



***IMAGES OF INHERITED WAR: THREE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS
IN VIETNAM***

BY

WILLIAM R. HERSCH

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APPROVAL PAGE

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

Dr. Chiabotti (Date)

Dr. Forsyth (Date)



DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major William Hersch is a B-1B Instructor Weapons System Officer and completed this study as part of the graduation requirements for a Masters Degree in Military Philosophy from the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS) at Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. William Graduated from Colorado State University with a degree in English Literature and also holds a Masters in Business Administration and is a graduate of Air Command and Staff College with a Masters Degree in Military Arts and Sciences. Major Hersch is currently an Air University doctoral candidate and will be pursuing a PhD in Military Strategy. William has accumulated nearly 2,000 flight hours in multiple aircraft and is a decorated veteran of both OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM and OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM. He and his wife have a two-year-old son.

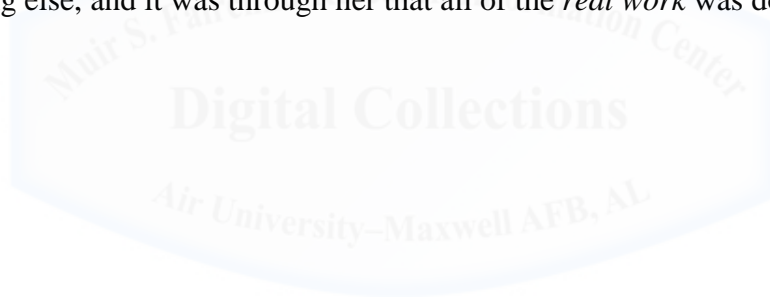


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ABSTRACT

This study examines how cognitive forces shape grand war-time strategy across successive presidential administrations. By analyzing Vietnam through the lens of Image and Cognitive theory, the author attempts to answer the question: How did Presidential Image effect agendas and outcomes during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon Administrations? Specifically, the author examines the presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon through key decision points and policy shifts during the Vietnam War in an effort to unveil the substantial cognitive forces with which Presidents must contend, and often counter, when they inherit war. It is the author's hope that revealing the confluence of Images, Agendas, and Outcomes during the Vietnam War will make current and future decision-makers more aware of the impact cognitive forces have in shaping war's trajectory. Moreover, it is hoped that by examining Vietnam through the lens of Presidential Image, a broader conceptualization of 'war as inheritance,' will emerge. Ultimately, this study may help minimize current and future cognitive pitfalls in the development and execution of grand strategy, particularly when policy-makers face the daunting challenge of inherited war. This study establishes the foundation for a larger project that not only examines Vietnam more broadly, but that also analyzes how Image and Inheritance influenced grand strategy in Afghanistan.



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Introduction

After the brilliantly successful air campaign in Desert Storm, President George H. W. Bush exclaimed, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”¹ The same President Bush told the *New York Times* in 1992 that he hesitated to get involved in Bosnia because he did “not want to see the United States bogged down in any way into some guerrilla warfare [in Bosnia]. We’ve lived through that once already.”² After the Dayton Agreement that ended the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, President Clinton reflected on the resistance he encountered arguing for American peacekeepers, commenting that “[e]verybody said, oh, it was going to be just like Vietnam. It was going to be a bloody quagmire, even though there was a peace agreement.”³ Within nineteen days of the start of the air campaign in OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM, press reports and pundits circulated conjecture that the United States was risking another Vietnam. “It’s a flawed plan,” wrote William Kristol in the *Washington Post* and on October 31st the *New York Times* headlined R.W. Apple Jr.’s article, “Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam?”⁴ The second Bush administration’s aversion to any formal nation-building mission also stemmed from wanting to avoid the kind of dubious and protracted military missions and objectives that plagued Vietnam.⁵ Vietnam analogies so permeated the public discourse of the Afghanistan War that when Mazari Sharif fell in November 2001 and U.S. progress became apparent, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously joked with the press corps: “The suggestions that things had not gone well initially were uninformed. It looked like nothing was happening. Indeed, it looked like we were in a”—the Secretary paused so that the reporters could complete his sentence in unison—“quagmire.”⁶

¹ Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 12.

² Dag Henriksen, *NATO's Gamble: Combining Diplomacy and Airpower in the Kosovo Crisis, 1998-1999* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 73.

³ Henriksen, *NATO's Gamble: Combining Diplomacy and Airpower in the Kosovo Crisis, 1998-1999*, 85.

⁴ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 278-79. Apple wrote that “their role sounds suspiciously like that of the adviser sent to Vietnam in the early 1960s” and referenced the Soviet Union’s failures in Afghanistan despite “their good tanks in great numbers.” See also, Woodward 262, 269, 283 for additional press reports and questions.

⁵ Woodward, *Bush at War*, 220, 41, 310.

⁶ Woodward, *Bush at War*, 313.

In February of 2009, during a National Security Council review of potential options in Afghanistan, the Obama administration debated whether it should send more ground troops in support of General McKiernan's emerging Counterinsurgency strategy. Richard Holbrooke brought the debate to an abrupt halt when he asserted that "[h]istory should not be forgotten," referencing the same discussions President Johnson and his advisers had had over Vietnam 44 years earlier.⁷ "Ghosts," Obama whispered into the "confused silence."⁸ The Vietnam War has embedded itself deep within the American political and military psyche. Whether decision-makers invoke Vietnam for points of caution or contrast, the war lingers. One of the central books for Obama and his advisors in framing their agenda for the Afghanistan War was Gordon M. Goldstein's *Lessons In Disaster*, a candid assessment of Presidential and Institutional decision-making during the Vietnam War.⁹ Vietnam's ghosts come in many shades. Some literary works, such as Lewis Sorley's *A Better War*, see the specters of failed political objectives that compromised valid military strategy and undercut victory.¹⁰ Others, like David Halberstam in *The Best and The Brightest*, point to a polity that was too smart for its own good, blaming arrogance and deception by the ruling elite for America's ill-fated slide to defeat.¹¹ In *Derelection of Duty*, H.R. McMaster laments that the "disaster in Vietnam was not the result of impersonal forces but a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisers...and, above all, the abdication of responsibility to the American people."¹² Robert Pape calls the American civilian and military leadership's failure to

⁷ Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 97.

⁸ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 97.

⁹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 129-30, 254, 79, 332. Goldstein derives six lessons from his analysis of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations between 1961-65. 1). Counselors Advise but Presidents Decide; 2). Never Trust the Bureaucracy to Get It Right; 3). Politics Is the Enemy of Strategy; 4). Conviction Without Rigor Is a Strategy for Disaster; 5). Never Deploy Military Means in Pursuit of Indeterminate Ends; 6). Intervention Is a Presidential Choice, Not an Inevitability. See, Goldstein, Gordon M., *Lessons In Disaster: McGeorge Bundy And The Path To War In Vietnam* (New York, NY: Times Books, 2008).

¹⁰ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999).

¹¹ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest Audible Audio Edition* (New York, NY: Random House Inc, 2007).

¹² H. R. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 334.

pay sufficient attention “to the relationship between American military action and the enemy’s goals [the] decisive error” in Vietnam.¹³

Undoubtedly, there is a litany of perspectives and nuances on Vietnam refracted through history’s prism. But no historical reflection, as George Kennan points out, can give us *the* answer: “The historian can never prove that a better comprehension of realities would have prevented any specific calamity or obviated any of the major human predicaments. He can only say that in the law of averages it should have helped.”¹⁴ History can tell us what might have been helpful or unhelpful but it can’t tell us, for certain, that if only the actors had done this or that, things would have turned out exactly as desired. Policy and war are sticky. Information is certainly never perfect and strategy is rarely flawless.

Unlike baseball, there is no “perfect game.” Then again, even in baseball perfection is elusive—as fans and players discovered in June 2010 following the game between Detroit and Cleveland. Following the game, consensus could not be reached whether Detroit pitcher Armando Galarraga did in fact pitch the 21st perfect game in history after instant-replay revealed umpire Jim Joyce mistakenly called Cleveland’s runner safe.¹⁵ The ultimate decision to not award Galarraga with a perfect game angered as many as it satisfied, demonstrating that “truth” is rarely without caveat. What this all means, really, is that not just politics but anything involving people is sticky. No matter the strength of conviction, there is no absolute truth, solution, or satisfaction. Otherwise, wars’ problems would fold neatly in their boxes to be shelved. There would be no need to dredge up the past repeatedly, thinking that maybe, this time, if we hold them just right and shine the light just so, wars’ confounding mysteries will finally give themselves up. If there were such absoluteness, we could just tally the wins and losses and get on with our lives. But there isn’t. There are only shades. And those shades of Vietnam still echo and rattle and haunt our halls of power. As alluded to in the opening of this paper, images of Vietnam ripple under the surface of current policy just as they have done for decades.

¹³ Robert Anthony Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1996), 210.

¹⁴ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, Expanded ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 90.

¹⁵ Ben Walker, “Selig Won’t Overturn Call That Cost Perfect Game,” *NBC Sports*, 3 June 2010. <http://nbcports.msnbc.com/id/37479309/ns/sports-baseball/>. (Accessed 25 July 2010).

The war is part of our national schema, which filters and shapes how we think about conflicts today and informs the how, where, and why of American foreign policy--as very well it should.

At its peak in 1968, more than 537,377 American servicemen were deployed to Vietnam, and by its end more than 58,000 troops had died.¹⁶ The United States spent nearly \$200 billion (\$660 billion in current US dollars) on Vietnam.¹⁷ In addition to the costs in men and material, Vietnam incurred great spiritual costs. Resentment, disillusionment, even an occasional nationalistic amnesia, have colored post-Vietnam America, spawned a wide body of literature, and burrowed into the minds of citizens, soldiers, and decision-makers.¹⁸ That Vietnam was such an inflective event means any analysis of the war is ripe with both opportunity and danger. Though no two wars are alike, and no claim is here made that *Afghanistan is like Vietnam*, there are most certainly contemporary lessons to be drawn from *America's Longest War*. The danger comes in trying to uncover the *real* story and the *real* lessons. Politics and war are sticky and truth is elusive. How individuals image events initially may be very different from *reality* and both image and reality evolve. For our part, we will accept that the true story and lessons change over time. Vietnam may well be frozen in the past, but it continues to live and evolve through history. As mentioned, countless books and documents exist on the Vietnam War, and this paper will make no claim to encapsulate or do justice to them, nor does it attempt to overthrow one school of thought for another. Instead, given the influence Vietnam continues to exert, I thought it appropriate to once again shake the hornet's nest and see what flies out.

Despite the many contrasts between Vietnam and Afghanistan, there is one undeniably congruent aspect that links both wars—each war spans several Presidential administrations. Additionally, Vietnam and Afghanistan cost far more in money, people, and time than was ever initially intended, and Presidents of both parties were forced to wrestle with these conflicts. Vietnam provides the opportunity to examine war as

¹⁶“The Surprising Lessons of Vietnam.” *Newsweek*, 16 November 2009, 39. See also, John Kerry, “Beware The Revisionists,” *Newsweek*, 16 November 2009, 40.

¹⁷ Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows; The Guerrilla in History*, [1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

¹⁸ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed., *America in Crisis* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1986), 272-81.

inheritance from the vantage point of history through a lens of our choosing. In so doing, we might find value for modern decision makers wrestling with their own inherited conflicts. Since Vietnam is today so embedded in our national political and military schema, with both decision-makers and pundits drawing on their own images of the conflict, it is appropriate to examine how Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon themselves saw the war. How did each of these three Vietnam-era presidents' images of Vietnam shape their agendas and outcomes? What was pushed forward across administrations and how did each ascending president contend with the war's inertia and subsequently formulate his own image to represent the Vietnam problem? What might each president's image reveal about the meta-construct of containment strategy and the overarching tenets and "truths" of the Cold War? Most importantly, perhaps, and the central question of this essay: *How did each president's image shape agendas, drive outcomes, and determine his successor's inheritance? What can decision-makers today learn from this process?*

To that end, we examine primary and secondary sources, drawing out each President's image of the war, his agenda, and the outcomes of his approach. In the parlance of political science, we attempt to treat the Vietnam War as the *dependent* variable while presidential images and agendas serve as the *independent* variables. Though we draw on documents, literature, perspectives, and correspondences involving various actors, institutions, principals, and advisors, our units of analysis are the presidents themselves, who represent the aggregate of the Foreign Policy Establishment. The Presidents provide the lens through which we seek to ascertain the relationship between image, agenda, and outcomes in national decision making and the degree to which this relationship affects subsequent administrations. Today's battlespace may in fact swell with ever-increasing networks of machines, weaponry, and information and communication technologies (ICTs), yet war remains a distinctly human affair. As such, war's study not only leads to but demands sober consideration of the cognitive forces that drive and shape it. By examining the relationship between image, agendas, and outcomes, current and future decision-makers might better anticipate predispositions and minimize the degree to which predilections subvert policy and dissuade effective representation of problems. "We must be clear-sighted in beginnings," wrote Montaigne, "for, as in their budding we discern not the danger, so in their full growth we perceive not

the remedy.”¹⁹ War is seeded in image, so it is in image where we must look for our clearer beginnings.

Roadmap

Chapter 1

While it is not our purpose to establish and subsequently prove a theoretical model for explaining presidential behavior and policy, the study warrants a review of cognitive theory. Neither this study nor the theories it reviews purport to offer a comprehensive explanatory model for political behavior in war or in peace. However, since it is our purpose to inspire a keener awareness of the influences cognitive forces have on decision making, some foundational concepts will prove useful. To that end, we will explore Stephen Hawking’s theory of Model-Dependent Realism, cognitive theories from Robert Jervis, Yuen Foong Khong, and others, as well as Kenneth E. Boulding’s Image theory. Cognitive processes in international decision-making afford a wide body of literature. We review some of the more salient aspects as a way to present the Vietnam War as a ‘problem’ both defined and ‘solved’ through the belief structures of the Presidents.

Chapter 2

Though the United States had been involved in Vietnam throughout the Eisenhower Administration, the study begins with an analysis of John F. Kennedy’s administration. While Kennedy refrained from the overt commitment of U.S. combat troops to Vietnam, he did greatly increase America’s commitments there as he simultaneously pursued a grander vision. Kennedy pushed for broader, unconventional military capabilities, interpreting the new fronts of the Cold War as aligning with ‘wars of national liberation.’ Kennedy’s approach to Vietnam, like all Presidents of the era, was also very much informed by Cold War containment theory. Kennedy broached a new dimension, however, by departing from Eisenhower’s policies of massive retaliation and sought a more nimble position through what became known as Flexible Response. Despite Kennedy’s ‘triumph’ in 1961, when he resisted pressures from the Joint Chiefs for combat troops, the young President did increase the number of U.S. advisors from

¹⁹ Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 29.

400 to over 16,000. Additionally, his correspondence with South Vietnamese President Diem, his speeches, and policy papers reveal his increasing concerns over Vietnam and his sense of the increasing importance of the country to US security interests. These facts, combined with the somewhat complicit nature of the United States' role in the coups and ultimate assassination of Diem in 1963 transformed US commitment from a 'toe-hold' to a 'foot-hold.' As one State Dept official commented, after Kennedy, the US was "now responsible for the government in the South."

Chapter 3

The assassination of Kennedy on the heels of Diem's murder left Johnson with some large shoes to fill. In his first speech to the nation, Johnson committed himself to the continuance of Kennedy's policies. The problem was that though Kennedy's policies had firmly planted US boots in Vietnam, the exact shape of the foot to fill them was still not decided. Like many of his political generation, Johnson was committed to protecting the world from communism. Johnson was determined not to let Kennedy's and the Democrats' rise to power flail under his watch, and a successful Vietnam policy was critical. Losing Vietnam, in Johnson's words, would result in "a mean and destructive debate...that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy."²⁰ Despite Johnson's concern over losing Vietnam, the war was ultimately a distraction from his real "mistress," the Great Society Program. And, just like a man with multiple wives or a penchant for illicit liaisons, Johnson's Vietnam policy was dubious, surreptitious, harried, and fraught with intrigue. Johnson was a deft politician and his closed and even secretive leadership style contrasted sharply with Kennedy's more open forum for debate. Johnson wrestled with the inheritance he desired, fulfilling Roosevelt's New Deal legacy, and the inheritance he had, which was the United States' commitment to Vietnam. The policy debates of 1964 and the ultimate decision in 1965 to send combat troops (and the manner in which it was conducted) provide ample insight into Johnson's image and into how his perceptions interacted with 'reality.' By 1968, Johnson's 'behind-the-scenes' policy development were exposed and he confronted overwhelming domestic forces. Johnson's treatment of protestors and the disparity between how he had

²⁰ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1976), 252-53.

portrayed progress in Vietnam and how the public came to perceive the war there ultimately ended his presidency.

Chapter 4

Before even taking office, Nixon sponsored a RAND study and strategic review of Vietnam. Convinced that Johnson's undulating policies were weak and reflective of a poor understanding of the real international environment, Nixon ascended to office with the vision of aggressively and succinctly putting an end to Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger had a grand vision for rearranging the world and saw Vietnam as a springboard to make that vision a reality. Nixon's ascendance to the presidency also represented yet another resurrection of his political career, and he simultaneously attempted to recreate himself while he redefined the war. Unable to suppress his obsession with 'winning,' Nixon soon prosecuted a 'savage policy' aimed at ending the war quickly. The disparity between 'The New Nixon' and how he conducted the war exposed him to even more criticism than his predecessor, however, which he was never able to fully reconcile. Still, Nixon continued to pursue and eventually 'won his bigger game' through détente and a vigorous air campaign that facilitated America's withdrawal from the war. Nixon formed a new relationship with China and was the first U.S. President to set foot in the Kremlin since the start of the Cold War. At home, however, Nixon attacked his critics and his rivals with the same ferocity thrown against North Vietnam and ultimately his 'honorable peace' is overshadowed by its brutal tactics.

Conclusion

The final section summarizes findings on the relationship between image, agendas, and attempts to make general conclusions regarding the role image played in each administration. Broader implications are also explored concerning the relationship between Presidential image, war, and inheritance. The study of Vietnam as an inherited war may not only inform policy-makers as they wage America's current wars, but the findings might also demand a reevaluation of the inherited assumptions that led us to battle in the first place.

Chapter 1

From Quarks to Cognition: An Overview of Image Theory

It is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience...the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office.

-- Henry Kissinger, 1979

Wars are, by their nature, inflective political, social, and psychological events and tend to ‘hyper-excite’ both the polity and the public. Individual and organizational behaviors, processes, predilections, and the fissures and bonds that exist within and between the various bodies of the democratic decision-making processes are exacerbated in war. The above contention assumes that if war truly is ‘policy by other means,’ then not only is war waged to solve policy problems, but how war is conceived and waged reflects a particular perception of the world. In the subsequent chapters, the administrations of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon are examined so as to identify not only how each man’s image influenced his war policies, but also to trace in part the lineage and effects of Presidential image across administrations. There is a fundamental tension each President faces once in office, between the institutional and policy inertia (what Stephen Randolph and others describe as the ‘state of play’) and his own agenda.¹ Inherited wars offer a unique opportunity to examine the nexus of these two, sometimes countervailing and sometimes complimentary, forces.

There are two general schools of thought or “lumps” as John Gaddis terms them, with regard to the interplay between the individual and the institution in the formation of grand policy.² Some argue that inertia and events quickly overtake individual agendas and that structural forces inevitably dictate Presidential decisions. Others believe that individuals can ‘make a difference,’ and that individual perceptions drive outcomes. The position of this paper is that although the interplay between individuals and structure is

¹ Randolph, Stephen, Dr. Personal correspondence with author, 30 November 2010.

² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), vii-viii. In characterizing historians, Gaddis describes them as either “lumpers” or splitters. His characterization is adapted here to characterizers the general, albeit overly simplified, division between individualists and ‘structuralists.’

iterative, individual perceptions matter. Therefore, while the structural state of play during the Vietnam era is covered, the focus is on the outcomes driven by the influences of individual perceptions. As such, the analysis requires an understanding of some of the key concepts from cognitive theory in foreign policy decision-making and clarification of what is meant by 'Presidential image.' To that end, we first look briefly at Stephen Hawkins' theory of *Model-Dependent Realism* to demonstrate how theoretical advances in modern physical science correlate to cognitive theories in International Relations. We then review some of the key literature of Robert Jervis, Yuen Khong, and others to provide a background on cognitive and schema theory in foreign-policy decision-making. Finally, Kenneth Boulding's Image-theory is reviewed and Boulding's definitions are used to frame this essay's use of Image. It should be noted that the purpose of this essay is not to develop a new cognitive theory or model. Rather, this work draws on and summarizes major aspects of the existing literature so as to provide a lens through which to view cognitive influences on Presidential agendas and outcomes.

Quantum Physics and Model-Dependent Realism

In his book, *The Grand Design*, theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking draws on theoretical and proven concepts from quantum-theory to establish what he describes as a theory of *Model-Dependent Realism*. Quantum theory emerged in the 1920s as a reaction to the inability of classical Newtonian science to accurately explain and predict the behavior of atomic and subatomic particles.³ While Newtonian science proved quite efficient at predicting the movements of large bodies, scientists discovered that matter at the micro-level exhibited wave-like properties and that existing scientific laws could not account for their behavior. Newtonian physics was "built on a framework reflecting everyday experience in which material objects have an individual

³ S. W. Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, Kindle Edition ed. (New York, NY: Bantam Books), 50-60. Quantum physics, also referred to as quantum mechanics or quantum theory, emerged in the 1920s coincident with the scientific exploration, observation, and manipulation of atomic and subatomic particles. Traditional 'Newtonian Science' was unable to dependably explain or predict the behavior of subatomic particles. Two particular discoveries of particle behavior were of central significance. First, observation influenced particle behavior. Second, particles existed in multiple states simultaneously. In concert, these two discoveries defied the objective reality and prescriptions of Newtonian science. Some major contributors to the field include Erwin Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, Max Planck, and Richard Feynman. For more reading on quantum physics, see Alastair, Rae, I.M., *Quantum Mechanics* (New York: Taylor Francis Group, 2002); William K. Ford, *The Quantum World: Quantum Physics for Everyone* (Harvard, CT: Harvard University Press, 2005); James Gleick, *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*.

existence, can be located at definite locations, follow definite paths, etc.”⁴ In short, Newtonian physics ascribed to objects behaviors that had to comply with an objective set of laws and assumed that, once discovered, those laws afforded accurate predictions of past, present, and future. In experimenting with and observing subatomic particles, however, it was demonstrated that matter can and does actually change its behavior in unpredictable and unforeseeable ways.⁵ The framework for quantum physics thus introduced “a completely different conceptual schema...in which an object’s position, path, and even its past and future are not precisely determined.”⁶

Two key principles emerge from quantum theory that inform Hawking’s concept of model-dependent realism, which in turn provides correlation between the physical sciences and cognitive theory. The first is the *uncertainty principle*, which states that “no matter how much information we obtain or how powerful our computing capabilities, the outcomes of physical processes cannot be predicted with certainty.”⁷ The second principle comes from physicist John Wheeler’s ‘delayed choice’ experiment, which proved that *observing a system actually alters the course of that system*.⁸ If a system’s past, present, and future are uncertain, and if observation actually influences the course of a system, then a system “has not just one history, but every possible history.”⁹ Furthermore, as opposed to Newtonian physics where theory derived from an objective reality, reality now becomes the effect of theory. Or, as Hawking posits, reality becomes a reflection of the model used to describe it. A significant consequence of Hawking’s proposal is that the point of finding an objective “reality” becomes moot, and models have meaning only in so far as they are useful to the user. Each model is also the product

⁴ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 622-24.

⁵ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 585-602. Named the “two-slit experiment” and originally performed with light waves in the 1930s, Austrian Physicists in 1999 demonstrated how alternately firing molecules at two slits in a barrier proved that matter behaved differently depending on whether one or both slits were open. Newtonian physics would dictate that the same number of molecules would flow through each slit whether or not the other slit was open or blocked. However, what scientists found was that the number of molecules that flowed through each slit would change when the other slit was open. It appeared as if the molecules were “choosing” an alternate path, which contradicts Newtonian assumptions that matter behaves in accordance with natural mandates.

⁶ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 625-29.

⁷ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 665-72. The uncertainty principle was first formulated by Werner Heisenberg in 1926. Heisenberg tells us that “there are limits to our ability to simultaneously measure certain data, such as position and velocity.”

⁸ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 806-15.

⁹ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 56-62.

of an individual's physical and cognitive processes, so that usefulness is not a matter of accuracy, but rather a matter of function. As such, models will endure so long as they provide functionality for the user, and each model is the reflection of a particular *reality*.

Model-dependent realism...is based on the idea that our brains interpret the input from our sensory organs by making a model of the world. When such a model is successful at explaining events, we tend to attribute to it...the quality of reality or absolute truth...but there may be different ways in which to model the same physical situation...If two such models accurately predict the same events, one cannot be said to be more real than the other...Our perception—and hence the observations on which our theories are based—is not direct, but is shaped by a kind of lens, the interpretive structure of our human brains.¹⁰

Hawking explains that there are both physical and cognitive processes that determine how the human brain creates models. During the vision process, for example, signals are transmitted along the optic nerve to the brain. These signals are incomplete and of poor quality due to the blind spot where the optic nerve attaches to the retina. The data is further obscured by the fact that the high fidelity of the human eye is limited to about one-degree around the center of the retina.¹¹ The data the brain receives through the optic nerve is “like a badly pixilated picture with a hole in it.”¹² In order to translate the incomplete and blurry data into useful information, the brain combines the data from both eyes and fills “in gaps on the assumption that the visual properties of neighboring locations are similar.”¹³ Through a process of interpolation and assumption, the brain translates an incomplete array of two-dimensional data into a three-dimensional model of reality.¹⁴ Reality is thus created through the process by which the brain patterns data. The human brain invokes what it *knows* to fill in the gaps for what it cannot see. When the brain is confronted with data that grossly contradicts its own understanding of reality, it will even go so far as to align incoming data to correspond to preexisting and known patterns. As example to this phenomenon, Hawkins describes how individuals were given eyeglasses that inverted incoming images so that the world appeared upside down.

¹⁰ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 60-65, 450-52.

¹¹ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 453-54. High-resolution is limited to an area of about 1 degree around the center of the human retina.

¹² Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 454.

¹³ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 457-58.

¹⁴ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 459.

Over time, without having to remove the glasses, the test subjects' own brains 'righted' the world and countermanded the effects of the glasses.¹⁵

Dove-tailing on quantum theory and the peculiar and sometimes ambiguous, paradoxical behavior of subatomic particles, Hawking describes some of the key physiological aspects and limitations of the human brain. Through the concepts described in model-dependent realism, Hawking also illuminates how the human brain collects, arranges, and even invents data to create a complete picture of reality. The reality that is created is necessarily model-based because that is how the human brain works. Cognitive theorists describe the belief structures that influence perceptions and decisions in foreign policy in much the same way that Hawking describes model-based realities. Sometimes referred to as Long-Term-Memory (LTM), belief structures exist as "mental-models" whose architecture is comprised of "a network of linked nodes [of] conceptual information."¹⁶ New information and stimuli received from the external world is processed through short-term memory and given meaning and context when the incoming stimuli are attached to the preexisting cognitive architecture—much like atoms bonding to a molecule.¹⁷ Belief structures fill in the gaps between individual information packets, and thus cognitive processes contextualize meaning and shape subsequent behavior.

Whether he intended to or not, Hawking provides a bridge between the physical sciences and psychology and illustrates how theories in physical sciences have recognized the important influences of perceptions on individual realities and their effects on the physical world. Revolutions in quantum theory and the experiments Hawking cites as proof of its efficacy demonstrate not only how perceptions and cognitive processes create individual realities, but also illuminate how the application of perceptions (through observation) can affect the physical world. The relationship Hawking establishes between observer and reality provides a useful backdrop to the following discussion on cognitive theory because it demonstrates the quantifiable tie between the conceptual and the existential world. If through observation human beings

¹⁵ Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 458-61.

¹⁶ Charles S. Taber, "The Interpretation of Foreign Policy Events: A Cognitive Process Theory," in *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, ed. Donald A. Sylvan (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 31.

¹⁷ Taber, "A Cognitive Process Theory," 31, 33-34.

can affect particle behavior, and if quantum theory reliably proves the existence of an infinite number of past and future universes limited only by the imaginings of the human mind, then turning to the perceptions of some of the world's most powerful leaders as a way to understand a war is not only justifiable...but essential.

Schema, Analogies, and Problem Representation

Much has been written on the influence of cognitive forces on decision makers. Both Robert Jervis and Yuen Foong Khong have made tremendous contributions to the literature and to the understanding of the role cognitive forces play in foreign policy. Khong's Analogical Explanation (AE) framework draws extensively on schema theory and brilliantly delineates how analogies influence policy decisions and provide critical cognitive devices to help policymakers perform six central decision-making tasks.¹⁸ Schema theory assumes that the "mind organizes and processes information around some type of internal perceptual or cognitive structure."¹⁹ Schemas persist in the face of contradictory evidence, acting as "cognitive misers," and are the "building blocks of cognition."²⁰ When North Korea invaded the South in 1950, for example, President Truman's 'cognitive structure' interpreted the North's actions in light of other instances where the West had failed to act against aggression and the aggression continued. "Truman thus arrived at the axiom that aggression unchecked means general war later."²¹ A more recent example is found in the President George W. Bush's administration's belief that the Clinton administration's retaliation for the 1998 embassy bombings was weak and invited future attacks. "The antiseptic notion of launching a cruise missile into some guys, you know, tent, really is a joke...people viewed that as the impotent America..."²² Schemas are cognitive frameworks that tend to codify anticipations and

¹⁸ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9-10. "Analogies (1) help define the nature of the situation confronting the policymaker; (2) help assess the stakes and (3) provide prescriptions. They help evaluate alternative options by (4) predicting their chances of success; (5) evaluating their moral rightness, and (6) warning about dangers associated with the options."

¹⁹ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 42-43. As adapted from Markus and Zajonc, "The Cognitive Perspective," 143, 201.

²⁰ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 25, 27. As adapted from Rumelhart, David, "Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition," in *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension*, ed. Rand Spiro, Bertram Bruce, and William Brewer (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980), 33-34.

²¹ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 26.

²² Woodward, *Bush at War*, 38. President Bush as quoted during interview with Bob Woodward.

influence how events are interpreted. Just as the schema of Newtonian physics discussed in the previous section inspired assumptions on the predictable behavior of matter, schemas in international policy provide predetermined departure points for how decision-makers interpret and respond to particular events.

The significance of schemas as a departure point for decision-makers should not be underestimated. When assumptions and predilections are effectively entrenched in the minds of leaders, the process of deciding how to deal with particular policy issues starts downstream of the assumptions embedded within the schema. Robert Jervis describes how schemas are built around preconceived notions of 'self' and 'other' that lead decision-makers to perceive events and behaviors as those preconceived notions would dictate.²³ Expectations create a perceived reality where "ambiguous and even discrepant information" is assimilated to reinforce that reality.²⁴ The influences of predispositions on decision-makers are particularly acute when events force a confrontation between a positive 'self' image and a negative or hostile 'other.' During the Korean War, for example, the United States overlooked the fact that its actions on the Peninsula could be interpreted as aggressive and threatening to China's national security.²⁵ China responded in much the same way the United States would probably respond if the Chinese Army was suddenly massed along the Canadian border, yet China's actions were immediately interpreted as aggressive. The United States' positive self-image denied consideration of the possibility that its own actions could be perceived as aggressive. The United States' general foreign policy schema during the Cold War characterized America and its Capitalist allies as 'good,' and the Soviets and its Communist allies as 'bad.' Interpretation of, and response to, behaviors and events started downstream of these general assumptions.

There are many such examples throughout the Cold War. Graham Allison describes the Soviets' decision to deploy SS-20 intermediate-range missiles that targeted Europe in the late 1970s as "the most fateful force posture decision of the Soviet

²³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 68.

²⁴ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 68.

²⁵ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 72-73.

government before its collapse.”²⁶ The SS-20 case is compelling because it demonstrates not only how the Soviet’s self-image muted consideration of the West’s perspective, but the United State’s reaction to the missiles also shows how policy-makers failed to understand the SS-20s as part of routine Soviet modernization. Allison describes America’s vehement response to the SS-20s as a product of “organizational repertoires and programs.”²⁷ In another instance, when Czechoslovakia consolidated under the Soviets in 1948, Washington interpreted the move as expansionist, despite having approved Soviet Occupation in 1945 and the “elevation of an already dominant Czechoslovak Communist Party.”²⁸ By 1948, American perceptions of the Soviet Union had evolved from potential ally to a personification of a growing Communist threat. Such historical examples testify to the influence perceptions and schemas have on how policy-makers interpret and react to events. Perhaps most importantly, schemas shift the starting point for problem-representation downstream of the assumptions embedded within the schema. As such, event interpretations and policy decisions may emanate from a faulty or misaligned premise and start events down a path preordained not by objective factors, but rather by subjective perceptions. In this way perceptions effectively create their own reality.

Another way that policy-makers build realities and ‘fill in the gaps’ when confronted with major policy questions is by drawing on historical analogies. Khong examines how Johnson’s use of historical analogies (Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and Korea) influenced his 1965 decision to commit combat troops in Vietnam. Khong’s focus is on the “use and misuse of history” by policy-makers through cognitive processes.²⁹ Using the key findings and theories from the social cognitive research program, Khong establishes how decision-makers use analogies because the similarities (real or imagined) between events simplify understanding of complex situations.³⁰ Khong also ascribes

²⁶ Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Longman, 1999), 184-85.

²⁷ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 185. As adapted from McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Chaos About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988).

²⁸ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 73-74.

²⁹ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 255.

³⁰ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 13-14.

For summaries of the cognitive psychological research experiments and theories that Khong draws on, see, Markus and Zajonc, “The Cognitive Perspective,” and Stella Vosniadou and Andrew Ortony, eds., *Similarity and Analogical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

principles from schematic processing theory to President Johnson's decision-making process. Through schematic processing, once an analogy is accessed, it "(1) allows the perceiver to go beyond the information given, (2) processes information 'top-down,' and (3) can lead to the phenomenon of perseverance."³¹

Similar to the way Hawking describes the processes by which the brain fills in the gaps with known patterns during the vision process, so too analogies provide 'knowledge structures' that help decision-makers cope with enormous amounts of ambiguous information.³² However, as both Khong and Jervis point out, the gaps are sometimes 'a bridge too far' and analogies are overstretched. To use a sports analogy, knowledge structures often 'outkick their coverage,' and the results are overly "simplistic and mistaken [in their] interpretations of incoming stimuli."³³ According to Khong's study, when Johnson confronts the 1965 decision to commit combat troops in Vietnam, he misuses the Korean War analogy and allows the assumptions of that analogy to influence his policy despite substantial contrary evidence.³⁴

Jervis attributes the decisions of Johnson and others to the maxim posited by Max Weber, who argued that it is "[n]ot ideas but material and ideal interests [that] govern men's conduct."³⁵ Jervis argues that no political theology based on interest can "explain interventions in countries such as Vietnam."³⁶ Vietnam only makes sense, Jervis says, if "decision-makers either place a high intrinsic value on seeing insignificant states remain non-communist or believe in the domino theory."³⁷ Belief structures, schemas, and the images that constitute them move policy. Alexander George proposed that all political

³¹ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 14.

³² Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 13.

³³ Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, 14. The notion of knowledge structures "outkicking their coverage" is this author's own, but it is consistent with what Khong describes as "the phenomenon of perseverance." Jervis describes the theory of "cognitive consistency" in which "belief structures tend toward consistency or balance." According to Jervis, rational consistency does not imply that interpretations and subsequent behaviors accurately reflect reality, but rather that interpretations and behaviors are consistent with existing belief structures. See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 117-121. See also, Sidney Verba, "Assumptions of Rationality and Non-rationality in Models of the International System," in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba, ed., *The International System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 94.

³⁴ George Ball, "'How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Our Viet-Nam Policies?," *The Atlantic Monthly* 320, (July, 1972): 36.

³⁵ Max Weber, Hans Heinrich Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1946), 280.

³⁶ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 9.

³⁷ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 9.

leaders have an “operational code,” which he defines as “a set of assumptions about the world, formed early in one’s career, that tend to govern without much subsequent variation the way one responds to crises afterward.”³⁸ Building on George’s theories, John Gaddis extrapolates a set of “strategic” or “geopolitical codes” that he suggests define Presidential “assumptions about American interests in the world, potential threats to them, and feasible responses, that tend to be formed either before or just after an administration takes office.”³⁹ Between 1948 and 1975, the overarching schema that moved U.S. strategic decisions was the policy of containment, and Gaddis argues that five distinct geopolitical codes, each variations of an overall containment strategy, define America’s grand strategy after WW II.⁴⁰

Security Schemas of the Vietnam Era

Gaddis divides each containment strategy into distinct eras that stretch from Truman to Carter. The first era is characterized by George Kennan’s original strategy of containment that he described during the *Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures* and in his two essays, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” and “America and the Russian Future.”⁴¹ The second era stems from the tenets established by NSC-68 and reflects the

³⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, viii. As adapted from, Alexander L. George, “Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured Focused Comparisons,” in Paul Gordon Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York, NY: 1979), 43-68.

³⁹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: a Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, ix.

⁴⁰ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, ix. 1). George Kennan’s original strategy of containment implemented by the Truman administration between 1947-49. 2). The period between 1950-53, defined by the assumptions surrounding NSC-68 following the Korean War. 3). The “New Look” implemented by the Eisenhower-Dulles administration that defined the period between 1953-1961. 4). The era of “Flexible Response,” conducted by the Kennedy-Johnson administrations between 1961-1969. 5). The period from 1970-1979, defined by Nixon-Kissinger strategy of détente. Gaddis conducts a comparison between the five geopolitical codes as a way to delineate patterns in U.S. grand strategy. This paper draws on Gaddis’ structural divisions of U.S. grand strategy into ‘eras of containment’ in order to help define the larger Cold War context within which each Vietnam era president imagined and tried to solve the Vietnam War.

⁴¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, ix, 24-27, 54, 64, 69. Kennan coined the term ‘containment’ and postulated two fundamental objectives in foreign policy. First, “to protect the security of the nation, by which is meant the continued ability of this country to pursue the development of its internal life without serious interference, or threat of interference, from foreign powers.” Second, “to advance the welfare of its people, by promoting a world order in which this nation can make the maximum contribution to the peaceful and orderly development of other nations and derive maximum benefit from their experiences and abilities.” Kennan was adamant that “complete security or perfection of international environment will never be achieved” and that the best policies indicated “direction” as opposed to final “destinations.” For the Kennan lectures and essays, see Kennan, *George American Diplomacy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Kennan’s containment

Korean War's effects on American policy between 1950 and 1953.⁴² Secretary of State Dean Acheson captured the theme of NSC-68 in a speech he delivered to the National War College in 1952: "What we are trying to do," Acheson said, "is to find ways in which our power as a nation may match our responsibilities as a nation...The job before all of us today is to learn the ins and outs of power and policy so that our nation's intentions and the capacities to achieve these intentions may be brought into balance."⁴³ During the era of NSC-68, decision-makers were wrestling with how to effectively incorporate nuclear weapons into effective foreign policies. Reconciling the need to contain Communism with the threat of nuclear Armageddon proved difficult and expensive, and when Eisenhower took office he initiated the *New Look* in an effort to satisfy both growing strategic initiatives and budgetary restraints.

The New Look under Eisenhower describes Gaddis' third era of containment between 1953 and 1961. Truman had been unable to develop a "clear strategy for deriving political benefits from...nuclear weapons," and Eisenhower wanted to "regain the initiative."⁴⁴ Buoyed by technological breakthroughs, yet challenged by the costs of those breakthroughs, the Eisenhower administration determined in 1953 that "the dependence that we are placing on new weapons would justify completely some

strategy proposed three stages: 1). "Restore the balance of power left unstable by the defeats of Germany and Japan and by the simultaneous expansion of Soviet influence in Europe and Asia." 2). Discover and exploit the schisms between different Communist regimes and fragment "the international Communist movement." 3). Change the Soviet Union over time by promoting a new conceptualization of international relations, convincing "Russian leaders that their interests could better be served by learning to live with a diverse world than by trying to remake it in their image."

⁴² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, ix, 88-92, 115. NSC-68 departed from Kennan's version of containment by expanding U.S. commitment from the defending of strategic 'strong points' to a wider perimeter defense. NSC-68 more intimately coupled prestige, credibility, economics, and perceptions of national strength to balance of power theory, thus moving containment into non-military domains. NSC-68 assumed "Western weakness," that the West could not tolerate even short-term advances by Communists, that alliances were key in preemptively combating Communist advances, and that Soviet behavior could actually help the Western image. NSC-68 pivoted on the idea of collective security and expanded the aims of U.S. containment strategy. Despite the expansion of containment strategy into non-military domains, however, NSC-68 was still much more military-centric than the containment strategy developed under Eisenhower. For more detail on NSC-68, see NSC-68, April 14, 1950, FRUS: 1950, I, 240.

⁴³ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 124. Adapted from John Paton Davies memorandum, September 22, 1950, FRUS: 1950, VII, 754; Acheson national War College address, August 27, 1951, Acheson Papers, Box 69, "Classified Off the Record Speeches, 1947-52."

⁴⁴ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 144-46.

reduction in conventional forces.”⁴⁵ Eisenhower was obsessed with not letting the means destroy the ends, and believed Truman’s policy of retaliation equated to little more than a ‘tit for tat’ strategy that could not be economically sustained. Eisenhower also felt that Truman’s policies forced the United States to be reactive instead of proactive. Eisenhower thus advocated a more diverse policy that would draw on American technology and international partnerships to counterbalance, thwart, and deter Communist aggression. In his inaugural address, Eisenhower stated that the “defense of freedom” was “indivisible” and that all people and continents (Communists excluded) were “equal” and could not be forgotten.⁴⁶ The central idea of Eisenhower’s New Look was that the United States could provide a technological umbrella for its partners that would make Soviet-Communist aggression so costly that total war would become nearly impossible. A massive American nuclear arsenal, backed by the will to use it, would deter the Soviets, and the arsenal would also facilitate an affordable strategic posture—no longer requiring massive deployments.

The United States and the West, from Eisenhower’s perspective, was to develop asymmetric technological advantages and blend “nuclear deterrence, alliances, psychological warfare, covert action, and negotiations” that could in aggregate minimize costs and provide the security and time necessary for freedom to blossom in Communism’s stead.⁴⁷ Despite Eisenhower’s metered economic policies, the New Look was certainly ambitious. In a letter to Winston Churchill, Eisenhower described how every Communist advance was a three-fold loss for the West, where the West lost an ally, the Communists gained an ally, and Western prestige was compromised.⁴⁸ That Eisenhower held such a broad, zero-sum view of the contest between East and West reveals the amount of faith he placed in the New Look’s umbrella. The New Look departed from NSC-68 in that it intimately tied the defense of U.S. interests to security

⁴⁵ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 146. Adapted from, Hagerty Diary, January 5, 1954, Hagerty Papers, Box 1; Dulles to Eisenhower, September Korea/Security Policy.”

⁴⁶ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 128. See also, Eisenhower inaugural address, January 20, 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 1953, p 6.

⁴⁷ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 152, 59.

⁴⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 129.

policy instead of just focusing on “the repulsion of transitory threats.”⁴⁹ Eisenhower also conceptualized broader, albeit cheaper, means by which the United States could pursue its containment objectives. By 1959, however, events in Vietnam and elsewhere undermined the purported efficacies of Eisenhower’s New Look. Communism appeared on the march, and Kennedy entered office seeking a less binary containment strategy that was both more expansive and flexible. Kennedy desired not just to deter total war, but all wars.⁵⁰

Where Eisenhower had sought asymmetry through technology, Kennedy turned containment strategy back toward a symmetrical approach that could better accommodate and match not just Communist nuclear capabilities, but also their conventional and unconventional capacities. As Kennedy’s Presidential advisor Walt Rostow put it: “[W]e have generally been at a disadvantage in crises, since the Communists command a more flexible set of tools for imposing strain on the Free World—and a greater freedom to use them...We are often caught in circumstances where our only available riposte is so disproportionate to the immediate provocation that its use risks unwanted escalation or serious political costs...We must seek, therefore, to expand our arsenal of limited overt and covert countermeasures.”⁵¹ Kennedy wanted the ability to “act at all levels, ranging from diplomacy through covert action, guerrilla operations, conventional and nuclear war.”⁵² Eisenhower’s administration did open up additional spigots for American power, pursuing not just nuclear dominance but also an assortment of unconventional and covert operations, but these efforts were always tempered by Eisenhower’s sense of economics and did not go far enough from Kennedy’s perspective. George Herring writes that “the exigencies of the nuclear age” revived the theory of limited war in the mid-twentieth century, marking a significant evolution in and departure from the “American way of war.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 134.

⁵⁰ John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs,” PP of P, John F. Kennedy (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Online, 1961).

⁵¹ Rostow, draft, “Basic National Security Policy,” March 26, 1962, 173-174.

⁵² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 213.

⁵³ George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (University of Texas Press, 1994), 4. See also, Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973).

Limited-war theorists such as Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling insisted that governments must limit political objectives and use military action as a way to communicate with the adversary. Military objectives were to “exact good behavior or...oblige discontinuance of mischief, not destroy the subject altogether.”⁵⁴ In order to facilitate the kind of proportionality and precision limited-war theory demanded, Kennedy relied on more expansive civilian controls and a broader array of military instruments. Eisenhower departed from Truman when he sought greater political utility from nuclear weapons. Kennedy, in-turn, departed from Eisenhower when he attempted to wrest U.S. political options out from under policies that were overly reliant on nuclear weapons—ushering in the era of *Flexible Response*.

The era of Flexible Response lasted from 1961 to 1969 and manifested itself in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Though there were distinct differences between Kennedy and Johnson in how they pursued flexible-response strategies, the overarching assumptions of the policy were the same. In contrast to WW II paradigms, where the military served as the ‘final arbiter of kings,’ flexible response required that military force be woven into negotiations. Instead of seeking the adversary’s blanket capitulation, flexible response and limited war introduced an ebb and flow of military and non military actions, so that non-military instruments of containment became “at least as important as their military counterparts.”⁵⁵ A key aspect of flexible response was the tight civilian control over military action and the sometimes excruciatingly metered means by which military force was applied. Both Kennedy and Johnson believed that “force could be orchestrated in such a way as to communicate precise and specific signals.”⁵⁶

Such an orchestra required a high degree of “calibration” or “fine-tuning” in not only the type of force but also in the manner of its use. Kennedy, for example, emphasized and expanded Special Forces and covert operations in Vietnam. Johnson, on the other hand, greatly expanded the introduction of traditional military forces, yet

⁵⁴ Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1968* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 9.

⁵⁵ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 5. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 222.

⁵⁶ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 5.

curtailed the manner in which those forces were used.⁵⁷ Regardless of whether one views Flexible Response as ‘purifying’ military force by tying it so intimately to political objectives or instead sees it as corruptive and undermining military force, the fact remains that the advent of Flexible Response marks a distinct shift in the way in which policy-makers pursued containment strategies. When Richard Nixon ascends to office in 1969, he again reorients containment strategy and initiates the era of détente.⁵⁸

Nixon ushered in the era of détente, which marked a distinct shift in the relationships between the great powers during the Cold War. The conceptual roots of this new strategy came from Nixon and Kissinger’s belief that containment could be better served “based on a new combination of pressures and inducements that would, if successful, convince the Kremlin leaders that it was in their country’s interest to be “contained.”⁵⁹ Nixon wanted to create an intersection of interests that would serve not only the purposes of containment, but that would also dampen the severity of Vietnam’s impact on American policies. Ironically, after having built his career as a staunch anti-communist, Nixon decoupled (or at least greatly reduced) the tie between ideology and negotiations.

Where Kennedy and Johnson had prosecuted a flexible strategy based on means that could face-down Communism on all fronts, Nixon made the interests themselves more flexible. His overtures to China and Russia were possible in large part because he was so well known as a Republican crusader against Communism, and he used this

⁵⁷ During the Kennedy Administration, multiple covert operations against Hanoi and in South Vietnam were conducted. The most notable were those performed by Major General Landsdale. Kennedy authorized the introduction of 400 Special Forces Soldiers almost immediately in 1961 and cleared them for harassment and sabotage missions in South Vietnam as well as in the North. See Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 80-81, 231-233. President Johnson originally limited Marine and Army actions to within fifty miles of their bases in Vietnam and also was extremely restrictive on target selection and prosecution during OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER.

⁵⁸ According to Gaddis, détente translates from French to mean “calm, relaxation, easing, but it can also mean the trigger of a gun.” In Russian, the closest term to détente is *razriadka*, “which means “lessening,” or “reduction and relaxation.” *Razriadka* can also mean “discharging” or “unloading.” Détente implies a releasing of tension. The ‘trigger’ that was to release tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States under Nixon was a shift away from policies of ‘absolute security’ towards policies that promoted ‘relative security.’ Kissinger wrote in 1957 that absolute security was not possible, because for one state to be “totally satisfied” all other states had to be “totally dissatisfied.” Therefore, Nixon’s containment strategy incorporated a shared “relative insecurity” between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. See Kissinger, Henry A., *A World Restored* (New York, NY: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1957).

⁵⁹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 287.

reputation as a bulwark against attacks from American Hawks. At the same time, his more reasonable approach to relations with American adversaries appeased the more Dovish coalitions. Kennedy had reacted to the perceived rigidity of Eisenhower's policies, which he believed were too dependent on nuclear weapons, and Nixon reacted to the rigidity of Kennedy's policies, which he believed were too dependent on the transformation of America's adversaries. "No country," wrote Kissinger, "can act wisely simultaneously in every part of the globe at every moment of time."⁶⁰ Unlike Kennedy and Johnson, Nixon did not automatically equate "democratic governance" with "good governance" and believed that the degree to which America could transform nations internally was limited.⁶¹

Détente will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, as Nixon's containment strategy was an integral part of how he sought to reframe the Vietnam War. Nixon's détente strategy is also a key element in the study's argument that he sought to cultivate and exploit others' perceptions of him so as to affect his agenda, and those points are better reserved for the chapter dedicated to him. The containment strategies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson were introduced in more detail here in order to provide the background for their world image and subsequent policies. It is important at least to introduce all the different containment strategies, however, because they illustrate that within the meta-construct, there were subcategories that mirror images between Presidential administrations.

Containment formed the basic security schema for each of the Vietnam-era presidents, yet the nuances and delineations between each sub-strategy (operational code) reflect the distinctive way in which each President pursued the same ends. Eisenhower was committed to reducing the costs of containment through technology, yet broadened U.S. commitments. Kennedy and Johnson both attempted to temper military means within specific political objectives, yet they both expanded the means by which the United States would pursue those objectives. Flexible Response strategies and the theory of limited war manifested themselves throughout the 1960s in the Dominican Republic,

⁶⁰ As quoted by Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 277.

⁶¹ Richard M. Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 301-05.

the Bay of Pigs, and elsewhere.⁶² Still, even within the sub-strategy of Flexible Response that carried through both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, each President emphasized different means, with Johnson shifting towards a greater emphasis on ground troops and airpower in Vietnam. Nixon reconceived U.S. interests and the threats to those interests, incorporating Moscow and Beijing into joint efforts for stability through détente. Where Kennedy and Johnson put Vietnam on the front line in the total war against Communism, Nixon moved Vietnam back into the interior lines of the Cold War.

For each administration during Gaddis' five geopolitical eras of containment, the primary objective remained combating Communism and transforming Communist behavior on the macro-scale. Containment was the overarching schema, yet each Vietnam-era president perceived the means and strategies to best affect containment differently, and brought to Vietnam his respective Image of those means and ways. The different Presidential Images are reflected not only in the shifts within containment strategy, but also in how they perceived the adversary, allies, and in the particular agendas each President pursued in Vietnam. With a basic understanding of schema and some of the larger belief structures and strategic context of the Vietnam-era, we turn now to the theory of Image invoked in this essay.

Image

The Cold War was certainly dominated by powerful images and schemata. Perhaps due to the stakes of potential nuclear conflict and the sheer breadth and number of actors involved in the precarious balance between East and West, the Cold War was first and foremost a cognitive war.⁶³ The evolution of *Game Theory* and other literature both during and after the Cold War reflects the emphasis decision-makers placed on the iterative, psychological interactions between states.⁶⁴ According to Goldstein and

⁶² In 1964 President Johnson sent more than 20,000 American troops to the Dominican Republic to prevent the Communist military regime from retaining power in that country.

⁶³ Martha and Dorcas McCoy Cottam, "Image Change and Problem Representation after the Cold War," in *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making*, ed. Donald A. Sylvan (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117-19.

⁶⁴ For reading on Game Theory and its influence on U.S. Grand Strategy, see Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966). For additional reading on Evolutionary Game Theory and theories on collective cooperation and competition, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1984); Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and The Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

Freeman, international-relations models fall into three general categories: game theory, psychological theory, and quantitative-empirical theory.⁶⁵ Despite the differences between the three categories, there are two consistent elements through which states conceive their strategies--*reciprocity* and *cooperative initiatives*.⁶⁶ Psychological theory emphasizes the role perceptions play in calculating strategies of reprisal and cooperation.

As such, psychological theory affords a more predominant role to the influence of individual images on how policy-makers interpret, define, and behave in response to policy problems. Based on psychological theory, problems are defined through cognitive constructs and processes that determine a discrepancy between "the preferred state and the perceived current state."⁶⁷ In this way, belief structures not only define the desired end-state, but also define the problem. Inherited war spans administrations and thus provides multiple opportunities for decision-makers to represent and re-represent both the war and the solutions to it.⁶⁸ Over time, policy-makers must decide whether to A) continue the present course; B) change basic course but make adjustments; C) change course but not problem-representations; D) re-represent the problem; E) or reconsider fundamental goals.⁶⁹ Since belief-structures vary from president to president in accordance with the amalgam of their individual images, no two world views and no two perceptions of either the war or its solutions will be exactly the same. Additionally, when and how presidents decide whether to stay the course, change the course, or reconsider fundamental goals depends on their perceptions. If perceptions shape both how the war is defined and should be solved and those perceptions derive from a world view

⁶⁵ Joshua S. Goldstein and John R. Freeman, *Three-Way Street: Strategic Reciprocity in World Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6.

⁶⁶ Goldstein and Freeman, *Three-Way Street : Strategic Reciprocity in World Politics*, 6.

⁶⁷ Robert S. Billings and Charles F. Hermann, "Problem Identification in Sequential Policy Decision Making: The Re-Representation of Problems," in *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making*, ed. Donald A. Sylvan (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54-56.

⁶⁸ Billings, "The Re-Representation of Problems," 55. Problem Representation consists of two key stages: *Location*, which involves first detecting the gap between goals and the perceived current state and then placing the problem into cognitive categories (threat, opportunity, etc). The second stage, *Diagnosis*, involves a more thorough assessment of the causes and consequences of the problem. Location and Diagnosis in aggregate recognize a problem, categorize it, and then embed it in a more or less well-developed causal network. Since most policy problems and especially inherited wars are 'long-term,' policy-makers are forced to revisit and reevaluate and possibly redefine the problem and solutions continuously.

⁶⁹ Billings, "The Re-Representation of Problems," 57.

comprised of a collection of individual images, then it is important to understand the make-up of Image.

In 1957, Kenneth Boulding developed a theory of behavior based on an individual's *Image* of the world. According to Boulding, image is created through the accumulation of an individual's subjective knowledge. Every individual perceives herself as located in a particular space, in a particular time, in a network of human relationships, organizations, and emotions, and also as located in a "natural world" that operates according to a set of assumed and "reasonably" reliable operational laws.⁷⁰ Every locus of subjective knowledge also has layers and can be visualized as a series of concentric rings, expanding out from small to large. One's knowledge of his position in space, for example, might include seeing himself at his desk, in his office building, in downtown Manhattan, in New York City, in New York State, in America, on planet Earth, in the Milky Way Galaxy, etc. An individual's perceived locations in time and within organizations and human networks the past is similarly layered.

Each person reflects upon a past as they remember it, projects unto a future as they conceive it, and lives in a present as they perceive it. The temporal aspect of image blends with one's identity within, and perception of, organizations and human networks. A doctor with children might concurrently consider herself a mother, a brain surgeon, a hospital employee, the member of a profession, and a wife. Co-mingled with the doctor's image are a litany of past experiences and affiliations as well as anticipations for the future, based on the different ways she identifies herself, the organizations she works for, and those she competes with and competes for. How individuals locate themselves and perceive the various human networks of which they are a part is exceptionally complex. Human interactions swirl around a continuously evolving image of 'self' and 'other.' Bounding conceptions of time, space, self, and human networks are sets of natural laws. Natural laws, either overt or tacit, provide boundaries and define sets of assumptions that build an architecture within which human beings are reasonably able to adapt behaviors and expectations. Gravity, thermodynamics, the progression of time, and the combustion engine, all characterize natural laws upon which people generally rely to frame their

⁷⁰ Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1956), 3-5.

reality and to conduct their everyday lives. Understanding of natural laws and the interpretative conclusions drawn from one's knowledge of their location in space, time, and within human networks all combine to create a set of expectations. Individuals draw on these expectations to formulate a calculus of behavior that seeks to apply the aggregated knowledge set to their best advantage.⁷¹

The disparity between expectations and outcomes can be small or large, but that there is a gap is an important characteristic of Image theory. Even though Boulding asserts that Image is comprised of knowledge, he purposefully refrains from terming his hypothesis 'a theory of knowledge.' "Knowledge," says Boulding, "has an implication of validity, of truth. What I am talking about is what I believe to be true: my subjective knowledge."⁷² Behavior is governed not necessarily by reality, but rather by perception. Since perceived knowledge comprises image, and that knowledge affects behaviors, Boulding's central proposition is that *behavior depends on image*.⁷³ Robert Jervis draws on this very concept in his study of perception in international politics when he argues that the real question is not whether a particular perception is correct, but rather how perceptions translate information into decision and action.⁷⁴ Recall the anomalous behavior of subatomic particles encountered by early quantum physicists. Prior to quantum physics, expectations, scientific theories, and experiments were based on a reality perceived through Newtonian science. That scientists were not aware of some of the unique aspects of the atomic world did not mean that these aspects did not exist—quantum mechanics was just not yet a part of their existing image of reality. "The image is built up as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image [and] part of the image is the history of the image itself."⁷⁵ When individuals encounter stimuli that lie outside of their experience, the image must account for them. How image accounts for

⁷¹ 'Advantage' is not meant to imply rote rationality or the blind pursuit of self-interest. Rather, individuals will seek behaviors that they perceive as most likely to preserve or attain what is believed to be most-valuable. What individual's value most shifts and is context dependent. Value-scales and their influence on image and behavior will be discussed later on in this section.

⁷² Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 6.

⁷³ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 6.

⁷⁴ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 7-8.

⁷⁵ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 6.

new information forms the basis for Boulding's second proposition, which is that the meaning of information (message) is *the change it produces in the image*.⁷⁶

There is an iterative relationship between image and the information it receives. Every experience, every piece of information, interacts with an existing image in one of three ways. First, the new information can be discarded. Much of what individuals perceive or encounter is in fact discarded as insignificant or 'noise.' The human brain is capable of processing only so much information at a time and will filter out what is deemed to be unimportant or superfluous. Consider the amount of information that floods the senses every minute of every day. As Khong and Jervis demonstrate, this is also why analogies and predilections are so prevalent in affecting decision-making. Preconceived notions and comparisons provide cognitive short-cuts and a means by which policy-makers can quickly understand, interpret, and react to floods of information. Images help decision makers make sense of the world. Just as the eyes and ears will tend to ignore background noise or objects that they are not purposefully attuned to, image orients perception so that individuals tend to become aware of and latch on to reaffirming experiences and stimuli. Billings describes 'new information' as "any signal from the environment perceived by decision-makers after their most recent decision."⁷⁷ Like noise, disconfirming information may be discarded or overridden.

The second way in which new information may interact with image is by adding to it. "New information may change the image in some rather regular and well-defined way that might be described as simple addition."⁷⁸ Information that is additive expands image, but does not transform it. For example, an individual might understand that Mars is further from the Sun than the Earth. After taking an astronomy class, she might discover that Mars is roughly forty million miles further from the Sun than the Earth. The astronomy student's image of the solar system is subsequently refined with this knowledge, but her fundamental understanding or conception of the solar system remains unchanged. The student may also have learned that light travels at a set speed and that travel beyond the speed of light is not possible. Travel to Mars, which is relatively close in cosmic terms, would not be proscribed by such a limit, but travel to other suns or

⁷⁶ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 7.

⁷⁷ Billings, "The Re-Representation of Problems," 62-63.

⁷⁸ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 7.

galaxies certainly would be. The student would thus have an understanding of the vast expansiveness of space and some of the natural laws which govern and limit humans' mobility within it. If, however, scientists discovered a way to exceed the speed of light or uncovered a mode of travel that relied not on propulsion but rather on the actual bending of space so that object could be brought to the traveler rather than the traveler going to the object, then the student's image of space would be transformed. Transformation is the third possible effect new information can have on image.

Transformation is a "revolutionary change" to image where "a message hits some sort of nucleus or supporting structure...and the whole thing changes in a quite radical way."⁷⁹ Transformation may radically alter how one perceives himself in space, time, or in an organization, and can also alter understanding of natural laws. Thomas Kuhn's description of paradigm shifts in science correlates to how images transform. "[L]arge-scale paradigm destruction and major shifts...is generally preceded by a period of pronounced professional insecurity" as existing paradigms fail to solve an increasing number of important problems."⁸⁰ Copernican astronomy and quantum physics both represent scientific paradigm shifts. Scientific instruments for astronomy did not radically change immediately following Copernicus' new paradigm, yet what astronomers discovered and how they viewed the universe did. "The very ease and rapidity with which astronomers saw new things when looking at old objects with old instruments may make us wish to say that, after Copernicus, astronomers lived in a different world."⁸¹ Kuhn also describes the Gestalt Switch, which is a sudden or rapid transformation of the way individuals perceive the world, where they may "pick up the other end of the stick."⁸² Image transformation and reorganization is dramatic, because images tend to be extremely resistant to change. Barring an obvious experience that blatantly and comprehensively contradicts image, such as the sudden arrival of aliens, images tend to require a fair amount of convincing.

⁷⁹ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 8.

⁸⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 44-45, 67-68.

⁸¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 115-16.

⁸² Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 63, 85, 111, 50.

“When [an image] receives messages that conflicts with it, its first impulse is to reject them as in some sense untrue.”⁸³ Jervis describes this phenomenon as *premature cognitive closure*, where “actors are more apt to err on the side of being too wedded to an established view and too quick to reject discrepant information than to make the opposite error of too quickly altering their theories.”⁸⁴ While such resistance to change often marries decision-makers to predetermined courses of action, it also provides a stabilizing effect. If every piece of disconfirming information caused a sudden abandonment of image, there could be no order, predictability, or consistency, and policies would oscillate chaotically. Additionally, against the backdrop of assumptions and expectations, anomalies are starker and more readily identifiable. However, a multitude of variables affects the way with which anomalies are handled. Personal investments in past decisions, varying degrees of certainty, fear of being wrong, and the strong desire for particular outcomes are just some of the factors that can cause individuals to over-commit to existing images.⁸⁵ Thus, images of “fact” must contend with images of “value.”⁸⁶

There is a clear difference, Boulding points out, between how images locate objects “at a certain point in space and time,” and how images assign value.⁸⁷ Imagining Tucson in Arizona, for instance, is different than imagining Tucson as a ‘good place to live.’ Images of value are “concerned with the *rating* of the various parts of our image of the world, according to some scale of betterness [sic] or worseness,” and these “scales of valuation” depend on context, experience, and outcomes of particular actions.⁸⁸ Value scales are “the most important single element in determining the effect” information has on image and subsequent behaviors.⁸⁹ There is a direct relationship between the amount of value placed on a particular belief or perception and the degree of resistance that perception exhibits towards disconfirming information and/or behavior contrary to that perception. For example, a person of average Christian faith might renounce the

⁸³ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 8.

⁸⁴ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 187.

⁸⁵ Billings, “The Re-Representation of Problems,” 62-68. Boulding also addresses the degree to which certainty, uncertainty, probability, improbability, clarity, and vagueness all play in how much or how little information transforms image. See Boulding, 10-11.

⁸⁶ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 11.

⁸⁷ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 11.

⁸⁸ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 11.

⁸⁹ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 12.

existence of God if a gun were held to his head and he were ordered to do so. A more devout Christian, however, might refuse, even if it meant a shot to the head, because his valuing of biblical teachings and of the afterlife is higher than the value placed on his current life. Conceptions of human networks, organizations, and one's place in them are particularly sensitive to value-scales, because relationships and allegiances can be exceptionally dynamic. Even the senses, argues Boulding, mediate incoming information through a certain value system that translates raw data into what the brain 'knows' to be true. "When an object apparently increases in size on the retina of the eye, we interpret this not as an increase in size but as movement...we consistently and persistently disbelieve the plain evidence of our senses."⁹⁰ Boulding's descriptions of how the brain translates sensory data are echoed by the assertions of Hawking discussed at the start of this chapter.

The implication of context-dependent and dynamic value-systems is that "there are no such things as facts" for individuals or organizations.⁹¹ There are instead perceived realities adjusted to match individual valuation scales. Values may be shared between individuals or among groups or organizations which may result in a common "public" or group image of the world. Human beings are differentiated from the rest of the animal kingdom, however, by their ability to organize information into large and complex images, and by their capacity for self-reflection and abstract thought.⁹² As such, human beings continuously "initiate and receive messages themselves," and internalize the valuation process.⁹³ Therefore, while there may be the proclivity within a group to imagine a certain way due to peer pressures or organizational norms, it is the aggregation of individual valuation processes and individual images that facilitate the group image. The interaction between individual and group image is an important aspect of the political process as described by Boulding's theory.

Boulding describes political decision-making as "a process of mutual modification of images through the processes of feedback and communication."⁹⁴ Political leaders, such as presidents, retain a powerful "role" in the political process

⁹⁰ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 14.

⁹¹ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 14.

⁹² Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 14-17, 20-28.

⁹³ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 15.

⁹⁴ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 100-02.

because of the “number of people affected and the magnitude of the effect when decisions are made.”⁹⁵ Like any other individual, a President’s world view is woven from his accumulated experiences and from his subjective perceptions. Images of self, others, values, time, space, society, and the organizations he presides over all formulate a Presidential world image, which he then invokes when setting agendas and making decisions. In democracies, Presidential authority comes from below, so while Presidents decide, they can only do so after an iterative discussion process that theoretically includes everyone from the woman on the street to the man in the White House. Successful decision-making in democracies, therefore, “must exhibit a degree of convergence toward common images of the whole organization,” where the organization includes governmental institutions and the society they represent.⁹⁶ From his vantage point, a President may be able to change or shape common organizational images. However, whether common organizational images are of his own making or are external to his manipulations, he is always accountable to them.

The interaction of two key processes affects the dynamics between Presidents and the societies they represent. “The first is the process whereby political images are created and distributed [and the] second is the process whereby specialized skills and knowledge are distributed among the people of the society.”⁹⁷ Individuals within a society form political images of leaders, policies, and world events based in large part upon where they draw their information from. This does not mean, as some more contemporary information theories posit, that political images are simple reflections of different media outlets. Individual experiences, backgrounds, histories, skill-sets, and relationships all affect political image. That politicians can ‘get the message out’ and distribute their brand is true, but political images are a subset of the larger world image, which “is the great interleaving variable between incoming and outgoing information.”⁹⁸ So, both message distribution and the individual interpretations of those messages help form political images. Presidents, therefore, must account for the perceptions of the

⁹⁵ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 98.

⁹⁶ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 101.

⁹⁷ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 103.

⁹⁸ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 28.

organization they represent and be mindful of the congruency between how their images are projected and perceived.

In large part, Americans view the President as serving a particular role. Images of the role of the President derive partly from the Constitution, partly from history, partly from the performance and perceptions of those who occupied the office. The role of President is “the center of a complex network of communications both in and out, part of which each occupant...inherits and a part of which he creates for himself.”⁹⁹ Just as the organization assumes an image of the Presidential office and of the man who inhabits it, each President has brought to his station his own images of the office, of himself, and of what he might accomplish through his office based on a particular view of the world. Symbolic images permeate the political world, and the Presidency has been as much an American symbol as it has been a protector and purveyor of symbols. Acting on their individual images, Presidents have sought to bridge the gap between the world they preferred and the world they perceived. If, under presidential direction, the Eagle has not flown in search of monsters to destroy, it certainly has sought out its share of Bears and Dragons. By viewing Presidential pursuits in war through the lens of image, not only may understanding of the Vietnam War sharpen, but America’s perceptions of itself and of the world may also sharpen. For, while there is some truth to the notion that nations are “the creation of their historians...who give rise both to the image of the present and the future,” it is perhaps more true that the shared experience of danger [has] more than anything else created the national spirit.”¹⁰⁰ Nations, then, are not the creation of their historians, “but of their enemies.”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The preceding chapter discussed the correlation between physical sciences and cognitive theory and explored how schemata and belief structure influence decision-making processes. Containment theory was examined as an overarching security schema that pervaded the Vietnam era, yet it was also revealed that each President effected that strategy differently, as described by Gaddis’ five eras of geopolitical codes. Boulding’s image theory was elucidated, attempting to demonstrate how image applies in the

⁹⁹ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 104.

¹⁰⁰ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 114.

¹⁰¹ Boulding, *The Image; Knowledge in Life and Society*, 114.

political process. *Image is a summation of subjective perceptions which attempts to locate self, others, beliefs, and organizations along a dynamic value scale punctuated by temporal and geographic factors and in accordance with “reliable” natural laws.*

Natural laws themselves may be subjective and unpredictable. Image is determined through an iterative information process where the “history” of the image interacts with incoming messages and reconciles those messages with the existing image. Information has meaning only to the degree that it affects a change to the image. Information may be discarded, additive, or transformative, but images are resistant to change and often discard or dampen disconfirming information. Through this iterative process, image builds upon itself and continuously recreates “reality,” constantly balancing between forcing information to fit into image and adjusting image to fit and adapt to external conditions.

Due to the limited processing capacity of the human brain and to physiological limitations, analogies and belief structures are often invoked so decision makers can make sense of a complex world. The brain naturally and necessarily patterns information and ‘fills in the gaps.’ This phenomenon is illustrated by the sensory processes described by both Hawking and Boulding and in the cognitive processes described by Khong, Jervis, and others. The strong correlation between the physical sciences and cognitive theory, using elements from quantum physics as well as from Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions, lends credence to the idea that perceptions have tangible effects on the physical world. Schema and existing physiological and psychological patterns are significant because they often act as departure points in decision-making. When Presidents inherit war, they not only pick-up fighting the war at a point downstream of their predecessors, but they also must contend with policies and organizational momentum spawned from the schematic premises of their predecessors. How far back presidential heirs reach to evaluate their predecessor’s assumptions affects how the new president represents the war and how he develops solutions to it. Additionally, each president has his own set of assumptions which affects how he defines and represents the war. The confluence of both the momentum spurred by his predecessor and his own subjective starting point based on his own Presidential image dictates the architecture

upon which he builds his own war policies. Presidential image, then, is both sire and heir to war policy in Vietnam.

Arthur Schlesinger asserts that the “American system of self-governance...comes to focus in the presidency” and that “the turmoil perennially swirling around the White House illuminates the heart of the American democracy.”¹⁰² Woodrow Wilson called the Presidency the “vital place of action in the system,” and Schlesinger posits that the “executive branch alone is capable” of taking the initiative required to break the tendency of the American system towards “inertia and stalemate.”¹⁰³ Presidential image plays a central role in American politics. Image shapes presidential agendas, influences decisions, and provides both motive and opportunity for potentially the most proactive and influential branch of the United States Government. Given the influence of perceptions and the outcomes they shape in the physical world, while image is not the only lens, it is at the very least an important and useful one—particularly when examining the phenomenon of inheriting war.

¹⁰² Charles Peters, Arthur M. Schlesinger, and Sean Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson* (Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, 2010), xvi, xviii.

¹⁰³ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, xv-xvi.

Chapter 2

Kennedy: “Containment” From Camelot to Cam Ranh Bay

*Let every nation know, ...we shall pay any price, bear any burden,
meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the
survival and the success of liberty...knowing that here on earth
God's work must truly be our own.*

-- JFK Inaugural Address, January 1961

*There'll be great Presidents again...but there'll never be another
Camelot.*

-- Jackie Kennedy, November 1963

During a 1963 interview with *Life* magazine writer Theodore H. White, Jackie Kennedy revealed that she and her late husband had been particularly enamored with the then popular Broadway musical *Camelot*, written by Alan Jay Lerner. “Jack had this hero idea of history,” the former first lady said, “the idealistic view.”¹ White had resurrected the 1000-year-old Arthurian legend in the 1950s for his novel, *The Once and Future King*.² Following the publication of his interview with Jackie Kennedy, the JFK administration was inexorably linked with Camelot. Ever since, historians, political scientists, and analysts have produced scores of literature with contrary, overlapping, and shifting interpretations of this mythical kingdom. The literature simultaneously portrays Kennedy as a “martyred politician,” a betrayed king, a charlatan, the consummate Cold Warrior, a hero, a fool, rash, pragmatic, and the “unwitting or deliberate architect of a tragic war.”³ Dean Acheson found nothing stirring in Kennedy, commenting that “he did not seem to me to be in any sense a great man.”⁴ In 1993, President Clinton called Kennedy’s time in office a great and singular episode in “the history of our great Nation [that] changed the way we think about our country, our world, and our obligations to the

¹ Theodore H. White, “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” *Life*, Dec 6 1963, 159. According to Jackie Kennedy, the late President’s favorite lyrics from the musical were: “Don’t let it be forgot; That once there was a spot; For one brief, shining moment that was known as Camelot.”

² T.H. White is the same author who conducted the Jackie Kennedy interview for *Life* magazine introduced at the start of this chapter. White contextualizes the Arthurian legend for a post WW II world, yet retains many of the original themes.

³ Kent B. Beck, “The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 1974, 45.

⁴ Beck, “The Kennedy Image,” 45.

future.”⁵ Robert McNamara asserts that had Kennedy lived, the United States would not have escalated in Vietnam, while others insist that the debacles in Vietnam and Cuba define Kennedy’s presidency.⁶

The Camelot legend and the Kennedy’s enduring association with it are once again invoked to examine the kingdom JFK sought, the enemies he believed threatened it, and the mechanisms he imagined could build it. When Kennedy took the mantle from Eisenhower in 1961, the presidency passed from the oldest elected president to the youngest, symbolizing a “generational imperative” and legitimacy not too dissimilar from the young and unlikely squire pulling *Excalibur* from the stone.⁷ During his Inaugural Address, Kennedy said that man now “holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”⁸ In the *different* world Kennedy describes during his inauguration speech, there is a sense that all things, good and ill, are possible; and both the *new* government’s potential and the threats it faces are of legendary, even magical proportion. The legend of the Round Table is often invoked to describe Arthur’s noble and equitable leadership style, but it also reflects a king’s vision for how best to arrange and organize his knights. Kennedy’s rearrangement of governmental institutions bespeaks a President’s vision for how best to arrange and administer his agents.

Kennedy’s vision for the world was perhaps both noble and inspirational, but what were the consequences of the image he held of his own presidency and of Vietnam? How did Kennedy’s image of the United States’ role in the world and of Vietnam’s place in the security environment drive agendas and what were the outcomes of those agendas? In the Arthurian legend, Arthur is betrayed by his half-sister Morgan le Fay, who drugs Arthur so that he unwittingly couples with his other half-sister Morgause. The child

⁵ Bill Clinton, "Remarks at the Dedication of the New Museum October 29th, 1993," Speeches (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum: JFK Library Online, 1993).

⁶ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 86. Beck, Kent, "The Kennedy Image," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 1974, 45.

⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 197. Gaddis describes the “promise” of the new generation that would break with past policies. In the Arthurian legend, whoever was able to pull Excalibur from the stone would be king. All the knights and lords of England were gathered to try and remove the sword and all failed. By happenstance, a 16-year-old Arthur came across the sword and removed it easily from the stone, and thus became king.

⁸ John F. Kennedy, "1961 Presidential Inaugural Address," (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Online, 1961).

conceived through this betrayal was prophesized to destroy Arthur's kingdom. Were Kennedy's image and agenda themselves betrayed, so that now in retrospect the ill-conceived offspring of Vietnam returns to destroy Camelot? If so, who or what were the betrayers and who or what were the betrayed? To address these questions, we will now examine Kennedy's own Presidential image of the war in Vietnam and how that image tied to agendas and outcomes.

Presidential Image

For the purposes of this study, Presidential image encompasses images of self, public perceptions, the office of the president and the institutions it commands, presidential values and agendas, perceptions of threats and the means and methods the president perceives as necessary to overcome those threats. The term Presidential image and image are used interchangeably. Additionally, Vietnam was by no means the only threat faced by President Kennedy, but since it is the subject of this essay, analysis is rooted in how Vietnam was perceived within the larger security environment. Even in the context of Vietnam, there are an infinite number of possible images to draw from, so we purposely limit the scope to those that best correlate to agendas and decisions discovered in primary and secondary sources. For ease of analysis and explanation, we also attempt to separate different images, but the iterative nature of cognitive processes and the overlap between various images makes this difficult, and an approach that is too linear might artificially imply direct causality between particular images and outcomes. The same is true for our division between *image*, *agenda*, and *outcomes*. Decision-making in politics is messy and agendas and results flow from an extremely convoluted "sausage-making" process. Any one decision or outcome may be the result of multiple factors. However, by parceling out some of the more pronounced images, it is possible to better identify some of the more influential ingredients that pervaded one, if not several, presidencies during Vietnam.

Images of Vietnam, Total War, and A New Generation

In January 1963, Specialist James McAndrew was killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam. In February, McAndrew's sister, Bobbie Pendergrass, wrote a letter asking President Kennedy for an explanation. "I can't help but feel that giving one's life for one's country is one thing," Pendergrass wrote, "but being sent to a country where half

our country never even heard of and being shot at without even a chance to shoot back is another thing altogether!”⁹ Kennedy responded to Bobbie Pendergrass in a two-page letter, dated March 6, 1963:

The questions which you posed in your letter can...best be answered by realizing why your brother—and other American men—went to Viet Nam [sic] in the first place...Americans are in Vietnam because we have determined that this country must not fall under Communist domination...Shortly after the division [of Vietnam] eight years ago it became apparent that they could not be successful...without extensive assistance...By 1961 it became apparent that the trouble in...Viet Nam could easily expand [and] that Viet Nam, is only part of a larger plan for bringing...Southeast Asia under their domination... Viet Nam is now most crucial. If Viet Nam should fall, it will indicate to the people of Southeast Asia that complete Communist domination...is inevitable. Your brother was in Viet Nam because the threat to the Viet Nameese [sic] people is, in the long run, a threat to the Free World community...For when freedom is destroyed in one country, it is threatened throughout the world.¹⁰

At the end of her letter, Pendergrass assures Kennedy that he is doing a “wonderful job,” and that she is, in fact a “good Democrat,” but her questions are salient and reflective of the angst and incongruity that continue to plague the Vietnam debate today.¹¹ Moreover, the exchange between Kennedy and Pendergrass reveals key aspects of Kennedy’s presidential image of the war. Kennedy saw Vietnam as a crucial domino in the now total Cold War against Communism,¹² and he believed South Vietnam was incapable of handling the conflict on its own. Kennedy’s letter also reveals an implied, even necessary responsibility of the United States to intervene on behalf of the *Free World*. Finally, through his discourse with Mrs. Pendergrass, we get a sense of Kennedy’s belief

⁹ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, ed. BACM Research, 193-94. The Archives contain both a copy of the original handwritten letter from Ms. Pendergrass as well as a typed transcript.

¹⁰ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," ed. *BACM Research*, 186-87.

¹¹ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," ed. *BACM Research*, 194.

¹² Neil. Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, & Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers*, ed. *The New York Times*, Unabridged ed., *The Secret History of the Vietnam War: The Complete and Unabridged Series as Published by the New York Times* (New York, NY: Bantam Books Inc, 1971), 6-7. The rationale of what came to be known as the domino theory was first articulated by the National Security Council in February, 1950 and justified extended military aid to the French in Indochina. “It is important to U.S. security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.” In January of 1954, Eisenhower approved a National Security Council paper that predicted “the loss of any single country [in Southeast Asia would ultimately lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia, then India and Japan, and finally] endanger the stability and security of Europe.”

that leaders should both educate and inspire: An educated man, Kennedy insisted, “must give his objective sense, his sense of liberty to the maintenance of our society at a critical time.”¹³ Kennedy’s image of a leader as educator also came through during a 1956 speech on Indochina, where he quoted Thomas Jefferson, saying “If we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion by education.”¹⁴ For Kennedy, Vietnam represented high stakes that the United States could not ignore and it was up to a new generation to figure out how to pull the sword from the stone.

In May 1961, Kennedy described to a joint session of Congress the new and exceptional threats to freedom and the responsibility the United States had in meeting those threats: “[T]he great battlefield for the defense and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe—Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—the lands of the rising peoples...the adversaries of freedom did not create the revolution...but they are seeking to ride the crest of its wave—to capture it for themselves.”¹⁵ Kennedy referenced Vietnam and described its struggle for freedom as a “contest of will and purpose as well as force and violence---a battle for minds and souls as well as lives and territories. “[W]e are engaged in a world-wide struggle in which we bear a heavy burden to preserve and promote the ideas that we share with all mankind...[t]he United States must give all necessary aid to local forces with the will and capacity to cope with attack, subversion, insurrection, or guerilla warfare.” The United States, Kennedy said, must “foster global progress.”¹⁶

Kennedy perceived the consequences of a Communist victory in South Vietnam much as his predecessor had. In 1954, the National Security Council under Eisenhower’s direction predicted that the fall of any nation to Communism would inevitably “endanger the stability and security” of Europe.¹⁷ The assumptions behind domino theory pervaded

¹³ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 231. Kennedy was quoted following the Vienna Summit with Khrushchev in June, 1961.

¹⁴ John F. Kennedy, Senator, “The Truth About Indochina: Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on Indochina before the Senate, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1954,” ed. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum Digital Archives, Selected Speeches of John F. Kennedy (John F. Kennedy Library, 1954).

¹⁵ Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs.”

¹⁶ Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs.”

¹⁷ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 27-32. “1952 Policy Statement by U.S. on Goals in Southeast Asia,” The Pentagon Papers, Document #2.

both the Eisenhower and the Kennedy administration. What was different for Kennedy, however, was the preeminence of threat posed by the *wars of national liberation* that Soviet Premier Khrushchev threatened to support in 1961. “[W]e are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence,” Kennedy told the American Newspaper Publishers’ Association in April, 1961.¹⁸ For Kennedy, the battlespace had expanded and the new challenges could no longer be met by the tired policies of past generations. “[T]he torch has been passed,” Kennedy said during his inaugural speech, to one of the “few generations...granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger.”¹⁹ From his time as a Senator, through his presidential campaign, and in taking office, Kennedy emphasized putting “distance between himself” and those of Eisenhower’s generation and was preoccupied “with creating a distinct identity.”²⁰ As President, Kennedy even went so far as to resist being photographed playing golf, out of worry that he would be associated with his “more leisurely predecessor.”²¹

Kennedy’s belief in the new generation is intertwined with his image of Vietnam and both are revealed in several speeches he delivered as a Senator. In his 1954 speech, “The Truth About Indochina,” Kennedy railed against what he saw as a stale and impotent U.S. policy for Indochina. He condemned the platitudes and overused “prophecies” that had repeatedly failed to bring either political independence or a French military victory, noting that prophetic failures had “in no way diminished the frequency of their reiteration.”²² Kennedy saw the Eisenhower administration as overly passive and imprecise, inclined to ignore unpleasant confrontations with facts surrounding potentially unpleasant foreign policy options. Eisenhower’s massive retaliation policy and undulating debates concerning Indochina were overly blunt and increasingly obsolescent

¹⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 207.

¹⁹ Kennedy, “1961 Presidential Inaugural Address.”

²⁰ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 197.

²¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 198.

²² Kennedy, “The Truth About Indochina: Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on Indochina before the Senate, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1954.”

“in an era of supersonic attack and atomic retaliation.”²³ In addition to lambasting the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy also revealed specifics on how he perceived the struggle in Vietnam.

Commenting on calls to further aid the French, Kennedy stated that “frankly, [there] is no amount of American military assistance in Indochina [that] can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, ‘an enemy of the people’ which has the sympathy and covert support of the people.”²⁴ Kennedy cautioned against U.S. involvement and an overreliance on military means in a political struggle: “There is no broad, general support of the native Vietnam government among the people...[t]o check the southern drive of communism makes sense but not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is rather to build strong native non-communist sentiment within these areas and rely on that as a spearhead of defense rather than upon the legions of General de Lattre. To do this apart from and in defiance of innately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure.”²⁵

Kennedy warned of the stark political reality in Vietnam while at the same time he legitimizes the need to contain the spread of communism. His hesitations over purely military strategies, his criticisms of the Eisenhower administration, and his emphasis on governmental solutions all delineate images of Vietnam and the peculiar challenges facing his generation. Victory in Vietnam was necessary but not possible through blunt and outdated policies. Success required a new generation and a new approach. As will be discussed later, when Kennedy becomes president, these images directly inform his Vietnam policy agendas. Kennedy also imagines a unique role and responsibility for the United States in Vietnam that will require a distinct break with Eisenhower’s policies, a point clearly illustrated in a speech he delivers to the Conference on Vietnam in 1956.

Addressing the Vietnam Conference in Washington D.C., Kennedy lamented that too often U.S. involvement is like that of the world’s “fireman,” rushing in when a fire breaks out with the “heavy equipment” to heavy applause, only to leave when the blaze is

²³ Kennedy, "The Truth About Indochina: Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on Indochina before the Senate, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1954."

²⁴ Kennedy, "The Truth About Indochina: Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on Indochina before the Senate, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1954."

²⁵ Kennedy, "The Truth About Indochina: Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on Indochina before the Senate, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1954."

extinguished.²⁶ The United States required a long-term vision for Vietnam and an honest recognition for how vital the country's fate was to U.S. security. In an allusion to Eisenhower's domino theory, Kennedy called Vietnam the "keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike ...the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia."²⁷ Kennedy's meaning was clear. As goes Vietnam, so goes Asia, so goes the world. It is important to note that while Kennedy insisted on a departure from the 'fireman' approach, he did not disengage from the underlying assumptions of the domino theory. Containing Communism is an entrenched objective and part of Kennedy's overall security schema. As Robert Jervis observes, "world images that have been created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interests."²⁸ So while Kennedy views the problem of Vietnam and its solutions quite differently than Eisenhower, emphasizing the need for a more politically, vice militarily, oriented strategy, their shared world image of a monolithic Communist threat drives them both to the same ends—containment. Or, so it appears at first glance.

A Pentagon study describes Eisenhower's approach to the Vietnam problem as a "limited-risk gamble."²⁹ Eisenhower pursued containment through a minimum-cost approach and feared the consequences of an over-reaching foreign policy. The massive-retaliation nuclear policy was as much an economic calculus as it was a military strategy. And while Eisenhower's strategic fiscal and military decisions between 1955 and 1960 perhaps provided the "gingerbread architecture" for the political, military, and social legislation that manifested themselves under President Kennedy, the latter's version of containment and the means to achieve it were far more expansive.³⁰

Five years prior to succeeding Eisenhower and in a prelude to the near supernatural mandates laid out in his inaugural address, Kennedy reveals just how

²⁶ John F. Kennedy, Senator, "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon in the Hotel Willard, Washington, D.C., June 1, 1956," ed. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum Digital Archives, Selected Speeches of John F. Kennedy (John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 1956).

²⁷ Kennedy, "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon in the Hotel Willard, Washington, D.C., June 1, 1956."

²⁸ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 9

²⁹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 84.

³⁰ Walter A. McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1985), 228-29.

intimately he views the relationship between Vietnam and American prestige. "Vietnam represents a test of American responsibility and determination... [i]f we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth...gave assistance to its life...have helped to shape its future. As French influence ...has declined in Vietnam, American influence has steadily grown. This is our offspring—we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs."³¹ Kennedy deeply imbued outcomes in Vietnam with notions of U.S. prestige and responsibility—an image that inevitably raises America's stakes in Vietnam and that also increases the means the United States is ultimately willing to use to protect those stakes.

Kennedy's more expansive image of US stakes and responsibilities in Vietnam is the back-story to what James McDougal describes as the salient psychological shift that occurs in the transition between Eisenhower and Kennedy. The 'new generation' ushered in a "technocracy of politicians, arrogating to government the right to fix a national agenda and order fabrication of techniques, both hardware and management, for its fulfillment."³² Martha Cottam and Dorcas McCoy describe the Cold War as primarily a cognitive conflict, "associated with a clear and powerful worldview composed of clearly defined images, scripts, and schemata and a repertoire of tactics that derived from containment."³³ The arrangements and accomplishments of institutions and ideologies surrounded the strict material standoff between the United States and Soviet Union. The validity of these respective institutions and ideologies became as important, if not more so, than the competitive military balance of tanks and missiles. High technology, such as nuclear warheads, intercontinental-jet bombers, satellites, and ICBMS, were not just symbols of military prowess, but also personified the ideologies and institutions of the societies that produced them. As Paul Edwards describes in *The Closed World*, "the primary weapons of the Cold War were ideologies, alliances, advisors, foreign aid, national prestige—and above and behind them all, the juggernaut of high technology."³⁴

³¹ Kennedy, "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon in the Hotel Willard, Washington, D.C., June 1, 1956."

³² McDougal, *The Heavens and the Earth : A Political History of the Space Age*, 405.

³³ Martha Cottam, "Image Change: The Interpretation of Foreign Policy Events: A Cognitive Process Theory," in *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, ed. Donald A. Sylvan (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

³⁴ Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America, Inside Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), Preface.

Edwards' work demonstrates how "ideas and devices are linked through politics and culture."³⁵ While Edwards certainly emphasizes technology over image in his observations, the interplay between perceptions, technology, and decision making are important contributions and helpful in understanding how the Cold War had become a total "competition for the loyalty and trust of all peoples fought out in all arenas."³⁶ The advent of new technologies coincided with the rise of Kennedy's generation and created an atmosphere of both "fear and euphoria" that permeated a now total Cold War that was being fought on all fronts.³⁷ Kennedy's image of the stakes involved, the total threat, and of the inefficacies of the old regime in duly meeting the new challenges in this very different world are consistent with the actions he takes as president. However, Kennedy's image was not simply driven by technology. Technology was a part of how Kennedy viewed the potential accomplishments and concurrent responsibilities of the institutions that created the technology in the first place.

An industrialized country armed with the latest technology might be capable, but such a country could only become transcendent through the full expression of democracy's ideals. Infused with new blood and fresh outlooks, America could lead the fight that would not only conquer the Communist monster, but also the collective woes of humanity. "For what Pericles said to the Athenians has long been true of this commonwealth: 'We do not imitate—for we are a model to others.'"³⁸ America was to be the model government on the new frontier of freedom. Faced with the ultimate fear and inspired by the possibility of Utopia, the United States *had* to act. Vietnam was America's offspring, and therefore the United States had to fortify and raise South Vietnam through transcendent American values, ideals, institutions, and military capabilities. Kennedy's parental analogy between the United States and Vietnam reflects the *dependent* image he had of South Vietnam's government. Cottam describes dependent image as the "social comparison in which each perceiver's country (or in-group) is considered vastly superior to and beneficent toward the dependent [who is]

³⁵ Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, xiii.

³⁶ McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 8-9.

³⁷ McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth : A Political History of the Space Age*, 9.

³⁸ John F. Kennedy, "City on a Hill Speech," (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Online, 1961).

deemed childlike.”³⁹ Kennedy saw America’s position and power as a necessary ingredient for bolstering South Vietnam.

One pervasive assumption of the Kennedy Administration was that “the Diem regime’s own evident weakness—from the ‘famous problem of Diem as administrator’ to the [South Vietnamese] Army’s lack of offensive spirit—could be cured if enough dedicated Americans, civilians, and military, became involved in South Vietnam to show the South Vietnamese, at all levels, how to get on and win the war.”⁴⁰ In a letter to Diem in late 1961, Kennedy told the South Vietnamese President that the United States was “prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence,” and that American “indignation” had mounted over the “deliberate savagery of the Communist[s].”⁴¹ Kennedy’s assurances to Diem exemplified his own belief that the United States should respond to South Vietnam’s plight and marked the continuing trajectory toward increased unilateral U.S. action in Vietnam.

The United States was not a party to the July 7, 1955 Geneva accords that divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel and called for cessation of hostilities. While the United States endorsed the ‘spirit’ of the accords, Eisenhower reserved the right to act if South Vietnam was threatened and also held out hope for a united and democratic Vietnam. Officially, the United States called for free elections and democratic unity in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, so that the people of Indochina could achieve “full independence [and] ...determine their own future.”⁴² Unofficially, Eisenhower viewed the accords as a disastrous accommodation of the Communists. A cable from Secretary of State Dulles to the Saigon embassy in December, 1955 reveals the Eisenhower administration’s disillusionment with the Geneva agreement. “While we should certainly take no positive step,” wrote Dulles, “to speed up present process of decay of Geneva accords, neither should we make the slightest effort to infuse life into them.”⁴³ Despite warnings from the National Intelligence Board that no amount of military action or aid to Vietnam was likely to produce results, and irrespective of memos from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that

³⁹ Cottam, “Image Change,” 118.

⁴⁰ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 84.

⁴¹ John F. Kennedy, “Letter from President Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem, President of South Vietnam,” (1961), http://www.pbs.org/gbh/amex/presidents/35_kennedy/psources/ps_jfkdiem.html. (accessed 15 February, 2011).

⁴² Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 52. Document #14.

⁴³ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 23.

highlighted the utter lack of military objectives in Vietnam, Eisenhower committed to a three-fold program for post-Geneva Vietnam.⁴⁴ Eisenhower's program included building up Vietnamese indigenous forces, providing economic aid directly to the Vietnamese, and working with and supporting President Diem. The Geneva accords mark a significant point of departure for U.S. policy in Vietnam. By pursuing its own agenda and interactions with Diem, the United States supplanted the French in Vietnam. Furthermore, Diem's regime was so unstable and so inefficient that it depended on U.S. support for its very existence, thus South Vietnam became "the creation of the United States."⁴⁵

Eisenhower's policies are an important factor in understanding Kennedy's own perceptions and policies on Vietnam. Though they were limited in scope, Eisenhower sired increased U.S. obligations in Vietnam. Kennedy inherited this commitment, and therefore there was a definite institutional momentum and direction when Kennedy took office. However, whether Eisenhower fostered a situation from which it was impossible for the United States to disentangle itself might be another matter altogether. The inevitability of Vietnam based on overarching Cold War paradigms and logic is certainly a plausible explanation. As George Herring asserts:

The United States' involvement in Vietnam was not primarily a result of errors of judgment or of the personality quirks of the policymakers, although these things existed in abundance. It was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy, the policy of containment, which Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades. The commitment in Vietnam expanded as the containment policy itself grew. America's failure in Vietnam calls into question the basic premises of that policy and suggests the urgent need for a ...reappraisal of American attitudes toward the world and their place in it.⁴⁶

The contention of this paper, however, is that the images of the Vietnam led by American presidents did in fact affect U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and that images also affected the manner in which each President confronted and conducted the war. The containment schema may very well have influenced presidential choices, but individual images should

⁴⁴ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 14-15.

⁴⁵ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 25.

⁴⁶ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed., America in Crisis (New York, NY: Knopf, 1986), xiii.

not be discounted. The macro explanation for Vietnam proposed by Herring overly abstracts out not only the reinforcing effects individual presidential images had on containment policy, but also overlooks individual variances and perceptions that drove particular policies. Could we assume, for instance, that if Nixon had defeated Kennedy in 1960 that Nixon would have conducted Vietnam policy in much the same manner as Kennedy? Though counterfactual and impossible to know, this paper argues that the ‘*who*’ matters, because each individual image is distinct. Kennedy himself was convinced that “one man could make a difference.”⁴⁷ Regardless of the institutional schema, each president’s individual image not only interprets the overarching national security problem, but also how to incorporate problems such as Vietnam into national security strategy. Image is thus the intermediary between the schema and the existential. So, while Eisenhower may very well have recognized Vietnam as a critical piece in his overall containment strategy, the degree to which he was willing to commit U.S. resources differed from Kennedy. Part of this distinction was driven by the differing perceptions the two men had not only of Vietnam, but also of what government was capable of and how it should behave.

In his farewell address, Eisenhower described America as “the strongest, most influential, and most productive nation in the world,” but he also warned that the nation’s “pre-eminence” depended as much upon how America used its power as upon its military and material strength.⁴⁸ Eisenhower described America’s responsibility and challenge to “keep the peace...enhance liberty” and foster human progress in the face of Communism’s hostile, ruthless, and global threat.⁴⁹ There are certainly thematic consistencies between Eisenhower’s farewell address and Kennedy’s inaugural address. Communism was a global threat to the free world’s progress and America’s unique position and values left the United States not only with the challenge but also the responsibility of leading the fight against it. However, while Eisenhower characterizes the fight against Communism as the “crisis” that “absorbs our very beings,” he also quite clearly admonishes policy makers over their tendency to believe that “some spectacular

⁴⁷ Thomas G. Patterson, “Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK’s Foreign Policy,” *Virginia Quarterly* 54, (Spring, 1978): 195.

⁴⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “President Eisenhower Farewell Address,” Speech Series (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum Online, 1961), 1.

⁴⁹ Eisenhower, “President Eisenhower Farewell Address,” 2.

and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties.”⁵⁰ For Eisenhower, the military industrial-complex and the absorption of private-sector institutions into the burgeoning federal government could potentially combine with arrogant ambitions, causing not just an imbalance but a squandering of American power, prestige, resources, and future.⁵¹

Kennedy’s perception of Eisenhower’s policies as overly passive and undulating is perhaps a product of the contrasting image each man had concerning the role and capabilities of government in solving problems. Where Eisenhower saw his policies necessarily taking ‘the long view,’ Kennedy saw inaction. The contrasting images affected how each man ultimately represented the problems facing the United States. For example, during a 1959 Thanksgiving weekend retreat with his National Security Council, Eisenhower asked his staff: “What is the true problem which faces Western Civilization?” In answer to his own question, Eisenhower said the following:

The question is whether free government can continue to exist in the world, in view of the demands made by government and peoples on free economies while simultaneously facing the continuing threat posed by a centrally controlled, hostile, atheistic, and growing economy?...We have got to meet the [Soviets] by keeping our economy absolutely healthy...We must get the Federal Government out of every unnecessary activity. We can refuse to do things too rapidly. Humanity has existed for a long time. Suddenly we seem to have an hysterical approach, in health and welfare programs, in grants to the states...We want to cure every ill in two years, in five years...To my mind, this is the wrong attack.⁵²

When Kennedy pledges that America will “pay any price” and “bear any burden” to win the battle “for minds and souls,” he distinguishes his perceptions from those of his predecessor by at once elevating the objectives he believes governments are capable of achieving and by expanding the means by which a government should pursue those objectives. Gaddis observes that “perception of means had shaped both the nature and the extent” of America’s commitments and range of actions “in defense of global equilibrium” under Truman and Eisenhower, but that “Kennedy’s more expansive

⁵⁰ Eisenhower, "President Eisenhower Farewell Address," 2.

⁵¹ Eisenhower, "President Eisenhower Farewell Address," 3-4.

⁵² McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 138. See also, Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years*, 2, vol. 2, *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (New York, 1965), 464.

perception of means paved the way for a more activist foreign policy.”⁵³ So while both Kennedy and Eisenhower perceive a ‘total’ Cold War and commit to containing the Communist threat, the means and measures by which each is willing to utilize for the containment policy differ. That difference reveals the different images each President had of government. Thus, when Vietnam becomes for Kennedy part of America’s “world-wide struggle,” he is inclined to extend the increased machinations and resources of his own country’s government to the government of South Vietnam.⁵⁴ Kennedy’s inclinations for increased assistance to South Vietnam are further compounded by his perceptions of the Diem regime and of the geo-political context surrounding Vietnam.

McNamara describes how the “intensification of relations between Cuba and the Soviets [and] a new wave of Soviet provocations in Berlin” created a context within which it was “reasonable to consider expanding U.S. effort in Vietnam” in light of the domino theory.⁵⁵ McNamara admits, however, that despite the weight afforded the preservation of South Vietnam at the outset of the Kennedy administration, President Kennedy and his cadre of advisors (McNamara included), all lacked significant historical, social, and cultural understanding of Vietnam.⁵⁶ In contrast to the abundant institutional expertise available on the Soviet Union, the State Department had ironically been purged of its most competent East Asian and China experts during the “McCarthy hysteria of the 1950s.”⁵⁷ Unable to draw on either extensive personal or institutional expertise, Kennedy set about making policy for a region that was “terra incognita.”⁵⁸ Therefore, Kennedy’s image of Vietnam and his subsequent policies were heavily influenced by the context within which he viewed the country and by the U.S. objectives he tied to it. Image readily fills cognitive gaps, and with Vietnam being the ‘unknown land’ for Kennedy, his perceptions of Vietnam adhered to the strategic purposes to be carried out through the conflict and the means by which he believed those purposes could be achieved. Vietnam was seen through the lens of the United States’ *cause* and therefore images of Diem

⁵³ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 204.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, "Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs."

⁵⁵ Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 32.

⁵⁶ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 32.

⁵⁷ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 33.

⁵⁸ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 32.

coalesced around American-centric ambitions. Characteristics that leant themselves to the *Americanesque* narrative and mythology were embraced while characteristics that ran counter were tolerated, overlooked, or attributed to the mystical unknowns of the Asian culture.

President Ngo Dinh Diem had spent several years in exile in the United States where he attended a New Jersey Seminary. Diem came from long line of Christian Vietnamese, was himself a devoted Catholic and a staunch anti-communist.⁵⁹ Diem returned to Vietnam in 1954 and served as President Bao Dai's Prime Minister. Through a controversial and "rigged" referendum in 1955, Diem replaced Bao Dai as president.⁶⁰ Diem was even less enthusiastic about the Geneva accords than the Eisenhower administration. With both overt and covert support from the United States, Diem effectively quashed election efforts prescribed by the Geneva Accords in 1956.⁶¹ American intelligence estimates, diplomatic cables, and reports reveal that the United States was fully aware of Diem's corruption and authoritarian rule in 1960. Yet, Diem's Catholicism and democratic rhetoric "seemed evidence that he shared Western values."⁶² Even a thin veneer of democracy in South Vietnam was too alluring to resist and Diem's apparent accomplishments in suppressing Communist activity and establishing rule of law, albeit harshly, seemed cause for hope.

As Kennedy assumed office, he confronted not just assessments pointing out the weaknesses and corruption of Diem's government, but also the sentimental possibility for what Diem might be able to do if properly fortified and supported through a more proactive U.S. government. A 1959 Newsweek article described Diem as "one of the ablest free Asian leaders."⁶³ Senator Mike Mansfield attested to Diem's "personal courage, integrity, determination, and authentic nationalism... [as] essential forces in forestalling a total collapse in South Vietnam."⁶⁴ That Diem was not perfect was obvious

⁵⁹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War* (New York, NY., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1984), 59.

⁶⁰ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 125, 201, 15, 18,691. See also, Sheehan, *Pentagon Papers*, 20-21. In 1955, Diem won 98.2% of the 'vote.' Pentagon reports described Diem's victory as "too resounding," but that did not deter Washington from reacting with "great alacrity" to his success.

⁶¹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 21-22.

⁶² McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 41.

⁶³ Ernest K. Lindley, "An Ally Worth Having," *Newsweek*, June 29 1959, 31.

⁶⁴ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 42.

to Kennedy, but Diem's imperfections were counterbalanced by the potential of what the United States could do through Diem. McNamara observes that the administration's proclivity to value Diem's potential as a democratic revolutionary dedicated to America's cause in Asia obscured the fact that these qualities, even were they true, isolated Diem from his own people.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Asian culture was somewhat of a mystery. The strange relationship between Diem, his brother and chief political advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu and Nuh's wife Madame Ngo Dinh Nuh reinforced the mystical characteristics of the Diem regime.⁶⁶ In McNamara's words, Diem was an "enigma," and Madame Nhu was "bright, forceful, and beautiful, but also diabolical and scheming—a true sorceress."⁶⁷ Madame Nhu and the mysterious inner-workings of the Diem regime both vexed and enchanted Kennedy's 'Administration and Vietnam, much like Arthur's half-sister Morgause, surreptitiously slid further under the sheets of American policy. The mystique of the Asian culture and the hopeful projection of iconic American values and ambitions skewed Kennedy's image of South Vietnam. Diem's inconsistencies and misunderstandings between him and Kennedy could be readily attributed to cultural idiosyncrasies and/or overlooked for want of pursuing American objectives.

Image affects interpretation, institutes biases, and discriminates between confirming and disconfirming information. Evidence that is contrary to established perceptions is often overlooked or discarded so that individuals can maintain a consistency in their world views.⁶⁸ Kennedy's lack of both personal and institutional expertise on Vietnam created a vacuum that allowed him to supplant a more objective assessment of the situation in Vietnam with what he wanted to accomplish in Vietnam. As such, how Kennedy viewed Vietnam's relationship to U.S. interests, Vietnam's meaning in terms of geopolitical struggles, and the nature and character of the country and its leaders all encountered very little initial friction. Under these circumstances, Vietnam comes to be defined through U.S. objectives vice U.S. objectives being derived from Vietnam. This is an important distinction and is evidenced by Kennedy's

⁶⁵ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 41-42.

⁶⁶ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 691. Diem was a bachelor and Madame Dinh Nhu became the "first lady" of South Vietnam. Madame Nhu took an active political role in Diem's government and was often a cause for resistance to Diem's regime.

⁶⁷ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 42.

⁶⁸ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 117-21.

commitment to the Diem regime despite multiple intelligence reports that revealed the inefficacies and brutalities of his government.⁶⁹ The argument that Diem was the ‘best the United States could hope for’ as justification for Kennedy’s commitment to the South Vietnamese president assumes Kennedy’s commitment was a foregone conclusion. Even if Diem was the only option, the fact that Kennedy insisted on pursuing an option reflects an inflated sense of what he believed the United States could help Diem achieve—a belief that contrasted sharply with the sobering reports from the ground. In November, 1961, Kennedy’s Presidential military advisor, General Maxwell Taylor, provided a report that outlined increased U.S. involvement on the ground and a “limited partnership” strategy.⁷⁰ The Pentagon’s own analysis of Taylor’s proposals highlights the Kennedy administration’s assumptions that South Vietnam’s military, political, and social problems “could be cured if enough dedicated Americans [became] involved” and that the U.S. involvement would imbue the South Vietnamese “with the élan and style needed to win.”⁷¹ Diem’s shortcomings and the inconsistent circumstances on the ground in Vietnam that were not conducive to, or even desirable for, U.S. involvement were overlooked. Vietnam was “the only place in the world where [Kennedy] faced a well-developed Communist effort to topple a pro-Western government” and as such became “a challenge that could hardly be ignored.”⁷²

Kennedy’s vision for what was possible and necessary in Vietnam created an image of the conflict that allowed U.S. missions and purposes in and through the country to overtake a more objective understanding of Vietnam’s *realities*. Kennedy’s understanding of Vietnam becomes inexorably bound by what the United States seeks to accomplish there. Vietnam becomes a symbolic expression of U.S. prestige and

⁶⁹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 85-87. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Document #16. Shortly before Kennedy took office, an assessment by Ambassador Durbrow highlighted the precarious situation in the South as well as Diem’s weakness and lack of support from the populace. Once in office, Kennedy received a national intelligence estimate that echoed Durbrow’s assessments. The intelligence estimate describes an “extremely critical period for the Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam...[m]ore than one-half of the entire rural region south and southwest of Saigon, as well as some areas to the north, are under...Communist Control...[d]iscontent with the Diem Government continues to be prevalent among intellectual circles...There has been increasing disposition within official circles and the Army to question Diem’s ability to rally the people in the fight against the Communists because of reliance on virtual one-man rule, his toleration of corruption extending even to his immediate encourage, and his refusal to relax a rigid system of public controls.”

⁷⁰ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 144-46. See *Pentagon Papers*, Documents #26 and #27.

⁷¹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 104.

⁷² Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 87-88.

commitment to the world-wide struggle against Communism and a reflection of Kennedy's image of the United States. The distinction between Vietnam serving as a symbol and as Vietnam reflecting Kennedy's image is subtle, but significant. Symbols are external and need not necessarily resemble who or what they come to symbolize. The value of symbols is derived from what is projected unto them, but the fundamental nature and definitional understanding of symbols are not transformed through symbolism. For example, the liberty bell is a symbol of American independence, but we still know and define the liberty bell as a bell. Reflective imaging, however, as occurs when Kennedy comes to define Vietnam through U.S. objectives, transforms definitional understanding so that aspects of Vietnam's character that are apart or separate from U.S. interests there are obscured or diminished.⁷³ Symbols can be powerful and are related to, and often integrated with, image, but image is transformative whereas symbols are representative. So, while the fact that Vietnam becomes a symbol of U.S. prestige and commitment is powerful, it is Kennedy's perceptual integration of Vietnam into his image of the United States and of the power and potential of government that ultimately transforms the degree, character, and nature of U.S. commitment to the conflict.

Kennedy recognized the political nature of the struggle in Vietnam and was arguably correct in identifying Diem's regime as the fulcrum in the struggle, at least to the extent that lack of strong governance in the South favored Hanoi's cause. During a conversation with his National Security Council in November, 1961, Kennedy revealed his misgivings over a strong U.S. military response in Vietnam and pointed out "how starkly the situation in Vietnam contrasted with the Korean War."⁷⁴ Kennedy identified several compelling reasons for not intervening "10,000 miles away to help a native army of 200,000 fight 16,000 guerillas."⁷⁵ Yet, Kennedy's hesitance over full-blown military intervention did not equate to hesitancy over a more robust political intervention. As discussed above, Kennedy intimately tied U.S. prestige, interests, and global objectives to outcomes in Vietnam. After the U.S. suffered its first casualties in Vietnam, Kennedy said during an interview that "[w]e are attempting to help Vietnam maintain its

⁷³ The analysis concerning the difference between symbols and image are the author's own, based on the research conducted into cognitive and image theory.

⁷⁴ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 40.

⁷⁵ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 40.

independence and not fall under domination of the Communists...We cannot desist in Vietnam.”⁷⁶ So while Kennedy repeatedly insisted that the Vietnamese had to *do it themselves*, the conflict in Vietnam was also too important to lose, and the Vietnamese doing it themselves really equated to the Vietnamese government operating as an extension of the machinations of the U.S. government. In this way, Kennedy’s images of government, the United States, and of Vietnam coalesce and provide insight into the motivations behind the policies and agendas he pursues in Vietnam. That he recognized the political nature of the conflict is to his credit. But just as there are limits and misalignments in military-centric policies, the same pitfalls exist in political ones.

Kennedy’s emphasis on political aspects and his belief in what the United States government could accomplish perhaps prolonged the administration’s patience with Diem. Conversations, cables, and internal documents concerning Diem’s weakness in 1963 very much resembled the intelligence and assessment reports from 1961 referenced earlier in this document (which themselves very closely resemble assessments conducted by the Eisenhower administration). Part of the explanation for this is that Kennedy’s objective-driven images and the importance he placed on success in Vietnam put Diem on a pedestal—not because Diem was particularly enamoring or capable, but rather because what a successful Diem signified in terms of Kennedy’s vision was too enchanting to resist. Diem’s pedestal was underpinned not so much by what he could potentially do himself (though his apparent early accomplishments certainly bolstered hopes), but rather by the promise of what a new generation of U.S. government could do if it were properly organized and mobilized. Diem and Vietnam were both absorbed into and defined through Kennedy’s Presidential image.

Clausewitz tells us that war is policy by other means, and it is a common lament when wars go afoul to decry the failures of policies that undermine, misalign, and/or blur military objectives and capabilities. H.R. McMaster unequivocally states that “[t]he war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before

⁷⁶ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 110.

Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965.”⁷⁷ There is definite validity to the argument that overly ambiguous political objectives or the misunderstanding of the character of the war or of the adversary often result in military failure. These truths were no less stark for the Americans in Vietnam than they were for the Prussians facing Napoleon. Yet, in emphasizing the importance of political objectives there may be a tendency to assume that policy can in fact remedy the myriad of strategic problems nations face and that failure results from simply not finding the appropriate political remedy. When Eisenhower warned against hastily seeking solutions through an ever-expanding government in his farewell address, he asserts that some problems lie beyond even the polity’s capacity to find clean lines and satisfactory solutions. For Eisenhower, the gears of even the most clear-sighted and capable government could only grind so far. Complex social ills and wars might require “malleable” objectives, or even lie beyond the scope of governmental solutions.⁷⁸ Kennedy’s image, however, stands in stark contrast to Eisenhower’s despite the fact that both men root Vietnam in the context of the Cold War containment policy. Kennedy and his men were convinced that their vigor and intellect could succeed where Eisenhower had failed and that they could raise government to new heights. “[I]f there was anything that bound the men, their followers, and their subordinates together,” David Halberstam wrote of the Kennedy administration, “it was the belief that sheer intelligence and rationality could answer and solve anything.”⁷⁹

So, with images of total war, a dependent yet crucial ally, and the imperatives and potential of a new governmental era, Kennedy turned to solving the Vietnam problem. The sword Kennedy pulled from the stone was government. Now, the task before him was organizing and revolutionizing government so that it might be re-forged into a well-

⁷⁷ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty : Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 333.

⁷⁸ Dag Henriksen, *NATO’s Gamble: Combining Diplomacy and Airpower in the Kosovo Crisis, 1998-1999* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 197. In his analysis on OPERATION ALLIED FREEDOM, Henriksen quotes General Smith, who asserts that the character of war has changed “from the hard absolute objectives of interstate industrial war to more malleable objectives.” Henriksen also summarizes Smith, who says that “modern wars are marked by the relationship between political and military activities, since they will evolve and change together.”

⁷⁹David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Random House, 1972), 57, 153.

honed and calibrated instrument. With sword in scabbard, Kennedy went in search of his round table, so that he might arrange his knights for action.

From Inheritance to Legacy: Kennedy's New Table

"The United States needs a Grand Objective," wrote a Kennedy appointee in a memo shortly after the administration took office, "we behave as if...our real objective is to sit by our pools...the key consideration is not that the Grand Objective be exactly right, it is that we have one and that we start moving toward it."⁸⁰ Kennedy's ascendance coincided with his clarion call to action. Kennedy believed Eisenhower's administration had been too lax, too committed to increasingly obsolete approaches that were easily outstripped by the complex challenges of modern geopolitical realities. Governmental institutions as arranged by past generations were overly bloated and blunt instruments. Kennedy immediately streamlined the structure of the National Security Council staff and instituted what he believed to be a more nimble and proactive managerial style, relying on "ad hoc" task forces.⁸¹ Additionally, Kennedy bolstered U.S. nuclear capabilities and demanded a more agile U.S. military with modernized conventional forces and an increased ability to conduct irregular warfare. Guerilla warfare was "an international disease" that had infected Vietnam and that the United States had to eradicate.⁸² Kennedy also believed that Communism and guerilla warfare flourished in impoverished and underdeveloped societies and sought to inoculate such areas by removing the "source of disease" through extensive "economic and technical assistance" programs.⁸³ In contrast to Eisenhower's more reserved approach to foreign policy, Kennedy staked out a proactive agenda of "global activism" that sought greater flexibility through a transformed defense department and economic policy.⁸⁴ Before examining some of the specifics involved in Kennedy's transformative agenda, it is useful to describe at least in

⁸⁰ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 198.

⁸¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 198. See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: MA, 1965) 420-21.

⁸² Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise; The Politics of Expectation*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 132, 264.

⁸³ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 75.

⁸⁴ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 75.

part how the characteristics of the transition between Eisenhower and Kennedy perhaps contributed to the degree, if not the nature, of Kennedy's agenda.

Shortly before taking office, Kennedy and his staff met with Eisenhower and his advisors. Though the records vary as to whether Eisenhower actually recommended direct U.S. military involvement, Eisenhower did emphasize the importance of Laos and Vietnam in stopping the Communists' advance in Asia.⁸⁵ "If Laos is lost to the Free World," said Eisenhower, "in the long run we will lose all of Southeast Asia."⁸⁶ Despite Eisenhower's unequivocal statement, McNamara and others from Kennedy's presidential staff left the meeting with the distinct impression that Eisenhower "did not know what to do in Southeast Asia."⁸⁷ McNamara recalled that "we received no thoughtful analysis of the problem and no pros and cons regarding alternative ways to deal with it. We were left only with [Eisenhower's] ominous prediction[s]...which made a deep impression on Kennedy."⁸⁸ Eisenhower's ambiguity over Indochina and Vietnam, despite the criticality he places on the region in light of domino theory, is partially explained by his economically-minded foreign policy. Eisenhower relied on a general nuclear-deterrent strategy, and American military forays in Southeast Asia were extremely limited. Additionally, Indochina sat at the intersection between generally accepted Cold War logic and the growing trend of wars of national liberation. Limited conflicts in Asia and around the globe begged Cold War rationales yet defied existing Cold War methodologies. Eisenhower inherited from Truman the same intractable Vietnam challenge he handed off to Kennedy—namely, how to reconcile grand Cold War strategies with the emerging threat of revolutionary wars.

As Truman's Secretary of State, George C. Marshall described the difficulties of discerning a satisfactory policy during France's involvement in Vietnam: "We have fully recognized France's sovereign position...at the same time we cannot shut our eyes to the fact there are two sides to this problem and that our reports indicate lack of French understanding [the] other side and [the] continued existence [of France's] dangerously

⁸⁵ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 36.

⁸⁶ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 36. Quoted from, Memorandum to the President, January 24, 1961, reprinted in *Journal of American History*, June 1993, p. 363.

⁸⁷ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 36.

⁸⁸ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 37.

outmoded colonial outlook and method....On the other hand we do not lose sight [of the] fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by philosophy of political organization directed from and controlled by Kremlin.”⁸⁹ The Eisenhower administration continued to straddle the line described by Marshall, and while Eisenhower did direct aid and assistance to France and later South Vietnam, he withheld overt U.S. military involvement. As the struggle between Communist and Democratic factions intensified and the meaning of the struggle to U.S. interests sharpened in the minds of policy makers, satisfactory solutions remained elusive, and U.S. Indochina policy remained ambivalent. Therefore, within the context of U.S. goals and concerns regarding Indochina, Kennedy was correct in perceiving Eisenhower’s policies as insufficient. As framed by Eisenhower’s policies and existing Cold War paradigms, the “Indochina problem was intractable,” and Eisenhower handed Kennedy a “problem with no solution.”⁹⁰

The lack of specificity on Indochina during the handoff between Eisenhower and Kennedy pushed ambiguity across administrations and invited Kennedy to form his own image to define the problem and its solutions. According to McNamara, what impressed Kennedy during the meeting with Eisenhower was the criticality of Southeast Asia to U.S. interests in the global struggle against Communism. Eisenhower’s characterization of Vietnam with regard to its importance to U.S. interests was little different than Kennedy’s own. As such, Kennedy’s subsequent agenda derived not so much from a detailed collusion with Eisenhower’s perspectives or policies for the future (since few were provided) but rather from perceptions Kennedy developed while still outside the Presidency.⁹¹ Presidential transitions are “like trying to change drivers of a car on a

⁸⁹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 7-8.

⁹⁰ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 36.

⁹¹ In a note from his memoirs, McNamara describes the manner of handoff between Presidents during transitions as “a weakness in our form of government [where there is] the lack of an effective way to transfer knowledge and experience from one administration to another.” McNamara assesses that the United States pays a heavy price in policy and outcomes as a result of the somewhat haphazard presidential transition process and compares the inefficacies of the American system to what he sees as the more advantageous ways power is transferred in parliamentary systems. In Great Britain and West Germany, for example, McNamara recalls how defense ministers trained for their positions by serving as opposition party leaders and studying their country’s security issues for many years. McNamara contrasts this with his own ‘preparation’ for serving as Defense Secretary by working at the Ford Motor Company and calls the

freeway at very high speed.”⁹² There is a powerful institutional inertia and momentum that carries across presidencies. In this case, the momentum was commitment to the importance of Vietnam without clear specifics on how to proceed in Vietnam. That lack of specifics allowed Kennedy to more freely infuse Vietnam policy with his *Grand Objective* and image of not only what Vietnam meant to U.S. interests, but also of how he believed the United States could transform itself, Vietnam, and the world.

A New Force for a New War

Prior to Kennedy taking office in 1961, Hanoi had established the National Liberation Front (NLF). The NLF was a guerrilla group designed to undermine President Ngo Dinh Diem’s government in Saigon. Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev had also pledged Soviet support for wars of *national liberation*. The fall of China in 1949, Khrushchev’s stated ambitions, Soviet expansion, and the promulgation of Mao’s guerrilla doctrine throughout the 1950s created an atmosphere where a succession of Communist takeovers seemed “likely...wherever lack of national cohesion made states vulnerable...to guerilla attack.”⁹³ Even apart from the relationship between guerrilla warfare and the perceived sweep of Communism, Irregular Warfare and Counterinsurgency appealed to Kennedy’s sensibilities in that unconventional warfare blended the martial and the political. Unconventional warfare was much more flexible, discreet, and marked a distinct break with existing paradigms. Kennedy read the revolutionary writings of Che Guevara and often quoted Mao’s maxim that “guerillas are like fish, and the people are the water in which fish swim... [i]f the temperature of the water is right, the fish will thrive.”⁹⁴ After Laos fell to the Communists, Vietnam “became the test bed for counterinsurgency programs and techniques.”⁹⁵ Kennedy sought the employment of a new breed of American military power in Vietnam. “If freedom is to be saved,” Kennedy told West Point’s 1962 graduating class, “we need a

meeting between Eisenhower and Kennedy “a poor substitute” for the kind of training and handoff practiced in other countries. See, McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 35.

⁹² Kurt M. Campbell and James Steinberg, *Difficult Transitions : Foreign Policy Troubles at the Outset of Presidential Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), x.

⁹³ Russell Frank Weigley, *The American Way of War; a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1973), 456.

⁹⁴ Patterson, “Bearing the Burden,” 208.

⁹⁵ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty : Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 32.

whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and a wholly different kind of training and commitment.”⁹⁶

In early spring of 1961, Kennedy created the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam and charged its director, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric, to develop a “program of action” on Vietnam.⁹⁷ In Gilpatric’s Task Force memo for the president, he summarizes that “a state of guerrilla warfare now exists throughout the country,” with a near tripling of “hard-core Communists” between 1960 and 1961.⁹⁸ Gilpatric’s report characterizes Viet Cong activities as consistent with the “Communist ‘master plan’ to take over all of Southeast Asia and makes several political, military, and economic recommendations to Kennedy.”⁹⁹ In National Security Action Memorandum 52, Kennedy immediately approves Gilpatric’s stated U.S. objectives and concept of operations in Vietnam as well as the Task Force’s political, military and economic recommendations.¹⁰⁰ Kennedy’s approval message read:

The U.S. objective and concept of operations stated in the Report are approved: to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam; to create in that country a visible and increasingly Democratic society, and to initiate, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a military, political, economic, psychological and covert character to achieve this objective... Additional actions... [include] the objective of meeting the increased security threat ...along the frontier between Laos and Vietnam...the President directs an assessment of the military utility of a further increase in G.V.N. forces from 170,000 to 200,000, together with an assessment of the parallel political and fiscal implications.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 32. John F. Kennedy as quoted in the New York Times, 7 June 1962, p. 26.

⁹⁷ Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), "1961-1963 Volume 1; Vietnam, 1961," (Paperless Edition reproduced by BACM Research). Page 92 of BACM electronic version.

⁹⁸ Roswell Gilpatric, L., "United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967: A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam," (US Department of State, 1961). Volume 11, page 43.

⁹⁹ Gilpatric, "United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967: A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam."

¹⁰⁰ The Draft Task Force Report is dated 26 April 1961, The United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967 (Department of State), V.11, 42-57. NSAM 52, which approves the Task Force recommendations, is dated 11 May, 1961. NSAM 52 is available at the John F. Kennedy Museum and Library Online, <http://www.jfk.library.org/Asset-Viewer/KDit5FSwHEmiuwttnVhDZQ.aspx>.

¹⁰¹ McGeorge Bundy, "National Security Action Memorandum 52," (John F. Kennedy Library and Museum Online, 1961).

Gilpatric identified the Counter Insurgency Plan as “most significant” in halting Communist subversion and called for an urgent and dedicated expansion in U.S. military and economic aid as well as a dramatic increase in unconventional and psychological operations.¹⁰² The Task Force Report makes clear the urgent need for U.S. “operational flexibility” through increased unconventional, covert, and psychological capabilities and also emphasizes that the U.S. must “impress upon [its] friends, the Vietnamese, and [its] foes...that come what may, the United States intends to win this battle.”¹⁰³ In addition to approving the above, Kennedy also directed “full examination by the Defense Department under the guidance of the Director [Gilpatric]...of the size and composition of forces which would be desirable in the case of a possible commitment of U.S. forces to Vietnam.”¹⁰⁴

George Herring contends that while Kennedy was more willing to wade “deeper into the morass” than the more limited approach of his predecessor, that Kennedy’s actions actually contradicted the more impassioned rhetoric of his administration.¹⁰⁵ Kennedy, according to Herring, was “cautious rather than bold, hesitant rather than decisive, and improvisational rather than carefully calculating.”¹⁰⁶ The evidence begs an alternative view, which is that Kennedy was actually precisely calculating, decisive, and bold. Kennedy’s hesitancy was in the application of U.S. military, economic, and political mechanisms in their current form or in the manner by which convention would dictate. Kennedy’s rhetoric was backed by a deliberate conceptualization of what the reformed institutions of government could accomplish, and he did not balk at immediately taking steps to initiate government’s transformation. In fact, it was Kennedy’s aversion to plodding caution and inaction that not only colored his perceptions

¹⁰² Gilpatric, “United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967: A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam.” Gilpatric’s report calls for increased Military Assistance Advisory Group expansion “as necessary” with at least an additional 100 U.S. advisors to be dispatched immediately. The report also calls for expansion of International Cooperation Agency procedures so that more U.S. administrators, public health officials, educators, agricultural experts, etc. could be deployed to Vietnam. Gilpatric asks for a doubling of South Vietnam’s Civil Guard Force and an additional \$49 million in funding, the delivery of U.S. surveillance and early warning radar equipment, the delivery and stand-up of a more expansive communication and information operation network.

¹⁰³ Gilpatric, “United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967: A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam,” 43-46.

¹⁰⁴ Bundy, “National Security Action Memorandum 52.”

¹⁰⁵ Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 75.

¹⁰⁶ Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 75.

of the Eisenhower administration, but also informed his decisions on whom he chose and trusted to affect his vision and also what he charged them to do.

When Kennedy abolished the rigid National Security Council structure that existed under Eisenhower, he replaced it with a more “collegial style of decision making” and met irregularly with his “inner club” of trusted advisers.¹⁰⁷ Kennedy was dissatisfied with both the architecture and the people carried over from Eisenhower’s administration. In Kennedy’s view, policies lacked flexibility and individuals lacked imagination. Two key international incidents in the early months of Kennedy’s administration reinforced this view. The first was the Bay of Pigs debacle in April and the second was the Laotian settlement in May. The Bay of Pigs was an outgrowth of Eisenhower’s covert CIA operation to arm and train Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro’s government. The Laotian agreement left Communist sympathizer Pathet Lao in control of eastern Laos, which benefited Hanoi’s logistic efforts to support the Viet Cong. In both instances, Kennedy found fault with JCS planning and advice.¹⁰⁸ Kennedy’s impression was that the Joint Chiefs were reluctant and prone to “beat their chest until it comes time to do some fighting.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, Kennedy’s restructuring of the National Security and decision-making structures diminished the role of the JCS, and he turned to men like Maxwell Taylor and Robert McNamara to affect the desired transformation.

Taylor was the consummate soldier-statesman and had a “reputation as both a warrior and a scholar” that appealed to Kennedy.¹¹⁰ Taylor had railed against Eisenhower’s massive-retaliation policies as too metered, binary, and rigid and called for an increased operational flexibility that would draw on expanded, non-nuclear forces and

¹⁰⁷ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 4. According to Maxwell Taylor, the NSC was “little more than a sort of registration office” for decisions that President Kennedy had already “made in the comparative privacy of the oval office.” See also, Maxwell D. Taylor, “Trends in national Security Planning,” speech presented at the Naval War College, 14 March 1963, General Taylor’s Speeches, Box 20, File T-415-69.

¹⁰⁸ For more a more detailed account of The Bay of Pigs from within the Kennedy administration, see Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987). For more detail on the Laotian agreement, see Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

¹⁰⁹ Moya Ann Ball, *Vietnam-on-the-Potomac*, Praeger Series in Political Communication (New York, NY: Praeger, 1992), 90.

¹¹⁰ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty : Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 9.

capabilities.¹¹¹ Taylor embodied the maxims of Kennedy's generation and was appointed as Military Representative of the President in April, 1961. Taylor's appointment came with a large degree of implied, if not direct, command authority where he could "call directly on any department or agency for the discharge of his responsibilities."¹¹² Most significantly, Taylor had the ear of the president. Taylor's position subsumed the historical role and influence of the JCS, which was further diminished when Taylor was appointed Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff in 1962. Instead of the JCS filling the traditional role of providing impartial military advice to the president, Kennedy now had one of his own in charge—an arrangement that, when combined with McNamara's coincident efforts to transform the Pentagon, helped "Kennedy effect a doctrinal shift that influenced deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam."¹¹³

In June 1961, Kennedy advisor Walt Rostow described America's "central task" in Kennedy's emerging policy of "nation-building" through counter-insurgency as protecting "the independence of the revolutionary process now going forward."¹¹⁴ Vietnam and other underdeveloped countries were at the forefront of Kennedy's total war against Communism. There was a distinctive belief within the administration that with enough "pump-priming" and "fine tuning" that government could do almost anything.¹¹⁵ Revitalization of American institutions could better exploit and redirect domestic production, capabilities, and behaviors to new heights, which in turn could be channeled in support of Kennedy's global agenda. "American money, American technology, and the force of the American example" would be the catalyst and the fuel for democracies abroad and "a bar to the Communists' grand design."¹¹⁶ McNamara was selected as Secretary of Defense not because he possessed extensive experience in foreign military and security affairs, but rather because Kennedy believed he "would bring to the military

¹¹¹ Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Harper 1960).

¹¹² McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 12. See also Maxwell D. Taylor, Trends in National Security Planning, "Swords and Plowshares, 179-81, 195-97.

¹¹³ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 593-94, 604-9. As quoted from Rostow Speech at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, June 28, 1961.

¹¹⁵ McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 305.

¹¹⁶ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 224. See also Kennedy state of the union address, January 11, 1962.

techniques of management from the business world.”¹¹⁷ McNamara had proven his mettle as a statistical analyst and control officer for the military during WW II and again demonstrated the efficacy of his management techniques as president of Ford motor company. It was those attributes that Kennedy believed would allow McNamara to transform the Pentagon and maximize military capabilities and outputs. When McNamara brought his Planning-Programming-Budgeting System (PPBS) to the pentagon, he was the youngest Secretary of Defense ever appointed. At 44, however, he was also one of the oldest in Kennedy’s administration.

The New Defense Secretary’s approach attempted to quantify force structures according to national security needs and establish systems analysis procedures that could reconcile desired ‘outputs’ with the costs of ‘inputs.’ PPBS attempted to eliminate redundancies and non-essential variables, such as inter or intra-service compromises.¹¹⁸ In *The McNamara Strategy*, William Kaufman lists five key assumptions of PPBS: 1). force structure should derive from tasks and not parochial interests; 2). *costs* had to be reconciled with *benefits*; 3). all alternative courses of action were subject to evaluation and could be measured; 4). short-term planning could be tied to and reflective of long-term goals; and 5). the Secretary of Defense would have the autonomy, staff, and latitude to make decisions independent of the military services.¹¹⁹ Much like Taylor, McNamara had Kennedy’s ear and backing for the implementation of new ideas and organizational approaches that reflected both a change in the relationship amongst governmental institutions and a shift in the role, nature, and character of government itself.

Perhaps one of the more subtle but dramatic effects of not only whom Kennedy placed but also what they believed was that ideological congruency and generational affinities insulated the ‘inner-circle’ not only from their own doubts, but also from the doubts of others. From the outset, Kennedy received continuous, albeit often contradictory and inconclusive, reports on the situation in Vietnam. JCS memos both called for and warned against military involvement. State Department cables were one day optimistic over what could be accomplished with Diem and on another day

¹¹⁷ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect : The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 3.

¹¹⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 224.

¹¹⁹ William W. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy*, 1st ed. (New York,: Harper & Row, 1964), 48.

convincingly certain of Diem's imminent demise. Amongst all the noise, if Kennedy's inner circle did not determine presidential decisions, the relationships certainly captured the president's attention. In 1961, for example, despite warnings from various military and State Department officials, Kennedy accepted Taylor's assurance that increased operational roles for U.S. equipment and advisory teams would not result in the United States' inevitable involvement in a ground war.¹²⁰ One of the last assessments of Vietnam received by Kennedy was the Taylor-McNamara report in October, 1963. The joint report came on the heels of months of speculation over the status of Diem's regime and of the situation in Vietnam, to include the administration's potential role in a coup against Diem.¹²¹ The McNamara-Taylor report summarized the following conclusions for Kennedy: 1). The continuing great progress of the military campaign; 2). that there was significant and growing dissatisfaction with the Diem regime; 3). that there was no solid evidence for a successful coup against Diem; 4). but the majority of GVN military officers remained more hostile to the Viet Cong than Diem; 5). that the loyalties of GVN military officers could swing against Diem if his regime persisted in more repressive policies, and that this would undermine favorable military progress; 6). and that it was unclear whether the United States could successfully push Diem's regime to moderation, but that such pressures were necessary.¹²²

In addition to recommending a more robust and efficient strategic hamlet program, the report also predicted that current U.S. progress justified the potential withdrawal of 1000 advisors and the possible handoff of internal security operations to the South Vietnamese by 1965. In almost the same breath, however, the report states that the "security of South Vietnam remains vital to United States Security" and that all efforts should seek to defeat the Viet Cong insurgency "as promptly as possible."¹²³ The report's tone and assessment is optimistic, yet still anchors U.S. security on positive outcomes in Vietnam. Recommendations (which include condemnation of Diem's

¹²⁰ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 101-04. The Pentagon study asserts that, despite the controversy and differing opinions, the outcome of the Taylor mission to Vietnam, which called for increased support forces, helicopter companies, an expanded advisory mission and tactical air support "were essentially already agreed to by the President before Taylor left Washington."

¹²¹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 158-59, 91-216. See Documents #33-#51.

¹²² Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 211. "McNamara-Taylor Report on Mission to South Vietnam," Document #47.

¹²³ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 213.

repressive policies and a mixture of carrots and sticks) also assume the pliability of Diem's behavior through the leverage the United States holds over him. This final set of assumptions concerning Diem's pliability reflects a pervasive attitude within Kennedy's White House that "private behavior was susceptible to political control."¹²⁴ The White House's belief that it could channel Diem's behavior was merely an extension of the belief that it could align U.S. domestic and institutional behavior through a series of well-designed programs and policies.

Many in the military questioned Kennedy's assumptions, criticizing McNamara's programs and Taylor's actions. In aggregate, critics believed that the two men overly diminished the influence of the JCS and that they also ripped the ceiling off of budgets and missions.¹²⁵ McNamara's Whiz Kids were "the most egotistical people I ever saw in my life," said Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis Lemay.¹²⁶ Alain Enthoven, who headed McNamara's Systems Analysis division, believed military experience actually discouraged "seeing the larger picture" and that "there was little in the typical officer's early career that qualifies him to be a better strategic planner than...a graduate of the Harvard business school."¹²⁷ McNamara's PPBS program was an expression of Kennedy's belief that the Defense Department could be manipulated to meet the demands of his ambitious objectives without imposing budgetary limits. The appointment of Taylor both as Presidential Military Advisor and as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs demonstrated Kennedy's determination to put in place his 'own men' as a way to break the inertia of the past. Kennedy was convinced that the proper arrangement of people and institutions, of intellect and action, could trump the more conservative fiscal and military policies of Eisenhower. Even the national economy "could be manipulated to provide the resources necessary to sustain" Washington's desires.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 305.

¹²⁵ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 20-21.

¹²⁶ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 20. See also, Lemay, Oral History Transcript, 28 June 1971, p.7, LBJ Library.

¹²⁷ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 19. See also Alain Enthoven, History Transcript, 29 July 1970, tape 1, p. 6, LBJ Library; Alain Enthoven and Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough: Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 73-116.

¹²⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 225.

The highest rate of growth in U.S. real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) under Eisenhower was less than three percent, which occurred between 1958 and 1960.¹²⁹ Twice under Eisenhower, U.S. GDP actually shrunk, and Kennedy and his advisers blamed Eisenhower's "failure to maintain a high growth rate" for three U.S. recessions.¹³⁰ Prior to taking office, Kennedy appointed domestic and international policy task forces, chaired by economists Paul Samuelson and Allan Sproul.¹³¹ Samuelson prepared the "Economy-Samuelson Report," dated January 6, 1961, in which he argued that Eisenhower's outdated economics stalled the high-growth rates needed to sustain more substantial U.S. military and policy objectives.¹³² Samuelson and Walter Heller, Kennedy's Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, successfully convinced Kennedy that economic expansion through Keynesian economic principles was more important than balanced budgets. Keynesian theory argues that naturally occurring individual behaviors and business cycles at the micro level can cause suboptimal and adverse effects at the macroeconomic level. Government, Keynes argues, could and should anticipate and interrupt economic downturns by artificially injecting money supplies and manipulating interest rates, tax rates, and other economic mechanisms.¹³³

Kennedy's economic policies followed the prescriptions of Heller and Samuelson, and the economy became a tool of government to produce sustained growth and stimulate behaviors; forever necessitating the placement of "the political economist at the President's elbow."¹³⁴ Kennedy's economic hand was much more visible than Adam Smith's and many were troubled by what they viewed as government's encroachment into the private sector. In anticipation, Kennedy delivered several preemptive speeches, where he laid before the business community the familiar rallying cries of his

¹²⁹ Cambell McConnell, R., Stanley L. Brue, *Economics: Principles, Problems, and Policies*, ed. Lucille Sutton, 15 ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2002).

¹³⁰ McConnell, *Economics: Principles, Problems, and Policies*. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 225.

¹³¹ Allan H. Meltzer, *A History of the Federal Reserve* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 315-17.

¹³² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 225-26. See also, Paul A. Samuelson's task force report on the economy, January 6, 1961, Kennedy Papers, Pre-Presidential File, Box 1071, "Economy-Samuelson Report."

¹³³ John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, 1st Harvest/HBJ ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1964).

¹³⁴ Walter W. Heller, *New Dimensions of Political Economy*, "The Godkin Lectures at Harvard University" (New York, NY: Norton, 1967).

administration. "In every sense of the word," Kennedy told the National Association of Manufacturers in December, 1961, "Capitalism is on trial as we debate these issues...[t]he hour of decision has arrived. We cannot afford to 'wait and see what happens,' while the tide of events sweeps over and beyond us. We must use time as a tool, not a couch. We must carve out our own destiny."¹³⁵ In his 1963 State of The Union Address, Kennedy emphasized the need for tax cuts, increased spending, and increased growth:

Now the time has come to make the most of our gains...But recovery is not enough...We have undertaken the most far reaching defense improvements in the ...history of this country. And we have maintained the frontiers of freedom from Vietnam to West Berlin. But complacency or self-congratulation can imperil our security as much as the weapons of our adversary. A moment of pause is not a moment of peace...free world development will still be an uphill struggle...In the end, the crucial effort is one of purpose—requiring not only the fuel of finance but the torch of idealism...For we seek not the worldwide victory of one nation...but a worldwide victory of men...To achieve this end, the United States will continue to spend a greater portion of its national production than any other people in the free world.¹³⁶

Table 1 below captures some of the core U.S. economic data between 1954 and 1970. Though not comprehensive, the data clearly shows a distinctive growth trend for the Kennedy-Johnson years as compared to those of Eisenhower.

Table 1: U.S. Economic Statistical Data 1954-1970

	1954	1956	1958	1960	1962	1964	1966	1968	1970
Real GDP (in Billions 1996 Dollars)	1,9650.5	2,141.1	2,162.8	2,376.7	2,578.9	2,846.5	3,227.5	3,466.1	3,578.0
Percent Change In Real GDP	-0.7	2.0	-1.0	2.5	6.0	5.8	6.6	4.8	0.2
Consumer Price Index (1982-84 =100)	26.9	27.2	28.9	29.6	30.2	31.0	32.4	34.8	38.8
Supply of Money, M1 (in billions of dollars)	130.3	136.0	138.4	140.7	147.8	160.3	172.0	197.4	214.3
Public Debt (in billions)	270.8	272.7	279.7	290.5	302.9	316.1	328.5	368.7	380.9

Source: McConnell, Campbell R. & Stanley L. Brue, As adapted from Bureau of Labor Statistics, Federal Reserve System, and Economic Report of the President, 2001.

¹³⁵ John F. Kennedy, "Address in New York City to the National Association of Manufacturers," *The American Presidency Project* (1961), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8474>.

¹³⁶ John F. Kennedy, "The State of the Union Address, 1963," (Vital Speeches of The Day Vol. XXIX, 1963).

Gaddis observes that *McNamara's revolution* in the Pentagon and the *Keynesian revolution* in economics “implied a rejection of Eisenhower’s administrative style” and marked a significant shift in the how government perceived the means it had at its disposal to affect its ends.¹³⁷ McDougal describes Kennedy’s new arrangements not only as transformative of governmental institutions and the relationships within government, but also as a distinctive shift in the relationship between government and society.¹³⁸ Antoine Bousquet assesses the Kennedy era as reflective of the cybernetic regime that “emerged from the unprecedented technological and industrial effort of WW II” and was driven by the belief that “complete predictability and centralized control” was now possible.¹³⁹ “Scientific methodology was applied more systematically than ever, with operations research and systems analysis comprehensively deployed to solve tactical and strategic problems, ...[which] fuelled fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence.”¹⁴⁰

However we choose to describe Kennedy’s *New Table*, it seems clear that how the President imagined the threats aligned against the United States and the means required to meet those threats clearly influenced his policies. In many ways, Vietnam became a proving ground for Kennedy’s beliefs. A transformed government and a transformed military, under the auspices of the new generation could find solution and victory where the policies of old had failed.

In May 1961, Kennedy lobbied Congress for the funding and support required for extraordinary times. Kennedy described 1961 as a “great opportunity” to fund and effect the transformations required to stem the tides of Communist revolutions.¹⁴¹ Swift action was needed, according to the President, and he laid before Congress a litany of budgetary requests that would transform social programs, the military, and foreign aid. Kennedy requested more than \$3.4B in additional funding for capabilities and requirements linked to operations in Vietnam.¹⁴² Of those, the largest increases were slated to the Military

¹³⁷ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 226, 59-62.

¹³⁸ McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 305-07.

¹³⁹ Antoine J. Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 33.

¹⁴⁰ Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 34.

¹⁴¹ Kennedy, "Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs."

¹⁴² Kennedy, "Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs." The amount listed was derived by adding the requested additional funding for the Presidential contingency fund, the United States

Assistance Program (\$2B), the Presidential Contingency Fund (\$250M), and the equipping, retraining, and development of conventional and paramilitary forces (\$100M). Many of the President's requests were a direct reflection of the recommendations made by Gilpatric's Vietnam Task Force. Kennedy also acted on advice received from his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, who he had appointed as his personal representative in the newly formed "Special Group, Counter Insurgency" task force.¹⁴³ The special group was headed by General Taylor and personified the administration's belief in the need for unconventional solutions, flexibility, and a new synergistic form of U.S. military power. During his first year in office, Kennedy increased the number of Special Forces from 1,500 to 9,000 men, and it was Kennedy who authorized the official wear of the Green Beret. Kennedy was enamored with Special Forces because he believed that not only could they bring the required military expertise, but that they could also provide the leadership and "nation-building" essential to remedying the "underlying national incohesiveness [sic]" that left underdeveloped nations vulnerable to Communist subversion.¹⁴⁴

The mobilization of the American economy and the development of Special Forces and paramilitary capabilities were important corollaries to the "new strategists' assault on massive retaliation doctrine."¹⁴⁵ Kennedy took to heart the postulates Robert Osgood set down in *Limited War: the Challenge to American Strategy*.¹⁴⁶ Osgood suggested that limited war required limited aims as well as an intimate link between military force and diplomacy. To avoid both Armageddon and martial impotency, military means had to be "appropriately limited."¹⁴⁷ The American experience in Korea, said Osgood, demonstrated that "America's capacity to retaliate directly upon the Soviet Union could not deter Communist aggression in the gray areas, [and] that the United was

Information Agency, the Military Assistance Program, the re-equip and retraining programs, the increase to Marine Corps manning, and for the doubling of Army Reserve and deployment forces. The figure is limited to increases only, and does not reflect the total amount already approved to each of these programs nor does it reflect the entire budget.

¹⁴³ Weigley, *The American Way of War; a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 457.

¹⁴⁴ Weigley, *The American Way of War; a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 457.

¹⁴⁵ Weigley, *The American Way of War; a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 411.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War; The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

¹⁴⁷ Weigley, *The American Way of War; a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 412. See Osgood, Robert E., *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), ix., 146, 189.

inadequately prepared to contain Communist aggression by any other means.”¹⁴⁸

Vietnam and wars of national liberation were the ‘grey areas,’ and Kennedy’s budgetary requests to Congress and administered reorganizations on the DOD, NSC, and U.S. economy were part of the administration’s transition to a strategy of Flexible Response.¹⁴⁹ Though covert operations against Hanoi and in South Vietnam had been ongoing since the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy greatly expanded resources, presence, and operational latitude for these missions. This increased commitment is reflected in Kennedy’s approval of Gilpatric’s Task Force Requests in NSAM 52, Kennedy’s budgetary requests and approved recommendations from the Special Counterinsurgency Group, and in his response to General Landsdale’s “Resources for Unconventional Warfare, S.E. Asia” report.¹⁵⁰ Kennedy pushed for the integration of military, political, and psychological elements of national power and was outwardly expansive in his commitment to Vietnam, yet he emphasized and sought solution through limited, covert operations.¹⁵¹ This contradiction was noted by Mrs. Bobbie Pendergrass. Mrs. Pendergrass, whose observations in her letter to Kennedy opened our discussion on the President’s image of the Vietnam War, was a housewife far removed from Kennedy’s inner circle, yet her poignant observations demonstrate that acumen comes as much from outside the beltway as from within—sometimes more so.

“Please,” Pendergrass tells the President, “I’m only a housewife who doesn’t claim to know all about the international situation—but...can the small number of our boys over in Viet Nam possibly be doing enough good to justify the awful number of casualties? It seems to me that ...we should send enough to have a chance—or else stay home. Those fellows are just sitting ducks...If a war is worth fighting—Isn’t it worth

¹⁴⁸ Weigley, *The American Way of War; a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, 412. See Osgood, Robert E., *Limited War: the Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), ix., 146, 189.

¹⁴⁹ For more information on Flexible Response and other major U.S. Containment Strategies see, John Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982); Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 441-477; and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

¹⁵⁰ See, Sheehan, 90-91, 130-138, and Weigley 455-457.

¹⁵¹ William Conrad Gibbons and US Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 40.

fighting to win?¹⁵² In his response, Kennedy said that Pendergrass' brother James must have understood that he could find himself in "a war like this [where] he took part not as a combatant but as an advisor" and that James certainly "understood the necessity" and that a full war in Vietnam was "unthinkable."¹⁵³ The logic of flexible response and of containment strategy in general is revealed in Kennedy's statements, as is the intractable Vietnam situation. One of the only requests Kennedy denied Taylor was the General's call for 8,000 combat troops in 1961 and McNamara references Kennedy's refusal of a JCS request for more involvement in Vietnam in 1962 as well as Kennedy's statements against combat troops in late 1963 as evidence of the President's commitment *against* a larger war.¹⁵⁴

George Herring and others propose a similar logic as McNamara, citing Kennedy's non-commitment of combat troops as proof of the President's reserve and of the limitations of his commitment to Vietnam. However, the contrary *truth* might actually be that Kennedy's constraint of traditional military mechanisms and of combat troops actually illuminates his over-commitment to, and beliefs in, the mechanisms of government he saw as necessary to win the fight in Vietnam and against Communism. From this perspective, Kennedy's transformations were ways to squeeze more out of government so as to increase capabilities to meet ever-expanding objectives. Containment in Camelot was actually an explosion of commitments where Kennedy sought to supplant blunt mechanisms and policies with a better-calibrated, more-flexible, and sharper government. Kennedy believed that a new generation of the *right* men, organized the *right* way, could in fact triumph where others had and would fail. This perspective extended to the government of South Vietnam, and culminated in the administration's complicity in the coups and ultimate assassination of Diem.¹⁵⁵ By the fall of 1963, Diem had become a "seething problem," and stood in the way of direct U.S. manipulations and controls, frustrating Kennedy's efforts to administer reforms and

¹⁵² "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," 193-94. BACM Research ed. The Archives contain both a copy of the original handwritten letter from Ms. Pendergrass as well as a typed transcript. Underlining in original.

¹⁵³ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," BACM Research ed., 186-87.

¹⁵⁴ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 148-55. McNamara, In Retrospect (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 62, 86-87, 96-97.

¹⁵⁵ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 155-209. See Documents #33-#46. McNamara, Robert S., In Retrospect, 68, 72-77.

policy through the South Vietnamese President.¹⁵⁶ Kennedy's at least tacit involvement in the coups against Diem further ratified U.S. obligations not only to South Vietnamese governance, but also outcomes of the war.

Empty Shoes

During Kennedy's 34 months in office the number of U.S. advisers in Vietnam increased from less than 400 to over 16,000. He expanded the means and the missions of those advisers, which resulted in a ten-fold increase in US casualties. Kennedy injected the United States into the political processes and maneuverings of South Vietnam that eventually led to the toppled Diem regime and dramatically increased U.S. obligations for South Vietnam's governance. Transformation of America's government moved the U.S. economy from policies of solvency to policies of expansion and created a Pentagon and national security architecture that was convinced of its own ability to solve almost any problem through systems analysis and calibrated efficiencies. On one occasion, an aide told McNamara that U.S. efforts in Vietnam were doomed to fail, to which the Secretary responded, "[w]here is your data? Give me something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry!"¹⁵⁷ Kennedy laid the ground work for the "Americanization of the war," creating an open-ended commitment that lost "sight of proportion" and transformed the "limited risk gamble undertaken by Eisenhower."¹⁵⁸ Kennedy also greatly improved U.S. military capabilities, particularly with regard to non-nuclear and special forces. Kennedy's insights and improvements in these areas, however, had not proved their efficacy at the time of his death. As such, divergent attitudes prevailed as to whether or not the United States was 'winning' in Vietnam and what level of military and political

¹⁵⁶ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," BACM Research ed., 19, 24, 31, 42-44, 57, 73-75, 105-07. The collection of memos, cables, and policy papers between August and November 1963 reveal increasing tensions between Washington and Diem. At one point, Kennedy initiates investigation into ways to build up anti-Diem forces. In another exchange, it is revealed that the U.S. suspects Diem and Nhu might be secretly working to reconcile with Hanoi. A CIA memo in October described Diem's increasingly harsh policies, the growing disillusionment of the Vietnamese people, and how Diem was frustrating the U.S. COIN supply system by denying American control and standing in the way. Though Kennedy was outwardly shocked with Diem's assassination, that the President was aware of at least tacitly involved in the coups against Diem is a matter of record.

¹⁵⁷ Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*, 121. As adapted from Edwards, *The Closed World*, 127-28.

¹⁵⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 263-64. Sheehan, *Pentagon Papers*, 79-84. According to Sheehan, Kennedy started the dilemma that plagued the U.S. throughout Vietnam—"Limited Means for excessive ends."

commitment was appropriate.¹⁵⁹ McGeorge Bundy, for example, who would later become Johnson's National Security Advisor, was convinced that "unlimited commitment in Vietnam was justified," while men like George Ball argued that the U.S. should withdraw.¹⁶⁰ Kennedy placed American shoes firmly on the shores of Vietnam, but ambiguous results and Kennedy's sudden death left them empty, and it was Johnson who would have to decide what to fill them with. Kennedy thus "bequeathed to his successor a problem eminently more dangerous than the one he had inherited from Eisenhower."¹⁶¹

Kennedy entered office with the distinct impression that Eisenhower's passive policies and undulating methodologies failed to fully exploit governmental potential and were grossly inadequate for the extreme and different world the United States faced. Kennedy arms the New Generation with the sword of a transformed and proactive government, infused with intellect and vision and properly organized around his newly fashioned 'round-table.' Into the breach of a total Cold War Kennedy pours his vision and his knights, who are tempered in form but not in degree or purpose. As we revisit Kennedy's Presidential image and its influences on agendas and outcomes, it is perhaps now possible to surmise whether Vietnam is in fact the child returned to destroy Camelot.

History and the events that comprise it evolve. One of the advantages of this phenomenon is that as contemporary lives and challenges unfold, the past can be rediscovered as a rich well from which policy makers and strategists might draw fertile lessons and insights. One of the disadvantages of a 'living history' is that attempts to fix inflective events in a box of absolutes can prove futile, misleading, and even dangerous. However, review of the evidence and our current vantage point leads to the conclusion that neither Vietnam nor Kennedy's heirs betrayed Camelot, but rather that Kennedy was betrayed by his own image. Kennedy's faith in government and the ambitions he sought through it resulted in large, over-extended promises. Moreover, Kennedy tied these promises to results and embedded American prestige and interests in the outcomes for Vietnam—making it such that American retraction from the war could be seen as too costly not only for his own administration, but also for subsequent ones. When policy is

¹⁵⁹ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," BACM Research ed., 67.

¹⁶⁰ "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963," BACM Research ed., 90-91, 107-09.

¹⁶¹ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 107.

imbued with the sense that the United States must make good on its promises, regardless of feasibility or changing circumstances, then the value of commitment comes to equal or even exceed the tangible objectives that inspired the promises in the first place.

America's promises and subsequent policies in Vietnam were underwritten by the blood and treasure of the nation. So while it is noble to strive for great societies and grand international designs, it is also dangerous, for even governments have limits. And, if anything, Vietnam defined them for the United States.



Chapter 3

From Texas to Tet: Johnson's Posse of Lies

*Just like the Alamo, somebody damn well needed to go to their aid.
Well, by God, I'm going to Viet Nam's aid!*

-- Lyndon B. Johnson, 1964

*Thus the White House machinery became the President's psyche
writ large, transmitting his wishes throughout the Executive Office
with a terrifying force...*

-- Doris Kearns, 1976

*Once on the tiger's back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to
dismount.*

-- George Ball, 1964

*"I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman
I really loved, the Great Society in order to get involved with that
bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose
everything at home. But if I left that war and let the Communists take
over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as an appeaser and we
would find it impossible to accomplish anything, anywhere, on the
entire globe."*

--LBJ, 1970

Foreword

McNamara said of Johnson that he "possessed a kaleidoscopic personality," and was "by turns open and devious, loving and mean, compassionate and tough, gentle and cruel—he was a towering, powerful, paradoxical figure."¹ Johnson was a man of contradictions and a man of many metaphors. Throughout this study, the reader will find an array of American mythology and metaphor that draws on everything from the pioneer to the promise of outer space. No person is readily encapsulated in a single metaphor, but Johnson proves especially difficult because he was an especially enigmatic leader during and especially enigmatic time who attempted to tackle not just the challenges of his time, but really believed he could solve the complex challenges that have accompanied

¹ Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 98. McNamara said that Johnson reminded him a verse from Walt Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself": *Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself;/I am large, I contain multitudes.*

humankind throughout time. In the end, we ultimately settled on Johnson's fabrications, misrepresentations, and lies that both accompanied and obscured his policies in Vietnam as the organizing metaphor. It is no small gauntlet that is thrown down when a President is called a *liar*, so it is important to briefly address some distinctions.

Johnson's *posse of lies* is not meant in the insidious sense. This study is not attempting to maliciously paint the President as immoral. This study is concerned with what perhaps inspired Johnson to lie and, more importantly, the consequences of those lies, rather than to judge the man or the act. Furthermore, lies are not always *bad*, nor are they always avoidable. Fundamentally, lies are gap-fillers used to force together 'what is' with 'what is desired,' and in this way are little different from the myths, beliefs, and perceptions that root out problems and define our realities every day. Recall that reality, as Boulding describes is not 'truth,' but rather what one 'believes to be true.' In that sense, every image is, to varying degrees, a lie. This study previously defined *problems* as the gap between what 'what is' and 'what could and should be.' Understood in this way, lies are also ways to solve problems. It is in their implementation, however, that lies present themselves as particularly precarious solutions to problems. An image depends on its ability to translate experience and feedback. When an image encounters disconfirming information, either the image transforms the information or the information transforms the image. Lies can delay, but cannot prevent one of these two outcomes. The disparity between the existential world and the world as it is perceived eventually widens to the point where the cognitive bridge lacks foundation and the image collapses. Lies provide a temporary and especially *false* bridge.

When Kennedy is assassinated, Johnson sees a Communist plot and starts drawing lines in the sand and turns his attention not just to vengeance, but to vindication of the American ideal. He sets about a course that in his mind will not only bring strength to bear against the Communists, but that will also eradicate the villains of the human condition. When he takes the reins of the Presidency, Johnson essentially mounts a posse to carry out his just cause. Poses from the American West were often an eclectic mix of armed men, deputized in a just cause, and dedicated to a common purpose. When Johnson rides out he takes his men, but he also takes with him an assortment of beliefs. Furthermore, the men surrounding Johnson were victims of their own beliefs and often

muddied the waters on the situation in Vietnam and made it easier for the President to believe his master narrative. Almost to a man, members of Johnson's administration never considered it possible that a small country like North Vietnam could stand up to and thwart American power. To them, it seemed perfectly reasonable that America's immense capabilities would readily overwhelm North Vietnam and could do so for relatively little cost. Such optimism reflected perhaps a misunderstanding of the kind of war North Vietnam was fighting and was anchored by an overwhelming faith in American Exceptionalism. Johnson was both a perpetuator of and a victim to the sentiments of his time. Presidents are "simultaneously the strongest and the weakest of all national leaders," and none completely escapes the shackles placed on them by their advisors, their agents, or by the institutions they command.² Ultimately, however, it is the President who sits at the apex of American power. As Gordon Goldstein reminds us in *Lessons in Disaster*, "*counselors advise but Presidents decide*" and military interventions are a "*Presidential choice*."³ The many pieces that feed national decision-making are integrated and channeled to the President and in aggregate give birth to policy through him. Presidents are Gullivers, but they are also the Chief Executive and do choose how to view and how to use the advice they receive.⁴ This study concerns itself with how Presidential image perceives, shapes, and conducts agendas. As such, while it must allow for the influence of Johnson's advisers and of binding political structures, it is Johnson who 'closes the decision loop.' For our purposes, then, it is not as important that Johnson was perhaps lied to or had facts about Vietnam misrepresented to him. It is more important in discovering how Johnson's own predilections made him susceptible to

² H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's, 1994), 5-6. In the foreword to the diaries, Stephen Ambrose quotes political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Arendt posits that the President of the United States is the strongest leader in the world because he has the "power to destroy the world at his fingertips." The President is the weakest, because "the House controls the money, the Senate controls the treaties, the Congress as a whole has the power to make war, the next election is always just around the corner [and] the bureaucracy is always there."

³ Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Times Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2008), 27-68, 229-48.

⁴ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979), 45-47. Waltz compares great powers to Gulliver, pointing out that even the strongest nations cannot escape the structural influences that dictate to varying degrees state behaviors. A lot of power resides in the Executive Branch, but Presidents are subjected to structural influences that often 'select' for them. Still, Presidents, like great powers, must decide what to do and how to do it.

lies and misinformation and also how his own image affected what he did with those lies and how he contrived his own.

Johnson's lies begin with the myths he armed himself with, but eventually his *posse* grows as the realities of Vietnam, international, and domestic politics frustrate his cause. Johnson's ultimate quarry is elusive, but his dedication is iron-clad and that commitment both inspires and allows for what is at first a maligning of truth but what is eventually a destructive *posse of lies*.

Image of a New Frontiersman

Lyndon Johnson would often boast that his "ancestors were teachers and lawyers and college presidents and governors when the Kennedys in this country were still tending bar."⁵ Johnson was outwardly proud of his lineage. He recounted tales of family members standing with Crocket and Boone at the Alamo and herding cattle "across Kansas" with the first pioneers."⁶ Born in 1908 on the banks of the Pedernales River near Stonewall in southern Texas, Johnson's childhood was quintessential 'rural American.' Travel to the closest metropolitan area of Austin meant two days by horse or one day by Henry Ford's Model T over dirt roads that washed out with every rain. Electricity and pavement took some of the edge off the rugged countryside by the 1930s, but outhouses, straw brooms, and the hand-carrying of kindling and water for woodstoves characterized Johnson's youth. The Johnsons were 'country,' but as LBJ continually reminded folks with the recounting of his ancestry, they were 'fancy country.' Johnson's mother Rebekah graduated from Baylor and his father, Sam Johnson, served in the Texas Legislature. Still, despite the image of the Johnson family purported by LBJ, they were also farmers, cattle-speculators, and at times literally lived hand-to-mouth on the edge of economic ruin.⁷

⁵ Charles Peters, Arthur M. Schlesinger, and Sean Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson* (Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, 2010), 2.

⁶ Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12. Johnson's fellow San Marcos students said that "Lyndon would have you believe...that there wasn't anybody in the Alamo except Johnsons and Baineses." See also, Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 2.

⁷ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 3, 5, 7-9. According to Johnson's long-time friend and Press Secretary George Reedy, Johnson's mother was "an unrelenting snob who reminded everyone [that]...her ancestry included high-ranking Baptist clerics and intellectuals." This image rubbed off on Johnson, and he was driven to prove that he and his family were not "shiftless dirt farmers and grubby politicians." Sam Johnson, however, often ran into financial trouble and in 1924 he lost re-election to the

Johnson's confrontation with poverty at an early age became an enduring part of his Presidential image. In one instance, during the Christmas holiday in 1963, Johnson cajoled New York hairdresser Eddie Senz to secretly fly to Washington D.C. to coif Lady Bird, Johnson's daughters, and his secretaries. "All right now," Johnson told Senz, "I'm a poor man, and I don't make much money, but I got a wife and a couple of daughters, and four or five people...and I like the way you make them look, [so] bring whoever you need, and we'll pay for their transportation, but we can't pay for much else."⁸ Johnson had worked as a silk-stockings salesman, a janitor, and as a messenger to supplement the costs of his tuition (\$17 a semester plus \$30 per month for room and board) at Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos. During his senior year he also took on a teaching job at a Mexican American school in Cotulla, Texas, located about half way between San Antonio and Laredo. Cotulla was segregated, and Johnson's pupils and their families were impoverished, hungry, and ill-treated. After witnessing how his pupils lived without modern amenities, often searching garbage piles for food, Johnson described the treatment of the poor Mexican farm workers as "worse than you'd treat a dog."⁹ Johnson later recounted that "[y]ou never forgot what poverty and hatred could do, when you see the scars on the hopeful face of a young child."¹⁰

As a Senator and as President, Johnson vigorously pushed social and economic legislation, declared war on poverty and inequality, and in many ways carried out a crusade against the disparities and hardships he encountered during his youth. Like Kennedy, Johnson saw within government the means to eradicate social barriers and inequity. Also like Kennedy, Johnson had accompanied his own father on numerous political trips and spent time listening, learning, and falling in love with the world of politics. However, the two men orbited two very different worlds. Kennedy had attended an array of private and prep-schools in New York and Connecticut, summered in Hyannis Port, and spent winter holidays at his family home in Palm Beach. Kennedy

Texas legislature and "the family was living at the poverty level," eating "cornbread and milk." Watching his proud mother cook over a woodstove made a deep impression on Johnson and he made fighting poverty a central aim in his life—starting with his determination to bring electricity to the Hill country.

⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson and Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 115-16. Transcript of recorded conversation from 23 December, 1963, 11:38 A.M. *The Johnson Tapes*.

⁹ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 7.

¹⁰ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 8.

also graduated from Harvard, and where Johnson's political rounds with his father entailed driving the dirt roads of Texas to talk with farmers, Kennedy accompanied Ambassador Joseph Kennedy on diplomatic trips to Europe—once even bringing his own convertible. Johnson's world was less a pastoral realm filled with knights carrying out a divine charge, and more a craggy and harsh landscape where the individual needed not rescuing, but empowerment. Johnson's vision was no less ambitious than Kennedy's, but it faced the challenge of reconciling two worlds. On one hand, he believed in the rugged individualism of his forbearers, and demanded of himself and of others the kind of self-reliance, initiative, and culpability that distinguished America's pioneering spirit. At the same time, he saw the seemingly insurmountable barriers to individual excellence all around him:

The problems confronting [America] were hardly new. The lack of specific training, the denial of civil rights to black Americans, the neglect of the educational needs of our young, the inadequacy of health care, the invisible barriers around our ghettos—all these had been with us for generations... My entire life, from boyhood on, had helped me recognize the work that needed to be done in America. My view of leadership had always been an activist one... Harry Truman used to say that 13 or 14 million Americans had their interests represented in Washington, but that the rest of the people had to depend on the President of the United States. That is how I felt about the 35 million American poor. They had no voice and no champion. Whatever the cost, I was determined to represent them.¹¹

Johnson's words reveal core tenets of his Presidential image. Johnson was the champion of the individual and believed the world belonged to everyone, not just the ivy-educated or the well-bred. He hated to see people either obstructed or diminished—especially himself. Whether the barriers were race, bureaucracy, sex, breeding, economics, or oppressive ideologies, Johnson sought to smash them. That he saw himself as a champion of Walt Whitman's *great unwashed* exemplifies his affinity for the impoverished. It was born out of his experiences and demonstrates his belief in the individual. Doris Kearns posits that Johnson's sense of rugged individualism and civil responsibility were part of his own "inner need" and also reflected the character of the

¹¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Holt, 1971), 70-71.

age in which he grew up.¹² Johnson believed that a man, with enough will and effort, could make a difference. If that one man was President, he could defeat the monsters that plagued the human condition and every man, woman, and child could rise and take their rightful place within a Great Society. “Some men,” Johnson said, “want power simply to strut around the world and to hear the tune ‘Hail to the Chief.’ Others want it simply to build prestige, to collect antiques, and to buy pretty things. Well I wanted power to give things to people—all sorts of things to all sorts of people, especially the poor and the blacks.”¹³ Where Kennedy saw the machinations of government as a way to build a new world, Johnson saw government as a way to remove the obstacles that prevented individuals from building it themselves. And the people, and the government that could liberate them, needed their President.

In describing the role of the President, Johnson said that “[n]o one can experience with the President of the United States the glory and agony of his office. No one can share the majestic view from his pinnacle of power. No one can share the burden of his decisions or the scope of his duties.”¹⁴ The President stands alone. If Kennedy resembled the young *Arthur*, imbued with, and leading, the destiny of a New Generation, Johnson was more akin to the often solitary and contradictory heroes from the American West.

America’s heroes of the western frontier were self-reliant and faced daunting odds as they fought for their just cause on the knife’s edge that separates justice and law. Patrick Porter observes that the American identity, and indeed the mythology and history of America’s wars, are replete with examples of the archetypal frontiersman.¹⁵ From the Alamo, to Little Big Horn, to Vietnam, Porter suggests that American leaders have “nourished” and invoked a ‘frontier ideology,’ that encapsulates the country’s “righteous struggle against barbarism.”¹⁶ This frontier ideology allows U.S. Presidents to paint

¹² Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 13.

¹³ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 13.

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, ix.

¹⁵ Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 43-45.

¹⁶ Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes*, 4, 44-45. Porter relays how The Alamo came to be America’s Thermopylae and that Custer’s “tragic heroism...ennobled the war to tame the landscape and create a bicoastal nation.” Porter also suggests the idea of the “surrounded hero” and “daunting odds” leads to the notion that when American soldiers go abroad to fight, they “take the frontier with them.” In so doing, America’s “heroic formula becomes about numbers as well as rhetoric.” Seeded

America's wars as a landscape upon which the country can articulate its fate.

Furthermore, frontier mythology promotes the idea that America's wars are expeditions of not just firepower and coercion, but also of virtue, where victory both depends upon and reinforces the efficacy of the American ideal.¹⁷ When Johnson compares Vietnam to the Alamo and when he interprets himself as a cross between a 'preacher and a cowboy,' he translates the frontier myth to America's struggle against communism, to his war on poverty, and to his role as President.¹⁸ As President, Johnson holed up in the adobe fort, faced daunting odds, and was steadfast in his commitment to a just cause.

Johnson imagined a government that, with him at its behest, could ride in so as to tame the frontier, free the individual, and then move on. Johnson declares wars on poverty, and ignorance, and on corruptive ideologies, and tilts into the breach in full regalia.¹⁹ Yet, he recoiled from the possibility of Vietnam making him a "wartime President."²⁰ Johnson's frontier was wicked.²¹ There were no simple bands of bad guys that could be cleanly excised with posses and six shooters. The villains Johnson pursued were nebulous, comingled, and not readily cowed. The stakes Kennedy created in Vietnam, combined with Johnson's sense of justice, left the new President with fights he could not refuse both at home and abroad. Johnson was also driven by a multi-faceted sense of duty and purpose. During an interview with Washington Star reporter Isabelle

in the conquest of the Western frontier, "the residue of frontier struggles supplies a language through which to interpret American wars abroad...that resurfaced" during America's expeditionary wars against Japan, North Vietnam, and Iraq."

¹⁷ Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes*, 44.

¹⁸ The research conducted during the course of this study included review of numerous audio tapes, transcripts, biographies, memoirs, primary and secondary sources. This quotation and others in this paragraph are widely available and the descriptions presented here are a summary of some of the prominent and famous stories, quotes, and remembrances of Lyndon Johnson. See, Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert Dallek, , *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004); Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976); Johnson, Lyndon B., *The Vantage Point: Perspectives Of The Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1971); Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

¹⁹ American Public Media, *Vietnam and the Presidency (Unabridged)* (Boston, MA: American Public Radio, 2006).

²⁰ American Public Media, *Vietnam and the Presidency (Unabridged)*.

²¹ Reference to wicked problems as defined by Rittel, Horst W. & Melvin M. Webber. Societal, political and military problems, such as those Johnson was undertaking as President, are wicked in that they lack clarifying traits, demand nebulous solutions, and are not readily identifiable as having been solved. Webber lists ten characteristics of wicked problems. See "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155-69.

Shelton in 1964, Johnson was asked about his literary and presidential influences: “The first President I really loved was Jackson,” Johnson revealed, “I had great respect of Jefferson because he believed in the land...Then I loved Jackson because he was a guy that didn’t let ‘em tread on him...And Wilson. I devoured him...everything he wrote or said I memorized.”²² Johnson thus informed his own presidency with an arrangement of past presidents whose disparate political flavors ranged widely among the rugged ‘tough guy,’ the ‘nationalist,’ and the consummate progressive internationalist and ‘Kantian liberal.’

Johnson’s multifaceted sense of purpose drove him to attempt reconciling very different worlds. His world views embraced the tensions created by the intersection of a complex assortment of domestic and international challenges. On the domestic front, not only did he believe in the purposes and aspirations initiated by Kennedy, but he thought they didn’t go far enough. Building a Great Society would fulfill Johnson’s own vision and serve as a fitting eulogy to his fallen predecessor: “Everything I had ever learned in the history books taught me that *martyrs* have to die for causes. John Kennedy had died. But his ‘cause’ was not really clear. That was my job. I had to take the dead man’s program and turn it into a *martyr’s* cause.”²³ Kennedy’s domestic agenda, from Johnson’s perspective, was incomplete; and Kennedy’s sudden departure left a vacuum into which Johnson poured his own Presidential image. Johnson’s experiences with poverty and his time spent teaching at the Mexican American School in Cotulla constituted an important part of that image. His students described the work Johnson had done and his arrival as “like a blessing from the clear sky,” and Johnson himself believed he could in fact deliver similar blessings to the nation and the world.²⁴

To carry out his mission, Johnson was forced on the international front to take up the mantle in Vietnam, no matter how distasteful he found it. In 1965, Johnson explained to Martin Luther King during a telephone conversation why he believed the United States had to fight in Vietnam. “I can’t get out, I just can’t be the architect of failure...I can’t lose in Vietnam...I didn’t get us into this. We got into it in 54’...Eisenhower and

²² Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 294-95. Transcript of taped interview, recorded on 21 March, 1964 at 3:45 P.M. *The Johnson Tapes*.

²³ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 148-49. As quoted from an interview between Johnson and Doris Kearns. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 8.

Kennedy were in deep. We had 33,000 men out there when I came into the presidency...I don't want to pull down the flag and come home running with my tail between my legs...particularly if it's going to create more problems [here] than I got out there...On the other hand, I don't want to get us into war with China...I got a pretty tough problem.”²⁵ That Johnson explains his position to the famous civil rights activist demonstrates his delicate balancing of international and domestic demands. Johnson could not let Vietnam derail his domestic agenda, but he couldn't ignore the conflict. Vietnam was an obstacle to his real 'love,' the Great Society.

The intersection and tension between Johnson's domestic and international policies were just one of the lines between disparate worlds that he had to straddle as he wire-walked Kennedy's administration. “We were moving into uncharted territory,” Johnson wrote of his ambitious domestic agenda, “[p]owerful forces of opposition would be stirred...But the powerful conviction that an attack on poverty was right and necessary blotted out any fears.”²⁶ Johnson was on the frontier, riding with his posse in search of reconciliation. He was the new journeyman bequeathed the responsibility of bolstering Kennedy's outposts of freedom. If he could liberate all people, then Johnson could move beyond Kennedy and toward the Great Society.²⁷

Johnson's personality was itself an intersection of conflicting lines. He was a doting but unfaithful husband and known for both drinking and gambling. Though often vilified in the Press, an April 1964 *Time Magazine* article titled “Mr. President, You're

²⁵ American Public Media, *Vietnam and the Presidency (Unabridged)*. Audio of taped conversation, minute 08:00-09:30.

²⁶ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 148.

²⁷ Kennedy is often associated with “The New Frontier” and repeatedly defined the “new frontiers of freedom” and the “exceptional challenges to freedom” as represented by the ever expanding Communist threat into the third world. Chapter 2 cited several examples of Kennedy's speeches that illustrate this fact, and showed how Kennedy sought to reorganize and mobilize the government (his knights) to meet these challenges. Johnson was not just heir to these policies, but it was Johnson who now had to ‘fill-in’ and fortify Kennedy's commitments. Additionally, Johnson would take his domestic agenda and Vietnam policy well past where Kennedy had left it. The New Frontier is also associated with the Space Program. While it was Kennedy's charge to go to the moon, it was Johnson who was put in charge of standing up NASA and Johnson was an avid developer of, and believer in, the Space Program and its policies. Johnson also led passage of the Space Act of 1958, campaigned adamantly against Eisenhower's neglect of Space after Sputnik, and chaired the Johnson Hearings, which dealt with the United States falling behind the USSR in space. See, Dallek 110, 126, 132-33, 363 and McDougal, *The Heavens and The Earth*, 142, 151-55, 162, 166, 172-176, 417-420.

Fun,” reveals his more jovial and carefree side that charmed even his harshest critics.²⁸ Johnson could be cold, and would treat those he disapproved of to the ‘Johnson Freeze Out.’ He could also be exceptionally considerate. Following Kennedy’s assassination Johnson deliberately and consistently talked with, comforted, and extended courtesies to Jacqueline Kennedy and her family.²⁹ Johnson was bullish, and famous for standing only inches from other Senators during discussions so he could ‘breathe into their nose,’ and even took to physically leaning on people he was arguing with—almost literally twisting arms to get his way. Under Truman as a Senator, Johnson grilled MacArthur during a Senate hearing “in a solicitous manner that nonetheless glaringly revealed the general’s ignorance of world affairs,” a performance that was described by another Senator as “the biggest honeyfucking I ever saw.”³⁰ Johnson twisted arms, but could do so in a way that that the recipient might be unaware of the treatment. Even when overtly domineering, Johnson was often motivated by a noble cause. From the powerful office of the presidency, Johnson could carry out his responsibilities to the poor, but he was the ‘accidental president,’ in office by virtue of Kennedy’s assassination. “I was catapulted without preparation into the most difficult job any mortal man could hold... [m]y duties could not wait.”³¹ Johnson worried about not only his preparation, but also his legitimacy:

Every President has to establish with the various sectors of the country what I call ‘the right to govern.’ Just being elected to the office does not guarantee him that right...Every President has to

²⁸ “The Presidency: Mr. President, You’re Fun,” *TIME*, 13 April 1964. According to the article, the President loaded the press car into his Cadillac for a tour of his ranch, during which he swilled beer from a paper cup and drove upwards of 90 mph, routinely screeching to a halt for crossing pigs or to point out sites. Johnson talked incessantly and had the press corps laughing. At one point, after a correspondent commented on Johnson’s excessive speed, he took off his ten-gallon cowboy hat and used it to cover-up the speedometer.

²⁹ Though Johnson’s treatment of the Kennedy’s was often a source of much contention, especially between RFK and Johnson, Jacqueline Kennedy, through personal letters and statements, made it clear that she both admired and respected Johnson’s consideration for her.

³⁰ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 26-28, 44-45. Johnson had enlisted in the Naval Reserves during WW II, even though he was an acting Senator. Anxious to prove himself ‘combat worthy,’ Johnson convinced Roosevelt to send him on a “fact-finding” mission in the Pacific, where he was essentially a spy for FDR. MacArthur, recognizing that Johnson had the ear of the President, allowed Johnson to observe on a combat mission in a B-26. During the course of the mission, the B-26 took fire and MacArthur awarded Johnson the Silver Star (none of the other crewmen received a medal). Johnson had charmed and built a rapport with MacArthur. Years later, however, during the Korean War, Johnson grilled MacArthur, but did so in such a way that he was able to preserve their relationship while still essentially hanging the general out to dry during the hearings.

³¹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 12.

inspire the confidence of the people. Every president has to become a leader...Every President has to develop a moral underpinning to his power...For me that presented special problems. In spite of more than three decades of public service, I knew I was an unknown quantity to many of my countrymen and to much of the world...I suffered another handicap, since I had come to the Presidency not through the collective will of the people but in the wake of tragedy. I had no mandate from the voters.³²

As President, Johnson's paradoxical and complicated personality confronted an equally paradoxical and complicated world. Johnson perceived and tried to reconcile these disparate worlds, so that he fought not one war, but many.

Internally, a war raged between Johnson's proud pioneer and his insecurities about being on the world-stage. Johnson was caught between the world he came from and the world he now sought to lead. A war raged between the inheritance he wanted to fulfill, completing Roosevelt's New Deal (which would also pay homage to Kennedy), and the inheritance forced upon him by Kennedy in Vietnam. To carry out his fight for the Great Society, Johnson found himself in the crossfire between Hawks and Doves, which drove him to seek out ways to be tough on Communism without sacrificing the resources and domestic support for his social programs. Johnson also faced a war of perceptions, where the manner of his ascendance to office left him compelled to not only validate Kennedy's policies, but also to prove himself by leaving his own mark upon them. In Chapter 2 it was suggested that Kennedy pushed Vietnam to the front lines of the Cold War. Johnson continued to contextualize Vietnam as an important part of the Cold War, but he folded both the Cold War and Vietnam into the interior lines of his domestic agenda and his war on poverty. The frontlines of Johnson's fight for the great society were the perceptions of Congress (and more importantly the public), and he poured into that breach all the energy and resources he could muster. Johnson calculated and manipulated perceptions with the exceptional fervor of a man who believed, much as Hawking suggested, 'individual will' could create reality. The war of perceptions thus became Johnson's primary line of operations.

It was only by proving himself, reconciling his inheritance, and by convincing the coalitions of the disparate worlds he sought to unify of the efficacy and merit of his

³² Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 18.

programs, that he could realize his vision. Johnson's fellow students, his teachers, his coworkers, and his subordinates throughout his life described him as driven and domineering. He would often interrupt conversations and strove to project and create an image of himself in the minds of those around him.³³ These tendencies were amplified when Johnson became President, not just by virtue of the power and position of the office, but also by the fact that Johnson perceived an even greater need to shape perceptions so that he could carry out his agenda. Johnson had not only to build an image of himself in the minds of his countrymen, but also had to create the appropriate perceptions of his presidency, its policies, and his legacy.

Doris Kearns Goodwin describes how the characteristics of Johnson's nature and the manner in which he saw the world not only shaped his White House, but also exacerbated the tendency for staffers, advisors, and principals to become overly dependent on the President.³⁴ Drawing on Carl Friedrich's description of the *vacuum phenomenon* in totalitarian societies, Kearns observes that Johnson's penchant for control would screen out "options, facts, and ideas," so that "Lyndon Johnson's personality operated to distort truth in much the same way as ideology works in totalitarian society."³⁵ George Reedy described the White House as "the life of a court...designed for one purpose and one purpose only—to serve the material needs and the desires of a single man...No one interrupts presidential contemplation for anything less than a major catastrophe...No one speaks to him unless spoken to...No one ever invites [the President] to 'go soak your head' when his demands become...unreasonable."³⁶ Already inclined to being overbearing and with a penchant for exaggerating his understanding and control of things, Johnson the President now enjoyed the ultimate 'bully pulpit.' When this perch

³³ Johnson's boastful stories of his family's lineage discussed earlier in the chapter certainly testify to this fact. Johnson's mother would also "tell anyone who'd listen" just how prestigious her family was. Those around Johnson respected his ambition and his abilities, but were also put-off by instances of his sometimes blatant "brown-nosing." Many in Johnson's life had the impression that Johnson "wasn't just doing good; he was taking care of Lyndon." One of Johnson's close associates described him as a "son-of-a-bitch, but a colossal son-of-a-bitch," capturing the immensity of Johnson's personality and his ability to win others over to his side. See, Peters, Charles, *Lyndon B. Johnson* and Dallek, Robert, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*.

³⁴ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 323-24.

³⁵ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 322. As adapted from, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

³⁶ George E. Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency* (New York, NY: World Pub. Co., 1970), 18.

conjoined with his intense motivation to paint the reality he believed necessary to his ends, the effect on policy was both dramatic and tragic:

In this strange atmosphere, the men surrounding the President [became] sycophants...[This] structure proved disastrous for Lyndon Johnson and the nation. He had always functioned best in relationships where the other person had independent power. Then Johnson had to pay attention to the necessities of bargaining, moderating his drive to dominate by a realistic perception of the limitations of his own resources. But when the structure reduced the external limitations, Johnson fell back on his need to dominate...Thus the White House machinery became the President's psyche writ large, transmitting his wishes throughout the Executive Office with a terrifying force.³⁷

Johnson often lamented that the last thing he wanted was to be a “wartime President,” yet wars permeated his administration. From the existential threat of the Cold War to the burgeoning conflict in Vietnam, to Johnson’s own declared war on poverty, and the conflicts that raged within him, Johnson was besieged both from without and from within. These competing interests and demands mapped the geography of Johnson’s Presidency. From the high-desert of southern Texas and the shanty towns full of America’s forgotten, to the concrete cacophony of beltway politics, to center-stage at the U.N. assembly, and all the way to the jungles of Vietnam, Johnson, the New Frontiersman, rode the fence lines between his many wars, and carried the American people with him.

In the following sections, Johnson’s Presidential image is examined with a particular focus on how his obsession for controlling perceptions not only reflected his view of the world but also shaped agendas and outcomes in Vietnam. This study analyzes Johnson’s initial impressions and approaches to the Vietnam War and also looks at how he contended with and perceived the transition from Kennedy’s presidency to his own. As American pioneers braved the hazards of the country’s wild landscapes to forge the destiny of a nation, they mollified the frontier with a fierce will and often called upon the harsher angels so as to reconcile the nation they sought with the obstacles that threatened it. Men of justice were called upon to ride forth and press their sacred cause as they renegotiated the lines of a savage and unforgiving landscape. Johnson believed

³⁷ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 324.

that his iron will could both create and negotiate the lines that separated Vietnam, his domestic agenda, and the divides within himself and his nation. In doing so, Johnson formed his own posse that could ride herd on America's perceptions and harness the reality he needed to prosecute his agenda. Once invested, he could no sooner accept defeat than Custard could have withdrawn or Danielle Boone surrendered. The mythology of the American West, conveyed through history, stories, and film, shows us archetypal heroes who are at once cowboys, pioneers, saviors, villains, and martyrs. Johnson's turn at the Presidency and his policies in Vietnam are an expression of these American motifs. Common Western images include glorious last stands or show the flawed hero ambling off into the sunset, the people he saved at his back--their calls for his return echoing off the hillsides.

As Johnson picked up the mantle from Kennedy, he described his duty to continue and expand the fallen President's policies as *the martyr's cause*.³⁸ After Johnson moves the nation through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the 1965 troop decision, and toward the war's peak in 1968, what did the country shout into the hills when *he* rode away? What villains and obstacles were vanquished and which ones remained? Who was surrounded and what challenges faced the next presidential heir? How successful was the martyr's cause, and who or what was martyred?

A New Seat, A New President, and A New War

Within hours of assuming the Presidency, Johnson declared, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."³⁹ During his address before a Joint Session of Congress on November 27th, 1963, Johnson calls for the vigorous recommitment to Kennedy's causes and affirms his dedication to a robust social and international agenda:

The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed...And now the ideas and the ideals which he so nobly represented must and will be translated into...action... this Nation has demonstrated that it has the courage to seek peace, and it has the fortitude to risk war...This Nation will keep its commitments from South Viet-Nam to West Berlin.

³⁸ See Above, this section.

³⁹ Tom Wicker, "The Wrong Rubicon," in *Who We Are: An Atlantic Chronicle of the United States in Vietnam*, ed. Robert Manning, *Who We Are: An Atlantic Chronicle of the United States and Vietnam* (Boston: 1969), 216.

We will be unceasing in the search for peace...And let all know we will extend no special privilege...We will carry on the fight against poverty and misery, and disease and ignorance, in other lands and in our own...For 32 years Capitol Hill has been my home... An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the Presidency...let all the world know...I rededicate this government to the unswerving support [of its commitments]...This is our challenge—not to hesitate, not to pause, not to turn about and linger...but to continue on our course...It is a time for action...[s]o that John Fitzgerald Kennedy did not live—or die in vain.⁴⁰

In his address, Johnson attempts to build his own credibility, while at the same time draws on Kennedy's memory to push a list of social legislation, telling Congress that "no eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory" than passage of bills on civil rights, taxation, education, etc.⁴¹ During his State of the Union address in January, 1964, Johnson again calls on Congress to honor Kennedy by passing the social agenda Johnson is now advocating, stating that Congress "can demonstrate effective legislative leadership by dispatching the public business with clarity."⁴² Johnson believed in the 'rightness' of Kennedy's social legislation, but wanted to take it further and had no qualms about pivoting on Kennedy's memory to do so. It is also telling that while he unequivocally committed himself to Vietnam and the Cold War, his speeches were heavily weighted towards domestic progress and social agendas. Kennedy's early addresses emphasized the 'extraordinary challenges to freedom' that international threats (wars of national liberation) posed, and called for the country's mobilization to turn outward to meet those challenges. In contrast, Johnson embedded those external challenges within America's 'fight against poverty and misery.'

For Johnson, the intimacy between Vietnam and domestic politics was driven by more than just what he believed was necessary in order to facilitate his Great Society. There was also a consistency between what he believed necessary to build the Great Society and how he believed he could solve Vietnam. Louis Hartz writes in *The*

⁴⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address before a Joint Session of the Congress: Nov 27, 1963," Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64 (Government Printing Office, 1965).

⁴¹ Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address before a Joint Session of the Congress: Nov 27, 1963."

⁴² Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union: January 8, 1964," Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64 (Public Policy Papers of the President: Government Printing Office, 1964).

Founding of New Societies that “from the time of Wilson...[America] has actually sought to project its ethos abroad,” and Doris Kearns Goodwin observes that this “American tendency...was dramatized” by decision-makers in Vietnam and led to viewing the “Vietnamese conflict [as] a battle between two fixed groups of people with different but negotiable interests.”⁴³ Johnson thus approached Vietnam much like it was a round of negotiations in the U.S. Senate, where ‘everyone had a price’ (including Ho Chi Minh). Solving Vietnam, Johnson said, would be “like a filibuster—enormous resistance at first, then a steady whittling away, then Ho hurrying to get it over with.”⁴⁴ Johnson’s view characterized a distinctly American perception of the world that grossly overlooked the cultural nuances of Vietnam. Vietnamese culture did not share the same view of politics, and the North Vietnamese saw their efforts as part of the *dau tranh*, or “the struggle,” which intimately married politics, morality, and society and that could not be ‘bought off’ with political or economic programs.⁴⁵

For the North Vietnamese, *dau tranh* could not be divided and ‘horse-traded,’ which meant that Johnson mistakenly believed that he could win Hanoi over with what essentially equated to internationally appropriated earmarks.⁴⁶ Even Johnson’s eventual turn to the graduated bombing campaign during ROLLING THUNDER and his incremental introduction, expansion, and application of ground forces reflected his quid-pro-quo bargaining strategy and his deeply held belief that all problems were negotiable. Negotiations between the United States and Hanoi during Johnson’s tenure were marked by a string of unproductive meetings where the participants could hardly even agree on the terms for the discussions, let alone the subject of them. This demonstrates that Johnson and the North Vietnamese were playing not just with different chips, but also two entirely different games. Johnson’s Presidential image misrepresented the character

⁴³ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 265. As adapted from, Harz, Louis, *The Founding of New Societies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 118.

⁴⁴ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 266.

⁴⁵ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (London; Washington, DC: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1986), 213-53.

⁴⁶ Johnson visited Vietnam and Asia several times as a congressman and as Vice President. Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts that ever since his trip to Saigon as Vice President, “Johnson had been intrigued by the idea of developing the Mekong River to provide food, water, and power on a scale so immense as to dwarf even the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority]. See Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 266.

and motive of the North Vietnamese and caused him to persist in his attempts to swap the North's war in South Vietnam for American commodities and programs.

In a speech at Johns Hopkins University in 1965, Johnson called for a "billion-dollar American investment" to develop the Mekong River that could bring electricity, jobs, schools, and "the wonders of modern medicine" to Vietnam.⁴⁷ Johnson imagined the future of Vietnam just as he had seen the developments "in his hill country forty years before, when the dams had been first built, bringing water, electricity, and hope to the poor farmers."⁴⁸ Johnson wanted to imprint Vietnam with American schools and dams and modernization, turning the "Mekong into a Tennessee valley," and believed by doing so he could defeat Hanoi and even win them to his cause.⁴⁹ Though Johnson's vision for Vietnam reflected his own experiences emerging from an underdeveloped and impoverished region, and his agenda for Vietnam coincided with the tenets of his domestic agenda, the ease with which he projected his own image unto Vietnam was due in part to a particular world-view that he inherited.

When Johnson took the presidential oath, behind him was a century of American involvement and concern with Asia, three Pacific wars, two decades of Cold War accompanied by the feared possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, and a widely held belief—almost a dogma—that the arena of confrontation was shifting to the "third world." But perhaps most significant of all was the fact that an entire generation, many of its members now come to leadership, viewed these events... from the perspective of their experience of World War II—that shattering transformation of historical conditions which created an America, not only powerful but supreme [but that had also allowed the forces of darkness to] come perilously close to a decisive conquest.⁵⁰

The leaders of Johnson's generation were all imbued with a sense of America's moral obligation—that America occupied a unique position in the world and that there was no one else to stand watch or hold out in freedom's Alamo. There was also, to

⁴⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address at Johns Hopkins University: "Peace without Conquest," April 7 1965," Public Papers of the President (Public Policy Papers of the Presidents: Government Printing Office, 1965).

⁴⁸ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 267. "He could see the fields of rice, rich in harvest, and surrounding fields, lively, bustling villages. New houses. New schools. New hospitals. New roads. New forms of transportation making it possible for the people to travel beyond their place of birth."

⁴⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Lyndon B. Johnson Speech to the AFL-CIO: March 22, 1966," Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966 (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Government Printing Office, 1966).

⁵⁰ Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 254-55. See also, Robert Jervis, "Hypothesis on Misperception," *World Politics*, April, 1968.

varying degrees, the shared purpose of spreading the American ethos so as to forestall the march of Communism's dark forces. The meta-structure of containment certainly covered the arc of the Vietnam War. However, each president conceived of carrying out the policy of containment differently, and each man invoked their own Presidential image in the development and execution of agendas. Johnson was no different in this regard, and set about framing his domestic and international agenda in a way that reflected his own belief structures. While every president must contend with the stickiness of institutional inertia and must both define and fill his own seat at the table of power, the circumstances of Johnson's ascension were especially challenging, because Kennedy's men already occupied the round table from which Johnson was now to rule.

"I eventually developed my own programs and policies," Johnson said of his initial years as President, "but I never lost sight of the fact that I was the trustee and custodian of the Kennedy administration."⁵¹ George Herring observes that Kennedy's replacement of Eisenhower's National Security Council with an informal, intimate, and ad hoc arrangement allowed men like George Bundy, Robert Kennedy, and McNamara to hold great sway when Johnson came to power.⁵² On the surface, carry over from the Kennedy administration might seem inconsequential. It would stand to reason that Johnson should have had a 'feel' for Kennedy's policies and an established rapport with his predecessor's closest advisors. Indeed, some of Johnson's own reports as Vice President seem to support the idea that he was in line with Kennedy's Vietnam policies.

In 1961, Johnson prepared a report for Kennedy from his fact-finding mission to Asia. In it, Johnson assured Kennedy that the mission had "arrested the decline of confidence in the United States," but he also emphasized that such missions would not "restore any confidence already lost."⁵³ "We didn't buy time, but were given it," Johnson tells the President and advises Kennedy that he should proceed with the

⁵¹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 19. In his memoir, Johnson said that he would have "no more considered changing the name of the Honey Fitz—the name Jack Kennedy had given one of the Presidential yachts—than [he] would have thought of changing the name of the Washington Monument. I did everything I could to enhance the memory of Jack Kennedy."

⁵² George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 6.

⁵³ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Johnson Report to Kennedy on Vietnam," in *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Washington, DC.: Department of Defense, 1961).

expansion of his Vietnam policies.⁵⁴ Johnson shares Kennedy's own sense of urgency for the situation in Vietnam and the report's conclusions reflect a consistency with Kennedy's own views. Among them, Johnson reasserts the pivotal role American prestige will play and that the mobilization and "imaginative use" of American political, technological, and scientific capabilities would be the only hope for beating back Communism, "hunger, ignorance, poverty, and disease."⁵⁵ Johnson also advised that the United States should not look to deploy combat troops, but should instead take on an advisory role and shepherd Vietnam through economic, military, and political assistance "under the very closest Washington direction."⁵⁶ Years later, Johnson's own initial emphasis on social, economic and political means, as well as his sanctioned covert military actions in both North and South Vietnam seemed in lock-step with Kennedy's initiatives.⁵⁷ When Johnson declared in 1965 that "this is a different kind of war... [with] no marching armies or solemn declarations," he echoed the same sentiments Kennedy conveyed during his 1962 speech at West Point, where a "different kind of force" was needed "if freedom was to be saved."⁵⁸ Also like Kennedy, as Walter LaFeber points out, Johnson never questioned the "doctrine of Containment" or the tenets of the domino theory.⁵⁹

Such congruencies demonstrate Johnson's alignment with basic Kennedy policies in Vietnam. However, the carry-over of key personnel from the Kennedy Administration meant that Johnson was reliant on "decision making machinery already in place."⁶⁰ So, as situations in Vietnam and at home evolved, Johnson was forced to draw advice from, and pivot on, Kennedy's men. Though Johnson declares in his memoirs that he appreciated and needed his inherited advisors and kept them on out of loyalty,

⁵⁴ Johnson, "Johnson Report to Kennedy on Vietnam."

⁵⁵ Johnson, "Johnson Report to Kennedy on Vietnam."

⁵⁶ Johnson, "Johnson Report to Kennedy on Vietnam."

⁵⁷ Neil. Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, & Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers*, ed. *The New York Times*, Unabridged ed., The Secret History of the Vietnam War: The Complete and Unabridged Series as Published by the *New York Times* (New York, NY: Bantam Books Inc, 1971), 314-15. See also, *The Pentagon Papers*, Documents #80 and #81.

⁵⁸ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty : Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 32. John F. Kennedy as quoted in the *New York Times*, 7 June 1962, p. 26. See also Chapter 2, this document.

⁵⁹ William Appleman Williams, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985), 215-16.

⁶⁰ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 6.

admiration, and even necessity, taped private conversations reveal that he quickly came to resent both his dependency on them and their association with Kennedy.

On July 23, 1964, Johnson speaks with Texas Governor John Connally about his concerns over the Kennedy camp, particularly Bobby Kennedy, and the potential impact on the upcoming election. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was demanding that the all-white Mississippi delegation be expelled and replaced with its own delegation of “64 blacks and four whites.”⁶¹ Johnson worried that Bobby Kennedy and his supporters were secretly supporting the Freedom Party so as to facilitate a fracture within the Democratic Party as part of an effort for the younger Kennedy’s run at the presidency. “It may very well be that Bobby has started it,” Johnson told Connally, “they’ve got all the Communists in...Both sides are in on these riots...Hell, these folks have got walkie-talkies...Somebody’s financing them big.”⁶² Johnson then confesses to Connally what he believes he needs in a Vice President and how he lacks his own trusted circle of advisors.

You really need somebody that’s a good debater and a good TV performer and can take ‘em on because you’re tied down so damned hard in this job...you got problems with Khrushchev and Castro. Say they’re gonna shoot down your planes the minute the elections over...You’ve got more damned problems than *I* can handle. I’ve got old enough and flabby enough that I can’t surmount all the obstacles. And I don’t have the help and the advice and the counselors and the loved ones around...to do it. Every man in my Cabinet’s a Kennedy man...I haven’t been able to change ‘em and I don’t have the personnel if I *could* change em. They didn’t go to San Marcos Teachers College...It’s just agony.⁶³

⁶¹ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 466.

⁶² Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 467. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded 5:31 p.m., Thursday July 23, 1964. *The Johnson Tapes*.

⁶³ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 469-70.

Transcript of taped conversation, recorded 5:31 p.m., Thursday July 23, 1964. *The Johnson Tapes*. Johnson worried constantly that Bobby Kennedy saw himself as the rightful heir to his brother’s presidency. Despite overt pleasantries between the two men, the relationship was always somewhat tense. Johnson viewed much of what Bobby Kennedy did with suspicion, and wondered if he wasn’t attempting to run an insurgency against Johnson’s Presidency. See Johnson and Beschloss, 388, 412, 466-67, 490. Johnson told Kenneth O’Donnell in 1963 that if he needed Bobby to win the 1964 election, he’d take him, but that if he didn’t, he wouldn’t. “I don’t want to go down in history as the guy to have the dog wagged by the tail...Bobby and I don’t get along, and that’s neither one of our faults, but there’s no sense” to pretending otherwise. Johnson denied Bobby Kennedy’s request to replace Ambassador Lodge in Saigon and ultimately denied his bid to run as Vice President on Johnson’s ticket, telling McGeorge Bundy, “I want him [Bobby Kennedy] to stay right where he is.”

Johnson had inherited not only a war but an administration. Remitting his image and agenda would thus be ‘double-dog’ difficult. Different backgrounds and perspectives separated Johnson from the Kennedys and he never quite earned a comfortable place within Camelot. McNamara said that “although Johnson had been a part of the Kennedy administration for three years, none of us had worked closely with him” and that this must have been cause for some mistrust.⁶⁴ Jack Kennedy was well aware of Johnson’s presidential ambitions. JFK was also aware of the differences between him and Johnson and arguably selected Johnson as his running mate to help carry the South in the election. In order to appease Johnson and keep him “inside the tent,” Kennedy kept him on the road or in charge of special projects and working his connections on the hill.⁶⁵ Johnson used to joke that while “Jack was out kissing babies while I was out passing bills” and tending the store, but the truth was that Johnson was often excluded or diminished during important policy decisions.⁶⁶ During the White House’s decision on the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Johnson was left entertaining the German Chancellor at his ranch in Texas the Vice President’s voice during the Cuban Missile Crisis was somewhat muted.⁶⁷

The Cuban Missile Crisis was an especially inflective event for the men involved. The apparent successful handling of the crisis by Kennedy and his men reinforced not only their faith in themselves, but also in the tenets and efficacies of Limited War Theory.⁶⁸ Following the crisis, McNamara was quoted as saying that “there is no longer any such thing as strategy, only crisis management.”⁶⁹ Kennedy’s men, who became

⁶⁴ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 98. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk actually came to be two of Johnson’s most trusted advisers throughout his presidency, until McNamara’s perspective on the war changed, beginning in 1967. Still, Johnson felt surrounded by Kennedy’s men, especially in the early years of his Presidency.

⁶⁵ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 68-69. Johnson was appointed to chair the National Aeronautics and Space Council and to head the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Johnson was also extremely useful for his connections in Congress and around Washington, which Kennedy took full advantage of.

⁶⁶ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 69-70.

⁶⁷ Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 70. What Johnson did contribute during the Cuban Missile crisis differed with Kennedy. Johnson took a harder line than Kennedy and his last words when he left the meeting on the crisis were: “When I was a boy in Texas, and walking down the road when a rattlesnake reared up, the only thing you could do was take a stick and chop its head off.”

⁶⁸ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 180.

⁶⁹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 39. For more details on the impact of the missile crisis on Kennedy’s men and the carryover of the precepts that their experience bore out, see Nathan, James G., “The Tragic Enshrinement of Toughness,” in Thomas G. Paterson, ed. *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy*, vol. 2: Since 1914 (New York, NY: D.C. Heath, 1984).

Johnson's, drew distinct impressions of themselves, their image of the world, and of the military from the Cuban Missile Crisis and these impressions served as a critical departure point for their subsequent strategies in Vietnam. Two key assumptions derived from the Cuban Missile Crisis pushed forward into the framing of U.S. policy in Vietnam. The first was that the military needed to be controlled. The second was that crisis and conflict could be managed through an iterative bargaining process. Johnson himself brought his own suspicions of the military to his presidency that were only reinforced by the views of his advisors: "This goddamn military," Johnson once said, "I just don't know when I can trust them and when I can't."⁷⁰ Additionally, Johnson spent his years in Congress and as Vice President ardently hammering out deals and successfully negotiating often controversial legislation, so he was highly susceptible to the idea that Vietnam could be solved in similar fashion. As such, McNamara, Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy continued to have great influence during Johnson's presidency—which led to a mutually reinforcing tendency to want to control things. "Johnson and McNamara saw their principal task in war management as maintaining tight operational control over the military."⁷¹

Kennedy's men believed that they needed to control things and Johnson believed that he needed to control things. Though they shared overarching principles, Johnson begrudged the fact that he lacked his own confidant. When vetting his Vice President for the 1964 election, Johnson adamantly made clear to Hubert Humphrey that it was "Johnson's show" and that he expected total loyalty from him if he was chosen for Johnson's ticket.⁷² Johnson's emphasis on loyalty in his Vice President, his confessions to Governor Connally, and even the close relationships he develops with McNamara and Rusk, reveals his longing for allies and his sense that he felt trapped by the men he depended on. In order to carry out his agenda, he needed loyal men in his corner who

⁷⁰ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 39.

⁷¹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 38. See also, Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 494. Caro quotes an aide that describes Johnson's compulsive determination to micromanage where, even as a young Congressman, Johnson insisted overseeing even the most minute detail and felt that things would only go right if "he was in charge of everything."

⁷² Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 485-86. Humphrey agrees and his loyalty persists even in 1968, when he refuses to speak out against Johnson's Vietnam policies essentially forfeits his own chance at the presidency to Richard Nixon.

could help him shape events, and perceptions of those events, so that Vietnam did not undermine his domestic goals.

Johnson's decision to escalate in Vietnam was greatly influenced by his reliance on a closed circle of advisors and by his passion to not let Vietnam interfere with the Great Society. In 1964, the effectiveness of Kennedy's covert military operations as well as the fallen president's social and diplomatic programs in Vietnam remained unclear. Fearful that Vietnam might inconveniently go awry while he was pressing his social agenda, Johnson was inclined to succumb to suggestions for greater military action. With outcomes indeterminate, Johnson was convinced that if he could reign in perceptions and control the script, then he could orchestrate the support for his domestic agenda while still solving the Vietnam problem. "The most important foreign policy problem I faced was that of signaling to the world what kind of man I was and what sort of policies I intended to carry out. It was important that there be no hesitancy on my part—nothing to indicate that the U.S. government had faltered. It was equally important for the world to understand that I intended to continue the established foreign policies of...Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy."⁷³

In the run-up to the 1964 election, Johnson's ability to control the script was challenged as he is simultaneously taken to task by the Republican opposition for not being tough enough on Communism and criticized by members of his own party for being too hawkish.⁷⁴ Johnson is "eager for a landslide victory" so that he can gain the legitimacy and independence as President that he both longs for and needs to carry out his agenda. During a conversation with McGeorge Bundy in March, 1964, Johnson vents his frustration and his concerns: "I just spent a lot of time with the Joint Chiefs. The net

⁷³ Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 22.

⁷⁴ Johnson had been briefed by the JCS over the importance of Vietnam to U.S. National Security and faced their calls for more robust action in Vietnam. See, Beschloss, 266. Johnson was also facing intense pressure from Republican Presidential Candidate Barry Goldwater. During a conversation with his friend and Georgia Governor Richard Russell, Johnson said: "if you don't stand up for America, there's nothing that a fellow in Johnson City [or any other place can do]...they'll forgive you for anything except being weak...Goldwater an all of em' [sic] are raising hell about...hot pursuit and lets go in and bomb em." See Beschloss, 402. Democratic Senator Mike Mansfield, whose opposition to Johnson's Vietnam policies persisted throughout the war, continually criticized Johnson's seeming want of commitment there. Mansfield described the potential course in Vietnam as taking "us further and further out on a sagging limb... [that would saddle the U.S.] with enormous burdens in Cambodia, Laos, and elsewhere in Asia, along with those in Viet Nam." See, Dallek, Robert, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of A President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 209-210.

of it...is---they say, get in or get out...I told them, 'let's try to find an amendment—we haven't got any Congress that will go with us, and we haven't got any mothers that will go with us in a war...I'm just an inherited—I'm a trustee. I've got to win an election.'"⁷⁵ Johnson was trying to placate disparate coalitions so that he could address the challenge of Vietnam without sacrificing the support he needed in order to earn his Presidential mandate. As voices of opposition and criticism continued to surface in the press, Johnson became increasingly frustrated, and worked tirelessly to control the script. At one point, Johnson tells his Press Secretary George Reedy that reporters “are not masters of the White House. They're just the servants and we give them what we want to give them.”⁷⁶

As part of his efforts to mediate between the increasing requirements in Vietnam and a polity that was in many ways ambiguous over commitments there, Johnson approved in 1964 a more robust covert campaign against North Vietnam. Labeled OPLAN 34A, the operations were designed to bolster South Vietnamese morale, improve South Vietnamese positions, and signal Hanoi that the United States was committed to the fight. The clandestine measures included “sabotage and commando raids against military installations along [North Vietnam's] coast...air attacks against North Vietnamese forces in Laos” and covert intelligence-gathering patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin by U.S. warships, referred to as “Desoto Patrols.”⁷⁷ The classified operation would ostensibly keep U.S. activities ‘off-the-books’ and out of the public eye. National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288 formally approved OPLAN 34A, and also detailed U.S. objectives in Vietnam and retaliatory options if U.S. forces were attacked. McNamara's March 16, 1964 report, OPLAN 34A, and NSAM 288 all indicate that Johnson considered success in Vietnam critical to U.S. interests; and the documents also reflect the administration's strong preference for U.S. efforts to remain mostly relegated to supporting the South politically, economically, and through covert military action.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 266-67.

Transcript of taped conversation, recorded March 4, 1964 at 7:26 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*. Johnson goes on to tell Bundy that he is looking for a policy that will keep the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong “off-base,” but that will not interfere with the election. Johnson is looking for middle ground.

⁷⁶ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 307-08.

⁷⁷ George C. Herring, *The Pentagon Papers*, Abridged ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 84-85. See also, Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, “1964 McNamara Report on Steps to change the Trend of the War,” Document #63.

⁷⁸ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 275-83. See Documents #62 and #63.

At the same time, however, NSAM 288 pre-loaded plans for more overt and escalatory U.S. military action, stating that U.S. policy was “to prepare immediately to be in a position on 72 hours notice to initiate the full range of Laotian and Cambodian ‘Border Control actions’...and the ‘Retaliatory Actions’ against North Vietnam, and to be in a position on 30 days’ notice to initiate the program of ‘Graduated Overt Military Pressure’ against North Vietnam.”⁷⁹

Johnson’s initial policies for Vietnam, then, were both declarative and dubious, and relied extensively on his ability to develop practical and effective military options while simultaneously keeping the nature and extent of those options under wraps. Johnson was thus hypersensitive to how his statements on Vietnam were characterized by the press, and he also obsessed over how the press treated his critics and how his critics treated him. With the election looming and with Vietnam refusing to stay quiet through the Spring and Summer of 1964, Johnson labored continuously to control the narrative by quelling leaks and by making carefully calculated statements that were intentionally dubious—or at least seemed to serve mutually exclusive ends.⁸⁰ During a press conference in Los Angeles, for example, Johnson had stated that the North Vietnamese were playing a “deeply dangerous game,” which inspired several editorials accusing Johnson of wanting to invade North Vietnam with force.⁸¹ In response to the criticism, Johnson turned to McNamara, and the conversation recounted below reveals the President’s want of a well-reasoned and defensible position on Vietnam policy, his desire for quick and positive actions, and also the need for his position to be sufficiently ambiguous so as to be defensible.

LBJ: I want you to dictate to me a memorandum—a couple of pages...so I can read it and study it and commit it to memory...on the situation in Vietnam...I’d like for you to say that there are several courses that could be followed...We could send our own divisions...and they could start attacking the Vietcong...We could

⁷⁹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 283. See, “U.S. Order for Preparations for Some Retaliatory Action,” Document # 64.

⁸⁰ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 256. In his commentary, Beschloss describes Johnson’s behavior during the run-up to the election as “being determined, if possible, to defer irrevocable decisions on war in Southeast Asia until the 1964 election is over.” Beschloss goes on to describe that Johnson is “eager to win the presidency in a landslide,” but in order to do so, he can neither appear “soft on Communism nor frighteningly ready to take the nation into a war of unimaginable cost—even if this means leaving Americans confused about his inner inclinations.”

⁸¹ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 256.

come out of there...and let 'em neutralize South Vietnam and let the Communists take North Vietnam...And as soon as we get out, they could swallow up South Vietnam...Or we could pull out and say, 'To hell with you, we're going to have Fortress America.'...and here's what would happen in Thailand, and here's what would happen in the Philippines...Or we can say this is the Vietnamese's war...and we've got to bring their morale up...We can put in socially conscious people and try to get them to improve their own government...and we can train them how to fight...And that, after considering all of these, it seems that the latter offers the best alternative for America to follow. ..I would like to have for this period, when everybody is asking me, something in my own words. I can say, why, here are the alternatives and here's our theory... [but] we don't say that we'll win.

[Johnson then asks McNamara if the Defense Secretary thinks "it's a mistake" to explain his stance on Vietnam and what the United States faces there.]

McNAMARA: I do think, Mr. President, it would be wise for you to say as little as possible. The frank answer is we don't know what's going on out there. The signs I see coming through the cables are disturbing signs—poor morale...disunity, a tremendous amount of coup planning...Not what you'd expect.

LBJ: Why don't we take some pretty offensive steps pretty quickly then? Why don't we...do some of these things that are inclined to bolster them...

[Johnson then expresses his frustrations with Ambassador Lodge, who he feels has been too hesitant to take effective action and Johnson tells McNamara to instruct Lodge to be more aggressive and "clear out an area" and to assure South Vietnamese President Khan that the U.S. is committed but needs Khan to get better results. McNamara agrees to pass on the President's instructions.]

LBJ: And then you get me this other paper on Vietnam, so that when people ask me questions, I have a smattering of information.⁸²

McNamara complied and delivered the President a memorandum that stated that the United States' "purpose in South Vietnam is to help the Vietnamese maintain their independence. We are providing the training and the logistic support which they cannot

⁸² Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 257-60. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded March 2, 1964 at 11:00 a.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

provide themselves. We will continue to provide that support as long as it is required.”⁸³ That Johnson was at first inclined to elucidate in more detail the conundrum U.S. policy faced in Vietnam reveals his belief that if he could present a well-enough reasoned argument, then the American people could be convinced of the *reality* as Johnson saw it. That Johnson ultimately drew on McNamara’s very much watered-down and ambiguous memorandum reveals both Johnson’s reliance on McNamara as well as the President’s hesitancy to publicly tilt too far in any direction on Vietnam policy. For Johnson to be successful in the election and on his agenda, it was imperative that he control the narrative.

With a more robust, albeit covert, strategy in place through OPLAN 34A and the Desoto Patrols, and with his mind constantly on the 1964 election and the Vietnam narrative’s effects on it, Johnson continued to beef-up U.S. missions and potential missions in Vietnam while downplaying them in the press. As reports of imminent disaster rolled in from the embassy in Saigon and from the military leadership, Johnson sends Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the Defense Secretary to Honolulu in June for “a hastily called meeting” with Ambassador Lodge, Maxwell Taylor, and the new American commander in South Vietnam, General William Westmoreland.⁸⁴ The purpose of the meeting was to iron out contingency plans for greater U.S. military actions in Vietnam. After criticism surfaced that Johnson’s men were secretly planning “an American war in Asia,” Johnson vehemently backpedaled and insisted that he “knew of no plans...to carry the war into Vietnam” and insisted that he and his staff were simply looking at alternatives.⁸⁵ It was important to Johnson that the Honolulu meeting be perceived as nothing out of the ordinary or, as Rusk put it, that the meeting was “not a massive orgasm” but instead part of a routine.⁸⁶ The fact was, however, that the Honolulu

⁸³ The memorandum is available at the Johnson Library, and is dated March 2, 1964. See also, Beschloss, 260 and The Johnson Presidential Library Online:

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives-main.shtm>

⁸⁴ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 380.

⁸⁵ For Senator Wayne Morse’s criticism of the Honolulu meeting, see Congressional Record, June 1, 1964. For transcript revealing Johnson’s angst over implications that he and his staff were in fact planning for a larger war, see Beschloss, 380-382, transcript of taped conversation, recorded June 2, 1964, at 3:56 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

⁸⁶ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 382. Johnson also told Rusk that they were “not playing it [the meeting] any heavier than we can help back here,” to which

meeting, in concert with NSAM 288 and internal policy and position papers, put in place deliberate mechanisms for more expansive military action. If the arrow was not yet fully notched and sighted, the giant bow string of the U.S. military was certainly being drawn back—a fact that Johnson desperately wanted to keep from the public. As the crisis in the Gulf of Tonkin heated up later that summer, Johnson had caught wind that Hubert Humphrey had referred to U.S. covert operations and Desoto Patrols along the coast of North Vietnam. Johnson's response is telling:

LBJ: Our friend Hubert is just destroying himself with his big mouth.

ROWE: Is he talking again?

LBJ: Yeah, all the time...Every responsible person gets frightened when they see him...he went on TV and...just blabbed everything... [when Humphrey was asked by reporters] 'How would you account for these PT boat attacks on our destroyers when we are innocently out there in a gulf, sixty miles from shore?'...Humphrey said, 'Well, we have been carrying on some operations in that area...where we have been going in and knocking out roads and petroleum things.'... And that is exactly what we *have* been doing!

ROWE: Good Lord!

LBJ: The damned fool...just ought to keep his goddamned big Mouth shut on foreign affairs, at least until the election is over... They don't pay him to do this...He is just doing this *free* and he's hurting his government. And he's hurting *us*!⁸⁷

Johnson is so upset because his narrative requires that any U.S. response to North Vietnamese attacks must be to unprovoked aggression by the North. If it were revealed that the United States was in fact covertly striking targets within North Vietnam and running patrols not sixty miles but within sixteen miles of Hanoi's coast, then Johnson would be unable to make his case.

In his efforts to satiate Hawks, Doves, his own push for reelection, and the needs of a war that wouldn't stay quiet, Johnson made a series of fateful decisions and directed a series of events to manipulate perceptions during the Gulf of Tonkin crisis that arguably

Rusk responded: "I think we ought to play down any sort of notion of cataclysmic character of this meeting." Transcript of taped conversation, *The Johnson Tapes*.

⁸⁷ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 499. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded on August 4, 1964 at 1:35 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

set the tenor of his own Vietnam policy and the arc of the war itself. Though the full record and exact nature and timing of information that Johnson had remains incomplete, there is enough within the existing declassified tapes and documents to demonstrate Johnson's tacit and deliberate misleading of the public. Even if one concludes that Johnson acted as best he could given the information he had at the time and that he misrepresented facts so as to protect sensitive operations, his hurried decision-making and eagerness to act reflects a particular policy momentum and linkage to domestic political calculations.

Three months prior to the incident involving U.S. warships and North Vietnamese Patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson told McNamara that he saw "a glimmer of hope on Vietnam" and that he wanted to policies that got more tangible results.⁸⁸ Johnson asked McNamara if there was "anybody in the military that can come up with something," and told his Defense Secretary, "I gotta do something. We gotta kill some of these guys."⁸⁹ Johnson's calls for more tangible effects and action in Vietnam were met with reaffirming calls for more direct military involvement from his advisors.⁹⁰ OPLAN 34A and the Desoto Patrols were a way by which Johnson could expand the U.S. military mission without overtly doing so. *The New York Times* published a series of articles in 1972 that describe the "Covert War" Johnson waged in Vietnam between February and August, 1964.⁹¹ During this period, Johnson and his advisors developed and executed a series of extensive military operations in South Vietnam, Laos, and North Vietnam, which included bombing missions in Laos and plans for more aggressive bombing campaigns against North Vietnam.

⁸⁸ Charles Wheel, "Into Vietnam: Playing with the Truth," in *The Johnson White House Tapes, Volume 3*, ed. George Carey (USA: Whitestar Video, 1997).

⁸⁹ Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Recording of Conversation taped 30 April, 1964.

⁹⁰ Wheel, "Into Vietnam." See also, Sheehan, "McNamara Report," *Pentagon Papers*, Document #63 and "Summary of Taylor's Reports to McNamara by Joint Chiefs," *Pentagon Papers*, Document #69.

⁹¹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 234. Sheehan summarizes the articles in Chapter Five. Of particular note is that the OPLAN 34A differed significantly from "the relatively low-level and unsuccessful intelligence and sabotage operations that the C.I.A. had earlier been carrying out in Vietnam." 34A was commanded by Gen. Paul D. Harkins, who was chief of the United States Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. Also significant were the multiple reports by McNamara, the JCS, Bundy, and Johnson's advisors that described a continually degrading situation in Vietnam and the subsequent planning and authorizations for stepped-up U.S. military action that Johnson approved. With these mechanisms in place, for instance, Johnson was able to "order retaliatory air strikes on less than six hours' notice during the Tonkin incident."

In May, Johnson and his National Security Council debated a draft resolution for Congress that would “endorse all measures, including the commitment of force” in Laos and in Vietnam.⁹² However, both McNamara and Bundy argued against going to Congress in May, with Bundy saying that “the Administration should seek a Congressional resolution giving general authority for action...if and only if we decide that a substantial increase of national attention...is a necessary part of the defense of Southeast Asia in the coming summer.”⁹³ Bundy also suggested that the best ‘timing’ for such a resolution would be after the Civil Rights Bill had cleared the Senate floor. The *Pentagon Papers* reveal that Johnson elected to not go to Congress sooner because he wanted to conceal both the deteriorating situation in Vietnam and U.S. existing and potential operations there so that the Administration would have “maximum flexibility to determine its moves as it chose from behind the scenes,” and that Johnson wanted to maintain a ‘non-committed’ position.⁹⁴

While devising operations that could solve the increasingly difficult situation in Vietnam, Johnson metered his decisions based on how Congressional and public perceptions of Vietnam would affect his political capital for key legislation and in the upcoming election. As such, Johnson attempted to orchestrate both the timing and content of what was revealed about his Vietnam policies so that he could shape those perceptions. When two American reconnaissance planes were shot down over Laos on June 8, 1964, Johnson had a series of conversations that reveal how he was attempting to play to both the Hawks and the Doves, and also how he believed that more overt U.S. military involvement would require a particular narrative or story line.

[Here Johnson is talking with House Speaker John McCormack, a political ally, about U.S. retaliation for the two reconnaissance aircraft that were shot down over Laos]

LBJ: We went in there last night to take out this battery that had shot down these two planes and we destroyed some buildings... If we didn't [respond], why, we'd just destroy ourselves. Now

⁹² Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 286-88. See “Draft Resolution for Congress on Actions in Southeast Asia,” Document #66. See also, “Draft Congressional Resolution, May 24, 1964; Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting, May 24, 1964,” *The Johnson Library Online*.

⁹³ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 390. Beschloss summarizes a memorandum written by McGeorge Bundy on June 10, 1964.

⁹⁴ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 238, 41.

we can't say anything about it...I don't know who we ought to discuss this with, if anyone...But we have...shown that we mean business...Would it be your thought we ought to talk to Hallek and any of the Republicans about it?

McCORMACK: It's bound to come out. I would think so.

LBJ: I had the feeling I ought to send McNamara to see the Armed services people and I ought to send Rusk to see the foreign affairs people...But we've got to keep it to a very limited group. If we don't, it would greatly injure our interests by their talking about it.

McCORMACK: Yeah, the worst of that is when you get a group Like that, you know what democracies are...

LBJ: They ought to be sworn to secrecy...Don't discuss it with anyone. I'm gonna discuss it with you and Carl, Mansfield and Humphrey, and we'll try to keep it to that.

[Johnson then talks with Senate Majority Leader Mansfield, a committed dove on Vietnam and one of Johnson's most vocal critics, about the U.S. airstrikes in Laos.]

LBJ: I've submitted all the things you've suggested to me and I've got Stevenson down here...We can't go in there with ground troops. The air forces don't get the job done and can't get it done. We are trying every way we know how to appeal to Hanoi and [China]. We've told de Gaulle that we are very anxious to follow any conference route...But we've got to keep our strength there and show that we will react... [so the North Vietnamese] will talk to us at all...We don't want to dominate anybody. If they'll just quit advancing, why, then we can get out...I don't want to get in a land war in Asia.

MANSFIELD: I think the best thing to do would be if you would talk to them all together.

LBJ: It always gets out...and we don't want to blow it up. 'Cause we sure don't want to give any indications that we're getting involved in a war...I've been playing it down...You-all are voting [on Civil Rights] this afternoon, aren't you?⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 393-94. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded June 9, 1964 at 12:50 p.m. The *Johnson Tapes*.

The differences in Johnson's tone and approach to the two Congressmen are telling. With McCormack, Johnson focuses almost solely on what should be revealed about U.S. operations and to whom, and he emphasizes his position of strength and 'meaning business.' With Mansfield, on the other hand, Johnson is almost pleading with the dovish Senator, emphasizing his want of restraint and negotiations. Johnson appears to be attempting to convince Mansfield that he had no choice in ordering the retaliatory airstrikes and that he prefers and will seek a more dovish and diplomatic approach to avoid 'a land war in Asia.' Johnson also deftly couples a suggested Vietnam policy that is more in line with Mansfield's thinking with a mention of the pending Senate vote on the Civil Rights Bill.

[Johnson then speaks with McNamara after the Defense Secretary had briefed a small group of Congressmen on the Laos airstrikes. McNamara reports to the President the sentiments of some of the Congressman, particularly the more hesitant and skeptical.]

LBJ: We haven't taken any serious losses and we can't put our finger on anything that really justifies this acceleration and escalation of public sentiment that it's going to hell in a hack...Is that a buildup of our critics largely? Have we fed that? Where does it come from that we're losing?

McNAMARA: If you went to...the estimators in CIA and said how's the situation...I think they'd say it's worse.

LBJ: That's not what Lodge and Khanh think, is it? They think it's a little better, don't they?

McNAMARA: I don't think they really believe that...I think that they both would indicate it's a very weak situation...The CIA estimators, Lodge, many of the rest of us in private would say that things are not good...While we say this in private and not in public, there are facts available in the public domain over there that find their way in the press

LBJ: While I was talking to you, I have a note from Mansfield, which is interesting: *[Johnson reads Mansfield's note]* "I do not conclude that our national interests are served by deep military involvement in Southeast Asia... [If the U.S. is to get more deeply involved] I...suggest that the basis for these decisions must be made much clearer and more persuasive to the people of this nation..."

McNAMARA: I think he's absolutely right. If we're going to stay in there, if we're going to go strictly up the escalating chain, we're going to have to educate the people, Mr. President...

LBJ: Now, and I think if you start doing it, they're going to be hollering, "You're a warmonger."...I think that's the horn the Republicans would like to get us on.⁹⁶

Johnson goes on to emphasize the need to expand U.S. social and economic aid to Vietnam. The emphasis Johnson places on Mansfield's note and McNamara's response to it is significant, because through it Johnson is able to determine that more aggressive action in Vietnam will require clear justification. When the USS *Maddox* is attacked on August 2, 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson is given an opportunity to make just such a case.

North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the USS *Maddox* while the U.S. warship was performing intelligence-gathering missions off the coast of North Vietnam. During the sea battle, the USS *Ticonderoga* launched jet aircraft, three North Vietnamese patrol boats were destroyed, and the *Maddox* was slightly damaged. The North Vietnamese attack came on the heels of joint US and South Vietnamese commando raids against military installations along their coast. Retired Admiral Cathal Flynn, who was in charge of training the South Vietnamese Commandos, revealed that Americans did in fact participate in the raids, using American ships that would stow their flags once in Vietnamese waters.⁹⁷ Due to America's involvement in the raids and the Desoto Patrols operating well within the sovereign waters of North Vietnam, the Johnson administration considered the North's reaction "natural," and McNamara advised the President to not retaliate or draw attention to the incident.⁹⁸

However, while the Laos airstrikes were able to remain somewhat off the public's radar, the more dramatic naval battle in the Gulf of Tonkin threatened Johnson's ability to downplay the incident. Of utmost concern was the fact that U.S. operations were most likely the cause of the attacks. If word got out that the United States was in fact the provoker and not the victim of an unsolicited attack, then not only would Johnson's

⁹⁶ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 397-99. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded on June 9, 1964 at 6:20 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

⁹⁷ Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Minute 11-13.

⁹⁸ Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Minute 12. Recording of conversation between McNamara and LBJ on August 3, 1964 at 12:15 p.m.

covert war in Vietnam be revealed, but it would become nearly impossible for the administration to make a justifiable case for increased U.S. military involvement. Furthermore, Johnson could not let an attack on U.S. ships go unanswered, out of fear of appearing weak on Communism.⁹⁹

Convinced that he could control the narrative and perhaps seeing an opportunity to create the storyline necessary to gain support for more robust military action, Johnson not only sent the Maddox back into Vietnamese waters the following day, but he authorized McNamara and the military to retaliate against any further attacks.¹⁰⁰ Here was the chance to inform the North that he was serious. John Bayley, the Communications Officer on the Maddox, said during an interview that there was no reason for the ship to be sent so quickly back into North Vietnamese waters and that the action was “dangerously provocative,” believing that the Maddox was “sent up there to be attacked again.”¹⁰¹ Johnson had also ordered additional commando raids on 3 August, demonstrating to the North that America would not back down.¹⁰² McNamara’s preparations at the Pentagon and all of the contingency plans that had been developed since February were now spring-loaded, and an additional attack on the Maddox could be met with a swift and demonstrative U.S. retaliatory strike. So long as the North Vietnamese were portrayed as the aggressors, then American action would not only be justified, but appropriate and supported. Prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson talked with Richard Russell about American reservations for getting involved in Vietnam and about how he viewed his options in the blossoming conflict: “If they shoot at us, we’re going to shoot back,” Johnson tells Russell, who then warns the President about the “American inclination” to not get involved.”¹⁰³ Johnson says that he shares not only America’s perspective, but also Mansfield’s fear of another war, but that “the fear the

⁹⁹ Wheel, "Into Vietnam."

¹⁰⁰ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 239-41. In retrospect, the Administration insisted that the Desoto Patrols and the ordering of the Maddox back into North Vietnamese waters so soon after the August 2nd incident were not meant to be provocative. However, the Pentagon’s own study “makes it clear that the physical presence of the destroyers provided the elements for the Tonkin clash. And immediately after the reprisal air strikes, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Assistant Secretary of Defense McNamara put forward a ‘provocation strategy’ proposing to repeat the clash as a pretext for bombing the North. Of the three elements of the covert war...the 34A raids symbolized the ‘unequivocal’ American responsibility that ‘carried with [them] an implicit symbolic and psychological intensification of the U.S. commitment.’”

¹⁰¹ Wheel, "Into Vietnam," Minute 13-14.

¹⁰² Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Minute 11

¹⁰³ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 403.

other way is more,” indicating that he is more fearful of non-action than of action.

Johnson then goes on:

I think that I've got to say that I didn't get you in here [Vietnam], but we're in here by treaty and our national honor's at stake. And if this treaty's no good, none of 'em are any good...And being there, we've got to conduct ourselves like men. That's number one. Number two, in our own revolution, we wanted freedom and we naturally look with sympathy with other people who want freedom... Third thing, we've got to try and find some proposal...some way, like Eisenhower worked out in Korea.¹⁰⁴

As such, when reports flow in on August 4th that the Maddox is again under attack and McNamara recommends to Johnson that he should retaliate, Johnson's only hesitancy stems from his want to get in front of the story and ensure that America's part in potentially provoking the attack remains concealed. “We've been playing around up there within the twelve-mile limit,” Johnson said during a conversation with McNamara on August 3rd, and also said he knew that the North was reacting to the commando raids with their attack on the *Maddox* on August 2nd. Still, the new attacks provided an opportunity to unleash the “ample” retaliatory forces that McNamara assured Johnson were at his disposal with which he could inflict significant damage against “prestige” targets in North Vietnam.¹⁰⁵ Almost coincident with Johnson's directive for retaliatory military action, however, were reports from pilots, the Captain of the Maddox, and from CIA analysts which seemed to indicate that the second attack on the Maddox never happened.¹⁰⁶ Fearful of leaks, Johnson did not discuss the ongoing situation in the Gulf of Tonkin during the August 4 National Security Council meeting, but instead discussed it privately with McNamara and Rusk over lunch. During the private luncheon,

¹⁰⁴ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 403. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded June 11, 1964 at 12:26 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

¹⁰⁵ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Recording of phone conversation between McNamara and Johnson, taped on August 4th at 10:56 a.m.

¹⁰⁶ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Navy Captain John Harrick, the Task Force Commander for US Naval Forces in the region, sent a briefing to Honolulu on August 4th in which he said “I don't think this happened. Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes appear doubtful.” Harrick attributed the reports to an exhausted and overeager crew and freak weather effects on the ships' radars. Harrick's report to Honolulu and the Pentagon suggested “evaluation before any further action.” Everett Alvarez, a pilot from the USS *Constellation* that launched patrols over the area the Maddox was operating in, also reported that he had not seen any indication of enemy activity. Navy Commander Robert Laske, the chief Naval intelligence officer in Saigon also reported that “we were watching and saw nothing and heard nothing indicating enemy activity.”

McNamara pushed for a “firm retaliatory strike” and Johnson agreed.¹⁰⁷ By the evening of August 4th, Johnson was in a race with the press as news of the second attack on the *Maddox* began to surface. “Mr. President,” McNamara told Johnson, “the story has broken on the AP and the UP...and it seems to me we ought to agree now on a statement.”¹⁰⁸

The statement to which Johnson agreed simply acknowledged that several North Vietnamese patrol boats had attacked two U.S. warships and that the attack was driven off, with several North Vietnamese patrol boats being sunk and that no damage or casualties were suffered by American forces.¹⁰⁹ McNamara, the JCS, and Johnson had all agreed that they would proceed as if an attack had occurred, despite the conflicting evidence—revealing that they were at once eager to avoid accusations of weakness during the election cycle and possibly even more eager to exploit the incident as an opportunity to galvanize American support for greater action in Vietnam.¹¹⁰

Johnson’s assumptions and decision to proceed as if the *Maddox* was actually attacked are perhaps understandable as erring on the side of caution. However, Johnson’s subsequent statements to the press regarding America’s retaliation for the attacks and, most damnably, McNamara’s testimony before Congress that led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution both indicate a deliberate misleading of Congress and the public. Both are readily explained by Johnson’s belief that he could and should control perceptions. McNamara’s assistant at the time, Alexander Haig, said later during an interview that in the age of modern communications, too often leaders act hastily and need to learn “patience.”¹¹¹ Haig also observed that Johnson’s eagerness to act and to get his story on Tonkin out stemmed from his embarrassment over not having acted sooner and that

¹⁰⁷ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 500.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 500. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded August 4, 1964 at 5:09 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

¹⁰⁹ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 500. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded August 4, 1964 at 5:09 p.m. *The Johnson Tapes*.

¹¹⁰ See Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 608-09. Multiple moderate congressmen made it clear to Johnson that he could not appear ‘soft’ on Communism, with Secretary of Treasury Douglas Dillon pointing out that “there is a limit on the number of times we can be attacked by the North Vietnamese without hitting their naval bases.” McNamara also reflected that the Johnson Administration hurried in its summations and decisions potentially as a result of trying to ‘beat the press’ and get out their own version of the story. See, McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 133-35.

¹¹¹ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Minute 31-32.

Johnson wanted to “beat the next day’s papers.”¹¹² Once Johnson received word from McNamara that American planes were enroute to their targets in North Vietnam, the President declared that that was “great news,” and hurried to make his statement from the White House. “Renewed hostile actions,” the President said, against U.S. ships have “today required me to order military forces of the United States to take rebuttal.”¹¹³ Johnson’s hand was forced by the aggressive North Vietnamese and he was taking the appropriate action. No mention was made of exactly what U.S. forces were actually doing in the area. During his own press conference, McNamara told reporters that U.S. warships were operating “thirty to forty to sixty miles” off of the North Vietnamese coast and that the Maddox was on a routine patrol. When pressed by reporters on the possible relationship between “U.S. patrols” and the attacks (revealing that some in the press were aware of some aspects of OPLAN 34A and the nature of the Desoto Patrols) McNamara flat out denied any relationship, saying that the United States conducted similar operations “all over the world.”¹¹⁴

When rumors started to circulate that the United States had in fact been conducting covert raids and operations in North Vietnam prior to the first attack on the *Maddox*, McNamara advised the President that he must “state categorically that U.S. forces did not participate in, were not associated with any alleged incident of that kind.”¹¹⁵ For his part, McNamara towed a similar line when he went to Congress on August 6, 1964 to testify and lobby for what became known as the *Gulf of Tonkin*

¹¹² Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Minute 33. Once Johnson ordered retaliatory attacks on August 4, he literally harried McNamara for word on the American airstrikes against targets in North Vietnam and kept the White House Press corps ‘on ice’ in the White House until 11:25 p.m. when he finally was able to make his statement.

¹¹³ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” As adapted from Johnson’s National Address during an NBC Special Report, aired at 11:33 pm. on August 4, 1964.

¹¹⁴ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Minute 36-37.

¹¹⁵ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 508-10. Transcript of taped conversation, recorded August 8, 1964 at 8:24 a.m. As with the press conference with McNamara on August 4th, reporters were questioning whether or not the second attack actually happened and/or whether the United States had been participating in covert operations that may have provoked the North Vietnamese’s attack. One Washington Post story by staff writer Murray Marder, titled “Maddox Incident Reexamined—Miscalculation Theory Weighted in Viet Crisis,” was particularly probing. McNamara also told the President that he should “disassociate [himself] from and certainly not admit that any” covert action had taken place. In a portion of the conversation that was not part of the transcript in the Beschloss text, but that was recounted in the Wheel Documentary, “Into Vietnam,” McNamara told Johnson to specifically say that U.S. forces did not “even enter the area until two days” after the incident.

*Resolution.*¹¹⁶ During his testimony, McNamara stated that “our Navy played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, and was not aware of, South Vietnamese actions, if there were any.”¹¹⁷ Secretary of State Rusk testified that the “North Vietnamese attacks on our naval vessels [were] no isolated event [but] part and parcel of a continuing Communist drive to conquer South Vietnam...and eventually dominate and conquer other free nations of Southeast Asia.”¹¹⁸ With the Gulf of Tonkin incident portrayed as a justified American response to an unprovoked act of aggression by the North Vietnamese, and with North Vietnam’s behavior neatly framed within the insidious and monolithic block of Communist aggression, the Resolution cleared both the House and the Senate committees with little difficulty. After its formal passage, an excited McNamara told an equally jubilant Johnson that the President now had “a blank check for further action.”¹¹⁹

Before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was even in front of the legislative branch, however, Johnson had given McNamara the green light to make preparations and mobilize for further action. The Pentagon activated an attack carrier group, sent fighter

¹¹⁶ Secretary of Defense McNamara, Dean Rusk, and General Wheeler testified before a Joint Session of Congress concerning the August 2 and August 4 attacks on U.S. forces and the American response. McNamara’s purpose was to convince Congress to concede war powers to the President. See Wheel, “Into Vietnam,” Minute 44. For record of the official hearing and testimony, see *Southeast Asia Resolution: Joint Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations and the committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Eighty-Eight Congress, Second Session* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966). In summary, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution stated that: “The Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” [Section 2]: “The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations, and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force. [Section 3]: “This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.” See also, Goulden, Joseph C., *Truth is The First Casualty; The Gulf of Tonkin Affair: Illusion and Reality* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1969).

¹¹⁷ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Minute 43. McNamara was responding to questions concerning possible U.S. covert operations and whether or not the U.S. had participated in operations that may have provoked the North Vietnamese attacks. Though some of the record of what was said is lost, and McNamara himself asserts in his memoirs that he “learned later” that he was incorrect in his assertion, intelligence operations scholar Dr. William Bader observes that McNamara replied at least four times under direct questioning that there were on U.S. forces involved in Commando raids. See Wheel, “Into Vietnam,” Minute 44. “There was no disclosure,” Dr. Bader said.

¹¹⁸ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, 506.

¹¹⁹ Wheel, “Into Vietnam.” Minute 45.

aircraft to South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Pacific theater, moved an anti-submarine task force into Vietnamese waters, and readied selected Army and Marine forces.¹²⁰

During a speech at the University of Syracuse on August 5th, President Johnson said the following:

On this occasion, it is fitting, I think, that we are meeting to dedicate this new center to better understanding among all men. For that is my purpose in speaking to you. Last night I spoke to the people of the Nation. This morning, I speak to people of all nations—so that they may understand without mistake our purpose in the action that we have been required to take. On August 2nd, the United States Destroyer was attacked on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin by hostile vessels of the Government of Viet Nam [sic]. On August 4th that attack was repeated in those same waters...The attacks were deliberate. The attacks were unprovoked. The attacks have been answered...We welcome—and we invite—the scrutiny of all men who seek peace, for peace is the only purpose of the course that America pursues.¹²¹

The ‘scrutiny’ that Johnson invited would eventually reveal in 1968 that his administration’s characterization of the attacks were both hasty and misleading. Admiral Flynn said he was “surprised” at the time by the denials and rhetoric of both McNamara and Johnson, believing that the United States was “going to war” and that the leadership had better “level with the American people and Congress.”¹²² Johnson said in his memoirs that he was “determined, from the time [he] became President, to seek the fullest support of Congress for any major action.”¹²³ “My first major decision on Vietnam had been to reaffirm President Kennedy’s policies. This [the Gulf of Tonkin] was my second major decision: to order the Tonkin attacks and to seek a congressional resolution in support of our Southeast Asia policy.”¹²⁴

To his credit, Johnson did ‘go to Congress,’ eventually, but neither he nor those who worked for him ever leveled with Congress or the American people. Johnson painted a false reality that propelled the United States into an overt shooting war with North Vietnam. Johnson controlled perceptions and subordinated the truth of his

¹²⁰ Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Minute 38-39.

¹²¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks of the President at the Dedication of the Samuel I. Newhouse Communications Center at Syracuse University [as Actually Delivered]," (Office of the White House Press Secretary, 1964). Available at the Johnson Presidential Library Online.

¹²² Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Minute 46.

¹²³ Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 115-16.

¹²⁴ Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 116.

Vietnam policies to his domestic political agenda. In so doing, he “tragically foreclosed the possibility of a grand national debate that might have educated both Johnson and the American people as they faced one of the most important presidential decisions of the century—whether the United States should make a monumental commitment to war in Vietnam.”¹²⁵ Stephen Walt observes that French leadership during its active colonial period in the 19th century often took their nation to war based on “little more than ill-conceived propaganda intended to minimize civilian interference in their activities abroad.”¹²⁶ Johnson misrepresented his foreign policy and the circumstances surrounding his actions in Vietnam so that he could prevent his activities abroad from interfering with his actions at home. By doing so, Johnson accomplished his near-term and more important goal of winning the 1964 election by a landslide and gaining the legitimacy he craved. Johnson successfully created the illusion that would enable him to prosecute his domestic policies, and he probably believed that if he could maintain the veneer long enough, *what he wanted to be true in Vietnam could actually become true*—he just needed the time to figure out the right mix sequence of bargains. The ‘new’ New Deal for America would require the right deal in Vietnam.

Throughout the war, all of the variants of bombing campaigns, covert operations, proposed and executed social and economic programs for Vietnam, the introduction of ground troops, and his pressures on both the North and South Vietnamese regimes, were mile markers in his search for ‘the right price’ that could bring the conflict to an acceptable end. Johnson sought to add Vietnam to the ever-expanding homestead of his master social agenda. However, Johnson’s perceived presidential mandate after the 1964 election, just like his justification for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and his escalation of the war in Vietnam, was based on false pretenses. That he believed that he could control perceptions, and that he was committed to the idea that Hanoi could be coaxed into bargaining, demonstrates just how much Johnson’s own image obscured both his interpretation of the war and of his adversary. The unfolding of decisions leading up to

¹²⁵ Johnson and Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*.

¹²⁶ Stephen M. Walt, "The Search for a Science of Strategy: A Review Essay," *International Security* 12, no. 1 (1987): 144. Walt is discussing an essay written by Douglas Porch titled “Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” which appears in Peter Paret’s *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). Porch notes the parallels between the French mission civilisatrice and the U.S. mission to win “hearts and minds” in Vietnam.

the Gulf of Tonkin also reveals just how intertwined Johnson's image was with the character of his agenda and the manner of its execution.

So while Johnson had by the end of 1964 secured a seat at the table, the President he was to the electorate was not the same President who was making the decisions. While he had temporarily reconciled some of his disparate worlds, the glue that held these worlds together was at best a series of expedients and at worst a collection of outright lies. Johnson's manufactured reality was thus tenuous, and his early manipulations opened up a new breach in a 'different kind of war' that ultimately reverberated and came to define not just the United States' war effort, but also his Presidency and, in many ways, the nation he led.

"Limited War" and The Arc of Perception

In 1965, Johnson comes to another crossroads in Vietnam and, like his handling of the Gulf of Tonkin incident; he again manipulates perceptions and misrepresents both the situation in Vietnam and U.S. actions there. As George Herring observes, Johnson metered and shaped the delivery of his "war message," so that the media received it "in much the same spirit it was delivered, seriously, but without any sense of urgency."¹²⁷ Following the elections and the implied mandate from the public, Johnson administered from a position that now included a new authority and the perception that he had been tough on Communists but still sought a moderate approach in Vietnam. "I will not permit," Johnson said, "the independent nations of the East to be swallowed up," but that does not mean sending "American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."¹²⁸ Thus, as Johnson implements the graduated bombing campaign ROLLING THUNDER in early February, 1965, and as the first Marines arrive in March to protect the airbases used for the bombing campaign, and as 110,000 servicemen flow into Vietnam between April and August, Johnson tightly controls the message¹²⁹. With Johnson committed to the tenets of limited war theory, and

¹²⁷ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 2. Though several news stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times* predicted the possibility of a "long war," there was a distinct lack of urgency, so that one writer at the time described it as a "strange, almost passionless war." See, *New York Times*, July 29, 1965; *Time*, August 6, 1965, 17-18; and *Newsweek*, August 9, 1965, 17-18.

¹²⁸ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 208.

¹²⁹ Two Marine battalions landed at Da Nang airfield on March 8, 1965 after General Westmoreland successfully convinced Johnson that U.S. airbases needed American security. Viet Cong attacks on American installations in early February had led to OPERATION FLAMING DART, which marked the

convinced that Vietnam was a war that could be waged “in cold blood,” and due to his absolute conviction that he could control the public reality of the war, it was “no accident” that “the United States went to war without knowing it” in 1965.¹³⁰

Just as with the run-up to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, Johnson had in place a series of plans that supported his agenda for a more vigorous military campaign that could, through a series of carrots and sticks, compel North Vietnam to call off the war. The early turn to a graduated air campaign was perhaps a way by which Johnson sought to ‘overfly’ a potential ground war. Johnson’s hopes ignored multiple C.I.A. and intelligence estimates that highlighted the flawed assumptions concerning the potential impact a bombing campaign would have on the North. Based on a skewed image of the adversary, that essentially equated Hanoi to Moscow and thereby conflated both Hanoi’s objectives and Vietnamese society with the characteristics of the Soviet Union, the bombing campaign had little effect on the North’s war effort. Johnson and his advisors had conceptualized ROLLING THUNDER by looking “to the example of the Cuban missile crisis, in which they had coerced an enemy far more powerful than North Vietnam.”¹³¹ Johnson initially believed that airpower could find North Vietnam’s price, and thus resolve the conflict. Despite the punishment administered by American airpower, the North deftly interpreted the United States’ political position. General Giap commented in 1967 that “the U.S. imperialists must restrict the U.S. forces participating in a local war because otherwise their global strategy would be hampered and their influence...would diminish.”¹³² From the start, the Politburo was committed to its

beginning of overt American air raids against North Vietnam. Flaming Dart quickly evolved into ROLLING THUNDER by the end of February. A few weeks after the Marines landed at Da Nang, Johnson authorized another 20,000 servicemen and in July, Johnson approves Westmoreland’s request for an additional forty-four combat battalions that consisted of approximately 90,000 men.

¹³⁰ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 2. Dean Rusk had coined the notion of waging war in “cold blood,” absent the passions of ‘traditional war.’ Limited war theory dictated that the nation could wage war without enduring the overt societal, economic, and material impacts that historically accompanied war. See Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago, IL: University Press of Chicago, 1957); and Wallace, Thies, J., *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1968* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 9.

¹³¹ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 65. The idea that force could be used as a ‘signaling device’ was also a key tenet of Limited War theory.

¹³² Nguyễn Giáp Võ, *“Big Victory, Great Task”; North Viet-Nam's Minister of Defense Assesses the Course of the War* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1968), 207.

struggle and took a holistic approach that accepted short-term costs for what its members believed was an inevitable long term victory.¹³³

Johnson's entering arguments and assumptions, however, overlooked key factors of the war and of his adversary. Maxwell Taylor said after the war that "We didn't know our ally... We knew even less about the enemy. And the last, most inexcusable of our mistakes was not knowing our own people."¹³⁴ The latter of Taylor's laments is illuminated by the fact that the Johnson administration believed that it could misrepresent the war to the American people. Taylor's first two points are given example to by a cable he issued in June, 1965:

Our strategy must be based upon a patient and steady increase of pressure following an escalating pattern while making maximum effort to turn the tide here in the South. This does not mean that we must "win" in the South to bring about change in [North Vietnam's] attitudes, but rather that the DRV must perceive that the tide has turned or is likely to turn. Hopefully at this point the [North] will seek to find some way out, and if and when it does, there could be a "bandwagon" effect that would so lower [Viet Cong] morale and so raise that of South Vietnam as to permit bringing major hostilities to a reasonably early conclusion.¹³⁵

Taylor's cable is consistent with the agenda Johnson had initiated in February. Driven by the belief that the costs of an air campaign would be relatively "cheap," and that Hanoi could be brought to the table through coercion, McGeorge Bundy developed a "Sustained Reprisal" policy.¹³⁶ The policy recommended that the United States should "retaliate against any [Viet Cong] act of violence," and that the continual retaliations would create in the minds of the Politburo the connection between Viet Cong actions and punishment—thereby dissuading their continuing support of the Viet Cong while

¹³³ As adapted from, Harrison E. Salisbury, *Behind the Lines: Hanoi, December 23, 1966-January 7, 1967*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 196. The North was not inclined to 'horse-trade' with Johnson and actually benefited from the bombing campaigns against it because ROLLING THUNDER galvanized the populace and helped perpetuate the idea that they were fighting for the sacred cause of unification against an unjust giant. Clodfelter, 136-139.

¹³⁴ Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam, 1945-1975* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 417.

¹³⁵ Gideon Rose, *How Wars End : Why We Always Fight the Last Battle : A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 166. Quoted from, Cable #4035, Taylor to Rusk, June 3, 1965, Top Secret, NSC History—Deployment in Vietnam.

¹³⁶ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 423-27.

maintaining a “low level” commitment.¹³⁷ Hanoi was however fighting a different kind of war than Johnson was, and the United States’ approach only emboldened their cause.

Hanoi was fighting a ‘total war,’ while the United States struggled to fight a limited war. Gideon Rose summarizes Johnson’s limited-war strategy as having three key components: “limited bombing in the North (and enemy-held areas in the South); defeating Communist forces in pitched battles in the South’s hinterlands; and ‘nation-building in the South’s core.’”¹³⁸ In aggregate, Johnson believed he could use these measures to effectively create in the minds of his adversary a picture of the war that coincided with his own, and thus ‘win’ Hanoi’s capitulation. The United States and North Vietnam, however, were playing different games and thus invoked different value scales and judged costs differently. Throughout the course of ROLLING THUNDER, the United States dropped over 636,000 tons of bombs and destroyed over half of the North’s oil-storage capacity, bridges, and power plants.¹³⁹ The monetary costs of Johnson’s ‘sustained reprisal’ policy executed through ROLLING THUNDER were 10:1 in the North’s favor.¹⁴⁰

Even by the summer of 1965, it was apparent that the bombing campaign was not achieving the desired effects. Between February and July 1965, reports poured in that testified to the tenuous situation in Vietnam. Coupled with these reports of pending disaster, were various iterations of what would be required to win in Vietnam and what shape the path to victory might take. Westmoreland’s continual call for more troops simultaneously spoke of pending doom while optimistically asserting that he could get the job done with the right amount of forces. National Security Advisor Walt Rostow submitted a memo in the spring assuring Johnson that “historically, guerilla wars have generally been won or lost cleanly,” and that the forces of the free world, in appropriate

¹³⁷ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 423-27.

¹³⁸ Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*, 166. See also, Rosen, Stephen P., “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security* 7:2 (Fall 1982), 83-113.

¹³⁹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 542-72. See Document #118, “McNamara Memo of Oct 14, 1966, Opposing Increase in War Effort,”; Appendix, “Extracts from CIA/DIA Report “An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam through 12 September 1966,”; Document #126, “McGeorge Bundy’s Memorandum to Johnson in May 1966 on Bombing.” Also see, *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, IV, 136. Analysts had calculated the effectiveness of ROLLING THUNDER as early as 1967.

¹⁴⁰ Clodfelter, *the Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*, 134.

numbers, would inevitably prevail.¹⁴¹ The deteriorating situation in Vietnam and the seemingly ambiguous results from the impotent policies already in place provided momentum to recommendations that called for more troops. McNamara visited Vietnam in July and immediately recommended upon his return that Johnson approve a dramatic increase in U.S. troops.¹⁴² McNamara's elements for victory were appealing and reasonable, and he was convincing in correlating the achievement of these ends to increased U.S. forces. Additionally, there was a persistent sense within the Johnson Administration that "Vietnam was a fourth rate, raggedy ass little country" that could not possibly stand up to any significant application of American power.¹⁴³

American self-image and Johnson's image of the adversary skewed analysis and influenced decisions that stemmed from, and reinforced, an almost pathological belief in the American myth. South Vietnam was besieged, much like the outnumbered and desperate fighters at the Alamo. American prestige and policy were also trapped in South Vietnam. Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote in July, 1965: "The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusion[s] that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interests throughout the world."¹⁴⁴ The sacred trust of freedom was itself trapped

¹⁴¹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 447-48. See Document #101, Rostow Memorandum on "Victory and Defeat in Guerilla Wars."

¹⁴² Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 456-57. McNamara was optimistic about a 'quick' U.S. victory if the military was given more troops. He outlined nine elements that would lead to "a favorable outcome:" 1). VC stop attacks and drastically reduce incidents of terror and sabotage; 2). North Vietnam reduces infiltration to a trickle, with some reasonably reliable method of our obtaining confirmation of this fact; 3). U.S. and South Vietnam stop bombing of North Vietnam; 4). South Vietnam stays independent (hopefully pro-U.S., but possibly genuinely neutral); 5). South Vietnam exercises governmental functions over substantially all of South Vietnam; 6). Communists remain quiescent in Laos and Thailand; 7). North Vietnam withdraws regular army forces (PAVN) and other North Vietnamese infiltrators from South Vietnam; 8). The Viet Cong and National Liberation Front (NLF) transform from a military to a purely political organization; 9). U.S. combat forces (not advisors or AID) withdraw.

¹⁴³ Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1984), 321.

¹⁴⁴ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 194-95. Adapted from Memorandum, Rusk to the President, July 1, 1965, "Deployment," vol. 6, tabs 357-383, National Security Council History, Box 43, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library. Documents available at the Johnson Presidential Library Online. McNamara observes that Rusk's sentiments were shared by the majority of the administration.

behind the crumbling walls of South Vietnam. The difference, however, was that Johnson could mount a posse that never came for the heroes at the Alamo.

Characterized in this way, Johnson readily interpreted Vietnam as a case of naked Communist aggression. Not only was he obligated to take a stand to preserve the integrity of his office, but the burgeoning conflict threatened to obstruct his larger domestic agenda. If he could reconcile these competing demands with a massive, yet short-term, influx of American troops, then he could both demonstrate his resolve and remove Vietnam from the main table of political discourse. These motivations muted George Ball's prescient cautions and perhaps explain in large part why Johnson "failed to take the American people into his confidence" and why the military strategy, and its long-term implications, was not "exhaustively debated."¹⁴⁵

George Ball's now famous memo presented Johnson with a clear delineation between Korea and Vietnam and called into questions many of the assumptions that were shaping the debate over the 1965 troop decision. Johnson was predisposed to the Korean analogy and Ball attempted to unseat the President's predilections. Ball's memo was titled "How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying our Viet-nam Policies?" Ball's foreword to the memo boldly asserted that "South Viet-nam Is Not Korea," to which he added that "it would be a mistake to rely too heavily on the Korean analogy."¹⁴⁶ Ball provided Johnson with a list of differences between South Vietnam and Korea:

1. We were in South Korea under a clear United Nations Mandate. Our presence in South Vietnam depends upon the continuing request of the GVN [Government of South Vietnam] plus the SEATO [South East Asia Treaty Organization] protocol.
2. At their peak, United Nation forces in South Korea (other than ours and those of the ROK [Republic of Korea] included 53,000 infantrymen and 1000 other troops provided by fifty-three nations. In Vietnam, we are doing it alone with no substantial help from any other

¹⁴⁵ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 169, 205-06. McNamara explains Johnson's misleading of Congress and of the American people as resulting from "two bitter choices: subterfuge versus the twin dangers of escalatory pressure and the loss of his social programs."

¹⁴⁶ Ball, "'How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Our Viet-Nam Policies?," 36.

country.

3. In 1950, the Korean government under Syngman Rhee was stable. It had the general support of the principal elements in the country. There was little factional fighting and jockeying for power. In South Vietnam, we face governmental chaos.
4. The Korean War started only two years after Korean independence. The Korean people were still excited by their newfound freedom; they were fresh for war. In contrast, the people of Indochina have been fighting for almost twenty years—first the French, then the last ten against the NVN [North Vietnamese].
5. Finally, the Korean War started with a massive land invasion by 100,000 troops. This was a classical type of invasion across an established border...It gave an unassailable political and legal base for action. In South Vietnam, there has been no invasion—only slow infiltration. Insurgency is by its nature ambiguous. The Viet Cong insurgency does have substantial indigenous support...[A]s the weakness of the Saigon Government becomes more and more evident, an increasing number of governments will be inclined to believe that the Viet Cong insurgency, is, in fact an internal rebellion.¹⁴⁷

Ball was a carryover from the Kennedy administration and though it is not possible to know what Kennedy would have done had he served through 1965, it is important to note that Kennedy at the very least saw the distinct differences between Korea and Vietnam.¹⁴⁸ Ball's memo represents a clear instance where a decision-maker was presented with a precise assessment yet took action that ran counter to it. Ball's analysis not only coincides with what we know today about Vietnam, but it also reveals that the Johnson Administration was privy to the same information. That Ball was ignored and even subsequently ostracized from the Johnson administration makes a compelling case for the strength and influences of belief structures on decision-making and also aligns with Khong's assertions about how Presidents 'misuse' history. Additionally, the

¹⁴⁷ Ball, "'How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Our Viet-Nam Policies?," 37.

¹⁴⁸ McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 40-41.

decisions that flowed from Johnson's interpretation of the Vietnam War and America's role in it, transformed what was still primarily a guerilla war into a conventional confrontation between the United States and Hanoi—thereby turning perceptions into reality.

By the end of 1965, more than 180,000 U.S. troops were in Vietnam. However, Johnson not only refuted Ball's warnings about the true character of the Vietnam War, he also ignored Ball's warning that the administration had better be "damn serious with the American people."¹⁴⁹ Brian VanDeMark observes that Johnson "minimized political dangers by minimizing public awareness and debate," so that he could escalate his efforts against North Vietnam without "escalating the war."¹⁵⁰ Each additional step up the escalation ladder was coupled with an equally deliberate move to dampen and/or obscure the reality of that escalation. For instance, Johnson had authorized the deployment of 100,000 servicemen to Vietnam in 1965 as well as an additional 100,000 in 1966, but he only revealed publicly that he was sending 50,000 troops. The manner by which Johnson carried out his agenda in Vietnam contrasted sharply with the "parades and fanfare" of previous wars and "in no real sense did the nation appear to be going to war."¹⁵¹ Johnson wanted to mobilize the country to build his Great Society, but did not want to mobilize the country for Vietnam, fearing that not only would a more overt war posture lead to escalation of the Cold War but also, and perhaps more significant, believed that a nation mobilized for a potentially controversial war would be unable or unwilling to build the society he envisioned.

So Johnson proceeded to wage an "all-out limited war," that quickly turned a tertiary guerrilla war into a conventional enterprise that created a "huge, sprawling, many-faceted, military-civilian effort" that lacked coordination, cooperation, and clarity of purpose.¹⁵² In his desire not to let Vietnam undermine his larger agenda, he ironically

¹⁴⁹ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185.

¹⁵⁰ VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, 54, 67-79, 113. For example, Maxwell Taylor was directed to reveal policies and American actions through "inconspicuous background briefings, and both Johnson and Bundy believed that they had an "education problem," regarding the American public. See also, Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 125.

¹⁵¹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 131.

¹⁵² Bundy quoted in Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrief, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam*, 2d ed. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1989), 120. See also, Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy at War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986, 82-85. The architecture of Johnson's military

and relentlessly increased U.S. commitment there. Johnson's tight hold over the military, from his notorious Tuesday Lunches to his undulating bombing campaign, to what he did and did not permit the military to do, reveals his deep-rooted belief in the efficacy of limited war. So long as Johnson was able to perpetuate the public perception that U.S. efforts in Vietnam were limited, then he could prosecute his agenda. The fact that U.S. resources were pouring into Vietnam was less important than how the public perceived the war. Johnson's penchant for control and his want to keep a tight rein on the Vietnam narrative, obscured and thwarted the purpose of his war effort—even from those he relied upon to carry it out. In this way, Johnson sought to limit every aspect of the Vietnam War, while at the same time exerting massive amounts of his own energy, time, and the resources of his country to keep the war limited. Keeping with his own paradoxical nature, Johnson thus created in Vietnam the seemingly contradictory situation of a 'total limited war.'

Hawking Doves

When Johnson opened the seal in July, 1965 and authorized the large deployment of ground troops, public opinion polls showed that sixty-two percent of the public approved of Vietnam policies and seventy-nine percent were convinced that South Vietnam would fall without U.S. intervention.¹⁵³ In June of 1966, only forty-one percent approved of the job Johnson was doing in Vietnam, and by 1967; favorable opinions of Johnson's handling of Vietnam plummeted to twenty-eight percent.¹⁵⁴ The trajectory of public opinion on Johnson and Vietnam coincided with Johnson's escalation of the war and the increasing difficulty he had in maintaining control of the narrative. His short term manipulations, starting with the Gulf of Tonkin, bought him time but the reality on the ground soon caught up with and surpassed the fiction he portrayed. Vietnam was part of the new and wicked frontier that Johnson had committed the country to and upon

efforts was troubling and inefficient. Komer notes that nobody had definitive responsibility. Komer also quotes Bundy as saying that "I don't think we had an effective war governing mechanism in Washington at any time." Chester Cooper also notes that both the State Department and the Pentagon failed to centralize their massive efforts into any high-level office or individual until much later in the war. Despite the massive endeavor that Vietnam was turning into, leadership's attentions were divided. See, Cooper, *The Lost Crusade; America in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Dodd, 1970).

¹⁵³ As quoted by Herring from, William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs : The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, DC: Center for Military History For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S.G.P.O., 1988).

¹⁵⁴ Samuel Lubell, *The Hidden Crisis in American Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1971), 254-60.

which he sought to build the Great Society. The multitude of interests complicated and contradicted Johnson's goals. As Horst Rittel observes, the social and politic context of complex problems (such as war) creates a "setting in which a plurality of publics is politically pursuing a diversity of goals" and that these goals emanate from different value sets.¹⁵⁵

In *Every War Must End*, Fred Ikle analyzes the phenomenon and influence of competing domestic coalitions that in war often divide into camps of *Hawks* and *Doves*:

The power structure of a government is not made of one piece—even in dictatorships. Political factions contend for influence, government agencies and military services maintain their own separate loyalties and pursue partisan objectives, and the basis of popular support keeps shifting. During a war, different parts of this power structure become differently committed to the military effort. The more important a group's role in this effort, the greater the share of the nation's resources on which it can exert claim.¹⁵⁶

In the fight over resources and in the struggle between competing domestic coalitions, strategies can be "distorted by organizational interests," and the object of the war (assuming there was one) is lost in the debate over what the war was *really* about.¹⁵⁷

Hawks and Doves thus compete for their own interests through determining not only how the war should end, but also through determining how and why it started in the first place. In the course of this debate, each side colorfully attempts to 'paint' the other and thereby define themselves by pointing out what they are not.¹⁵⁸ Presidents face the challenge of shepherding the competing coalitions, and depending on the balance of equities between the different factions, must adjust their agendas and policies so as to appease the stronger group while at the same time rationalizing and justifying their actions to the weaker group. Johnson was duly aware that he needed enough support from both the Hawks and the Doves to effect his agenda, which was why he labored to create a reality that was palatable to both.

¹⁵⁵ Horst W. Rittel, & Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 167-69.

¹⁵⁶ Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 59-60.

¹⁵⁷ Walt, "The Search for a Science of Strategy: A Review Essay," 156.

¹⁵⁸ This concept of "otherness" is elucidated in Patrick Porter's *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes*, and also by Robert Jervis' *Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics*.

Johnson believed that he could invent the future. So long as he could weave the tendrils of his vision through the multitude of Congressional and public interests, then he could tie together seemingly disparate worlds. Walter McDougal observes:

To LBJ, the space program was a model of the role government should play in society...an expression of limitless power... [f]or the War on Poverty and Great Society, as much as Apollo or Vietnam, were Cold War phenomena, but they were not only that... They were born of a moral vision in which men of power and charity sought to use their gifts for the less gifted. It was possible to eradicate poverty, crime, ignorance, whip the Communists, and develop the Third World...The power existed and needed only to be grasped...¹⁵⁹

Going to space, however, was an “engineering problem,” and all of the material and technological power of the United States was perhaps ill-suited to tackle the equations of “discrimination or poverty or even urban blight.”¹⁶⁰ In many ways, the ‘final frontier of space’ was much simpler than the enduring and wicked frontiers of man. Johnson was therefore doubly challenged in harnessing support for his Vietnam and social policies. He needed others to ‘*grasp the future*’ he purported and also *believe in the present* he portrayed.

In 1967, the combined efforts of the United States Air Force and Navy totaled more than 108,000 sorties and 226,000 tons of bombs. South Vietnam received more than \$625 million, which comprised more than twenty-five percent of the American foreign aid programs for the entire world.”¹⁶¹ Journalists, members of Congress, and even the casual observer started to seriously question Johnson’s portrayal of the war. Public sentiment was confused. “I want to get out,” one subject said during a study on public opinion, “but I don’t want to give up.”¹⁶² Right-wing Republicans and conservative Democrats resented what they saw as Johnson’s undue restraints on the military in what was a “global struggle with Communism,” and urged Johnson to “win or get out.”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ McDougal, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 406.

¹⁶⁰ McDougal, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 413.

¹⁶¹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 21.

¹⁶² Lubell, *The Hidden Crisis in American Politics*, 254-60.

¹⁶³ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 170. Herring quotes Democratic House member Mendel Rivers.

The Doves were an eclectic mix of pacifists, “New Left” radicals, and antiwar liberals.¹⁶⁴ Though the more rancorous and passionate members of the anti-war movement comprised a relatively small percentage, they enjoyed a stage that allowed them to counter and even ‘out-shout’ Johnson’s own bully-pulpit.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, political leaders, some who were once staunch supporters of Johnson’s Vietnam’s policies, started questioning the war. Kentucky Senator Morton said that the United States had been “planted in a corner” in Vietnam and that there “would have to be a change.”¹⁶⁶ Senator Fulbright, who had been instrumental in pushing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress, said that the “Great Society was a Sick Society.”¹⁶⁷ Fulbright also claimed that the United States was “showing signs of that fatal presumption, that over-extension of power and mission, which brought ruin to ancient Athens, to Napoleonic France, and to Nazi Germany.”¹⁶⁸

Perhaps most dramatic was the exodus of members from Johnson’s inner circle. White House Chief of Staff Bill Moyers and George Ball both resigned over policy differences, and McNamara, Johnson’s staunch ally and confidant, had by 1967 become disenchanted with the war and advised against many of Johnson’s policies.¹⁶⁹ The immensity of U.S. efforts, which one White House aide described as “the Holy Empire going to war,” combined with dubious results exacerbated the fissures both within and outside the administration.¹⁷⁰ A leaked Pentagon study published in the *New York Times*

¹⁶⁴ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 171. Pacifists opposed all wars on moral grounds. The “New Left” represented a small but vocal contingent that included mostly upper-middle-class youth on college campuses who viewed Vietnam as a “classic example of the way the American ruling class exploited helpless people to sustain a decadent capitalist system. Antiwar liberals did not generally oppose the war on “systemic grounds,” but thought that Vietnam, unlike Korea or WW II, lacked the moral justification for U.S. intervention and that the United States’ involvement there undermined fundamental U.S. principals. See also, DeBenedetti, Charles, *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980).

¹⁶⁵ Many celebrities, such as Jane Fonda and Muhammad Ali, as well as social leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, gave celebrity and momentum to the anti-war movement.

¹⁶⁶ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 175.

¹⁶⁷ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 175.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Powers, *Vietnam, The War at Home: Vietnam and the American People, 1964-1968* (Boston, MA, G.K. Hall, 1984), 118.

¹⁶⁹ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 510-18, 77. See Document #129. “The climax for what [the Pentagon study] calls the disillusioned doves came in Secretary McNamara’s May 19 memorandum to President Johnson, which marshaled the arguments against the strategy of widening the war and sharpened the case for curtailing it.” McNamara’s memo attempted to force arguments about the “philosophy of the war” and recommended a cut-back on troops, bombing, and compromise with the North.

¹⁷⁰ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 21.

revealed that analysts had concluded that a “decisive military victory for either side is unlikely and that it would take at least five years to win the war even if “U.S. forces were increased to 750,000.”¹⁷¹ Denied the quick victory he had hoped for, and with both his allies and his adversaries circling, Johnson’s already dubious war aims in Vietnam were further skewed and obstructed by increased dissension at home. In a fashion consistent with his personality and his predilections, Johnson reinvigorated his efforts to control perceptions.

Herring reveals that the anti-war movement did not, in and of itself, dictate outcomes in Vietnam, and that many Americans were actually just as ambiguous in their attitudes toward ‘the movement’ as they were to the war.¹⁷² What the vocal opposition did accomplish, however, was to reintroduce Vietnam into the arena of public debate. Open discussion on the war, especially critical discussions, left too much to chance for a President who was convinced that his stranglehold on perceptions was critical to success. Thwarted in Vietnam by the Communists, Johnson’s perceptual control included management of his own beliefs. “Public attitudes toward the war...bewildered Johnson. He had made sincere efforts to negotiate but the Communists would not talk.”¹⁷³ His lack of success in Vietnam was not due to any error in judgment on his part or to his decisions, but rather to the inscrutable inability of his adversaries to see the logic of his policies. Jervis discusses the idea of rational consistency and Robert Billings explains the tendency of decision makers to displace blame for failed policies unto others rather than question the validity of those decisions.¹⁷⁴ So, while Johnson accepted the significance of his adversaries and critics, he never accepted the possibility of their ‘correctness,’ or entertained the possibility that his assumptions about them might be false. In Johnson’s mind, not only was his opposition wrong, they were also an impediment to what he needed to get done. As such, he framed his critics at home and his approach to them in much the same way that he framed and dealt with his adversaries abroad—And he went at them.

¹⁷¹ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 263.

¹⁷² Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 173.

¹⁷³ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 258.

¹⁷⁴ For Jervis’ discussion on rational consistency, see *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 118-195. For Billings discussion on the impact of attribution, non-attribution and how decision makers process confirming and disconfirming information, see “Problem Identification in Sequential Decision-Making: The Re-representation of Problems.”

Forced by 1967 to withdraw many of his efforts for the Great Society due to the circumstances in Vietnam, Johnson was not about to let ‘aggression at home’ force him to lose in Vietnam. Johnson was embittered, and blamed not just the North Vietnamese for complicating his war aims, but also the disgruntled factions at home who just couldn’t seem to get on board with his policies. Feeling undermined, both in his domestic and international agenda by his critics, he became convinced that the “real enemy” was the fools and knaves at home who gave encouragement to Hanoi.”¹⁷⁵ Afraid of losing both the war at home and abroad, “Johnson launched a two-pronged offensive to silence his most outspoken enemies and win public support for his policies. Mistakenly believing that the peace movement was turning the public against the war, he set out to destroy it.”¹⁷⁶

The first prong of Johnson’s offensive was a comprehensive pitch for credibility and good news. Throughout 1967, Johnson labored and travelled across the country in an effort ‘to get the word out’ that America was making progress in Vietnam and that he was, in fact, a legitimate and effective wartime President. Ever mindful that his background and ‘less refined’ persona might give the impression that he was not suited for complicated foreign policy, Johnson continued to invoke support from a panel of foreign policy consultants, known later as The Wise Men, as a way to lend credibility to his policies.¹⁷⁷ Lady Bird wrote in her diaries that Johnson busily hammered away on TV and on college campus tours to get his message out. “What we need more than anything else,” one internal memo stated, “is some visible evidence of our success.”¹⁷⁸

As part of that effort, Johnson established the Vietnam Information Group in August, 1967 whose mandate was to act as a “quick reaction team” that could exploit every opportunity to provide positive information about the war to the public.¹⁷⁹ The

¹⁷⁵ Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President*, 261.

¹⁷⁶ Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 183.

¹⁷⁷ The Wise Men were made up of “such establishment luminaries as Eugene Black, Allen Dulles, Robert Lovett, and John McCloy.” See Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 125. The group was active throughout the Kennedy and Johnson administration and members often included ex-military and political leaders.

¹⁷⁸ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 132.

¹⁷⁹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 143. The Vietnam Action Group was designed to “break the siege” of the critics. Johnson also established the Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam, which was ostensibly a citizen’s group, but that was in actuality populated with Johnson supporters that could essentially churn out propaganda favorable to Johnson’s cause. See Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 144 and Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 182-83.

Pentagon and the State Department were also both instrumental in Johnson's PR campaign, with "off the record briefings" provided to the press or, as General William Depuy described them, "key persons in those areas that particularly need some religion."¹⁸⁰ Sympathetic or 'malleable' reporters were given exclusive access, some even being sent to Vietnam where, upon their return, they produced articles describing the "clear signs of progress."¹⁸¹ Johnson directed Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) to "search urgently for occasions to present sound evidence of progress," and MACV provided studies that tallied progress in security, pacification, and territory which were then presented to the press in "concise, hard hitting briefs."¹⁸²

The second prong of Johnson's offensive was equally vigorous, but much less benign. Dubbed OPERATION CHAOS, Johnson enticed the CIA to conduct surveillance operations on antiwar leaders and ordered the FBI to disrupt and harass meetings, marches and movements. Undercover FBI agents would pose as peace movement sympathizers and attempt to incite groups to "take such actions that would further discredit them."¹⁸³ Johnson sought out sympathetic ears in Congress and tried to convince various members that the peace movement was "being cranked up by Hanoi."¹⁸⁴ Eric Goldman, a Princeton historian who was part of Johnson's "quiet brain trust," said of Johnson that the "domestic reformer of the Great Society days had become a war chief."¹⁸⁵ Goldman also recounted that Johnson described war opponents as "crackpots" who were being "duped and orchestrated by the Russians."¹⁸⁶ Johnson even went so far as to insinuate that anti-war senators were in cahoots with the Russians,

¹⁸⁰ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 144.

¹⁸¹ For example, *New York Times* Reporter Hanson Baldwin was sent on a three week trip to Vietnam. For his series of articles that positively describe the progress in Vietnam, Herring adapted information found in the Hanson Baldwin Papers, box 96; Baldwin articles, *New York Times*, November 23, December 3, 6, 17, 1967.

¹⁸² As adapted by Herring from Saigon Cable 7867, October 7, 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers, National Security Files, box 99. Documents available at the Johnson Presidential Library Online.

¹⁸³ As quoted by Herring from, Charles DeBenedetti, "A CIA Analysis of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement: October 1967," *Peace and Change*, no. 9 (1983).

¹⁸⁴ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 182.

¹⁸⁵ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 366-67.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 366-67.

eating lunch at the Russian embassy or having “children of their staff people” who dated Russians.¹⁸⁷

Johnson also went on the offensive in his message, often trying to reason with the public and explain the realities of Vietnam. “Vietnam is not an academic question,” he told troops during a Veterans Day speech, “it’s not a topic for cocktail parties...or debate from distant sidelines.”¹⁸⁸ During a press conference following the March on Washington in November, 1967, Johnson described how Americans preferred the “quick victory,” in football and war, but that Vietnam was not that kind of war. Instead, Vietnam required patience and understanding of a complex situation, and the President called for resolve at home.¹⁸⁹ During that same press conference, Johnson also lambasted irresponsible protestors, declaring that their “storm trooper tactics and bullying” threatened free speech and aided the Communists.

Johnson’s covert and overt attacks on his critics and his immense ‘positive spin’ campaign reflect his Presidential image and the agenda it drove. First, while the JCS, the State Department, the Pentagon, and his advisers presented Johnson with contradictory recommendations, Johnson was attempting to ‘buy time’ and negotiate with the American people.¹⁹⁰ If the public and Congress could only recognize the difficulty of Vietnam, and see the logic of his policies, then Johnson could strike a bargain and win support for the war. At the same time, there was a distinct coercive element to Johnson’s public campaign. Those who failed to see his ‘logic’ were punished, investigated, harassed, and characterized as part of the Communist monolith. Very little in Johnson’s actions indicates that he considered the possibility that his policies were failing or even questioned his fundamental assumption about the war or even his own country. Just as

¹⁸⁷ Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973*, 367.

¹⁸⁸ *Time*, November 17, 1967, 23.

¹⁸⁹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 146-47. See also, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, 1967, vol.2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968), 1045-1055.

¹⁹⁰ Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 573-88. See Documents #124, #125, #128, #129, and #130. See also, Herring, George C., *The Pentagon Papers*, abridged ed., 174-207. McGeorge Bundy, who by 1967 was officially out of the administration but who still advised on policy matters, wrote a memo to Johnson that advised against escalating the war. William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State wrote a somewhat ambiguous and contradictory memo that seemed both for and against escalation. General Westmoreland, General Wheeler, and the JCS produced a report that called for the introduction of more troops. McNamara’s report cautioned against further escalation and recommended seeking negotiations with the North.

Johnson perceived and mischaracterized the North Vietnamese as part of a monolithic Communist bloc, so too were Johnson's critics identified as part of the conspiracy. In fact, the lack of progress in Vietnam was even attributable to the undermining, evil-doers at home. "The main front of the war," Johnson said during a staff meeting, "is here in the United States [and the American people are not] as solid in support of my soldiers as Ho's people are solid in support of his troops."¹⁹¹

Johnson's re-representation of Vietnam in 1967 invoked the very same predilections with which he framed Vietnam in 1964. In order to prosecute his agenda the American people needed to believe in a facilitating master narrative, and detractors to that narrative had to be defined and coerced as if they were illegitimate aggressors. Furthermore, Johnson's obstinacy reflects his continuing belief that he could, through force of will and management of perceptions, dictate circumstances conducive to his desired outcomes. His mantra, on the eve of the Tet Offensive in 1968 was: "We are not going to yield. We are not going to shimmy. We are going to wind up with a peace with honor which all Americans seek."¹⁹² Like the heroes at the Alamo, Johnson was dug in. The irony was, however, that Johnson had created both the walls that he was trapped behind and the forces that threatened to overrun them. While he had inherited Vietnam, he had created the mirage of purpose and progress that was under siege in 1967. When North Vietnam and the Vietcong launched the Tet Offensive in January, 1968, a very different reality cascaded across America's television screens. The veneer that Johnson had so painstakingly constructed and believed in was ripped away.

What the Hell is Going On?

On January 31, 1968, close to seventy thousand North Vietnamese Communist troops launched a surprise offensive that stretched from the demilitarized zone along the 20th parallel down to the Ca Mau Peninsula on the southern tip of Vietnam. Immediately prior to attacks with conventional forces, Vietcong sappers blasted their way into the American Embassy in Saigon and a six-hour standoff ensued between the guerrilla forces and Embassy security forces. By the end of the first day's volleys, the North Vietnamese

¹⁹¹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, 146. As adapted from, Tom Johnson notes on LBJ conversation with Chalmers Roberts, October 16, 1967, Tom Johnson notes on meeting, October 3, 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers, Tom Johnson Notes, box 1.

¹⁹² "The American Experience: LBJ." *PBS Online*. www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/president/video/lbj_23.html. Digital Recording.

forces attacked nearly all forty-four provincial capitals, five of the six major cities, sixty-four district capitals, and close to fifty hamlets. Though certainly not militarily successful, the offensive surprised American forces; and its sheer expansiveness and coordination set the U.S. military and political leaders on their heels. Westmoreland's memoirs quoted the General's intelligence officer as saying that "Even had I known exactly what was to take place, it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody."¹⁹³

It was during the initial news bulletins on the attack that Walter Cronkite supposedly blurted out, "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning this war!"¹⁹⁴ Whether Cronkite actually said this or whether this is in fact part of journalism's own myths about the Vietnam War is irrelevant, because the sentiment duly captures the collective reaction of the American public.¹⁹⁵ The country was shocked by the images of Vietcong tearing up the courtyard of the American embassy and by South Vietnam's coastal and interior cities being apparently overrun. "After years of viewing the war on television," Karnow writes, "Americans at home had become accustomed to a familiar pattern of images."¹⁹⁶ War coverage between 1965 and 1968 did not hide all of war's realities, images of human suffering on both sides was given due, but there was a certain plodding monotony, "punctuated periodically by moments of horror," that was conveyed in the seemingly endless reels of hovering helicopters, rice fields, and booby traps.¹⁹⁷ The war was arduous, but remote, and the enemy was shadowy, even cowardly as he hid and struck only to fade away again—fearful of confronting American military might head-on. During Tet, however, the enemy was out in force and appeared to have America on the run.

¹⁹³ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 321.

¹⁹⁴ Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1984), 158. Oberdorfer offers a more thorough account of the Tet offensive. For a more recent version, see Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). See also, Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam a History: The First Complete Account of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984).

¹⁹⁵ Johnson was also shocked by the Tet offensive. Though he was 'more in the know' than the public, skewed reports from his military commanders and the overriding power of his own perceptions that could not allow for the possibility of Hanoi thwarting, let alone defeating, American power contrasted sharply with what looked initially like an American defeat.

¹⁹⁶ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; the First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 523.

¹⁹⁷ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; the First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 523.

Tran Do, Deputy Commander of Communist forces in South Vietnam said of the Tet offensive:

In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the south. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and that was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result.¹⁹⁸

The Politburo's own evaluation of the offensive was even more optimistic:

The protracted offensive and siege campaign...together with the simultaneous surprise attacks against the cities...threw the Americans and their puppets into a state of great confusion...The Tet General Offensive and Uprising conducted by our soldiers and civilians secured a great strategic victory...we had killed or dispersed 150,000 enemy soldiers, including 43,000 Americans...and liberated 1.4 million people. We had struck a decisive blow that bankrupted the "limited war" strategy of the American imperialists.¹⁹⁹

The Vietnam War did not end with the Tet Offensive. In fact, American and South Vietnamese forces recovered rather quickly and the North's actions were actually much more uncoordinated and haphazard than they appeared. With the exception of Hue, nearly all of the territory, cities, and advantage initially gained by Hanoi were recovered by American and South Vietnamese forces within a matter of days.²⁰⁰ A second, less dramatic offensive was launched by North Vietnam in February, and between the two campaigns, the United States lost 1,100 men, the South Vietnamese lost 2,300 troops, and it is estimated that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese suffered close to 40,000 deaths.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; the First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 523.

¹⁹⁹ Merle L. Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 223-24. The numerical claims by the Politburo included the destruction of 43 percent of the American war reserve supplies in Vietnam and the destruction of 4,200 "strategic hamlets." While their claim on casualties and actual material damage may have overreached, the net effect ultimately did lead to a serious weakening of America's war fighting ability. In the Politburo's words, they successfully "initiated the strategic decline of the American imperialists in their war of aggression against Vietnam, and created a decisive turning point in the war.

²⁰⁰ Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 193-95. U.S. and South Vietnam lost close to 500 men in the retaking of Hue and there were close to 100,000 civilian refugees as well as a massive bombing and artillery campaign. Several thousand South Vietnamese were apparently executed by the North Vietnamese forces. Hue was an exceptionally bloody and protracted battle. Nixon references the Battle of Hue in his speech following his administration's incursion into Cambodia as justification for his bold and aggressive actions.

²⁰¹ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 189-92.

From a military standpoint, the United States and South Vietnamese forces had decimated the Vietcong and had inflicted huge material and personnel losses on the North's conventional forces. Tet also exposed serious coordination and capability gaps in North Vietnamese conventional doctrine. Even with the element of surprise and an impressively sized conventional force, the North Vietnamese were readily stopped, destroyed, and rolled back. These facts, however, were lost in the din of initial reporting and perceptions and thus, ultimately, were irrelevant.

In perhaps an ironic twist to Johnson's initial subterfuge during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, where he manufactured an overestimation of the North's aggression, capability, and threat to American interests, Tet contorted the reality of American military achievements to a false perception of North Vietnamese victory. What mattered was not the reality of Tet in the military sense, but rather what the public perceived to be true. Johnson's manipulations and his struggle to control the narrative boomeranged. He had both unwittingly and purposefully created the conditions for a public opinion backlash from which neither his administration nor its policies could recover.²⁰²

Johnson's dramatic efforts to control perceptions had failed. The arc of public opinion between 1964 and 1968 demonstrates that even a President's ability to control reality is limited. Einstein said that "reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." Image theory postulates that there is always a gap between the 'world as it is' and the 'world as it is perceived.' A core tenet of this study is that perceptions, as articulated through Presidential image, influence agendas and outcomes. In order to endure, however, perceptions and the images they form must find some bedrock, either through experience or reconfirming patterns, upon which to purchase. Though images convert reality, they are not completely ethereal and therefore cannot simply be manufactured. Johnson's failed attempts to create in the minds of the North Vietnamese a certain reality was mirrored in his failure to ultimately affect and control reality for the American people.

Johnson Rides Away

²⁰² James Robbins, "Anchorman," *National Review Online* (2006), <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/218318/anchorman/james-s-robbins>. Johnson reportedly said during a staff meeting that "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." (accessed 20 March 2011).

In a national address exactly two months following the Tet Offensive, Johnson spoke on Vietnam, his policies, and revealed that he would not seek another term as President. In his opening, Johnson characterizes the importance of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia: "No other question so preoccupies our people. No other dream so absorbs the 250 million human beings who live in that part of the world. No other goal motivates American policy in Southeast Asia."²⁰³ Ironically, the war had become all encompassing. During the speech, Johnson conveyed what he believed to be critical U.S. interests in Vietnam and the signs of American success in the war, attempting to convey the *truth* of the Tet Offensive. In some ways, Johnson came clean with the public, revealing that his administration had authorized an increase to 525,000 men and that the United States would continue in its commitment to Vietnam.²⁰⁴ He also attempted to clarify U.S. intentions: "Our objective in South Vietnam has never been the annihilation of the enemy. It has been to bring about a recognition in Hanoi that its objective—taking the South by force—could not be achieved."²⁰⁵ Despite flagging U.S. policies and nearly six years of unsuccessful attempts to 'create recognition in Hanoi,' Johnson still believed that the United States could find North Vietnam's price. Johnson also resurrected the words of JFK, telling the American people that he still believed the country was willing to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, [and] oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."²⁰⁶ Yet, Johnson no longer believed that he could lead the nation in its cause:

There is a division in the American house now. There is divisiveness among us all tonight. And holding the trust that is mine, as President...I cannot disregard the peril...[w]ith America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in balance...I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day... to any personal partisan causes...Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation March 31, 1968," Public Papers of the Presidents (Government Printing Office, 1968).

²⁰⁴ Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation March 31, 1968."

²⁰⁵ Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation March 31, 1968."

²⁰⁶ Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation March 31, 1968."

²⁰⁷ Johnson, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation March 31, 1968."

Johnson's analogy of Vietnam to the Alamo was accurate, but not for the reasons he thought. His paradoxical image and the paradoxical realities of the Cold War ultimately trapped Johnson, and the foreign policy and military establishment that he led. "The Presidency," Johnson said in his memoirs, "has made every man who occupied it, no matter how small, bigger than he was; and no matter how big, not big enough for its demands."²⁰⁸ Kennedy had engendered a generation with a new vision of government and purpose. During his short time as President, Kennedy drew a swath of American commitments and planted his country's standard along the new frontiers of freedom—recasting the demarcation lines between the United States, its allies, and everyone else. But the lines were blurry. Kennedy left Vietnam as an outpost along an ill-defined frontier and Johnson believed he could not only better define that frontier, but expand it.

Driven by his deep-seated Presidential image and his desire to validate that image, Johnson took to forging and manning the new outposts of freedom and to fulfilling the visions of his predecessor as well as his own. Johnson believed that he could hammer out a reality of his choosing. If Kennedy rode the wave of a new generation and in his noble cause overreached in the expectations of what the American Government could do, Johnson arrived as if he were leading a posse mounted atop the most powerful nation in the world. Convinced of the efficacy of his iron will that had been proved out during so many years in Congress and as Vice President, and that was seeded and fortified in his rise from an impoverished background all the way to the Presidency, Johnson overreached in his belief as to what one man could do. Vietnam was subsumed by this belief and suffered the consequences. The arc of the Vietnam War and of the country between 1963 and 1969 is very much the arc of the man who was president. Johnson took up an inheritance that was stark with wars, poverty, and strife, yet colorful and rich in possibilities. Johnson and the nation were buoyed as if they were in fact on a crest of a wave in 1963. Despite Kennedy's tragic death, he had left Johnson and the country invigorated and determined to meet and rise above the challenges not just of that age, but of all ages. Racism, ignorance, hatred, poverty. These remained Johnson's targets and were for him even more the root cause of Communism than they were for Kennedy.

²⁰⁸ Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*.

But in his fervor, in his absolute dedication to slay the demons of the human condition and uproot the fodder upon which the armies of Communism fed, he sacrificed the masonry stone upon which healthy democracies are built—truth. His own predilections left him vulnerable to obscured representations of the Vietnam War. Additionally, he toiled endlessly to shape the reality surrounding Vietnam and misled the public from the Gulf of Tonkin through the Tet offensive. He even loosed on journalists the mechanisms of their own government, inciting the CIA and FBI in an effort to discredit and destroy the messengers after he had lost control of the message. His effort, and its ultimate failure, destroyed him; and in his fall, so too fell much of what Americans had clung to at the start of the decade. Despite the passage of so much critical and successful legislation (Medicare, Civil Right Act, etc), race riots and student protests erupted. In 1968, America was on fire and the streets echoed the cries of the marching disenchanted. The Democratic convention erupted in violence. Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were shot dead. The veneer of victory in Vietnam that Johnson had so achingly struggled to maintain for over five years was ripped away as images poured across television screens. It wasn't just that it appeared as if America was losing, but the television showed war. Real war. Not the academic theories or no-impact, limited war notions or abstract rallying calls but the full color of blood and death. That the costs can remain hidden on paper according to Osgood's theories may be true, but that does not mean that the costs of war were not there. Vietnam in 1968 demonstrated graphically that America was in fact in a war—and she was neither invincible in that war nor above incurring the costs for waging it.

The frontier Johnson sought to conquer was wicked. Johnson's frontier was more than the international and domestic battle lines and stretched beyond the existential world of body counts, bombs, and dollars. What Johnson most needed to conquer was the territory of perception, both in the minds of his adversaries and of the nation that he led. Controlling perceptions, however, and the reconciliation he sought by doing so ultimately proved a bridge too far—perhaps demonstrating that the human mind is the most wicked frontier of all. Lady Bird described Johnson's torture and, in perhaps one of

the wisest assessments of America's Vietnam War, said that the real lesson was to not ever take on "somebody else's insoluble burdens."²⁰⁹

What were ultimately martyred in Johnson's Alamo, then, were not only his Presidency, but also his image-driven agendas and the distinctly American myths from which they were derived. Johnson embarked at the start of his Presidency flanked by a posse of American ideals and myths. In the course of his wars, he added to that posse the misrepresentations and lies that ultimately, like mercenaries swayed by a higher bidder, turned on him. Gunned down, or at least held at gunpoint by the end of his term was the notion that a country, embodied in the virtuous ideals of one man, could accomplish whatever it set out to do. The faith and promise that had started the decade looking to the stars had fallen like crushed adobe to the dirtied floors of a White House collapsed under the weight of its own lies and its own myths. In sharp contrast to the archetypal heroes of the American West, it was not the pleas for Johnson's return that reverberated across the hill-tops as he rode away. Rather, what followed Johnson into the sunset was a cascade of accusations and questions—not the least of which was the question of 'who the real enemy was,' and if in fact the enemy had not been shadowing the jungles of Vietnam, but instead been in the White House the whole time. It is left to Johnson's successor not only redefine the terrain of America's frontier, but also the country's purpose there and the nature of her enemies.

²⁰⁹ Wheel, "Into Vietnam." Minute 3.

Chapter 4

From San Clemente to Saigon: Nixon's Five O' Clock Shadow

We will not make the same old mistakes, we will make our own.

-- Henry Kissinger, 1969

The China initiative also restored perspective to our national policy.

It reduced Indochina to its proper scale—a small peninsula on a major continent.

-- Henry Kissinger

We're playing a much bigger game—we're playing a Russia game, a China game, and an election game, and we're not gonna have [South Vietnam] collapse.

-- Richard Nixon, 1972

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow...

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang, but a whimper

-- T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 1925

A "Winning Image:" Beards, Boy Scouts, and the Ugly King

In 1960, John F. Kennedy challenged Richard M. Nixon to a series of televised debates. Nixon accepted eagerly, and was confident that he could school the relatively inexperienced Senator from Massachusetts. After all, Nixon had been a House member, a Senator, and a Vice President who not only ran the country while Eisenhower was ill, but who had also accumulated a long record both domestically and internationally.¹

Nixon was one of the most visible and active Vice Presidents, often serving as Eisenhower's attack dog, and he was famous for his strong stance against communism. Comparatively, Kennedy seemed a squire taking on a seasoned statesman. On the radio, the outcome was very much as Nixon had predicted. The majority of listeners overwhelmingly judged the Vice President victorious. The debates however also drew the largest television audience in U.S. history, and the camera judged Nixon harshly.

¹ During a trip to Russia, for instance, Nixon had confronted Khrushchev in an impromptu televised debate.

Against the advice of his staff, Nixon refused make-up, and his seemingly permanent five o'clock shadow was even more pronounced and contrasted sharply with his pallid skin.² During the debate, pools of sweat were readily visible on Nixon's chin, almost as if he were drooling, and his narrow eyes and stubborn beard created an image that was at once shadowy and sallow. Kennedy, on the other hand, resembled a 'Bronzed Warrior,' looking young, relaxed, athletic, and well tanned. The disparate images of the two men readily overshadowed the difference and merit of their arguments, and the television audience sided decisively with the young Senator.

Kennedy had charmed both the press and the public while Nixon's countenance proved a liability. Consistent with his political history, Nixon waged a vigorous campaign, attacking Kennedy for his youth and pointing out that the White House could not be a "training ground."³ Nixon ultimately lost by little more than 100,000 votes. Despite the closeness of the election, and some questions that arose concerning vote counting in Chicago and Texas, Nixon publicly conceded and did not officially protest the results.⁴ Not only did the 1960 televised debates forever change how candidates campaigned and the way Americans voted, with television replacing the old-fashioned hand-shaking and convention format, but Nixon staffer and biographer Roger Morris observes that Nixon was permanently scarred by the experience: Nixon concluded that he would "never again be caught short...or let his opponents outdo him, or trust the system to work the way it's supposed to."⁵

Following his failed presidential campaign, Nixon returned to his home state of California and ran for Governor in 1962, where he was soundly defeated by Democratic incumbent Jerry Brown. During the press conference after the election, Nixon's bitterness and frustration were apparent. The defeated candidate marched out on stage and lambasted the press corps, essentially blaming them for his loss: "You've had a lot of fun...you've had an opportunity to attack me... [but] you won't have Nixon to kick

² David Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon," in *The American Experience*, ed. David Espar (USA: PBS, 1990). Minute 42-45. Nixon's television adviser had tried to tell the Vice President that his skin had a "translucent quality" but Nixon was adamantly against wearing make-up.

³ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Quoted from a Nixon 1968 campaign speech.

⁴ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon."

⁵ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 44.

around anymore.”⁶ The general consensus was that Nixon’s political career was over. He took a job as a Wall Street lawyer and announced publicly that he would not run in the 1964 Presidential election.⁷ Private life proved difficult for the life-long politician, however, and it wasn’t long before he emerged from shadowy obscurity. Within six months of his failed run for Governor, Nixon appeared on the Jack Parr show, playing piano, poking fun at himself, and came across as a much softer, friendlier, and humble man. Though he did not run for President in 1964, he did storm the country in support of the Republican Party, visiting 35 states and stumping for 135 candidates—playing a key part in the Republican Congressional comeback in 1966. No longer in the spotlight, Nixon worked from behind the scenes, and there was “hardly a Republican that [didn’t] owe him a favor.”⁸

He won the Republican nomination for President in 1968 as the *New Nixon*, and cashed in not only the political capital he had built during the intervening years within the Republican Party, but also pivoted on a well cultivated image.⁹ The *New Nixon* was part of an evolving mythology he was continually trying to build.¹⁰ In 1967, he launched an extensive tour of four continents, building his stature as an international statesman. John Ehrlichman observes that Nixon had a “core fire” to be President and believed his unique vision and leadership should guide the country.¹¹ Part of that vision is revealed in Nixon’s 1967 article, “Asia After Viet Nam.”¹² Published in *Foreign Affairs*, the article presents a very well reasoned, stately argument that acknowledges America’s war weariness, yet cautions against both isolationism and belligerence.¹³ Through the article,

⁶ Quoted from a November 7, 1962 speech as portrayed on “The American Experience.”

⁷ Nixon made clear he had no intention of running in 1964 prior to his run for Governor of California. He again declared he had no intention of running after Kennedy was assassinated. He believed that Kennedy would easily hold the White House for eight years and after JFK was assassinated, Nixon also believed that the mood of the country was such that Johnson would easily win re-election.

⁸ Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.”

⁹ Multiple press releases, biographies, and scholarly works use the term *New Nixon* to describe him at multiple points in his political career.

¹⁰ The Nixon Mythology, or the “Nixon Myth,” is explained throughout this chapter. Summarized, it consists of a blended storyline that marries Romantic American and Classic European motifs, but that also infuses the heroic archetypes with distinctive ‘leadership’ values that derive from Nixon’s own perception of what makes leaders great. Nixon romanticized his heritage and deemed himself as possessing the same qualities that distinguished men like Winston Churchill, Charles De Gaulle, and Joseph Stalin.

¹¹ Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.”

¹² Richard Nixon, “Asia after Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs* XLVI, (October, 1967).

¹³ Nixon, “Asia after Vietnam.” 123-124. Nixon urges “containment without isolation” with regard to China and states that “there is no room for heavy-handed American pressures,” in Asia’s future. Nixon

Nixon recasts himself, and at the same time gives a prelude to his vision for recasting Vietnam and the Cold War. America's want for answers and solutions provided fertile soil for the New Nixon and his vision.

Not everyone bought into it, however. Democratic Presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey scathingly criticized the notion of a reformed Nixon. During a campaign speech, Humphrey reminded everyone that Nixon had undergone numerous "renovations," and claimed that the Republican candidate had had his "political face lifted so many times" that there couldn't possibly be anything new.¹⁴ Critics were vehemently skeptical, and Nixon's shadowy side was not so easily painted over. Many still recalled the financing scandal of 1952 and sentiments had not ranged far from Adlai Stevenson's comments during the Presidential campaign of 1956.¹⁵ After Eisenhower's heart trouble, Stevenson warned the American people that voting for the Republicans would literally put Nixon within a heartbeat of the Presidency: "Every piece of scientific evidence we have," Stevenson said "indicates that a Republican victory tomorrow" means that Nixon will be president within four years "and I recoil as a citizen" to think of Nixon as custodian of America with his hands on the hydrogen bomb.¹⁶

Nixon's reemergence in 1968 was a continuation of his ongoing and deliberate effort to subdue the darker angels of his image and to cultivate the mystique that would win him the presidency. He had a keen, even romanticized attachment to his roots and blended both European and American motifs in his attempt to create a Nixon mythology.¹⁷ Born in 1913 in Yorba Linda California, Richard Milhous Nixon was

illuminates the 'failed' policies in Vietnam as well as the cold realities of a surging Russian and China, but does so in a very tempered manner, thereby promoting himself as a 'middle of the road' realist with vision and answers.

¹⁴ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 63-64. Humphrey referenced Nixon's political campaigns for the House and Senate as well as his makeovers during the 1952 and 1960 elections. Humphrey also reminded everyone that Nixon had reinvented himself in 1962 and 1964.

¹⁵ After being selected as Vice President, accusations arose that Nixon had received illegal contributions from a group of wealthy businessmen. Though the allegations ultimately proved false, the scandal threatened Nixon remaining on Eisenhower's ticket. In response, Nixon conducted a television address that was the first of its kind—bypassing the press and going direct to the American people. In what was later named the "Checkers Speech," Nixon appealed to the public and insisted on his innocence. Nixon portrayed himself as a 'regular Joe.' Nixon made several references to his dog "Checkers" which is how the speech was later named. Critics viewed Nixon as extremely manipulative.

¹⁶ Recording of televised address by Adlai Stevens, "The American Experience," Minute 42.

¹⁷ Here we borrow from Jeffrey Kimball's discussion of the role of mythology in Nixon's political career. See Kimball, Nixon's Vietnam War, 1-15.

named for the twelfth century English monarch, Richard “the Lion-Hearted.”¹⁸ The Nixon family Coat of Arms is emblazoned with the phrase “Toujours Prêt,” which translates as “always prepared.”¹⁹ Nixon took this sentiment to heart, and the words are not that different from the Boy Scout’s motto of *Be Prepared*. Not many people, either in Nixon’s time or in our own, would envision Nixon as a Boy Scout. His Quaker roots, however, and his self-espoused virtues created, in his own mind at least, a puritanical self-image and a moral-separateness. All of these variables fed the “Nixon Mythology,” and gelled with Nixon’s belief that he was experienced, selfless, disciplined, hard-working, possessed of moral courage, confident, cool headed, and dedicated to a great cause.²⁰ Unlike his two predecessors, he did not enjoy extra-marital affairs and often openly disapproved of Henry Kissinger’s trysts and reputation as a *playboy*.²¹

Nixon’s romanticized image of his modest roots, his moral superiority, and his namesake had him believing he was a “brave warrior-champion, wielding the ax of righteousness.”²² In the eighth grade, he wrote that he wanted to pursue a career in politics and law because he “believed he could do some good.”²³ Nixon was born for a cause and “cast himself as a self-made man, a resilient fighter, and a nationalist champion.”²⁴ Henry Kissinger added to Nixon’s repertoire, and while the two men could not have been more different, they also reinforced each other’s mythologies and in aggregate formed Nixon’s Presidential image. During an interview, Kissinger stated:

I’ve always acted alone...Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse, the cowboy who rides all alone into the town, the village, with his horse and nothing else...He acts, that’s all, by being in the right place at the right time... In a sense...I’m a fatalist. I believe in destiny. I’m convinced of course, that you have to fight to reach a goal...I believe more in

¹⁸ Roger Morris, *Richard Milhous Nixon: The Rise of an American Politician*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Holt, 1990), 41.

¹⁹ Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 7.

²⁰ Richard M. Nixon, *Leaders* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1982), 1-6. In the first chapter, Nixon describes “Leaders who changed the world,” and lists many of these qualities. Nixon was adamant over the differences between “management and leadership,” and felt that all great leaders who “changed the world” had overlapping characteristics. See also, Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 5-6.

²¹ Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*. In several instances Haldeman notes Nixon’s disapproval of Kissinger’s more relaxed morals.

²² Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 7.

²³ Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.” Minute 8-9

²⁴ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* 6-7.

human relations than ideas. I use ideas but I need human relations.²⁵ Nixon thought of himself as one of what he would later describe as “the forgotten Americans of the silent majority,” and exalted himself as their voice, their champion, their lead cowboy.²⁶

The President also pushed his staff to further develop his mystique and to draw upon European and American mythology so as to create the Nixon myth. Jeffrey Kimball surmised that Nixon believed that leadership pivoted more on *how* a President is perceived to do things than *what* he actually does.²⁷ Nixon was a man who believed in myth and who was obsessed with the creation of his own:

One reason why it is frequently so difficult to sort out myth from reality in reading about political leaders is that part of political leadership is the creation of myths...The politician, no less than the actor or filmmaker, knows that to bore his audience is to lose his audience...[They] must appeal to the heart...We cannot find the stuff of leadership in the dry pages of history...we have to look to the spirit of the man...We must also look to legends. Legends are often an artful intertwining of fact and myth, designed to beguile, to impress, to inspire, or sometimes simply to attract attention. But legend is an essential ingredient of leadership.²⁸

Nixon believed he was a unique leader who could blend the European hero with the American cowboy and infuse them with his own “Nixonness.” He tenaciously prepared for politics from a very early age and never stopped conjuring his image.²⁹ In 1968,

²⁵ Quoted in Oriana Fallaci, “Henry Kissinger,” *Interview with History* (New York, NY: Liveright, 1976), 29, 41-42. Kissinger and Nixon have been dubbed by some historians as ‘Nixinger’ and while the two came from disparate backgrounds and couldn’t have been more different in many ways, they also shared core images of the world. Gerald Astor notes that Kissinger “admired Austria-Hungary’s Crown Prince Metternich” and the success the Prince had at bringing nearly “fifty years of peace to Europe [through] balance of power negotiations.” Astor also notes that Kissinger was apparently undisturbed by the Prince’s arrangement, which “oppressed millions and sowed the seeds of World War I.” Nixon also looked outward to the broader international stage, and was very much aligned with Machiavelli’s notion that fear and hate were much more useful to leaders than love. Whatever the disparity between the two leaders, the myths and images of Nixon and Kissinger intertwined to form Nixon’s Presidential image.

²⁶ Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.” Minute 3-7, Minute 10.

²⁷ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 1. According to Kimball, Nixon said “What an individual does is irrelevant to his ability to lead; the whole point is how he does it.”

²⁸ Richard Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 329-30.

²⁹ Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.” Nixon’s cousin recalled the President as a boy standing on a stump and ‘campaigning’ for different policies and presidents. Haldeman’s diaries and numerous biographers also recount Nixon’s obsession with perceptions and his calculations for developing his mystique. Kimball also observes that Nixon was “remembered as a perpetual office seeker who was sanctimonious in references to his own behavior but ruthless in his attack on others. See Kimball, 4.

Nixon campaigned as the architect of a new world order and as the peace maker. The grave challenges of the Cold War and Vietnam demanded new leadership: “We live in an age in which individual reaction to crisis may bear on the fate of mankind for centuries to come.”³⁰ Many saw his ‘new brand of leadership,’ however, as just another hue of an amorphous politician famous for shape-shifting.

John Ehrlichman said of Nixon that “we all knew him differently,” and that even Nixon’s wife could not have “told you who the real Richard Nixon was.”³¹ Nixon biographer Ralph De Toledano described Nixon as a man “with no set ideology” and historian Gary Wills characterized him as the “plastic man.”³² Nixon’s many layers reflected a penchant for political expediency, and critics wondered if in fact there was anything solid at his core. In his memoirs, Nixon reveals at least one enduring element of his views on foreign policy:

As I looked at America’s position in the world and examined our relations with other nations, I could see that the central factor in 1968 on the eve of my presidency was the same as it had been in 1947...America now, as then, was the main defender of the free world against the encroachment and aggression of the Communist world. For twenty-five years, I had watched the changing face of communism...Never once in my career have I doubted that the Communists mean it when they say that their goal is to bring the world under Communist control...But unlike some anticommunists... I have always believed that we can and must communicate and...negotiate...They are too powerful to ignore.³³

Throughout his many facelifts, Nixon never strayed far from this philosophy, which was fundamentally little different from what Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson believed. What differentiated Nixon were not so much the ends, but rather the means he believed necessary to achieve them. From his perspective, not only had American foreign policy been “held hostage” by the unsophisticated meanderings of both Johnson and Kennedy, but his Democratic predecessors had misused and piddled away American power.³⁴ The

³⁰ As quoted by Kimball in *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 6.

³¹ Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.”

³² Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.” Minute 30. Also, Kimball quotes Wills from *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 540. See Kimball, 32.

³³ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1978), 425-26.

³⁴ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. 424. In *No More Vietnams*, Nixon also lamented that “Never in history has so much power been used so ineffectively as in the war in Vietnam.” See, Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 44-45.

right leader could effectively apply American power against North Vietnam while at the same time reorienting larger Cold War interests. To Nixon's thinking, his predecessors lacked the sophistication to keep more than one or two balls in the air at a time, and subsequently Vietnam had wrongly been allowed to bind U.S. foreign policy.

Nixon promised a way to free South Vietnam from the Communist threat in a way that would also free the United States from its war there. Furthermore, he suggested that he could do all of this while transforming Cold War relationships between the great powers and overcoming the inertia of stagnating American power. Though perhaps politically expedient, the promise had great appeal to the American people, and Nixon banked on his new mystique and the promises that came with it as a way to win the presidency. Once in office, he would invoke his own myth as a way to win in Vietnam and to reshape the Cold War. For Nixon, presidential power derived from the mythology surrounding the man who held the office. To that end, he wanted to differentiate himself from Kennedy, "who did nothing but appeared great," and from Johnson, who "did everything but appeared terrible."³⁵

There were many shades to Nixon, and his makeover in 1968 could not long subdue the prickly stubble of his personality, nor did any amount of makeup long hide his absolute commitment to victory. Nixon wanted into the arena and believed that once he was there, he could redirect his own destiny and that of his country towards hitherto unseen levels of greatness. One of his favorite movies that he watched repeatedly in the White House was *Patton*. In the opening scene, George C. Scott stands in front of an American flag and rallies his troops with his philosophy on victory: "Americans love a winner...the very thought of losing is hateful to America."³⁶ This sentiment perhaps forms the core that so many looked for in Nixon. It wasn't just about gaining power and keeping it, but about winning the judgment of history. After his final speech as President, Henry Kissinger told Nixon that he would be judged as one of the nation's greatest presidents, to which he responded, "That depends, Henry, on who writes the History."³⁷ William Costello points out that "Nixon's family name is a mutation of the Gaelic words

³⁵ Nixon as quoted by Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 1.

³⁶ Franklin J. Schaffner, "Patton," (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1970).

³⁷ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 1083-1084.

meaning *he faileth not*.”³⁸ Even after his resignation and after the collapse of South Vietnam, Nixon persisted in conveying his victory and his history, and never fully accepted his part in either the failings of his policies or of his Presidency.

The mythology he cultivated served his commitment to winning. He believed his mystique would help him win the power of the presidency, win in Vietnam, allow him to restructure great power politics, win peace abroad and at home, and a heroic ruling from history. Such grand victories, however, required more than fables, and Nixon prepared for and exercised his power both brilliantly and ruthlessly. With Henry Kissinger at his side, Nixon “organized government to concentrate power...in the White House,” and purposely appointed “weak” individuals at the Departments of State and Defense.³⁹ There was no doubt that America’s foreign policy would be Richard Nixon’s foreign policy, and it was not without great achievements. He was the first American President since the start of the Cold War to set foot in the Kremlin. America’s relationship with China was re-framed, and Nixon secured the first-ever arms control summit with Moscow. And, America’s direct involvement in Vietnam did end. Still, despite these accomplishments, for all the promises of peace, virtue, and leadership, and no matter how much such promises satiated public appetites for resolution and reconciliation, Nixon’s game shocked the polity and the public. The hero of America’s forgotten did not whittle peace from a soap box. This Boy Scout had a beard. He was the consummate Cold Warrior and a wizard of realpolitik who had crossed and re-crossed the River Styx only to return again in yet another political resurrection as President. Nixon was elected on a platform to end the war and unify the country. Only when he started hammering out his peace, it was not a Quaker or Knight or even a Statesman the nation saw, but rather the machinations of an ugly king looking to win. The hour of the Vietnam War had grown late. The decade waned. America now turned under the five o’clock shadow.

The following sections examine how Nixon sought to reframe himself and the Vietnam War and we analyze the role his mythology played in shaping agendas and outcomes. Did the New Nixon effectively shave off the old, and was he truly a

³⁸ William Costello, *The Facts About Nixon: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1960), 17.

³⁹ Roger Morris, during an interview on “The American Experience,” Minute 74. See also, Stephen Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 88-92, 340-342.

peacemaker? If so, what kind of peace did he make and at what cost? America's ground war officially ends in 1973, Nixon resigns in 1974, and Saigon falls in 1975. Was this a decent interval? An honorable peace? A necessary iteration in a larger game? Or something else? Finally, what does the war's ending tell us of its beginning and what might this reveal about inherited war?

A New Myth for an Old War

Nixon was once asked, "How is it that you can deal with evil forces, an evil empire, like the Soviet Union?" To which the President responded, "Because I'm evil." Nixon also later stated that, "You've got to be a little evil to understand the people out there. You have to have known the dark side of life."⁴⁰ The above is not meant to imply that Nixon was wholly sinister, but rather that he was very much aware of his dark side and of the utility of that dark side. He believed it gave him insight and could serve certain ends. When it came to Vietnam and Russia, for example, Nixon very deliberately pivoted on perceptions of his 'irrationality' and even 'madness' to coerce his adversaries. He was also aware that the more shadowy aspects of his character could be a liability, especially under public lighting. So Nixon often struggled to balance the various aspects of his nature, promoting or subduing each in accordance with his purpose. The darker shades often cropped up, however, even when he was ostensibly engaged in a noble cause.

Nixon rose to notoriety as a Congressman during the Alger Hiss hearings in 1948.⁴¹ Nixon was only a junior member of the *Un-American Activities Committee*, but his doggedness ultimately resulted in Hiss' conviction. The high drama of the hearings offered Nixon a stage to go after Truman, the Democrats, and the Communists. Whether he was motivated more by his conviction that Hiss was actually a Communist or by

⁴⁰ Hugh Sidey, "The Man and Foreign Policy," in *The Nixon Presidency: Twenty-Two Intimate Perspectives of Richard M. Nixon*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: University Press of America, 1987), 4, 312. The entire opening exchange in this paragraph is taken from Sidey's section in the volume edited by Thompson. Numerous biographers also observe several instances where Nixon recalled his time in school and characterized himself as very consciously trying to 'appear good,' even though he knew he wasn't wholly so. He knew he was no angel, but what mattered was that his teachers thought he was.

⁴¹ Nixon was the junior member on the House Committee of Un-American Activities. Initial evidence against Hiss, who had served Roosevelt as an attorney, was shaky. Testimony by Whittaker Chambers indicated that Hiss had been involved in espionage. Unwilling to let the case go, Nixon risked his reputation and put himself in the spotlight and pushed the investigation. Ultimately, Hiss was convicted after sensitive material was found hidden in a pumpkin in Hiss' garden. The discovery of the "Pumpkin Papers," as they came to be known, cast Nixon as an 'iconic Communist hunter.'

political opportunity is debatable. Those around him at the time, however, observed that the trial became personal for Nixon, and he came to see it as a competition.⁴² Nixon's run for the House of Representatives in 1946 was also shaped by a crusade against Communists. He ran as the champion of the forgotten man, and painted his Democratic opponent Jerry Voorhis as a *New Dealer*, actually passing out flyers identifying Voorhis as an ex-Socialist and Communist sympathizer.⁴³ Nixon later said of the campaign, "I had to win. Of course I knew Voorhis wasn't a Communist."⁴⁴

Nixon's reputation emerged as a ruthless campaigner and staunch anti-Communist. Helen Douglas, his Democratic opponent for Senate in 1950, gave him the moniker 'Tricky Dick,' after he smeared her as a Communist and New Dealer.⁴⁵ Nixon's ruthlessness left waves of bitterness in his wake. "People react to fear not love," he once told Haldeman, "they don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true."⁴⁶ He didn't just defeat opponents; he "destroyed them."⁴⁷ Part of Nixon delighted in the angst he caused. His well-crafted television address after the 1952 slush-fund scandal purposefully mirrored Roosevelt's fireside chat, and Nixon's use of his dog Checkers and allusions to his wife's 'cloth coat' rankled Democrats and "delighted his friends."⁴⁸ Following the speech, there was still some question as to whether or not Eisenhower would keep Nixon on his ticket. During a conversation, Nixon told Eisenhower, "General, there comes a time, even in your life, when you have to shit or get off the pot."⁴⁹ Nixon's audacity was neither rank nor party-sensitive.

Given his political roots, and his very often cantankerous public displays and ruthlessness, it is understandable why so many doubted the new, softer, middle-of-the

⁴² Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 19-21.

⁴³ Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2007), 81-84. Nixon passed out flyers titled "Facts About Jerry Voorhis," and during the campaign maligned his opponents voting record as both ineffective and supportive of Russia.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Espar, "The American Experience," Minute 18.

⁴⁵ Nixon was even more ruthless in his campaign against Douglas. The 1950 Senate Campaign between Douglas and Nixon is ranked 7th in Kerwn C. Swint's top 25 dirtiest political campaigns of all time. For fuller detail on the campaign, see Mitchell, Greg, *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady: Richard Nixon vs. Helen Gahagon Douglas—Sexual Politics and the Red Scare*, 1950 (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁴⁶ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon."

⁴⁷ Roger Morris, during an interview on "The American Experience," Minute 28.

⁴⁸ The Truman administration was undergoing criticism at the time for the first-lady's mink coat and Nixon purposefully chose the format and subject matter to 'stick it in the eye' of the Democrats. See, Espar "The American Experience," Minute 38.

⁴⁹ Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2007), 241.

road Nixon that hit the campaign trail in 1968. But the country was hungry for leadership. The polity was triangulated by the context of Vietnam, Johnson's withdrawal from the Presidential race, and the sense that America was spiraling out of control domestically. Nixon's resurgence towards the nation's highest office was facilitated by the breach in the political lines that these three factors created. Remove any single factor, and arguably there is no new Nixon, no Kissinger, and no Woodward and Bernstein. But the reality was that those breaches existed. The great man, "acts," and does so by "being in the right place at the right time," and Nixon once again positioned himself for a rendezvous with destiny.⁵⁰ Having seized both opportunity and circumstance, Nixon's successful run at the presidency mirrored his attempts to triangulate American foreign policy. His image lathered, Nixon turned to the Vietnam War.

For the new president, the war in Vietnam was both old and new. As a Congressman and as Vice President, Nixon had journeyed "the labyrinth of Indochina" and had formed distinct impressions concerning the conflicts there.⁵¹ Nor had he remained quiet during the intervening years. Nixon harried Johnson and the Democrats. A series of press releases and newspaper clippings between 1965 and 1967 capture Nixon condemning the infighting within the Democratic Party, saying that the "behavior of a small segment of our population" was costing the United States the war.⁵² What made Vietnam 'new,' was the fact that Nixon would now hold the reigns. He simultaneously reframed himself and the war; attempting to "straddle the political center of foreign-policy issues" with an implied "secret plan to achieve peace with honor."⁵³ Just as his conjuring for the new Nixon started well before he took office, so too did his preparations on Vietnam.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Oriana Fallaci, "Henry Kissinger," *Interview with History* (New York, NY: Liveright, 1976), 29, 41-42.

⁵¹ Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* 16.

⁵² Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* 30-31. In 1967, Nixon commented that "It is essential, that the enemy be convinced that he cannot win the war militarily, that he cannot win it through a change in public opinion in the United State." Nixon asserted that the war could be won by uniting world opinion behind a united United States.

⁵³ Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 10.

Nixon had prepared his own version of containment and ushered in the era of détente.⁵⁴ Henry Kissinger described the Nixon Administration's "bigger-game," détente strategy as an approach that sought the flexibility of the Kennedy-Johnson era, yet with the cohesiveness and long-range view of the Eisenhower administration.⁵⁵ Kissinger believed that there was a need for a "philosophical deepening" in U.S. policy, and that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had lacked an adequate "conception" of the world.⁵⁶ The confrontations between the United States and the Soviet-Communist world had obscured larger U.S. interests and goals, and Vietnam had to be re-understood as "a small peninsula on a major continent."⁵⁷ In his 1967 Foreign Affairs article, Nixon called for a new relationship with China.⁵⁸ Détente still had as its core objective the containment of Communism. What delineated Nixon's strategy from those of his predecessors, however, was a re-caging of interests and threats in the broader context of great-power politics. For Nixon, it was no longer necessary for the United States to bear sole responsibility for international security. In fact, Nixon and Kissinger both felt that basing American policy on the belief that the United States could transform international society to match its own image was both an illusion and dangerous.

The United States had limits, Kissinger argued, and over-investment in trying to 'win' the bi-polar competition between America and the Soviet Union wasted resources and misread the 'reality' of international life.⁵⁹ From the perspective of the Nixon administration, the world was multi-polar and the primary interest of the United States

⁵⁴ As introduced in Chapter 1, détente translates from French to mean "calm, relaxation, easing, but it can also mean the trigger of a gun." In Russian, the closest term to détente is razriadka, "which means 'lessening,' or 'reduction and relaxation.'" Razriadka can also mean "discharging" or "unloading." Détente implies a releasing of tension. The 'trigger' that was to release tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States under Nixon was a shift away from policies of 'absolute security' towards policies that promoted 'relative security.' Kissinger wrote in 1957 that absolute security was not possible, because for one state to be "totally satisfied" all other states had to be "totally dissatisfied." Therefore, Nixon's containment strategy incorporated a shared "relative insecurity" between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. See Kissinger, Henry A., *A World Restored* (New York, NY: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1957).

⁵⁵ Henry Kissinger and Clare Boothe Luce, *White House Years*, 1st ed. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 40-44.

⁵⁶ Kissinger and Luce, *White House Years*, 11, 39-43.

⁵⁷ Kissinger and Luce, *White House Years*, 1049.

⁵⁸ Nixon, "Asia after Vietnam," 121-23.

⁵⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 278-89.

was international stability, which relied not on ideological cohesion between countries, but rather on the behaviors of all countries. Nixon believed that simply drawing policy lines in accordance with ideological lines falsely and counterproductively parceled policy in a way that ran counter to U.S. interests. “The world had changed,” Nixon told the Chinese President in 1972, and the United States was breaking “with the old pattern,” and would “look at each country in terms of its own conduct rather than lumping them all together” based on a particular philosophy.⁶⁰ Eisenhower had sought asymmetric superiority through technology. Kennedy and Johnson had pursued symmetrical superiority on all fronts so as to not only beat the Soviets in total war, but also to outmaneuver them in guerilla war, economics, prestige, and conventional war. Nixon’s policy shifted containment strategy from the pursuit of superiority to one of *sufficiency* that would allow for acceptable differences between the United States and its rivals.⁶¹ The primary interest of the United States was stability, which was not possible without the contributions of the Soviet Union and China.⁶²

Détente redefined U.S. interests and threats, placing both in a wider context. The key to affecting Soviet behavior, the Nixon administration believed, was to understand the “ambiguous tendencies” of Moscow that could produce both harmful and helpful outcomes.⁶³ Instead of using Vietnam to push the Soviets and Chinese through competition, Vietnam could be used to draw the Soviets and Chinese in. U.S. policy had to balance the need for competition with the need for cooperation. Kissinger argued that policies in Vietnam had invigorated a military competition with the Soviets, and that efforts to achieve superiority over the Soviets only made them less likely to negotiate.⁶⁴ Instead of pursuing policies that forced Moscow’s undesirable tendencies, détente

⁶⁰ Nixon, as quoted by Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 282.

⁶¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 280-84.

⁶² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 280. See Annual foreign policy report, February 9, 1972, Nixon Presidential Papers: 1972, 204-5.

⁶³ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 288.

⁶⁴ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 288.

required engagement with the Soviets on “substantive issues.”⁶⁵ Though the Kennedy Administration had at least been aware of the possibility to more closely tie Vietnam to US-Soviet and US-China relations, it was under Nixon that triangular diplomacy emerged.⁶⁶

For détente to be successful and so as to effectively reframe Vietnam and the Cold War, Nixon worked his policies before even taking office. Prior to Nixon’s inauguration, Kissinger commissioned a RAND study, the results of which were made available in December of 1968.⁶⁷ The RAND study proved an influential tool and framed the context for Nixon’s initial agenda in Vietnam. The timing of the study also reflects that Nixon was proactive and not about to settle for the kind of simple hand-off that Kennedy had received from Eisenhower on Indochina in 1960.⁶⁸ Whatever conclusions might be drawn with regard to Nixon’s meddling in policy issues prior to him taking office, there is merit in his attempts to understand the problems he would face as President. The RAND study defined U.S. victory as “the destruction, withdrawal, or dissolution of all (or most) VC forces and apparatus, the permanent cessation of infiltration, and the

⁶⁵Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 287.

⁶⁶ “Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961-1963,” BACM Research Edition, 170. An internal memo from 1963 discusses the possibility of a diplomatic “triple-play,” that would get the Russians out of Cuba and the United States out of Vietnam by using the French as intermediaries in Vietnam. Kennedy was looking for a policy that could exploit the convergence of US-Russian and French interests. Nixon was much more successful at finding the nexus of great power interests and through secret negotiations and maneuvering, leveraged Soviet interests against outcomes in Vietnam. The term “triangular diplomacy” reflects the way with which Nixon maneuvered these negotiations. Nixon’s diplomacy will be covered in more detail in Chapter 4 of this essay. For more reading on US-Soviet Relations during the Nixon administration and on triangular diplomacy, see Dobrynin, Anatoly, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents* (Seattle, WA: First University of Washington Press, 2001), 191-315; Randolph, Stephen, *Powerful And Brutal Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Kimball, Jeffrey, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Wichita, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁶⁷ Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*, 48. Kimball’s book “plumbs...millions of documents” and source materials related to Nixon’s Vietnam policies. For the purposes of our study, we draw on the source materials compiled by Kimball. Unless otherwise noted, the memorandums, speeches, policy documents, transcripts, and archival material quoted in this chapter are drawn from Kimball’s compilations and we treat the sources as primary. Kimball’s work is well known and this particular volume provides an excellent and admittedly much more accessible resource for accessing the primary policy materials. If Kimball’s narrative or editorializing is used, it will be footnoted as such. Otherwise, quotations and citations are directly from the source material as re-printed in Kimball’s work. Citations will provide the title of the document, followed by Kimball’s assigned document number, followed by the page number where the document appears in Kimball’s collective volume.

⁶⁸ The handoff between Eisenhower and Kennedy on Vietnam is discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. See also, Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDemark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 35-37.

virtually unchallenged sovereignty of a stable, noncommunist regime..., with no significant Communist political role except on an individual, 'reconciled' basis."⁶⁹

Victory, then, was thus defined little differently by Nixon's administration than by those of Kennedy or Johnson. What were different were the means and assessments of exactly how the United States might achieve these ends.

In an attempt to delineate not only objectives but also the means required, the RAND study posited several alternative outcomes and strategies. Outcomes posited included: Assured GVN Control of All of South Vietnam [aka "Victory"]; Mutual Withdrawal without Political Accommodation; Political Accommodation (with Mutual Troop Withdrawal; and Territorial Accommodation.⁷⁰ Military strategies were reduced to two basic options: 1). Continuing "pressures on Hanoi through the current strategy, threats of escalation, or actual escalation;" and 2). Reducing "the U.S. presence in South Vietnam, which, by making U.S. presence more sustainable, could be another form of pressure."⁷¹ The political climate at home meant Nixon was under immense pressure to ease U.S. commitments in Vietnam, but he was also bound by a deep belief in upholding U.S. commitments: "For the United States, this first defeat in our Nation's history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the world."⁷² Nixon could not simply 'bring the troops home.' Both American prestige and the prestige of the administration were heavily vested in Vietnam, and he was unwilling to sacrifice either. Nixon could have simply withdrawn from Vietnam, blamed the war on the Democrats, and focused on broader, great power politics. That he didn't reveals not only that he retained significant commitment to Cold War notions such as domino theory, but also that he was unwilling to concede to Communist aggression, and that he was perhaps convinced that he could and should win where others had failed. In another address, Nixon captured this sentiment, saying that America could not, "when the

⁶⁹ "Vietnam Policy Alternatives," Kimball, document 2.8.

⁷⁰ "Alternative Strategies in Vietnam," Kimball, document 2.8, transcript of RAND study, 48. Each of the possible outcomes listed are accompanied with a brief assessment of their feasibility, their potential benefits, and some of the ways that the U.S. might affect them.

⁷¹ "Alternative Strategies in Vietnam," Kimball, Document 2.8, transcript of RAND study, 49.

⁷² As quoted from Nixon's November 3, 1969 speech, "Address to The Nation On The War In Vietnam." Transcript taken from United States Government, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon (Washington D.C, 1971), 901-9.

chips are down...act like a pitiful giant.”⁷³ At the same time, Hanoi had up to that point been unresponsive to coercive U.S. military efforts. The challenge confronting Nixon was in finding ways to make the military efforts more effective, while still maneuvering towards ‘peace.’

Both Nixon and Kissinger wanted to reorient American policy, but were unwilling to ‘give-in’ on Vietnam.⁷⁴ Kissinger observes that the “new Nixon Administration was the first of the postwar generation that had to conduct foreign policy without the national consensus that had sustained its predecessors largely since 1947...We faced not only the dislocation of a war but the need to articulate a new foreign policy for a new era...the Vietnam War would end...Could we shape a new consensus that could reconcile our idealism and our responsibilities, our security and our values, our dreams and our possibilities?”⁷⁵ Though controversial, the Vietnam War was largely supported throughout the Johnson Administration, and the popular collapse came only after the nation believed itself misled.⁷⁶ Not only, then, did Nixon face a complex and difficult war, but he also confronted a polity that was increasingly distrustful of its leaders and increasingly skeptical as to the merits of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Add in the nuances and challenges of the Cold War, and the way ahead for the new President was particularly sticky. He believed himself up to the challenge, however, and was convinced that by consolidating power he could guide the nation and solve the war. “This is no time for consensus government,” Nixon declared in 1965, “[i]t’s a time for leadership,” and 1969 presented opportunity to prove his merits.⁷⁷

In a *Foreign Affairs* article, Kissinger characterized the limits to American commitment: “First, the United States cannot accept a military defeat or a change in the political structure of South Viet Nam brought about by external military force; second, once North Vietnamese forces and pressures are removed, the United States has no obligation to maintain a government in Saigon by force.”⁷⁸ Gideon Rose surmises that Nixon believed that he could remove “certain limits on American operations in

⁷³ Televised speech, April 30, 1970, as shown on “The American Experience,” Minute 87. This speech was delivered shortly after Nixon announced the U.S. incursion into Cambodia.

⁷⁴ Kissinger and Luce, *White House Years*, 65.

⁷⁵ Kissinger and Luce, *White House Years*, 65.

⁷⁶ Reference Tet and the “Arc of Perception” in previous chapter.

⁷⁷ “Nixon Urges U.S. To Press Attacks on North Vietnam,” *New York Times*, February 12 1965.

⁷⁸ Henry Kissinger, “The Viet Nam Negotiations,” *Foreign Affairs* XLVII, (January, 1969), 230.

Indochina,” threaten further escalation, and pressure Moscow “to restrain its proxy,” while encouraging South Vietnam to play a larger role.⁷⁹ In aggregate, Nixon’s initial strategy was comprised of de-Americanization, Vietnamization, pacification, détente, negotiations, and relied upon “irresistible military pressure.”⁸⁰ National Security Study Memorandum 36 (NSSM 36) denotes the assumed timelines for Nixon’s strategy, with projected dates for full transfer ranging between December, 1970 and December, 1972.⁸¹ The memorandum assumes: 1). Efforts will start on July 1, 1969; 2). Current North Vietnamese and Vietcong force levels, barring an agreement on mutual withdrawal; 3). Accurate projections of South Vietnamese force levels; 4). The only de-escalation will be from the phased withdrawal of American troops; 5). Vigorous efforts will be made to equip and train South Vietnamese forces.⁸²

Both Nixon and Kissinger were confident in their strategy and assumed that it would work quickly. Cooperation and buy-in were needed from South Vietnam, however. Nixon talked with South Vietnamese President Thieu in July of 1969 and assured him that the United States was committed to the South’s cause. Obviously worried by the American draw-down, Thieu pressed Nixon on the possibility of a protracted war and the extent to which he could rely on U.S. support. Nixon’s response is telling:

We know that we are progressing, that the other side is growing weaker. Therefore, if the enemy gives no indication of wanting to negotiate seriously...we should review the evidence. The long road is risky; there are too many backseat drivers...we should... adopt a flexible and reasonable posture to keep public opinion in support of us...

[Thieu then raised concerns about a possible offensive by the North once American troops were withdrawn. Nixon replied that he had a plan,

⁷⁹ Gideon Rose, *How Wars End : Why We Always Fight the Last Battle : A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 168.

⁸⁰ Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*, 11. Kimball defines each term: de-Americanization-the gradual withdrawal of American troops; Vietnamization-the strengthening of Saigon’s armed forces and government; pacification-antiguerrilla operations; détente-diplomacy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union; and negotiations with the Vietnamese Communists in Paris in both public and secret venues.

⁸¹ “Vietnamizing the War,” National Security Study Memorandum 36, April 10, 1969. Kimball document 3.21. , 77.

⁸² “Vietnamizing the War,” NSSM 36, Kimball document 3.21, 77.

referencing earlier discussions on the use of American military ground and air power. Nixon then urged Thieu towards secrecy.]

We should not disclose to the enemy what we propose to do...
Another disadvantage in making public disclosures...is the fact
That critics at home will not be satisfied...Consequently, let us
have a plan, but let us keep it secret among ourselves.⁸³

The reality of Nixon's drawdown and his plan was, in his own mind, somewhat different than what he portrayed publicly. The above conversation took place less than a week after Nixon revealed what became known as the *Guam Doctrine*.⁸⁴ Deposed King and Cambodian Prime Minister Norodom Sihanouk praised Nixon's approach, saying that if the United States "brings aid without conditions and without physical intervention...they will certainly have more hope of seeing the flood of Communism contained than if they assume this task with their soldiers."⁸⁵ The public perception was that Nixon was maneuvering towards peace and taking a less direct approach. As his conversation with Thieu reveals, however, Nixon very consciously reserved the right to find peace on his terms.

A key aspect of Nixon's strategy relied not just on the use of force, but the threat of force, which he believed was made all the more real by his reputation as a hardliner. So while he marched his 'better angels' publicly through ostensibly moderate policies aimed at ending the war, he also drew upon his dark side to affect those policies.

Reflecting on his own 'Nixonness,' he wrote in his memoirs:

I was sure that Brezhnev and Kosygin had been no more anxious for me to win in 1968 than Khrushchev had been in 1960. The prospect of having to deal with a Republican administration—and a Nixon administration at that—undoubtedly caused anxiety in Moscow. In fact, I suspected that the Soviets might have counseled the North Vietnamese to offer to begin the Paris talks in the hope that the bombing halt would tip the balance to Humphrey in the election—and if that was their strategy, it had almost worked."⁸⁶

⁸³ "Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon and Thieu," July 30, 1969. Kimball document 3.22, 78-79.

⁸⁴ During a press conference on July 25, 1969, Nixon addressed questions concerning the future of Vietnam, Asia, and his policies. Nixon insisted that Asian nation's should be responsible for defending themselves but provided a caveat that the involvement of nuclear powers changed the equation of self-determination. Nixon's statement alluded to the involvement of Russia and China and also bespoke of the interests of the United States in Vietnam. Though dubious, public perceptions were that Nixon had a clear strategy for the way ahead. Depending on where one sat, the Guam Doctrine (later renamed the Nixon Doctrine) implied either withdrawal or escalation.

⁸⁵ Kissinger and Luce, *White House Years*, 460.

⁸⁶ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 427. As quoted by Kissinger.

He certainly believed in and stroked the Nixon myth. From Moscow's perspective, there was some concern over dealing with the new American President. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, however, writes that at the time, he felt he had a fair understanding of the new American President.

No one in the Soviet leadership, including the most zealous supporters of communism, ever talked seriously about any concrete prospects for communism in the United States...In my boldest thoughts I never looked beyond the idea of our two systems peacefully converging somehow...But did Richard Nixon really believe in the communist threat in the United States, or was it just a convenient means to climb the political ladder? To my mind, the latter was more likely.⁸⁷

Dobrynin's assessment in 1969 was that Nixon's anti-communism was really "a factor related to the foreign policy struggle," and "translated from a domestic issue to the more rarefied plane of relations between nations," thus it provided opening for dialogue.⁸⁸

Nixon was a Cold warrior and a realist, and the Soviets, though wary; felt they understood the American's calculations. Soviet Premier Brezhnev asserted that "You can do business with Nixon."⁸⁹

Yet, Nixon's world image was rooted in history and he proclaimed that "[b]eneath the struggle among Vietnamese lies the larger, continuing struggle between those nations that want order and those that want disorder."⁹⁰ Similar to Kennedy's descriptions of Vietnam as part of the world-wide Communist revolution, Nixon seemed to believe that peripheral wars were a subset of the larger clash between ideologies. The French history in Indochina, the lessons from Munich, Korea, and the United States' own experiences in Vietnam up to that point shaped Nixon's perception that there was a 'larger game afoot.' What is interesting with regard to Nixon's image of the Vietnam War and his subsequent approach is that while he caged it in a Cold War context (with enduring Cold War

⁸⁷ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Times Books, Random House, 1995), 197. Dobrynin was the Soviet Ambassador to the United States throughout most of the Cold War and his insights offer a unique perspective from 'the other side.'

⁸⁸ Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 197.

⁸⁹ Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 256.

⁹⁰ As quoted from Richard J. Whalen's *Catch the Falling Flag; A Republican's Challenge to His Party*, by Jeffrey Kimball. See, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 50.

themes) he and Kissinger also sought to disassociate ideology from the struggle. The ‘deepening philosophy’ that Kissinger called for in American policy was recognition that ideology had corrupted both the means and the ends of the United States’ struggle. Policy needed to understand the realities of the security environment and forego attempts to change the nature of countries. Instead, America needed to learn to deal with nations as they were.⁹¹

Reframed in this way, Nixon’s Vietnam policies can be understood as a means by which the administration sought to ‘win’ while simultaneously changing the context of the game.⁹² Appeals to anti-communist sentiments may have been more expediency than philosophy. Not that Nixon suddenly came to love Communism, but rather that ‘victory and peace with honor’ was more about the preservation of American (read Nixon’s) prestige and less about the stamping out of evil ideologies. Nixon envisioned a new world that ranged beyond the binding architectures of his predecessors. To his mind, Johnson had squandered numerous diplomatic opportunities and also overly restricted U.S. military power. Nixon believed his own approach was more sophisticated and that his unique abilities could better exploit all the means of American power at the President’s disposal. In 1968 he stated that a better use of military strength “could have ended [the war] with far less than we are now using.”⁹³ Nixon sniped continually from the sidelines before he was President. Once he was President, he continued to unveil a new version of himself, the war, and the United States’ approach to it. Reflecting on the plan he revealed in July, 1969, Nixon commented:

The Nixon Doctrine announced on Guam was misinterpreted by Some as signaling a new policy that would lead to total American withdrawal from Asia and from other parts of the world as well... the Nixon Doctrine was not a formula for getting America out of Asia, but one that provided the only sound basis for America’s staying in and continuing to play a responsible role in helping the non-Communist nations and neutrals as well as our Asian allies to

⁹¹ Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, Expanded ed. (New York, NY: Norton, 1974). 255-257, 265-268.

⁹² Stephen Randolph asserts that Nixon’s strategy of détente, as well as his shaping and administering of the U.S. government and its power reshaped “the geostrategic landscape,” and “the war in Southeast Asia assumed a whole new complexion.” See Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 21.

⁹³ Gerald Astor, *Presidents at War: From Truman to Bush, The Gathering of Military Power to Our Commanders in Chief*, Kindle Edition ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2006), 2118-19.

defend their independence.”⁹⁴

Nixon’s peace equated to winning America’s continuing ability to influence events. Doing so required preserving American prestige. Kissinger once commented that Nixon entered the Presidency “when the forces of history were moving America from a position of dominance to one of leadership.”⁹⁵ The difference between ‘dominance’ and ‘leadership’ was that the former reflected “objective strengths,” while the latter reflected “other’s perceptions.”⁹⁶ Nixon believed his own unique attributes could shape perceptions of America’s leadership. To that end, he found utility in both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ Nixon.

In a last gasp at peace (and arguably at a Democratic Presidential victory), Johnson halted bombing of the North as the election approached in 1968. During that time, Nixon conducted his own political manipulations behind the scenes. Between 1967 and 1968, Anna Chennault acted as the Administration’s special liaison to South Vietnamese President Thieu. Though she played a distinctly different role than that of Madame Nhu during the Kennedy Administration, Nixon thus found himself involving his own “Dragon Lady” in his Vietnam policies. Chennault was connected both in D.C. and in Saigon, and she would visit Saigon so as to inform Thieu that “Nixon would be a strong supporter of Vietnam,” hinting that Thieu should “hold back” from any agreements arranged by Johnson.⁹⁷ During this period, Kissinger also served both as Nixon’s spy and unofficial emissary. As peace talks between the Johnson Administration and the Vietnamese reached a “delicate stage” in Paris, Kissinger surreptitiously whispered in the ears of all parties while simultaneously keeping Nixon abreast of developments.⁹⁸ Nixon used the inside information provided by both Chennault and Kissinger to frame Johnson’s efforts as a “cynical, last minute attempt” to get Humphrey elected.⁹⁹ Nixon’s full statement on the matter actually asserted that he was ‘on

⁹⁴ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 488.

⁹⁵ As quoted by Gideon Rose, *How Wars End*, 163.

⁹⁶ Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*, 163. Rose summarizes Kissinger, saying that this transition made “policy-makers even more obsessed than usual with the credibility of American commitments.”

⁹⁷ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* 56. Anna Chennault was the widow of WW II Aviation Ace and hero, Lieutenant General Claire Lee Chennault.

⁹⁸ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* 58.

⁹⁹ Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*

Johnson's side' and that he did not *believe* Johnson was working toward a bombing halt for political reasons. However, by raising the possibility of Johnson's ulterior motives, he effectively tainted the negotiations and the Administration's credibility. Additionally, the nefarious communications between Nixon's agents and the South Vietnamese indicate that Nixon was in fact manipulating events. South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem told President Thieu in several cables: "Many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm...I am regularly in touch with the Nixon entourage."¹⁰⁰

Nixon played 'the innocent,' publicly insisting that he just 'couldn't believe' that Johnson was up to no good. Yet, he worked behind the scenes to undermine Johnson's efforts and even in his declarations of support for the President; Nixon raised the specter of doubt. Tricky Dick had come out of the woodwork to influence the election and events in Vietnam. Once elected, Nixon's shaded conjuring continued.

In an address to the nation on November 3, 1969, Nixon re-represented himself, the war, and the nation's agenda in Vietnam:

Tonight I want to talk to you on a subject of deep concern to all Americans and to many people in all parts of the world—the war in Vietnam. I believe that one of the reasons for the deep division about Vietnam is that many Americans have lost confidence in what their Government has told them about our policy. The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace unless they know the truth about that policy.

[Nixon thus contrasts himself with his predecessor and cages his approach to Vietnam as rooted in "truth." He at once attempts to solidify his own image while convincing the nation that 'this time, it's going to be different, and that the country can trust him. He then

327. Nixon said in his memoirs that it was "Johnson's last chance to redeem his record, and I could not begrudge him the effort...[but] I was convinced" he had ulterior motives. Nixon's October 26th statement read: "I am told that top officials in the administration have been driving very hard for an agreement on a bombing halt, accompanied possibly by a cease fire, in the immediate future...I am ...told that this spurt of activity is a cynical, last minute attempt by President Johnson to salvage the candidacy of Mr. Humphrey. This I do not believe." In typical Nixon fashion, he raised the specter of Johnson's ulterior motive, yet ostensibly 'took Johnson's side.'

¹⁰⁰ As quoted by Kimball from Hung and Schecter, *Palace File*, 24; and Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History*, 244. See Nixon's Vietnam War, 59. Stanley Karnow also notes that "Thieu balked at sending diplomats to Paris until four days before Nixon's inauguration," further indicating that Nixon's play directly impacted President Thieu's calculations during the peace talks of 1968. See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 586.

goes on to 'clarify' why the United States is involved in the first place and the situation that he inherited.]

[When I took office] the war had been going on for four years. 31,000 Americans had been killed in action. The training program for the South Vietnamese was behind schedule. 540,000 Americans were in Vietnam with no plans to reduce the number. No progress had been made at the negotiations in Paris...The war was causing deep division at home [and abroad].

[Nixon then discusses that the 'easy course' would be to quit the war and to lay it at the feet of his predecessors. He is bound, however, by a greater duty.]

But I had a greater obligation than to think only of the years of my administration and of the next election. I had to think of the effect of my decision on the next generation and on the future of peace and freedom in America and in the world...The great question is: How can we win America's peace?

[Nixon then summarizes some of the broader history of conflict in Indochina and Vietnam and emphasizes the many atrocities committed by the Communists. After effectively painting the 'ugly Communists,' Nixon then highlights the importance of U.S. prestige and invokes images of Kennedy and Eisenhower's visions—raising both the specter of the Communist threat and contrasting it with the 'hope' of America. Nixon then ties America's hope to the proposals he put forth on Guam and At the United Nations.]

I initiated a pursuit for peace on many fronts...We have offered the complete withdrawal of all outside forces within 1 year. We have proposed a cease-fire under international supervision. We have offered free elections under international supervision with the Communists participating...And the Saigon Government has pledged to accept the result[s]...We have not put forth our proposals on a take-it-or-leave-it basis...We have declared that anything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future.

[Nixon's 'plan' appears overwhelmingly reasonable, sophisticated, and effectively contrasts the 'peacemaker' with the stubborn and uncooperative Communists. It was a somewhat gross mischaracterization, however. Everything was 'not negotiable.' Hanoi and Nixon were operating from two distinct, mutually-exclusive premises. Despite his overtures for 'peace and negotiation,' Nixon's plan rested on the premise that he could, through greater force and diplomatic maneuvering, pressure Hanoi to capitulate with the very same terms that Johnson pursued. Hanoi, for its

part, would not negotiate 'under duress,' and therefore bombing them to the negotiating table remained a non-starter. Nixon then details his extensive efforts that started even before his inauguration, and highlights the role of the Soviets and China. He then punctuates Hanoi's stubbornness by relaying his interchange with Ho Chi Minh, giving himself credit for making extensive efforts for peace and stating that Ho Chi Minh "flatly rejected my initiative." Nixon proceeds to outline his strategy.]

...I laid down in Guam three principles...First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments. Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us...Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance.

[Nixon explains his principles of de-Americanization, Vietnamization and purports that both are already yielding results]

The policy of the previous administration not only resulted in our assuming the primary responsibility for fighting the war, but even more significantly did not adequately stress the goal of strengthening the South Vietnamese...In July...I changed General Abrams' orders so that they were consistent with the objectives of our new policies... Our air operations have been reduced by 20 percent...we are finally bringing American men home...The South Vietnamese have continued to gain in strength...Enemy infiltration...is less than 20 percent of what it was over the same period last year... [and] United States casualties have declined...to the lowest point in 3 years.

[Nixon's estimations greatly oversimplified and exaggerated the progress being made on the ground and gave the nation the false impression that, under his leadership, the war was just about won. That the United States would suffer an additional 30,000 casualties before the end is a stark testament to the extent of Nixon's misrepresentation of the direction he was taking the war. Though he cautions that some "flexibility" may be required going forward, he hammers home the notion that he is taking the strong, but 'peaceful' route.]

Fifty years ago, in this room and at this very desk, President Woodrow Wilson spoke words which caught the imagination of a war-weary world. He said: "This is the war to end war." His dream for peace after World War I was shattered...Tonight I do not tell you that the war in Vietnam is the war to end wars. But I do say this: I have initiated a plan which will end this war in a way that will bring us closer to that great goal...the goal of a just

and lasting peace.¹⁰¹

The allusion to Wilson was a particularly deft way to paint himself as the ‘peacemaker.’ Nixon also wove images of American *Exceptionalism* into the speech and pledged to uphold the historic virtues of his country. He appealed to the ‘silent majority’ and insisted that he wanted peace as much as they did. Above all, Nixon insisted that he could preserve America’s honor and resolve Vietnam in a way that would distinguish himself from his predecessors. Longing for peace and eager for resolution both abroad and at home, the American people wanted to believe that Nixon could extricate them from Vietnam, and Nixon played to these desires.¹⁰² The American public, however, had pinned their hopes for a quiet and honorable peace on a man who not only had a dark side, but who often embraced it.

The Utility of Madness

The situation Nixon faced in Vietnam was not too dissimilar than that confronted by the French nearly two decades before.¹⁰³ The difference was that where the French were trying to reclaim and maintain a physical empire, Nixon’s challenge was preserving an empire of the mind where America’s prestige was the coin of the realm. To that end, he believed he could capitalize on his more sinister side and use the ‘bearded Nixon’ as a way to coerce his adversaries. Where he let his darker shade operate behind the scenes in the domestic political arena, he felt that to be effective on the international stage he would have to bring the ugliness into the light. Gerald Astor comments that Lyndon Johnson “justly earned a reputation for manipulating and shading the truth,” and that

¹⁰¹ United States Government, "Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1969," ed. National Archives, Public Papers of the Presidents (Government Printing Office, 1969), 901-09.

¹⁰² The day following the speech, the *New York Times* described a “large and normally undemonstrative cross section of the country,” that flooded the White House with supportive telegrams and letters. There appeared to be a boost in public opinion and support on the war and for Nixon. See the *New York Times*, November 5, 1969. Two weeks later, during the “Moratorium,” where 500,000 protestors flooded the capital, Nixon was disregarded the significance of the protests—convinced that he had the majority of Americans on his side.

¹⁰³ Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* 16. “The Vietnam predicament that Nixon faced as president paralleled that faced by French leaders in 1953. Their seven-year-old military effort to restore France’s colonial grip...was in serious jeopardy. Military and political failure in Vietnam, the threat of greater Chinese involvement in support of the Vietminh, and war-weariness at home had driven France’s leaders to consider withdrawal through a negotiated settlement...Taking steps toward a diplomatic solution, the French believed that an honorable withdrawal required the stabilization or even improvement of their military position—a course Nixon would also follow as president.”

Nixon was equally “adept” at such management of people and facts.¹⁰⁴ What differentiated Nixon, however, was that “he also sought by devious means to tweak minds.”¹⁰⁵ Richard Reeves points out that Nixon often relished press coverage and perceptions that painted him as unpredictable, strong, and even a little mad.¹⁰⁶ Nixon “believed there was an advantage in persuading adversaries, foreign and domestic, that there was something irrational about him, that he was a dangerous man capable of any retaliation, up to and including the use of nuclear weapons.”¹⁰⁷

Jeffrey Kimball’s extensive review of source materials led him to the conclusion that while there was no “smoking gun” with regard to Nixon ever using the term ‘madman theory,’ there was enough evidence to surmise that Nixon believed in and cultivated its tenets.¹⁰⁸ In his work, *A Grand Delusion*, Robert Mann quotes a conversation between Nixon and Haldeman: “I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where I might do *anything* to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that, ‘for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button’—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.”¹⁰⁹ The conversation not only reveals that Nixon deliberately cultivated and sought to utilize the ‘mad man myth,’ but that he also recognized his crusade against Communism as a political expediency.

The irony was that Nixon was actually often excruciatingly rational and calculating. According to former members of the JCS and his staff, Nixon ran the Security Council like a board meeting, and never “made a decision on the spot.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2130.

¹⁰⁵ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2130.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 57. Reeves refers to an instance where ABC news had reported that Nixon would bomb the North if they didn’t cooperate during the peace talks. After the report, a Nixon staffer commented: “Good, RN is for this.”

¹⁰⁷ Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House*, 57.

¹⁰⁸ Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* 76-86. According to Kimball, Haldeman recorded in his notes that Nixon spoke the words “mad bomber” at a meeting in 1973. Kimball also points out that Nixon’s public and private statements before, during, and after his presidency are replete with references to irrationality, unpredictability, disproportionate force, risk taking, blackmail, toughness, audacity, defiance, and similar qualities and poses.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), 630-31.

¹¹⁰ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2138.

Nixon once revealed during a press conference that his father told him that he would have to “scratch it out” to make something of himself, because there was no way he could “get by on his looks.”¹¹¹ Nixon had learned, however, not only how to compensate for his ‘looks,’ but also how to exploit them. He was extremely calculated as to which face he showed to whom and when. So long as the different realities and different ‘Nixons’ he purported remained separate, his calculations were generally successful. Even after his fall and for years after Watergate, his version of history was widely accepted and influential, albeit not comprehensively so. Within the context of the Vietnam War, however, the many shades of Nixon inevitably cropped up. Nixon believed in the uncertainty principle, and drew on lessons from Berlin and from the use and threat of force throughout history. He admired Eisenhower’s *Massive Retaliation* strategy and believed there were merits in madness. As he took the reins of America’s military might, he was both the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Nixon, reframing himself as he sought to reframe America’s longest war. While drinking with an associate in 1964, Nixon revealed why he sought the presidency: “Because I know the fucking Commie mind. But they don’t know mine. I really think I could do something. I really believe I could make a contribution to peace.”¹¹² America and the world were about to learn some things, both about Nixon’s ‘mind’ and his ‘peace.’

The Hammer of Peace

For over fifteen years, “Nixon had consistently taken belligerent positions on the war in Vietnam, usually advocating more militant strategies than Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson.”¹¹³ His concentration of power in the Executive Branch, his penchant for action, and his determination to win meant that his darker side would not remain long subdued. Kissinger wrote in *Diplomacy* that Nixon had “exceeded” the tolerances of the Democrats’ “dove platform” within nine months of taking office.¹¹⁴ Nixon believed his military and diplomatic plan would bear quick fruit and became frustrated when that did not happen. He imagined the conflict in Vietnam not just as a national conflict, but also as a personal challenge from Hanoi, Moscow, Beijing,

¹¹¹ Televised interview, as aired on Espar, “The American Experience: Nixon.”

¹¹² As quoted from an interview conducted by Tom Wicker in *One of Us*. See Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 37.

¹¹³ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* 39.

¹¹⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 677-79.

Cambodian Rebels, the Viet Cong, and from his critics at home. Roger Morris said Nixon believed that his adversaries were “testing his mettle.”¹¹⁵ Nixon believed that both his and his nation’s character and will were being tested and was determined that the enemy should know that neither the United States nor its President could be intimidated.

In the summer of 1970, Nixon demonstrated his and his nation’s resolve in an act that marked not only a departure from his predecessor’s policies, but also broke with the ‘new Vietnam War’ that he had described in the spring. Nixon had been secretly bombing supply routes in Cambodia since 1969. By 1970, his frustration with the war led him to openly send waves B-52s against suspected sanctuaries in Cambodia. The air raids were followed by American and South Vietnamese ground teams. The decision to ‘invade’ Cambodia was made in private. He told only Kissinger of the decision beforehand, and revealed what was dubbed OPERATION MENU to the State and Defense departments only after the forces were already enroute.¹¹⁶ Nixon did discuss the possibility of a Cambodia operation with his other principals, but they were not very receptive to the idea of using U.S. troops for the operation. Haldeman’s diary entries from this period are telling. At one point, a frustrated Nixon declared: “Damn Johnson, if he’d just done the right thing we wouldn’t be in this mess now.”¹¹⁷ In typical Nixon fashion, the President bypassed protests from the Secretary of Defense and from others. Nixon communicated directly with General Abrams, who was convinced that sanctuaries in Cambodia were critical to Hanoi’s war effort. Besides Abrams, Kissinger was the most in favor of the President’s operation, and Haldeman noted that his support was as much about demonstrating Nixon’s authority as it was about any potential mission.¹¹⁸

Despite the protests, Nixon committed to the Cambodian operation. Roger Morris and several other staffers resigned over the President’s decision. By the time Nixon ‘briefed’ Congress, “he did not tell his audience that...the bombers were already on their

¹¹⁵ Interview aired on “The American Experience: Nixon.” Minute 84.

¹¹⁶ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2162-70. Neither was Congress informed of the plan. Haldeman notes in his diaries that Nixon was extremely agitated and “really driving at Cambodia.” According to Haldeman, Nixon knew he was on “thin ice” legally when it came to any military push into Cambodia. Nixon was also concerned about the apparent lack of progress in the war and the waning public support for his policies and was determined to get results. See, *The Haldeman Diaries*, 153-156.

¹¹⁷ Haldeman, *the Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, 153.

¹¹⁸ Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, 156. Haldeman’s entry from April 27th reads: “K takes whole deal as test of P’s authority, and I think would go ahead even if plan is wrong, just to prove [the President] can’t be challenged.”

way.”¹¹⁹ The administration also schemed and “faked the paperwork detailing the targeting objectives,” and Kissinger insisted that Cambodia was not “neutral,” because “as many as four North divisions operated from within that country with impunity.”¹²⁰ Kennedy had expanded U.S. counterinsurgency missions and resources, and Johnson had also exercised covert operations. Starting in 1967 and under the code name *Daniel Boone*, special teams of Americans and local Vietnamese mercenaries repeatedly crossed into Cambodia to gather intelligence on North Vietnamese positions, material, and resources.¹²¹ The difference in the spring of 1970 was that MENU was conducted in the public’s eye and contrasted sharply with the image of Nixon’s Vietnam that the President had so diligently cultivated. International and domestic audiences were shocked, and waves of protest erupted across the country. Nixon attempted to assuage the public’s consternation in a speech delivered on April 30, 1970.

Nixon reminded his audience that he had reserved the right to remain ‘flexible’ during his 1969 speech and that he had stated unequivocally that he “would not hesitate to take strong and effective measures” if the Communists remained obstinate.¹²²

For the past 5 years...North Vietnam has occupied military sanctuaries all along the Cambodian frontier...these Communist occupied territories contain major base camps, training sites, logistics facilities, weapons and ammunition factories, airstrips, and prisoner-of-war compounds. For 5 years, neither the United States nor South Vietnam has moved against these...sanctuaries because we did not wish to violate the territory of a neutral nation... In contrast to our policy, the enemy in the past 2 weeks has stepped up his guerrilla actions...Cambodia, as a result of this, has sent out a call to the United States...for assistance.¹²³

In response to Nixon’s claims, Cornell University Professor George Kahin was asked by members of Congress to ‘fact-check’ the President.¹²⁴ Kahin pointed out that the United States had been involved to varying degrees in clandestine activity in Cambodia since the

¹¹⁹ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2162-70.

¹²⁰ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2170.

¹²¹ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2154.

¹²² United States Government, "Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1970," ed. National Archives, Public Papers of the Presidents (Government Printing Office, 1970), 405-06.

¹²³ "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia." United States Government, "Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1970," 406.

¹²⁴ Professor Kahin was a scholar of modern Southeast studies and considered an expert on the region and on U.S. policy there.

1954 Geneva Convention: “[F]or most of the last 15 years the U.S. has opposed Cambodian neutrality and applied various kinds of pressure to get it to assume an anti-Communist stance in alignment with American policy objectives.”¹²⁵ Kahin also noted that the International Control Commission had evidence for more than 760 incursions into Cambodia by South Vietnamese forces between 1964 and 1965.¹²⁶ The Professor’s paper concludes: “It is appalling for the Administration to define the legitimacy of President Nixon’s act strictly in terms of American law and precedent. Cambodia is a sovereign state. Since the U.S. acted without consulting its government, our invasion is a violation of international law.”¹²⁷

Kahin’s observations are telling, but must still be considered within the political context. Nixon was not the only President ever to ‘end-run’ formalities, international law, or to ‘bend the truth,’ and he certainly would not be the last. The effectiveness of OPERATION MENU is debatable, but from a military strategic standpoint, the principles were sound. Airpower, combined with both covert and overt ground operations played a critical and effective role in dampening Hanoi’s war effort.¹²⁸ Lewis Sorley assesses that limitations placed on Nixon’s Cambodian incursion as well as its timing in the war resulted in “little more than a temporary disruption of North Vietnam’s march toward domination of all of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, Nixon’s critics could only gain from disparaging his policies, so while the ‘facts’ used to lambast

¹²⁵ George Kahin, *Cambodia: The Administration’s Version and the Historical Record* (Washington, 1970), as transcribed in Williams, *America in Vietnam : A Documentary History*, 283-87. As example, Kahin describes U.S. Special Forces and CIA campaign in 1966 to pressure then Cambodian President Sihanouk by supporting opposition forces.

¹²⁶ George Kahin, *Cambodia: The Administration’s Version and the Historical Record* (Washington, 1970), as transcribed in Williams, *America in Vietnam : A Documentary History*, 285. The United States had also been repeatedly bombing Cambodia during the Johnson and the Nixon Administrations.

¹²⁷ George Kahin, *Cambodia: The Administration’s Version and the Historical Record* (Washington, 1970), as transcribed in Williams, *America in Vietnam : A Documentary History*, 287.

¹²⁸ Stephen Randolph cites numerous instances where Airpower, combined with ground troops, either thwarted the North’s military build-up or knocked back offensives. The North was extremely dependent on its sanctuaries as well as its logistic trails that the required those sanctuaries. Nixon and Abram’s strategy was sound. During OPERATION COMMANDO HUNT and in response to North Vietnam’s Easter Offensive in 1972, Nixon’s use of airpower and ground forces at the very least delayed Hanoi’s victory. Though Randolph notes that the Linebacker campaign “never managed to eliminate military imports,” it did levy “a heavy toll on equipment and supplies.” Air assets also blunted the North’s “offensive in the South, and Nixon administered a “cascade of firepower” that crippled Hanoi’s offensive power. See Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 64-58, 336-340.

¹²⁹ Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, as quoted in Sorley, *A Better War : The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, 213. “That outcome was, of course, a function of later policies and actions, not inherent in the Cambodian operation itself.”

the Cambodian campaign were 'true,' they were not necessarily untainted by ulterior motives. Johnson once characterized the Presidency as akin to being a Jackass in the rain, where all's you could do was stand there and take it. Certainly, the criticism lobbed at Nixon over Cambodia can be partially explained as simply paying the price for holding the nation's highest office. But such an explanation is incomplete. Nixon was lying. Furthermore, the future he painted for his Presidency, the war, and the country contrasted sharply with his actions and his policies.

America had little tolerance for any more dissonance over Vietnam policies, and the administration's honeymoon was over. The ugly king stood revealed and the nation went looking for razors so as to shave the darkness from Nixon's face. Nixon said during his April 30th speech that he would "rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President and see America become a second-rate power."¹³⁰ Whether Nixon would truly have martyred himself for a policy is debatable, but his Presidency was at risk from the firestorm that ensued following his actions in Cambodia. He only added fuel to the fire when during a press conference he off-handedly comforted a veteran's wife by calling her husband a "hero" and the anti-war protestors "bums."¹³¹ Vietnam was now 'Nixon's War,' and his America was cleanly divided, from his perspective, into heroes and bums. Sixteen months into his Presidency he still enjoyed support for his war effort, but he had very effectively exacerbated divisions at home. The tragic and violent protests at Kent State and at Jackson State were two of more than 800 sit-ins and demonstrations that rocked the country in the spring and summer of 1970. Nixon was butting up against the 'new-new generation' that perceived things very differently than did the President.

When Nixon talked of 'peace,' 'success,' and of American 'values,' the meaning of those words had very different connotations for those who were against the war than they did for him. Internal memorandums meant to explain the riots of 1970 concluded that there were several key factors. First, where Nixon imagined a "peace" that involved a self-determinant and American-friendly Vietnam, students imagined "peace" to mean

¹³⁰ United States Government, "Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard Nixon, 1970," 407.

¹³¹ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 88.

the immediate end to killing.¹³² Second, “success” for the administration meant a tempered and orderly withdrawal from Vietnam, while protestors envisioned an immediate dissolution of U.S. involvement in an “immoral” war.¹³³ Third, Nixon’s conceptualization of “winning” and of overcoming the “deep divisions” pivoted on what the new generation of Americans perceived as an archaic and obstructive world view.¹³⁴ Boulding reminds us that perceptions are reality, and in the minds of young Americans, Cold War constructs and notions of “national honor” artificially divided and corrupted their reality.¹³⁵ Not that the new generation was unconcerned about national honor. Rather, they believed that Nixon had to end the war immediately so as to preserve the nation’s values, while the President believed he had to hammer out an acceptable peace or the nation would lose face. The means that Nixon believed were necessary to win that acceptable peace were the ones that many believed were costing America her honor. In short, the President and those who opposed his policies were proceeding from “vastly different assumptions,” and this clash of world views played out across the campuses and on the air waves.¹³⁶

The domestic strife created a “bunker mentality” for the White House, and Nixon was embittered by his critics and continued to characterize them as thugs—often blaming protestors and the press for the war’s length and difficulty.¹³⁷ Nixon created an ‘enemies list’ and constantly pushed his staff to keep an eye on the press and exert pressure on them. Nixon’s staff commented that “going to work felt like going to war with the press.”¹³⁸ When the *Pentagon Papers* broke in the *New York Times*, Nixon was furious and felt that his worse fears had been confirmed. Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, who had participated in Nixon’s 1968 RAND study on Vietnam, released top-secret documents to the *New York Times* which revealed the inconsistencies and subterfuge of American

¹³² Williams, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, 290-91.

¹³³ Williams, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, 291.

¹³⁴ Williams, William, Thomas McCormick, Loyd Gardner & Walter LaFeber, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (New York, NY: Castle House, 1989), 291.

¹³⁵ Williams, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, 291.

¹³⁶ Williams, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, 291.

¹³⁷ Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 93-94.

¹³⁸ Interview with Nixon Special Council, as aired on Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 99.

Vietnam policies.¹³⁹ Though the information in the *Pentagon Papers* predated his administration, Nixon worried that an inquisitive press would only be emboldened by the study and that they would start scratching harder at his own policies—threatening his mystique. He formed a group of private detectives known as ‘the plumbers’ and used them to harass and investigate potential troublemakers. Those who found themselves on the ‘enemies list,’ would be barred from the White House or come under immediate scrutiny by the IRS. In a move that was a prelude to Watergate, Nixon ordered his heavies to break into the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, who was Ellsberg’s psychiatrist.¹⁴⁰ Fielding had been called to testify and Nixon wanted dirt on Ellsberg that could be used to discredit him.

The extent and range of Nixon’s shadowy activities that led to Watergate and the subsequent cover-up are well known and fill volumes well beyond their treatment here. Nixon attacked adversaries he faced in politics as ruthlessly as he attacked those he faced on the battlefield, and he was willing to use whatever means were at his disposal in order to achieve victory. His ambivalence towards rivals and authority figures and the vehemence with which he attacked those who opposed him were manifested in the agendas and outcomes of his Presidency and in Vietnam.¹⁴¹ How he perceived the institutions he ruled affected not only how he treated them, but also how he conducted and applied his power. As the political controversy started to heat up at home, Nixon looked for ways to end the war in Vietnam and secure his Presidency and his legacy.

Prior to the escapades with Ellsberg’s psychiatrist and well before the 1972 election, Nixon turned his eye on Laos and viewed a potential operation there as way to validate South Vietnam’s forces while disrupting Hanoi’s war effort. Code-named Lam Son 719, the bold, slashing attack would cut a swath into North Vietnam’s critical logistics line along Route 9 west of Khe Sanh.¹⁴² The plan was aggressive and would use American air power to soften the lines for elite South Vietnamese ground forces. Its shortcoming, however, was that it failed to consider “Vietnamese realities,” by

¹³⁹ The *Pentagon Papers*, both the abridged version and the original version as published by the New York Times are cited throughout this study and full reference information is available in the bibliography.

¹⁴⁰ Black, *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*, 732-34.

¹⁴¹ Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 13.

¹⁴² Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13-14.

overestimating the capabilities of South Vietnamese forces and underestimating the North's commitment to protecting its logistics.¹⁴³ Militarily, Lam Son 719 put the South's forces in a situation for which they were not prepared. Additionally, South Vietnamese President Thieu had issued orders to halt the attack "when casualties reached 3,000," thereby blunting any hope of speed and momentum.¹⁴⁴ The premature and uncoordinated nature of Lam Son 719 resulted in a rout of the South Vietnamese forces, and the shortcomings of Nixon's allies were revealed—thus undermining a key pillar of his strategic plan.¹⁴⁵ Bureaucratic complications and command-and-control problems plagued the South Vietnamese army, exacerbating gaps in its military capabilities and amplifying the communication and coordination problems with U.S. forces.¹⁴⁶

Lam Son 719 "changed the trajectory of the war," and left lasting impressions with Nixon and the North Vietnamese.¹⁴⁷ In *The White House Years*, Kissinger described Lam Son 719: "The operation conceived in doubt and assailed by skepticism, proceeded in confusion. It soon became apparent that the plans on which we had been so eloquently and frequently briefed reflected staff exercises, not military reality."¹⁴⁸ The abject failure of the Laos operation reinforced Nixon's predilections and his image of the CIA and of the military. He believed both institutions lacked the kind of creative leadership necessary to win the war: "As you know," Nixon wrote in a memo, "I have very little confidence in the CIA insofar as in developing programs that are imaginative...I just

¹⁴³ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 14-15. One of the main objectives of Lam Son 719 was to prove the mettle of the South's Army so the United States was not willing to commit its own ground forces to the operation. President Thieu had requested mechanized brigades but was denied. Though a good idea, the timing was poor and Nixon's eagerness for action and his want of a quick solution forced a bold and potentially effective plan prematurely.

¹⁴⁵ De-Americanization and Vietnamization were essential elements to Nixon's plan for honorable U.S. withdrawal and hand-off. The images of Lam Son 719 "froze the American public's perception of their South Vietnamese allies. Vietnamization had faced its first major test, and to all appearances had proven an abject failure." See Randolph, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. 181-183. General Abrams lamented that the rotating nature of U.S. advisors, combined with the often inconsistent U.S. military policies made effective training difficult and the South's commanders were sometimes left in the lurch. South Vietnamese command relationships were also dubious. Commanders were "never able to gain a firm grip on the operation or create any real unity among the American and various South Vietnamese forces." The operation also suffered intelligence leaks and the North was aware of the attack well in advance. See Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 15-16.

¹⁴⁷ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 17.

¹⁴⁸ Kissinger and Luce, *White House Years*, 1002.

have a feeling that they are more interested in numbers.”¹⁴⁹ In a 1972 memo, Nixon wrote: “I do not pretend to have any knowledge or experience whatever in military matters. But I do know that military men generally are noted for the courage and loyalty of their character and notorious for the plodding mediocrity of their strategy and tactics.”¹⁵⁰ As the war progressed, Nixon became increasingly convinced that the peace he sought would require his strong hand and leadership. “The goddamned Air Force has to take some goddamned risks,” Nixon complained, “just like they did during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II.”¹⁵¹

Like Johnson, Nixon thus took tighter control of the military. The difference was that Nixon was prepared to unleash a much fuller spectrum of American fury on the North Vietnamese and their allies. Nixon said during a conversation in the White House, “I don’t think anybody realizes how far I am prepared to go to save this...we have no option but to win this...whatever is necessary to stop this thing has to be done.”¹⁵² As Nixon revved up the U.S. military machine, he worked secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese through Kissinger in Paris. When negotiations stalled in the fall of 1971, Nixon told Kissinger, “They’ve got to fear that in some way I’m going to do a hell of a lot more.”¹⁵³ Nixon simultaneously blended hard-line diplomacy and stepped-up military operations, believing that the Nixon myth could coerce North Vietnam and change relationships among the great powers. In a conversation with Chinese Prime Minister Zhou, Kissinger pivoted on Nixon’s mystique:

I would like to make one other U.S. domestic political point. The only president who could conceivably do what I am discussing with you is President Nixon. Other political leaders might use more

¹⁴⁹ Nixon-Kissinger Memorandum, untitled, 10 May 1972, as quoted by Stephen Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 227-228.

¹⁵⁰ Nixon-Kissinger Memorandum, untitled, 15 May 1972, as quoted by Stephen Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 228.

¹⁵¹ Nixon as quoted by Stephen Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 88. Nixon was equally frustrated with Abrams, believing the ground commander had “screwed up Laos.” Speaking to CJCS chief Moorer, Nixon said: “From now on, you get those reports in to me. Second thing is, I want Abrams braced hard.” Nixon was frustrated by what he perceived as a lack of enthusiasm and aggressiveness during a counteroffensive along the DMZ. “The most consistent theme,” in the weeks following Laos, “was the White House’s frustration with the military... [Nixon] felt he had given the members of the military too much leeway...and they had let him down. He was determined to leave little latitude” in the future. See Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 81.

¹⁵² Nixon during taped Oval Office conversation, 4 April 1972, as quoted by Stephen Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 93.

¹⁵³ “Transcript of Oval Office Conversation, September 17, 1971,” Kimball document 5.29, 193-194.

honeyed words but would be destroyed by what is called the China lobby in the U.S. if they ever tried to move even partially in the direction which I have described to you. President Nixon, precisely because his political support comes from the Center and right of Center, cannot be attacked from that direction, and won't be attacked by the Left in a policy of moving toward a friendship with the People's Republic of China.¹⁵⁴

Nixon was building towards his 1972 Summit with China and using Peking as a way to gain leverage against the Soviet Union, which he could then use to pressure North Vietnam. White House staffers said that Nixon reveled in the "great power game," and he strategically linked China, Russia, and Vietnam as a way to triangulate and overcome his enemies. In the spring of 1972, Kissinger made it clear to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin that North Vietnam was launching large-scale attacks "armed 90 percent with Soviet-made weapons."¹⁵⁵ Recalling the exchange and the meetings that followed, Dobrynin said that it was obvious "[t]he Nixon administration was attempting to draw Moscow into the diplomatic game with Vietnam."¹⁵⁶ Having visited China in February, Nixon was working toward a summit in Moscow and escalation in Vietnam threatened to thwart his efforts. The American President could not appear weak and had to respond to the North's military action, but his ultimate goal of building a larger peace and better relations with his more formidable allies hung in the balance. After a lot of haranguing and maneuvering, "the final verdict of the Politburo was to go ahead with the summit,

¹⁵⁴ Transcript of Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger and Zhou, July 10, 1971, China/Vietnam Negotiations, National Security Council Files, Kimball document 5.28, 191.

¹⁵⁵ Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 243.

¹⁵⁶ Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 243-50. Dobrynin said it seemed obvious that the Nixon was on the verge of launching major military actions against the North. The Nixon Administration was concerned that escalation of the conflict in Vietnam might stall or kill the upcoming Summit between Brezhnev and Nixon in Moscow. Though Dobrynin recalls that Nixon perhaps overestimated the amount of influence Russian had on Hanoi's leadership, he reveals that the Soviets were eager to resolve Vietnam and saw the potential gains from better relations with the United States as outweighing their 'obligations' to North Vietnam. As the U.S. ramped up military operations following the North's Easter Offensive, "the summit literally hung in the balance." Moscow worried that Nixon might go even further and unleash some new "shock tactic" against the North. Additionally, it was not easy for Moscow to forego their support of Hanoi. "The Politburo discussed the delicate situation in Vietnam several times. It was caught in a dilemma between wanting to stop the American bombing and wanting to go ahead with a summit."

because its members recognized that the alternative would amount to handing Hanoi a veto over our relations with America.”¹⁵⁷

The Soviet’s decision to go ahead with the summit illuminates a larger point with regard to the Nixon Administration. American policy, as Nixon lamented, had effectively come under siege in Vietnam during the Johnson Administration. Though Vietnam continued under Nixon to bind politics both at home and abroad, Nixon’s reframing of the context within which he viewed Vietnam was liberating. Kennedy had pushed Vietnam to the front lines of the Cold War. Johnson folded Vietnam back into his domestic policy, where it became a gravity-well to his Great Society, his foreign policy, and his presidency. On Nixon’s turn, he re-elevated the Cold War but did so while he recalibrated some of the critical American assumptions of the past. Instead of seeking to stamp out Communism *carte blanche*, Nixon worked to find seams where both the Soviets and the United States could find mutual interests and benefit. This thawing allowed the subjugation of Vietnam to larger U.S. and Soviet interests. Dobrynin’s description of this evolution in Cold War policies is particularly salient: “It consolidated the policy of peaceful coexistence and opened the way to promoting our relations with the United States, notwithstanding our ideological differences...and our commitment to the dogma of ‘international solidarity’ with the ‘victims of imperialism.’ That was probably the first time that ideological considerations gave way to common sense.”¹⁵⁸

As Nixon worked China and Russia to exert pressure on North Vietnam, he also shocked Hanoi with vigorous assaults on their war effort. Hanoi had grown confident after Lam Son 719, and foresaw an opportunity to crush resistance in the South. In the spring of 1972, Hanoi launched the Easter Offensive, believing that they could simultaneously foment uprisings in the South’s countryside while taking up strategic positions with their conventional forces in urban areas. Against the advice of both Secretary Laird and General Abrams, Nixon responded with a furious air campaign code-named *Linebacker*. “With Kissinger encouraging him to signal to the enemy” that he had

¹⁵⁷ Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 248.

¹⁵⁸ Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, 249. Though Dobrynin characterized the shift in the Soviet mindset, we could easily replace the Soviet’s “dogma” with “Frontier’s of Freedom” and “Victims of Communist aggression.”

lost his mind, “Nixon’s purpose was to psychologically shock the other side while damaging its logistical capabilities.”¹⁵⁹ In discussing the operation, Nixon said:

Under no circumstances can I, with all the things I believe, fail to use the total power of this office—with the exception of nuclear weapons, that I cannot do, unless it’s necessary...the power of this office [is] to see that the United States does not lose [to] put it quite bluntly. Now, I’m being quite precise. South Vietnam may lose, but the United States cannot lose. It means whatever happens in South Vietnam, we are going to cream North Vietnam...So I’ve determined...that for once we’ve got to use the maximum power of the country against a shit-asshole country to win the war.¹⁶⁰

To that end, the objectives for Linebacker included mining Haiphong harbor, aggressive strikes against railroads, key command-and-control facilities, storage, support, and transshipment areas, and enemy defenses.¹⁶¹ The lowest priority was assigned to enemy defenses, because Nixon wanted to make Hanoi hurt. Nixon also wanted to ensure that the campaign distinguished itself from Johnson’s gradualism, directing the military to “bomb those bastards like they’ve never been bombed before.”¹⁶²

The North Vietnamese launched the Easter Offensive as part of a “strategic offensive posture in South Vietnam to defeat the American ‘Vietnamization policy,’ gain a decisive victory in 1972, and force the U.S. imperialists to negotiate an end to the war from a position of defeat.”¹⁶³ The Politburo hoped to quickly overrun resistance in the South and also banked on the Viet Cong successfully rallying the people in the South towards revolution. Hanoi was somewhat taken aback by the savagery of Nixon’s response: “The war against the Americans became very complicated in all areas: military, political, and diplomatic. Our armed forces [confronted]...the two most powerful, modern armed services of the U.S. imperialists. The fighting during the

¹⁵⁹ Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*, 30-31.

¹⁶⁰ Transcript of Executive Office Building Conversation, May 4, 1972, White House Tapes, Kimball document 6.11, 220-221.

¹⁶¹ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 190. Randolph summarizes the United States Air Force “North Vietnam Interdiction Plan” that formed the basic concept of operations for Linebacker.

¹⁶² Nixon as quoted by Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 183.

¹⁶³ Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, 283.

summer of 1972 was arduous and savage in North and South Vietnam and on the battlefields of Laos.”¹⁶⁴

Nixon’s use of airpower was effective in blunting the North’s offensive, but airpower could not fully root out and destroy the entire critical, albeit low-tech, infrastructure that Hanoi depended on. Despite wielding forces armed with the most modern technology available, sheer manpower and commitment, often shaded under dense jungle canopies, defied America’s efforts. Also at play was Hanoi’s commitment to “continue the strategic offensive in South Vietnam...and to reach, no matter what the cost, the strategic goals that we had set forward.”¹⁶⁵ In short, Hanoi was willing to accept whatever Nixon would dish out, and accepted the long, painful struggle. North Vietnam was “probably the most thoroughly mobilized society in humankind’s long and violent history. The government was able to turn every element of national power toward its ends.”¹⁶⁶ By 1973 North Vietnamese imports from China were reduced by forty percent and Hanoi had lost seventy percent of its power grid.¹⁶⁷ Movement of men and material along the Ho Chi Minh trail had actually increased, however, and Hanoi gained position for its forces throughout South Vietnam.

Perhaps recognizing Nixon’s tenuous position at home, the North calculated that continued direct confrontation with the United States would be both costly and unnecessary. Nixon won reelection decisively in 1972, but the Watergate scandal was percolating and he faced growing opposition from the Congress and the public. Just as he had arranged every means at his disposal to throw at Hanoi, Nixon had also gone ‘all-in’ during his reelection campaign. Besides the now notorious break-ins of 1972 and the subsequent cover-up, Nixon had undermined the Republican Party by selfishly hoarding the war chest for his reelection.¹⁶⁸ As a result, the Democrats swept back in control of the House and the Senate. There is a famous picture of Nixon on the eve of his victory that shows him brooding and melancholy. Despite his reelection, he knew that the

¹⁶⁴ Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, 299.

¹⁶⁵ Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, 299.

¹⁶⁶ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 339.

¹⁶⁷ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 338.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with *Washington Post* Reporter David Broder, as aired on Espar, "The American Experience: Nixon." Minute 115. Broder described Nixon’s actions as manically “selfish.”

resurgence of the Democrats would undermine his rule and rightly anticipated their vigorous investigation of the Watergate scandal. The confluence of Nixon's bombing campaign, his triangular diplomacy, and perhaps a prescient understanding of the American political system, inspired Hanoi to sue for peace in the fall of 1973.

The 1973 Paris Accords proceeded under several preliminary conditions. First, the Thieu government, southern neutralists, and the Viet Cong would form a "tripartite electoral commission."¹⁶⁹ Hanoi agreed to let Thieu remain in place so long as the Communist party was afforded representation. There would also be an in-place cease fire on all sides. The process leading up to the accords actually started in 1972. Haldeman describes the plan worked out by Kissinger and the North Vietnamese:

Henry started to outline the agreement from his secret red folder. Made the point that we got a much better deal by far than we had expected. The net effect is that it leaves Thieu in office. We get a stand-in-place cease-fire on October 30 or 31. They have to agree to work together to set up a Council of National Concord and reconciliation, but any action by this council has to be by unanimous vote, so it can't effectively hurt Thieu...The cease-fire would be followed by a complete withdrawal of troops within 60 days and a return of the POWs within 60 days. We'd have everything done by the end of the year.¹⁷⁰

The Nixon Administration was quite satisfied with the conditions, but President Thieu was not. The biggest breakthrough of the preliminary deal was that Hanoi relented on their insistence that Thieu would have to be removed from power. Thieu believed that leaving North Vietnamese forces in place and affording the Communist party a voice in his government merely delayed his being ousted from office. We now know that Thieu was spot-on in his objections, but as Nixon had already made clear, the Administration was only concerned with the United States' victory.¹⁷¹ With Thieu stalling, Hanoi attempted to pressure the United States by broadcasting details of the draft agreement.¹⁷² Thieu became only more obstinate, and the talks in the fall of 1972 proceeded through a

¹⁶⁹ Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*, 173.

¹⁷⁰ Notes of Oval Office Conversation, October 12, 1972. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, 513-14.

¹⁷¹ Reference quote this section: "South Vietnam may lose, but the United States cannot lose."

¹⁷² Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War* (New York, NY., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1984), 686. Kissinger continued to insist that "peace is at hand."

series of starts and stops, finally breaking off completely in December. Nixon had tried a series of “carrots and sticks” in order to coerce Thieu, promising both the delivery and the withholding of military and financial aid.¹⁷³ Nixon wanted the deal that Kissinger had arranged with the North, but also wanted to support his ally. Additionally, the American President had concluded that his vigorous bombing campaign and his deft diplomatic dealings had forced Hanoi to the table, so he was willing to once again reach for his hammer.

It wasn't the hoary elf who visited Christmas cheer upon Hanoi in 1972, but rather the dark-bearded and glowering American President wielding a B-52. Between December 18th and December 28th, the big bombers rained steel down on North Vietnam. For all the fury, there was little significance, and when talks between Le Duc Tho and Kissinger resumed in January, the parties arrived at essentially the same conditions that were established in October. There was a shift, however, regarding President Thieu. In a letter dated December 17th, Nixon cordially, yet firmly, let Thieu know exactly where he stood:

Over the last two months...I have kept you scrupulously informed of the progress of the negotiations. I have sought to convey to you my best judgment of what is in our mutual interest. I have given you every opportunity to join with me in bringing peace with honor to the people of South Vietnam. General Haig's mission now represents my final effort to point out to you the necessity for joint action and to convey my irrevocable intention to proceed, preferably with your cooperation, but, if necessary, alone...Let me emphasize...that General Haig is not coming to Saigon...[to negotiate] with you. The time has come for us to present a united front...and you must decide now whether you desire to continue to work together or whether you want me to seek a settlement with the enemy which serves U.S. interests alone.¹⁷⁴

Nixon knew that it would be better to have Thieu involved than not, and had no qualms about using military power in the interim while he realigned the South Vietnamese President's understanding of things. But Thieu had overplayed his hand in Nixon's game. It was five o'clock, and the American President was hell-bent on bringing

¹⁷³ Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*, 252-53, 57. Thieu was unmoved by these enticements, and in November issued what Kissinger described as Thieu's sixty-nine “preposterous” changes in the October agreement.

¹⁷⁴ Transcribed Letter, Nixon to Thieu, December 17, 1972, Kimball document 6.40, 276-277.

Vietnam to a close before dinner. He was more than willing to use the hammer of peace to do so—but it was Nixon's hammer and Nixon's peace.

The Hollow Peace

The Peace Accords were signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. The military arrangement left large portions of North Vietnamese forces in-place throughout Vietnam, which meant that combat after the cease-fire was “inevitable.”¹⁷⁵ Nixon's peace depended upon the “interlocking understandings with others and...the strategic realities of the conflict.”¹⁷⁶ Nixon banked on his mastery of great power politics to sustain the peace in Vietnam. He had won, but the victory thinly covered the ugly truth that in winning, he had sewn the seed for defeat. His commitment to ‘win at all costs’ had cost the Republican Party, the South Vietnamese, and his country. The decent interval of his second term expired before the decent interval of peace in Vietnam, but both nonetheless collapsed. The Vietnam War under Nixon, like his Presidency, was dramatic in its build up, but failed to end cleanly. The slow spiral of South Vietnam and the cascade of indictments and corruption surrounding Nixon were corrosive.

Congressman Murtha commented that a “president's strength lies not in his simply being commander in chief, but in his public support and the perception of his power. President Richard Nixon, for instance, was reelected in 1972 in a 520-17 electoral vote landslide. By 1974, though...he was powerless. As Watergate unfolded that year, Nixon was virtually confined to the White House. Even as the North Vietnamese were violating the Paris Peace Accords that Nixon had himself secretly authorized and supervised, he could not react...His approval rating in February was 27 percent. The weaker he became, the more the North Vietnamese ignored the peace agreement.”¹⁷⁷

Whether it was hiring men from personal accounts to rifle through psychiatrist's files, or bugging the Democratic headquarters, or breaching the borders of sovereign nations out of his own frustration, or bombing his adversaries into oblivion, Nixon was willing to do whatever it took to win. Furthermore, the peace he wrought in Vietnam was an illusion, conjured just as much as the New Nixon was conjured—from an amalgam of

¹⁷⁵ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 333.

¹⁷⁶ Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*, 335.

¹⁷⁷ Astor, *Presidents at War*, 26.

manipulated perceptions, strong-arming, selfishness, misrepresentations, and lies. Nixon accomplished both great and terrible things. Vietnam may very well fade in the grand annals of history as a subtext to a larger Cold War victory, but that is for others to determine. What we can know is that within the boundaries of Vietnam, the American victory Nixon brought came with empty promises. Americans' faith in their government, the U.S. economy, and the stature and confidence of America's military were tarnished. Nixon's victory and his Presidency hung like a guillotine over the nation of Vietnam and over his own.

South Vietnamese forces and Saigon fell to a major Communist offensive in 1975. Called to testify after he and President Ford had asked congress for \$722 million in U.S. aid for South Vietnam, Kissinger was asked if there was anything America could do to prevent a Communist takeover. "There is no certain answer to that question," Kissinger said, "I wish there were."¹⁷⁸ Commenting on Nixon's achievements through détente, Gaddis writes: "It is difficult to think of anything [he] could have done that would have produced a more dramatic shift in world power relationships of greater benefit to the United States...For the first time since the Korean War, it was Russians, and not Americans who faced rivals more determined to contain them than to contain each other."¹⁷⁹ Yet, Nixon ran the country as if it was "his own preserve," and despite his accomplishments, the shadowy aspects of his nature incurred costs.¹⁸⁰

Nixon's story reveals the limits of image. Nixon imagined himself the peacemaker, the exceptional leader, and the architect of a new world order, but his vision could only shape reality so far. Just like his and Kissinger's belief that American power had limits and that there was no such thing as absolute security, so too was the power of his myth limited in imposing his image upon the world. It is difficult to occupy and control multiple realities at once. Quarks might find it perfectly natural to shift readily between states, sometimes even choosing after the fact where they've been and how they got there. But for people, it's not so easy. Presidents' histories are sticky, even dubious

¹⁷⁸ United States Senate, Committee on Appropriations, Emergency Military Assistance, April 15, 1975 (Washington D.C.), as transcribed in Williams, *America in Vietnam : A Documentary History*, 312-15.

¹⁷⁹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, 295.

¹⁸⁰ Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*, 163.

and can serve as anchor and catapult, friend and foe. Nixon, perhaps more than others, was especially attuned to his dual-sided nature, both light and dark. He suppressed each when necessary, but he also embraced and nurtured them. In the end, he did succeed where others had failed, but he never was quite able to create the reality he desired. Nixon the villain won out, and out of his fear of persecution he behaved in ways that guaranteed his prosecution. He succumbed to the very five o'clock shadow that threatened, won, sustained, and lost his presidency. That same shadow dimmed what was a new dawn in the Cold War and obscured the peace, so that the country felt not so much honored as hollow and deceived.

On Image, Nixon, and Inheritance

Broader conclusions will be discussed in further detail in the next section, but since Nixon 'rounds-out' the slice of Vietnam this study examined, it is appropriate to hint at some of our findings. Nixon effectively redefined the Vietnam problem for the United States, but in reframing it, he only delayed the outcomes seeded by Kennedy and Johnson. Nixon's Presidency makes an interesting case for the study of image, agendas, and outcomes, because Nixon vehemently believed in the power of myth and dedicated so much time developing and exploiting his own. Ultimately, however, even a President is somewhat bound by structural forces, and while myth is indeed powerful, it is often only temporarily so. This is particularly true in the case of Nixon, because not only was his own self-image swirling with competing shades and contradictions, but his emphasis on winning meant that his Presidential image sought expediency over substance. Commenting on Kissinger and Nixon, Kimball writes: "Neither was a hollow man in the sense of lacking convictions about society, politics, economics, or diplomacy, but both were pragmatically flexible in response to circumstances. They also seemed to lack moral compunctions about using unethical means to achieve their ends and were ruthless players in the arena of power and politics."¹⁸¹

Flexibility is an important trait in a President. This study has often asserted that rigid belief structures bound decision-makers and prevented them from seeing the 'world-as-it-is,' or at least from seeing it more clearly. Yet, Nixon demonstrates that the converse is also true. Latching on to victory is a valid philosophy, and we wouldn't want

¹⁸¹ Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 65.

our Presidents to shy away from winning. But there is a point at which the object Presidents seek to win is surpassed by the aim of winning, and Nixon exemplifies this. Beliefs need to be underwritten by more than just 'success' if they are to hold together and sustain themselves effectively through the course of policy. As amorphous as many Presidential assertions are, they and their nation often pursue the vision described in those assertions vigorously. It is important, then, that such visions find at least some bedrock in morality and purpose beyond simply achieving them.

The totality of the Vietnam War cannot be laid at Nixon's feet. But his policies there, and the direction in which he took the war and his country, do reflect his Presidential image. Whether we believe Nixon's center was hollow, shaded, or both, how he ended Vietnam is at once an expression of the man and the Vietnam War. For all the sound and fury leading up to the 1973 Peace Accords, the ending for the United States was more whisper and whimper than 'bang.' Vietnam started and ended ambiguously. From Eisenhower's inchoate policies to Kennedy's covert investment with broad commitments to Johnson's quiet slide, Nixon's turn to the 'decent interval' merely continued the confusion that surrounded America's longest war. How wars begin may very well determine how they end. Wars that start muddled will most likely end so. Such wars make for a sticky inheritance and can taper in their endings as surreptitiously and insidiously as they snowball in their beginnings, so that they linger and haunt the halls of power long after the reports of rifles have silenced and the helicopters have left.

Conclusions

Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power—not only at home, but throughout the world. It has poisoned our domestic debate. So we paid an exorbitant price for the decisions that were made in good faith and for good purpose.

-- Henry Kissinger

Summary and Conclusions

This study examined three Presidents in Vietnam and the effects their image had on the agenda and outcomes of America's longest war. In seeking to convey the more salient points and aspects of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, the study invoked the often useful, but infinitely limited literary device of metaphor. No matter how consistent the images of Camelot's mythical king, America's frontiersman, or the 'shadow,' are with Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, the caricatures inevitably fall short. Each President is an amalgam and could be described a hundred different ways, and none would be wrong. Neither would any one description be wholly correct. Presidents, like their policies, are an iterative accumulation of experiences and interactions. In the full refraction of history's prism, they are at once revealed to be stunningly similar to the way we elect to perceive and portray them, while still defying encapsulation. Like T.S. Eliot's 'Prufrock,' Presidents are not so easily "formulated," no matter how intently we pin them to the wall.¹ In this way, wars are little different than the men who wage them. Still, the metaphors and the explorations of Presidential image through the lens of cognitive theory have led to some conclusions regarding the relationship between each President, his image, and Vietnam as an inherited war.

First and foremost, analysis of the three Presidents confirms Boulding's contention that images evolve through an iterative process of interaction. Though predilections are stubborn, and the many examples throughout the study demonstrate Kennedy's, Johnson's, and Nixon's enduring commitment to existing beliefs, often the

¹ Reference to T.S. Eliot's 1917 poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The verse the quote refers to is: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all—/The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,/And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,/ Then how should I begin/to spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways? /And how should I presume?" See, Eliot, *The Wasteland, Prufrock and Other Poems*, digireads ed (Stilwell, KS: 2005). www.digireads.com.

most salient examples regarding the impact of images came from their interactions with the 'real world.' Presidential image consists not only of the personal world view projected through each of the Presidents, but also is comprised by the integration of both confirming and disconfirming information. Domestic pressures, public perceptions of the Presidents and their policies, opinions, as well as the interactions of particular policies with the war on the international stage all congealed to form each man's Presidential image. Each President's image was shaped by political equities—sometimes even more than the world views that spawned their agendas in the first place. At a minimum, however, each man's existing belief structure influenced how externalities (such as an uncooperative press or domestic dissent) were dealt with. These facts not only heighten the importance for leaders to be cognizant of their predilections, but it also illuminates the integral role played by the public in shaping Presidential image.

The study also revealed that though each Vietnam-era President adhered to the same containment meta-structure, each man individually perceived the means best suited to achieve its prescriptions. Even Johnson and Kennedy, who were from the same political party and who shared numerous, overlapping assumptions as to the role of government, differed in how they levied their agendas to push back Communism, transform American society, and to win in Vietnam. While dynamic circumstances and 'changes on the ground,' certainly played a role between Kennedy's demise and Nixon's rise, the respective differences between each man are attributable in large part to the individual images of each President. This seems consistent with the assertions of both Hawking and Boulding, where beliefs or models effectively create reality through perceptions. Each man helped shape, if not create, many of the circumstances surrounding his Vietnam policies, and forced unto his successor the ramifications wrought through his Presidential image.

Current decision makers should pay heed to the role image played on each Vietnam-era President's policies and their outcomes, and should be especially mindful of the effects Presidential image had on the successor's 'state of play.' Kennedy's inheritance and subsequent policies demonstrate the importance of transitions. When Presidential transitions include a war, or another problem deemed paramount to national security, it is important that the war is effectively 'handed-off.' When both the problem

and the solutions are ill-defined, there is more room for preconceptions and Presidential Image to 'fill in the white space.' Eisenhower's hand-off of Vietnam to Kennedy amounted to little more than 'it's important, complicated, and difficult.' The consequence was Kennedy's almost blanket departure from past policies. Such departures are not always bad, but the danger lies in the premature dismissal of context and circumstances that at the very least might better inform the new President on the way ahead. Marked departures from past policy stances in the absence of deliberate collusion between the ingoing and outgoing administrations amplifies the tendency to dismiss or overlook previous rationales. Wicked problems are inherently inchoate and provide ample opportunity for decision-makers to define them through their own image. If the new administration is already inclined to 'rebel' against its predecessor, this tendency is exacerbated. Furthermore, if the heir's image is rooted in the same assumptions as his predecessor, as was the case with Johnson, disconfirming information can be readily dismissed. The result with Johnson was a 'doubling-down' on previous policies with little to no inquiry into the validity of their assumptions.

Kissinger said "[i]t is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience...the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office."² Predilections are enduring and stubborn even in the face of experience. Biases become even more defiant when decision-makers are denied a deliberate, detailed, formal and cooperative interchange with their predecessor. Lacking both first-hand experience and 'experience by proxy,' Kennedy's perception of Eisenhower's passivity and ineptitudes regarding Indochina policies were only reinforced by the lack of a detailed hand-off.

Chapter one elucidated how the human brain fills in patterns, drawing on theories from Hawking, Jervis, Khong, and Boulding. Both the social and the physical sciences postulate how what 'we believe' becomes 'what is,' and that beliefs may even redefine 'what was'. Objective 'facts' do remain. Vietnam happened. The question is the degree of influence Presidential image exhibited on the war. When Kennedy looked to Vietnam, he saw the 'New Frontiers of Freedom,' and staked out America's claim and commitment there. He reorganized the government and rallied it to Vietnam, which became the new

² Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1979), 54.

frontline of the Cold War. Johnson subsequently labored to fortify America's position there, but he did so by folding Vietnam into the interior lines of his larger quest for a Great Society. In so doing, the Vietnam War acted as a sink hole to Johnson's cause and his presidency. Nixon reached into that dark hole and attempted to place Vietnam back on the map as a 'small peninsula' amongst much larger continents. Perceptions influenced, and sometimes dictated, the agendas and subsequent outcomes for both Johnson and Nixon.

Johnson obsessed over controlling perceptions. His manipulations were driven by a need to overcome his own insecurities as well as the need to 'buy time' in Vietnam so as to prosecute his social agendas. In "Theory of Victory," Boone Bartholomees asserts that Victory is ultimately a matter of 'opinion,' and in America the domestic opinion matters the most.³ Bartholomees' observations should not be confused to mean that 'opinion' supersedes the practical applications and conduct of war. Vietnam was not merely a public relations campaign, but opinions did matter. In fact, many have asserted that American public opinion was the Clausewitzian center of gravity for this war. Military force, diplomacy, economic incentives and coercions are, in the end, ways by which Presidents seek to influence and change their adversary's behavior. According to Clausewitz, the *object* of war is capitulation of the enemy while the *aim* is attacking the enemy's means to resist. Belief structures, and the perceptions that flow from them, are means of resistance. Johnson's failings in Vietnam were driven by his failure to successfully create the reality he desired in the minds of both his countrymen and his enemy. His failed negotiations with Hanoi were in large part due to the different value scales of the American and the North Vietnamese leaders—the two sides were playing very different games. Additionally, the gap between what 'was' and what he wanted others to believe had for Johnson grown too wide. As Louis Halle astutely observes:

All nations cultivate myths that endow them with dignity and when occasion arises, give nobility to the causes in which they fight...myths belong to the conceptual world by which, alone, we are able to interpret the existential world that constitutes our raw environment...We men have to live, then, in two worlds at once, the conceptual and the existential, and our central problem is to

³ As quoted by Jeffrey Kimball from, J.B. Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," *Parameters* (Summer, 2008): 30-31.

maintain the correspondence between them. It is when these two worlds diverge excessively that we find ourselves in trouble... Under circumstances of conflict between individuals or societies...the respective conceptual formulations of the parties tend to diverge...[and] fear, hatred, and the need for self-justification find their expression in conceptual falsification, whether innocent, or deliberate.⁴

Even more than Johnson, Nixon believed in the power of myth and worked hard to 'tweak minds' and shape perceptions. In discussing the upcoming 1972 election with his staff, Nixon told Haldeman that he needed to be perceived as a "fighting president" and was therefore in need "an enemy."⁵ Nixon lamented how Kennedy had "mesmerized" the public and the attorney from Yorba Linda pushed his staff to cultivate a more effective 'Nixon' myth. "No one loves him, fears him, or hates him, and he needs to have all three."⁶ As Vietnam became Nixon's War and the perceptual gaps between the President and the public widened, he cast a long shadow of fear, hatred, and self-justification.

Presidential image played out across three administrations in Vietnam. Despite the fundamental meta-structure of containment and the Cold War, each President pursued common ends in distinctly different ways. How each perceived himself, the government and its institutions, and the security environment influenced the nature and character of his policies and their outcomes. Kennedy and Nixon both summoned the country to greatness during their inaugural addresses, but each man had distinctly different understandings of what 'greatness' meant and how to get there.⁷ Where Kennedy envisioned a greatly expanded government and institutional mechanisms, Nixon

⁴ Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War as History*, 1991 ed. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Inc., 1967), 412.

⁵ Transcript of Oval Office conversation from diaries, January 17, 1972. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, 397-98.

⁶ Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, 398.

⁷ In Nixon's inaugural address, he said: "I ask you to share with me today the majesty of the moment. In the orderly transfer of power, we celebrate the unity that keeps us free...This is our summons to greatness." Kennedy said: "Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us...Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need...but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out...a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself." Transcripts of Nixon's inaugural address are available at The American Experience, PBS, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/37_nixon/psources/ps_inaug1.html. Transcripts of Kennedy's inaugural address is available through the JFK Presidential library online, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BqXIEM9F4024ntF17SVAjA.aspx>

imagined a smaller, less ambitious government.⁸ Nixon also differed with Kennedy and Johnson over the idea that America should seek to transform other nations:

In foreign policy we are faced with a choice of insisting on Democratic rule around the world or of accepting the existence of the non-democratic regimes that have arisen in cultures different from our own. At the philosophical level, we should endorse Locke's concept of natural rights. In practice, however, we must recognize that often nations lack the traditions and institutions to make democracy work. Democratic government does not automatically mean good government...our country developed its democratic political institutions over centuries, we should not expect others to replicate them overnight.⁹

Nixon conceptualized Vietnam as part of a 'much bigger game,' and reframed the war to align with his understanding of America's interests. For good and ill, each President's image affected his war policies and the subsequent outcomes were bequeathed to their successors.

Another question we might ask at the end of this study is how the exploration of Presidential image has shaped or re-shaped our understanding of Vietnam and inherited war?

I cannot say for certain that the world would be a better place had we not gone to Vietnam. Historians and scholars lament the missed opportunity to stop Hitler sooner and Chamberlain's naivety is axiomatic. Hindsight affords a luxurious perch from which to judge. The *Couch of Reason* is not often available, however, in the frantic world of Presidents. Johnson's quandary left him 'damned if he did and damned if he didn't.' The Hippocratic Oath demands that doctors first "do no harm." In politics, it is not always easy to find an option that eliminates all harm, and presidents are often challenged with determining what will do 'less harm.' Francis Bacon said that more comes from failure

⁸ Chapter Two discusses at length Kennedy's vision and realignment of government. Johnson shared Kennedy's premise and both departed sharply from Eisenhower's more conservative fiscal and social policies. Chapter Three also discusses Johnson's desire to fulfill Roosevelt's and Kennedy's vision by creating the 'New-New Deal' through his Great Society program. In his memoirs, Nixon contrasts himself with these visions by recounting a speech he delivered in 1945: "I described my view of the two conflicting opinions about the nature of the American System...One advocated by the New Deal is government control in regulating our lives. The other calls for individual freedom and all that initiative can produce. I hold the latter viewpoint." See, Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 35.

⁹ Richard Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 305.

than from success, and while we can assess the costs of Vietnam, it is much harder to determine the benefits. Without Vietnam, all of the political missteps and inefficacies of presidential leadership may have remained shadowed, and we would be without their benefit today. Similarly, American military reform may have taken a different path—or none at all.

Vietnam cost the United States nearly \$200 billion, more than 58,000 U.S. lives, and over 300,000 wounded.¹⁰ Though the figures vary, it is estimated that the Communists lost some 600,000 men and South Vietnam approximately 500,000.¹¹ Nearly 800,000 South Vietnamese fled their country.¹² Less quantifiable but just as significant were the costs the war incurred upon the American psyche. The relationships between the American government and its people, the military mind, and public perceptions of the institutions built to protect and represent them were forever changed. Whether the gains were worth the costs is not for this author to judge. Given today's fights, however, as we wrangle through our own inherited wars, we should ask not only questions of worth. The larger question for policy-makers is the degree to which image affected *why* we fought in the first place and also *how* we fought once we were there? Presidential image matters no less today than it did in Vietnam and serves as a salient starting point in coming to understand today's fight.

Final Thoughts

Analysis of Kennedy's, Johnson's, and Nixon's Presidential image provides access not just to how their predilections and belief structures drove agendas and outcomes in Vietnam, but also is an excellent lens through which to view our own understandings and beliefs about Vietnam, our Presidents, wars, and our country. Every new war receives unto its fields the ghosts of wars past, reincarnated through the incantations of Presidential image. If we expect certain limits in Presidential behavior and disapprove of either the wars they choose or how they fight them, then it is to our own expectations of government and understanding of war where we must turn. It is easy to throw stones, especially through time, but it is much more difficult to consider,

¹⁰ Williams, William, Thomas McCormick, Loyd Gardner & Walter LaFeber, *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (New York, NY: Norton and Company, 1989), 300-01.

¹¹ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History; the First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 1-8.

¹² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed., *America in Crisis* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1986), 270.

understand, and engage problems of national interest from the perspective of those who face such wickedness every day. While it may not be possible for each of us to share the view of the Oval Office, we can turn to history, self-reflection, and current affairs. Only when informed might we find the purchase required to see when Presidents' judgments are clouded or when their rhetoric abuses history. If, however, we leave not just the decisions but the understanding of history solely to the decision-makers, then certainly we have no right to feel abused when Presidents drive us to places we would rather not go. Presidents are endowed with a sacred trust, but so too are those who elect them. Images, the wars they drive, and the inheritance they bequeath are not just the business of Presidents. Ultimately, the image, the war, and the inheritance are our own.



A Note for Future Study

The interplay between individual image and the inertial ‘state of play’ is crucial in inherited wars. In the expanse of Vietnam this study examined, each president was presented within a particular metaphor which was then tied to their agendas and outcomes. Though the preceding study of image is satisfactory and attention was paid to the interaction between each image and the momentum inherited from the previous administration, it is that very nexus of those transitions that warrants further research. Preliminary findings derived from each President’s image lead us to believe that Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon may signify three broad ‘categories’ or ‘types’ of Presidents in inherited wars. Respectively, they are: *The Visionary*, *The Shepherd*, and the *Re-framer*.¹³ Each President must react to the trajectory of the war and contend with the political environment he inherits while at the same time implementing his own agenda. Wars that transcend administrations funnel both spectral and tangible threats forward, so that heirs must immediately contend with dramatic threats to American interests and ideology—whether the threat is real or perceived.

Regardless of size and scope, wars are an automatic crisis that hyper-excites the polity, and the immediacy of crisis that inherited wars present means that each bias, predilection, and image that Presidents draw from is immediately in play—Analogies and other cognitive shortcuts are the first and sometimes only fallback position. At the same time, inherited wars have a momentum of their own, and the contest between the individual and the structure takes center stage. In the arc of Vietnam, the progression from Visionary to Re-framer followed the course of each administration. This does not necessarily mean, however, that each President was inherently a Visionary, a Shepherd, or a Re-framer. The same President might very well oscillate between categories in his policies. Conclusions cannot be drawn as to whether party affiliation, the war’s duration, or the point at which each President takes over affects the ‘type’ of war President he becomes. Presidential image, however, proves a good place to start.

¹³ These are loose, potential categories that may signify the arc of inherited wars. The Visionary creates the stakes and goals. The Shepherd manages the goals and the correlating and competing commitments while trying to satisfy the stakes created by his predecessor. The Re-framer redefines the stakes, the goals, and re-matches resources to ‘the new war.’

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