, at the time, was beginning to be a serious problem. The domestic war at home seemed to be a much larger issue than the war in Vietnam. Johnson was at a crossroads trying to fix the issue of desegregation while also trying to make progress in a war on the other side of the world. What did not help either situation was that black men were being drafted in much higher quantities than white men were. This caused an immediate backlash from black Americans who felt as though their lives were not as important as white lives. There were conflicts in every corner of Johnson's presidency all of which were at their most volatile points.

As fighting went on and on, and more people lost sight of what it was the United States was fighting for, the year 1968 began and ultimately led to a war with a “no win” solution. As the year opened, there were 492,000 members of the American military in Vietnam, nearly 17,000 had died, and the president’s policies were only approved by 48 percent of the U.S. public.<sup>17</sup> At this point, all Johnson really wanted was peace. The media was making it very evident that American men were being beaten by a small, impoverished nation and the citizens of the U.S. we’re growing confused and angry. Unfortunately for Johnson, nothing was easy from here on out. Intelligence warned the White House that a considerably strong attack would be coming from the Vietcong. The Tet Offensive would go on to be considered the major battle of the Vietnam War. When the attack actually happened during the traditional Vietnamese Tet holiday, it cost 3,895 American lives and 214 allied lives.<sup>18</sup> Although the number of Vietnamese casualties greatly outnumbered those of American casualties, America suffered a great deal. The manner of this ferocious attack, its ability to even reach the U.S. embassy, its ability to be seen by major news outlets and the way it required a multitude of explanations from U.S. authorities led to this battle being regarded as a turning point in the war.

In Vietnam, the reality of the enemy even coming close to a victory over U.S. forces was a terrible shock to the uncertain American public. It was important for the American people to know that although many Americans lost their lives in this event, there were a great deal of casualties on the enemy side. Reporters were partially to blame for this because they focused on everything sensational and had generalized on single incidents. This presented a completely misleading image of what happened during the Tet Offensive, portraying it as a military defeat, which it was not. Tet obviously did involve some setbacks and losses, but perhaps the most

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<sup>17</sup>Bornet, 272.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

crucial error made by the Johnson administration was that it failed to use every means at its disposal to relay the entire truth about military aspects. Although Johnson had claimed that he received word that “the Communists had suffered a disaster, a debacle, and a serious military loss,”<sup>19</sup> he later claimed that he felt that message was never properly conveyed to the American people. No matter who really won the battle, there was a major communication error that would negatively affect Johnson. Some could now argue that the collapse of the American psyche after Tet can be correlated to the media and TV, but Johnson’s lackluster performance in giving out information to the public was a major contributor. For example, at a February 2 press conference he said, “It may be that General Westmoreland makes some serious mistakes or that I make some. We don’t know. We are just acting in the light of information we have.”<sup>20</sup> This was a point of collapse in leadership during a crisis. General Westmoreland grew highly critical of his president, claiming that he was too focused on domestic affairs like “The Great Society,” and that his key Vietnam decisions ultimately dragged out the war.

Another major issue that had not been accounted for before the war escalated was just how foreign this war really was to the American people. The U.S. had never seen fighting like it did in Vietnam. It was unconventional and sporadic. The war was one of atrocities from the very beginning. The Vietcong relied heavily on assassination, terror, and torture in order to make gains. It was not long before many frustrated American soldiers began to engage in similar acts of violence and violations of basic human rights. An increasing number of U.S. soldiers began to question their role in the war. They could never truly determine why they were there in the first place. One major issue was that civilians were never necessarily deemed as noncombatants. In turn, when dear friends and fellow soldiers were lost to innocent-looking peasants or booby traps

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<sup>19</sup> Mark, Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*, (New York: Ballantine, 2004), 124.

<sup>20</sup> Bornet, 273.

that seemed to be anywhere at any time were set off, rage and blurred decision-making took over for the American soldier. Massive drug problems also took a stranglehold on the U.S. military. Opiates and LSD became a major problem as well as alcoholism. Such conduct was presented in nearly every single living room in America by correspondents who were well aware of the emotional effect it would have on the country. Every mistake, failure, or wrongdoing was being directly sent to television screens with generally critical press. It eventually seemed impossible for America or the South Vietnamese to do anything right.

Major controversy has surrounded the choice of weapons, tactics, and intentions of the United States military in Vietnam. The use of helicopter gunships proved to be too obvious. The expense of an almost unthinkable amount of ammunition and bombs, and especially the use of herbicides, were exceedingly controversial. Perhaps there was no action that stirred more controversy than what began in 1962 and continued to devastate Vietnam known as Agent Orange. Agent Orange was used to defoliate the jungles and to destroy rice crops within Vietnam. The assumption was that destroying crops would help in an effort to cut off the enemy food supply. Unbelievably enough, this action was taken in South Vietnam, but not in North Vietnam. The use of Agent Orange was not stopped until 1970 when it was made clear that it caused malformations in test animals and because of complaints from veterans back home in America. What was commonly referred to as an *ecocide* resulted in 3,733,899 defoliated acres of land. This movement did virtually nothing to stop the onslaught of the Vietcong throughout the course of the war; it was just another blunder in the war effort during Johnson's presidency. Agent Orange was devastating to mangrove swamps and thus would harm marine environment; it killed trees but did not sterilize the soil. There were even detrimental effects being reported on



babies.<sup>21</sup> America's involvement in Vietnam began to come under fire at every level. Based on interviews with former Vietnamese leaders there was "racketeering in scarce and often vital goods, bribery of officials, buying and selling of jobs and appointments, and the collection of army pay from ghost and roll call soldiers."<sup>22</sup> There was, in turn, a great mutual misunderstanding. The effort put forth to shift any burden toward the Vietnamese was called by many "the U.S. dollar and Vietnam blood sharing plan."<sup>23</sup>

Johnson's record in Southeast Asia is easy to criticize. Whenever an opportunity to try to neutralize the war was made apparent and when the opportunity to withdraw was possible, these options were never taken seriously. Then, escalation was not pursued in a way that persuaded the enemy that the U.S. was absolutely determined to prevail. The president decided to fight a restricted and contained war. He avoided asking the American people's full emotional commitment. Johnson's top military leaders practiced public silence, held onto their jobs, and would be promoted. Army morale had never been so low in an American war. Withdrawal was never been an option for Johnson, because he was consistently convinced that keeping a limited mindset toward the war would ultimately convince the Northern Vietnamese to agree to peace talks. A true escalation of the war was rejected each time because of the great fear in the White House that China would let its immense power actively engage the American military, thus giving communism a significant advantage in the world. Invading North Vietnam was never an option due to major communist threats and because it went against Johnson's idea of not fighting an aggressive war.

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<sup>21</sup>Woods, 831.

<sup>22</sup>Bornet, 277.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

The costs of the Vietnam War were appalling. All costs were calculated including loss of lifetime potential wages of deceased soldiers, loss in production of civilian goods by those who volunteered to fight or were drafted, and the future extent of medical care and veterans benefits. From the beginning to the very end, Vietnam cost the U.S. \$842 billion. This was the final bill for fighting what Johnson had deemed “a raggedyass little fourth-rate country.”<sup>24</sup> This was a perfect example of when Johnson’s own stubbornness led him to underestimate the power of this “fourth-rate country.”

Early on, Vietnam came to dominate the Johnson presidency. It simply could not be escaped, due to the fact that it affected the economy, appropriations for Johnson’s beloved Great Society, and desired legislature. The commander-in-chief began to sense that this war would go on to have historians obsessing over it. He was not able to neglect the war’s aggressive nature. Eventually, there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel. On March 31, 1968, Johnson made his famous speech in which he declared that there would be a massive reduction in the number of American soldiers in Vietnam, called on other nations involved to do everything in their power to move toward peace, and also announced that he would not be running for reelection that year. It seemed to be the inevitable end for Johnson. Success was moving further and further away from Johnson’s reach until finally in 1968 there was no chance of grabbing a hold of victory. Americans could see right through the cracks and watched as their strong charismatic leader continued to spiral this war out of control. His approval rating was disastrously low, Vietnam involvement proved to be a failure, he became sick and grew old fast, and on a consistent basis he could hear the chants from young protestors singing, “Hey, Hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” At this point, it became clear that Johnson had

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<sup>24</sup>May, 277.

devastated the Democratic Party and that a revitalization would be necessary. Many historians argue that Johnson was dealt an unfair hand in Vietnam when coming into office, which is a fair argument. However, it was his naivety on foreign policy, his inability to make a strong stance on the war, and the lack of communication with the American people that ultimately rests responsibility for this war on him.

Many asked what on earth the President and his team thought they were doing as they plunged deeper and deeper into a war of attrition in Vietnam starting in 1965 and continually escalated for the next three years. Defeating aggression, restoring peace, and building a nation were the key goals sought out by Johnson but were ultimately not achieved. When one reflects back on the events that took place, the decisions that were made and the consequences those decisions had all in regards to the violence that took place in Vietnam, one can see how it has drastically affected decision-making in foreign conflicts during the last 50 years. At this point in time, it is clear that there is a great hesitance in diving head first into conflict with other nations. One can look back to the decisions made during the Iraq War in 2002-2003 and understand why full involvement was not as beneficial as it may have seemed at the time. President Obama, over the years, has seen what can go wrong when deciding to enter a war with another nation. Right now, there is a serious demand by both American citizens and foreign affairs experts many for the United States to involve itself in Syria by means of military intervention on a full frontal scale. Can we be certain that the majority of the American public could support a war like this? The United States has not officially declared war, since World War II. Can the U.S. really handle a full-scale war at this moment in time? Would a war in Syria help create jobs, boost nationalism, or even accomplish the ultimate goal of freeing the Syrian people from a tyrannical regime? These are the big questions running through President Obama's head. The aftermath of

the most detrimental United States war has created an idea that a full-scale war with any nation would really only be plausible if a nation were to begin a direct attack on U.S. soil. Other than that, there should be a great deal of hesitance to fight overseas.

Vietnam hurt the U.S economy, it showed how a powerful nation can show absolute negligence toward something very costly, and became a large contributor in the American people despising their own leader. Following Johnson's presidency, there was a great deal of mistrust by the people of the United States regarding to their president. We as a nation will look back to the 1960s as a time when the thought that America being the most powerful country on Earth was set in stone, may not have been so concrete. This war can help explain perfectly why it is in fact that we study history. It is important to know what works and what does not. When it comes to international conflicts, it is crucial that one look to Johnson and realize that while confidence and determination can go a long way, sometimes it can cause one to be in over one's head. Johnson acted as though victory was inevitable. The dark reality of the situation was that the underdog would prove to be stronger than anyone could have imagined and the blame was left on the one man who claimed he knew what the solution to the war was. Johnson's tenure in office solidified the fact that an American president is fully capable of shooting himself in the foot on a consistent basis.

Although Johnson was a good, strong, charismatic and determined man through and through, he lacked the proper knowledge to handle something like the Vietnam War. One could argue that he was dealt an unwinnable hand with what Kennedy had left behind following his death, but escalation proved to be a disaster. There is a captivating photograph of Johnson toward the end of his time in office when he was at his lowest point. He is sitting at his desk looking confused, stressed, tired, and completely disheveled. Here we see a man that has been

defeated by his worst enemy, his own self. In this picture we see hopelessness and regret.

Johnson's demeanor alone is a perfect example of the plight of man taking on more than he can handle.

It is important that future presidents, no matter who they are, look at the outcome of the Vietnam War with grave detail. The U.S. would not be able to sustain a war of such cost whether that be actual money or human lives. An important factor a president would need to keep in mind is whether or not there is public support. Although the president could just send troops to wherever he or she would like to and disregard public opinion, it is important to have public support because nationalism is one of the main components to fighting a war. If the country backs its leader then he will often see success to some degree. There was no understanding or reason that Americans could see as to why the war in Vietnam had continued for as long as it did and why the fighting had escalated so quickly.

In today's age of social media, a president could make one wrong move in a time of war and it could easily ruin him or her. If Johnson thought that the media destroyed him in the 1960s he would have been decimated today. A president must always take citizens views into account. Communism seemed to be such a threat that often Johnson and his team would neglect the opinions of the American people. It is a leader's own people who shapes his legacy. Johnson was not able to please everyone as desperately as he may have wanted to. The legacy of LBJ shows evidence of his ultimate rise and demise. A man was bestowed the highest honor in the land. The people felt as though he could be their savior or at least they prayed he might be. Unfortunately, he took on more than he could handle.

Generations will long remember the plight of the U.S. during the 1960s and will continue to see the effects the war had on the country. People will look back at the Johnson administration

and say, “Here is what not to do. Here is a perfect example of things going from bad to worse.” Johnson did have an unrelenting desire to improve the nation. Perhaps this was his strongest quality as president. If one were to take any kind of positive from Johnson’s presidency, it would be to acknowledge the fact that there is clear evidence that his presidency created a direct force for change in many aspects of American day-to-day life. It provoked a force for change in the efforts to prevail in space, guarantee civil rights, wage war on poverty, provide medical care for the aged and poor, educate our youth, improve the environment, help finance the arts and public broadcasting, support consumer rights, and defeat communism overseas. John F. Kennedy once said of Johnson, “He really cares about this nation as I want a president to care.”<sup>25</sup> This strong, tall, determined Texan always aimed high and sought out change on a Texas-sized scale. History will look at the executive branch from 1963 to 1969 as a dynamic administration that will likely never be equaled. Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency will undoubtedly be remembered for the unintentional but significant and substantial damage that it did.

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<sup>25</sup>Bornet, 350.

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