Negro leaders and choosing them on the basis of which ones were the most accommodating.

Clearly, the racial situation in the late 1960s presented Johnson with political liabilities no matter which way he moved. Public opinion surveys taken in the aftermath of the riots suggested a sharp polarization in black-white attitudes. Of the whites surveyed, 45 percent blamed the riots on outside agitators with Communist backing; only 7 percent of the blacks took this view; 93 percent blamed general frustration. Two-thirds of the blacks felt the police had contributed to the riots; only one-sixth of the whites even acknowledged the presence of police brutality. And what the riots began, the inflationary economy—which locked the blue-collar worker into a struggle with the blacks for jobs—finished: the collapse of the old coalition of organized labor, intellectuals, workers, minorities, and the poor that had functioned for nearly a generation to unite the Democratic Party.

The anger and bitterness on all sides presented Johnson with a task of leadership more difficult than any he had ever faced before. It is tempting, but wrong, to suggest that it was simply a task beyond the ability of this traditional Southern politician. Considering how much Lyndon Johnson had grown on the issue of civil rights, remembering his “We Shall Overcome” speech to the Congress, watching his persistent commitment to open housing long after most of his advisers suggested that he give up, I think the question remains open. Perhaps the symbolic aspects of reunifying the blacks and the blue-collar workers would have been beyond his grasp; perhaps he never could have projected an image that pointed toward the future instead of the past. The point is, we shall never know. For once again, the war in Vietnam mortgaged his leadership at home—exacerbating tensions with Martin Luther King, forcing Johnson into defensive postures, draining his resources.

And in his abdication of leadership on this critical issue, Johnson paved the way for the emergence of two of his greatest rivals: Robert Kennedy, who came to be seen by many in 1968 as the only man capable of rebuilding the Democratic Party and bringing back together the blacks and the whites; and, after his assassination, Richard Nixon, who shared and elaborated upon Johnson’s means without any ends at all.
course" was attacked by both opponents of the war and those who agreed with the premise that our national security was at stake but believed that the necessary victory could be achieved only by the swift and massive use of military power against North Vietnam. As Johnson had feared, growing awareness of the war's dimensions stiffened congressional resistance to his Great Society program. The effectiveness of this resistance was enhanced because it tended to come from those same conservatives who supported his policies in Vietnam, and could command domestic concessions as a reward for that support.

At the same time, the peace movement expanded the size and scope of its activity. Teach-ins and marches were followed by sit-ins and lie-ins, by draft card burnings and demonstrations, by desertions from the Army and other acts of civil disobedience. The nation was in turmoil, and the disruption worked against the President. Yet Johnson persisted in his course in Vietnam. Why? Why did this most pragmatic of men obstinately refuse to alter his policy and cut his losses? The answer requires an understanding of both the institutional and personal momentum at work.

In the beginning, Johnson had feared his country would become obsessed with failure if Vietnam was lost. As the war went on, the obsession he feared for his country became his own. Indeed, as the Great Society disintegrated, the lower the President's popularity fell, the more Johnson had to see his decision to escalate as the only decision he could have made. He had committed everything he had to Vietnam. Regardless of all evidence, he simply had to be right. To think otherwise, to entertain even the slightest doubt, was to open himself to pain of reliving old decisions, options, and possibilities long since discarded. "No, no, no!" Johnson shouted at me one afternoon as I tried to discuss earlier opportunities for peace. "I will not let you take me backward in time on Vietnam. Fifty thousand American boys are dead. Nothing we say can change that fact. Your idea that I could have chosen otherwise rests upon complete ignorance. For if I had chosen otherwise, I would have been responsible for starting World War III. In fact, it was the thought of World War III that kept me going every day. I saw how long the war was taking. I knew what it was doing to my Great Society programs. But all that horror, as horrible as it was, and I hated it more than anyone—do you know what it's like to feel responsible for the deaths of men you love?—well, all that horror was acceptable if it prevented the far worse horror of World War III. For that would have meant the end of everything we know."1

As Lyndon Johnson saw the situation, large forces were at work in Vietnam that others did not see but that he, privy to vast and undisclosed knowledge of the matter, clearly understood. Furthermore, these forces had their origin in the experiences of war. It was a test case for World War III; danger to the survival of the free world was the sole criterion for a just apprehension of America's actions in Vietnam. Johnson's thought simply followed to its furthest reach a system of logic rooted in a particular reading of history. But as the need to ward off threatening aspects of reality intensified, his reasoning tended toward rationalization, wishful thinking, denial, repression, and projection.

Apparently hoping that his words would conceal or even change established facts, and in an effort to halt the erosion of his support, Johnson indulged more and more freely in distortion and patent falsehoods: constant reference to "the progress" made in Vietnam, describing things as he wanted them to be, as if he believed that by the force of his will he could transform what was or had already happened. And because of the office he held, and the armor of institutions, access to media, and control of information available to support him, he was capable of projecting a confusing distortion across the nation. His optimistic public reports drowned the black and ominous analyses of dissenters simply because they were official and public. Publicly established and accepted propositions had a great advantage over whatever individuals privately knew and believed to be the truth.2 And because Johnson wanted so desperately to believe, he was unable to deceive others without often deceiving himself. In persuading the public of the success of the bombing program, he persuaded himself.

But as time went by, neither the powers of Johnson's office nor the intensity of his own conviction could overcome the accumulating facts and evidence of the war's cost and American errors. In 1960 the United States troop strength in South Vietnam stood at 800. By the end of 1964 the number had risen to 23,000, a year later it hit 184,000, and two years after that it reached nearly 500,000. As the troop level went up, the level of casualties (killed, wounded, hospitalized, missing) increased, growing from 2,500 in 1965 to 33,000 in 1966, to 80,000 in 1967, to 130,000 in 1968.3 As the promise of easy victory receded, the war critics became increasingly strident. Deprived of an atmosphere of public support, besieged at home and abroad, Johnson retreated more
and more into the world of his imagination, directing an increasing part of his energies to the task of protecting himself.

In the heady days of the Great Society and at the start of the escalation, Johnson was confident that he could deal rationally and successfully with the small, scattered strands of criticisms on the war. His conviction (that he was right and his critics were wrong) allowed him to spend hours at a time with his opponents. He summoned them to his office for confidential interviews; he invited them to specially prepared White House briefings. At that time, Johnson was able to maintain a bantering, almost friendly, tone—so long as those critics remained few in number and confined their critiques to private conversations. “Well, Bill [Fulbright],” one conversation began in 1965, “what have you been doing today to damage the Republic? You say you’ve got a bad stomach. Well, that’s because you’ve been so anti-Johnson lately. I told you that it’s bad for you to take out after me. Now you tell your wife I love her and I am sorry you’re so damned cranky and grouchy all the time.” But as the opposition proliferated and surfaced in the public forums and as support for the administration’s policies plummeted in the polls, Johnson no longer debated or discussed the substance of the critics’ charges. Increasingly, he endeavored to dismiss the content by discrediting the source.

Strangely, however, Johnson was probably least harsh toward the protesting young, although he heard each taunt and chant, and they wounded him deeply. But they were not, he believed, motivated by self-interest or personal animosity; their dissent sprang from the ignorance of their youth. “Why should I listen to all those student peaceniks marching up and down the streets? They were barely in their cradles in the dark days of World War II; they never experienced the ravages of Adolf Hitler; they were only in nursery school during the fall of China; they were sitting in grammar school during the Korean War; they wouldn’t know a Communist if they tripped over one. They simply don’t understand the world the way I do.” And how else could he deal with the young? Certainly not as enemies. They were, after all, the future for which he had hoped to build, and for which, he believed, he was now fighting. If they marched against him because of what they did not know, then there was a chance that someday they would understand.

Johnson, however, could be unsparing of the professors who had failed to guide their students. All his life he had maintained a distinct-
officials, but they’re like a bunch of sheep in their own profession and they will always follow the bellwether sheep, the leaders of their profession, Lippmann and Reston. As long as those two stayed with me, I was okay. But once they left me in pursuit of their fancy prizes, everyone else left me as well. But the more they screamed and squawked, the more determined I was to stick it out. I read about all the troubles Lincoln had in conducting the Civil War. Yet he persevered and history rewarded him for the perseverance.”

By supplying himself with such explanations, Johnson tried to devalue the merit of the dissenting idea. In doing so, he expressed a host of fears, biases, and assumptions that had been held for a lifetime, and which not only had informed his public career but had made it so successful, and to which now he steadfastly would cling.

If Johnson rationalized and sought to deflect pressures on the left, he overexaggerated those on the right. The President was indeed criticized by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the members of the Armed Services Committees in the Senate and the House for talking too much about peace and for not bearing down harder to win, but his picture of himself as under their constant barrage had little relation to reality. However, the picture served not only a public purpose but an inner need. Johnson wanted to believe he was restrained in his conduct of the war. He wanted to believe he was pursuing a middle course, warding off the crazies on both sides. It was necessary to magnify the hawks to balance the doves.

Still, Johnson had to find a reason for the fact that the level of public support for his moderate position was steadily waning. At this point, more elaborate devices were brought into play, in particular the mechanisms of projection and conspiracy. The more his popularity slipped, the greater became his need for evidence that he was not at fault. The scapegoat emerged in a group composed of the intellectuals, the press, the liberals, and the Kennedys. As unpleasant as it was to feel “done in” by his opponents, it was not accepting the blame. Indeed, his ensuing feeling of martyrdom brought a temporary rise in self-esteem. That his polls were down meant only that the conspirators had been successful in creating a false image. This was something new, and ominous, in Johnson’s internal pattern of thought. It was one thing to look for unworthy motives, however unfairly or inaccurately described. But to believe oneself the target of a giant conspiracy was such a leap into unreason that it could only mean some disintegration of Johnson’s thought, that the barriers separating irrational thought and delusion were crumbling.

“No matter what anyone said,” Johnson once argued, “I knew that the people out there loved me a great deal. All that talk about my lack of charisma was a lot of crap. There is no such thing as charisma. It’s just the creation of the press and the pollsters. Deep down I knew—I simply knew—that the American people loved me. After all that I’d done for them and given to them, how could they help but love me? And I knew that it was only a very small percentage that had given up, who had lost faith. We had more than three million young people serving in uniform. I heard from a hundred of them every day. They didn’t get the attention the TV people gave the exhibitionists. They didn’t have anyone to make signs for them and parade around for them. They were just there, from daylight to dark, fighting for freedom and willing to die for it.”

“It is characteristic of obsessional, delusional thinking to piece together bits of fact. Johnson’s critics did, in fact, have a reinforcing effect upon each other. The Eastern media did exaggerate the sentiments of the people. There were those in the Kennedy crowd out to get Johnson. But in the past Johnson had displayed a fine sense of discrimination about his political opponents, recognizing that his enemies today might be his allies tomorrow. Now he became unrestrained and reckless, creating a fantasy world of heroes and villains. Members of the
White House staff who had listened to the President's violent name-calling were frightened by what seemed to them signs of paranoia. Suddenly in the middle of a conversation, the President's voice would become intense and low-keyed. He would laugh inappropriately and his thoughts would assume a random, almost incoherent quality, as he began to spin a vast web of accusations.

"Two or three intellectuals started it all, you know. They produced all the doubt, they and the columnists in the Washington Post, the New York Times, Newsweek, and Life. And it spread and it spread until it appeared as if the people were against the war. Then Bobby began taking it up as his cause and with Martin Luther King on his payroll he went around stirring up the Negroes and telling them that if they came out into the streets they'd get more. Then the Communists stepped in. They control the three networks, you know, and the forty major outlets of communication. It's all in the FBI reports. They prove everything. Not just about the reporters but about the professors, too.

"The Communists' desire to dominate the world is just like the lawyer's desire to be the ultimate judge on the Supreme Court or the politician's desire to be President. You see, the Communists want to rule the world, and if we don't stand up to them, they will do it. And we'll be slaves. Now I'm not one of those folks seeing Communists under every bed. But I do know about the principles of power, and when one side is weak, the other steps in. And that's just what the Communists did when they realized the soft spots in the American liberal community.

"You see the way it worked: The opponents of the war went on jags which pretty much originated in the Communist world and eventually found their way to the American critics. One jag was that we were killing civilians. The next was that we needed a bombing pause. The first bombing pause came after a Communist diplomat talked to some influential Americans. Bobby Kennedy sat with me and told me that he knew that if we ordered a pause something would happen. So I ordered a pause. We delivered a letter to North Vietnam and they threw it back the next day. Later, Senator Morse came in and told me the Soviet Ambassador said that such and such would happen if we stopped the bombing. They were telling the same thing to Fulbright, Clark, Mansfield, Church, and others. Then McGeorge Bundy had lunch with Dobrynin and suddenly he became an ardent advocate for peace. Fortas was against the pause. So were Rusk and Clifford. I also thought it was wrong, that it would make us look like a weak sister. But I hated to see history record that I stood in the way of peace. So again I ordered a pause and again nothing happened. Isn't it funny that I always received a piece of advice from my top advisers right after each of them had been in contact with someone in the Communist world? And isn't it funny that you could always find Dobrynin's car in front of Reston's house the night before Reston delivered a blast on Vietnam?"

Sometimes it seemed as if Johnson himself did not believe what he was saying, as if all the surmises were a bizarre recreation, a way to relax. But at other times Johnson's voice carried so much conviction that his words produced an almost hypnotic effect. What is clear, however, is that this continual concentration on conspiracy squandered a large amount of energy. The worse the situation in Vietnam became, the more Johnson intruded his suspicions and his fears into every aspect of his daily work. Conversations with Cabinet members would begin with the question "Why aren't you out there fighting against my enemies? Don't you realize that if they destroy me, they'll destroy you as well?" Discussions on legislation would be interrupted by diatribes against "the critics." Private luncheons and dinners would be dominated by complaints about "the traitors."

In typical circumstances, of course, people who slip into fantasy are quickly set straight by the adverse criticism of those around them, which forces them to face the truth. In Johnson's White House there were no such correctives. To the contrary, his every self-deception was repeatedly confirmed in the men around him. How did this happen? Where were all the checks and balances that had been built into the American political system to guard against precisely this occurrence? The answer requires an understanding of some developments of the modern Presidency and its relationship to the surrounding institutions of the Cabinet, the White House staff, the Congress, the Party, and the public.

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No matter how well a polity's institutions are designed, its leaders are subject to lapses from rational, functional behavior. Every society learns to live with a certain amount of irrational behavior at the top, but lest the irrationality feed upon itself and lead to general decay, the polity must have the capacity to marshal forces that influence or compel the faltering actors to revert to the behavior that is required if the polity
is to function properly. Those who framed the American system sought to protect against a malfunctioning executive through a structure that provided for competition between "separated institutions sharing powers." Presidential performance would be checked from deterioration by the powers of the Congress, the threat of public disaffection, and the workings of the free press. Believing that the necessity for consent would discipline the participants, the framers created a system of checks and balances that called for agreement among a variety of institutions before decisions could be made. The system was reinforced in the early days of the Republic by the development of two extraconstitutional institutions—the Cabinet and the party—which served, along with the Congress, the public, and the press, to check the President. Thus the system as a whole—legal structure and formal institutions—seemed to require a politics of bargaining in which the President's advantages were continually checked by the advantages of others.

Bargaining continued throughout Johnson's Presidency, as did the structure of separated institutions sharing powers. But historical experience in the area of foreign policy—along with the increase in the executive's domestic functions—had fundamentally changed the distribution of resources among the actors. The President still had rivals for power in foreign affairs, but not one of these rivals was coherent enough in its dissent nor strong enough in its base of power to stay the President's hand. As we have seen, for decades the power of foreign policymaking had been absorbed by the executive. This consolidation, justified by the speed with which the President was able to act and the stores of information available to him, along with the dominant tendency in liberal thought that only a strong executive could be counted on to enforce the country's noblest and rational goals, had resulted in a constitutional imbalance between the President and the rest of the government.

In the course of the war in Vietnam several members of Johnson's Cabinet, including the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, John Gardner, and the Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz, developed substantial doubts about American policy. They were distressed about the massive drain of resources away from essential domestic programs. Privately, these men urged a limit to America's involvement. But the structure of executive decision-making offered little opportunity for heads of domestic departments to express their views on matters of war and peace. The only individuals whose opinions on foreign policy could carry weight were those whose positions tied them in on a daily basis to the decisions made about Vietnam. The rules of the game restricted all other players from real participation in decisions on Vietnam, thus inhibiting an expression of views on the basis of domestic considerations. Cabinet meetings were largely ceremonial, serving more as channels of information between the heads of departments than as adversary proceedings. The agendas of the Cabinet meetings called upon each department head to report on activities in his own jurisdiction. In this atmosphere of "show and tell," little exchange took place; questions relating to Vietnam remained unasked and unanswered.

With the decline of the Cabinet meetings as a forum for discussion of foreign policy, domestic department heads were deprived of the one institution through which collective complaints could be effectively lodged. Lacking an effective voice within the administration, individual members were thrown back on the defense of dramatic resignation masquerading under the name of loyalty, served only to discipline the participants, the framers created a system of adversary proceedings. The agendas of the Cabinet meetings called upon each department head to report on activities in his own jurisdiction. In this atmosphere of "show and tell," little exchange took place; questions relating to Vietnam remained unasked and unanswered.

With the decline of the Cabinet meetings as a forum for discussion of foreign policy, domestic department heads were deprived of the one institution through which collective complaints could be effectively lodged. Lacking an effective voice within the administration, individual members were thrown back on the defense of dramatic resignation intended to communicate their dissent, and, perhaps, stimulate debate. However, knowing that his accumulated power, prestige, and alliances within the government would evaporate with his resignation, given the absence in the American system of a parliamentary bench, the typical Cabinet member chose to stay and fight from within, reasoning and rationalizing at the same time that if he left, things in his own organization would go from bad to worse. In the end, this quiescence, masquerading under the name of loyalty, served only to insulate the President from views and concerns that were essential to his understanding.

Johnson was ravenous for information when things were going well. Under siege, however, his operational style closed in and insulated him within the White House, where discussion was confined to those who offered no disagreement. As time went by, he tended more and more to bypass the National Security Council, believing it too unwieldy for secret diplomacy. And as suspicions of disloyalty and conspiracy began to dominate his thought, Johnson narrowed his circle of advisers to the trusted Tuesday lunch group—the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and selected others. As Johnson explained it: "The National Security Council meetings were like sieves. I couldn't control them. You knew after the National Security Council meeting that each of those guys would run home to tell his wife and neighbors what they said..."
to the President. That’s why I used the Tuesday lunch format instead. That group never leaked a single note. Those men were loyal to me. I could control them, but in those larger meetings, why, every Defense Department official and his brother would be leaks at one time or another. And when I’d see some DOD official’s picture in the paper with a nice story about him, I’d know it was the paper’s bribe for the leaked story.”

Soon, all who did not share Johnson’s convictions ceased to attend the Tuesday lunches. Johnson protected himself from contrary arguments and discussions by dismissing the doubters from his staff. First McGeorge Bundy left. Then George Ball. Then Bill Moyers. The emphasis shifted to Walt Rostow, who believed that Johnson was doing the right thing in Vietnam; soon Rostow became the man who screened what the President heard and saw. Under Rostow’s regime, the most optimistic news was packaged and sent to the President with covering notes which said such things as “This will give confirmation to the statement which the President so wisely made to the Congressional leadership yesterday.”

In 1967 McNamara began to move away from the President’s policy of escalation. As McNamara now saw the situation in Vietnam, the war was going badly and should be capped. But as McNamara’s pessimism grew, his access to the President diminished. Johnson did not want to hear other people’s doubts. He needed loyalty and support. So in November, 1967, the President suddenly announced that McNamara was leaving the DOD to accept the directorship of the World Bank. Here again Johnson conjured an explanation that precluded the necessity for dealing directly with the content of McNamara’s doubts.

“McNamara’s problem,” Johnson later said, “was that he began to feel a division in his loyalties. He had always loved and admired the Kennedys; he was more their cup of tea, but he also admired and respected the Presidency. Then, when he came to work for me, I believed he developed a deep affection for me as well, not so deep as the one he held for the Kennedys but deep enough, combined with his feelings about the office itself, to keep him completely loyal for three long years. Then he got surrounded by Paul Warnke, Adam Yarmoliinsky, and Alain Enthoven; they excited him with their brilliance, all the same cup of tea, all came to the same conclusion after old man Galbraith. Then the Kennedys began pushing him harder and harder.

Every day Bobby would call up McNamara, telling him that the war was terrible and immoral and that he had to leave. Two months before he left he felt he was a murderer and didn’t know how to extricate himself. I never felt like a murderer, that’s the difference. Someone had to call Hitler and someone had to call Ho. We can’t let the Kennedys be peacemakers and us warmakers simply because they came from the Charles River.

“After a while, the pressure got so great that Bob couldn’t sleep at night. I was afraid he might have a nervous breakdown. I loved him and I didn’t want to let him go, but he was just short of cracking and I felt it’d be a damn unfair thing to force him to stay. When he told me in November that the only job he really wanted then was the World Bank, I told him any job he wanted in the administration he could have. Now the man who deserved that bank job all along was Henry Fowler; he’d been waiting for it all the way through. When I told him McNamara was going to get it, tears came to his eyes. But at that point, I had no choice.”

As the central forum for decision-making on the war, the Tuesday lunch had serious weaknesses. It was not a place through which military, economic, and political programs could be coordinated. Nor was it a place to discuss the larger questions of the war. Men deeply in the administration he could have.

The secrecy of the proceedings created additional problems. In his fear of leaks, Johnson refused to let his subordinates draw up either a systematic agenda or a written report of the discussion. As a result, decisions were often reached on matters that had not been discussed and therefore were not fully reviewed in advance. The confusion was
compounded by the President's habitual desire to keep as many people in the dark about as many things as possible. Under Johnson's surveill-
ance, the participants in the Tuesday lunch group were afraid to dis-
cuss the content of the meetings even with their senior subordinates. Eventually a serious communication gap developed between the men at the top and the assistants who were supposed to serve them but found it increasingly difficult to translate a policy they did not understand into daily action.20

Moreover, the content of the meetings varied substantially with Johnson's shifting moods. If he felt momentarily good about something—some article of praise or some news from the field—he could focus well and hard on the decisions that had to be made. But during periods of depression he would spend hours in rambling talk, turning listlessly from one extraneous subject to another. At such times he reduced the Tuesday lunch to a stage on which to vent his emotions, a forum for his monologues, holding forth at great length with a diatribe against the critics or calling out in a self-pitying way for understanding of his plight.

Once Johnson started on one of his monologues, it was difficult to halt him. If one of the listeners interrupted, trying to pull him back to the business at hand, he would become enraged. Yet if the listeners acquiesced by a smile or a sympathetic nodding of the head, Johnson would feel encouraged and continue on.21 In such moods, Johnson's vanity proved unappeasable. The constant encouragement he de-
manded deadened the critical faculties of those still allowed access, creating a vacuum around himself and making him a prisoner of his own propaganda. Screening out options, facts, and ideas, Lyndon Johnson's personality operated to distort the truth in much the same way as ideology works in a totalitarian society.22

Secure in his enclave at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Johnson could depend upon his aides for a reassuring interpretation of the public mood. "According to my son," White House aide Ernest Goldstein wrote in October, 1967, at the time of the March on the Pentagon, "your storm trooper reference slowed down the Vietniks at his college. A decent majority are now pulling away from the rowdies."23 Writing in the same vein, another White House aide told Johnson that he had much stronger support in the liberal community than he realized. "Hardly a day goes by without my getting a call from outstanding liberals who just want you to know they are backing you."24

Over time, Johnson tacitly developed an anticipatory feedback system that discouraged views that the President would not receive favorably from being communicated to him. Chester Cooper described how this process worked in a National Security Council meeting. "The President, in due course, would announce his decision and then poll everyone in the room—council members, their assistants, and members of the White House and NSC staffs. 'Mr. Secretary, do you agree with the decision?' 'Yes, Mr. President.' 'Mr. X, do you agree?' 'I agree, Mr. President.' " During the process Cooper would frequently fall into a Walter Mitty-like fantasy: "When my turn came, I would rise to my feet slowly, look around the room and then directly at the President and say very quietly and emphatically, 'Mr. President, gentlemen, I most definitely do not agree.' But I was removed from my trance when I heard the President's voice saying, 'Mr. Cooper, do you agree?' And out would come a 'Yes, Mr. President, I agree.' "25

The organizational dynamics remind one of a phenomenon in psychology known as folie à deux, in which strong, overbearing personali-

Under Siege in the White House

...
on the globe. No one speaks to him unless spoken to first. No one ever invites him to "go soak your head" when his demands become petulant and unreasonable.27

In this strange atmosphere, the men surrounding the President tend to become sycophants. The tendency is most striking in relation to the members of the White House staff, who possess no independent constituency of their own and are completely dependent upon the President for their decisions, publicity, and status. The members of the staff are appointed by the President, promoted by him, and fired by him. Access to him soon becomes the coin of the realm. In this competitive contest, there is little room or incentive for independent criticism. On the contrary, compelled to explain their actions to no one but the man at the top, the members of the staff tend to become mirrors for the chief. In Reedy's words: "No White House assistant can stay in the President's grace for any considerable period without renouncing his own ego . . . . Those I have known who had kept some personality either left after a while or were careful to unleash their personality only in the President's absence."28 Nor did this requisite of deference stop with the White House staff. As the Secretaries of State and Defense began spending more time at the White House than in their own departments, their dependence on the President grew. And with the growth in dependence came an increasing submission.

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

Nor did the President have to listen even to the Congress. At any time in the course of the war, the Congress could have stopped America's involvement in Vietnam if it had wanted to. The formal institutional authority was there: for example, the Congress could have rejected any one of the annual authorization bills for the DOD, or it could have passed a bill requiring the President to stop the bombing. The point is that when it came to the making of rough decisions on recorded roll call votes, a majority of the members of the Congress chose to support the war. In 1967 Representative George Brown of California introduced a motion to recommit the DOD authorization bill to add a sense-of-Congress resolution that none of the funds authorized by the Act should be used to carry out military operations in or over North Vietnam. The resolution was not legally binding, but even this move was considered a radical step. The vote on the motion found only 18 members, all Democrats, in favor and 372 opposed.29

In the House, the antiwar faction tended to be composed of junior members with limited access to the key committees that were in the best position to exercise leverage over the course of the war. The top positions in these committees—Appropriations and Armed Services—were filled by pro-administration members, men with years of accumulated seniority, extensive tie-ins to the military, and long experience in deferring to the President on matters of war and peace. The antiwar members could have compensated for their institutional disadvantage with a firm knowledge of the written rules, which allowed the House as a whole to take positions above and beyond the committee deliberations. But in understanding the parliamentary rules, the Young Turks were no match for the powerful few who controlled the committees.30

The antiwar faction in the Senate had an easier time. The Senate is less committee-dominated than the House. A Senator with a strong interest in a subject not covered by his committee assignments has more options. Protected by the tradition of unlimited debate, he can take to the Senate floor to express his opinions at great length. But the general level of senatorial debate in the 1960s was nowhere near what it once had been. For one thing, the Senators were involved in more committees and more activities than they used to be and could not afford to sit in the chamber half the day listening to speeches and waiting to vote. To accommodate these increased activities, the Senate leadership continued the practice that Lyndon Johnson had established as Majority Leader, of scheduling all the important business of the Senate on the basis of unanimous-consent agreements. This allowed the Senate as a whole to establish a precise time for voting or to place a specific limit on debate so that each Senator could know when a vote would be taken and arrange his schedule accordingly. Lyndon Johnson's innovation
had proved extraordinarily effective in expediting Senate action on legislation. In reducing the individual Senator's incentive for being in the chamber, however, it had a stultifying effect upon debate. A quarter of a century earlier sixty or seventy Senators were generally present to hear Senator Vandenberg's discussions of foreign policy. In 1966, when Senator Fulbright delivered his celebrated address "Old Myths and New Realities," he spoke to an audience of four.11

Some have argued that Fulbright's televised hearings helped compensate for the deterioration in the Senate debate and performed an even wider educational function. But the hearings merely tugged and hauled at the President through a series of disconnected statements. They never really debated the premises behind the war. A graver problem was the absence of connection between the concerns of public hearings and the subject matter of senatorial votes. Not once during the years of the escalation did the issue of the war reach the floor of the Senate for a direct vote on the policy itself. Only three roll-call votes on Vietnam were recorded in the years between 1963 and 1968; all three revolved around the yearly supplemental appropriations in 1963, 1966, and 1967. But these votes did not accurately reflect dovish sentiment since they were phrased as measures to "support our troops." Faced with voting yea or nay on providing resources for American soldiers already in combat, all but two Senators consistently voted yea.12

In the absence of a collective legislative decision on the war, Johnson felt free to disregard the adverse voices as "nothing but a lot of sound and poppycock stimulated by the personal needs of William Fulbright."13 Moreover, most of the communications from the Hill left the President in the dark as to what precisely was wanted of him. When Republican members criticized Johnson for lack of credibility, for mismanagement of the war, and for not exercising more power in the area, their charges were phrased in general terms and were not translated into specific policy alternatives. And when the Democratic doves expressed their opposition to the bombing, they failed to recommend withdrawal, and never followed their criticism to its logical extreme. Lacking clear-cut alternatives, facing simultaneous demands from different directions—urged by some to bomb more and by others to stop the bombing—Johnson continued unimpeded upon his escalatory course.

The bipartisan tradition reinforced Congress' impotence to constrain the President on Vietnam. The ideology of bipartisanship per-
went their different ways, the peace movement to the streets, Johnson to the refuge of his adamant convictions. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he could not even fathom the position on the other side. No longer the mediator, he had become a righteous if ineffective advocate of his own inflexibility.

The depth of Johnson’s feelings, and the distance between the different views, was brought home to me in a long conversation with him during the summer of 1970. In the course of the conversation, I expressed a feeling that too often the debate about Vietnam was confined to tactical questions, focusing on the means of war—the effectiveness of bombing, the viability of strategic enclaves, the success or failure of pacification—at the expense of understanding the rightness or wrongness of the ends. After I finished, Johnson talked uninterruptedly for nearly three hours.

“How in the world can you and your friends say that South Vietnam is not a separate country with a traditionally recognized boundary? That boundary was created and internationally recognized by the Geneva Accords. Fifty nations recognized it; the Communist states recognized Hanoi’s regime as a sovereign entity. The final decision specified two zones. That’s that.... Oh, sure, there were some Koreans in both North and South Korea who believed their country was one country, yet was there any doubt that North Korean aggression took place? And does the belief of some within a country determine the legality of the boundaries? As for your claim it’s not aggression, why, when a man walks into your house with a gun and its hammer pulled back, that’s aggression. And that’s exactly what North Vietnam did when it walked into the house of South Vietnam. It’s just perverted history to claim that it’s civil war, just pure bad history manufactured by the Harvards and the Galbraiths. No understanding of the thirty years before. There was no insurrection before the Communists decided to take part. Ho was a Communist all his adult life. He was trained in Moscow Communist headquarters. He was the founding father of the Communist Party in Indochina. After the Geneva Accords thousands of guerrillas moved from North to South awaiting word from Ho. All under Communist discipline, directly under Ho’s command. The myth these professors have that it’s a nice family fight, papa and mama and children, is pure crap. Why, the decision to renew the fight was made in Hanoi in 1959. The NLF was organized by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Hanoi and announced from Hanoi. Sure, there’s some free movement, but look at who controls it, who determines its direction. It is Hanoi, loud and clear.

“As for the argument that it was our aggression, not the North’s aggression, against the people’s will, well, that’s just nonsense and naïveté. What better proof do you want of ‘the people’s’ will than the elections in September, 1967? What better proof of the existence of a large fraction of dedicated anti-Communists in the South than their struggle in this war? And when you and your friends speak of the peasants physically suffering at the hands of the South Vietnamese government, just compare that with the suffering at the hands of the Vietcong—where every village chief, teacher, and doctor is killed to destroy the infrastructure.

“And when you all speak of a consensus among well-informed writers that the pro-Vietcong element is larger, just recognize the stake that La Couture, a Frenchman, has in seeing it that way, and the academics and journalists make money and sell papers, not by agreeing with government policy, but by disagreeing with it. And you people read their history. While we read the security and intelligence reports of the CIA, the State Department, the DOD—men whose interest it is to find out what’s really happening over there. You see, we just read different histories, that’s all.

“You see, I deeply believe we are quarantining aggressors over there just like the smallpox. Just like FDR and Hitler, just like Wilson and the Kaiser. You’ve simply got to see this thing in historical perspective. What I learned as a boy in my teens and in college about World War I was that it was our lack of strength and failure to show stamina that got us into that war. I was taught that the Kaiser never would have made his moves if he hadn’t been able to count Uncle Sam out because he believed we’d never come in. Then I was taught in Congress and in committees on defense preparedness and by FDR that we in Congress were constantly telegraphing the wrong messages to Hitler and the Japanese—that the Wheelers, the Lindberghs, the La Follettes and the Japanese—that the Wheelers, the Lindberghs, the La Follettes and the America Firsters were letting Hitler know he could move without worrying about Uncle Sam. I remember those days in Congress. The liberal debate almost got to me. I even signed a petition for something called the Ludlow Resolution, calling for a popular vote before a war. But then I came to my senses and recognized that Hitler could take over America while we were holding our election, and I felt so silly I ran down and took my name off. I firmly believe we wouldn’t have been
involved in World War II if it hadn't been for all the vacillation.

"So I knew that if the aggression succeeded in South Vietnam, then the aggressors would simply keep on going until all of Southeast Asia fell into their hands, slowly or quickly, but inevitably at least down to Singapore, and almost certainly to Djakarta. Now I know these academics thought that all they had to do was to write a lot of words proclaiming the death of the domino theory and their words alone could make the Communist threat vanish overnight. But while the impotent academics were talking, Moscow and Peking would be moving to expand their control and soon we'd be fighting in Berlin or elsewhere. And so would begin World War III.

"Oh, sure, I recognize your argument about the diversity of Communism and your claim that nationalism is strong as well as Communism, but the question is: which is stronger? And I believe that the Communists—in terms of resources, skill, leadership, and training—have the upper hand in every battle against nationalist uprisings. I wish it were otherwise. It would certainly make the world a safer place. But look at Czechoslovakia. Now there you had a deep and strong solid nationalistic faith, but in the crunch of Soviet tanks how did that faith hold up? 'Spirit' cannot stand up to superior force. You've got to understand the facts of power.

"And then you all speak of a united Vietnam as the best bulwark against Communist aggression and you talk approvingly of social revolution as a base for popular government. Well, you tell me when was the last major social revolution that came out successfully while a country was carved up in a war? Well, that's something for your sociologists. And don't give me the Bolshevik Revolution; that's a lot different. And to talk about Vietnam as a bulwark against Communist China—that's sheer Fulbright nonsense. Only slightly less nonsense than Dulles' claim that Laos was a bulwark of democracy. Vietnam ain't a bulwark of anything right now. It's in the midst of a struggle against Communism. And if you think it is, it's just because you don't understand the country. You don't understand the way in which the Communists control the resources over there. You simply see a different country than I do. First, we've got to get the Communists out and then begin the process of building South Vietnam as a stronghold.

"But the most unfair part of all is your constant screeching about the bombing, like I wanted to bomb civilians. There is nothing I wanted less, which is why I made sure that I had more control over the generals than any other civilian President in history. I insisted on that. I knew what the generals wanted. To saturate the whole area. To bomb the hell out of the North. Look at what's happening under Nixon. He's already dropped more bombs than I did in all my years. I spent ten hours a day worrying about all this, picking the targets one by one, making sure we didn't go over the limits.

"As for your criticism of our pacification, you are right that war is devastating. But we are doing everything we could to limit that. We rebuilt as we went along. That was our Mekong River Delta project. Hospitals, schools, technology. We wanted to modernize Vietnam society. You talk of land enclosure as a good thing. Well, I see it as an enclosure of spirit and mind. The promise of America has always been freedom from narrow boundaries. The frontier. The future. And technology is essential for that freedom and that future. Sure, the Vietnamese will never be the same again, but they've had a whole world opened to them. More choices. Freedom from superstition. The freedom of alternative lives. You can't talk about the quality of life until food and basic minimums are provided. We will get those things there. As soon as this conflict is peaceably settled. America will do it. You'll see. We've got in our history a tradition of benevolence. It will show up here, too. I am as certain of that as I am of anything in my life."

At that moment Lady Bird's voice came over the car radio to announce that lunch was ready. Johnson turned to me for just one final comment. "Look, I know you don't agree with me, but you must know that I believe everything I've just said with every bone inside me. You must at least give me that. Besides, someday it'll be you and your generation running this nation and then you'll know what it's like to agonize every night over the tough decisions you've got to make. I can only wish you better luck than me."

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During my college and university years in the East, where half my friends were involved in the peace movement, avoiding the draft, or participating in radical activity, and where dropping out of school was so commonplace, it seemed that all young Americans were engaged in revolution, and that a fundamental change in American values had been effected. Accepting economic security as a given, we asserted that wealth was not enough, that America was spiritually empty, a country with no national purpose aside from increasing the GNP, with no
tangible foreign goals except to roll back the Communist menace. Our discontent was reinforced by the popular literature and songs and movies that spoke of restlessness, desolation, and awareness of absurdity. Suddenly it was fashionable to see only the bad, to discover everywhere signs of failure. The songs of Bob Dylan and the lyrics of Paul Simon became the texts for a generation—such as Simon’s “And we sit and drink our coffee / crouched in our indifference, like shells upon the shore / you can hear the ocean roar / in the dangling conversation / and the superficial sighs / the borders of our lives.” “Ah,” the Beatles began in “Eleanor Rigby,” “look at all the lonely people ... where do they all come from?”

The assumption of our underground papers, Dylan’s lyrics, and images of loneliness and alienation contrasted sharply with the optimistic idealism permeating Lyndon Johnson’s America. Johnson’s heroes were winners—“Lucky” Lindbergh, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Roosevelt—men who made it. The heroes of the sixties were losers who survived or martyrs. Malcolm X and Che Guevara became symbols for the age. Again and again, the words of these two figures could be found in pamphlets, in underground newspapers, in conversation. The young not only kept posters on their walls but copied the hair, the beard, the beret and the style. The cult of failure spread. As Benjamin Braddock in The Graduate, Dustin Hoffman came to epitomize the unknown everyman who was the hero of the late sixties: uncertain, alienated, and, by any traditional standards, a loser.

“How in the hell can that creepy guy be a hero to you?” Johnson asked me after we saw The Graduate in the movie theater on his ranch. “All I needed was to see ten minutes of that guy, floating like a big lump in a pool, moving like an elephant in that woman’s bed, riding up and down the California coast polluting the atmosphere, to know that I wouldn’t trust him for one minute with anything that really mattered to me. And if that’s an example of what love seems like to your generation, then we’re all in big trouble. All they did was to scream and yell at each other before getting to the altar. Then after it was over they sat on the bus like dumb mutes with absolutely nothing to say to one another.”

It looked at first as if a complete reversal of values had taken place, yet the new culture was also a product of the old. “The values of any new generation,” Erikson wrote, “do not spring full blown from their heads; they are already there, inherent if not clearly articulated in the older generation. The generation gap is just another way of saying that the younger generation makes overt what is covert in the older generation; the child expresses openly what the parent represses.” There was in the culture of the sixties a romantic nostalgia for the era of the Old West, the simple life, the life of adventure. Once again, the West was seen as an escape from the sober responsibilities and acquiescence to impersonal authority that characterized the civilized East. For some, the vehicle of escape was the open road. For others, it was drugs. Beneath it all was a profound boredom with respectable middle-class life. The quest for simplicity also extended to the realm of political action. The tactics of the left in the 1960s can be partially understood as a disgust with the slow, meandering procedures of American liberalism. In the words of an SDS troupe: “They took us through committees and procedures and places we’d never been before.” The simpler, almost vigilante political tradition of the frontier was a much more direct and emotionally satisfying political alternative. As Jerry Rubin said: “I didn’t get my ideas from Mao, Lenin, or Ho. I got my ideas from the Lone Ranger.”

Beneath their wild flurry of activity, however, the young dissenter lacked the sustained involvement of a radical cadre. Their dissent was coopted as the revolutionary leaders willingly sat on evening talk shows, and as participants in marches left early to look for themselves on the 6 p.m. news. As the war continued, propelled by a political process seemingly oblivious to their marches and meetings, this sense of hopelessness spread. Yet the new hopelessness was as simplistic as the earlier naïve beliefs. The overthrow of the old gods resulted in the installation of new gods. Devotion to a strong and benign central government was replaced by decentralization and community control, integration by black power, economic growth by zero growth, technology by pastoralism, optimism by pessimism. In these mirror images the sense of complexity was lost. The American as Adam had been replaced by the American as Satan. With equal arrogance, many Americans had gone from believing they were the best people in the world to believing they were the worst people in the world.

Among many of the young, for all the misdeeds of America they had found a single symbol, a primal villain. And Johnson knew this, and it saddened him. “I just don’t understand those young people,” he said in his last years. “Don’t they realize I’m really one of them? I always hated cops when I was a kid, and just like them I dropped out...
of school and took off for California. I'm not some conformist middle-class personality. I could never be bureaucratized.” Of course, it was unfair of the young to cast Johnson in so dark a role, but he also did not perceive the genuine impulses behind their own, somewhat different, American dream.

More interesting and less understandable than Johnson’s inability to relate to the critical few was his inability to retain the support of that large majority which by and large shared his attitudes about work, progress, economic success, and the importance of maintaining America’s position in the world. They, like Lyndon Johnson, tended to be patriotic and proud of the fact that America had never lost a war. And also like Lyndon Johnson, the majority of Americans still believed in anti-Communism and in America’s right and responsibility to intervene in support of small nations threatened by the enemy. After investing so much, the people wanted to believe their investment had been worthwhile. However discouraged they became about the long and appalling course of the war, they strongly opposed the tactics of the critics, especially when the critique became associated with rioting, disruption, bomb-throwing, and desecration of the flag.

But Johnson never took the steps that would have been necessary to mobilize this majority. Afraid of arousing the emotions of the masses, he refused publicly to turn his critics into enemies of the people and he kept his own public statements on the war to a minimum. Obsessed with criticism from the left and the right, he simply assumed the support of the middle, an assumption that could not be tested so long as the Congress, the party system, and the peace movement remained incapable of defining viable alternatives to the administration’s policy. In the absence of these alternatives, it appeared that only a small minority was visibly in opposition to the President’s actions in Vietnam. And it was the virtually unanimous belief of other politicians that his renomination was inevitable, and that his chances for re-election were good. But—as the next chapter illustrates—one of the constitutional checks on executive power remained intact: the requirement of periodic elections. And once the presidential primaries opened up the mechanisms of choice, this public consensus was tested and it was clear that Lyndon Johnson’s support had collapsed.

Chapter 12 / THE WITHDRAWAL

After three years of persisting in the same policy, Lyndon Johnson finally decided on March 31, 1968, both to de-escalate the war and to withdraw from politics. Why? This chapter suggests that the Tet offensive and the presidential primaries changed the prism through which Johnson viewed the war and his Presidency. Reality returned as the checks and balances of the American political system came back into play.

The success of the enemy’s sudden attack against what had until then appeared to be impregnable areas deep within South Vietnam suddenly exposed the falsity of the administration’s optimistic progress reports. Until Tet, Vietcong forces had chosen to fight in jungles or villages, striking quickly and moving on, their true vitality hidden and, therefore, more easily concealed from the American people. Now the news of captured cities, and the films of skirmishes shown on the TV screen night after night, exhibited the other side’s strength. Surely an enemy with the resilience and the resources to mount an attack on the scale of the Tet offensive was not on the verge of collapse. Though Tet may not have surprised Johnson—he later claimed in his memoirs that his advisers had predicted the offensive weeks in advance—it certainly made the man who proclaimed his foresight only after the fact look