

with Johnson on the incomparably more dangerous and important issue of the war in Vietnam.

All during the 1964 presidential campaign, Johnson had ridiculed the pugnacious chauvinism of Barry Goldwater's war-hawk policy in Vietnam. In one speech he said, "There are those that say you ought to go North [across the 17th parallel into North Vietnam] and drop bombs to try to wipe out the supply lines. . . . We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys." And again, 12 days before the election: ". . . We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing to protect themselves."

The hard fact was that Johnson had simply not had time to educate himself fully on the collapsing state of affairs in South Vietnam. His look had been inward—to Congress, to the Great Society, to the election—not outward to a still small war in Southeast Asia. With one conspicuous exception in the pre-election period, Johnson left the war to McNamara and his field commander in Saigon, Gen. William Westmoreland. That exception was the President's prompt reaction to an attack by North Vietnamese gunboats on the United States destroyer *Maddox* on August 2 in the Gulf of Tonkin. The incident resulted in a swift presidential order to the Navy to double the United States patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin, to provide air cover and, in the event of new attacks, to retaliate immediately "with the objective not only of driving off the force but of destroying it."

On August 4, North Vietnamese gunboats struck again, and the President's order immediately came into play. Two enemy boats were believed to have been sunk. At 11:36 P.M. on that same night Johnson went on television to explain what had happened in the Tonkin Gulf and to announce that he had ordered a retaliatory air strike against the boat pens along the coast of North Vietnam.

The incident also provided Johnson with a perfect reason to exploit presidential power and go to Congress for a special resolution giving him clear congressional authority to use the Armed Forces just about as he wished in the Vietnam war. It was a shrewd political act, shoring up Johnson against the Republican campaign charge that he was "soft on Vietnam." Although rushed through Congress in just two days, with a combined Senate-House vote of 502 to 2, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was to become the President's partial justification for far greater United States military involvement in Vietnam.

When Johnson finally gave his full attention to Vietnam after the election, he soon learned that, starting in the summer and fall of 1964, organized battalions of North Vietnamese regulars had been marching down the Ho Chi Minh trail, running along the eastern border of Laos, into South Vietnam. Moreover the Viet Cong had graduated from hit-and-run guerrilla tactics and had recruited what were called Main Force units, composing a formidable regular army quite capable of taking on South Vietnamese troops.

Through that fall of 1964, Air Force generals, along with Defense Secretary McNamara and his staff, had studied aerial-reconnaissance photographs cov-

ering almost every inch of North Vietnam. President Johnson, too, pored over these blown-up photographs that pinpointed the location of every bridge, railroad, highway, ammunitions depot, barracks, petroleum storage tank, thermal power plant, and other potential targets of military significance north of the 17th parallel.

Laid out on the large Cabinet table in the White House, these amazingly precise photographs gave the President an accurate map of the entire country,

together with estimates of how many civilians lived within the blast pattern of bombs at the various targets, showing which targets could be bombed without killing civilians. Elaborate analyses were made of the probable number of civilian casualties if certain targets were struck—enough information to enable targets to be chosen with careful discrimination.

The President's advisers were pressing him for immediate bombing in the North, for both military and political

reasons; that is, both to make it more difficult for Ho Chi Minh to provide assistance to the Viet Cong, and to demonstrate to Saigon that the United States was standing behind its commitment.

But the President made no decision to bomb North Vietnam. Ever leery of advice from the military, Johnson was acutely aware of the danger of Chinese intervention in the war. He knew, too, that "going North" would immediately endanger his consensus at home, and his highest interest was still not the



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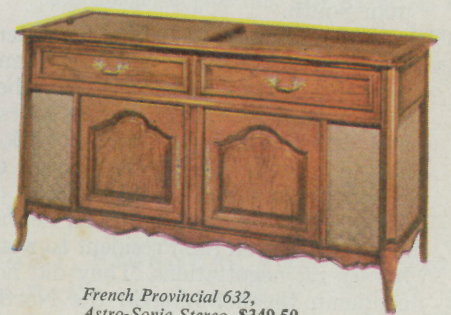
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guerrilla war in South Vietnam, but the Great Society legislative program. Then, on February 7, the United States Air Force barracks at Pleiku, in the Vietnamese highlands, were attacked by a Viet Cong raiding party with mortars and hand grenades. Eight Americans were killed and 126 wounded. Johnson displayed the same toughness and swift reaction to the Pleiku raid that he had displayed six months earlier in the Gulf of Tonkin.

McGeorge Bundy, the White House foreign-affairs adviser, was in Saigon at the time of the Pleiku raid. He joined Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and Gen. Westmoreland in telephoning a recommendation of instant retaliation. With McNamara and the Pentagon generals making the same recommendations in Washington, the President personally selected the first targets from hundreds of choices clearly marked on the large-scale map of North Vietnam pasted together from the reconnaissance photographs.

The bombers streamed North, and, from that moment, the war that had been impersonal, distant, and secondary became for Lyndon Johnson the consuming passion of his Presidency. It became, more than any war in the 20th century for any other President, Johnson's personal war; a war he had not started and could not end, a war that broke his consensus, alienated the liberal wing of his party, and threatened to undermine his higher purposes; a war fought without major allies, without front lines, and without the goal of total victory.

The purpose of the bombing was, primarily, to bolster confidence. The bombing program (code-named Rolling Thunder) stopped an alarming decline of morale in South Vietnam. And in other Asian capitals Rolling Thunder was impressive evidence that the United States meant to stay in Vietnam.

But Rolling Thunder did not close the Ho Chi Minh trail. The supplies poured South, partly by trucks, moving at night, mostly on the backs of Vietnamese coolies. As quickly as a strategic bridge was knocked out, a pontoon bypass was thrown over the river. The civilian economy of North Vietnam suffered, but war supplies continued to pour South.

With the onset of Rolling Thunder, the circle of Johnson's critics in the Senate quickly grew to include many besides mavericks such as Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening. More orthodox Senate liberals—George McGovern of South Dakota and Frank Church of Idaho—both made speeches on February 17 calling on the President to work harder for negotiations. They did not condemn the bombing in the North,

but by itself, they said, it would have little effect in compelling Hanoi to negotiate. The President must state publicly that negotiations were at the heart of his policy, and must continue to state and restate it.

Soon thereafter, misgivings about the Johnson policy were voiced publicly by other liberal Democratic senators from the Midwest—Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, Stephen Young of Ohio. Others,

attempting through The Treatment to outflank his critics. Presidential lobbying was not restricted to Congress. Outside groups representing business, labor, and other economic sectors were hustled in and out of the White House to hear the President explain and justify the war 10,000 miles away.

One day soon after the bombing started, Johnson talked to visitors in his office for an hour and a half about the restraint and patience he was show-

ing to the escalation as a woman might react to attempted seduction, by threatening to retaliate (a slap in the face, to continue the President's metaphor), the United States would have plenty of time to ease off the bombing. On the other hand, if the United States were to unleash an all-out, total assault on the North—rape rather than seduction—there could be no turning back and Chinese reaction might be instant and total. Johnson's language left nothing to the imagination and made an unforgettable image.

Despite his full use of the presidential power to influence, Johnson could not appease his critics. To the contrary, condemnation of the bombing in the North spread quickly to university campuses, where the anti-Vietnam war "teach-ins" suddenly took hold, to peace groups, and to zealous idealists in the civil-rights movement. On April 7, 1965, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Johnson made his most important speech to date on Vietnam. Hoping to satisfy the doves, he appealed for "unconditional discussions" with Hanoi.

But North Vietnam did not choose to negotiate. The war hardened, and in July, McNamara returned from a tour of Vietnam with the strong recommendation that, within a year, the U.S. force should be quadrupled from the 70,000 troops already there. Initial reinforcements, to be sent as soon as possible, should number about 50,000.

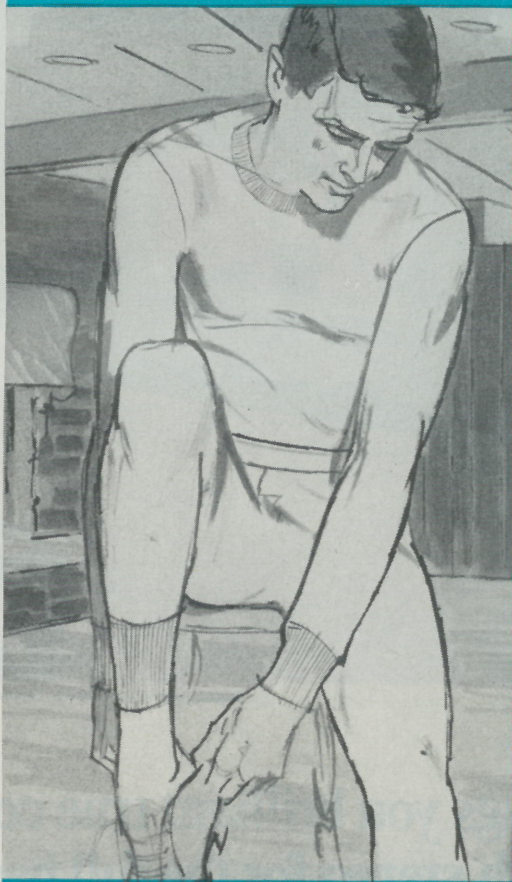
That was indeed a vast increase, not merely in the size but in the nature of the American commitment to Vietnam. But coming from McNamara, the formal recommendation carried special weight with Johnson. Although the peace bloc had picked up Wayne Morse's lead to brand McNamara as the arch warmonger, the truth was far different. McNamara, the President remarked privately one day in April, was more professor than industrialist, more intellectual than militarist. Hell, Johnson continued, he's not even among the top three hawks in my Administration. The President ranked McNamara behind Secretary of State Dean

Rusk, McGeorge Bundy and himself.

Even with McNamara's influence, none of the President's key advisers and policy-makers who gathered around the Cabinet table those long, hot days in late July viewed Johnson's decision on the McNamara recommendations as an open-and-shut case. Johnson never had been more authoritative, more restrained, or more in control of the debate than he was during that fateful week. He skillfully resolved the issue around the Cabinet table by shrewd questioning, while concealing his own decision. The questions he asked at the Cabinet table were funda-

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including the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, J.W. Fulbright, and Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania, were disturbed by the bombing but withheld public criticism for the time being.

To stem the rising protest, Johnson held elaborate briefing sessions in the White House for small groups of senators and representatives, at which the Vietnam high command—Rusk, McNamara, the CIA's Raborn, and, of course, the President himself—briefed them with maps and charts, and answered their questions. In these evening meetings, Johnson was superlative, exerting his charm and persuasion and

in Operation Rolling Thunder. "I won't let those Air Force generals bomb the smallest outhouse north of the 17th parallel without checking with me," he said. "The generals," he went on derisively, "know only two words—spend and bomb." But he, the President, not they, was running this war.

As for Communist China, he was watching every reaction. Employing a vivid sexual analogy, the President explained to friends and critics one day that the slow escalation of the air war in the North and the increasing pressure on Ho Chi Minh was seduction, not rape. If China should suddenly re-

mental: What are the risks in raising the level of the American military participation? What is the proof, or if no proof, what are the indications that it will work? If it doesn't work, what will have to follow? Are we absolutely sure that the South Vietnamese cannot do the job themselves?

The answer to all these questions pointed to Johnson's decision: Unhappy though the prospect was, American troops had to take over a major combat function of the war. The decision was a declaration of intent to win the war, not just to keep from losing it.

Early in the evening of July 27, Johnson called congressional leaders of both parties to the White House for an advance look at what he was going to say the next day. Assembled in the Cabinet Room were the most powerful leaders of the United States—with one exception. Vice President Humphrey had already gone to Minneapolis, to address the annual Governors Conference. His moving speech warned of grave sacrifices for thousands of American families whose sons must march off to war.

The President appealed to the congressional leaders for their support and spoke of the importance of a bipartisan front on Vietnam. Then he reached into his pocket and extracted a news-ticker story based on Humphrey's speech, which had not yet been delivered but which Humphrey had given to the press in advance. Johnson read Humphrey's rather emotional words and then administered a cutting rebuke to his Vice President for departing from the official line. That line was to underplay the new combat role of the U.S., but the White House had failed to so inform Humphrey, whose speech had earlier been approved by White House aides. The President's rebuke of his Vice President lasted only a moment or two, but this thoughtless insult to the Vice President in the presence of the White House staff, the Cabinet, and the congressional hierarchy made a chilling impression on those who heard it. Meanwhile, Humphrey was taking a telephone call from the White House. When he delivered his speech, the offending language had been deleted.

The Tuesday-night session at the White House had yet another surprise. Johnson normally held the floor at these briefing sessions, and then at the end asked for questions. This time, however, Sen. Mike Mansfield broke precedent. He pulled from his pocket a three-page typed statement and read it in full. For a decade Mansfield had become more and more skeptical about United States commitments to South Vietnam's changing governments, but as Senate Majority Leader he had suppressed his own criticism out of loyalty to the Administration. On this day in the privacy of the Cabinet Room, however, he read to the President his carefully prepared dissent. While promising Johnson to stand behind him publicly on the large reinforcements to be sent to Vietnam, Mansfield made it clear that he was privately opposed to the move—and to just about everything else the United States had done in Vietnam since the death of President Diem in 1963—and particularly to the bombing in the North. Johnson was not pleased by the interruption. "Well, Mike," the President asked the Majority Leader, "what would you do?" Mansfield had no reply. But his statement was a warning signal of the liberal

reaction to Lyndon Johnson's decision.

The President's nationally televised message to the country the next day, July 28, was low-keyed and undramatic—purposely scheduled for midday, not the evening, when the television audience would have been much greater. The timing of the speech, the subdued tone, and the decision not to call up the reserves all added up to the loss of another opportunity to galvanize the American people in support of the war. But cautious though it was, the television appearance was still the President's most effective declaration of American war aims up to that point.

After announcing an immediate initial dispatch of 50,000 troops, including the famous First Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the President used the occasion to try once again to explain why the United States was in Vietnam. He said:

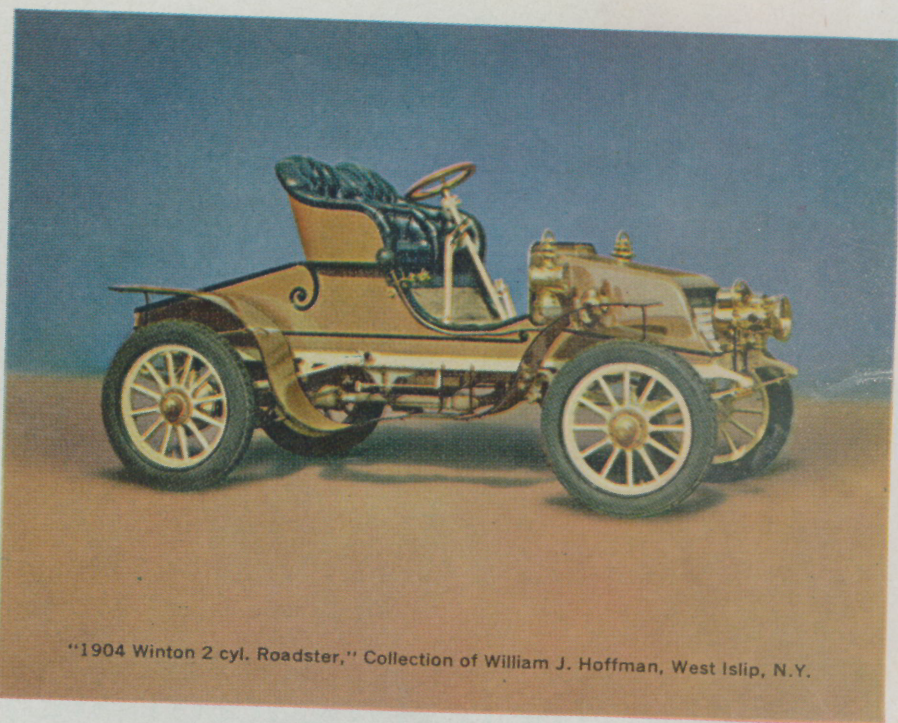
Most of the non-Communist nations of Asia cannot, by themselves and alone, resist the growing might and grasping ambition of Asian Communism. Our power, therefore, is a vital shield. If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise or in American protection. In each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened. And an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would imperil the security of the United States itself. . . .

Moreover, we are in Vietnam to fulfill one of the most solemn pledges of the American nation. Three Presidents—President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and your present President—over eleven years have committed themselves and have promised to help defend this small and valiant nation. . . . We cannot now dishonor our word or abandon our commitment.

Almost every night for the next five months Johnson stayed up past midnight to learn the results of major engagements between American forces and the Viet Cong, how many United States planes had been shot down and whether "my boys" had been rescued.

The bombing program in the North had now become routine, but still Johnson personally supervised the choice of targets. Each week McNamara formally asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a bombing plan for the ensuing seven days. The Joint Chiefs of Staff passed the request to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. The targets were laid out, described and located, with an estimate of the number of sorties required, and the program was then returned to the Joint Chiefs in Washington, thence to McNamara and his deputy, Cyrus Vance, and finally to the President. The President approved, disapproved, or changed the schedule.

But the bombing program obviously was not reducing the infiltration of regular battalions from the North. And the improvement on the battlegrounds of the South, though significant and necessary, was far from conclusive. Early in November the President received a proposal for a second bombing pause in the North. (The first, lasting for six days in the previous May, had produced no results.) Oddly, the proposal came not from the State Department, but in an exhaustive and unsolicited memorandum from the Defense Department, and it had the solidly responsible backing of Robert



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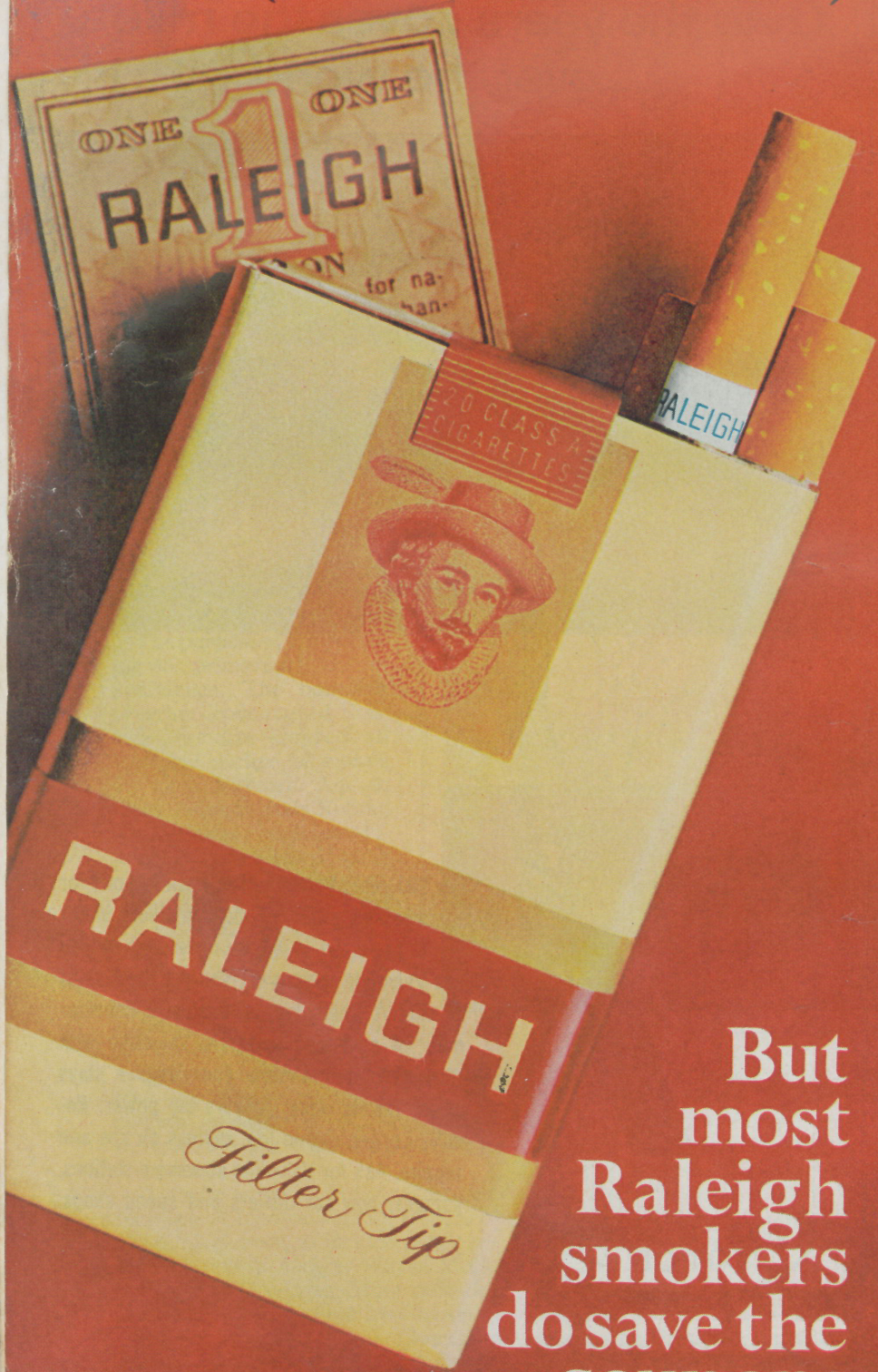
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THE EXERCISE OF POWER

McNamara. In December, during discussions at the LBJ Ranch, Johnson somewhat reluctantly agreed to go ahead with the pause. And once converted, he became the most enthusiastic exponent of the idea.

The cessation of bombing in the North was announced on December 24. On December 29, Johnson dispatched his emissaries—Averell Harriman to Warsaw, the Middle East, and on around the world; Arthur Goldberg to the Vatican; McGeorge Bundy to Canada; Thomas Mann to Mexico. All carried the same urgent message to the statesmen of the world: The President of the United States wanted them to help in making the bombing pause the prelude to negotiations and peace.

When it became apparent, however, that North Vietnam still would not negotiate, the President had to face the agonizing question of when to end the pause, and he took pains to make the country aware of his agony through leaked stories to the press. Calling the congressional leaders to the White House to discuss the resumption of bombing, he read several paragraphs from Bruce Catton's *Never Call Retreat* depicting Abraham Lincoln's lonely agony during the Civil War. Although Johnson told the congressional leaders he had been comforting himself at night by reading the famous Civil War historian, the very copy of the book he held in his hand had been sent to him only that day, with the pertinent passage marked, by a senator who wanted the President to know he had his sympathy. The senator was Robert F. Kennedy. Finally, on January 31, 1966, after a 39-day pause the President reluctantly ordered a resumption of the bombing.

When Johnson made his 1966 State of the Union Address, Congress and the nation expected hard talk about Vietnam. Instead, the speech was 36 minutes old before he began to discuss the subject ("Tonight the cup of peril is full in Vietnam"). Instead of emphasizing Vietnam, Johnson listed a long series of bills that he wanted passed—among them new attacks on air and water pollution, and new programs for urban redevelopment. He insisted: "I believe we can continue the Great Society while we fight in Vietnam." The former senator from Texas, who had criticized Harry Truman in 1950 for seeking guns and butter, was now doing precisely the same thing. In continuing to subordinate Vietnam to the Great Society, moreover, Johnson was refusing to issue a clear and compelling call to his countrymen to stand up straight beside him. Implicit in that refusal was his continuing conviction that the more dangerous threat to him lay not in peace-minded doves but in war-courting hawks. He deliberately avoided stirring up national fervor with an emotional appeal to the colors.

Johnson's new demand for legislation was a revealing display of the corruptive quality of presidential power, indicating how strongly he had come to believe that there are few, if any, limitations to what a President can do. Mesmerized by his historic and prodigious legislative harvests of 1964 and 1965, Johnson made an uncharacteristic overestimate of what Congress would accept in 1966. He failed to appreciate the

incipient rebellion on Capitol Hill in the late stages of the 1965 session.

One extenuating circumstance partially explained Johnson's lapse in judgment. On October 8, 1965, his gall bladder and a ureter stone were removed in surgery at Bethesda Naval Hospital. Despite the cheery official bulletins about the President's condition, this operation was no frolic for a man of 57. Exhausted and in constant pain following surgery, Johnson resisted efforts of his staff to impose the full burdens of the Presidency on him even before he left Bethesda. When a presidential assistant handed him a complicated memorandum calling for a detailed response, the President replied by scrawling on it with his felt-tip pen in inch-high letters: "I'M SICK." Even after he left Bethesda, and on into the early weeks of 1966, pain and fatigue continued to make this a period of low vitality and low activity for Johnson.

Thus, having misread the mood of Congress and having asked for far more than he could get, Johnson found himself, by virtue of his convalescence, unable to make the usual careful advance preparations for his overambitious program. For a politician of Johnson's innate caution, that was heresy.

But it was Vietnam, still Vietnam, that remained the core of all of his problems. If that "dirty little" war 10,000 miles away would only disappear, all of the President's lesser political afflictions—the revolt in Congress, the disappearing of the consensus, the curious joylessness pervading his Administration—would shrink. But Vietnam would not go away. Rather, it became the awful adversity of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency.

The cloakrooms of the Senate hummed with complaints and criticism concerning the President's Vietnam policy. What had started in 1964 with the two-man opposition of Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening now had mushroomed to perhaps half the 67 Democratic senators in 1966. Majority Leader Mike Mansfield himself was finding it increasingly difficult to harmonize his loyalty to the President with his desire for a soft line in Vietnam.

Sen. J. W. Fulbright, who had moved into conflict with the President since their rupture over the Dominican intervention, now launched an open attempt to force a change in Johnson's Vietnam policy by putting that policy on public trial. In effect, he intended to go over the President's head to the people, using the dramatic vehicle of public hearings. (One of his committee members said privately that if the investigation undermined the country's confidence in its President, that was a small price to pay for changing American policy in Vietnam.)

Johnson was, in fact, genuinely afraid that the televised hearings would generate a national tide of sentiment against continuing the war, but his two spokesmen, Dean Rusk and Maxwell Taylor, handled Fulbright with skill. The really worrisome result of the hearings was their effect on a serious-faced young man with a shock of bushy chestnut hair who sat listening in the rear of the Caucus Room: Sen. Robert F. Kennedy of New York, next to Johnson himself the most intriguing political figure in the nation.

From the moment of his election to the Senate in 1964, Bobby Kennedy

became the hope for the future to New Frontiersmen who counted the days to a Kennedy restoration. Kennedy had no desire to break openly with Johnson and lead a government-in-exile. But he did regard himself as preserver of John F. Kennedy's mystique and, a critic by nature, he began through 1965 to take issue here and there with Lyndon Johnson's Presidency, particularly his foreign policy. He was less than happy with the Dominican intervention. By calling for greater efforts to halt the threatened proliferation of nuclear weapons, he implied Johnson was not doing enough in the field of disarmament.

On Vietnam, he held similarly critical views of Johnson, but he had kept them to himself. Yet Bobby Kennedy was no man to remain quiet indefinitely on the great issue of the day. Sitting in on the Fulbright hearings, he came to the erroneous and, in hindsight, naïve conclusion that he could make a constructive suggestion which, even though a sharp departure from Johnson's Vietnam policy, would not lead to a personal split with Johnson.

At a press conference on February 19 Kennedy took pains to make it clear that he rejected United States withdrawal from Vietnam as "impossible for this country." But the heart of his statement was this: "We must reveal enough of our intentions to Hanoi to eliminate any reasonable fear that we ask them to talk only to demand surrender." That means, he went on, granting the Viet Cong "a share of the power and responsibility" under a new coalition government in Saigon.

The statement was widely regarded as Kennedy's long-expected public break with the Johnson Administration, which was adamantly opposed to giving the Viet Cong any power or responsibility in any coalition government. Democrats from one end of the country to the other began choosing sides between Johnson and Kennedy, though understanding only faintly the substance of the Washington debate that was to rage in the coming weeks over the desirability of a coalition government in Saigon. Kennedy's Vietnam stand put still another crack in what used to be Johnson's consensus, subtly diminishing a major source of his strength.

By Easter, Vietnam was becoming the malignant cancer of the Great Society. A bloody, insoluble dilemma, it infected all else in 1966. In frustration, Johnson turned to satire one night in May when he addressed a \$100-a-plate Democratic fund-raising dinner. Twenty seats down the head table from the President was J. W. Fulbright, uncrowned leader of the peace bloc, who had become increasingly biting and immoderate in his attacks on the "arrogance of power" displayed by Johnson and the United States in Vietnam.

The President began his talk that night by saying that he was "glad to be here among so many friends—and some members of the Foreign Relations Committee." Embarrassed laughter. "You can say one thing about those [Foreign Relations Committee] hearings," said the President, "but I don't think this is the place to say it." More embarrassment. In a political party so deeply split, the sarcasm was resented. Nor was there enthusiasm for the President's summons to all Democratic candidates that night to campaign on a policy of supporting his stand in Vietnam. It was, on the whole, a sour

night for everyone there, and it revealed how useless Johnson's old and tested political weapons were in dealing with the great crisis of Vietnam.

Throughout his long climb upward, Johnson's posture had always been deliberately and necessarily flexible. There was, first, his shifting constituency in Texas. Representing the barren hill country of poor farmers and small-town merchants still impoverished by the Depression, Johnson was Franklin Roosevelt's young protégé, a New Deal stalwart. Then, seeking the larger constituency of all of Texas—including the new Texas of oil and big money—Johnson became a labor-baiting, Southern-style freshman senator. And in the Senate, Johnson survived in two worlds: that of Senate Majority Leader, a national party spokesman, and that of a Texan who was never quite sure of survival in his home base. And finally, the emancipation from that Texas constituency to become Vice President, free now at last to be as liberal as necessary for his national constituency.

Up that long and tortuous path, his flexibility of ideology had been essential to his acquisition of power. He had magnified the pitifully small prerogatives of the Majority Leader's office and made that office, while he held it, one of the mightiest in the land. And as President he had stretched and refined to new dimensions the powers of an office inherently more powerful than any other in the world.

For the most part, the power of Lyndon Johnson had been well used for public purpose. His Senate had censured Joe McCarthy, passed the first civil-rights act since Reconstruction and subdued a brief but concentrated assault on the Supreme Court by the reactionaries. His Presidency had welded together a national consensus at a time of sorrow, tamed the Congress to produce a vast outpouring of legislation, and presided over an unprecedented economic prosperity.

But on the issue of Vietnam Johnson's flexibility, which had enabled him so long to endure and grow, was of no avail. It was, perhaps, a liability. Wayne Morse could draw from his rigid ideology the certitude that the United States *must* withdraw from Vietnam. Richard Russell could conclude from his own set of principles that the United States *must* increase its use of aerial power to win the war or withdraw. But for Johnson, the pragmatist and the compromiser, there were no axioms and no certitudes. He could not call upon the nation to wage holy war—nor to withdraw from the conflict. Torn between the need to hold the line against Communist aggression and fear of a general war, he had no complete answer. Perhaps that fact itself would turn out to be best for the nation. But the ideological flexibility that had always served him so well before, that had allowed him to move from one political milieu to another, and had brought him to the Presidency, could bring no great triumph now.

Never was there an unhappier warrior than the Commander-in-Chief in mid-1966. For the future and shape of Lyndon Baines Johnson's Presidency rested with events singularly intransigent, taking place 10,000 miles away, in a war that refused to respond to the mastery and exercise of presidential power. □

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