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THE PRESIDENT AND THE PEOPLE-STRATEGIC
PSYOP IN EARLY PHASES OF VIETNAM WAR

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THE PRESIDENT AND THE PEOPLE--STRATEGIC PSYOP IN
EARLY PHASES OF VIETNAM WAR

by

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ABSTRACT

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The withdrawal by President Johnson from the Presidential race of 1968 represented a strategic psychological victory by the Vietnamese Communists. The genesis of the victory is examined by assessing the nature of the psychological threat posed to the American people in the early phases of the Vietnam War (1964-1965). It is developed that the Presidency was probably the only agency capable of countering the psychological threat which existed in 1964-1965. The public papers and speeches of President Johnson are examined for that period to assess his understanding of the threat and his explanation of the developing Vietnam War to the American people. The paper concludes that the Vietnamese Communists were relying upon protracted warfare to achieve eventual withdrawal of the United States; there was a recognizable psychological threat existing in 1964-1965; President Johnson did not understand the threat; and it is problematical that President Johnson could have won the support of the American people for the war in the manner in which he chose to wage it.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During November of 1967 the debate over the Vietnam War raged throughout the country. Experienced and knowledgeable people held diametrically opposed views, not only as to whether or not the United States should be involved in that conflict, but also as to whether or not the war was being won.

November also brought to a head the irreconcilable differences between the administration and the press on the issue of how the war was going. The Administration continued to insist it was gradually being won, that there was no stalemate; more roads were open to safe travel; aircraft now landed unscathed at Tan Son Nhut airport on the outskirts of Saigon; the people in the south were being brought progressively under GVN allegiance and control through the pacification program; the ARVN was becoming a tough, cohesive army. The current phrase for all this progress was "at last we begin to see light at the end of the tunnel." The roughly five hundred newsmen covering Vietnam appeared to be reporting a different war. They found no evidence that North Vietnam's will or fighting capacity was being weakened, that any real headway was being made in pacification, or that the GVN was any less corrupt or more efficient. They thought the Administration's chosen indicators of progress were either superficial or irrelevant, and they noted a marked disparity between the optimism of high American officials in Saigon and the gloomy assessments emanating from lesser officials posted in the provinces. Reports from the latter group indicated an increased tempo of VC terrorism and a deepening pessimism among the peasantry, even a feeling that U.S. obstinacy on the question of a bombing halt was deliberately prolonging the war against the interests of the people of South Vietnam. The New York Times Bureau Chief in Saigon had said as early as August, "In the opinion of most disinterested

observers, the war is not going well. Victory is not close at hand. It may be beyond reach.¹

The President did not withdraw from the debate but met it head on. He brought home Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland who addressed the nation through various media, expressing optimism over the conduct and outcome of the war. During the Presidential Press Conference of 18 November 1967, in reply to a question, President Johnson expressed a hard, historical view of the situation,

I don't need to remind you of what happened in the Civil War. People were here in the White House begging Lincoln to concede. . . . You know what Roosevelt went through, and President Wilson. . . . We are going to have this criticism. . . . No one likes war. All people love peace. But you can't have freedom without defending it. . . . We are going to do whatever it is necessary to do to see that the aggressor does not succeed.²

A short four months later, on 31 March 1968, following what his military advisors held to be a major allied military victory during the Tet Offensive of January-February 1968, the President addressed the nation; reviewed the Administration's efforts to find a basis for peace talks; and then announced the halting of the bombing of North Vietnam, except for a portion close to the Demilitarized Zone. In his closing remarks, the world witnessed a most remarkable political act, unparalleled in the nation's history. The President concluded,

There is division in the American house now. There

¹Townsend Hoopes, The Limits of Intervention (1969), pp. 98-99.
²US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1967, Book II--July 1 to December 31, 1967 (1968), pp. 1051, 1054.

is divisiveness among us all tonight. And holding the trust that is mine, as President of all the people, I cannot disregard the peril to the progress of the American people and the hope and the prospect of peace for all peoples. . . . What we have won when all of our people united just must not now be lost in suspicion, distrust, selfishness, and politics among any of our people. . . . I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. . . . Accordingly I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.³

Thus the President tacitly acknowledged the inability of his Administration to continue the conduct of the war, as previously planned, in view of the growing and widespread unpopularity of the war. The "credibility gap" had been driven home to the President. The enemy had suffered a tactical defeat in South Vietnam while achieving a strategic psychological victory in the United States!

The subject area of this paper is to analyze the genesis of that victory. The following questions are pertinent to the analysis. Was the nature of the Vietnam conflict understood at the highest level of our government during the early phases (1964-1965) of the Vietnam War? Was the strategic psychological threat perceived? What was the nature of the Presidential effort to explain the developing conflict to the American people during the early phases of the war?

This paper will examine the nature of the Vietnam War and the psychological threat existing in 1964-1965 as viewed from literature

³US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1968, Book I--January 1 to June 30, 1968 (1970), pp. 475-476.

available on the subject at that time. The Presidential public statements on Vietnam during 1964-1965 will be examined and conclusions will be drawn.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF THE THREAT

The attacks by North Vietnamese gunboats upon United States destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin on 2 and 4 August 1964 and the United States reaction represented one of the most significant events in the Vietnam War. From it came the now famous Gulf of Tonkin Resolution by Congress which formed a basis of support for the President in the subsequent build-up of United States forces in Vietnam.

On 5 August 1964, the day after his speech to the nation informing of his decision to reply to the attacks with an air strike against the gunboats and supporting facilities in North Vietnam, the President spoke on the Communist challenge in Southeast Asia at Syracuse University. In his closing remarks, he said,

So, to our friends of the Atlantic Alliance, let me say this, this morning: the challenge that we face in Southeast Asia today is the same challenge that we have faced with courage and that we have met with strength in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin and Korea, in Lebanon and in Cuba. And to any who may be tempted to support or to widen the present aggression I say this: there is no threat to any peaceful power from the United States of America. But there can be no peace by aggression and no immunity from reply. That is what is meant by the actions we took yesterday. Finally, my fellow Americans, I would like to say to ally and adversary alike: let no friend needlessly fear--and no foe vainly hope--that this is a nation divided in this election year. Our free elections--our full and free

debate--are America's strength, not America's weakness. . . . We are one nation united and indivisible.¹

Was the challenge the same? What was known of the nature of the threat at that time? Or perhaps more appropriately, what should have been known about the nature of the threat?

VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST STRATEGY

Prior to French colonialization the peoples of South, Central, and North Vietnam had, since 111 B.C., spent about 1000 years under Chinese domination, followed by 900 years of independence. Their history and folk lore were resplendent with heroes who had fought fiercely to repel and throw out Chinese intruders. However, by the mid 1800's, they were no match for French colonialist ambitions. As Joseph Buttinger analyses it,

Minh Mang's successors, Thieu Tri and Tu Duc, were unable to escape from the impasse that the policy of isolation and hostility toward the West had reached after 1840. Exposed to increasing French demands supported by threats of military action, they became more and more convinced that isolation from the West was the only way to preserve their country's political independence. But the walls they erected between 1840 and 1858 proved too weak for the guns that the West was producing during the same time. The mandarin's refusal to permit social change and technical progress . . . was also the reason why the Vietnamese people lacked both the means and the will to defeat colonial aggression when the West was ready to attack. The flight into

¹US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1963/1964, Book II--July 1 to December 31, 1964 (1965), p. 930.

isolation had only shortened Vietnam's life as an independent state.²

By 1888 the French had generally consolidated their gains in Vietnam. French administration held sway until World War II.

Both the French colonial rule and the new force of World Communism were to have a significant impact on the Vietnamese peoples. The first was to kindle a cohesive patriotic fervor following the end of Japanese rule in 1945. The second was to capture the imagination and inspire the efforts of a great Vietnamese patriot who was destined to lead the Vietnamese people in finally throwing off the French yoke of imperialism--Ho Chi Minh.

One is struck by the similarities between Lenin and Ho Chi Minh. Both were exiles from their homeland for long years. Both formed and led Communist parties. Both were more inclined towards carrying out the political revolution than towards producing philosophical trappings. Both fired the imagination and inspired their compatriots. This latter quality was to prove particularly troublesome in the early 1960's in South Vietnam. Bernard Fall touches on this in discussing Ngo Dinh Diem and Ho Chi Minh,

Both are bachelors and both are thus presented as 'fathers' of their country, but since the 'father' image in Viet-Nam is too much wrapped up in the old mandarinal tradition--which Ngo accepts but Ho rejects--the latter is presented to his public as 'uncle' instead, i.e., as a man who still commands respect but not with the forbidding sternness of a father. This difference in 'image' is clearly reflected in their propaganda photographs. Ngo appears either in full traditional mandarin's dress

²Joseph Buttlinger, The Smaller Dragon (1958), pp. 304-305.

or in the snow white Western business suit of the French colonial tradition; Ho is shown either in the 'Mao Tse-tung suit' of his party or in the dark peasant cu-nao and open toed rubber sandals of the Vietnamese farmer or guerrilla fighter. There can be no doubt that these conflicting propaganda images of the two men are an important element in the struggle that divides Viet-Nam in the 1960's.³

Under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, the French were expelled and a Communist government was successfully implanted in North Vietnam. At the time of the Geneva Agreement in 1954, Ho had every reason to expect that South Vietnam would fall under his control through promised elections. However, in this he was thwarted by Diem who, with United States backing, refused to hold elections.⁴ The Communists did not wait long before continuing the struggle. Taking advantage of Diem's problems in putting down dissident elements, they increased terror attacks and began the formulation of the National Liberation Front in 1959.⁵

But, what was the Communist strategy? What was the nature of the threat which faced South Vietnam and its most powerful ally, the United States?

In the introduction to a facsimile edition of two books printed in North Vietnam, The August Revolution and The Resistance Will Win, Bernard Fall said of their author,

In every Communist regime, there is a man who likes to think of himself as a manipulator rather than as an 'operator'--as the deus ex machina of the system within which he lives . . . one man has occupied this

³Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams (1964), p. 82.

⁴Ibid., p. 233.

⁵Malcolm W. Browne, The New Face of War (1968), p. 326.

challenging post for nearly thirty years almost without interruption. His name is Dang Xuan Khu, but he is better known under the pseudonym of 'Truong Chinh.' The choice of that pseudonym--it is the literal Vietnamese translation of the Chinese expression meaning the 'Long March'--is in itself revelatory of the man's character and leanings. . . . He is also the only North Vietnamese Communist thus far to have produced anything approaching a truly articulate statement of the aims of the Vietnamese Communist revolution. . . . anyone who, as early as 1947, had the good sense to remind his colleagues that, 'Guerrilla warfare must be the tactic of the people as a whole, not of the Army alone' surely deserves a niche among the more sophisticated thinkers on the art.⁶

On 19 September 1947, in the preface to his book The Resistance Will Win, Truong Chinh set forth the strategy that was to defeat the French. He stated,

At present the Vietnamese Armed Forces are still weaker than those of the enemy; therefore it is necessary to prolong the Resistance war. In the course of the fighting we shall develop our forces, gradually wearing down the enemy's strength, awaiting the day when we can crush him completely. This Resistance war must be waged by the entire people in every field--military, political, economic and cultural--so that, wherever the enemy goes, he meets our fierce resistance, which encircles and chokes him, making it impossible for him to live in peace in our country.⁷

Although Truong Chinh's work was directed against the "reactionary French colonialists", it has remained relevant throughout the Vietnamese conflict (Fall gave it the accolade of being timeless).⁸ The strongest theme running through the book is the achievement of

⁶Chinh Truong, Primer for Revolt (1963), pp. vii-x.

⁷Ibid., p. 38.

⁸Ibid., p. ix.

a unified Vietnam by means of prolonged warfare. In answering his question "What are we fighting for?", Truong Chinh stated that diplomacy would be ineffective in achieving the political aims of the Resistance war. Military action was required to destroy the French forces in Vietnam and to regain control of the entire country. In order to achieve these military aims he advocated a long resistance.⁹ In discussing the character of such a resistance, he unequivocally stated that the war had to be prolonged and that such was to be the guiding principle of the strategy. He felt that time was on the side of the Vietnamese resistance; as such, "time" would be the best strategist of the resistance.¹⁰ To a great extent this feeling was based on his assessment of the French situation. He foresaw world opinion tending to isolate the French in their "colonialist aggression". He foresaw the growth of the anti-war movement in France and that the difficulties of the French would be insurmountable, whereas the difficulties of the Vietnamese aggression would be overcome by patience and fortitude.¹¹ In his concluding chapter, he stressed the requirements for unity and self reliance; because, even if the French anti-war movement and outside support would prove not to be the critical factor of victory, the very nature of the prolongation of the war would assure eventual victory.¹²

⁹Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 111-112.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 161-162.

¹²Ibid., pp. 212-213.

DEMOCRACY'S ACHILLES HEEL

General Vo Nguyen Giap was the architect of the military defeat of the French which culminated at Dien Bien Phu and the author of People's War People's Army, a description of the methods used by the Viet Minh in defeating the French and a description of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. According to Bernard Fall,

Giap's own best contribution to the art of revolutionary war was probably his estimate of the political-psychological shortcomings of a democratic system when faced with an inconclusive military operation. In a remarkable presentation before the political commissars of the 316th Division, Giap stated, 'The enemy will pass slowly from the offensive to the defensive. The blitzkrieg will transform itself into a war of long duration. Thus, the enemy will be caught in a dilemma: He has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and political means to fight a long drawn-out war. . . .' In all likelihood, Giap concludes, public opinion in the democracy will demand an end to the 'useless bloodshed', or its legislature will insist on knowing for how long it will have to vote astronomical credits without a clear-cut victory in sight. This is what eternally compels the military leaders of democratic armies to promise a quick end to the war--to 'bring the boys home by Christmas'--or forces the democratic politicians to agree to almost any kind of humiliating compromise rather than to accept the idea of a semi-permanent antiguerrilla operation. There is little indication in the 1960's that logical conclusions have been drawn from earlier lessons. . . . In any case, there is no reason whatever to believe that Giap's doctrine and views of revolutionary war have changed since the 1950's, and they need not have--for they were eminently successful then.¹³

Thus the aim of the Vietnamese Communists was clearly recognizable

¹³Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams (1964), p. 113, 115.

by 1964--the unification of all Vietnam under control of a Vietnamese Communist government. The most significant characteristics of their likely strategy, discernible at that time, were those of reliance on a protracted war and the psychological impact of such on the democracy involved, the United States.

It was not only the Communist strategists who recognized such a war as being the psychological achilles heel of the great American democracy. In 1957, Robert Osgood, commenting on Mao Tse-tung's strategy of prolonged warfare, concluded,

Thus, whereas Americans . . . are led to wage wars in a manner that will permit them to return to peace as quickly as possible, Mao . . . is content to prolong warfare indefinitely. . . . It is ironic that an avowedly materialistic philosophy should produce such a keen appreciation of the psychological elements in the struggle for power; whereas American idealism encourages a preoccupation with the purely military aspects of that struggle . . . a candid view of the nature of the contemporary struggle for power compels one to recognize that the Communist approach to war is as compatible with the imperatives of cold war and limited war as the traditional American approach is incompatible.¹⁴

Such remarks on the psychological achilles heel of the American democracy were not simply abstract speculation. American leaders did not have to go far back into the past for historical evidence. The Korean War presented sufficient evidence of the psychological impact upon the American people of a war which was not waged in an all-out effort to reestablish the peace as soon as possible, nor which permitted preoccupation with mostly military considerations. Osgood made the following comment,

¹⁴Robert Endicott Osgood, Limited War (1957), pp. 56-57.

However, the lesson of physical preparedness cannot be separated from the lesson of psychological preparedness. For containment like any strategy, is not only a matter of physical capacity; it is also a matter of will. If the nation as a whole is unwilling to expend its lives and resources upon limited military engagements that promise no clear-cut resolution of the struggle for power, then no military establishment will be adequate to sustain a successful strategy of containment. . . . The Korean War showed once more that, although the nation might be unwilling to follow any alternative to containment, it was also deeply reluctant to adhere to a strategy so antithetical to its traditional outlook.¹⁵

Thus the issue of psychological preparedness was one of central significance in 1964, at which time, the American democracy had become engaged in a war whose nature was entirely different from any experiences in its previous history. How could such psychological preparedness have been achieved?

America's experience with the propaganda techniques of Hitler's Germany expressed itself in an abhorrence of anything remotely resembling propaganda by our government. As a result, Congress specifically forbid the United States Information Agency (USIA) to engage in any informational activities within the United States. Thus an important function of the free press in our country is to sift through the relevant information and facts that impinge upon the American Democracy and to interpret such, thus preserving the people from any propagandizing by its government. The impact of this is seen in the doctrine of the Armed Forces and USIA. The Army defines psychological operations as "The planned use of propaganda and other measures to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 189, 191.

and behavior of hostile, neutral, or friendly groups in such a way as to support the achievement of national objectives."¹⁶ The mission of the USIA is to,

help achieve United States foreign policy objectives by (a) influencing public attitudes in other nations, and (b) advising the President, his representatives abroad, and the various departments and agencies on the implications of foreign opinion for present and contemplated United States policies, programs and official statements.¹⁷

So it is seen that not only is there no governmental agency to assist in any psychological preparedness of the people for war, but there is not even one to counter any strategic psychological campaign of an enemy upon the American people. The responsibility for such is that of the free press and the free press is not responsible to the government. When a significant majority of the free press does not support the government or the government perceives issues differently from such a majority, then the government must go to the people with its case. Although other methods are available, there can be little doubt that the most effective instrument is the President himself. In any event, the leadership must come from the President. As Murray Dyer emphasizes, in making his case for political communications,

It must be clear not only that government thinks political communication is important, but that in its day-to-day operations it treats it in such a way as to show that it is important. . . . It is by no means a matter of considering only the

¹⁶US Department of the Army, Field Manual 33-1: Psychological Operations--U.S. Army Doctrine (21 June 1968), p. 1-1.

¹⁷US Information Agency, The Agency in Brief (1969), p. 3.

facts and the logic that testify to the importance of political communication. By definition it is preeminently concerned with political realities and therefore subject to political considerations. . . . The exigencies of political life must be taken into account. The only figure in the United States who can do this in terms of national objectives . . . is the President.¹⁸

(Dyer assessed the Communist threat to the world, concluding that, "A challenge of this nature cannot be met by anything less than the mobilization of a nation's will and spirit."¹⁹ He then outlined the pitfalls of the use of the term psychological warfare and described a new concept of political communications based on the accuracy of independently verifiable facts and the ideas that sustain and advance the conception of a democratic free world.²⁰)

Regardless whether one agrees with Dyer's concepts, it appears probable that, in view of the foregoing, the only agency capable of countering the strategic psychological impact upon which the Communists were relying was the Presidency.

¹⁸Murray Dyer, The Weapon on the Wall (1959), pp. 164-165.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 6.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 16, 61.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENTS

In addition to all the other problems faced by President Johnson following the assumption of the Presidency, he inherited a situation in Vietnam where many responsible newsmen, working for major news media, had been taking quite different views of the war from that of the administration. This situation had evolved over the years resulting from statements by officials which often did not accurately reflect the situation in Vietnam. As an example, Bernard Fall documented the increasing impact of the Viet Cong terrorist campaign that took place from 1957 to 1963, estimating that 13,000 small governmental officials had been killed during that period.¹ However, in the summer of 1959, Major General Samuel Myers, deputy chief of MAAG, stated that the guerrillas had been gradually nibbled away until they had ceased to be a major menace to the government.² Such noted reporters as Homer Bigart (winner of two Pulitzer prizes), David Sheehan, Mert Perry, Charley Mohr, Malcom Brown and David Halberstram (the latter two shared a Pulitzer prize for their reporting of the Vietnam war) found themselves in serious disagreement with the administration. David Halberstram traces the genesis of the disagreement and, in considering whether the United States should commit combat troops into Vietnam, he

¹Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams (1964), pp. 359-360.

²David Halberstram, The Making of a Quagmire (1964), p. 63.

wrote in 1964,

It would be a war . . . extremely difficult for the American people to understand. The misconception, misinformation and lack of candor displayed by American officialdom in the past in Indochina does not give anyone confidence that our government would explain the conflict.³

With this background the questions posed in Chapter I will be considered.

CONCEPT OF WAR

Was the nature of the war understood by the President? Following the attack upon the United States vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin on 2 and 4 August 1964, President Johnson, on 5 August 1964, equated the challenge in Southeast Asia to the challenge we faced in Greece, Turkey, Berlin, Korea, Lebanon and Cuba. He stated that the threat had long been clear. The North Vietnamese had constantly sought to take over South Vietnam and Laos and had systematically conducted a campaign of subversion in South Vietnam.⁴ On 28 September 1964, the President linked North Vietnam and Communist China, stating that the United States was trying to evolve a method to wear them down, so that they will conclude to leave their neighbors alone.⁵ On 7 April 1965, the President acknowledged that some people of South Vietnam were participating in the attack upon their own country,

³Ibid., p. 316.

⁴US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1963/1964, Book II--July 1 to December 31, 1964 (1965), pp. 929-930.

⁵Ibid., p. 1165.

but that North Vietnam's support was the heartbeat of the war. The situation in that country was really only a part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes in Asia. He also stated that he hoped for a quick peace, but that the American people must be prepared for a long conflict.⁶ On 4 May 1965, he called the conflict a war of liberation, but not a civil war, as it was sustained from without.⁷ In addressing the attitude of the Chinese Communists, on 13 May 1965, he stated that their objective was not to fulfill Vietnamese Nationalism but to erode and to discredit America's ability to prevent Chinese domination over Asia.⁸ On 28 July 1965, the President said that the American people should understand that there is no quick solution to the Vietnam problem and that he would not want to predict whether it would be over in months, years, or decades.⁹

One cannot answer the question as to whether the President understood the nature of the war with assurance, but certain observations can be made. The President seemed to view the war in the context of containment of communism and equated the struggle to other conflicts which had been resolved primarily with military force. He felt the major problem to be one of external aggression of North Vietnam abetted by Communist China. He certainly gave little acknowledgement to any legitimate nationalistic aspirations for unification of the Vietnamese people.

⁶US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1965, Book I--January 1 to May 31, 1965 (1966), pp. 394-396.

⁷Ibid., p. 495.

⁸Ibid., pp. 522-523.

⁹US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1965, Book II--June 1 to December 31, 1965 (1966), p. 799.

PERCEPTION OF THREAT

Was the strategic psychological threat perceived by the President? On 5 August 1964, the President warned any foe from vainly hoping that the nation was divided in an election year.¹⁰ On 12 August 1964, he stated that the course chosen in the case of Vietnam would require wisdom and endurance and that no one should think that the United States would be worn down, driven out, or provoked to rashness.¹¹ On 28 September 1964, he stated what was to be a recurring theme, "And we must use our overwhelming power with calm restraint."¹² On 7 April 1965, the President stated in connection with the Vietnam conflict, "Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending."¹³ On 9 August 1965, in answering a press question concerning the situation in Vietnam, the President said,

One of the most noted leaders of this country said to me the other day that I must constantly be aware when I am talking to you that everything about our government is not bad, and I am not necessarily on trial, and we are not criminals here to have to argue and reply on every course of action, and that we need not explain any more of the details than is necessary to see the public has a reasonable knowledge.¹⁴

¹⁰US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1963/1964, Book II--July 1 to December 31, 1964 (1965), p. 930.

¹¹Ibid., p. 953.

¹²Ibid., p. 1162.

¹³US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1965, Book I--January 1 to May 31, 1965 (1966), p. 396.

¹⁴US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Book II--June 1 to December 31, 1965 (1966), p. 856.

(From 25 August 1965, until 6 December 1965, the President did not make any significant public statements on Vietnam.¹⁵)

It appears that President Johnson did not understand the nature of the psychological threat to the American people. He recognized that the course he had set required the understanding and patience of the American people. However, his above rationalization for the basis of patience by the American people seems to have been established more upon wishful thinking and less upon historical insight. Also, his refrainment between 25 August 1965, and 6 December 1965, from personal explanation to the American people of the rapidly developing involvement of the United States in Vietnam seems to indicate an insensitivity to the threat.

EXPLANATION OF WAR

Finally, what was the nature of the Presidential effort to explain the developing conflict to the American people? On 5 August 1964, the President stated that aggression unchallenged is aggression unleashed and that for ten years American presidents had been actively concerned with the threat to peace and the security of the peoples of Southeast Asia resulting from aggression by the Communist government of North Vietnam.¹⁶ On 25 and 28 September 1964, he cautioned against direct action in North Vietnam's territory

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 927-1144.

¹⁶US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1963-1964, Book II--July 1 to December 31, 1964 (1965), pp. 928-929.

because of the probability of becoming involved in a land war in Asia with 700 million Chinese.¹⁷ On 4 January 1965, he tied the security of the United States to peace in Asia, recalling its fight against aggression in Asia during World War II and stating that to ignore aggression now would only increase the danger of a much larger war.¹⁸ On 7 April 1965, he equated the responsibility of the United States for defense of Southeast Asia to its responsibility in Europe.¹⁹ On 27 April 1965, he said that defeat in South Vietnam would lead to the welfare and freedom of the United States being endangered.²⁰ On 9 July 1965, the President stated that the United States had committed its power and national honor to the Vietnam struggle.²¹ On 20 December 1965, the President said, "The credible commitment of the United States is the foundation stone of the house of freedom all around the world. If it is not good in Viet-Nam . . . who can trust it in the heart of Europe?"²²

Thus, the President explained the developing conflict in terms of containment of Communist aggression, tying the welfare of the United States and the credibility of the United States power in the world to the outcome of the war in Vietnam.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 1126, 1164.

¹⁸US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1965, Book I--January 1 to May 31, 1965 (1966), p. 18.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 395.

²⁰Ibid., p. 449.

²¹US Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1965, Book II--June 1 to December 31, 1965 (1966), p. 726.

²²Ibid., p. 1163.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

Before stating my conclusions, it is necessary to make certain precautionary observations. It would be naive of me to equate the President's remarks with what transpired in his mind. For example, the President might have understood the psychological threat, but gambled on an early victory to offset the impact of a protracted war. In which case, he perceived the threat, but badly misjudged the nature of the war. However, let me hasten to add that the evidence does not bear this out. His remarks of 28 July 1965, previously quoted, seem to indicate awareness that the conflict was to be a long one.

Also, it was necessary to be very selective in the use of the President's remarks to answer the questions posed in Chapter I. However, those selected were consistent with, and representative of, the remarks of the President in the period under examination.

My conclusions are as follows:

a. By 1964, it was evident that the North Vietnamese Communists were prepared, if necessary, to wage protracted warfare in South Vietnam, relying upon the psychological impact of such on the American people to achieve eventual withdrawal of the United States.

b. By 1965, there was a clear requirement for the American people to be prepared psychologically for a limited war of indefinite duration.

c. Upon assuming the Presidency, President Johnson was faced with a significant "credibility gap" between the Administration and the press in Vietnam.

d. It appears that in 1964-1965, President Johnson did not understand the consequences of the strategic psychological threat posed by a protracted, limited war.

e. In view of the nature of the war and the attitude of the American people to limited war, it is problematical that it would have been possible for President Johnson to have convinced the American people to support the manner in which he chose to wage the war in Vietnam, regardless of the effort he might have made.



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