

The Tragedy of Johnson
- A World Class Politician's Descent Into Doom

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Table of Contents

Abstract..... 3

Introduction..... 4

Section 1: The Rise of Lyndon Johnson- The Ascension of a World Class
Politician..... 6

Section 2: Johnson Takes a Stand in Vietnam..... 13

Section 3: The Beginning of the End for Lyndon Johnson..... 27

Section 4: The Fall of Johnson- A World Class Politician’s Descent into
Doom..... 32

Conclusion:.....35

Bibliography.....38

Abstract

This Senior Project aims to provide an in-depth explanation of Lyndon Johnson's historic rise to power, the turning point of his presidency, and his subsequent downfall. It will argue that Johnson as a skillful politician had achieved remarkable successes during his time in office such as passing a number of groundbreaking and enduring legislations, but at the same time as a tragic figure he quickly lost his momentum due to serious miscalculations in Vietnam. It will present a detailed narrative of Johnson's fall from grace and examine the multiple factors that contributed to it.

This senior project intends to examine the tragedy of President Lyndon Johnson's dramatic downfall from power. It will argue that Johnson was one of America's most accomplished presidents and had an extremely bright mind, but that his fervent need for popularity, consensus, and desire to preserve his reputation ended up contributing to his massive fall from grace. Johnson's greatest quality, his undying determination to act in response to conflicts, is ultimately what worked against him towards the end of his presidency and caused him to doom America in the Vietnam War. While Johnson did not originally bring America into Vietnam, his actions in the small Asian nation were the most significant of all the presidents. It will demonstrate that Johnson was aware of the potential consequences of escalation, yet signed off on it due to the pressure of other political commitments and his domestic initiative, and above all else, his political personality. Ultimately, it was Lyndon Johnson who capitalized on the alleged Gulf of Tonkin attacks, using them as a means to justify war. After Lyndon Johnson used his persuasion skills to get the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed, he would take several steps towards escalating the war. Johnson felt that it was a necessary step to take in order to ensure that he would craft for himself an unforgettable legacy, in which domestic reform would be something he was most remembered and respected for. As a person and a politician, Johnson was a complex figure who wished to balance the war with several notable bills that were in the process of being passed in America. He strategically tailored his policy in Vietnam in a way that would please both Republicans and Democrats and result in as little controversy as possible, but Johnson's

approach ultimately doomed his presidency and brought him to the point of no return. Johnson's attempts to gain further political momentum by escalating the war in Vietnam casted a shadow over his administration and ultimately led to his unbelievable fall from grace, and contributed to a historic tragedy in Vietnam that haunts the United States to this very day. This paper will include in-depth analysis of Lyndon Johnson, his presidential goals, and the numerous events that resulted in his loss of popularity. The paper will focus on Johnson's rise to power and the unique circumstances surrounding it, the methods he used to gain momentum, and the events that ultimately led to his downfall.

Section 1: The Rise of Lyndon Johnson- The Ascension of a World Class Politician

It is equally important to discuss Johnson's unparalleled rise to power and the peak of his popularity. Lyndon Johnson was originally the Vice President, with John F. Kennedy being the President of the United States. However, President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas Texas, and hours after the murder, Lyndon Johnson officially became the 36th president of the United States.

In the beginning of his presidency, Johnson made known his most important goals and aspirations, and made numerous promises to the American people, many of which he absolutely delivered on. In terms of domestic accomplishments, Lyndon Johnson happens to be one of America's greatest presidents. His ambitious program, the Great Society, featured numerous bills that forever changed the landscape and structure of American society, and the impact of these programs is still being felt today. These bills include the Civil Rights Act, the Economic Opportunity Act, and Medicare. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was unprecedented legislation in every sense of the word. It officially put an end to Jim Crow Laws, which were state laws that made segregation and racism perfectly legal and acceptable in American society. Thus, the act outlawed the segregation that griped America since 1865, and made it illegal for restaurants, schools, bathrooms, and other facilities to discriminate on the basis of race, and prohibited voting discrimination as well. It was a major victory for the Civil Rights Movement and gave it the momentum to continue being a force to be reckoned with, and Johnson prioritizing civil rights legislation sent a message to America that racism was a force that would be combated

relentlessly, and that there was simply no place for it in American society. While the act certainly did not completely demolish racism, it was still the most sweeping civil rights law passed since Reconstruction. Moreover, Johnson's Great Society brought a higher standard of living to the southern states and reminded the rest of America of the importance of the south.¹ It brought racial and economic justice to the south on a large scale, which was absolutely unprecedented for quite a long time.

Johnson's other groundbreaking program, Medicare, was signed into law on July 30, 1965, as an amendment to the Social Security Act, and it marked a turning point in American history. It provided millions of Americans with health insurance as well as social security, both of which still exist today and continue to be influential. It was a major breakthrough for the United States, as it had taken over 15 years for a major health insurance program to be passed by the government. President Truman formerly tried to pass it, but came up short in his attempts to do so. Johnson's masterful political skills and persuasion abilities allowed him to pass groundbreaking laws that benefited millions of elderly Americans.

Furthermore, on August 20, 1964, president Johnson officially signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act, which entailed a variety of programs designed to improve the well-being of those living in poverty. One of the most notable programs under the Economic Opportunity Act is known as Head Start. This federally funded program aims to provide young children with an education that they will need to flourish in the early years of life. The program teaches children important facts about health and nutrition and empowers both them and their parents to make choices that will benefit their well-being. The children who are eligible for Head Start are those of low-income families, as well as those who are in foster homes.

¹ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 625

Johnson's methods for getting these programs passed will be discussed extensively below. "Little wonder that he entered the White House with his eyes on matters at home— his main goal, he told aides only hours after being sworn in, was to enable all Americans to share in America's bounty. His first State of the Union address, delivered in January 1964, was the first since Franklin Roosevelt's to stress, by placement and by language, domestic affairs."² Johnson had a strong desire to pass this legislation because racial justice was a key part of his vision for a new and improved America. Not only this, in Johnson's home state of Texas, where he was in the senate, segregation was in effect and anyone who seemed to support desegregation would not be allowed to progress up the political ranks. Johnson saw firsthand how rampant racism was in Texas, and disagreed strongly with those who were in stark opposition to the civil rights movement. Moreover, Johnson understood that he alone could not pass the civil rights bill, and that it was a must to lean on Congress and other important organizations for assistance. Shortly after Kennedy's death, Lyndon Johnson stated "I urge you again, as I did in 1957 and again in 1960, to enact a civil rights law so that we can move forward to eliminate from this Nation every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based upon race or color. There could be no greater source of strength to this Nation both at home and abroad."³ However, not only did Johnson call upon the members of Congress to help enact the law, he also asked major racial justice movements to aid in the process of getting bills passed. On November 29, Johnson urged the NAACP to take part in the process, explaining that, although he had a great deal of power, Johnson alone could not get the bill

² Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (California: University of California Press, 2001) 75

³ Ted Gittinger and Allen Fisher, LBJ Champions the Civil Rights Act of 1964, National Archives

passed. Johnson was very skillful at spreading a powerful message to the correct people, and knew how to unify many. He used this skill to gain support for his program proposals.

Despite Johnson being adamant about passing the Civil Rights Act, it faced manifold obstacles. It was strongly opposed in the House of Representatives, many southern democrats attempted to slow the passage of it with filibusters, and the Senate was extremely hesitant to pass it. "Now you know that the bill can't pass unless you get Ev Dirksen [still worries about those 67 votes]." And he said, "You and I are going to Ev... You make up your mind now that you've got to spend time with Ev Dirksen. You've got to play to Ev Dirksen. You've got to let him have a piece of the action. He's got to look good all the time."- Lyndon Johnson⁴ Ev Dirksen was senator minority leader during Lyndon Johnson's term, and the president understood that it would be an uphill battle to have civil rights legislation passed. Despite the challenges to its passage, Johnson remained persistent and did everything in his power to influence the senate to pass the bill. He tasked Vice President Herbert Humphrey to foster a relationship with Dirksen for the purpose of getting the senate minority leader to support the civil rights agenda that Johnson pushed heavily for in 1964. A key tactic of Johnson was to focus on strengthening relationships with those around him, or having the members of his administration develop connections with other powerful people in politics. Johnson understood thoroughly that psychology was important in politics. One could not contribute to monumental change without establishing relationships, and this relates to Johnson's ability to form consensus and appeal to both sides of the political spectrum.

On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, which made discrimination in public places illegal. The successful passage of bills such as the Civil Rights

⁴ Irvin Bernstein, *Guns Or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 61

Act gave Johnson even more momentum to continue to be supported by the American people. In May 1964, his approval rating sat at 75%, a very impressive number all things considered. Another bill that Johnson worked tirelessly on was the poverty bill, in the first half of 1964. While one of Johnson's main priorities was the Vietnam war, he was also busy fighting a metaphorical war against the state of destitution that countless Americans found themselves in. Johnson coined this the "War on Poverty". While Lyndon Johnson himself was never in poverty, growing up in Texas, he saw clearly that countless Americans were living in destitution. He understood that, while many Americans were economically stable and even prospering, there were many who struggled to have even the most basic necessities. Johnson's upbringing laid the groundwork for his desire to pass legislation that would help those with poverty live a higher quality life. His methods for getting poverty legislation passed demonstrate even further that Johnson was masterful at forging consensus and acquiring legislative power.

On November 23, 1963, Walter Heller, an economist and advisor to John F. Kennedy, had an important meeting with then President Lyndon B. Johnson. He explained to Johnson that the Kennedy administration had been looking to address the issue of rampant poverty in America, and Johnson expressed to Heller a major interest in addressing the issue. He told Heller, "That's my kind of program. I'll find money for it one way or another. If I have to, I'll take money away from things to get money for people."⁵ Immediately, Johnson made it clear that he would reduce poverty, even if it meant losing the money for other projects he and his administration were working on. In the early stages of developing a plan for combating poverty, the economists in Johnson's administration were pressured to find funds that fit well into federal programs that already existed.⁶ They were instructed to establish a program that was only geared toward certain

⁵ Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Vintage, 2013) p. 540

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 540

populations, instead of a far-reaching program that addressed poverty on a large-scale. “That’s why... we talked about a targeted demonstration program. We used the argument that we were all terribly ignorant about poverty and programmatic ways to do something about it, that we had to learn a lot more. We were not talking about a massive program at all.”- Walter Heller⁷ Despite Heller having the goal of addressing poverty on a smaller scale, President Johnson was already at work on establishing an ambitious anti-poverty program. He had already found new money for it, and the amount doubled the original budget for the program. Originally, Heller reserved \$500 million, but Johnson added another \$500 million, which resulted in there being an astounding \$1 billion dedicated to combating poverty. Johnson was exceptionally knowledgeable on politics, and understood clearly that a limited program simply would not be supported by congress. Instead, according to Johnson, the program needed to be “big and bold” if it was ever going to garner widespread congressional support. “A small number of projects, he explained, meant that only a small number of congressional districts would receive the new federal funds, and the number of congressmen with a vested interest in supporting the program would therefore be small.”⁸ Originally, Heller did not have concrete plans for a poverty program. He did not have a strong idea of the bedrock and foundation of the program, and was relatively uncertain of what he expected it to achieve. President Johnson did not agree with Heller’s flexible and fluid approach on the topic of the poverty program. In discussions with Heller, Johnson was extremely forceful and demanding. He spoke with a great deal of intensity, and made it clear that he wanted and expected Heller to revise his original plans and establish something that was less vague and

⁷ Ibid., 540

⁸ Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Vintage, 2013) p. 541

more ambitious. Again, Johnson used his persuasion tactics to achieve his political goals. He knew how to be politic more than just about anyone.

Despite the manifold obstacles it faced, namely it being heavily opposed by both southern democrats and republicans as well, Johnson would eventually get the Economic Opportunity Act passed on July 23, 1964 through his natural ability to create consensus and get laws passed. Both the Civil Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act were intended to be major programs included in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, which was one of his major focuses as president. From the beginning of Johnson's career in politics, he was always primarily concerned with issues that affected the American people. His desire was to make life better for all Americans, no matter the background, and this remained the same during Johnson's presidency. However, in 1966 and 1967, the Johnson administration faced mounting pressure to strengthen the South Vietnamese army so it could exist as its own state while continuing to pass impactful domestic reforms in America. Johnson intended to make good on his promises to the American people, but the conflict in Vietnam put his ambitious plans in jeopardy.

Section 2: Johnson Takes a Stand in Vietnam

Before discussing Johnson's loss of political momentum and support and the derailing of his Great Society plans, it is of the utmost importance to provide historical context for America's entry into Vietnam, and demonstrate that Johnson ultimately inherited the war from his predecessors.

Johnson inherited the war from Kennedy, who greatly increased the amount of military advisors in Vietnam. To be exact, he brought the number of military advisors from less than 700 to 16,000 in merely two years, and also provided the south with ample support. Johnson would continue the support that JFK gave the south, and took it a step further through massive bombing campaigns and troop escalation.

One major factor that shaped America's response to the Vietnam War was the Geneva Conference, which took place in 1954, from April 26 to July 20. While this conference did not directly influence Lyndon Johnson, it still influenced what America could and could not do in Indochina after the conference was finished. The Geneva Conference, held in Switzerland, was supposed to resolve critical issues concerning the Indochinese war between the French and Vietnamese and the Korean War. These wars were part of a much larger Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, in which America did everything in its power to restrict the flow of communism. The Geneva accords, signed in 1954, ruled that that Vietnam was to be

temporarily divided into the north and south, and would be unified as a single nation through a national election in July of 1956.⁹ (history of Indochina, Encyclopedia Britannica) The United States ultimately made the decision to not sign the Geneva Accords, a controversial decision that put it on the receiving end of flack and criticism. Dwight Eisenhower and his administration went back and forth on whether or not signing it was the right choice, ultimately opting out of it for several important reasons. The United States developed a deep mistrust of Vietnam, but on a larger scale, it was suspicious of communist governments worldwide. This mistrust caused the United States to opt out of signing the Geneva accords. The United States wanted the ability to intervene if it felt like the communists in Vietnam were attempting to establish control over the Vietnamese people. America's fear of communism spreading caused it to join forces with France, Great Britain, and several other nations and form the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, which intended to battle communism in Southeast Asia. (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, Encyclopedia Britannica)¹⁰ The United States was determined to establish a new nation in South Vietnam, one that was not under communist rule. Thus, when Ngo Dinh Diem ran for president of the South in October 1954, the United States offered him support due to his political leanings, namely that he was a capitalist who agreed with American ideals. America continued to support Diem when he won the election, and began to provide South Vietnam with political and military support in the coming years. Its main objective was to assist the south in its battle against the northern regime, and bring the south to a point where it could stand on its own. However, this was simply not possible. Both the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong had no intentions of making concessions and were unwilling to enter the negotiation stage with the United States. The National Liberation Front was fully intent on overthrowing the government of

⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Geneva Accords, history of Indochina

¹⁰ Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, Encyclopedia Britannica

South Vietnam, and continued to battle the United States, who supported Diem's government. These southern guerrilla forces were working together with North Vietnam to prevent the South from establishing its own independent state. They would stop at nothing to ensure that Vietnam would become unified in the national election and any threats to this happening were actively fought against. The nationalism among the communists in both North and South Vietnam was widespread, and the United States did not realize the popularity of the communist's movement.¹¹ This is precisely the reason the Johnson administration increased ground troops by the thousands- They did not understand that they were no match for the nationalism and unity of North Vietnam and its supporters in South Vietnam. The United States had a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation, and as a result, made a number of misjudgments and miscalculations.¹²

It is of the utmost importance to also examine the factors that shaped Johnson's response in specific to communism in Vietnam, with the most significant of which being foreign policy debates in the 1940s and 1950s as well as Republican rhetoric that made Johnson feel pressured to take decisive action in Vietnam. While Johnson was Senate majority leader, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were at an all time high. America was in direct competition with the Soviets, as both countries attempted to demonstrate that they were the most powerful and influential, in what was known as the Cold War. Additionally, Barry Goldwater, presidential candidate in 1964 and Johnson's opponent, had made the argument that Lyndon Johnson's entire foreign policy was flawed, and repeated numerous times in campaign speeches that Johnson was "soft on communism" and that America needed strong new leadership that

¹¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "National Liberation Front", Encyclopedia Britannica

¹² Robert W. Sellen, "Old Assumptions versus New Realities: Lyndon Johnson and Foreign Policy", *Sage Publications*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1973, p. 227

would step up to the challenge of communism abroad. Goldwater applied this argument to the entire Democratic Party, arguing that democrats have had far more power in recent years than republicans, but lost far more countries to communism. In his own words, "The Democrats have been in power twice as long as the Republicans [since 1940]; but the Democrats have lost 10 times as many countries and 50 times as many people as the Republicans! How much can we lose before we have lost?"¹³ Johnson, fearing the political controversy that would arise if he did not take decisive action in Vietnam, ultimately escalated the war to portray himself as a strong and courageous president who would not allow communism to dominate other countries.

Furthermore, the importance of the Cold War mindset in Johnson's decision cannot be understated. One must also consider the historical context at the time to understand the president's executive decisions. In the 1960s, American citizens had a profound fear of communism, and pointed to numerous events in American history that they feared would be respected if Johnson was not a strong and fearless leader. These events include the rise of the Soviet Union, and Truman losing China to communism. Democrats felt a tremendous amount of pressure to not make the same mistakes, and thus, Johnson felt that if he lost Vietnam to communism, his legacy would be irreversibly damaged. His stance was that one must not retreat when faced with the specter of communism. They must face it head on, and with strength, resilience, and passion. Anything else was simply not an option for Johnson. He felt that it was not just America's responsibility, but his own responsibility to combat communism wherever it existed. The members of Johnson's administration had faced threats in other nations, namely Germany and Korea, and did not back down. Their philosophy was extremely similar to Johnson's, who also felt as if backing down was a sign of weakness- weakness he was unwilling

¹³ 1964 Barry Goldwater campaign handbill attacking the Democrats as soft on Communism, Boston Rare Maps

to show. What influenced Johnson the most, however, was not what occurred in Korea, Germany, or Berlin. It is what occurred in China. A civil war raged on between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party, in which the latter emerged victorious in 1949. Mao Zedong and the People's Republic of China rose to power, which was the outcome that President Truman had feared the most.. Following China becoming a communist nation, debates ensued over who was to blame for the blunder of massive proportions in China, with many arguing that Harry Truman and the democrats should take responsibility for it. President Johnson had his eye on these past events and debates, and felt that losing Vietnam to communism would result in even worse backlash than Truman faced. In Johnson's own words, "I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared to what might happen if we lost Vietnam." ¹⁴ LBJ also feared that the Republicans would launch attacks on his credibility if he was the president who saw south Vietnam toppled by communism. Thus, he stayed the course in Vietnam, despite the many uncertainties and doubts in the back of his mind about doing so.

The need for a strong leader after Kennedy's death, and Johnson's ability as a politician to have groundbreaking bills signed into law allowed him to thrive at the beginning of his presidency. Both the majority of American citizens and politicians alike supported Johnson, and he used this momentum to eventually have the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed. The resolution received near unanimous support in Congress, with only two senators opposing it. Because Johnson was a talented and skillful politician, he was able to garner support for major legislation.

¹⁴ Robert Zoellick, *America in the World*, p. 347

However, the main factor that allowed Johnson to pass his most important legislation during the beginning of his presidency was the fact that the war in Vietnam had not yet reached its peak. This section of my paper will show that while it is true that the conflict was very serious in all of 1964 and the first half of 1965, it was not yet something that completely consumed Lyndon Johnson's presidency. Thus, he still had the support and momentum to pass major bills. While many were critical of Johnson's executive decisions in Vietnam from the start, none of his actions in Vietnam were controversial enough to cause him to lose the support of the American people.

At the time of LBJ's presidency, the South Vietnamese regime was in an incredibly poor state, and was not able to suppress the insurrections supported by North Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson and his administration understood the deteriorating state of the political and military situation in the south, and thought deeply about what it should do to prevent the north from gaining monumental victories. Robert McNamara made the argument that a Vietnam dominated by communism would have disastrous implications for the rest of the world. More specifically, McNamara argued that South Vietnam being taken over by communism would severely impact neighboring countries, namely Thailand, Malaysia, and Laos, and that American credibility was being tested in the region. Many members of Johnson's administration sided with McNamara, and took it a step further. Many went as far as arguing that America should bomb the DRV, which was where the insurrection in South Vietnam was sustained.¹⁵ As demonstrated above, the question of further action in Vietnam had been considered early in Johnson's presidency, specifically in the form of a bombing campaign against Hanoi, but was ultimately turned down by Johnson himself. Furthermore, in mid June 1964, various graduated action scenario outlines

¹⁵ See Geoffrey Warner, "Lyndon Johnson's War? Part I: Escalation", *Lyndon Johnson's War*, Larry Berman, *International Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 4, pp. 831-832

were presented to President Lyndon Johnson.¹⁶ The major outline had the United States explaining to Hanoi that it did not want to destroy the North Vietnamese regime, but would do everything in its power to prevent the South from collapsing. The next part of the outline called for slowly increasing the amount of air strikes and their intensity against Hanoi. While Johnson was thoroughly impressed by much of the outline, he continued to be cautious of graduated pressure, as he was skeptical that such an approach would be helpful in the long run for both the United States and South Vietnam. In 1964, America was simply aiding South Vietnam in the fight against Hanoi. While the United States was clearly involved in the conflict, it did not yet play a significant role in it, and instead merely provided support and assistance when needed.

In July and early August of 1964 specifically, many American patrol boats were on the coast of Vietnam to monitor the north's political and military actions in the region. President Lyndon Johnson began to seriously rethink current policy in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident transpired in August 1964, in which America originally thought that Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the USS Maddox on the coast of Vietnam. Before the actual incident took place, the United States had sent ships to the Gulf area and was conducting covert operations.. The United States was working together with the South Vietnamese government in the area to collect further information about the North. However, the incident is most remembered about the American ship patrols in the summer of 1964. The Gulf of Tonkin incident refers to two separate events, one occurring on August 2, 1964, and the other transpiring on August 4, 1964. During the early morning hours of August 2, the US destroyer Maddox was present in the Tonkin Gulf to carry out intelligence-gathering missions.. Around 9 p.m, Maddox reported that North Vietnamese boats fired torpedoes from around 5 miles away, and both American destroyers opened fire,

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 832

followed by additional radar and sonar sightings. However, after both destroyers launched attacks in response to the sightings, there was no contact made with the suspected Vietnamese boats.

As for the second attack, the Maddox continued its patrol in the region, alongside the Destroyer Turner Joy. The Maddox would soon claim that North Vietnamese fired in its direction, to which the American ships fired back. Around half an hour after the second incident transpired, Lyndon Johnson contemplated ordering a retaliatory raid against the North Vietnamese, and eventually deemed such an action completely necessary. At 1:15 p.m. on August 5, North Vietnam was on the receiving end of the first bombs. Next, four Vietnamese bases were attacked, and Lyndon Johnson went on television to announce that military action had been decisively decided upon and executed.¹⁷ To state that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was instrumental in the following decisions and events that characterized the war is an understatement of massive proportions. It is ultimately a questionable interpretation of the second Gulf of Tonkin event that caused erroneous executive decisions and actions to be made by Lyndon Johnson and his administration, with consequences that could simply not be reversed.

Furthermore, on the night of the supposed attacks, there was an extreme storm taking place on the coast of Vietnam, and the waves were far higher than they would be on a day with typical weather patterns. Before the second attack took place, the Sonar technology of the Maddox had been dealing with errors and needed to be repaired. Other problems arise with the explanation of the events. There were no actual visual sightings, no targets were located by Air Force, and there were no reported injuries or fatalities on the Maddox nor the Turner Joy. Patrol commander Captain Herrick stated that "The first boat to close Maddox probably fired a torpedo at Maddox

¹⁷ Adam Roberts, "The Fog of Crisis", *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 5, (May 1970) p. 212

which was heard but not seen. All subsequent Maddox torpedo reports were doubtful in that it is supposed that sonarman was hearing the ship's own propeller beat.”¹⁸ Captain Herrick and military personnel knew that the torpedo sonar reports had alternative explanations that were far more plausible than the idea that the United States was under attack. However, despite the uncertainty surrounding the second event, President Lyndon Johnson went on television to announce that a retaliatory strike against the North would be taking place, which occurred over an hour after he gave his speech.

Despite this, McNamara continued to push the idea that the attack absolutely did happen, and that military might was essential. While McNamara was willing to wait some hours before making any choices about the next course of action, he still intended to use military might regardless of what information came to light, which is exactly why he asked for pilots to be briefed and planes to be armed. The uncertainty of what actually transpired on August 4 has haunted the Johnson administration far after it left office, and persists today due to a lack of clarity on what actually transpired. Regarding the second Gulf of Tonkin attack, Lyndon Johnson informed America that “We still seek no wider war.”¹⁹ Despite this promise, Johnson pushed for the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution merely two days later.

Johnson and his administration were adamant about ramping up the war effort against North Vietnam, and had major deliberations about how they could gain the right to escalate the conflict further. Even before an attack had occurred, there was certainly a desire among many to urge Congress to pass some form of resolution that would allow America to take further action in Vietnam. In as early as February 1964, Walt Rostow, who was a member of the State Department’s policy planning staff, called for a resolution to be legislated. Additionally, on May

¹⁸ Ibid., p.216

¹⁹ DocsTeach, President Johnson's Vietnam Address

22, support for a resolution was made even more apparent, this time, by multiple members of the Johnson administration, the most notable of which being McGeorge Bundy and George Ball. Ball oversaw a small group that set its sights on developing other forms of a Congressional resolution. The main reason there was support for legislation, and thus, actual action, was because Johnson greatly feared being seen as weak on communism and unwilling to actually take bold action. The President of the United States already had a goal of demonstrating military prowess to North Vietnam, to its citizens, and to the world. However, the Gulf of Tonkin incident made the desire for a resolution stronger than it ever had been before. This event is what eventually led President Johnson himself to support Congressional legislation. Moreover, while Johnson did not yet escalate the war in Vietnam in 1964 due to the pending civil rights bill and his desire to remain popular, he was now in a position to act, and wanted to show the American people that he was a leader who could be trusted and depended on when faced with unprecedented adversity, and he also wanted to show Barry Goldwater that he would not allow communism to thrive in Southeast Asia. He gained a great deal of confidence after being supported by the majority of congress and the Democratic Party, and he used this support to send America deeper into the war. After the Gulf of Tonkin events occurred, (or were thought to have occurred) Lyndon Johnson and the members of his administration began discussions over how America should respond to these attacks. McNamara was present at a joint session of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Service Committees in order to testify under oath about the Gulf of Tonkin events, the United States role in what occurred, and the several details surrounding the event that called for careful scrutiny.²⁰

²⁰ Adam Roberts, "The Fog of Crisis", *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 5, (May 1970): p. 211

While the majority of the session went smoothly for the Johnson administration, Wayne Morse, a democratic senator, questioned the narrative that the Maddox was on a routine patrol off the coast of Vietnam. Instead, according to the Pentagon official who Morse received information from, the Maddox was actually gathering intelligence for key American operations when the alleged attacks happened.²¹ McNamara had to answer very difficult questions in order to allow for the Tonkin resolution to be passed, which he succeeded in. McNamara had stated that America played no part in causing North Vietnam to attack. The vast majority of Congress believed the Secretary of State, and agreed that the Tonkin Gulf resolution was entirely necessary. This was reflected in the final senate vote, which was 88-2, meaning only 2 senators opposed it. The proposed resolution received overwhelming support, as Congress did not have enough time to conduct a thorough investigation. In this instance in particular, Johnson was able to achieve a level of consensus that was completely unheard of. He knew just how to garner massive support from people of varying backgrounds, and this is what allowed Johnson to continue accumulating power.

The resolution states that “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 treaty 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, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.”²² It gave Johnson a great deal of freedom to act in Vietnam, and carry the momentum he gained through the passage

²¹ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), p. 134

²² Tonkin Gulf Resolution, 88th Congress, August 7, 1964

of key bills, namely the Poverty Act and the Civil Rights Act. President Johnson at the moment appeared to the American people as a strong and resilient leader who would stop at nothing to bring about groundbreaking changes in the United States, but he also wanted to show American citizens that he was just as intent on having a positive impact on South Vietnam. As a result, Johnson strategically used the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to garner further support for his presidency. At the time of Johnson's presidency, anti-communism sentiment was widespread in America, and a large percentage of Americans felt that America's safety was directly threatened by it. Johnson thoroughly understood this, and based his actions on these beliefs held by numerous Americans.

Towards the end of 1964, the Vietcong launched several attacks on key American installations in Vietnam, namely the army barracks at Pleiku, which led to the death of eight Americans.²³ Not only this, the South Vietnamese army continued to lose significant battles against the northern regime. The Johnson administration saw these major attacks and the profound lack of progress as extremely concerning and disappointing, and the administration began to plan their next action. In February 1965, Johnson and his administration committed to air bombing of the north, in an attempt to convince Hanoi that the war could not be won. This laid the groundwork for ground forces to take part in the war effort as well, as the reinforcements sent to Vietnam had combat units protect key American bases in Vietnam.²⁴ The air campaign that began in late 1964 and early 1965 would eventually be followed by further commitment in Vietnam, in the form of an increased troop presence by the hundred thousands.

²³ Larry Berman, "Coming to Grips with Lyndon Johnson's War", *Oxford Journals*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (Fall 1993), p. 521

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 521

Before American escalation had taken place, George Ball made sure to explain to Johnson the uncertainties and dangers of a commitment to war in Vietnam. Ball stated that "In raising our commitment from 50,000 to 100,000 or more men and deploying most of the increment in combat roles we were beginning a new war—the United States directly against the Viet Cong. The President's most difficult continuing problem in South Vietnam is to prevent 'things' from getting into the saddle- or, in other words, to keep control of policy and prevent the momentum of events from taking command."²⁵ After this statement was made, Ball acknowledged the real possibility that the Johnson administration may be unable to achieve the goals it laid out in Vietnam. The Johnson administration and America as a whole had a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict between North and South Vietnam. It did not understand how much support existed for the unification of Vietnam, and as a result continued to increase military pressure on the north in the hopes that it would come to the negotiation table. While such increases ultimately were futile, Johnson continued to hold onto the hope that America would reach a breakthrough. When United States combat forces arrived in South Vietnam in 1965, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, who supported the North Vietnamese, warned America that it was unwilling to make any concessions, and that America should withdraw its combat forces from the South immediately. The Viet Minh, formed by Ho Chi Minh in 1941, supported the communist insurgents in the South and also starkly opposed American involvement in the South. The Viet Minh were unwilling to engage in negotiations with the United States regardless of how many ground and air operations it conducted.²⁶

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 523

²⁶ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "National Liberation Front", Encyclopedia Britannica

“even with 500,000 Americans in South Vietnam we must have more evidence than we now have that our troops will not bog down in the jungles and rice paddies—while we slowly blow the country to pieces... the French fought a war in Vietnam, and were finally defeated- after seven years of bloody struggle and when they still had 250,000 combat-hardened veterans in the field, supported by an army of 205,000 South Vietnamese.”²⁷ Despite Johnson’s contemplations, he ultimately did commit to American escalation not long after the above quote, which would lead to a loss of support for his presidency. At the end of 1965, there were over 185,000 troops in Vietnam, and this number would double in 1966.

Section 3: The Beginning of the End for Lyndon Johnson

²⁷ Larry Berman, “Coming to Grips with Lyndon Johnson’s War”, *Oxford Journals*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (Fall 1993), p. 523

Despite Johnson passing numerous groundbreaking bills in 1964 and 1965, he lost a considerable amount of political momentum in 1966, and it was almost completely destroyed in 1967 and 1968, which coincided with major spending on military and political actions in Vietnam. While the 88th and 89th United States Congress meetings went extremely well for Johnson, the 90th and 91st ones failed to replicate his previous success. As more Americans were sent to Vietnam to fight an extremely challenging war, the American people and Congress gradually lost faith in the president of the United States. While he still passed a variety of bills, very few were as impactful as the bills that combated racism, poverty, and injustice. "Yet for all Johnson's devotion to another round of reform legislation, his 1966 proposals were a pale imitation of those in 1965. To be sure, Congress would approve 97 of LBJ's 113 bills. But compared with the educational, health, and voting rights acts of 1965, the reforms in 1966, with two exceptions, were relatively limited. Child nutrition, truth in packaging, rent supplements, the teacher corps, clean rivers, child, mine, and tire safety, and the Freedom of Information act did not have the impact that the earlier laws had on the country. This is not to say that they were inconsequential; each of them had a significant effect on various groups, but none of them had the reach and resonance of the earlier measures."²⁸

As Dallek explains, the bills pushed in 1966 were still very important, and their success in being passed demonstrates that some congressional support for Johnson's presidential vision certainly existed in some capacity. Johnson was at a unique spot in his presidency in which his support was nowhere near as strong as it was in the beginning of his presidency, but many were still satisfied enough with the job he was doing so he was not completely stripped of the ability to pass major legislation. These bills helped improve the lives of millions of Americans in a way

²⁸ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 312

that his future bills could not do. “Mr. Johnson’s success did not nearly meet his historic accomplishments. In many cases Congress enacted bills requested by the White House only after adding relatively unpalatable provisions or restrictions. The important income tax surcharge, for example, was approved in conjunction with a limitation on federal expenditures which the president was forced to accept as the price for passage of the tax hike. The president’s spending plans for a variety of health, education and urban welfare programs were cut back considerably by the budget-minded Congress.”²⁹ June and July 1965 marked the beginning of Americanization in Vietnam, and as the months went on, Johnson would dramatically increase American Military expense.

In 1966, President Johnson attempted to improve the American economy in order to make it easier to pass important Great Society bills. Because Johnson had to fund the war in Vietnam, he was forced to scale back the size of the Great Society in America. He also saw that both the commitment to the Vietnam war and the effort to pass important legislation would both be even more expensive in 1966 and 1967, but he was unsure where he would get the funds to pay for both- and simultaneously. Ultimately, President Johnson operated under the assumption that if the American economy was steady and was without severe problems, he would be able to generate both the money and support to fund the bills that would be part of the Great Society legislative program.³⁰ Johnson made a very detailed prediction of the future of the American economy, one that he sincerely hoped would become a reality. “He predicted that in spite of an increase of \$5.8 billion in Vietnam spending, federal outlays would grow only be \$600 million, with a budget deficit of just \$1.8 billion, one of the lowest in many years.” This was “because of

²⁹ Irvin Bernstein, *Guns Or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 529

³⁰ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 302

the stringent cost-conscious economy program inaugurated in the Defense Department, and followed by the other departments of Government.”³¹ Furthermore, the signs of incoming economic issues in America had been seen in November of 1965, mere months after Johnson officially escalated the war. “By November, however, the CEA had begun to have second thoughts, expressing the belief that the war might create “a significant and undesirable acceleration in the pace of overall economic activity. Martin had no doubts about where the economy was heading. On December 6, the Federal Reserve announced an increase in the discount rate banks paid on loans from 4 to 4.5 percent.”³²

It was abundantly clear that America was on the verge of serious economic problems, and Johnson knew that this would pose major challenges to his domestic initiative. If the economy was in a poor state, it would be more difficult to pass his desired bills. Thus, the president attempted to get industry to adhere to wage guidelines that would prevent inflation from occurring.³³ There were major hurdles to wage settlements that Johnson faced in the summer of 1965, not long after combat troops were sent to Vietnam . For example, the president of the United Steel Workers of America wanted wage increases of around 5 percent, but industry only offered half of this. Executives in the steel industry predicted that succumbing to the union’s demands would cause steel prices to rise above the desired 3.2%.³⁴ This did not sit well with Johnson, and he was relentless in his pursuits to get both industries to stay below the 3.2% guidelines. Johnson went as far as entering the negotiations himself. He brought members of both labor and industry to the White House, and he attempted to prevent strikes happening for a little over a week in order to protect the American economy. Johnson’s persistence and uncanny

³¹ Ibid., p. 302

³² Ibid., p. 303

³³ Ibid., p. 303

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 303-304

persuasion abilities got him exactly what he wanted. A settlement between labor and industry had taken place, and Johnson announced it at the White House on September 3. Again, Johnson's ability to get others to reach agreement is on full display here. Johnson used this skill in order to get the steel industry to agree to a massive settlement that would help the American economy remain stable enough for Johnson to achieve the goals he set for his domestic initiative. A key tactic Johnson used was to aggressively push major American businesses to be extremely careful when setting prices and wages. . Johnson knew that if these businesses a certain wage percentage, the American economy would be dramatically weakened, which would pose a major problem for his legislative plans. While Johnson's goal was to keep wage increases below 3.2 percent, American businesses would eventually go well over this number in mid to late 1966 due to economic demands that needed to be met. The steel industry, which previously formed an agreement with Johnson, now refused to decrease their prices.³⁵ He understood thoroughly that his administration's attempts to prevent inflation had been unsuccessful, which would have disastrous implications for his domestic agenda. The President was having extreme difficulty focusing simultaneously on the Vietnam war and the Great Society, a dilemma that consumed him in the later years of his presidency.

However, Johnson did not inform the public of the seriousness of this issue. He left it out of speeches that addressed Americans, and instead made his doubts known behind closed doors. Despite the fact that his reform bills were fraught with uncertainty, Johnson continued to tell Americans that his goal was to pass additional reform legislation in 1966 and 1967. In both of these years, however, Johnson's flashes of hope that he would achieve his goals in Vietnam had

³⁵ Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 306

died out, and he would quickly learn that his goal of bringing Hanoi to the negotiation table was unattainable. The reality was dawning on Johnson that the South Vietnam simply could not hold its own against the North Vietnamese army, even with additional support from the United States. Johnson was beginning to understand that his hopes in Vietnam were unrealistic, and this caused the president a great deal of emotional turmoil. Johnson continued to receive pessimistic reports from his top advisors, causing him to become increasingly agitated, frantic, and frustrated over the events unfolding in Vietnam.

Section 4: The Fall of Johnson- A World Class Politician's Descent into Doom

In November 1967, a progress report on the war had been given to the president, and it was revealed to Johnson that America was coming closer and closer to defeat. American objectives could not be achieved and the administration was filled with pessimism. This news was nothing short of devastating to Johnson, and he did all he could to change the narrative and give the American people the impression that all was well in Vietnam. However, at this point, Americans could see that the facts did not match what Johnson said so confidently in his speeches, and the credibility gap only widened. Johnson could not use his persuasion skills to deceive America into believing that he had the war under control, but he still made attempts to assure the nation that it was doing what it needed to do to win.

On November 17, Johnson explained to the press that “Our American people, when we get in a contest of any kind— whether it is in a war, an election, a football game, or whatever it is— want it decided and decided quickly; get in or get out. They like that curve to rise like this (indicating a sharp rise) and they like the opposition and I go down like this (indicating a sharply declining line). That is not the kind of war we are fighting in Vietnam... We don't march out and have a big battle each day in a guerilla war. It is a new kind of war for us. So it doesn't move that fast... We are making progress. We are pleased with the results that we are getting. We are inflicting greater losses than we are taking.” Rostow wrote the president that the press conference “made big strides” in its “projection of confidence, moderate progress, and a will to sustain the efforts.”³⁶ Getting Americans to feel confident in America's abilities was the exact

³⁶ Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War- The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1989), p. 115

purpose of this statement by Johnson. It was to own the narrative that America was the strongest nation on earth, and that every obstacle in its way could be conquered with perseverance and diligence. However, as explained earlier, a large credibility gap existed between the president and the American people who once supported him, and it was too massive to be closed.

Anti war demonstrations began in 1965, when Johnson signed off on bombing operations, but became far more widespread in early 1968, when the actual facts about Vietnam were revealed. Those who opposed the war made their voices known by protesting at the Lincoln Memorial and the Pentagon, and made it clear that they viewed the war as a completely immoral act that caused far more losses than gains. Johnson was extremely agitated by the protests and stunning loss of support, and made numerous attempts to take control of the narrative and assure Americans that the war was under control, but his efforts fell drastically short. He could no longer convince the general public that there were reasons to be optimistic over the Vietnam war.

As a result, Johnson announced in early 1968 that he would not run for president again. In a short span of three years, Johnson's presidency was irreversibly damaged. The once loved, well-respected and accomplished president would be viewed as a manipulative and dishonest warmonger who ended up leading the country astray in Vietnam. While it is true that Johnson did not want to plunge America into war, he did just this with troop escalation, and only worsened the ensuing conflict. In a matter of three years, the United States greatly damaged its own reputation by getting involved in a conflict that it was unable to solve. Johnson went from loved to vilified, greatly supported to vehemently opposed. The tragedy lies in the fact that Johnson was an incredible president with an impressive list of accolades but let his failures outweigh his accomplishments. He outlawed segregation, provided health insurance to millions of elderly people, and combated poverty across the nation, but also had millions of young

Americans partake in one of the bloodiest wars imaginable, resulting in an overwhelming loss of life, and an unfathomable amount of damage and destruction in Vietnam.

Ultimately, it was Lyndon B. Johnson who made the decision to escalate the war, so one must examine his own beliefs to understand his actions. In 1967 and 1968, the facts about the Vietnam war were slowly but surely coming to light, and support for the war effort dramatically decreased. Johnson went to extreme lengths to conceal the harsh reality in Vietnam, but the American media shed light on the brutality, bloodshed, and utter tragedy, and as the facts came to light, president Lyndon Johnson gradually lost supporters, and many Americans lost faith in the government, and became extremely distrustful of any claims it would make regarding the Vietnam war. As a result of the public turning against Johnson, he went on national television on March 31, 1968 to announce that he would no longer be seeking reelection. From the very beginning of Lyndon Johnson's presidency to the end, he constantly made attempts to avoid disagreement, form consensus, and remain in control of the political narratives that he desired. Contrary to popular opinion, Johnson was not a meek politician who let others shape his opinions and make executive decisions for him. He was someone desperate for control in politics, and his need for power and adoration factored into his downfall. Johnson saw the signs that the war simply could not be won at various points during his presidency and held off on major decisive action in Vietnam because he believed it was unwise, but also because it could lessen his popularity. Ultimately, however, Johnson would be the president who Americanized the war, due to his personal insecurity that the opposite option of withdrawal would cause him to appear weak. When ushering America into the war, Johnson was not upfront with the American about the state of the conflict, as he did not want the United States to ultimately turn against him. However, this is exactly what happened, as Johnson's decisions only worsened the Vietnam war, particularly the increase of American troops by the thousands from 1965 to 1967. In the words of

Johnson himself “I stuck to the middle ground, for I realized that my Presidency would require dealing simultaneously with major military crises abroad and urgently needed reforms at home. That course was not comfortable... I was convinced that the middle ground was the right course for the United States. That was the fundamental approach of my administration, and I was not going to abandon it. Holding to it, however, eroded my popularity from two directions—with those who wanted to do more in the war and with those who wished to do more at home. And Presidential popularity is a major source of strength in gaining cooperation from Congress.”³⁷

As a president, Johnson made a major calculation, and it ultimately failed. His desire was to

³⁷ Larry Berman, “Coming to Grips with Lyndon Johnson's War”, *Oxford Journals*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (Fall 1993), p. 532

cause monumental change in American society while fending off communism in Asia, but it was simply impossible- both politically and economically- to commit to both. While it is true that Johnson did not originally intend to unleash a brutal war against the Vietnamese and believed that he had found a perfect balance between some involvement and not making the war America's war, Johnson failed to understand that once America escalated the war, it could not undo the increased troop presence, and by 1966, Johnson had no choice but to stay in Vietnam and continue the fight an unwinnable war that soon led to his fall from power.

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