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Rolling Thunder and Lyndon Johnson: How the Failures of a Military Operation Led to Johnson's Decision not to Seek Re-election in 1968

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A Thesis in the Field of History

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2023

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Abstract

In April 1965, President Johnson announced the start of Operation Rolling Thunder, an air campaign aimed at forcing North Vietnam into submission during the Vietnam War. The operation would prove to be an absolute failure, so much to the point that in March 1968, Johnson revealed that he was not running for President. How did Rolling Thunder's failures contribute to this decision? How did the progression of the Vietnam War affect Johnson's public approval ratings to the point that the President did not feel like he could win the election? How did Rolling Thunder alter the course of the Vietnam War and what impact did it leave on Johnson's legacy? Moreover, how did the foreign policy under Johnson affect his successor, Richard Nixon? This paper would attempt to answer these questions, drawing from both American and Vietnamese sources, to try and examine a war that has plagued both nations involved even to the present time.

Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction 1

Chapter II. Literature Review 4

Military Leadership 4

Civilian Leadership 7

Tension between the Two Groups 8

Johnson's Handling of the Two Groups 10

Approval Ratings 11

Vietnamese Sources 12

Gap in Literature 13

Chapter III. January – June 1968 14

Military Assessment 14

Political Assessment 15

State of the Union Address 15

The Tet Offensive 17

March 31, 1968 Speech 25

Beginning of Paris Peace Negotiations 27

Chapter IV. July – December 1968 31

Continuation of Paris Peace Negotiations 31

The Democratic National Convention 32

The Anna Chennault Affair 35

Ambivalence toward Hubert Humphrey....38
The End of Operation Rolling Thunder....39
The 1968 Presidential Election....41
Chapter V. Conclusion....43
The Effects of Rolling Thunder on the Vietnam War....43
American Troop Withdrawal....44
Foreign Policy of the Nixon Administration....47
End of Paris Negotiations....49
Vietnam's War....50
The Johnson Legacy....52
References....61

Acronyms

ARVN: Army of Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Army

DMZ: Demilitarized Zone, for Vietnam it would be the 17th parallel

DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnam

JCS: Joint Chiefs of Staff

LBJ: Lyndon B. Johnson

NLF: National Liberation Front, the main insurgent forces stationed in South Vietnam

ORT: Operation Rolling Thunder

Chapter I.

Introduction

In March 1965, President Johnson authorized Operation Rolling Thunder in an effort to Americanize the Vietnam War with the increase in the presence of U.S. soldiers in South Vietnam. The operation had three goals: destroy supply routes that North Vietnam used; boost morale in the South Vietnamese government and army; and pressure the Hanoi government into negotiating with the United States. By the termination of the operation in October 1968, it had failed to achieve every goal. The operation was a complete failure and it was costly, both in terms of economic and political impacts.

On April 1, 1965, President Johnson decided to use American ground troops as the main fighting forces in South Vietnam.[1] He realized that the air bombing of North Vietnam would not stop the Hanoi government from trying to take over the South. Despite the importance of this decision, President Johnson wanted to keep it from the public, fearing that a sudden change in policy would not be perceived in a positive light. Earlier that year in February, McGeorge Bundy, the Presidential Assistant for National Security, advocated for a policy of "Sustained Reprisal." This policy would justify the use of naval and air action against North Vietnam because it was necessary considering the violence that the North was implementing on the South. However, Bundy warned that American casualties would increase, and the American public would not take it lightly.[2] The President was caught between the anti-war left (the Doves) within his own

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[1] Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War* (New York:
[2] McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, 7 February 1965, *The Pentagon Papers*.

Democratic Party who did not want to escalate the war, and the pro-war Hawks who believed the United States should become more involved in South East Asia in an attempt to limit communist takeover.[3]

While caught in the middle of these two factions, President Johnson also did not want the Vietnam War to diverge all attention from his domestic policy, the Great Society. On April 7, 1965, he gave a speech at Johns Hopkins University titled "Peace Without Conquest" in an attempt to appeal to both the Doves and the Hawks. In this speech, Johnson justified Rolling Thunder and the escalation of the war, stating that the United States was fighting the war so that everyone could live in "a world where every country can shape its own destiny."[4] Ironically, he justified the war because Americans had promised to support South Vietnam since 1954. At the same time, he hoped to reassure both the Doves and the Hawks that Americans would do everything necessary, and *only* what was absolutely necessary, to ensure the independence of South Vietnam.[5]

Rolling Thunder was supposed to be the embodiment of that promise, although it ultimately proved to be a failed military operation. At the beginning of 1968, North Vietnam organized a series of uprisings using their insurgent forces in the south (the National Liberation Front) during the Lunar New Year celebration. The Tet Offensive was a rude awakening for the Johnson administration and Johnson himself that they were nowhere nearer to peace talks than they had been a year ago with North Vietnam. While the offensive was a military victory for the United States, as the administration would come to emphasize, it was a psychological victory for North Vietnam because Tet

[3] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: An International History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 86.
[4] Lyndon B. Johnson. "Peace Without Conquest," speech at Johns Hopkins University, 7 April 1965.
[5] Johnson, "Peace Without Conquest."

successfully changed the political landscape of the United States in the early part of 1968 and brought even more attention to the American public that the war was not justified. Tet proved that Operation Rolling Thunder was failing, that the nearly half a million American forces in Vietnam could not stop North Vietnamese forces from attacking the south.

The failures of Operation Rolling Thunder played a major role in Johnson's decision not to seek re-election in 1968. His approval ratings declined over the years, however, it plummeted after Tet. Going into 1968, even before Tet, Johnson had to deal with the divided opinions of the hawks and the doves in Washington, and more often than not, he usually chose a way to appease both sides, which did not gain him any points with either. Moreover, the United States was also plagued with racial injustice and anti-war movements on college campuses, and any chance of Johnson winning a landslide victory like he did four years earlier disappeared with Tet. In his private life, Johnson was also suffering from illnesses and his political worries had taken a toll on his health.[6] Because of these factors, on March 31, 1968, Johnson announced on live television that he would neither seek nor accept the nomination of his party, to the shock of the world.[7]

[6] Kyle Longley. *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 87.
[7] LBJ's Address to the Nation. 31 March 1968.

Chapter II.

Literature Review

Over the years, so much have been written on the subject of the Vietnam War as part of memoirs or recollection of decision makers, soldiers, or survivors of the war. In addition, scholars are constantly producing works on different aspects of the war that have not been considered before. On the subject of Operation Rolling Thunder and its implications on Johnson's political career in 1968, some themes that have come up during my research are: the perspectives of Johnson's most trusted advisors who often did not share the same views but agreed that the United States should not and could not openly bomb North Vietnam; the perspectives of military leaders who believed Rolling Thunder had too many limitations to be effective; the friction between these groups and Johnson's constant struggle to appease and appeal to both sides; and the staggering decline of approval ratings in Johnson's presidency, especially in 1968.

Military Leadership

One of the leading authorities on the war in terms of military leadership was General Westmoreland, who commanded the U.S. forces from 1964 to 1968. In his autobiography *A Soldier Reports,* Westmoreland reflected on his experiences as the commanding officer during Operation Rolling Thunder, with specific chapters dedicated to the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Khe Sanh. He argued that the operation would have been successful and the war could have been won had the civilian leadership provided more resources and imposed less restrictions.

In *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election*, Walter LaFeber analyzed the 1968 election from multiple perspectives. In the chapter on Westmoreland, LaFeber argued that General Westmoreland understood the need for the public approval of the ongoing war in Vietnam, given that it was an election year. The general was *the* military leadership in Vietnam, yet he was also well-versed in Washington politics enough to understand that the public needed to see that the United States was winning the war, despite anti-war protests. However, the Tet Offensive destroyed this optimism that Westmoreland, and by extension, Johnson, was trying to sell the public that the war was winnable. LaFeber observed that "it was dawning on more and more Americans that they might win every battle and still lose the war,"[8] which was the reality. North Vietnam needed only *not* to lose the war to be seen as "winning," because they were holding their own against a world superpower. While Westmoreland was trying to reassure the American public that supporting the war was a patriotic thing to do during his public appearances in late 1867,[9] Tet served as a jarring reminder that not even the President, the General, half a million soldiers, and continuous bombing that had been going on for two years could turn the favor of the war to the American side.

One of the most influential books on the military campaigns of the war, particularly when it comes to military campaigns, is *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* by Mark Clodfelter. This book has been cited by multiple scholars who study the air war in Vietnam. In this book, Clodfelter argued that too many limitations led to the failures of Operation Rolling Thunder. This included political limitations set forth by Johnson's administrations as they did not want to

[8] Walter LaFeber. *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 25.
[9] La Faber. *The Deadly Bet,* 22.

escalate the conflict by destroying North Vietnam and inadvertently inviting Beijing and Moscow into a global war. However, Clodfelter also mentioned that there were military and operational limitations to Rolling Thunder as well, which led to the its military failures, and therefore its political ineffectiveness.[10] The gradual intensification of the bombings and the restrictions on targets meant that the operation could not achieve its goals.

Steven Wilson analyzed Clodfelter in details in his article "Taking Clodfelter One Step Further: Mass, Surprise, Concentration, and the Failure of Operation Rolling Thunder." Wilson echoed Clodfelter's belief that from a military perspective, Rolling Thunder failed because the administration placed too many restrictions on it, therefore not allowing the operation to reach its true potential.[11] According to Wilson, gradual application rendered air power ineffective, as it violated many principles of aerial warfare. Wilson also believed Johnson authorized Rolling Thunder so he would not be regarded as powerless in the Vietnam conflict.

Other figures of military influence during this time would be the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) which included General Earle Wheeler as the Chairman. In official documents of the JCS on National Policy during the years 1965-1968, there was dissatisfaction from the JCS because they were excluded from most of the Tuesday luncheons that Johnson used to organize to discuss foreign policy regarding Vietnam during the Rolling Thunder years. The JCS thought that their words "carried little weight" and and their influence "minimal." There was also tension between the JCS and

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[10] Mark Clodfelter. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 117.

[11] Stephen W. Wilson, "Taking Clodfelter One Step Further: Mass, Surprise, Concentration, and the Failure of Operation Rolling Thunder," *Air Power History* 48 (2001): 42, URL: http://search.ebscohost.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=5718821&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

the administration, particularly Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, when it came to their handling of the Vietnam War, as McNamara "strengthened" his role while "clarifying" that of the JCS.[12] This made sense considering that Johnson tend to consult civilian leaders more often than military leaders. From the JCS's perspective, there was clear favoritism toward the civilian leaders when it came to decision making.

Civilian Leadership

For civilian leaders, Rolling Thunder had to be a gradual response because they could not risk destroying North Vietnam and angering its supporters, Beijing and Moscow. One of the most influential memoirs about the Vietnam War is *In Retrospect* written by Robert McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense. At the end of 1965, in a referendum to President Johnson, McNamara appraised the situation in South Vietnam and gave some recommendations, one of which was the increase of troops to 350,000 by the end of 1966 and the other was a one-month bombing halt.[13] In case the bombing halt proved to be ineffective, McNamara recommended intensifying Rolling Thunder. He expressed that this would not win the war as he considered that prospect "impossible, short of genocidal destruction," but to prevent North Vietnam from taking over South Vietnam.[14] McNamara also thought that Rolling Thunder did not achieve its basic objective of bringing North Vietnam closer to negotiating, as infiltration more than

[12] Walter S. Poole. *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy: 1965-1968* (Washington D.C.), 253.
[13] Robert McNamara. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 219.
[14] Robert McNamara. *In Retrospect*, 220.

doubled between 1965 and 1967, and perhaps more important psychologically, Hanoi did not lose its will to fight.[15]

In August of 1967, two years after Rolling Thunder commenced, its objectives had remained the same. However, McNamara thought that the air campaigns had many limitations. One of the most important points McNamara made in his book is the belief that "the air war in the North was no substitute for the ground war in the South."[16] This explained his support for Westmoreland's requests for more troops throughout the duration of Rolling Thunder. The memoir is understandably biased in justifying the actions of the former Secretary of Defense and his role in the decision making process under the Johnson administration. However, it is still helpful to have an insider's perspective on the Vietnam War & foreign policy. Through the book, McNamara's personal sentiments regarding President Johnson and General Westmoreland shined through, and there are feelings of resentment from the former Secretary toward the other two key players of the war. At the time of Tet, McNamara was disillusioned because he thought the war was no longer winnable. However, efforts to sway Johnson went unnoticed, and he later left the administration knowing he could not change the President's mind regarding Vietnam.

Tension between the Two Groups

In *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964-1975,* the author Ronald Frankum argued that the year 1968 was a turning point for the war both in terms of military and political implications. The Tet Offensive began in late January, and on

[15] Robert McNamara. *In Retrospect,* 244.
[16] Robert McNamara. *In Retrospect*, 286.

March 31, 1968, President Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election. What made Frankum stand out is his belief that 1968 had promised to be just as eventful as the previous years of the war.[17] The air war on North Vietnam clearly had an impact on the political landscape of the United States. However, because it was not a full-scale attack and because it could not replace the ground war being fought in South Vietnam, Westmoreland still asked for more troops. LBJ's unwillingness to completely bomb North Vietnam was justified because he could not risk upsetting Beijing and Moscow. This was evident by the numerous restrictions that Rolling Thunder had, and also Johnson's approval of Westmoreland's requests. Moreover, these limitations also created friction between the civilian and the military leaderships in Washington. Perhaps the air war was not as effective as it could have been, and the military leadership was justifiably frustrated at the lack of result, but for the administration, the alternative would have been much worse.

On April 1, 1968, Johnson halted all air strikes north of the 20th parallel where the majority of the North Vietnamese population lived. Two days later, he extended the restrictions to north of the 19th parallel where the majority of worthwhile targets were,[18] a move toward negotiations. Everything done after March 31, 1968 should be taken as a political move to preserve the Johnson legacy because at this point, everyone in the administration and the public were already aware that Johnson was not going to be the next President. Moreover, Johnson also announced that he would focus the rest of his term on moving the war toward negotiations. He was now above bipartisan politics.

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[17] Ronald B. Frankum Jr. *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam 1964-1975* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 59.
[18] Frankum. *Like Rolling Thunder,* 59.

Kyle Longley mentioned in *LBJ's 1968* that in regards to Tet, the hawks in the military led by General Wheeler, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Bunker Ellsworth, and Walt Rostow all wanted to seize the opportunity to attack North Vietnam more aggressively because after all, Tet was a "military" victory for the US.[19] On the other hand, the doves wanted to push the President toward negotiation that would begin with a bombing halt. In hindsight, Johnson did order the bombing halt in April, *after* he decided that he would not run for re-election. Would it have made a difference in the election if he was running, if he had decided to follow the doves' approach?

Robert McNamara also discussed this topic at length in *In Retrospect.* In late 1967, two years after President Johnson authorized Rolling Thunder, there was clear friction between the civilian leaders and the military leaders when it came to examining the effectiveness of Rolling Thunder and whether it was wiser to increase or halt the bombings. Attempts at peace talks also failed numerous times because there was no coordination between diplomatic and military objectives and actions.[20] When looking at the events that have transpired in Vietnam, McNamara admitted in his memoir that "we do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose."[21] It is unclear if the "we" here refers to the Johnson administration, the American government as a whole, or just the United States in general. Nevertheless, this retrospection is helpful in analyzing the results of the war and it gave a better understanding of the failures of the United States during the war.

Johnson's Handling of the Two Groups

[19] Longley. *LBJ's 1968,* 61.
[20] Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect,* 299.
[21] Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect,* 323.

In *The Deadly Bet*, LaFeber mentioned that despite announcing that he would halt the bombing in the March 31 speech, Johnson still wanted to "expand other military operations." U.S. troops in Vietnam increased from 486,600 in early 1968 to 535,500 by the summer of 1968.[22] LaFeber noted that Johnson wanted to preserve his legacy by taking a step back and becoming the "father of the people" so that he could ask for "patriotic support" and still direct the war the way he intended.[23] Johnson was known as a masterful politician who could manipulate situations to his favor, and even after announcing that he would not run for re-election, he was not washing his hands off Vietnam. However, after the monumental speech, he no longer had to worry how the public was gonna perceive him, because technically he did not have to win them over anymore, without an election to run. As LaFeber mentioned, Johnson gained some necessary "maneuvering room" in his handing of the war.[24]

Approval Ratings

Because Vietnam was the first war where everything was televised and broadcasted, public opinion mattered, as evident by anti-war protests on college campuses across the country. Johnson's approval ratings steadily declined over his years in office, and the Vietnam War only made these ratings worse. According to the Gallup polls, in January 4, 1968, Johnson's approval ratings were only at 48%. A month later, after the Tet Offensive began, his ratings dropped to 41%. There was a constant decline as the ratings were at 36% in mid-March. On April 4, 1968, after he had announced he would not run for re-election and after he had order a bombing halt, his approval ratings

[22] LaFeber. *The Deadly Bet,* 63.
[23] LaFeber. *The Deadly Bet,* 63.
[24] LaFeber. *The Deadly Bet,* 63.

went up to 50%.[25] While this was not a sharp increase, this would be Johnson's highest ratings in 1968, which showed the public approval of this decision.

According to Longley in *LBJ's 1968,* the approval ratings for his handling of the Vietnam War reached 26% by late March,[26] which were even lower compared to the Gallup polls. This combined with the constant pressure from the hawks and the doves in Washington took a toll on Johnson's health. Moreover, public opinion was one of the indicators whether someone would be a good and winnable candidate in an election year, and the odds were against Johnson.

Vietnamese Sources

One of the leading sources of looking at the war from a Vietnamese perspective is *Hanoi's War* by scholar Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. She was allowed access to Hanoi's official records and was able to uncover important documents of North Vietnam during the war. Her work put the war in a more international context and shred light on the decision making process of Hanoi during this time. The general narrative that the current Vietnamese government dictates is that the Vietnamese people, under the leadership and guidance of Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, drove out foreign invaders and reunite the country. The people who fought for North Vietnam would maintain this perspective, and because they were the "winners" of the war, they got to dictate the history.

However, while this might be the official narrative that the current Vietnamese government wanted to portray, other Vietnamese sources that were published outside of Vietnam had different perspectives on what the war meant to them. For example, Bui

[25] "Presidential Job Approval Center," Gallup, accessed September 1, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/presidential-job-approval-center.aspx.
[26] Longley. *LBJ's 1968,* 60.

Tin, a former colonel in the North Vietnamese Army, wrote a memoir called *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War*. He left Vietnam in 1990 for France after he became disillusioned by the regime and became a critic of the government that he had once fought for.

Bui Diem, the former South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States and one of the key figures in the Paris peace talks, wrote a book called *In the Jaws of History* to talk to about his experiences as South Vietnam was struggling to maintain a democracy away from the grasp of North Vietnam. For the general perspective of the South Vietnamese people who fought in the war and left the country after the North took over, they lost their homeland to communist hands. They wanted democracy and had hoped that American help would maintain an independent South Vietnam, but when this did not pass, they had to flee Vietnam and felt as if they had lost their own country.

Gap in Literature

Much have been written and studied on the subject of the war, and more materials kept being produced with time as scholars uncover more aspects and sources that were previously unavailable. While a lot have been written on Operation Rolling Thunder and on President Johnson himself, most of these sources come from an American or Western perspective. This is understandable because on the Vietnamese side, Hanoi had an official narrative of the war that is widely accepted throughout the country, and children learn this history in school. Moreover, much of the records of the war are not accessible to the public, and scholars have to go through a screening process in order to access these documents. To look at the war from a non-American-centric perspective is to understand the international implications of the conflict even until the present time.

Chapter III.

January – June 1968

Military Assessment

In 1968, the Vietnam War was raging on with no end in sight. Even with a large amount of troops stationed in South Vietnam, the United States was not able to force North Vietnam into submission, either through military or political means. This must be frustrating for a world superpower because they could not win a war against a small country in South East Asia. The military leaders including General Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff at this point were still pressing for more troops and a wider war, with less restrictions on the targets of bombing operations of North Vietnam. Moreover, they also wanted to expand the war into Laos and Cambodia, with the possibility of waging war in North Vietnam itself.[27] To them, the war could be won if the United States could flex all of its military muscles. The bombing was the bargaining chip and they were adamant that it should not be stopped without the United States getting something to return, such as an "end to the North Vietnamese aggression in South Vietnam."[28] This perspective was overly optimistic and it also overlooked the determination of North Vietnam in this conflict. While the United States could learn from past armed conflicts such as the world wars or Korea, especially when it came to military prowess, it also undermined North Vietnam and misunderstood the whole nature and ideology of *why* North Vietnam and the Hanoi government was willing to go to war with the United States in the first place.

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[27] Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers,* 525.
[28] Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers,* 531.

Political Assessment

The Vietnam War was the ultimate test for Johnson and the administration as a whole because while Johnson inherited the war from Kennedy, he also kept most of the members of the Kennedy administration, the "Best and the Brightest" with him so that the administration could transition smoothly. Most of the civilian leaders who had been with the Kennedy administration were already familiar with the foreign policy regarding Vietnam, and Johnson had hoped that if he had kept everything almost the same then he would find a way to handle Vietnam. As early as October of 1966, Secretary of Defense McNamara had already wanted Johnson to cut back on the bombing of North Vietnam, and in May 1967, McNamara even advocated that the administration should stop trying to guarantee a non-Communist South Vietnam but be open to the idea of a coalition government in Saigon.[29] The Pentagon Studies put McNamara into the group of the "disillusioned doves," ones who had supported the war and the bombing at the beginning but had now changed their belief that the war could be won using conventional military means. Johnson and the other members of the administration often tried to walk the middle line, wanting to appease both sides while maintaining the front, at least to the American public, that the United States was winning.

State of the Union Address

The quest to reassure the public that all was well began when Johnson recalled Westmoreland from South Vietnam to the U.S. at the end of 1967 to go on a public tour when the General gave press conferences emphasizing that the U.S. and its ally South Vietnam were winning the war. For example, in a speech at the National Press Club in

[29] Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers,* 524.

Washington D.C. on November 21, 1967, Westmoreland confidently stated that "whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing. There are indications that the Viet Cong and even Hanoi may know this."[30] The optimistic tone continued throughout the rest of the speech, with Westmoreland ending on a solid reassurance that they had come a long way and he could see it "in the increased willingness of the Vietnamese Army to fight North Vietnamese units and in the victories they [were] winning."[31] The rhetoric here was that the United States was helping its ally preserve their country, and they were successful in doing so.

On January 17, Johnson gave the annual State of the Union Address in which he mentioned the dangers that the United States was currently facing, including Vietnam, the conflict that was on everyone's mind. To start on a positive note, Johnson applauded the elections that had been held in South Vietnam that resembled the American democratic model. Johnson echoed Westmoreland's remarks in his State of the Union speech, saying "America will persevere. Our patience and our perseverance will match our power. Aggression will never prevail."[32] Here, Johnson painted the communist forces as the aggressors, while stating that the United States' goal was "peace—and peace at the earliest possible moment."[33] The United States was on the defensive side, and since they were supporting South Vietnam, the use and increase of troops should be justified, as they were doing their duty by helping their ally. The reality was, however, the United States and South Vietnam were not any closer to winning the war, despite the joined

[30] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War,* 119.
[31] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War,* 120.
[32] Lyndon B. Johnson, "State of the Union Address." 17 January 1968.
[33] Johnson, "State of the Union Address." 17 January 1968.

efforts of the administration and General Westmoreland to reassure the American people that they could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Johnson then went on to discuss other global events, and mentioned that over the last year, the United States and the USSR had "taken several important steps toward the goal of international cooperation."[34] While the issue of Vietnam was understandably very fresh in the public's eye, it is important to place the war in a global context, because it would help explain some actions that Vietnam and the United States took in regards to the war. At the beginning of 1968, when Johnson made this speech, he wanted to reassure Congress that everything was going well abroad. The focus then should be on improving domestic affairs. Moreover, because 1968 was an election year, he wanted to portray himself in the best light possible as the perfect candidate with the election on the horizon. He was the one who would lead the U.S. out of the war. He was the obvious choice, and this confidence often seeped through in his speeches. The State of the Union Address was no exception. Interestingly, there was no mention of Operation Rolling Thunder in this speech, despite the fact that the military campaign was going on its third year with no end in sight.

The Tet Offensive

All the positivity that Johnson was trying to paint with his State of the Union Address shattered on January 31, 1968 when North Vietnamese soldiers and the National Liberation Front (NLF) attacked the multiple cities in South Vietnam, including the stronghold of Saigon and the old capital of Hue. This was during the Lunar New Year, or "Tết" in Vietnamese, and it was part of a General Uprising organized by the Hanoi

[34] Johnson, "State of the Union Address."

government and the NLF. The goal of Tet was to attack the major cities in South Vietnam and weaken the American and South Vietnamese defenses, while at the same time inspire the people living in South Vietnam to rise up and join the uprising to retake the country from the American "invaders" and the "puppet" regime of South Vietnam.

There were three phases of the Tet Offensive. The first phase was from January 31 to February 24 of 1968. During this period, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong attacked Khe Sanh, a military base near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and lured most of the American army into this region, while Hanoi planned attacks on other major cities of South Vietnam, including Hue, where casualties were the heaviest. The political figures in Hanoi had hoped that these attacks would spark a national rebellion against the government of South Vietnam, and when this did not occur, Hanoi decided that there should be another wave of attack, which led to the second phase of the Tet Offensive. This phase began on May 4, and at this point the name of the offensive was no longer accurate because the Lunar New Year celebration has long passed. The final phase was from August to September, making the offensive about eight months long. At the end of Tet, both the United States and North Vietnam claimed victory, yet neither side truly won, and peace was still far away.

Before the Tet Offensive took place, the U.S. government actually knew that there would be an attack from the North Vietnamese based on intelligence sources.[35] The Johnson administration was aware that Hanoi was planning an attack that would take place in early 1968. They also knew that the offensive would have three objectives: luring U.S. troops away from the populated areas of South Vietnam, attempting to take

[35] David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive – Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 85.

control of the segments guarded by the ARVN, and followed by a major attack in a northern province.[36] With these insights, the U.S. should be able to predict and counterattack. However, the U.S. did not think that the NLF and the North Vietnam Army would be able to pull off such a large-scale attack. They thought that the main attack would be on Khe Sanh. More importantly, when Washington heard about the siege, President Johnson told congressional leaders, "if my poll goes where it has gone with all the victories, imagine what it would do if we had a major defeat."[37] His words carried a foreboding effect, as his approval ratings did plummet after Tet, regardless of its supposed military victory.

Khe Sanh was considered the "biggest lure" of the Vietnam War.[38] Although the siege was heavily military, its sole purpose was to deceive the United States into thinking that it would be another Dien Bien Phu. It served as a distraction for General William Westmoreland while the real blow was directed elsewhere. On the morning of January 31, Westmoreland announced that all the attacks on Saigon and other major cities and towns of South Vietnam were a "diversion for an intended main thrust at Khe Sanh and across the DMZ."[39] As a result, when North Vietnamese forces attacked the city of Hue, he did not send more troops to defend the city, but insisted on keeping a close watch on Khe Sanh. North Vietnamese forces were able to siege the city until February 24, and during this period, the city population suffered greatly.[40] Thousands of innocent people were massacred; and many of them were buried with their hands tied behind their back in

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[36] Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War – Vietnam, The United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 305.
[37] Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive – Politics, War, and Public Opinion,* 89.
[38] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 710.
[39] Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 719.
[40] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War – An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 113.

unmarked graves. Vietnamese sources believed that it was the biggest massacre of the war thus far.[41] Following this, on March 22, 1968, Westmoreland was brought back to the United States to be the Chief of Staff of the Army, from that point on he was no longer involved in the Vietnam War.[42] As scholar and reporter Neil Sheehan mentioned in *A Bright Shining Lie,* "William Westmoreland thought that he possessed South Vietnam. What he owned was a lot of American islands where his soldiers stood."[43] Perhaps individually or even looking at the war from the American strongholds in South Vietnam, it easily seemed like the U.S. was winning. North Vietnam had not been able to mount a successful military attack, including Tet, as it was an American military victory. However, when looking at the war from a bigger picture, the toll it took on Johnson, the administration, and public perception was apparent.

Interestingly, American soldiers did not feel that the they lost during the offensive because they took down Viet Cong and the North Vietnam Army swiftly. They were surprised by the attack, but the American Army had enough troops and arms to defend themselves. John Singlaub, the commander of SOG, America's largest clandestine military unit, stated that amidst the chaos, he did not feel like the communists were winning against the United States and South Vietnamese forces. He commented, "We had been trying for years to get them to come out in the open so we could slaughter them, and we slaughtered them… It was an enormous victory for us and we should have really pressed on."[44] From a military perspective, therefore, Tet was an American victory.

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[41] Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh – Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 62.
[42] Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 720.
[43] Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 713.
[44] Appy, Christian G. *Patriots – The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 93.

However, in the media, American viewers saw the bloodbath and battlefields, with children running away from soldiers, crying because their family was gone. The horror of the war was broadcasted in American homes. As a result, there were more anti-war protests, and Johnson's approval ratings suffered.

After the Tet Offensive, the United States had to re-think about the effectiveness of the strategies that had been used from the beginning of the war. American soldiers fought off the North Vietnamese Army and the NLF and prevented them from taking the cities of South Vietnam. However, North Vietnam did not fight to win every battle, their goal was to wear down Americans and outlast them. Even if they were defeated, they could still come back another day, another time, and took another initiative. Reporter H. D. S. Greenway who covered the war from 1967 to 1975 noted that the Vietnam War was always a political war. He stated, "to say that we killed all those people and they didn't kill so many of us misunderstand the whole Vietnam War. It was a victory for us only in the narrowest sense."[45] Although the U.S. won the military victory, the psychological damage on the public opinion was so great that the war was viewed as too inhumane and too brutal and not at all worth the cost that the win was pyrrhic. This weakened the will to continue fighting and it killed the American public's support of the Vietnam War. They might have won the battle, but Johnson lost all public support, and for an election year it was a blow he could not recover from.

On the side of North Vietnam, there were conflicting ideas about the objectives of Tet. Traditionally, the offensive has been known as a means to surprise the United States with what the North Vietnamese Army was capable of and at the same time to overthrow the government that the U.S. had put in charge of South Vietnam. However, there were

[45] Appy, *Patriots,* 261.

no unanimous approval of a large-scale offensive within the Communist Party itself. The prominent political leaders like Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap were both very much against a wide-range attack, especially on South Vietnamese cities. Vo Nguyen Giap personally thought that such a "General Offensive – General Uprising" (what the Tet Offensive was frequently known as in Vietnam at that time) should only be carried out when "the enemy was most vulnerable."[46] Despite the protest of both Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, Le Duan, another prominent decision maker in Hanoi, still insisted on the major attack. As a form of disapproval, Vo Nguyen Giap left the country for Eastern Europe before the first phase of the Offensive took place. Ho Chi Minh also left Vietnam for Beijing. With two of the major opposition leaders out of the country, Le Duan was able to get the approval of the massive Tet Offensive from the Politburo with ease. At the end of 1967, Ho Chi Minh returned to the country and met with the Politburo again as a final attempt of protesting. However, his effort was in vain.

After the Tet Offensive had taken place, Vo Nguyen Giap was among the many people who felt very optimistic about the war. In fact, he emphasized this viewpoint by saying that "no matter how enormous its military and economic potential, it will never succeed in crushing the will of a people fighting for its independence."[47] This point of view in general was what separated the ideology of the United States and North Vietnam in terms of what they were fighting for. While the civilian and military leaderships justified American involvement in Vietnam as stopping the spread of communism and protecting South Vietnam, the goals were not personal. For the North Vietnamese,

[46] Appy, *Patriots,* 286.
[47] Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Military Art of People's War: Selected Writings* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 320.

however, they were fighting to unite their country and to drive out who they considered invaders. Nationalism was the driving force.

Although Giap had doubted the possibility of a Tet's success, after it had happened he changed his viewpoint and assured that "the Vietnamese people do not give up easily and that their military strength had not been in any way impaired by United States aggression, no matter what its forms and its cruelty."[48] Moreover, Giap was also a firm believer that the government of South Vietnam was only a puppet regime and that "South Vietnam is half of a liberated country. The independent, socialist North is an always-existing source of encouragement and support for [the] compatriots in the South."[49] From Giap's viewpoint, the United States was to blame for the imperialization of South Vietnam, as they took the French's place after 1954, and South Vietnam was more or less a victim of this crime. Giap thought that socialism was what helped North Vietnam throughout this war, and the "people's determination to be independent is firmer than ever" after ten years of socialism.[50]

White there were records that show the major casualties that the Viet Cong army has lost, there was a sense of pride from North Vietnam's point of view that they had successfully carried out the Tet Offensive. They firmly believed that they managed to surprise Americans, both the soldiers in Vietnam and the headquarters back in Washington D.C. with the campaign. More importantly, the majority of North Vietnam's supporters, especially people who had served in the Viet Cong Army, still held on to the belief that because of the success of the Tet Offensive, North Vietnam managed to drive out the foreign invaders and took back the country from the puppet regime of South

[48] Giap, *The Military Art of People's War*, 322.
[49] Giap, *The Military Art of People's War,* 325.
[50] Giap, *The Military Art of People's War,* 325.

Vietnam. In a sense, there is a truth in this idea because technically, they were able to take over Vietnam after U.S. troops were pulled out of Vietnam and the South Vietnam government was defeated. However, there is also hubris involved in this notion because the Hanoi government thought that the Tet Offensive was a total victory. From their perspective, the Offensive "shook the enemy's will to its foundation and put an end to the U.S. dream of achieving 'victory' by escalating the war; it awakened the United States to the fact that might, resources, and money have their limits."[51] Not only did they fully believe that they won the campaign and the war, they did not regard the heavy casualties as significant, merely a necessary sacrifice so that the war for justice and independence could be won. This notion has not changed over the years, and there are still many people living in Vietnam today who study the history exclusively from this perspective and they believed that the Tet Offensive was a victorious turn of event that would eventually lead to the triumph of North Vietnam.

Most of the people who are involved with North Vietnam or are influenced by this mindset, like Colonel General Tran Van Tra who commanded the People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam that "liberated" South Vietnam for example, thought of the Vietnam War as "a just war against foreign aggression and a traitorous puppet regime, against brutality and injustice, for national independence and freedom, and for human dignity."[52] This viewpoint is quite popular among North Vietnamese military personnel because they felt like the only aim of the war was "to impose the domination of one nation over another, impose the ideology of one group on another."[53] This was how

[51] Jayne S. Werner, Luu Doan Huynh, *The Vietnam War – Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1993). 60.
[52] Werner, Huynh, *The Vietnam War,* 63.
[53] Werner, Huynh, *The Vietnam War* , 241.

some North Vietnamese military personnel viewed the war, and justified the Hanoi government's actions. Of course there are more open-minded people who try to see the war from the different perspective that they grew up with, but usually this is just a minority.

From the American point of view, the Tet Offensive of 1968 was not successful because the Viet Cong Army and the communists suffered heavy casualties and did not achieve a military success. The United States was able to keep the stronghold of Saigon, and South Vietnam did not fall. However, from North Vietnam's perspective, the offensive had a psychological victory because it forced the United States to recognize the public outcry of the horrors of what was happening in Vietnam. For Johnson, his approval ratings plummeted to 36%, whereas his disapproval ratings increased to 52% on March 10.[54] The media broadcasted the horrors and atrocities of Tet, and Johnson could no longer reassure the public that the war was under his control.

March 31, 1968 Speech

It was with these factors that on March 31, 1968, on a national broadcast, Johnson addressed the American public in what would be known as the "Withdrawal Speech" later on. Johnson criticized the Hanoi government for their unwillingness to cooperate with efforts towards de-escalation. Moreover, he emphasized that Tet was a failure for North Vietnam as it failed to accomplish all the military goals Hanoi had set. As the speech continued however, the tone changed when Johnson acknowledged the bloodshed that had been spilt on both sides, while also calling for the government of Hanoi to set

[54] "Presidential Job Approval Center," Gallup, accessed September 1, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/presidential-job-approval-center.aspx.

their differences aside and make an effort toward peace talks. However, Johnson stated that "if peace does not come now through negotiations, it will come when Hanoi understands that our common resolve in unshakable, and our common strength is invincible."[55] The United States was willing to move toward peace, but it would not hesitate to use more force to enforce the process of getting there.

The shocking moment came at the end of the speech when Johnson mentioned that he would not want to devote any time to "personal partisan causes" other than his current position as President. He then continued, "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."[56] It was this moment that everyone who was watching television in the United States knew that they would have another President by the end of the year. His family and members of the cabinet watched on as he essentially put an end date to his political career.

The decision not to seek re-election was not one that Johnson made lightly without considerations of all other factors. After the announcement, however, Johnson received a phone call from the Chicago Mayor Daly who reassured the President that "we" – as in the Democratic Party, would draft him as the candidate at the Democratic National Convention. Perhaps in the moment of announcing his decision, Johnson truly decided that his political career had come to an end. However, with the words from the Mayor, hope sparked up and the President considered that his career could continue.

On the side of North Vietnam, Johnson's speech and the earlier departures of Robert McNamara to the World Bank and the recall of Westmoreland back to Washington signaled to the Hanoi government that the United States wanted to get out of

[55] Johnson, "Address to the Nation," 31 March 1968.
[56] Johnson, "Address to the Nation," 31 March 1968.

Vietnam. The main decision makers of the war had decided to take a step back, which would explain why after Johnson's speech, on April 3, 1968, the Hanoi government declared that even though the United States had not met all their demands, they were willing to meet for preliminary discussions.[57] Johnson's speech had an impact on North Vietnam as they saw it as his willingness to discuss and perhaps negotiate toward an end to the war.

After the speech, Johnson's approval ratings improved, and the public finally perceived him as someone who was "above" politics whose main focus was getting American soldiers out of Vietnam. Moreover, by not "concerning" himself with re-election campaigns, he could redirect his energy into broker peace deals. The hawks and the doves of Washington would still attempt to sway him toward their ideology, but at least at this point in time, Johnson's decisions regarding the war would not affect his political future, only his place in history.

Beginning of Paris Peace Negotiations

When Johnson announced he would not run for re-election, he also let the public know that his focus would be getting the U.S. out of Vietnam by pushing toward negotiations. The Paris Peace talks began in May 1967 but both sides would not reach the final agreements until 1973 and the Vietnam War would not officially be over until April 30, 1975. Many factors affected this outcome, including the unwillingness to negotiate from all sides because they did not want to get the shorter end of the stick. For their part, North Vietnam was happy when Johnson announced he would not run for re-election,

[57] Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War – the Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 9.

because to them it meant he was serious about working toward peace negotiations. Johnson at first wanted to find a way to finish negotiations before the election day of November 5 because if he left office with the future of Vietnam secure, his legacy would still be intact. Sure, he was the President who Americanized the war, but he would also be the one who Vietnamized it.

When both sides first met in Paris, Rolling Thunder had passed its third year mark and the casualties were enormous. From the American perspective, the operation had failed to achieve all the goals it set out to do, and what it brought back was public disapproval and anti-war protests against the Johnson administration. Moreover, the war was not any closer to being over, despite attempts from individuals from both sides to move toward peace talks. Before the first phase of the offensive, the Hanoi government was certain that they would never negotiate with the United States unless there was a bombing halt in North Vietnam. However, after Phase One, Hanoi shocked the world, especially China and Russia, by agreeing to have a negotiation meeting with the U.S. representatives. In the midst of Phase Two, the Chinese had expressed some concern over Hanoi's willingness to negotiate with the United States. However, on May 13 in Paris, a meeting took place between the Vietnamese delegates led by Xuan Thuy with Ha Van Lau as his deputy and the American delegates led by Averell Harriman with Cyrus Vance as his deputy.[58] At the meeting, the delegates of North Vietnam had four main goals: to win international support and sympathy; to divide and isolate the U.S. and its allies; to gain an insight into the U.S. game plan; and the most important goal, to get the United

[58] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War,* 11.

States to stop bombing North Vietnam unconditionally.[59] Hanoi would not negotiate any other terms until the United States agreed to this.

On June 15, however, Hanoi declared that all discussions were for "probing purposes" and "not yet for bargaining."[60] Soon after that, on June 26, the two deputies of the delegations, Ha Van Lau and Cyrus Lance had another meeting in Vitry-sur-Seine. They met again in July, and at this meting Lance announced that the United States would be willing to cease fire, but there needed to be an agreement of what both sides would do after the bombing had stopped. Vance proposed a two-phased plan, the first being that the United States would stop the bombing and more importantly, all military actions in North Vietnam. But before that could happen, both sides needed to discuss the "measures to adopt" after the ceasefire.

The second phase of this plan consisted of three point, in which both sides would agree to: reestablish the Demilitarized Zone in accordance with the Geneva Agreements of 1954; refrain from increasing their military forces beyond the pre-bombing halt level; and begin substantial discussion on all matters for a peaceful solution to the conflict.[61] This was good news for North Vietnam because they had wanted a U.S. descalation of the war. However, both sides were in a stalemate: The United States would not stop the bombing unless there was a reason. North Vietnam would not agree to negotiate unless the U.S. stopped the bombing. In addition, a compromise had to be reached between both sides: The United States would acknowledge the National Liberation Front as a

[59] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 11.
[60] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War,* 11.
[61] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 12.

participant in the negotiations but Hanoi had to accept the political participation of the Saigon government.[62]

With all this going on, Johnson was still caught between the dovish and the hawkish factions of his administration. Even if he wanted to get American soldiers out of Vietnam, he could not afford to concede to too many demands from Hanoi because he would look weak. On the other hand, throughout the last years of Johnson's administration, Vice President Hubert Humphrey had started to distance himself from the President, especially on his foreign policy regarding Vietnam. Hubert Humphrey had wanted a complete bombing halt as a gesture of American goodwill and genuine interest toward negotiations. However, before Johnson's Withdrawal speech, Humphrey could not speak out against the President lest he be consider a traitor from Johnson's perspective. Even after announcing that he would not run for re-election, Johnson cautioned Humphrey that if he took a stance against the administration's policy, Johnson would not endorse him. For Humphrey, a potential candidate, to not get the endorsement of the President, the most powerful man of the Democratic Party, was to run for office without the most vital support. Therefore, even though Humphrey wanted nothing more than for the negotiations to go smoothly because it would boost his chance of getting endorsed and even elected, it was Johnson's own feelings toward the Vice President that contributed to the way the negotiation process started.

[62] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War,* 12.

Chapter IV.

July – December 1968

Continuation of Paris Peace Negotiations

The second half of the year saw the continuation, albeit an unsuccessful one, of the Paris peace talks. Any time that there seemed to be a breakthrough, one thing or another went wrong, and it was back to square one for all sides. This frustrated Johnson greatly because On August 21, the Soviet Union issued a press release announcing a summit between Johnson and Premier Alexi Kosygin scheduled for October. This greatly improved Johnson's mood and and signaled the possibility of the Soviets bringing North Vietnam to the negotiation table. In one of his usual Tuesday lunch with his national security team, Johnson stated that the summit "could be the greatest accomplishment of [his] administration."[63] For Johnson who inherited the Vietnam crisis from Kennedy and who pushed American soldiers onto foreign soil, the summit would be a chance of correcting his mistakes, of putting an end to a war that his administration furthered. It would be a chance for Johnson to redeem himself in his last days in office. However, a late visit from Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin brought the news that the Warsaw Pact nations, including the Soviet Union, were going to invade Czechoslovakia. The Johnson administration could not condone such an action. Moreover, it could not take any military action in response to the invasion because the war in Vietnam exhausted all military forces.[64] Johnson would not risk the United States going to war with another foreign nation, especially if that nation was the Soviet Union.

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[63] Longley, *LBJ's 1968,* 187.
[64] Longley, *LBJ's 1968,* 193-94.

Once again, Johnson's hope of securing his legacy went up in smokes in 1968. The invasion of Czechoslovakia was another missed opportunity to secure peace in South East Asia.

The Democratic National Convention

The Democratic National Convention, held on August 26 to August 29, was crucial to the Democratic Party. They had just lost Robert Kennedy, the man who could have been the torchbearer of the Kennedy legacy, and now the Party had to decide who would represent them in November. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who wrote a biography on Johnson, noted that when Kennedy announced his intention of running, Johnson felt betrayed by the American people who were cheering this news. "The American people, swayed by the magic of the name, were dancing in the streets." According to Goodwin, it was a contributing factor to why Johnson decided to not run for President again. He expressed, "After thirty-seven years of public service, I deserved something more than being left alone in the middle of the plain, chased by stampedes on every side."[65] With the news of Robert Kennedy's assassination, the party leaders briefly put aside their differences and mourned the death of an important figure who had made differences and would have made more had his life not been cut short. After the mourning period, however, the Democratic Party needed a new leader who would embody all their existing beliefs, and who already had the experience of a being in a ruling administration. The obvious choice, Vice President Hubert Humphrey however, did not have the charisma and the intimidating persona that Johnson possessed.

[65] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 343.

Moreover, there are contrasting accounts on how much Johnson was still involved in the Democratic Party on the days following his speech up until the election. Scholars who wrote about the convention such as Justin Nelson and Kyle Longley both thought that Johnson did not want to relinquish his power and planned to be drafted. On the other hand, Goodwin hardly mentioned the convention in her biography of Johnson at all, and instead focused more on the psyche of a now resigned and defeated President who wanted nothing more than to preserve his legacy through history.

After announcing that he would not seek the nomination of the Democratic Party on national television on March 31, 1968, Johnson received a phone call from the Mayor of Chicago city Richard Daley, who stated that "we," as in the Democratic Party, would draft Johnson as the candidate at the Democratic National Convention.[66] Before the speech, Johnson had to operate under the assumption that he would run in 1968, so everything he did affected that possibility. After the speech, there was a sense of freedom and relief because whatever he did, it would not affect his chance of being President again. The phone call changed that mindset, because suddenly for Johnson, there was hope. Some observers even thought that Johnson was not serious about giving up his presidency, as evident by his last-minute presidential trip to Chicago in late August just in time for the convention.[67] This meant that even though he declared he would not seek the nomination of his Party, there was nothing stopping them from drafting him themselves.

As someone who was seen now as "above politics," Johnson still had a lot of control and interest in the convention. This became more evident after Johnson's increase

[66] Longley, *LBJ's 1968*, 102.
[67] Melvin Small, "The Election of 1968," *Diplomatic History* 28, vol. 4 (September 2004), 520.

in poll points after Robert Kennedy's assassination. For the Democratic Party, it was important that they draft a candidate who had a chance of winning, and with Kennedy's tragic death, Johnson was the only one capable of pulling a victory over Nixon. Interestingly, historian Kyle Longley remarked that "the visions of Johnson sweeping in and saving the Democratic Party at the national convention in Chicago played right into his massive ego and vanity."[68] It had been recognized by multiple scholars that Johnson had a larger-than-life personality, and he craved acceptance and adoration from the public and he felt that after more than thirty years of dedicating his life to American politics, he deserved it. This was why even after he denied having any interest in representing the Democratic Party, few actually believed him. If drafted, Johnson would prolong his Presidency as another wartime President just like Franklin Roosevelt. Johnson put the people in his circle in charge of the convention, and because he was still the leader of the Party, his instructions were followed closely. The Draft Johnson movement became more inspired after the Republican National Convention had Nixon leading 45% with Humphrey trailing him at only 29%.[69] Now was the best chance for Johnson to swoop in and save the Democratic Party and lead his Party through another four-year victory. More importantly, the phone call from the Chicago Mayor allowed Johnson to think and assume that the Democratic Party wanted and *needed* him to be their candidate.

Scholar Justin Nelson argued that the reason Johnson was not ultimately drafted was because the party no longer wanted him to be their nominee, and that the political landscape did not change between the speech and the election, so neither the party nor the

[68] Longley, *LBJ's 1968,* 206.
[69] Longley, *LBJ's 1968,* 209.

nation had hoped for a Johnson swoop.[70] For Johnson, this was a shock considering that he had dedicated almost his entire life to politics. Moreover, when he delivered the speech, he had already resigned himself to the possibility of not ever becoming elected again. If it was true that Johnson truly had nothing to do with the planning of the convention, then he was given false hope that he could and would be elected again. However, if he truly had a stake in planning the convention and orchestrating his potential draft, then he was let down by his own party, the very party that he had dedicated his life to. Either way, the fact that Johnson was not drafted at the convention was a heavy blow, one he could not easily recover from. His hopes of being drafted did not die until after the end of the Convention, when the Party decided to draft Humphrey instead. It was then that the President finally let go of the dream of being re-elected. Interestingly, Goodwin did not mention the Draft Johnson movement in the biography but instead chose to focus on Johnson's desire to preserve his legacy after the March 31 speech. Perhaps in hindsight, both the President and his biographer realized that it was a failed attempt on Johnson's part to secure his Party's nomination, and something that should not be mentioned in a presidential memoir.

The Anna Chennault Affair

While the Draft Johnson movement gained momentum as the polls numbered showed that Johnson might be the only Democrat nominee who might beat Nixon, the President was still trying to broker peace deals in an efforts to please the dovish factors. They wanted a complete bombing halt, a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops, and

[70] Justin A. Nelson, "Drafting Lyndon Johnson: The President's Secret Role in the 1968 Democratic Convention," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (December 2000), 689.

increased efforts in negotiations. At the same time, however, Johnson still had to deal with the hawks who thought that the bombing halt meant the United States was getting soft and it would allow North Vietnam to take advantage. This sentiment was shared by President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, who felt directly threatened by North Vietnam and that the U.S. was not doing everything in its power to help its ally. While North Vietnam hoped to get a better deal from the Democrats, South Vietnam was certain that it would get one from the Republicans. This is why during the Paris meetings, South Vietnam did not want to compromise just yet under the Johnson administration. In the months leading up to the election, the negotiations continued and it seemed a breakthrough will be achieved. However, in October of 1968, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu suddenly refused to join the negotiations. Johnson speculated that this was because Thieu and presidential candidate Nixon were in agreement that Thieu should wait until Nixon became President to continue the peace talks because he would get a better deal.

A year ago in 1967, Nixon asked Anna Chennault, a prominent member of the U.S. China Lobby and Washington socialite at the time, to correspond to Bui Diem, the South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States. She was the wife of General Claire Chennault, a World War II aviator and leader of the squadron Flying Tigers. After his death, she took control of their aviation company which usually had contracts to fly cargo from and to South Vietnam. As a result, Anna Chennault had insights on the war and Nixon valued her opinions. Supposedly on October 29, 1968, an inside source from the Nixon campaign told economist Alexander Sachs that Nixon was trying to convince President Nguyen Van Thieu not to come to the Paris negotiations. Sachs passed the

information to Walt Rostow, who then passed it to Johnson. Later the same day, Thieu refused to come to Paris, and Johnson ordered the NSA to wiretap Bui Diem and follow Chennault's movements to see if they attempted contact with South Vietnam.

After Johnson announced the complete bombing halt on October 31, Chennault received a phone call from the Nixon camp asking her to express the "Republic position" to the South Vietnamese. While Chennault claimed that she was upset by this demand, a few days later the FBI recorded a call from her to Bui Diem with a message, "hold on, we are gonna win."[71] While this might seem like this was a part of a conspiracy, scholars have debated the validity of this theory, firstly because Chennault did not pass the message until two days after she received it. Moreover, there was no indication that Bui Diem responded to her nor mention her message in his following contact to the South Vietnamese government. Something of this degree of importance would have been conveyed to Thieu had Chennault and Bui Diem been a part of this conspiracy. The scholar George Veith believes that the timing of the leak from the Nixon camp and Thieu' refusal to cooperate with the Paris peace talks were indicators why it was logical to think that there was a conspiracy.

In an interview with Veith however, Bui Diem revealed that he did not make any deal with the Nixon camp in any effort to sabotage the peace talks. Chennault also rejected the allegations that she took part in any conspiracy to sway the election in Nixon's favor. They both claimed that the refusal of the South Vietnamese government to attend the Paris peace talks was based on political issues, not because Nixon requested them to. However, whether there was a conspiracy or not, what happened was that at this

[71] George J. Veith, "The Anna Chennault Affair: The South Vietnamese Side of the War's Greatest Conspiracy Theory," Wilson Center, last modified May 9, 2022, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/anna-chennault-affair-south-vietnamese-side-wars-greatest-conspiracy-theory.

time in the negotiation, the parties involved were not able to reach a resolution. Johnson and Humphrey were livid when they learned that a conspiracy might have happened, and they debated whether or not to tell the public about Nixon's doing. If they had done so, Humphrey could have won the election because the public would be outraged that a presidential candidate was sabotaging peace keeping efforts in order to win the race. However, the Democratic Party chose to keep silence, and Humphrey was devastated. A few days before the election, Nixon called Johnson in panic and explained that there was "absolutely no truth" in the Chennault incident "as far as he knew."[72] This was most likely to prevent Johnson from going public with the information, because Nixon and Chennault were already in association long before the "conspiracy."

Ambivalence toward Hubert Humphrey

With all these external political movements, it is important to keep in mind the growing tension between Johnson and Humphrey in these crucial months of 1968. While the President had stepped aside as a political candidate, he had also not personally endorsed any other candidate. While it might seem like Humphrey would be the obvious choice, the "ambivalence" that Johnson held toward Humphrey was one of the main reasons the President refused to endorse him. Johnson thought that Humphrey sometimes strayed too far away from the administration's policy, especially regarding Vietnam. For his part, while Humphrey wanted the President's support, he knew that in order to be a desirable candidate, he had to separate himself from the administration's viewpoint enough that he was viewed as different from Johnson, but not too far that he was betraying the administration he was serving. The Paris peace negotiations would be the

[72] Small, "The Election of 1968," 528.

perfect chance for Humphrey to present himself as the only possible candidate for the Democratic Party.

On July 25, Humphrey met Johnson to ask for permission to "deviate" and distance himself from the White House stance by advocating for a total bombing halt of North Vietnam. However, Johnson rejected this idea immediately, saying "The GOP may be more of a help to us than the Democrats in the next few months."[73] Johnson and the military leaders believed that if there was a complete bombing halt, North Vietnam would take advantage and launch major attacks on American troops. While the Johnson administration wanted to appear like they were willing to negotiate, the military leadership did not want to appear weak in front of North Vietnam. On the other hand, to Humphrey, the bombing halt would be a gesture of goodwill instead of naiveté on the part of the administration.

Johnson would not personally endorse Humphrey until October. However, at that time it was too little too late because the election was only days away. Moreover, neither Johnson nor Humphrey decided to go public with the Chennault affair. For Johnson, it was because he thought Thieu might still change his mind about negotiating. More importantly, if Nixon were going to win, this new information would make Johnson seem a little bit vindictive as a former President toward the newly elected President. To make matters worse, it meant that the war would not come to an end during Johnson's term, as South Vietnam had proven to be more willing to negotiate with a Republican presidency.

The End of Operation Rolling Thunder

[73] Small, "The Election of 1968," 522.

Operation Rolling Thunder came to an end on November 2, 1968 when President Johnson announced a complete bombing halt on North Vietnam. This came only a few days before the election, and this decision would have helped Humphrey if it had been made earlier, however, as mentioned previously, Johnson's personal feelings toward Humphrey often clouded his judgment. In its three-year duration, Rolling Thunder cost the United States more than 900 million dollars yet it achieved none of its objectives. There was a saying that "it cost America 10 dollars for every dollar worth of damage they did."[74]As stated previously in the introduction, a lot of the blame for the failures of the operation is placed on the administration, especially from the military perspective. For example, the Air Force leadership believed that the operation "had no clear-cut objective nor did its authors have any real estimate of the cost of lives and aircraft."[75] As early as 1967, the United States had dropped 864,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam during the operation.[76]

The cost would have been justified had the operation been successful, but it was a complete failure. In fact, a study by Colonel Dennis M. Drew, the Director of the Airpower Research Institute, published in 1986, argued that even in 1965, the birth year of Rolling Thunder, the operation already proved to be a failure. Colonel Drew stated that the military doctrine contradicted with the perceptions held by civilian leaders, and the military were unable to develop an airpower doctrine that was effective in a limited

[74] Cooper Willey, "Operation Rolling Thunder," Vietnam Project, accessed December 19, 2022, https://sites.wp.odu.edu/vietnamprojectforamericanpast/operation-rolling-thunder-cooper-willey/.
[75] "1965: Operation Rolling Thunder," Air Force Historical Support Division, accessed November 30, 2022, https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458992/1965-operation-rolling-thunder/.
[76] "Operation Rolling Thunder: American Casualties," HonorStates.org, accessed November 20, 2022, https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?page=features&tid=1471.

war.[77] This was already apparent in 1965, yet the operation went on for another three years despite all its shortcomings and ineffectiveness. The Johnson administration had hoped that the operation would eventually force North Vietnam to think that it could not win against the United States, and the push from military leaders to broaden the targets and decrease the limitations and restrictions of Rolling Thunder would make it more effective. None of these assumptions were true. Rolling Thunder did not bring North Vietnam to the negotiating table in 1965, and it would still fail to do so three years later.

The 1968 Presidential Election

On November 5, 1968, Nixon became the 37th president of the United States. The Democratic Party, represented by Humphrey, lost the election. Johnson watched his control of the Democratic Party and his grip over American politics loosen with the Nixon's victory. One thing that would probably have made this experience a little bit better was perhaps the fact that Humphrey did not win. To the end of his presidency, Johnson still did not entertain the thought of a Humphrey presidency. However, during the Nixon presidency, the peace talks with North Vietnam was successful and the United States was able to get out of Vietnam finally. It was one of the things that Johnson was unable to accomplish during his term. If negotiations had completed before Johnson left office, at least he could be comforted by the fact that he had led the United States out of the war.

This change in administration at the beginning of 1969 also signaled a new era of foreign policy. Richard Nixon would be the third President who oversaw the Vietnam

[77] Colonel Dennis M. Drew, *Rolling Thunder 1965: Anatomy of a Failure* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press, 1986), 4.

War, and he would be the one to finally "end" it. This would not prove to be an easy task as the war was not officially over until 1975, and Nixon could not have done it without help, especially from his National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

The Effects of Rolling Thunder on the Vietnam War

For Johnson, when he authorized Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965, he did not know that the operation would prove to be unsuccessful as much as it was costly. As mentioned previously, even in 1965, the operation exhibited signs of failures, yet the military and civilian leaders still wanted to extend its duration. A joint report by the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency came to the conclusion that from its inception until March 1968, Rolling Thunder cost a total of 436 million US dollars in both economic and military losses.[78]

When Johnson announced the end of Rolling Thunder in November 1968, it was merely days before the presidential election, and the operation had yielded no results. He did not want to be known as the President who lost Vietnam, because it would seriously undermine American credibility and authority and perhaps dominance that was established after World War II. It is also important to remember that for Johnson, the operation is a necessary part of the war, and the Vietnam War itself was seen as a way to restrain the communist expansion in Asia. The Cold War mentality did not allow him to be soft.

Johnson was in a war he did not want to be in. He wanted to focus on his domestic policy of the Great Society but he could not afford to do so. Rolling Thunder was just his way of attempting to seem like he was in control of the war. And he paid for

[78] The Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, "An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam (1 Jan – 31 March 68)."

it dearly, with his health, his grip on the Democratic Party, his approval ratings, and his presidency among other things. It was a situation that he could not win no matter what. And maybe we are left to wonder if things would have been different had there been another President, or would Kennedy have lost the war, etc. However, methods of counter-factual thinking while entertaining at times and allow us to think of more hypothetical situations do not change the reality that Vietnam happened. Rolling Thunder was a band-aid attempting to fix a large wound, and it could not. Its failures did not reflect on one mistake of one individual, so no one was entirely to blame. Rather it was a part of a series of mistakes made during the course of the Vietnam War.

American Troop Withdrawal

One of the agreements in Paris was the withdrawal of American troops, both ground and air forces. Interestingly, the question of troop withdrawal was already on the mind of the American public in early 1968. In March, a poll showed that 69% of Americans wanted a "phased withdrawal" of U.S. forces.[79] In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, the public perception was that the United States had been too involved with the war in Vietnam at too much of a cost, and it was time for a gradual withdrawal. At the start of the Paris negotiations, North Vietnam demanded a complete bombing halt before any serious negotiation could take place, as they viewed the political and military issues as inseparable. However, the three sides involved did not want to compromise on any topic, which led to Johnson's failures to wrap up negotiations by the time his term ended in January 1969. The public pressure for a troop withdrawal only intensified with the

[79] Robert J. McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam, 1968-1972," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010): 471.

Paris negotiations, as more people thought that it was due time American soldiers return home, and this topic became contested at the early stages of the talks.

When Nixon took office in January 1969, he still believed that a strong U.S. military presence in South Vietnam could make North Vietnam more willing to negotiate. He was optimistic in the belief that more pressure from U.S. military would break the stalemate of the negotiations. However, after a meeting with the National Security Council, the military and civilian leaders came to the conclusion that "balanced reductions" in forces were necessary.[80] Still, Nixon stressed that within the next three to four months, the United States could begin to bring home "a few troops unilaterally as a separate and distinct action from the Paris negotiations."[81] He did not want the potential withdrawal to be associated with the peace talks, as it could be viewed as a sign of compromise, or worse, weakness, on the American side. Interestingly, even though the war was now seen as a military stalemate, Nixon did not want to believe that no amount of military actions could shift the war to the U.S.' favor. When he was a candidate, he had promised that he would end the conflict; now that he was President he was faced with difficult situations. The advice he got from Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird was that increments of troop withdrawal are necessary so as to avoid public outcry if the number of Americans killed each week in Vietnam did not decrease.[82]

The Nixon administration seemingly had two different policies when it came to Vietnam in the first half of 1969. On the one hand, there were plans for a gradual troop withdrawal for 1970 in accordance with Laird's advice. On the other hand, the administration kept insisting to North Vietnam that mutual withdrawal of forces must be

[80] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 473.
[81] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 474.
[82] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 474.

the basis for negotiating. If the U.S. were to withdraw troops, North Vietnam should as well. Nixon and Kissinger even tried to appeal to the Soviet government, hoping they would persuade North Vietnam to be willing to negotiate, but it was to no avail. North Vietnam knew that they had the upper hand regarding this issue, since the U.S. could not afford to keep troops in South Vietnam indefinitely. In a private meeting between Kissinger and North Vietnam's senior Politburo member Le Duc Tho, Kissinger failed to convince him about the necessity of mutual withdrawal. In fact, Tho said that the U.S. plan to call back troops was a "withdrawal in droplets" and insisted that a complete withdrawal was a "legal principle" that needed to happen.[83] It seemed that the Hanoi government understood the fragile complexity of the American public perception of the war, and was using that to its advantage.

Nixon then commenced another military operation to invade Cambodia in 1970, targeting North Vietnamese and Viet Cong base camps, but this operation proved to be unsuccessful and even led to the halt of the Paris peace talks, while at the same time ignited the anti-war movement in the United States.[84] The administration then authorized a South Vietnamese incursion into Laos which also failed spectacularly. North Vietnam countered with the Eastertide Offensive in March 1972, but this time they overestimated their military capability and suffered a heavy loss. It was this defeat that brought North Vietnam to the negotiating table and the finally acquiesced that the removal of Thieu was not imperative to the peace talks.[85] Neither the topic of American troop withdrawal nor pressure from the Soviet Union nor China could make North Vietnam compromise, their own losses did. After that incident, North Vietnam was willing to negotiate, and even

[83] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 480.
[84] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 481.
[85] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 483.

though Nixon and Kissinger did not get the mutual withdrawal of troops that they wanted, at least they were able to get North Vietnam to the negotiating table, something the Johnson administration failed to do.

It is also important to keep the Vietnam War in a global context instead of merely a conflict between the United States and North Vietnam. For North Vietnam for example, it was almost like a civil war since they had to go against their own countrymen. Moreover, they wanted to unite the country in accordance with the Geneva Agreements, something they were promised by international world leaders. The parties involved were still in the Cold War mindset, and North Vietnam's ally the Soviet Union was in a middle of a détente with the United States in an attempt to cool down the Cold War. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union wanted to trigger the other into a nuclear World War III. To the American administrations, they could not let South Vietnam fall to Communism. It would send the message that the United States was week. If it could not protect one small country in South East Asia, what would that say about its global reputation as the defender of democracy?

Foreign Policy of the Nixon Administration

Nixon definitely employed different strategies when it came to foreign policy. He had won the election on the promise that he would get the United States out of Vietnam and achieve "peace with honor." Because he had wanted to continue Johnson's efforts in peace negotiations, Nixon did not count on a military victory over North Vietnam as the deciding factor in ending the war. Rather, it had to be done through negotiating and applying the right pressure on North Vietnam. Nixon also hoped that through increased contact with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Union would be willing to

persuade North Vietnam into negotiation with the United States. This task often fell to Kissinger, who was one of the most important figures credited to the success of the Paris peace talks, along with North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho.

When it came to Vietnam, however, Kissinger's approach could sometimes be considered harsh even to the military leaders. For example, in April 1969, North Korea shot down a U.S. Navy plane on a spy mission, and Kissinger suggested that the United States should bomb a North Korean air base in retaliation. This was strongly opposed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Earle Wheeler and other military figures, because the gesture could start a second Korean War. Kissinger justified it by saying that the act of bombing North Korea could make the Hanoi government realize that Nixon was "irrational" and become more likely to settle.[86] Kissinger would not mind expanding the Vietnam War if it could lead to the end of the war. This would explain why he was against the withdrawal of 25,000 troops in June 1969 and the promise of the withdrawal of all troops, as he feared that the South Vietnamese government would immediate collapse without American assistance.[87] Kissinger, therefore, opposed the Vietnamization of the war, doubting the effectiveness of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

The foreign policy of the United States under the Nixon administration was different than how it was under the Johnson administration, although one thing in common was neither of them wanted to lose the Vietnam War. For Johnson, he felt like he had to follow Kennedy's existing policy of aiding South Vietnam and when given the chance, he chose to escalate the war, despite the previous emphasis on peace without conquest. For Nixon, he won the election on the premise that he would bring peace with

[86] A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 546.
[87] Langguth, *Our Vietnam,* 548.

honor, so his main focus was how to deescalate the war without seeming like the United States was losing. Johnson was a proponent of the Americanization of the war, whereas Nixon supported the its Vietnamization.

End of Paris Negotiations

In January 1973, the United States, South Vietnam, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam signed the Paris Agreements. This marked the beginning of the end of the Vietnam conflict. Interestingly, both Kissinger and Le Duc Tho got awarded the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts, but Le Duc Tho did not accept it. American troops have slowly been withdrawn to the chagrin of Thieu and South Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese people who wanted to leave the country have begun to do so. There was the well-founded fear that once American troops left, the North Vietnamese Army and the NFL would attempt to unite the country.

When Nixon came to office, one of his main goals was to settle the Paris negotiations. Both Nixon and Kissinger had wanted a *mutual* troop withdrawal, both from the United States and North Vietnam, leaving South Vietnam to be an independent, and more importantly, non-Communist, state.[88] However, the Hanoi government understood that the United States could not afford to keep 549,000 troops in South Vietnam indefinitely, for both financial and public opinion reasons. Therefore, North Vietnam had the upper hand when it came to negotiating. Sure, the United States could threaten them with more bombing, but they had endured all these years of Rolling Thunder and developed strategies that would protect their resources. Moreover, the number of American troops did not keep North Vietnam from sending more reinforcements to the

[88] McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam," 476.

South and strengthening the NFL. North Vietnam, therefore, had the most to gain with the negotiations whereas South Vietnam had the shortest end of the stick. The United States was able to claim that the war in Vietnam ended, and American soldiers were finally returning home.

Vietnam's War

After the signing of the Paris Accords in 1973, both North Vietnam and South Vietnam broke the agreements multiple times with no official response from the U.S. The biggest offensive occurred on April 30, 1975 when North Vietnamese forces and the NFL rode on tanks through the gates of the Independence Palace in Saigon. Before that, the United States had started evacuating its military personnel and also some of the South Vietnamese people who wanted to leave the country. April 30th became Independence Day for Vietnam, at least the North thought so, and that was written in official history textbooks. For the Vietnamese people living in the South, or supporters of South Vietnam in general, the day was known as Black April. The liberation, or fall, depending on the narrative, marked the official end of the war for the Vietnamese people.

One major difference between the United States and North Vietnam in the war was the nature of their purpose. For the United States, it wanted to stop South Vietnam from falling to Communism. While the goal was lofty, it was not personal. For North Vietnam, including the Hanoi government and the National Liberation Front, the goal was to not have two Vietnams, especially since the United States and South Vietnam had refused to follow the instructions of the Geneva Agreements that called for an election to unify the country. Therefore, nationalism was the driving force for North Vietnam, and it was this ideology that drove it to victory. They knew it would be costly, but they were

prepared to sacrifice everything to achieve their goal. Moreover, North Vietnam referred to South Vietnam as "miền Nam," which translated to "the South," as in the southern part of the country, not a separate country. Whereas for the United States, there was a clear distinction that North Vietnam and South Vietnam were two distinct countries. This difference also affected the way Washington and Hanoi conducted foreign policy and their motivations.

While the Vietnam War was officially over in 1975, it leaves a lasting legacy that still affects the two countries involved. For the Vietnamese people whose family was involved in the war, how they feel about the war depends on which part of the country they are from and which side they supported, North or South Vietnam. While it is easy to assume that all Vietnamese people hated the United States for "invading" their country, for the South Vietnamese people, they thought that they would need the American help to stop South Vietnam from becoming a Communist state.

No person was single-handedly responsible for the failures of Operation Rolling Thunder, just like no individual was solely responsible for the Vietnam War. For the Vietnamese people, the war changed the course of their life. The people who grew up during the war watch their country get divided and then reunited, and how they felt about that depended on where in Vietnam they lived and the ideology they supported. For example, people who lived in South Vietnam or supported the U.S. wanted to leave the country when they realized that North Vietnam was going to be victorious. Some gave up their entire lifesavings for a chance to escape the country, sometimes by dangerous means such as by boat, where they could be stranded at sea. Sometimes they would make it to a

neighboring country where they had to stay as refugees for years before they gained passage to the United States.

In Vietnam, the scholarship on the war, including top secret materials, are not available for the public. After the North took over South Vietnam and unified the country, Vietnam became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. What is taught about the war is dictated by the government, as the Department of Education has to approve official textbooks that are taught in schools throughout the country. As a result, a person who grew up in Vietnam after 1975 merely learned about the war through the books that the government allows to be published, and their perception might be skewed until they find more international sources that allow them to learn about the war from a non-victorious North Vietnamese perspective. This is a way of controlling the narrative of how the war is remembered by the younger generations of Vietnamese.

The Johnson Legacy

Scholars have debated on whether the escalation of the war was inevitable. Fredrik Logevall, author of the Pulitzer prize winning book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* argued that even though Johnson inherited the war from Kennedy, he was not forced to continue or escalate it. While the administration was still in a Cold War mindset, which meant they were more willing to stop the supposed spread of Communism in Asia by interfering in Vietnam, the most senior civilian leaders at the time strongly opposed an increase in American involvement beyond strategic guidance and advising. Moreover, the public opinion in 1965 was that

the United States had already done enough to help its ally.[89] The South Vietnamese government was the one not doing enough to protect its own people, and they relied heavily on the American presence. Johnson had all the room in the world to maneuver the conflict, given that at that time, no one thought that the United States would suffer any long-term political effects if they decided not to intervene more than they already had.

Logevall noted that one of the failures of Johnson and the administration as a whole was their hubris in their "presumed right to be in Vietnam and to tell the Vietnamese what kind of society they ought to create."[90] Moreover, if one thinks back to Johnson's "Peace Without Conquest" speech in 1965, Johnson's decision to escalate did not support his claim that "everyone could live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny,"[91] because when it came to Vietnam, he made sure of the United States' intervention. Of course, there could be justifications that the United States was only intervening to help its ally of South Vietnam. However, the Vietnamese people had already been under French rule before the United States came to their country, so it was natural for them, especially for North Vietnam, to see the Americans as a replacement of the French.

Johnson as a politician had many shortcomings. After the announcement that he would not run for re-election, his main focus (at least what he told the public) was that he was going to try and move the war toward the direction of peace negotiations. That would be his last act of President, and he wanted to be remember as the President who got the US out of Vietnam. However, his resentment toward Vice President Humphrey among

[89] Fredrik Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 2004): 102.
[90] Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," 105.
[91] Johnson, "Peace Without Conquest."

other things did not allow him to wholeheartedly focus on making peace with North and South Vietnam. Rather he wanted to leave a legacy of what historians should remember him with. Unfortunately, we do not get to dictate our own legacy. Moreover, he would rather see Nixon win than Humphrey, which meant he put his personal feelings above his responsibilities as the nation's leader.

In the report *Images of Inherited War: Three American Presidents in Vietnam,* the author William Hersch titled the chapter on Johnson as "From Texas to Tet: Johnson's Posse of Lies." Hersch believed that Johnson's mishandling of the Vietnam War stemmed from his need to control the public perception of him as President. Because Johnson became President after Kennedy's assassination, he felt like he did not receive the votes of the American people, and because of that, he had to prove his worth as the nation's leader. Hersch also criticized the Johnson administration's handling of the Gulf Tonkin incident in 1964, saying that it proved 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."[92] According to Hersch, Johnson purposefully withheld information from Congress, which gave him a "blank check for further action" regarding Vietnam.[93] This meant that Johnson put his own political gains above the nation's and above the very people he had sworn to protect. Everything he did was based on how it would affect the public perception of him and the chances of him getting support if he were to run for office again. When it came to the start of Rolling Thunder in 1965, Hersch believed that Johnson again wanted to tightly and securely control the public perception of the war. It

[92] William R. Hersch, "From Texas to Tet: Johnson's Posse of Lies," *Images of Inherited War: There American Presidents in Vietnam* (Air University Press, 2014), 94.
[93] Hersch, "From Texas to Tet: Johnson's Posse of Lies," 95.

was a limited war, through a series of "carrots and sticks" methods that should make North Vietnam bend to the U.S.'s will.

In *Argument Without End,* a book that Robert McNamara co-wrote and edited with several senior members of the administration and experts of the war, the former Secretary of Defense organized a series of talks between former leaders of North Vietnam and U.S. officials to see whether the Vietnam War should have happened and what lessons could be derived from it. One theme that kept coming up in the book is the idea of "missed opportunities," whether aspects of the war could have been avoided had both sides not misunderstood each other. For example, McNamara mentioned that in April of 1965, Washington had misread Premier Pham Van Dong's "Four Points" statement that he delivered on April 13, 1965 on Hanoi Radio. The statement reinforced the 1954 Geneva Agreements, and the Premier implored the United States to "end its policy of intervention and aggression in South Vietnam."[94] While these words might seem like Hanoi was insisting that the United States leave South Vietnam, the Premier ended the broadcast by saying that he presented these points as a "basis for the soundest political settlement and as a basis for discussion."[95] This meant that at this point in time, before Johnson even authorized Rolling Thunder, Hanoi openly said that it was open to talk to the United States regarding Vietnam. Therefore, McNamara could not say that no one in Washington realized it was an invitation for negotiation, since the Premier had announced it. This meant that the civilian leaders in the Johnson administration chose not to take these words seriously, or merely ignored it in order to pursue their own agenda of intensifying and Americanizing the war. This would be one of the biggest missed

[94] Pham Van Dong, "The Four-Point Position of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Regarding a Political Solution of the Vietnam Question," April 8, 1965, Wilson Center Digital Archive, 5.
[95] Pham Van Dong, "The Four-Point Position," 5.

opportunities of the war, simply because the United States did not want to negotiate with North Vietnam. A State Department intelligence report even mentioned in late July 1965, "Has Hanoi shown any interest in negotiations? Yes, repeatedly."[96] This meant that there was at least one opportunities to avoid major escalation in 1965 or halt Rolling Thunder. Troops would not have been sent to South Vietnam, and Johnson would not have allowed Operation Rolling Thunder to continue.

Logevall also posed the question, what if Johnson had decided not to escalate the war?[97] The political implications of that decision would be great as well, considering that Johnson would get criticized by the hawks as being too soft, as not doing enough to help prevent the spread of Communism in South East Asia. However, considering that Johnson had won a landslide victory against Barry Goldwater in 1964, who was criticized as being too hawkish, it is logical to think that Johnson's decision not to become more involved in Vietnam would not turn the whole country against him and derive him of his public approval.

Moreover, the other part of the decision makers, the military leaders, did not think that escalating the war would lead to a swift victory by any means. They predicted another war on the scale of Korea, a triggering and too recent of a conflict still fresh in the minds of the American public. In 1965, the political implications of not escalating were minimal compared to the headaches that Johnson would eventually encounter in 1968, an election year, with more than 500,000 American troops in South Vietnam. However, the advisors also believed that if Johnson were to escalate the conflict, there would still be ways to end the war on American terms. At this point, the United States

[96] Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," 107.
[97] Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," 107.

was a world superpower who had never lost a major war before, and it had the most advanced military in the world. The decision to escalate the Vietnam war was also because the Soviet Union and China were allies of North Vietnam, and the United States, the self-proclaimed policeman of the world, needed to make sure that South Vietnam remain a democratic state. Because the United States had thought that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were part of the Communist bloc in Asia that was under Soviet influence,[98] they felt like it was necessary to intervene and prevent South Vietnam from falling to Communism. As a result, the involvement became almost inevitable. The United States had to protect its ally, and failure to do so would lead the democratic world to lose their faith in the United States.

Historian George Herring, an expert on the Vietnam War, mentioned that the United States never set out to win the war in a traditional sense, as in it did not seek the defeat of North Vietnam.[99] Fighting a blown out full scale war with North Vietnam would risk China and the Soviet Union getting involved. On the other side, the Hanoi government also did not want to go one on one with the United States, even though they were prepared to make the sacrifice. However, the limited war that the United States waged, especially through the gradual bombing of Operation Rolling Thunder, gave North Vietnam time to adapt. Because the operation had many military restrictions, the Hanoi government needed only to shield and move its resources, and develop an effective air defense system.[100] While the United States was trying to avoid an all-out war, North Vietnam was determined to hold out with everything they had.

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[98] George Herring, "The Cold War and Vietnam," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (October 2004): 18.
[99] Herring, "The Cold War and Vietnam," 19.
[100] Herring, "The Cold War and Vietnam," 19.

There is a debate on when the Vietnam War actually started because there was no formal declaration of war at all. Some could say that the war started in 1965 when Johnson increased the presence of American troops in South Vietnam. Or perhaps the war started when Kennedy sent the advisors to South Vietnam back in 1962. This is interesting considering that in 1961, when Johnson was still Vice President, he wrote a report to Kennedy after a fact-finding mission in Asia saying that the United States should take on an "advisory" role and "shepherd Vietnam through economic, military, and political assistance under the very closest Washington direction."[101] This was the way the Kennedy administration handled Vietnam in 1962. Johnson would disregard his own assessment when he took office, opting instead to intensify the war in 1965. Moreover, Johnson decided to wage war "in cold blood," as in there was no declaration of war, no calling of the reserves, and no state of emergency declared.[102] In other words, it was never a formal war despite all the political and military planning that went into Vietnam, not to mention the cost. The war ended, at least officially, under the Nixon administration. Johnson then was the one who was associated with the middle, the intensification, or the Americanization of the war. He was also the one who tried, but ultimately failed, to end the war with the Paris negotiations. During the Nixon administration, there were other military operations such as Linebacker and Linebacker II that were considered successful in contrast to Rolling Thunder. The main reason was because these operations did not have the same limitations set forth by the civilian leaders, which was what the military leaders had repeatedly asked for with Rolling Thunder.

[101] Hersch, "From Texas to Tet: Johnson's Posse of Lies," 82.
[102] Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," 109.

Since the United States had supported the French in its conflict with Vietnam, more specifically the Viet Minh forces, the United States had been involved in Vietnam since at least 1950. Logevall made the point that every time a President had been presented with the opportunity to retreat or escalate, they had always chosen the latter option, as it is the path of least resistance.[103] This had been the case until Johnson in 1968, but by that time, the damage to his credibility had been done.

From the multiple biographies on Johnson, the portrait of the President is someone with a larger-than-life personality, someone with charisma and confidence, who dedicated his entire life to politics and to the serving of his country. Regarding the Vietnam War, he did the best, or at least what he thought was the best, for both the United States and South Vietnam given the information he had at the time. Moreover, it is easier to look at the Johnson administration's effectiveness retrospectively, years after it has passed and years after the course of American history became a little bit clearer. However, Johnson had already started to seriously think about his legacy after he announced he would not run for re-election in the March 31 speech supposedly. His legacy would be even more eventful had he successfully been drafted as the Democratic nominee for the 1968 presidential election. Alas, this is another example of counter-factual reasoning that is entertaining and worth thinking of, but does not affect the reality other than pose a "what if" question.

While there are scholars who analyze the failures of Johnson both as a politician and a President, there are also sympathizers and people in his inner circle who praised him and believed that he did the best with what he could, what anyone could, given the situation he found himself in after Kennedy's death. This meant that Johnson was a

[103] Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," 109.

complex figure who could not be categorized as simply "good" or "bad." Sympathetic biographers understand the sentiment that he did not want to be the President who lost Vietnam. Johnson above all, wanted to focus more on domestic policy, but because he inherited Vietnam, foreign policy became the thing he had to focus on, because it was what the public was more concerned with. While Johnson was ambitious with his goals, it is expected since he had won a victory in 1964, and he truly believed, at least at first, that he could solve the Vietnam dilemma.

> "A leader's authority comes from the public's belief in his right and ability to rule, and it the willingness of individuals to suspend their own judgment and accept their leader's because they trust him and the system he represents. By 1968 Johnson had lost this trust. The issue was not simply Johnson's loss of popularity; it was his lost of credibility."[104]

Historian Doris Goodwin encapsulated Johnson's 1968 perfectly in these words. Because of the lack of progress in the Vietnam War, Johnson lost the support of the American people to the point that he announced he would not run for re-election in November. For a sitting president, the perception of the public is crucial especially in an election year. This must feel different for Johnson who in 1964 won the election with a landslide. In 1968 he could not fathom that big of a victory anymore. Perhaps there was a glimmer of hope that the Democratic Party would draft him and that he could swoop in and save the nation and lead the United States out of Vietnam, but all that disappeared when the Party nominated Humphrey instead, and the Paris negotiations reached one stalemate after another. Johnson left the White House more jaded and tired than when he was sworn in to become President, and left behind a legacy tied up with Vietnam that historians and scholars are still trying to find answers until this day.

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[104] Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream,* 337.

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