

24 Trapped: Lyndon Johnson and the Nightmare of Vietnam

LARRY L. KING

The Vietnam War was one of the most controversial episodes in United States history. American involvement in that conflict began with Truman and persisted through Democratic and Republican administrations alike, although the largest escalation took place under Lyndon Johnson—the subject of this selection.

To place Larry King's account in proper context, let us review what had gone on in Vietnam before the Johnson escalation. For more than twenty years, war had racked that distant Asian land. Initially, Communist and nationalist forces under Ho Chi Minh had battled to liberate their homeland from French colonial rule. The United States was suspicious of Ho, who was an avowed Communist trained in Moscow. But Ho was also an intense nationalist: he was determined to create a united and independent Vietnam and never wavered from that goal. Suspicious of Ho because of his Communist connections, the United States sided with the French against Ho and the Vietnamese; by 1954, when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, the United States was footing 70 percent of the French cost of prosecuting a war that was highly unpopular in France. When Vietnamese forces surrounded and besieged twelve thousand French troops in Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower's closest personal advisers urged armed American intervention to save the French position. Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, even recommended dropping the atomic bomb on the Vietnamese. But Eisenhower would have none of it.

The Eisenhower administration, however, continued using American aid and influence to combat communism in Indochina. In 1955, after suffering a humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French withdrew from Vietnam, whereupon the United States acted to prevent Ho Chi Minh from gaining complete control there. Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, ignored an international agreement in Geneva that called for free elections and helped install a repressive, anti-Communist regime in South Vietnam, supplying it with money, weapons, and military advisers. From the outset, American policymakers viewed Ho Chi Minh's government in North Vietnam as part of a world Communist conspiracy directed by Moscow and Beijing. If communism was not halted in Vietnam, they feared, then all Asia would ultimately succumb. Eisenhower himself repeated the analogy that it would be like a row of falling dominoes.

American intervention aroused Ho Chi Minh, who rushed help to nationalist guerrillas in South Vietnam and set out to unite all of Vietnam under his leadership. With civil war raging across South Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration stepped up the flow of American military aid to the government there, situated in the capital city of

Saigon. Under President John F. Kennedy, an enthusiast for counterinsurgency (or counterguerrilla warfare), the number of American advisers rose from 650 to 23,000. But Kennedy became disillusioned with American involvement in Vietnam and devised a disengagement plan before he was assassinated in November 1963. Whether he would have implemented the plan cannot be stated with certainty. When Vice President Johnson succeeded Kennedy, he nullified the disengagement plan and (with the encouragement of Kennedy's own advisers) continued American assistance to South Vietnam. Then, in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, Congress empowered the president to use armed force against "Communist aggression" in Vietnam. But Johnson repeatedly vowed, "We are not going to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

Over the next winter, however, all that changed. In November and December 1964, South Vietnamese guerrillas of the National Liberation Front (or Vietcong) killed seven United States advisers and wounded more than a hundred others in mortar and bomb attacks. Johnson's Texas blood was up: he wasn't going to let them "shoot our boys" out there, fire on "our flag." He talked obsessively about Communist "aggression" in Vietnam, about Munich and the lesson of appeasement, about how his enemies would call him "a coward," "an unmanly man," if he let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon. He couldn't depend on the United Nations to act—"It couldn't pour piss out of a boot if the instructions were printed on the heel." In February 1965, the administration became convinced that the coup-plagued Saigon government was about to collapse and that the United States had to do something drastic or South Vietnam would be lost and American international prestige and influence severely damaged. Accordingly, Johnson and his advisers moved to Americanize the war, sending waves of United States warplanes roaring over North Vietnam and 3,200 marines into the South.

The Americanization of the war took place with such stealth that people at home were hardly aware of the change. As reporter David Halberstam later wrote, United States decision makers "inched across the Rubicon without even admitting it," and the task of their press secretaries was "to misinform the public." The biggest misinformers were Johnson and his spokesmen, who lied about costs (which were staggering), casualties, victories, and build-ups. By June, more than 75,000 American soldiers were in Vietnam, and combat troops were fighting Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars in an Asian land war that Johnson had sworn to avoid. Soon troops were pouring in, and the war reeled out of control as each American escalation stiffened Vietcong and North Vietnamese resistance, which in turn led to more American escalation. By 1968, more than 500,000 American troops were fighting in that fire-scarred land. In the eyes of the administration and the Pentagon, it was unthinkable that America's awesome military power could fail to crush tiny North Vietnam and the Vietcong.

But the unthinkable came true. America's military forces failed to smash their Vietnamese foe, and the war bogged down in stalemate. How Johnson trapped himself and his country in the quagmire of Vietnam is the subject of the following selection, written by Larry L. King, a native Texan and an eminent author, historian, and journalist. As

a member of Johnson's political staff, King had occasion to observe his fellow Texan up close, and it shows in the stunning story he has to tell. To help us understand Johnson, King recounts the president's Texas background, personality, and political career in prose so stirring and full of insight and wit that you will not believe you are reading history. You will hear Johnson speak, see the world through his eyes, and feel his hurts and anger. You will think with Johnson as a combination of factors—his Cold War assumptions about a world Communist conspiracy and the domino theory, his belief in American invincibility, his emulation of mythical forebears, and his own deep-seated insecurities—drives him ever deeper into a war he never wanted to fight.

Finally, as King says, Johnson's manhood got tangled up in that horrendous conflict. To illustrate, King describes an episode that is shocking, hilarious, and sad all at the same time, an episode that captures perfectly Johnson's agony over Vietnam. This is surely one of the great portraits in literature.

GLOSSARY

ACHESON, DEAN As Harry Truman's secretary of state, he was one of the principal architects of the policy of containing communism that the United States developed in the early years of the Cold War.

ALAMO The famous battle of the Texas revolution where 187 rebels held off a much larger force of Mexicans for more than a week. Lyndon Johnson saw this as a symbol of the willpower and macho determination that characterized the American spirit.

BUNDY, MCGEORGE The former dean of Harvard College, he was a "hawk" on the war in Vietnam when he served as national security adviser for both Kennedy and Johnson.

CHIANG KAI-SHEK The leader of the Chinese Nationalists, who, despite American support, lost to the Communist forces under Mao Tse-tung. In 1949, the Nationalists retreated to Formosa, where they hoped to mount an assault to regain control of the mainland.

CLIFFORD, CLARK He replaced Robert McNamara as President Johnson's secretary of defense. Along with other trusted "wise men" (Dean Acheson and Omar Bradley among them), Clark

recommended limiting the bombing of North Vietnam.

DIEM, NGO DINH After the French left Vietnam in 1954, the United States provided economic and military support to Diem, who led the new government in South Vietnam. However, he was unable to unite his people or effectively fight the Communists. In November 1963, Diem died in a coup that had the approval of the American government.

DOMINO THEORY First voiced by President Eisenhower, it became a reason for America's reluctance to leave Vietnam. It argued that if Vietnam fell to communism so would its neighbors. The tumbling process would eventually threaten Japan and the Philippines and thus endanger the national security of the United States.

DULLES, JOHN FOSTER Eisenhower's secretary of state (1953–1959) and a militant cold warrior, he believed that threats of "massive nuclear retaliation" were the best way to deal with the Communist world.

FULBRIGHT, WILLIAM J. An Arkansas senator and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, he became an increasingly vocal critic of Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam. LBJ began referring to him as "Halfbright."

GOLDWATER, BARRY A conservative Republican senator from Arizona and a leading “hawk,” Johnson easily defeated him in the presidential election of 1964.

GREAT SOCIETY Johnson’s domestic reform agenda, which he saw as a fulfillment of FDR’s New Deal. Many of the programs (civil rights, medicaid, medicare) were part of Kennedy’s New Frontier. The war in Vietnam took both the focus and the funding of LBJ’s administration away from the Great Society.

GULF OF TONKIN In August of 1964, the American destroyer *Maddox* opened fire on what it believed were enemy gunboats. When Johnson addressed Congress, he stated that the Communists had initiated an unprovoked attack. Since American ships had shelled the North Vietnamese coast and there was no evidence that Communist gunboats had attacked the *Maddox*, the president’s statements were clearly misleading. Not knowing the true facts of the case, Congress empowered Johnson to use “all measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States.” The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave LBJ a virtual blank check to fight an undeclared war in Vietnam.

HALBERSTAM, DAVID A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who wrote a best-selling book entitled *The Best and the Brightest*. It examined the talented and intelligent advisers who made so many poor decisions while leading both Kennedy and Johnson into the war in Vietnam.

HO CHI MINH A Communist and a nationalist, he fought the French and then the Americans to establish a unified and independent Vietnam.

HUMPHREY, HUBERT LBJ’s vice president who ran for president in 1968 only to lose to Richard Nixon. King concludes that Johnson abused Humphrey by publicly embarrassing him, and even kicking the proud Minnesotan.

KEARNS, DORIS (Now Doris Kearns Goodwin) As a White House fellow, she came to know Johnson on a personal basis. In the president’s retirement years, she helped him with his memoirs,

Vantage Point, and later wrote a biography entitled *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*.

MCCARTHY, EUGENE A liberal senator from Minnesota who challenged LBJ for the presidential nomination of the Democratic party in 1968. McCarthy won almost half of the New Hampshire primary on a platform that called for American withdrawal from Vietnam. Johnson realized his vulnerability and how much the war had hurt his popularity. In March 1968, the president announced that he would not seek another term.

MCCARTHY, JOSEPH R. The demagogic senator from Wisconsin who argued during the Cold War of the 1950s that the Communists had not only infiltrated the American government but also had gained power abroad. He blamed Truman’s weak foreign policy based on containment. King argues that LBJ’s “Texas was a particularly happy hunting ground” for McCarthyism.

MCGOVERN, GEORGE A liberal Democratic senator from South Dakota who opposed the war in Vietnam, he lost the presidential election of 1972 to Richard Nixon.

McNAMARA, ROBERT He served as secretary of defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Near the end of Johnson’s presidency, McNamara began to doubt whether America could win the war in Vietnam. He left the administration to head the World Bank.

MONOLITHIC COMMUNISM The belief that all Communists—Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese—were bent on world domination and cooperated with each other to achieve that goal.

MOYERS, BILL A former Peace Corps official and a close friend of Johnson whom the president treated like “a surrogate son.” Moyers eventually left the administration to become an editor of *Newsday*.

PLEIKU In February of 1965, the North Vietnamese attacked Pleiku, killing nine Americans and destroying five aircraft. This resulted in an escalating program of air assaults against Communist targets above the 17th parallel.

PUEBLO An American warship seized by North Korea in 1968. There was also a crisis in Berlin that year. Johnson realized that Cold War tensions were not limited to Vietnam.

RAYBURN, SAM Powerful speaker of the House of Representatives and a Texan, he became one of LBJ's closest associates. When Johnson was a congressman, Rayburn assigned him to powerful committees that helped the future president learn about the importance of military preparedness.

RUSK, DEAN Secretary of state in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, he was an ardent cold warrior and a "hawk" on the war in Vietnam.

TET OFFENSIVE Although Johnson continued to boast that "the enemy had been defeated in battle after battle" and that America was winning the war, the Vietcong on the last day of January 1968 launched the massive Tet Offensive. The Communists assaulted most of the major cities in South Vietnam and even temporarily occupied the American embassy in Saigon. This seemed undeniable proof that Johnson's military solution was a failure and that the claims of the president and his generals could not be believed.

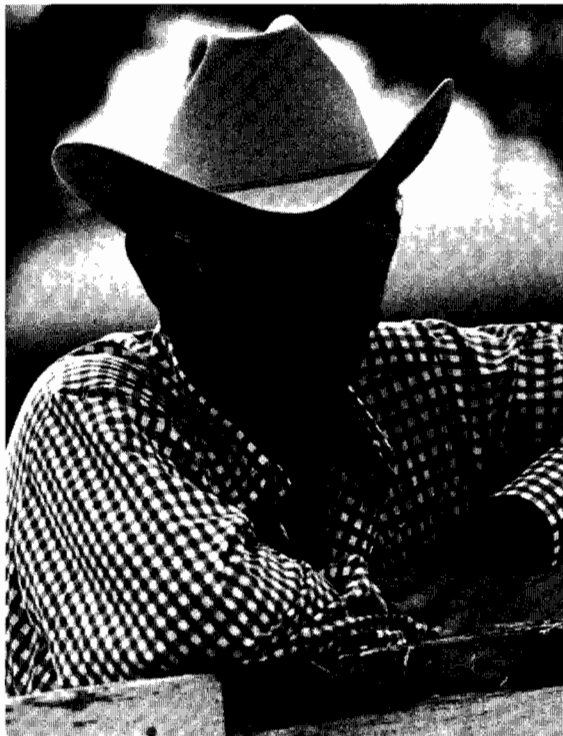
WESTMORELAND, WILLIAM American commander in Vietnam who devised "search and destroy" missions that the general hoped would help the United States win a war of attrition where "body counts" meant more than territory taken from the enemy.

He was an old-fashioned man by the purest definition. Forget that he was enamored of twentieth-century artifacts—the telephone, television, supersonic airplanes, spacecraft—to which he adapted with a child's wondering glee. His values were the relics of an earlier time; he had been shaped by an America both rawer and more confident than it later would become; his generation may have been the last to believe that for every problem there existed a workable solution; that the ultimate answer, as in old-time mathematics texts, always reposed in the back of the book.

He bought the prevailing American myths without closely inspecting the merchandise for rips or snares. He often said that Americans inherently were "cando" people capable of accomplishing anything they willed. It was part of his creed that Americans were God's chosen; why, otherwise, would they have become the richest, the strongest, the freest people in the history of man? His was a God, perhaps, who was a first cousin to Darwin; Lyndon B. Johnson believed in survival of the fittest, that the strong would conquer the weak, that almost always the big 'uns ate the little 'uns.

There was a certain pragmatism in his beliefs, a touch of fatalism, and often a goodly measure of common sense and true compassion. Yet, too, he could be wildly romantic or muddle-headed. Johnson truly believed that any boy could rise to become President, though only thirty-five had. Hadn't he—a shirt-tailed kid from the dusty hardscrabble of the Texas outback—walked with royalty and strong men, while reigning over what he called, without blushing, the Free World? In his last days, though bitter and withering in retirement at his rural Elba, he astonished and puzzled a young black teenager by waving his arms in windmill motions and telling the youngster, during a random encounter, "Well, maybe someday all of us

Larry L. King, "Trapped: Lyndon Johnson and the Nightmare of Vietnam," from *Outlaws, Con Men, Whores, Politicians, and Other Artists*, Viking Press, 1980. Reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. Copyright © 1980 by Larry L. King.



King's portrait of Lyndon Johnson, shown above, reveals a complex man with manifold contradictions. He could be crude yet caring, overbearing yet insecure, committed to a moral cause yet deceitful and mendacious. Like his mentor, Franklin Roosevelt, Johnson wanted to make "people's lives a little brighter." He was a skillful manipulator of Congress and a bold advocate of civil rights. But in the end, the war in Vietnam destroyed his dream of building the Great Society in America. (LBJ Library Photo by Franke Wolfe)

will be visiting *your* house in Waco, because *you'll* be President and your home will be a national museum just as mine is. It'll take a while, but it'll happen, you'll see. . . ." Then he turned to the black teenager's startled mother: "Now, you better get that home of yours cleaned up spick-and-span. There'll be hundreds of thousands coming through it, you know, wanting to see the bedroom and the kitchen and the living room. Now, I hope you get that dust rag of yours out the minute you get home. . . ."

Doris Kearns, the Harvard professor and latter-day LBJ confidante, who witnessed the performance, thought it a mock show: "almost a vaudeville act." Dr. Johnson peddling the same old snake oil. Perhaps. Whatever his motives that day, Lyndon Johnson chose his sermon from the text he most fervently believed throughout a lifetime; his catechism spoke to the heart of American opportunity, American responsibility, American good intentions, American superiority, American destiny, American infallibility. *Why, hell, boy*—he was saying to the black teenager—*this country's so goddamn great even a nigger's gonna be President! And you and others like you got to be ready!*

Despite a sly personal cynicism—a suspicion of others who might pull their dirks on him; the keen, cold eye of a man determined not to be victimized at the gaming tables—he was, in his institutional instincts, something of a Pollyanna in that, I think, he somehow believed people in the abstract to be somewhat better than they are. He expected they would *do* more, and more things could be done *for* them, than probably is true. There *was* such a thing as a free lunch; there *was* a Santa Claus; there *was*, somewhere, a Good Fairy, and probably it was made of the component parts of Franklin Roosevelt, Saint Francis, and Uncle Sam.

There were certain thoroughly American traits—as LBJ saw them—which constituted the foundation stone upon which the Republic, and his own dream castle, had been built; he found it impossible to abandon them even as the sands shifted and bogged him in the quagmire of Vietnam. If America was so wonderful (and it *was*; he had the evidence of himself to prove it), then he had the obligation to export its goodness and greatness to the less fortunate. It would not do to limit this healing ministry merely to domestic unfortunates—to the tattered blacks of Mississippi or to the bombed and strafed disadvantaged of the South Bronx—because man, *everywhere*, deserved the right to be just like us! Yessir! This good he would accomplish at any cost; it was why

we had no choice but “to nail the coonskin to the wall.” For if Lyndon B. Johnson believed in God and America and its goodness and greatness, he also believed in guts and gunpowder.

All the history he had read, and all he had personally witnessed, convinced him that the United States of America—if determined enough, if productive enough, if patriotic enough—simply could not lose a war. We have evidence from his mother that as a boy his favorite stories were of the Minutemen at Lexington and Concord, of the heroic defenders of the Alamo, of rugged frontiersmen who’d at once tamed the wild land and marauding Indians. He had a special affinity for a schoolboy poem proclaiming that the most beautiful sight his eyes had beheld was “the flag of my country in a foreign land.” He so admired war heroes that he claimed to have been fired on “by a Japanese ace,” though little evidence supported it; he invented an ancestor he carelessly claimed had been martyred at the Alamo; at the Democratic National Convention in 1956 he had cast his state’s delegate votes for the vice presidential ambitions of young John F. Kennedy, “that fighting sailor who bears the scars of battle.”

On a slow Saturday afternoon in the late 1950s, expansive and garrulous in his Capitol Hill office, Johnson discoursed to a half dozen young Texas staffers in the patois of their shared native place. Why—he said—you take that ragtag bunch at Valley Forge; who’d have given them a cut dog’s chance? There they were, barefoot in the snow and their asses hanging out, nothing to eat but moss and dead leaves and snakes, not half enough bullets for their guns, and facing the soldiers of the most powerful king of his time. Yet they sucked it up, wouldn’t quit, went on to fight and win. Or take the Civil War, now; it had been so exceptionally bloody because you had aroused Americans fighting on *both* sides; it had been something like rock against rock, or two mean ol’ pit bulldogs going at each other and both of ’em thinking only of taking hunks out of the other. He again invoked the Alamo: a mere handful

of freedom-loving men, knowing they faced certain death; but they’d carved their names in history for all time, and before they got through with ol’ General Santa Anna, he thought he’d stumbled into a swarm of bumblebees.

Fifteen years later Johnson would show irritation when Clark Clifford suggested that victory in Vietnam might require a sustaining commitment of twenty to thirty years. No—LBJ said—no, no, the thing to do was get in and out quickly, pour everything you had into the fight, land the knockout blow; hell, the North Vietnamese *had* to see the futility of facing all that American muscle! If you really poured it on ’em, you could clean up that mess within six months. We had the troops, the firepower, the bombs, the sophisticated weaponry, the oil—everything we needed to win. Did we have the resolve? Well, the Texas Rangers had a saying that you couldn’t stop a man who just kept on a-coming. And that’s what we’d do in Vietnam, Clark, just keep on a-coming. . . .

Always he talked of the necessity to be strong; he invoked his father’s standing up to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, Teddy Roosevelt’s carrying that big stick, FDR’s mobilizing the country to beat Hitler and Tojo. He had liked ol’ Harry Truman—tough little bastard and his own man—but, listen, Harry and Dean Acheson had lost control when they failed to prosecute the Korean War properly. They lost the public’s respect, lost control of General MacArthur, lost the backing of Congress, lost the *war* or the next thing to it. Next thing you know, they got blamed for losing China, and then there was Joe McCarthy accusing them of being soft on communism and everybody believed it. Well, it wouldn’t happen to him, no, sir. *He* hadn’t started the Vietnam War—Jack Kennedy had made the first commitment of out-and-out combat troops in force, don’t forget—but *he* wouldn’t bug out no matter how much the Nervous Nellies brayed. Kennedy had proved during the Cuban missile crisis that if you stood firm, then

the Reds would back down. They were bullies, and he didn't intend to be pushed around any more than Jack Kennedy had. When a bully ragged you, you didn't go whining to the teacher but gave him some of his own medicine.

Only later, in exile, when he spoke with unusual candor of his darker secretions, did it become clear how obsessed with failure Lyndon Johnson always had been. As a preschool youngster he walked a country lane to visit a grandfather, his head stuffed with answers he knew would be required ("How many head of cattle you got, Lyndon? How much do they eat? How many head can you graze to the acre?") and fearing he might forget them. If he forgot them, he got no bright-red apple but received, instead, a stern and disapproving gaze. LBJ's mother, who smothered him with affection and praise should he perform to her pleasure and expectations, refused to acknowledge his presence should he somehow displease or disappoint her. His father accused him of being a sleepyhead, a slow starter, and sometimes said every boy in town had a two-hour head start on him. Had we known those things from scratch, we might not have wondered why Lyndon Johnson seemed so blind for so long to the Asian realities. His personal history simply permitted him no retreats or failures in testings.

From childhood LBJ experienced bad dreams. As with much else, they would stay with him to the shadow of the grave. His nightmares were of being paralyzed and unable to act, of being chained inside a cage or to his desk, of being pursued by hostile forces. These and other disturbing dreams haunted his White House years; he could see himself stricken and ill on a cot, unable even to speak—like Woodrow Wilson—while, in an adjoining room, his trusted aides squabbled and quarreled in dividing his power. He translated the dreams to mean that should he for a moment show weakness, be indecisive, then history might judge him as the first American President who had failed to stand up and be counted. Johnson's was a benign translation; others might see a neurotic fear of

losing power—*his* power—to subordinates he did not, at least subconsciously, trust.

These deep-rooted insecurities prompted Lyndon Johnson always to assert himself, to abuse staff members simply to prove that he held the upper hand; to test his power in small or mean ways. Sometimes, in sending Vice President Hubert Humphrey off on missions or errands with exhortations to "get going," he literally kicked him in the shins. "Hard," Humphrey later recalled, pulling up his trouser leg to exhibit the scars to columnist Robert Allen. Especially when drinking did he swagger and strut. Riding high as Senate Majority Leader, Johnson one night after a Texas State Society function, in the National Press Club in Washington—in the spring of 1958—repaired to a nearby bar with Texas Congressmen Homer Thornberry and Jack Brooks.

"I'm a powerful sumbitch, you know that?" he repeatedly said. "You boys realize how goddamn *powerful* I am?"

Yes, Lyndon, his companions uneasily chorused. Johnson pounded the table as if attempting to crack stout oak. "Do you know Ike couldn't pass the Lord's Prayer without me? You understand that? Hah?" Yes, Lyndon. "Hah? Do you? Hah?" Sitting in an adjoining booth, with another Capitol Hill aide, James Boren, I thought I never had seen a man more desperate for affirmations of himself.

Lyndon Johnson always was an enthusiastic Cold Warrior. He was not made uncomfortable by John Foster Dulles's brinkmanship rhetoric about "rolling back" communism or "unleashing" Chiang Kai-shek to "free" the Chinese mainland—from which the generalissimo earlier had been routed by the Reds. LBJ was, indeed, one of the original soldiers of the Cold War, a volunteer rather than a draftee, just as he had been the first member of Congress to rush to the recruiting station following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Immediately after World War II he so bedeviled Speaker Sam Rayburn about his fears of

America's dismantling its military machine that Rayburn, in vexation, appointed him to the postwar Military Policy Committee and to the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. Johnson early had a preference for military assignments in Congress; he successfully campaigned for a seat on the House Naval Affairs Committee in the 1930s and, a decade later, the Senate Armed Services Committee. He eventually chaired the Senate Preparedness Committee and the Senate Space Committee. Perhaps others saw the exploration of outer space in scientific or peaceful terms; Johnson, however, told Senate Democrats that outer space offered "the ultimate position from which total control of the earth may be exercised. Whoever gains that ultimate position gains control, total control, over the earth."

He was a nagger, a complainer, a man not always patient with those of lesser gifts or with those who somehow inconvenienced him. Sometimes he complained that the generals knew nothing but "spend and bomb"; almost always, however, he went along with bigger military spending and, in most cases, with more bombing or whatever tough military action the brass proposed. This was his consistent record in Congress, and he generally affirmed it as President. On November 12, 1951, Senator Johnson rattled his saber at the Russians:

We are tired of fighting your stooges. We will no longer sacrifice our young men on the altar of your conspiracies. The next aggression will be the last. . . . We will strike back, not just at your satellites, but at you. We will strike back with all the dreaded might that is within our control and it will be a crushing blow.

Even allowing for those rhetorical excesses peculiar to senatorial oratory, those were not the words of a man preoccupied with the doctrine of peaceful coexistence. Nor were they inconsistent with Johnson's mind-set when he made a public demand—at the outbreak of the Korean War, in June 1950—that President Truman order an all-out mobilization of

all military reserve troops, National Guard units, draftees, and even civilian manpower and industry. He told intimates that this Korean thing could be the opening shot of World War III, and we had to be ready for that stark eventuality. In a Senate debate shortly thereafter, Senator Johnson scolded colleagues questioning the Pentagon's request for new and supplementary emergency billions: "Is this the hour of our nation's twilight, the last fading hour of light before an endless night shall envelop us and all the Western world?"

His ties with Texas—with its indigenous xenophobic instincts and general proclivities toward a raw yahooism—haunted him and, in a sense, may have made him a prisoner of grim political realities during the witch-hunting McCarthy era. "I'm damned tired," he said, "of being called a Dixiecrat in Washington and a communist in Texas"; it perfectly summed up those schizophrenic divisions uneasily compartmentalizing his national political life and the more restrictive parochial role dictated by conditions back home. He lived daily with a damned-if-I-do-and-damned-if-I-don't situation. Texas was a particularly happy hunting ground for Senator Joe McCarthy, whose self-proclaimed anticommunist crusade brought him invitation after invitation to speak there; the Texas legislature, in the 1950s controlled beyond belief by vested interests and showing the ideological instincts of the early primates, whooped through a resolution demanding that Senator McCarthy address it despite the suggestion of State Representative Maury Maverick, Jr., that the resolution be expanded to invite Mickey Mouse also. Both Johnson's powerful rightist adversaries and many of his wealthy Texas benefactors were enthusiastic contributors to the McCarthy cause and coffers.

Privately, LBJ groused of McCarthy's reckless showboat tactics and, particularly, of the Texas-directed pressures they brought him. Why—he said—Joe McCarthy was just a damn drunk, a blowhard, an incompetent who couldn't tie his own shoelaces, probably the biggest joke in the Senate. But—LBJ

reminded those counseling him to attack McCarthy—people *believed* him; they were so afraid of the communists they would believe anything. There would come a time when the hysteria died down, and then McCarthy would be vulnerable; such a fellow was certain to hang himself in time. But right now anybody openly challenging McCarthy would come away with dirty hands and with his heart broken. “Touch pitch,” he paraphrased the Bible, “and you’ll be defiled.”

By temperament a man who coveted the limelight and never was bashful about claiming credit for popular actions, Johnson uncharacteristically remained in the background when the U.S. Senate voted to censure McCarthy in late 1954. Though he was instrumental in selecting senators he believed would be effective and creditable members in leading the censure effort, Johnson’s fine hand was visible only to insiders. A correspondent for Texas newspapers later would remember it as “the only time we had to hunt to find Johnson. He almost went into hiding.”

Johnson believed, however—and probably more deeply than Joe McCarthy—in a worldwide, monolithic communist conspiracy. He believed it was directed from Moscow and that it was ready to blast America, or subvert it, at the drop of a fur hat. LBJ never surrendered that view. In retirement he suggested that the communists were everywhere, honeycombing the government, and he told astonished visitors that sometimes he hadn’t known whether he could trust even his own staff; *that’s* how widespread spying and subversion had become. The communists (it had been his first thought on hearing the gunshots in Dallas, and he never changed his mind) had killed Jack Kennedy; it had been their influence that turned people against the Vietnam War. One of LBJ’s former aides, having been treated to that angry lecture, came away from the Texas ranch with the sad and reluctant conclusion that “the Old Man’s absolutely paranoid on the communist thing.”

In May 1961 President Kennedy dispatched his Vice President to Asia on a “fact-finding” diplomatic

trip. Johnson, who believed it his duty to be a team player, to reinforce the prevailing wisdom, bought without qualification the optimistic briefings of military brass with their charts and slides “proving” the inevitable American victory. “I was sent out here to report on the *progress* of the war,” he told an aide, as if daring anyone to bring him anything less than good news. Carried away, he publicly endowed South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh Diem with the qualities of Winston Churchill, George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and FDR. Visiting refugee camps, he grew angry at communist aggressions “against decent people” and concluded: “There is no alternative to United States leadership in Southeast Asia. . . . We must decide whether to help to the best of our ability or throw in the towel [and] pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a ‘Fortress America’ concept.” Yes, sir, the damned dirty Reds would chase us all the way to the Golden Gate! LBJ believed then—and always would believe—in the domino theory first stated by President Eisenhower. Even after announcing his abdication, he continued to sing the tired litany: If Vietnam fell, then the rest of Asia might go, and then Africa, and then the Philippines. . . .

When Lyndon Johnson suddenly ascended to the presidency, however, he did not enter the Oval Office eager to immediately take the measure of Ho Chi Minh. Although he told Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, “I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went,” he wanted, for the moment, to keep the war—and, indeed, all foreign entanglements—at arm’s length. His preoccupation was with his domestic program; here, he was confident, he knew what he was doing. He would emulate FDR in making people’s lives a little brighter. To aides he talked eagerly of building schools and houses, of fighting poverty and attaining full employment, of heating the economy to record prosperity. The honeymoon with Congress—he said—couldn’t last; he had seen Congress grow balky and obstinate, take its measure of many Presidents, and he had to assume it would happen again. Then

he would lean forward, tapping a forefinger against someone's chest or squeezing a neighboring knee, and say, "I'm like a sweetheart to Congress right now. They love me because I'm new and courting 'em, and it's kinda exciting, like that first kiss. But after a while the new will wear off. Then Congress will complain that I don't bring enough roses or candy and will accuse me of seeing other girls." The need was to push forward quickly, pass the civil rights bill in the name of the martyred John F. Kennedy, then hit Capitol Hill with a blizzard of domestic proposals and dazzle it before sentiment and enthusiasms cooled. Foreign affairs could wait. Even war could walk at mark-time speed.

Lyndon B. Johnson at that point had little experience in foreign affairs. Except for his showcase missions accomplished as Vice President, he had not traveled outside the United States save for excursions to Mexico and his brief World War II peregrinations. He probably had little confidence in himself in foreign affairs; neither did he have an excessive interest in the field. "Foreigners are not like the folks I am used to," he sometimes said—and though it passed as a joke, there was the feeling he might be kidding on the level.

Ambassadors waiting to present their credentials to the new President were miffed by repeated delays—and then angrily astonished when LBJ received them in groups and clumps, seemingly paying only perfunctory attention, squirming in his chair, scowling or muttering during the traditional ceremonies. He appeared oblivious to their feelings, to their offended senses of dignity. "Why do I have to see them?" the President demanded. "They're Dean Rusk's clients, not mine."

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was selected to focus on Vietnam while LBJ concocted his Great Society. McNamara should send South Vietnam equipment and money as needed, a few more men, issue the necessary pronouncements. But don't splash it all over the front pages; don't let it get out of

hand; don't give Barry Goldwater Vietnam as an issue for the 1964 campaign. Barry, hell, he was a hip shooter; he'd fight Canada or Mexico—or give that impression anyhow—so the thing to do was sit tight, keep the lid on, keep all Asian options open. Above all, "Don't let it turn into a Bay of Pigs." Hunker down; don't gamble.

The trouble—Johnson said to advisers—was that foreign nations didn't understand Americans or the American way: They saw us as "fat and fifty, like the country-club set"; they didn't think we had the steel to act when the going got rough. Well, in time they'd find out differently. They'd learn that Lyndon Johnson was not about to abandon what other Presidents had started; he wouldn't permit history to write that he'd been the only American President to cut and run; he wouldn't sponsor any damn Munich. But for right now—cool it. Put Vietnam on the back burner, and let it simmer.

But the communists—he later would say—wouldn't permit him to cool it. There had been that Gulf of Tonkin attack on the United States destroyer *Maddox*, in August of 19-and-64, and if he hadn't convinced Congress to get on record as backing him up in Vietnam, why, then, the Reds would have interpreted it as a sign of weakness and Barry Goldwater would have cut his heart out. And in February of 19-and-65, don't forget, the Vietcong had made that attack on the American garrison at Pleiku, and how could he be expected to ignore that? There they came, thousands of 'em, barefoot and howling in their black pajamas and throwing homemade bombs; it had been a damned insult, a calculated show of contempt. LBJ told the National Security Council: "The worst thing we could do would be to let this [Pleiku] thing go by. It would be a big mistake. It would open the door to a major misunderstanding."

Twelve hours later, American aircraft—for the first time—bombed in North Vietnam; three weeks later, Lyndon Johnson ordered continuing bombing raids in the north to "force the North Vietnamese into negotiations"; only 120 days after Pleiku,

American ground forces were involved in a full-scale war and seeking new ways to take the offensive. Eight Americans died at Pleiku. Eight. Eventually 50,000-plus Americans would die in Asia.

Pleiku was the second major testing of American will, within a few months, in LBJ's view. In the spring of 1965 rebels had attacked the ruling military junta in the Dominican Republic. Lives and property of U.S. citizens were endangered, as Johnson saw it, but—more—this might be a special tactic by the Reds, a dry run for bigger mischief later on in Vietnam. The world was watching to see how America would react. "It's just like the Alamo," he lectured the National Security Council. "Hell, it's like you were down at that gate, and you were surrounded, and you damn well needed somebody. Well, by God, I'm going to go—and I thank the Lord that I've got men who want to go with me, from McNamara right down to the littlest private who's carrying a gun."

Somewhat to his puzzlement, and certainly to his great vexation, Lyndon Johnson would learn that not everybody approved of his rushing the Marines into the Dominican Republic, and within days building up a 21,000-man force. Congress, editorials, and some formerly friendly foreign diplomats blasted him. Attempting to answer these critics, he would claim thousands of patriots "bleeding in the streets and with their heads cut off"; paint a false picture of the United States ambassador cringing under his desk "while bullets whizzed over his head"; speak of howling Red hordes descending on American citizens and American holdings; and, generally, open what later become known as the Credibility Gap.

By now he had given up on his original notion of walking easy in Vietnam until he could put across the Great Society. Even before the three major "testings" of Tonkin Gulf, the Dominican Republic, and Pleiku, he had said—almost idly—"Well, I guess we have to touch up those North Vietnamese a little bit." By December 1964 he had reversed earlier priorities: "We'll beat the communists first; then we

can look around and maybe give something to the poor." Guns now ranked ahead of butter.

Not that he was happy about it. Though telling Congress, "This nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough, its people are strong enough, to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home," he knew, in his bones, that this was much too optimistic an outlook. He privately fretted that his domestic program would be victimized. He became touchy, irritable, impatient with those who even timorously questioned America's increasing commitment to the war. Why should I be blamed—he snapped—when the communists are the aggressors, when President Eisenhower committed us in Asia in 19-and-54, when Kennedy beefed up Ike's efforts? If he didn't prosecute the Vietnam War now, then later Congress would sour and want to hang him because he hadn't—and would gut his domestic programs in retaliation.

He claimed to have "pounded President Eisenhower's desk" in opposing Ike's sending 200 Air Force "technicians" to assist the French in Indochina (though those who were present in the Oval Office later recalled that only Senators Russell of Georgia and Stennis of Mississippi had raised major objections). Well, he'd been unable to stop Ike that time, though he *had* helped persuade him against dropping paratroopers into Dienbienphu to aid the doomed French garrison there. And after all *that*, everybody now called Vietnam "Lyndon Johnson's War"! It was unfair: "The only difference between the Kennedy assassination and mine is that I am alive and it is more torturous."

Very well, if it was his war in the public mind, then he would personally oversee its planning. "Never move up your artillery until you move up your ammunition," he told his generals—a thing he'd said as Senate Majority Leader when impatient liberals urged him to call for votes on issues he felt not yet ripe. Often he quizzed the military brass, sounding almost like a dove, in a way to resemble

courtroom cross-examinations. He forced the admirals and generals to affirm and reaffirm their recommendations as vital to victory. Reading selected transcripts, one might make the judgment that Lyndon Johnson was a most reluctant warrior, one more cautious in Vietnam than not. The larger evidence of Johnson's deeds, however, suggests that he was being a crafty politician—making a record so that later he couldn't be made the sole scapegoat.

He trusted Robert McNamara's computers, perhaps more than he trusted men, and took satisfaction when their printouts predicted that X amount of bombing would be needed to damage the Vietcong by Y or that X number of troops would be required to capture Z. Planning was the key. You figured what you had to do, you did it, and eventually you'd nail the coonskin to the wall. Johnson devoutly believed that all problems had solutions; in his lifetime alone we'd beaten the Great Depression, won two world wars, hacked away at racial discrimination, made an industrial giant and world power of a former agrarian society, explored outer space. This belief in available solutions led him, time and again, to change tactics in Vietnam and discover fresh enthusiasm for each new move; he did not pause, apparently, to reflect on why given tactics, themselves once heralded as practical solutions, had failed and had been abandoned. If counterinsurgency failed, you bombed. If bombing wasn't wholly effective, then you tried the enclave theory. If *that* proved disappointing, you sent your ground troops on search-and-destroy missions. If, somehow, your troops couldn't find the phantom Vietcong in large numbers (and therefore couldn't destroy them), you began pacification programs in the areas you'd newly occupied. And if *this* bogged down, if the bastards still sneaked up to knife you in the night, you beefed up your firepower and sent in enough troops simply to outmuscle the rice-paddy ragtags: Napalm 'em bomb 'em, shoot 'em; burn 'em out, and flush 'em out. Sure it would work! It always had! Yes, surely, the answer was there somewhere in the back of the book, if only you looked long enough. . . .

He sought, and found, assurances. Maybe he had only a "cow-college" education; perhaps he'd not attended West Point; he might not have excessive experience in foreign affairs. But he was surrounded by the good men David Halberstam later, and ironically, would label "the best and the brightest," and certainly they were unanimous in their supportive conclusions. "He would look around him," Tom Wicker later said, "and see in Bob McNamara that [the war] was technologically feasible, in McGeorge Bundy that it was intellectually respectable, and in Dean Rusk that it was historically necessary." It was especially easy to trust expertise when the experts in their calculations bolstered your own gut feelings—and when their computers and high-minded statements and mighty hardware all boiled down to reinforce your belief in American efficiency, American responsibility, American destiny. If so many good men agreed with him, then what might be wrong with those who didn't?

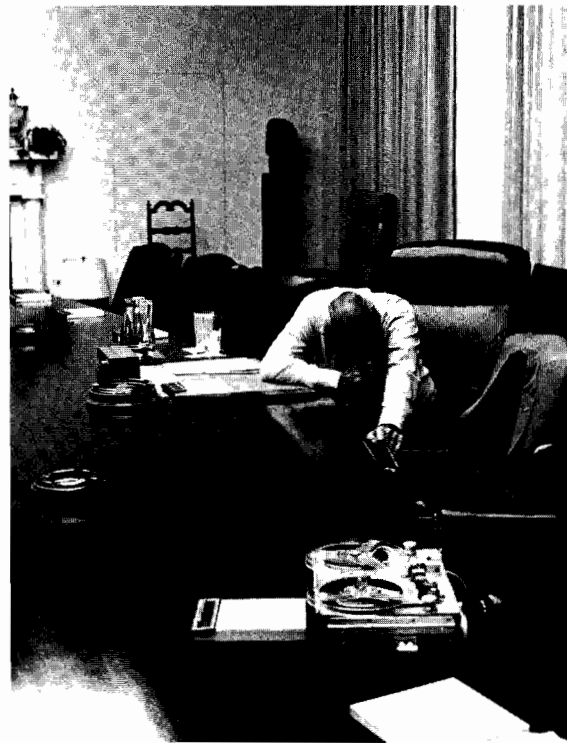
He considered the sources of dissatisfaction and dissent: the liberals—the "red-hots," he'd often sneeringly called them; the "pepper pots"—who were impractical dreamers, self-winding kamikazes intent on self-destruction. He often quoted an aphorism to put such people in perspective: "Any jackass can kick down a barn, but it takes a carpenter to build one." He fancied, however, that he knew all about those queer fellows. For years, down home, Ronnie Dugger and his *Texas Observer* crowd, in LBJ's opinion, had urged him to put his head in the noose by fighting impossible, profitless fights. They wanted him to take on Joe McCarthy, slap the oil powers down, kick Ike's tail, tell everybody who wasn't a red-hot to go to hell. Well, he'd learned a long time ago that just because you *told* a fellow to go to hell, he didn't necessarily have to go. The liberals just didn't understand the communists. Bill Fulbright and his bunch—the striped-pants boys over at the State Department; assorted outside red-hots, such as the goddamn Harvards—they thought you could *trust* the communists. They made the mistake of believing the Reds would

deal with you honorably when—in truth—the communists didn't respect anything but force. You had to fight fire with fire; let them know who had the biggest guns and the toughest hide and heart.

Where once he had argued the injustice of Vietnam's being viewed as "his" war, Lyndon Johnson now brought to it a proprietary attitude. This should have been among the early warnings that LBJ would increasingly resist less than victory, no matter his periodic bombing halts or conciliatory statements inviting peace, because once he took a thing personally, his pride and vanity and ego knew no bounds. Always a man to put his brand on everything (he wore monogrammed shirts, boots, cuff links; flew his private LBJ flag when in residence at the LBJ Ranch; saw to it that the names of Lynda Bird Johnson and Luci Baines Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson—not Claudia, as she had been named—had the magic LBJ; he even named a dog Little Beagle Johnson), he now personalized and internalized the war. Troops became "my" boys; those were "my" helicopters; it was "my" pilots he prayed might return from their bombing missions as he paid nocturnal calls to the White House situation room to learn the latest news from the battlefields; Walt Rostow became "my" intellectual because he was hawkish on LBJ's war.

His machismo was mixed up in it now, his manhood. After a Cabinet meeting in 1967 several staff aides and at least one Cabinet member—Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior—remained behind for informal discussions. Soon LBJ was waving his arms and fulminating about his war. Who the hell was Ho Chi Minh, anyway, that he thought he could push America around? Then the President of the United States did an astonishing thing: He unzipped his trousers, dangled a given appendage, and asked his shocked associates, "Has Ho Chi Minh got anything like that?"

By mid-1966 he had cooled toward many of his experts: not because they'd been wrong in their original optimistic calculations, no, so much as that some of them had recanted and now rejected *his*



This photograph shows the anguish and exhaustion of a president worn down by a seemingly endless war and the chants of protesters: "Hey hey LBJ/How many kids did you kill today?" Johnson moaned: "The only difference between the Kennedy assassination and mine is that I am alive and it is more torturous." (LBJ Library Photo by Jack Kightlinger)

war. This Lyndon Johnson could not forgive; they'd cut and run on him. Nobody had deserted Roosevelt—he gloomed—when FDR had been fighting Hitler. McGeorge Bundy, deserting to head the Ford Foundation, was no longer the brilliant statesman but merely "a smart kid, that's all." Bill Moyers, quitting to become editor of *Newsday* and once almost a surrogate son to the President, suddenly became "a little puppy I rescued from sacking groceries"—a reference to a part-time job Moyers held while a high school student in the long ago. George Ball, too, was leaving? Well, George had always

been a chronic bellyacher. When Defense Secretary McNamara doubted too openly (stories of his anguish leaked to the newspapers), he found it difficult to claim the President's time; ultimately he rudely was shuttled to the World Bank. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, privately having second thoughts, was not welcomed back to high councils until he'd muffled his timid dissent and shamelessly flattered LBJ. Even then, Johnson didn't wholly accept his Vice President; Hubert, he said, wasn't a real man, he cried as easily as a woman, he didn't have the weight. When Lady Bird Johnson voiced doubts about the war, her husband growled that *of course* she had doubts; it was *like* a woman to be uncertain. *Has Ho Chi Minh got anything like that?*

Shortly after the Tet offensive began—during which Americans would be shocked when the Vietcong temporarily captured a wing of the American Embassy in Saigon—the President, at his press conference of February 2, 1968, made such patently false statements that even his most loyal friends and supporters were troubled. The sudden Tet offensive had been traumatic, convincing many Americans that our condition was desperate, if not doomed. For years the official line ran that the Vietcong could not hang on, would shrink by the attritions of battle and an ebbing of confidence in a hopeless cause. Stories were handed out that captured documents showed the enemy to be of low morale, underfed, ill-armed. The Vietcong could not survive superior American firepower; the kill ratio favored our side by 7 to 1, 8 to 1; more. These and other optimisms were repeated by the President, by General Westmoreland, by this ambassador and that fact-finding team. Now, however, it became apparent that the Vietcong had the capability to challenge even our main lair in Asia—and there to inflict serious damage as well as major embarrassments. It dawned on the nation that we were a long way from defanging those rice-paddy ragtags.

It was a time demanding utmost candor, and LBJ blew it. He took the ludicrous position that the Tet

offensive—which would be felt for weeks or months to come—had abysmally failed. Why, we'd known about it all along—had, indeed, been in possession of Hanoi's order of battle. Incredible. To believe the President, one also had to believe that American authorities had simply failed to act on this vital intelligence, had wittingly and willingly invited disaster. The President was scoffed at and ridiculed; perhaps the thoughtful got goose bumps in realizing how far Lyndon Johnson now lived from reality. If there was a beginning of the end—of Lyndon Johnson, of hopes of anything remotely resembling victory, of a general public innocence of official razzmatazz—then Tet, and that Looney Tunes press conference, had to be it.

Even the stubborn President knew it. His presidency was shot, his party ruined and in tatters; his credibility was gone; he could speak only at military bases, where security guaranteed his safety against the possibility of mobs pursuing him through the streets as he had often dreamed. The old nightmares were real now. Street dissidents long had been chanting their cruel "*Hey Hey LBJ/How many kids did you kill today?*"; Senator Eugene McCarthy soon would capture almost half the vote in the New Hampshire primary against the unpopular President. There was nothing to do but what he'd always sworn he would not do: quit.

On March 31, 1968, at the end of a televised speech ordering the end of attacks on North Vietnam in the hope of getting the enemy to the negotiating table, Johnson startled the nation by announcing: ". . . I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term. . . ."

"In the final months of his Presidency," a former White House aide, and Princeton professor, Eric Goldman, wrote, "Lyndon Johnson kept shifting in mood. At times he was bitter and petulant at his repudiation by the nation; at times philosophical,

almost serene, confidently awaiting the verdict of the future." The serenity always was temporary; he grew angry with Hubert Humphrey for attempting to disengage himself from the Johnson war policy and, consequently, refused to make more than a token show of support for him. He saw Richard Nixon win on a pledge of having "a secret plan" to end the war—which, it developed, he did not have. LBJ never forgave George McGovern for opposing "his" war and let the world know it by a lukewarm endorsement of the South Dakota senator in 1972 which pointedly was announced only to LBJ's little hometown weekly newspaper.

In his final White House thrashings—and in retirement—Lyndon Johnson complained of unfinished business he had wanted to complete: Vietnam peace talks; free the crew of the *Pueblo*; begin talks with the Russians on halting the arms race; send a man to the moon. But the war, the goddamned war, had ruined all that. The people hadn't rallied around him as they had around FDR and Woodrow Wilson and other wartime Presidents; he had been abandoned, by Congress, by Cabinet members, by old friends; no other President had tried so hard or suffered so much. He had a great capacity for self-pity and often indulged it, becoming reclusive and rarely issuing a public statement or making public appearances. Doris Kearns has said that she and others helping LBJ write his memoirs, *The Vantage Point*, would draft chapters and lay out the documentation—but even then Lyndon Johnson would say no, no, it wasn't like that; it was like *this*. And he would rattle on, waving his arms and attempting to justify himself, invoking the old absolutes, calling up memories of the Alamo, the Texas Rangers, the myths, and the legends. He never seemed to understand where or how he had gone wrong.

When President Nixon assumed command of the war, he seemed to take up where Johnson left off. Like his predecessors, Nixon worried about "American credibility," about what would happen to American prestige if the United

States sold out its South Vietnamese ally, and in 1970 he sent American troops into contiguous Cambodia to exterminate Communist hideouts there. The Cambodian invasion brought antiwar protest to a tragic climax, as Ohio national guard troops opened fire on protesting students at Kent State University and killed four of them. With the campuses in turmoil and the country divided and adrift, Nixon gradually disengaged American ground troops in Vietnam and sought détente with both Russia and China.

Although the Nixon administration continued to speak of "peace with honor" in Indochina, and although it continued to bomb Hanoi, it was clear nevertheless that American involvement in the Vietnamese civil war was a tragic and costly mistake. Indeed, the signs were unmistakable that the original premise for American intervention in Indochina was erroneous. The domino theory, based as it was on the assumption of a worldwide monolithic Communist conspiracy directed by Moscow, appeared more and more implausible. For one thing, China and Russia developed an intense and bitter ideological feud that sharply divided the Communist world, and they almost went to war over their disputed boundary. The Sino-Soviet split exploded the notion of a Communist monolith out for world dominion, and so did the fierce independence of North Vietnam itself. Although Hanoi continued to receive aid from both Russia and China, North Vietnam apparently never asked China to intervene in the struggle (and apparently China never offered to do so). The truth was that North Vietnam was fighting to unite the country under Hanoi's leadership rather than under Beijing's or Moscow's.

At last, in top-secret negotiations in Paris, United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho worked out a peace agreement. Eventually, the United States removed its combat forces, and in 1975 South Vietnam's regime fell to the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front. After almost two decades of bitter civil war and the loss of more than 1 million lives, Vietnam was united under Hanoi's Communist government, something that would probably have happened without further violence had general elections been held in 1956, according to the Geneva agreements of two years before.