had signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. On October 3, 1965, he signed the Immigration Act in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty.

The signing of Medicare had originally been scheduled for Washington. But, at the last minute, the President changed his mind. He wanted to go to Independence, Missouri, so Harry Truman could attend. Wilbur Cohen, Under Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, along with other concerned officials, resisted the proposal. There would be chaos if they tried to fly all the people who had planned to attend halfway across the country and back in a single morning. There was also some concern that the symbolic choice of Independence would remind the nation of Truman’s more radical plan for national health insurance; that it might even risk an AMA boycott of the ceremony. But the President insisted. “Why, Wilbur,” Johnson said, “don’t you understand? I’m doing this for Harry Truman. He’s old and he’s tired and he’s been left all alone down there. I want him to know that his country had not forgotten him. I wonder if anyone will do the same for me.”

“LBJ was great in domestic affairs,” elder statesman Averell Harriman once observed. “Harry Truman had programs, but none got through. Kennedy had no technique. FDR talked simply during the crisis, but didn’t act enough later. Johnson went back past the New Frontier all the way to the New Deal. He loved FDR, and it was fantastic what he did. If it hadn’t been for . . . Vietnam he’d have been the greatest President ever. Even so he’ll still be remembered as great.”

“If it hadn’t been for Vietnam”—how many times this phrase has been spoken in conversations assessing Johnson’s place in history. For it is impossible to disconnect Johnson from that war, and undeniable that the fighting abroad halted progress toward the Great Society. Indeed, from the beginning, Johnson later claimed, he himself foresaw and weighed the devastating consequences of war on domestic reform, but in the end, felt he had no choice but to escalate the war.

“I knew from the start,” Johnson told me in 1970, describing the early weeks of 1965, “that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide
education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.

"Oh, I could see it coming all right. History provided too many cases where the sound of the bugle put an immediate end to the hopes and dreams of the best reformers: the Spanish-American War drowned the populist spirit; World War I ended Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom; World War II brought the New Deal to a close. Once the war began, then all those conservatives in the Congress would use it as a weapon against the Great Society. You see, they’d never wanted to help the poor or the Negroes in the first place. But they were having a hard time figuring out how to make their opposition sound noble in a time of great prosperity. But the war. Oh, they’d use it to say they were against my programs, not because they were against the poor—why, they were as generous and as charitable as the best of Americans—but because the war had to come first. First, we had to beat those Godless Communists and then we could worry about the homeless Americans. And the generals. Oh, they’d love the war, too. It’s hard to be a military hero without a war. Heroes need battles and bombs and bullets in order to be heroic. That’s why I am suspicious of the military. They’re always so narrow in their appraisal of everything. They see everything in military terms. Oh, I could see it coming. And I didn’t like the smell of it. I didn’t like anything about it, but I think the situation in South Vietnam bothered me most. They never seemed able to get themselves together down there. Always fighting with one another. Bad. Bad.

"Yet everything I knew about history told me that if I got out of Vietnam and let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon, then I’d be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II. I’d be giving a big fat reward to aggression. And I knew that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate—a mean and destructive debate—that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy. I knew that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.

“For this time there would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed Kennedy’s commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine. Oh, I could see it coming all right. Every night when I fell asleep I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: ‘Coward! Traitor! Weaking!’ They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones. At exactly that moment I would generally wake up... terribly shaken. But there was more. You see, I was as sure as any man could be that once we showed how weak we were, Moscow and Peking would move in a flash to exploit our weakness. They might move independently or they might move together. But move they would—whether through nuclear blackmail, through subversion, with regular armed forces or in some other manner. As nearly as anyone can be certain of anything, I knew they couldn’t resist the opportunity to expand their control over the vacuum of power we would leave behind us. And so would begin World War III. So you see, I was bound to be crucified either way I moved.”

Did Lyndon Johnson believe all this? Yes... some of the time. Was it true? Some of it; and the rest was not simply pure illusion. For even Johnson’s most grotesque exaggerations were always constructed on some fragment of reality, so that they could never be totally disproven by factual evidence or unanswerable logic alone, only by rejecting his judgment for one more reasonable, more consonant with the known facts.

Johnson’s description of the nature of the challenge in Vietnam was, of course, a product of his unique personal qualities. But it is important to remember that many others shared this view, although they would not have expressed it with such color or hyperbole. And they, like Johnson, derived their convictions from historical experience.

When Lyndon Johnson entered his fifth year in Congress, Roosevelt was increasing his active opposition to Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia because that area, with its rubber and tin, was thought vital to America’s interests. In so doing Roosevelt risked, and helped
precipitate, a Japanese attack. For the next quarter-century, as Johnson was learning the ways of power and growing in influence, events in Asia preoccupied American foreign policy, subordinate only to our confrontation with Soviet power in Europe. Indeed, both concerns often appeared like different fronts in the same struggle. As Johnson observed and gradually began to expand his participation in public life, China "fell" with devastating consequences for politics, innocent individuals, and American liberties. Truman was cheered for his response in Korea, censured as the war dragged on, seemingly vindicated by the historical judgment of the next decade; while Eisenhower, although applauded for restoring peace, did so on the basis of a settlement that secured the independence of South Korea—the original target of invasion from the North. As a Senate leader, Johnson opposed a proposal by Dulles and Radford for an air strike in support of encircled French forces in Indochina, not directly, not denying our interest, but because we had not yet secured a promise of assistance from our European allies, thus invoking a then well-established principle of American foreign policy.

But probably the most important factor in determining Johnson's position at that time was the fact that American intervention in Indochina was strongly opposed by Richard Russell, his friend, mentor, and patron, then the most powerful and respected man in the United States Senate and the man chosen by his colleagues to deliver the refusal of Democratic cooperation. Yet many years later, in 1964, Johnson, then President, telephoned Russell to discuss Castro's action in cutting off water supplies to our naval base at Guantánamo. "There's a slowly increasing feeling in this country," Russell remarked, "that we're not being as harsh and firm in our foreign relations as we should be—that is, we're worried more about our image than about our substance. A demagogue with any strength could blow it up. I don't know of anyone who has enough strength however. People don't trust Goldwater's judgment." Although the subject did not arise, and it was probably unknown to Russell, proposals to escalate our effort in Vietnam were already on Johnson's desk.

Thus, when Johnson took the presidential oath, behind him was a century of American involvement and concern with Asia, three Pacific wars, two decades of cold war accompanied by the feared possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, and a widely held belief—almost a dogma—that the arena of confrontation was shifting to the "third world."

But perhaps most significant of all was the fact that an entire generation, many of its members now come to leadership, viewed these events and other conditions of the postwar period from the perspective of their experience of World War II—that shattering transformation of historical conditions which created an America, not only powerful but supreme, faced with the alternative of accepting international responsibilities or abandoning the map of Europe to the intentions—whatever they were—of that only other significant power, the Soviet Union. Those felt responsibilities, emerging more from circumstances than from choice—and the ensuing confrontation, known as the cold war—were given their distinctive form by the lessons of the war that had just ended—or by what was then almost universally accepted as an accurate analysis of how the war had begun and why the forces of darkness had achieved so much, and had come so perilously close to a decisive conquest.

Indeed, for a long time events seemed to conspire to demonstrate that those lessons did, indeed, have a global validity. We stood firm, established clear commitments, seemed prepared, if necessary, to meet force with force—in Iran, Western Europe, South Korea, Berlin. And those nations were not conquered by the Soviet Union. Of course, one cannot prove that our policies prevented conquest, for that would require certain knowledge of Soviet ambitions and intentions. But for most of this period those who shaped American policies believed that were it not for those policies the Soviet Union would have attempted to conquer other countries with military force that no one but the United States could resist. As a result, the lessons of World War II were not regarded as precepts based upon the historical circumstances of the 1930s, whose validity under very different conditions must be challenged and reproven; rather, they assumed an almost ideological cast—matters of belief continually renewed by new experience, fresh illuminations. And, indeed, a quarter-century after Munich, and shortly before Johnson took office, there occurred what seemed to be another manifestation that America had discovered invaluable and enduring principles in the conduct of world affairs: the Cuban missile crisis.

Thus Johnson had inherited not only an office but a world view: criteria of American responsibility, principles of action, necessities of leadership, established standards for determining threats to American freedom and to our greatness as a nation. Beside him were advisers who shared that view, and who represented that difficult-to-determine group of men—the so-called foreign policy establishment—who, from Ache-
son to Dulles to Rusk and Bundy, had developed, applied, and believed
in the entire mode of reasoning that had dominated and given continu­
ity to American foreign policy.

In many ways Johnson felt uneasy with men like this, sensitive to
any sign of their contempt or condescension toward this crude Texan.
Nevertheless, he relied on them. Confident of his mastery of domestic
politics and matters of substance, he never hesitated to override or
ignore counsel that contradicted his own judgment. In dealing with
foreign policy, however, he was insecure, fearful, his touch unsure. In
this unfamiliar world, he could not readily apply the powerful instru­
ments through which he was accustomed to achieve mastery. As a
result, his greatest anxiety—unlike his attitude toward domestic affairs
—was to avoid making a serious error rather than to achieve great
things. He felt that so long as his policies were approved by those men
who represented the established wisdom, he was, at least, insured
against appearing foolish or incompetent. This feeling was reinforced
by his perception that these same men also constituted the dominant
influence of the public judgment on matters of foreign policy: the New
York Times and the Council on Foreign Relations and the other impor­
tant institutions and media were governed by an interlocking director­
ate. And this perception was fairly accurate, except that the influence
could be dissolved by widespread and intense popular feelings. Thus
Johnson, for whom the label “expert” meant almost nothing in domes­
tic affairs, who knew just how wrong established wisdom could be, and
how often unjustified a high “reputation” was, felt dependent on the
wise experts of established reputation in foreign policy.

Johnson’s insecurity, his incapacity to find, with his usual sure
touch, the levers of mastery in international affairs, had another, more
devastating consequence. Johnson’s great strength and principle of con­
duct was to recognize, manipulate, and draw upon practical realities;
he had always believed that unless there were practical possibilities of
achieving a goal, to advocate or pursue it was wasteful, or damaging,
and ordinarily deserving of contempt. Yet in foreign policy he lacked
an intimate and detailed command of such realities—what could be
done, how, by whom, etc. Thus he could not judge how and whether
a goal could be reached or a principle applied, and he was unaware of
this incapacity. So he tended to rely, was compelled to rely, on the
principles and goals themselves, to guide his conduct by ends for which
means might not exist. In the Senate he would not fight for legislation
that could not be passed and whose consideration might create serious
disruptions and divisions. His ability to avoid creating such a situation
depended on his detailed and sure knowledge of how the Senate would
behave and react. In foreign policy he lacked such knowledge.

When Johnson chose to pursue a legislative goal, having deter­
mined it to be realistic, he did so with a conviction that was often
genuine. “Whatever conviction I had with people,” he had explained,
“resulted from a deep, intense feeling I was right . . . intensity of
conviction is the number one priority.” He brought this same kind of
conviction to the goals and principles of foreign policy, its intensity
increased by the fact that he was not sure how to achieve them. For it
was inwardly necessary to be even more certain of the rightness of ends
that were established despite uncertainty about the means. Indeed, if
Johnson’s goals were generally thought to be noble, and he had insisted
upon them despite the fact that they seemed impossible of achievement,
it would be easier to accept that in this area he was what he always held
in contempt—an idealist. Failure, while almost unbearable, did not
diminish his conviction. He could admit to a mistake—although not
easily—after a legislative failure, and learn from it. But mistakes could
not be admitted in a situation like Vietnam, where the effort was defined
solely by a goal and where failure, therefore, was a challenge to the
rightness of belief, to some integrity of self, which must be even more
fiercely defended when under attack.

It was, therefore, natural for Johnson to describe the situation in
Vietnam with terms such as “appeasement” and “aggression”; and so
was his tendency to interpret violent and ideological struggles on other
continents as an aspect of the universal conflict of values between
freedom and unfreedom and between the interests of the great powers
that represented these values.

Thus every conflict in which one of the warring parties fought
under the ideological banner of Communism was part of the continuing
battle for domination of the future. This outlook made it possible to
view wars among the people within a single nation as, in reality, an
aspect of international aggression. In every such war, Johnson believed,
the enemy is the agent of an alien force that is invading the home of an
ally. Again, the words Johnson used to describe the dangers of appease­
ment were more colorful than most; the reasoning was that of a genera-
tion: “If you let a bully come into your front yard one day,” he explained, “the next day he’ll be up on your porch and the day after that he’ll rape your wife in your own bed.” The only way to prevent conflict is to stop the aggressor from the moment his intentions are perceived, or even suspected.

World views, once formed, are difficult to change, especially for politicians. Always reacting and responding, their life largely one of movement among and contact with others, politicians are nearly always bound to the concepts and images formed in their minds before taking office, or those evolved from well-established and therefore safely followed sources of knowledge and guidance. If their ideas about the world sometimes sound like assumptions from a forgotten age, it is, in part, the price they pay for a life of continual motion. Except for those matters of which he has substantial personal knowledge, a political leader is unlikely to become aware that an established point of view is no longer considered valid until he is made aware of a universal consensus to that effect.

Johnson’s perception that the situation in Vietnam was a war of aggression rather than a primarily internal struggle was also shaped by the systems of reporting in the Pentagon and the State Department: by the Pentagon’s propensity—given its expertise, the nature of its responsibilities, those upon whom it relies for information, and the way in which such information is processed—to look primarily at all violent struggle in military rather than political terms; and by the State Department’s lack of capacity to offset this military bias with effective political analysis. Having been purged of its best and most dispassionate men during the days of McCarthy, the State Department had never re-established a position of clear dominance over the Pentagon. Moreover, the State Department was still scarred by the memory of what had happened to those who had analyzed the Chinese revolution as an internal struggle; fear of similar retribution should Vietnam fall inhibited candid or detached assessment.

Johnson’s belief that no Democratic President could survive the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists was based on the assessment, then generally accepted, that the Democrats were particularly vulnerable at home to the charge of being soft on Communism abroad. But what were the dangers the Democrats faced at home? Certainly the American people, regarding strength of will as a virtue and unaccustomed to defeat, were likely to be angry and troubled by a Communist takeover in Vietnam. However, at least before the escalations of 1965, it was not an American war, and a Communist victory would be viewed as a defeat for the “Free World,” but probably not as the defeat—far more serious—of American military force. And, in the end, after paying a huge and bloody price, the American people seemed hardly to care when Communist forces moved into Saigon. The principal constraint, then, was not the extent of current public concern about Vietnam. It was fear that political opponents might be able to blame a Communist advance on weakness of American will, and successfully convince people of the administration’s “softness” toward Communism.

All these general fears were symbolized in Johnson’s image of Robert Kennedy. It is difficult to understand how anyone could have rationally believed that Kennedy might be a crusading hawk. Indeed, there is evidence that, as early as 1963, Kennedy was pressing a softer line on Vietnam. But to be fair to Johnson, it must be remembered that in 1964 Kennedy had voiced no public opposition to the war, and that before he had decided to run for the Senate he had wanted Johnson to appoint him as Ambassador to South Vietnam. Finally, however, the vivid terms in which Johnson describes the Kennedy assault—“betrayal” of John Kennedy, “unmanly”—are further evidence of what we have already observed: that whatever realistic basis there was for dislike or fear, it cannot explain the almost obsessive intensity of Johnson’s feelings about Robert Kennedy. Kennedy had come to stand for everything Lyndon Johnson hated in others (e.g., “betrayal”) and feared in himself (e.g., “unmanliness”). Kennedy’s mere existence intensified Johnson’s terror of withdrawing from Vietnam. And when Kennedy became an open opponent of the war, the same sense of Kennedy as “the enemy” only helped to stiffen his unwillingness to consider any change in his policies.

Still, Johnson did worry about the loss of his domestic programs. As a boy of five, he had heard his Populist grandfather describe the devastating impact of the Spanish-American War on social reform. He had lived through the periods of reaction following World War I and World War II, seen a virtual paralysis of domestic action in the aftermath of Korea. And one cannot doubt the intensity of this concern; the Great Society, after all, was to be his monument, his passport to historical immortality.

Nevertheless, American policy moved toward escalation with gathering momentum. “Losing the Great Society was a terrible
thought, but not so terrible as the thought of being responsible for America’s losing a war to the Communists. Nothing could possibly be worse than that.” America cannot lose to the Communists; Vietnam is a test of our ability to combat a new and dangerous form of aggression, the war of national liberation—these are the refrains running through the public dialogue of early 1965. The necessity to deal with daily events, immediate circumstances, inhibited careful reflection or re-examination of assumptions. The winter policy review informed Johnson that the Communists appeared, by every type of measurement, to be winning the war—by the number of battles won, by the territory secured, and by the number of recruits. In fact, they might be able to achieve a total victory within a matter of months. Johnson’s effort to prevent a South Vietnam defeat by convincing Hanoi that the United States meant business, while, at the same time, avoiding any expansion of the war, had obviously failed.

It probably did not occur to him that he may not have failed completely. Hanoi might have been convinced that the United States meant business, but so did they. The time for decision was near. Either he committed himself now, Johnson was told, or he stood to lose South Vietnam.

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On January 27, 1965, McGeorge Bundy sent a memo to the President arguing—on behalf of himself and Robert McNamara—that the current policy could lead only to disastrous defeat. Both men recommended using military power in the Far East to force a change in Communist policy.

Both of us understand the very grave questions presented by any decision of this sort. We both recognize that the ultimate responsibility is not ours. Both of us have fully supported your unwillingness, in earlier months, to move out of the middle course. We both agree that every effort should still be made to improve our operations on the ground and to prop up the authorities in South Vietnam as best we can. But we are both convinced that none of this is enough and the time has come for harder choices.9

Still, Johnson hesitated. He asked Rusk “to instruct his experts once again to consider all possible ways for finding a peaceful solution.” He also asked Bundy “to go out to Saigon immediately with a team of military and civilian experts for a hard look at the situation on the ground.”10

In the midst of this period of indecision, Johnson was informed that Vietcong guerrillas had raided a U.S. advisers’ barracks in Pleiku on February 6, 1965, and nine American soldiers had been killed. Johnson responded immediately to what was termed a “provocation,” authorizing air strikes against four targets in North Vietnam. Discussing his decision with the National Security Council, he said: “We have kept our guns over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now. And what was the result? They are killing our men while they sleep in the night. I can’t ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand tied behind their backs.”11 He did, however, fail to stress that the American troops were in Vietnamese territory, having been sent to help the South Vietnamese fight the Communists for the right to rule that territory. The following day Bundy returned to Washington to present his team’s evaluation of the situation in Vietnam. The report called for a policy of graduated and sustained reprisal against North Vietnam, concluding that “without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable.

The stakes in Vietnam are extremely high. The American investment is very large and American responsibility is a fact of life which is palpable in the atmosphere of Asia and even elsewhere. The international prestige of the United States and a substantial part of our influence are directly at risk in Vietnam. There is no way of unloading the burden on the Vietnamese themselves and there is no way of negotiating ourselves out of Vietnam which offers any serious promise at present.

There is one grave weakness in our posture on Vietnam which is within our power to fix—and that is widespread belief that we do not have the will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course. This is the overriding reason for our present recommendation of a policy of sustained reprisal.12

The recommendation for the sustained bombing was agreed to unanimously by Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Maxwell Taylor, General William Westmoreland, and General Earle Wheeler. The policy of escalation was advocated by every individual at the highest level of responsibility for actions related to national security: the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Special Assistant for
National Security Affairs, the Ambassador to Saigon, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The consensus at the top did not preclude the expression of dissent at other levels. However, the final decisions on important matters of foreign policy were made by a small group of top officials. Others could ordinarily participate only by having one of the officials represent their views. Clearly, this kind of hierarchical structure considerably increased the influence of those at the most commanding levels, while reducing the importance and the likelihood of dissent by those below them. In this case, the structure operated to reinforce the claims of those arguing for some form of escalation.

In early 1965 Under Secretary of State George Ball presented a critique of a policy of escalation. Rejecting the dominant and virtually unquestioned assumption that underlay the entire debate about policy, he argued that South Vietnam itself was not vital to America’s national security. If we did nothing, its collapse would not be serious. However, if escalation was tried and failed—and he thought failure was likely—then the consequences would be profoundly serious; the French Republic had almost collapsed under the weight of its failure in Vietnam. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield told the President that he feared that escalation might lead to a larger war, possibly with China. Richard Russell warned that the venture would be more difficult and complicated than the experts were saying. And Hubert Humphrey worried that it would take years to achieve a military solution.13

Those dissenters were significant figures in government, but none of them was among the inner circle of decision-makers. The institutional forms of the decision-making process made it difficult for those outside the process to prepare or present coherent arguments and rebuttals because those within the structure, the advocates of escalation, had daily contact with one another and access to secret information, which allowed them to prepare elaborately detailed predictions of the consequences, both immediate and far into the future, of a failure to escalate in Vietnam. The dissenters, on the other hand, were scattered, each proceeding from his own perspective, each criticizing a different aspect of the war. Without adequate staff work and collective organization the dissenters could do little more than express personal judgments opposed to an extensively documented and argued opinion shared by nearly all the top officials of government.

This is not to say that Lyndon Johnson was the prisoner of a bureaucratic structure that had coerced or deceived him into escalation.14 If Johnson had wanted different advice, or a wider range of opinion at the top, he could have changed his group of advisers. He could have dismissed Dean Rusk and elevated George Ball to Secretary of State. He could have replaced McGeorge Bundy with Bill Moyers. He could have promoted Westmoreland out of Vietnam and appointed a new commander more congenial to withdrawal. Moreover, many of those advocating escalation had taken that position as it became clearer that escalation would be the President’s own decision. If he had shifted, most of them would have shifted. None of this would have been easy. Leading the country out of war in 1965 would have required delicate planning on the order, in reverse, of FDR’s masterful job in leading the country into war in 1939–1941. The point is that Lyndon Johnson never tried.

“Suddenly,” Johnson later said, “I realized that doing nothing was more dangerous than doing something.”15 The bombing plans promised relief, however temporary, from indecision. Hesitations, paradoxes, debate—all could be abated by the elemental act of doing something. In the end, the coolness with which Johnson agreed to the bombing betrayed the pressures he had endured. Action, after so much discussion, was always a relief for Johnson.16

The decision to escalate, though ultimately disastrous, was probably inevitable, given Johnson’s nature and convictions: his belief that a Communist victory would be a serious defeat for America, that no problem was insoluble, that Americans could do anything. There was also his fear of appearing weak, and his self-deceiving conjecture that the struggle might end quickly and leave the Great Society unimpaired. And the immediate public response was encouraging. He benefited from the tendency to support the President in foreign policy and especially in times of apparent crisis, no matter what he does. At such times people react to the symbolic aspects of the office “first in war,” and are willing to believe that the President is in the best position to know what the country needs. The problem is that one cannot count on a continuation of the original opinion unless events vindicate the presidential action or things end quickly. Confidence in the President, strong as it is, cannot overcome anger at costly failure.17

Looking back, Johnson claimed he was never optimistic about the potential results of bombing. He had read the studies of previous bombing programs, and he said he fully recognized the built-in limitations. He hoped only to restore the crumbling morale in South Vietnam. But
in this recollection Johnson refused to admit to the hope that he must surely have entertained in 1965—that his show of force could convince Hanoi to come to the bargaining table. No small power could possibly resist America's sophisticated technology and enormous military strength. At least, Johnson wishfully believed, Hanoi would think this and be persuaded to a less dangerous course.

After Johnson's commitment to some form of bombing, the White House meetings discussed how and when to bomb. The Joint Chiefs favored large-scale strategic bombing, aimed at destroying the industrial base of North Vietnam. If all the American air power in the Western Pacific were used, they predicted, it would take only twelve days to complete the task. But most of Johnson's political advisers favored a more limited form of bombing. Fearful that China or Russia might be brought into the conflict if large-scale attacks were launched immediately, McNamara and Bundy argued, instead, for starting up slowly and then gradually increasing the scope and the intensity of the raids. Step-by-step escalation, they contended, would allow continuous monitoring of the reactions of China and Russia; it would emphasize America's limited objective; it might press Hanoi to negotiate in order to prevent the terrible damage that large-scale bombing would inflict. Johnson chose gradual escalation. It was a predictable choice, based, as it was, on the type of approach he found most congenial: bombing represented the moderate path between the competing extremes of massive destruction and total withdrawal. Of course, sometimes, as every automobile driver knows, the middle of the road is the most dangerous place to be.

In Johnson's view, limited bombing was seduction, not rape, and seduction was controllable, even reversible. "I saw our bombs as my political resources for negotiating a peace. On the one hand, our planes and our bombs could be used as carrots for the South, strengthening the morale of the South Vietnamese and pushing them to clean up their corrupt house, by demonstrating the depth of our commitment to the war. On the other hand, our bombs could be used as sticks against the North, pressuring North Vietnam to stop its aggression against the South. By keeping a lid on all the designated targets, I knew I could keep the control of the war in my own hands. If China reacted to our slow escalation by threatening to retaliate, we'd have plenty of time to ease off the bombing. But this control—so essential for preventing World War III—would be lost the moment we unleashed a total assault on the North—for that would be rape rather than seduction—and then there would be no turning back. The Chinese reaction would be instant and total."18

Johnson's metaphor suggests an effort to force the contest in Vietnam into a pattern drawn from the politics he knew so well. As long as he could use force as a means of bargaining, he could moderate his anxiety about the difficulties and unknowable dangers of this strange war in an unfamiliar land. Although Johnson recognized the "foreignness" of the Vietnamese, he simply could not accept the possibility that they might not share important qualities with Americans. Otherwise, how could Johnson hope to deal with them? Johnson needed to create a Vietnam in his mind so he could find the levers of persuasion and success.

Louis Hartz has pointed out that "From the time of Wilson, indeed even before then, if we take into account a stream of thought which accompanied our early imperial episodes at the turn of the century, the country has actually sought to project its ethos abroad."19 Separated for two centuries from the ideological struggles of Europe, the American cultural tradition displayed little awareness that it had taken a unique, peculiarly indigenous, direction and form, that the people of other nations might be different in fundamental ways. This American tendency to project its values upon other countries was dramatized in the view held on the highest levels of decision that the Vietnamese conflict was a battle between two fixed groups of people with different but negotiable interests. By denying significance to irreconcilable moral and ideological issues in favor of calculations of bargaining and power, thus limiting the stakes to matters negotiable, Americans overlooked the reality, ultimately decisive, that the war in Vietnam was an ideological struggle, a social revolution.20

Johnson assumed that in war, as in the Senate, everyone knew the rules of the game, what kind of agreement would be reasonable, and that eventually an agreement would be reached. The need for continuing relationships required at least this much. But this assumption closed his mind to the argument Frances FitzGerald and others have since made: that the Vietnamese people were interested in unanimity, not pluralism. Their culture embodied the moral principles of Confucius; they believed in the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of finding the one true way of life. Politics was not a matter of negotiable opinion, a realm unto itself; in Vietnam, morality, politics, and society were inex-
tricably joined. The war was a revolutionary war, which promised to affect not only the political system but the entire structure of Vietnamese society—its ethos, its customs, its religious expression.21

These cultural differences, profound as they were, seemed to be unknown not only to Lyndon Johnson but to all his top advisers. Moreover, Johnson had grounded his actions all his life on the conviction that every man had his price. That must also be true of Ho Chi Minh, except one could not discover it by reading reports. Johnson persisted in the belief that if he ever met with Ho, he would reach the private man beneath the public image. If Ho Chi Minh was a reasonable man, then he, too, would recognize superior resources, just as Richard Russell had done when he had finally recognized the strength of the forces against him on civil rights. The war, Johnson said, would be "like a filibuster—enormous resistance at first, then a steady whittling away, then Ho hurrying to get it over with." 22

The President had another reason for confidence in his ability to bargain with the enemy. Characteristically, Lyndon Johnson had a plan and a generous promise—a billion-dollar project for the social and economic betterment of both Vietnams, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Ever since his first trip to Saigon in 1961, Johnson had been intrigued by the idea of developing the Mekong River to provide food, water, and power on a scale so immense as to dwarf even the TVA. Now, perhaps, this noble concept could also serve the cause of peace.

These countries of Southeast Asia are homes for millions of impoverished people. Each day these people rise at dawn and struggle through until the night to wrest existence from the soil. They are often wracked by disease, plagued by hunger and death comes at the early age of 40.

The American people have helped generously in times past. . . . Now there must be a much more massive effort to improve the life of man in that conflict-torn corner of our world. . . . I will ask the Congress to join in a billion-dollar American investment.

The task is nothing less than to enrich the hopes and the existence of more than a hundred million people. And there is much to be done. The wonders of modern medicine can be spread through villages where thousands die every year from lack of care. Schools can be established to train people in the skills that are needed to manage the process of development. And these objectives are more within the reach of a cooperative and determined effort.23

He could see it all in the years ahead just as he had seen it in his hill country forty years before, when the dams had first been built, bringing water, electricity, and hope to the poor farmers. He could see the fields of rice, rich in harvest, and surrounding the fields, lively, bustling villages. New houses. New schools. New hospitals. New roads. New forms of transportation making it possible for the people to travel beyond their place of birth. "I want to leave the footprints of America in Vietnam," Johnson said in 1966. "I want them to say when the Americans come, this is what they leave—schools, not long cigars. We're going to turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley."24 As Johnson saw it, a bright future was within reach if only the North Vietnamese would stop their irrational war and turn to the task of improving society—with American help, of course.

The paradox cannot escape notice. Johnson was celebrating the possible reconstruction of a country even as his orders brought mounting destruction. Indeed, Johnson's grandiose visions for the future were being reduced to inadequacy by his bombs. The bombing devastated the forests, which had a critical part in the natural process of delta formation, depleted the organic layer of the soil and disturbed the natural checks and balances in the animal world. Defoliants did not distinguish between jungles and crops, and they spurred rapid runoff of rainwater, which crested into massive floods. Forced migration from the countryside to the city tore the peasants from the villages in which they and their families had lived for generations.25

Yet all this destruction, Johnson insisted, was necessary for the salvation of the Vietnamese. The Americans were in Vietnam not to wage war but to pursue peace. "We have helped," Johnson declared, "and we will help [the Vietnamese] to stabilize the economy, to increase the production of goods, to spread the light of education and stamp out disease."26 It is difficult to imagine the leader of any other nation making such a pledge in the midst of conflict, and even more difficult to imagine the citizens of any nation other than America responding with anything but cynicism.27 But Johnson was not simply playing politics. The rhetoric of reconstruction was traditional to American diplomacy. And the American people shared his faith. "We often say,"
Johnson said in 1965, "how impressive power is. But I do not find it impressive at all. The guns and bombs, the rockets and warships, are all symbols of human failure. They are witness to human folly. A dam built across a great river is impressive... electrification of the countryside is impressive... a rich harvest in a hungry land is impressive. The sight of healthy children in a classroom is impressive. These—not mighty arms—are the achievements which the American nation believes to be impressive. And if we are steadfast, the time may come when all other nations will also find it so."

Even if America's programs of foreign aid had failed in the past, Johnson believed, this one—coming at the height of the Great Society's social engineering at home—would be different. Here again Johnson fused Vietnamese culture and American values; as a result, what he viewed as the "demands of progress" would, had his program been implemented, have been instruments of cultural devastation. Johnson looked upon the Vietnamese wish to remain in the village of their birth as a confinement of the spirit; he saw their traditional customs as impositions; he viewed their sacralization of the past as an obstacle to the secular pragmatism needed for progress. Looking upon a system of individual competition as if it were a beneficent aspect of natural order, atomistic in his view of social relations, Johnson could not envisage a society in which the individual was an aspect of a more comprehensive organism. No word in the Vietnamese language corresponded exactly to the personal pronoun "I." Individualism was seen as selfish and immoral. The traditional Vietnamese had no existence outside his community.

Although Vietnam was ten thousand miles away, the psychic distance was far greater. So powerful was the American conception of individualism that it resisted even the barest consciousness that another society might conceive of freedom in precisely the opposite terms, viewing exaltation of the independent person as the denial of freedom, not its fulfillment. Endowed with the assumption that the desire for private property was a universal impulse, Johnson found it difficult to believe that in Vietnam private property did not really exist: the father was less an owner than a trustee of the land to be passed on to his children; to the Vietnamese, the land itself, not the individual ownership of it, was the indispensable element.

Studies suggest that national leaders tend to fit incoming information about other nations into existing theories about their own nation.

Experience with his own system typically determines what a leader perceives in another system. It is hard for any leader to see that issues important to him are not important to others, and even more difficult to realize that others may be governed by very different values and assumptions. Perception is always influenced by personal and historic memory. Historical analogies often precede rather than follow a careful analysis of the situation. But these cognitive mechanisms, natural as they are, do not fully explain Johnson's insistence that the Vietnamese experience could be assimilated into his own framework.

He wanted to believe this about the Vietnamese because he needed to believe it about everyone. This master practitioner of bargaining and negotiation was also a man who perceived the fragility of that process. He preached rationality and compromise, but continually feared and imagined the emergence of unreasoning passions and unyielding ideologies. His conduct and words expressed a will to believe, a fear of his own doubts. Johnson was always afraid that he himself might give way to irrational emotions; control came to appear a requirement of survival of the self. By treating the struggle in Vietnam as an exercise in bargaining, he sought to deny that it might exist somewhere beyond the healthy bounds of reasonable negotiations. Thus the purpose of the bombs was not to hurt or destroy; that was a by-product. They were a means of bargaining without words. Since Johnson, if not an expert on warfare, was a master bargainer, he would retain final control over when and where to bomb, so that his knowledge of detail could be both used and increased. The same attention to the minutiae of power that had characterized his relations with the Congress would now characterize his conduct of the war.

Long hours of discussion preceded the choice of each bombing target. Tracing his fingers across the map of Vietnam, the President would point to various potential targets—railroad bridges, army barracks, oil-storage depots, airfields, armored-truck convoys, factories—demanding to know the costs and benefits of attacking each one. "How many tons of bombs will it take to destroy this?" he would ask, while waving a photograph of a railroad bridge twenty miles from Da Nang. "How important is that [a petroleum-storage depot] to the North Vietnamese? If we choose these army barracks fifteen miles from Haiphong, how can we be certain of the accuracy of our aim?" So it went, one by one. In developing his list of permissible targets, Johnson operated on the fundamental premise that he could bomb only up to a certain point.
To move beyond that point—for example, to mine Haiphong Harbor or bomb the Red River dikes—might risk war with Russia or China. Suspicious that the North Vietnamese had entered into secret treaties with the Communist superpowers, Johnson lived in constant fear of triggering some imaginary provision of some imaginary treaty.

There, of course, was little basis for a belief in such agreements except Johnson’s own need to believe. How else could he explain the caution, the personal, endlessly debated selection of particular targets for particular missions? In a dozen jungle-shrouded spots the Communist powers had placed secret limits, tripwires whose passage would automatically precipitate Russia or China into armed conflict with the United States. And it was up to Johnson to outguess them. This belief was linked to, became part of, his continued magnification of the stakes—no longer just a “test case for wars of national liberation,” a “lesson for aggressors,” a necessity to “prevent the fall of Southeast Asia,” or part of the “containment of China.” America fought in Vietnam to prevent the otherwise inevitable onset of World War III. It was an aspect of Johnson’s own dimension, the size of his personal needs and his huge ambitions to satisfy the needs of all others, that only the largest cause of all—to forestall world-wide destruction—could justify actions that were now so threatening to the public’s admiration, his life as a public man, and his capacity to lead others, in their own interest, to accept his grandly benevolent intention. He had so much to give, but he must first preserve before he could build.

“I never knew,” Johnson later said, “as I sat there in the afternoon, approving targets one, two, and three, whether one of those three might just be the one to set off the provisions of those secret treaties. In the dark at night, I would lay awake picturing my boys flying around North Vietnam, asking myself an endless series of questions. What if one of those targets you picked today triggers off Russia or China? What happens then? Or suppose one of my boys misses his mark when he’s flying around Haiphong? Suppose one of his bombs falls on one of those Russian ships in the harbor? What happens then? Or suppose the fog is too thick or the clouds are too high or the target too small and the bomb drops by mistake within the thirty-mile radius of Hanoi?” The more questions he asked, the more agitated he became. “I would then begin to picture myself lying on the battlefield in Da Nang. I could see an American plane circling above me in the sky. I felt safe. Then I heard a long, loud shot. The plane began to fall faster, faster, faster. I saw it hit the ground, and as soon as it burst into flames, I couldn’t stand it any more. I knew that one of my boys must have been killed that night. I jumped out of bed, put on my robe, took my flashlight, and went into the Situation Room.”

After hours of being alone, he felt so weary that he sought the world of action. At 3 A.M. the Situation Room was the perfect escape. There, at any time of day or night, he could find what he needed: people, light, and talk. Around the table in the middle of the room sat five or six men on loan from the Pentagon and the CIA, responsible for receiving messages from Saigon and Da Nang. As the pilots completed their bombing missions, they would report the results over their radios to American headquarters at Saigon: mission accomplished, bridge destroyed. The message would then be transmitted to the White House in the form of a summary telegram. With these Telex reports before them, the Situation Room staff would make the appropriate markings on a giant map, indicating which strikes had destroyed what targets.

As it turned out, the classified tickers and reports were endowing illusion with the appearance of precision. Johnson had reason to worry about whether the bombs were actually hitting their targets, but it was not the reason he thought. The real concern was not that a mistaken strike might provoke China or Russia, but the fact that the bombers, flying over hundreds of hamlets and hillocks and villages, could not even begin to separate enemies and innocents, soldiers and civilians. A seismic detector cannot tell the difference between a truck full of arms and a school bus; a urine sniffer cannot tell a military shelter from a woodcutter’s shack. Forced to identify targets while passing over them at high speed, the pilot’s glimpse might last only a second or two. If the target was small—a bridge or a truck or a railroad car—it was often necessary to make several bombing runs before the mission was accomplished. At times, a large area might be saturated with bombs to compensate for the difficulties of accurate aim. This was combat by proxy; it was war waged at a distance. It looked impressive from the air. But on the ground one could see that it was like “trying to weed a garden with a bulldozer.”

The difficulties of target identification were described by reporter Jonathan Schell, who for several weeks accompanied pilots on their missions:
... the ground commander guided Captain Reese to the target by describing it in relation to landmarks on the ground. "It's five hundred meters east of that pagoda on the road there. Have you got the pagoda?" the ground commander asked. Captain Reese . . . answered, "I see a church but no pagoda." "It's right under you now." "I don't see it." "O.K. Well, there's one hooch [a house identified as the source of an enemy sniper position] down there about a klik south of us that we want you to get. We've got sniper fire out of that tree line." Captain Reese flew over the area indicated, and found that it was occupied by a village of sixty or seventy houses . . . "I see a village down there," he said. "No, this is just one hooch," said the ground commander, who was apparently unable to see the village from his spot on the ground because of a thick cover of trees. . . . [After more discussion and the firing of some marker rockets, without success] "That's the general area," said the ground commander, apparently tired of trying to pinpoint the one house. "Do you want us to pretty well cover this general area?" Captain Reese asked. "Affirmative. Hit the whole area. We've seen activity all through this area." "O.K. I'll put in a can of napalm and see what it looks like." . . . "Any civilians in the area are Charlie's, or Charlie sympathizers, so there's no sweat there."

In the end, the entire village was destroyed. But the evaluation form simply said that "an enemy sniper position" and seven "military structures" had been hit. None of the forms had any space on them for reporting civilian damage. Success was measured simply by the number of sorties per aircraft deployed, by counting which planes and which pilots delivered the most ordnance. In competing with one another for initiating more strikes and dropping more tonnage, the Air Force and the Navy frequently inflated their "killed by air" claims. Volume became an end in itself. Concentration on the technical aspects of the bombing program substituted a set of short-term physical objectives for long-term political goals. By narrow military criteria, American bombs were not effective in destroying preselected targets, but such destruction was not easy to translate into political success. The enemy's capacity to recruit more men and rebuild structures never seemed to enter into the military calculations. We could, after all, just continue to bomb. But where would the cycle end?

As the military increased its involvement and responsibility, errors in reporting became standard operating procedure. Exaggerated descriptions of American success were matched by diluted reports of North Vietnam's strength. The estimates of progress improved with each step of the journey from Army headquarters in Vietnam to the Situation Room in the White House. Soon it became almost impossible for anyone in Washington to really know what was going on in Vietnam. But Lyndon Johnson was not about to question a process of reporting that provided him with what he wanted to hear. If the enemy body count seemed inordinately high, that was to be expected when poorly trained men without photo equipment or spotting devices were engaged in battle with the most technologically accomplished civilization in the history of the world. How could America possibly fail to force the North Vietnamese into bargaining? Lyndon Johnson wanted one thing from his nightly visit—the feeling that he was still in control—and that was the only thing that the maps and the men and the messages were able to provide.

* "The realist," observed Randolph Bourne in describing the chain of events leading to American participation in World War I, "thinks he can at least control events by linking himself to the forces that are moving. Perhaps he can. But if it is a question of controlling war, it is difficult to see how the child on the back of a mad elephant is to be any more effective in stopping the beast than is the child who tries to stop him from the ground." The drift of events in the spring of 1965—the inexorable movement from bombs to troops—can be described in similar terms. Seated on the back of a beast that was far wilder than he had imagined, Johnson found himself carried along by its momentum, moving inexorably toward the wider war he did not want.

When Johnson first decided to escalate the bombing, he hoped to keep the involvement of "his boys" to a minimum. "If there is one thing," he said in February, 1965, "that the American people will not take, it is another shooting war in Asia." So Vietnam would be different. Mechanically concentrated firepower would substitute for conventional manpower. Warfare by remote control would keep America's sons at home and America's sight away from this remote conflict. Yet the situation markedly worsened in the months after the bombing had begun. The Vietcong kept the initiative and were hurting Saigon's army badly. As guerrilla activity mounted, the South Vietnamese government was able to provide security for fewer people in less territory. The cities and towns were being isolated by successful Vietcong attacks on their power and communication lines. The desertion
rate in the South Vietnamese Army was rising weekly. In contrast, the Vietcong were able to replace their losses more easily than before. There was no sign that the bombing had stopped the flow of supplies from the North; indeed, more weapons were now in Vietcong hands. America might control the sky, but the land was still being captured by the Communists.37

The more the situation deteriorated, as our military efforts met with failure, the more susceptible Johnson became to requests for increased use of American power.38 If bombing was a failure at present levels, then an increase in the number of sorties and an expansion in the choice of targets would bring success. If South Vietnamese soldiers were fighting badly, or hardly at all, then an increase in America's tanks and guns and training would make them fight hard and well. If the presence of fifty thousand American troops could not stave off defeat, then more troops would assure victory. Moreover, Johnson felt that dwindling public support for the war made it necessary for him to rely less on manpower than on technology and firepower in the kind of situation where they would have the least effectiveness. As long as the Vietcong had firmly established roots in South Vietnam, they could and would replace lost supplies with the assistance of the local population. If the guerrilla's railways and highways were destroyed, he could and did resort to bicycle and foot. Designed to break the will of North Vietnam, the bombing had the opposite result: it built North Vietnam's morale.

Our involvement seemed only to strengthen our enemy and to weaken our ally. America's sophisticated equipment could destroy objects and kill people, but it could not bend the human spirit to America's aims. On the other hand, the more aid we gave South Vietnam, the more dependent South Vietnam became. Our increased effort was met with decreased effort on their part. Each new grant or combat division generated a demand for additional help, for reassurance that the United States would not go away.39 President Johnson unwittingly impaired South Vietnam's strength with too many foreign goods and too many foreign services, just as surely as young Lyndon had destroyed Huissio's horse with too much food and too many races.

From one perspective, Johnson's power now seemed more imposing than that of any Chief Executive in history. Throughout the cold war, the American Presidency had steadily accumulated instruments of control over the conduct of foreign policy. Information, expertise, money, troops, publicity, etc., were concentrated in the White House. Ultimately, the American President exercised more power over his country's decisions of war and peace than did the Premier of the Soviet Union. Yet from another perspective, the President was like the Wizard of Oz, an ordinary man concealed behind a giant screen, pulling strings, pointing at targets, playing with the illusion of power. In the end, the most awesome arsenal of weaponry in the modern world could not ensure results, which turned out to depend upon less tangible qualities—in both Vietnam and the United States.

From the start, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been more realistic than Johnson's civilian advisers in foreseeing that the bombing would not make it possible to avoid sending troops. But they refrained from voicing this judgment at the beginning of 1965—when pessimism about the bombing might have persuaded Johnson not to do anything at all. Better to settle for half-measures than to risk a complete reversal of policy. So the requests for troops were made gradually, one after the other, in a succession of easy, incremental steps. First, the military requested a few troops to protect the air base near Da Nang from which American air strikes were launched. On March 10 two Marine battalions—fifteen hundred men—landed in Vietnam. A few weeks later there was a second request for more troops, this time to protect our boys—the same boys, of course, who were originally there to protect the airfield. By the end of April there were more than fifty thousand American soldiers in South Vietnam. And the mission expanded as the numbers increased. The original mission of the troops was simply to protect the air bases. In early April American troops were permitted active participation in combat if a nearby Vietnamese unit was in serious trouble. By June permission had been granted to commit American troops to combat, either in conjunction with Vietnamese forces or on their own. And all the while, Johnson still insisted that we were not at war.40

The movement from bombs to troops without the approval, discussion, or even the awareness of Congress was a stunning revelation of changes in the balance of power between the institutions of American government, and how far we had come from the original understanding. The Founding Fathers were convinced that most of the wars that had taken place in Europe were the product of crazy and destructive
ambitions, reflecting the desire of the rulers to enlarge themselves by enlarging their countries. And history had another lesson: power that was acquired in response to the necessities of war was not readily relinquished when peace returned. In Europe military exigencies had prepared the way for the rule of absolute monarchs. The monarchs had then become desirous of acquiring power over expanding domains, equating their ambitions for the good of the nation with the health of the nation. The iron ring of tyranny was closed: wars demanded monarchs and monarchs demanded wars.41

The framers originally intended to sever the potential connection between war and the possibility of despotism by giving the warmaking power to the elected representatives of the people. In the early drafts of the Constitution, the legislature was granted the sole power of “making war.” In later drafts, the wording was loosened to allow the executive to act in case a sudden attack was made upon the United States while the Congress was out of session—as it was expected to be for all but one month a year. In an age when it took several days for the fastest horse to ride to the proposed capital in New York from the northernmost state of New Hampshire, and considerably longer from the southernmost state of Georgia, one could easily envisage a military situation that required that something be done in less time than it would take Congress to assemble. The executive’s power to respond to attack was not meant to include the power to initiate hostilities. But history has a way of fudging theoretical distinctions; time and practical experience blurred the line between initiation and response. The framers gave the President substantial powers in the conduct of foreign policy: to receive ambassadors and other public ministers and with the advice and consent of the Senate to make treaties and appointments. He was also Commander in Chief of the armed forces.42 If, as was often the case, the exercise of these powers created situations that provoked armed attack, to which Presidents replied with force, it becomes difficult to draw the line between initiation and response.

The difficulty is not just theoretical. On May 18, 1846, President Polk sent an Army unit under General Taylor into a disputed territory on the border between Mexico and Texas. As expected, Mexico felt compelled to resist, and a Mexican unit ambushed Taylor’s unit, killing eleven men. The ambush enabled Polk to claim that the United States must act at once to repel Mexico’s armed attack. “I call on Congress,” Polk wrote in a presidential message, “to recognize the existence of war and place at the disposal of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, thus hastening the restoration of peace.”43 While Polk’s actions triggered some criticism in Congress, it was difficult to deny that the United States was now actually at war with Mexico—however the war had started—and therefore money and supplies could not be denied to American soldiers already in combat. So Congress acquiesced and war was acknowledged and continued.

FDR’s destroyer deal presents a more complicated example of the difficulty of distinguishing between initiation and response. In the summer of 1940, after France had fallen, Hitler was making plans for an invasion of England; the success of the invasion depended upon whether the Germans could control a sea lane across the English Channel. In ten days, the Nazis had sunk eleven British destroyers. Churchill wired Roosevelt for help. If the United States could provide Britain with fifty or sixty reconditioned destroyers, then perhaps the seaborne invasion could be repelled; if not, the future looked darker than ever before. Churchill’s request created a dilemma for Roosevelt. He knew he had to act immediately, but he also knew he could not get congressional approval. Instead, he drew up an executive agreement between chiefs of state, exchanging the destroyers for military bases. But the ingenious approach could not hide the fact that by providing destroyers to England, Roosevelt was placing the United States in a state of quasi belligerence, since the sale of destroyers was seen as an act of war.44

Presidents also enlarged the concept of defensive action to include their power to protect American citizens abroad (in the early twentieth century, Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft sent troops into the Dominican Republic to protect American citizens living there); to protect American prestige (in 1914 Wilson sent troops to Veracruz to enforce respect for the American flag); and, finally, to protect the free world against Communism (in 1950 Truman sent troops into South Korea to repulse the aggression of North Korea). Significantly, the test was not whether the American people believed that the welfare of the nation was at stake, but whether the President so determined. Since it was possible to find many reasons to support a claim that the nation’s security required swift actions, the original constraint on presidential action had in effect been removed.

The necessities of national survival were also used to justify the expansion of presidential powers at home. In the course of the Civil War, President Lincoln undertook sweeping actions without congres-
sional authorization: he arrested and detained people without warrant, paid out millions of unappropriated funds from the Treasury to private persons, seized railroads and telegraph communications, seized property, instituted a militia draft, suppressed newspapers, and emancipated the slaves. The nation’s survival, as Lincoln saw it, was at stake and with it the survival of free government upon earth. The situation, Lincoln said, “forces us to ask, ‘Is there in all republics this inherent and fatal weakness? Must a government of necessity be too strong for the liberties of its own people or too weak to maintain its own existence? Is it possible to lose the nation and yet preserve the Constitution?’” Lincoln’s answer to his own question was that the Constitution was nothing without the nation. The law of necessity demanded that the nation save itself, and by extension the Constitution, even if in the process extraconstitutional means were required. “Often a limb must be amputated,” Lincoln concluded, “to save a life but a life is never wisely given to save a limb.”

The presidential apparatus grew with the growth of military needs; the great steps forward in the expansion of presidential power were linked—whether as effect or cause—with the great wars: the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War. Time and again, the law of national self-preservation was seen to justify placing extravagant powers in the hands of the President.

The story of expanding presidential power is not, however, a story of rapacious Presidents tyrannically enlarging their control against the resistance of the people. On the contrary, the American people and their representatives in the Congress continually deferred to presidential action. And, over time, Congress acquiesced in the President’s increasing domination of national security policy, and restricted itself primarily to monitoring the executive branch, using its power in order to limit programs rather than attempting to intervene in shaping the substance of policies.

Explanations of this evolution usually give first priority to structural factors. It is said that the making of foreign policy demanded information, secrecy, dispatch, and concentration of authority, and that these qualities were difficult to find in an institution as large and unwieldy as the U.S. Congress. According to this view, the Congress was an assembly of individuals lacking a collective voice, hopelessly fragmented into dozens of committees and subcommittees. Nor could the parties put together what the congressional structure rent apart. Over time, the centralizing capacity of the parties had diminished—so much so that in some ways their activity added to the fragmentation of congressional structure.

Congress’ lack of information also crippled its ability to deal with questions of foreign policy; the Congress was almost solely dependent upon the executive for information and expertise in the field of foreign policy. And despite the President’s responsibility for informing Congress on the state of the union, the executive branch had progressively tightened its control over transmission of information to Congress. The claim of executive privilege, the growth of intelligence operations, and the farflung nature of America’s foreign affairs had given a near-monopoly of information to the Presidency. Nothing had done more to secure this monopoly than the development of an institutionalized system of security classification, which, by giving the power to conceal, helped persuade the executive branch that foreign policy was no one else’s business.

But too much emphasis should not be placed on institutional factors. On the one hand, the need for secrecy and dispatch was enormously exaggerated. On the other hand, the congressional structure was not as incapable of making decisions as the critics implied. The problem was more ideological than institutional. Congress’ difficulties in sharing responsibility for deciding issues of war and peace arose primarily from the fact that most Congressmen would not give the energy and time such important questions demanded. The average member of Congress spent little time on questions of foreign policy. Political necessity encouraged him to give first priority to the concerns of his constituents, and few of their problems related to foreign policy. Studies of voting patterns on foreign policy indicated little correlation between foreign policy issues and constituent attitudes. So, rather than taking his cues from his district, the average Congressman turned to the President for guidance in foreign affairs. For the average member knew that if Congress voted against the President on any foreign policy issue, and the result was bad, then Congress would be blamed. On the other hand, if he voted with the President and things went wrong, then the President would get the blame and not the Congressman. The legislators could always say: “Well, you see, I had my doubts but I voted to back my President.” And the public would respect this decision.

The concept that only the Presidency could deal with the complexities of foreign policy was a consequence of the Representative’s percep-
tion of that complexity. The sense of being overwhelmed by the demand for expertise happened to fit the individual Representative's own political needs and his own images of how foreign policy should be made. Over time, these fears and desires created a habit of deference, and the congressional muscles of decision-making in foreign policy atrophied for lack of normal use.

So it happened that in 1965 Johnson was able to take the American people into a war that turned out to be the longest in its history, without a declaration of war or even a specific resolution of support from the U.S. Congress. Advisers led to bombs and bombs led to troops and gradually America was at war with North Vietnam. And the Congress was called upon simply to recognize the situation and support the President's actions.

Still, the illusion of public choice remained. In July, 1965, five months after the initiation of the bombing, Robert McNamara presented the President with three options: to cut our losses and withdraw, to continue fighting at the current level, or to substantially expand our military pressure. The memo, signed by Bundy, Rusk, Taylor, Westmoreland, and Wheeler, clearly reveals their preference for the third option.

The Viet Cong seem to believe that South Vietnam is on the run and near collapse. There are no signs of their settling for anything less than a complete takeover.

We must choose among three courses of action . . . :

(a) Cut our losses and withdraw under the best of conditions that can be arranged—almost certainly conditions humiliating the United States and very damaging to our future effectiveness on the world scene.

(b) Continue at about the present level, with the U.S. forces limited to say 75,000, holding on and playing for breaks—a course of action which, because our position would grow weaker, almost certainly would confront us later with a choice between withdrawal and an emergency expansion of forces, perhaps too late to do any good.

(c) Expand promptly and substantially the U.S. military pressure against the Viet Cong in the South and maintain the military pressure against the North Vietnamese in the North while launching a vigorous effort on the political side to lay the groundwork for a favorable outcome by clarifying our objectives and establishing channels of communication. This alternative would stave off defeat in the short run and offer a good chance of producing a favorable settlement in the longer run; at the same time, it would imply a commitment to see a fighting war clear through at considerable cost in casualties and matériel and would make any later decision to withdraw even more difficult and even more costly than would be the case today. [Emphasis added.]

Not surprisingly, President Johnson also chose option No. 3. The process of decision is worth noting at this point. Though the decision called for a massive expansion of American troops, raising the troop level to 200,000, the structure of decision-making had become so narrowed that Lyndon Johnson received the advice of only five or six men, consulting the National Security Council, the Congress, and the Cabinet only after the decision had been made.

Having chosen his policy, Johnson turned to the question of implementation. There were two schools of thought: The majority of his advisers recommended that the President ask Congress for higher taxes to pay for the war, issue a presidential declaration of a "state of emergency," put the economy on a wartime footing, and order the mobilization of 235,000 reservists. Johnson recoiled from this dramatic display of presidential action. Going to Congress meant, in effect, going to the nation with an announcement of war, letting the country know that this was a major war, likely to be a long war, which would demand sacrifice on their part. The alternative strategy—which was Johnson's strategy—was to tell Congress and the public no more than absolutely necessary. The administration would request an additional appropriation of only $1.8 billion, thus deferring the full revelation of the conflict's mounting costs until the following year. It called for announcing only that fifty thousand troops were to be sent immediately, and folding that announcement into a crowded press conference held at midday to ensure the minimum TV audience. It called for extending enlistments and increasing draft calls rather than mobilizing the reserves. It called, in essence, for initiating a covert full-scale war.

In deciding against his advisers not to summon the country to a costly and difficult struggle, Johnson had asserted his intention to control the decision-making process. If in 1964 his decisions were shared by the similar experiences and convictions of his experts who had recommended increased military pressures against the North, now, in
the middle of 1965, Lyndon Johnson was the one leading rather than the one being led. McNamara's war had become Johnson's war.

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It is impossible for an outsider to know the weight of all the factors that influenced Johnson's course. He himself chose to present only one reason in public. At the time and later, in his memoirs, Johnson justified his decision to minimize the extent of the war by arguing that if he had asked Congress for vast sums of money, called up the reserves, and warned the country and the world of the length and breadth of the war, he might have triggered one of those secret provisions in one of those secret treaties. Then we would have been fighting China and Russia as well as North Vietnam. Better, he reasoned, to have done what was necessary without informing the Congress and the public. In private conversation, Johnson admitted two other considerations: his fear of "touching off a right-wing stampede" and his concern for the Great Society. Convinced that McCarthyism was dormant but not defeated, Johnson feared that if the full extent of our difficulties in Vietnam were known, the political right—a force of undetermined size whose power Johnson almost certainly overestimated—would seize the initiative and demand an invasion of North Vietnam and the bombing of Hanoi. Johnson was much more concerned with the kind of furor that men like John Stennis, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and others might have created than he was about any dove opposition. This reflected his knowledge of the sources of congressional power. Dissembling was the only way to keep the stampede from beginning. By pretending there was no major conflict, by minimizing the level of spending, and by refusing to call up the reserves or ask Congress for an acknowledgment or acceptance of the war, Johnson believed he could keep the levers of control in his hands.

He had worked hard to reach the position where he could not only propose but pass his Great Society legislation. In the summer of 1965, after a lifetime spent in the pursuit of public power, he had come so close that he "could see and almost touch [his] youthful dream of improving life for more people and in more ways than any other political leader, including FDR... I was determined to keep the war from shattering that dream," Johnson later said, "which meant I simply had no choice but to keep my foreign policy in the wings. I knew the Congress as well as I know Lady Bird, and I knew that the day it exploded into a major debate on the war, that day would be the beginning of the end of the Great Society... I was determined to be a leader of war and a leader of peace. I refused to let my critics push me into choosing one or the other. I wanted both, I believed in both, and I believed America had the resources to provide for both. After all, our country was built by pioneers who had a rifle in one hand to kill their enemies and an ax in the other to build their homes and provide for their families."3

A full-scale public commitment to Vietnam would have required Johnson to accept the fact that he would not secure all the goals he desired. It would have required him to admit that even this leader must make choices and accept limits. It would have meant defining priorities and settling the conflicts among them. But here, as always, Johnson attempted to compromise conflict instead of choosing sides, manipulating and orchestrating the political process in order to shape a formula that would satisfy every competing claim.

How could Johnson have imagined that he could conduct a major war in virtual secrecy while simultaneously summoning the American people toward a Great Society? In early positions of leadership Johnson found that he could move in contradictory directions, so long as he compartmentalized his leadership, and kept his dealings with one group a secret from the next. Even in the search for votes, the process of campaigning permits, indeed requires, stressing some facts and minimizing others. The politician's talent, as Johnson interpreted it, was the ability to embrace and enter into the habits and ways of life of many different men. This required control over information. Johnson could not allow his immediate audience access to contradictory information about the particular "self" he was playing to them, permit a person who had seen him in the "right" role happen upon him in the "wrong" role. And when his leadership proved effective, Johnson had been praised by the very Senate on which he had practiced his deceptions. The country, then, would also reward the President for "pulling off," as he described it, "both the war in Vietnam and the Great Society at home," even if he hadn't told them everything at the time.

Johnson's concept of the President's role in foreign policy reinforced his confidence that it would not be necessary to make full disclosure. As the Democratic Majority Leader under a Republican President, Johnson had supported Eisenhower on most matters of foreign policy. He had preached and practiced bipartisanship. Now he was the
President, and he expected the same deference from his Congress. After all, partisanship and public debate were enemies of a sound foreign policy. It was in the public's best interest——given its tendency every now and then to "go off on a jag in one crazy direction or another"——to leave complicated questions of international affairs in the hands of the President. The public, Johnson reasoned, would only hurt itself by knowing too much. Democracy demanded good results for the people, not big debates.

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In bequeathing him the problem of Vietnam, history presented Lyndon Johnson with issues alien to his experience, resistant to his methods of leadership, yet decisive for his Presidency.

That was a historic misfortune, for Johnson and for America. But Johnson was not simply a victim of circumstance. Destiny and victimization are not the same. The latter assumes neither an act of will nor even a motivating passion; the circumstances appear as exclusively external, arbitrary, and exorbitant. But Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam was his own, the product of his beliefs, inward needs, and the public experience of decades. Admittedly, unlike his predecessors, he did not choose to be confronted with the need to decide whether the assumption that Vietnam was vital to our security—an assumption that was part of the still more encompassing world view—must now be acted upon to the full extent of its furthest implications. But his choice to go into Vietnam covertly, with force and with overtures of benevolent intentions, was an act of will that almost seems to sum up the character of the man.

The initial choice to intervene in 1965, including the decision to start with the bombing, probably was not significantly shaped by Johnson's own personality. Given the pressures for action, it is easy to imagine a Kennedy, an Eisenhower, or a Truman making the same choice. On the other hand, it does seem clear that the decision to attempt the coexistence of the Great Society and the war, and the consequent tactics of half-truth and deception, bore Johnson's own personal stamp to a unique degree. It is difficult to imagine another President, even in the same situation, making the same choice. Almost any other President would have decided differently, not necessarily out of principle, but surely on the practical ground that not even a President can "pull off" the impossible. Perhaps only Johnson would have dared to conceal the cost of the war from senior members of Congress, so that he might receive the Great Society appropriations before the truth came out.

Probably the fact that he was, in fact, a master of the Congress had allowed him to engage in so complicated and immense an undertaking. The very qualities that had led to Johnson's political and legislative success were precisely those that now operated to destroy him: his inward insistence that the world adapt itself to his goals; his faith in the nation's limitless capacity; his tendency to evaluate all human activity in terms of its political significance; his insistence on translating every disruptive situation into one where bargaining was possible; his reliance on personal touch; his ability to speak to each of his constituent groups on its own terms. All these gifts, instead of sustaining him, now conspired to destroy him.

The most important thing about a democratic regime is what questions it refers to the public for decision or guidance, how it refers them to the public, how the alternatives are defined, and how it respects the limitations of the public. Above all, the people are powerless if the political enterprise is able to take them to war without their consent. The business of war involves the severest sacrifices falling on the ordinary men and women in the country. Here more than anywhere, the people must have an opportunity to make a choice. For in the end, no statesman can pursue a policy of war unless he knows for what goals, and for how long, his people are prepared to fight.

Lyndon Johnson had wanted to surpass Franklin Roosevelt; and Roosevelt, after all, had not only won the reforms Johnson envied, he had also waged a war. But there was a critical difference: Roosevelt did not attempt the New Deal and World War II at the same time. Only Johnson among the Presidents sought to be simultaneously first in peace and first in war; and even Johnson was bound to fail.
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