



Images of Inherited War

Three American Presidents
in Vietnam

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Lieutenant Colonel, USAF



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Foreword

The American experience in Vietnam casts a shadow that extends well into the present century. In fact, if one were to search for parallel context and present relevance in the history of this country's wars, Vietnam might offer the most compelling case. Such relevance becomes even more acute if one is interested in how American wars progress from one presidential administration to the next.

Inherited war is indeed the fate of three American presidencies in the Vietnam era, and the psychology of inheritance is the subject of this study. Lt Col William Hersch illuminates the importance of cognition in over a decade of conflict by projecting the personas of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon onto the war they inherited. In a word, Hersch's analysis boils down to image. Image conditions agenda, and agenda leads to outcome. While image is not everything, it is indeed central to the formulation of policy in the transition of embattled administrations. Thus, we should not be surprised to find elements of Camelot in Kennedy's war or Texas politics in Johnson's and even a little of Nixon's five o'clock shadow in the denouement of the conflict. In each case, cognitive forces that derive from baggage inherited from the previous administration, as well as the life experience of the incumbent, dominate structural and social factors in shaping the course of the war.

Images of Inherited War: Three American Presidents in Vietnam reflects thorough research, imaginative conceptualization, and an engaging literary style. These qualities garnered for it the 2011 First Command Financial Planning Prize for the best School of Advanced Air and Space Studies thesis in the field of leadership and ethics. Colonel Hersch not only sheds new light on the Vietnam conflict but also sets the stage for some hard thinking about contemporary American conflicts that became legacy for more than one president.



Stephen D. Chiabotti, PhD
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About the Author

Lt Col William Hersch is a B-1B instructor weapons system officer and completed this study as part of the graduation requirements for a master's degree in military philosophy from the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies at Maxwell AFB, Montgomery, Alabama. A graduate of Colorado State University with a degree in English literature, Colonel Hersch also holds a master's in business administration and is a graduate of Air Command and Staff College with a master's degree in military arts and sciences. Colonel Hersch is an Air University doctoral candidate pursuing a PhD in military strategy. He has accumulated nearly 2,000 flight hours in multiple aircraft and is a decorated veteran of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. He and his wife have a three-year-old son.

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Additional thanks are owed to Dr. James Kiras, Dr. Thomas Hughes, and the rest of the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies faculty for their empathetic ears and suggestions. Like any writer, I stood on a lot of shoulders. In particular, I leaned on the academic works of Dr. Jeffrey Kimball and Dr. Stephen Randolph for their excellent coverage of Pres. Richard Nixon during the Vietnam era. Dr. Randolph's early encouragement and advice also provided much-needed momentum. Michael Beschloss's recently released book on the Johnson tapes was also an excellent source. These authors supply the bedrock for any study of the presidents during the Vietnam era.

Most of all, however, I wish to thank my wife. In the end, what lies herein are just words, and during the course of my labor to tease out the right ones, she ran everything else, and it was through her that all of the *real work* was done.

Abstract

This study examines how cognitive forces shape grand wartime strategy across successive presidential administrations. By analyzing Vietnam through the lens of image and cognitive theory, the author attempts to answer the question, How did presidential image affect agendas and outcomes during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations? Specifically, the author examines the presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon through key decision points and policy shifts during the Vietnam War in an effort to unveil the substantial cognitive forces with which presidents must contend, and often counter, when they inherit war. It is the author's hope that revealing the confluence of images, agendas, and outcomes during the Vietnam War will make current and future decision makers more aware of the impact that cognitive forces have in shaping war's trajectory. Moreover, he hopes that by examining Vietnam through the lens of presidential image, a broader conceptualization of "war as inheritance" will emerge. Ultimately, this study may help minimize current and future cognitive pitfalls in the development and execution of grand strategy, particularly when policy makers face the daunting challenge of inherited war. It also establishes the foundation for a larger project that not only examines Vietnam more broadly but also analyzes how image and inheritance influenced grand strategy in Afghanistan.

Chapter 1

Introduction

After the brilliantly successful air campaign in Operation Desert Storm, Pres. George H. W. Bush exclaimed, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”¹ The same President Bush told the *New York Times* in 1992 that he hesitated to get involved in Bosnia because he did “not want to see the United States bogged down in any way into some guerrilla warfare. We’ve lived through that once already.”² After the Dayton Agreement that ended the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, President Clinton reflected on the resistance he encountered arguing for American peacekeepers, commenting that “everybody said, oh, it was going to be just like Vietnam. It was going to be a bloody quagmire, even though there was a peace agreement.”³ Within 19 days of the start of the air campaign in Operation Enduring Freedom, press reports and pundits circulated conjecture that the United States was risking another Vietnam. “It’s a flawed plan,” wrote William Kristol in the *Washington Post*, and on 31 October the *New York Times* headlined R. W. Apple Jr.’s article “Could Afghanistan Become Another Vietnam?”⁴ The second Bush administration’s aversion to any formal nation-building mission also stemmed from wanting to avoid the kind of dubious and protracted military missions and objectives that plagued Vietnam.⁵ Vietnam analogies so permeated the public discourse of the Afghanistan war that when Mazar-i-Sharif fell in November 2001 and US progress became apparent, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously joked with the press corps, “The suggestions that things had not gone well initially were uninformed. It looked like nothing was happening. Indeed, it looked like we were in a’—the Secretary paused so that the reporters could complete his sentence in unison—‘quagmire’” (emphasis in original).⁶

In February of 2009, during a National Security Council (NSC) review of potential options in Afghanistan, the Obama administration debated whether it should send more ground troops in support of Gen David McKiernan’s emerging counterinsurgency strategy. Richard Holbrooke brought the debate to an abrupt halt when he asserted that “history should not be forgotten,” referencing the same discussions President Johnson and his advisers had had over Vietnam 44 years earlier.⁷ “Ghosts,” Obama whispered into the “confused silence.”⁸ The Vietnam War has embedded itself deep within the American political and military psyche. Whether decision makers invoke Vietnam for points of caution or contrast, the war lingers. One of the central books for

Obama and his advisers in framing their agenda for the war in Afghanistan was Gordon M. Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster*, a candid assessment of presidential and institutional decision making during the Vietnam War.⁹ Vietnam's ghosts come in many shades. Some literary works, such as Lewis Sorley's *A Better War*, see the specters of failed political objectives that compromised valid military strategy and undercut victory. Others, like David Halberstam in *The Best and the Brightest*, point to a policy that was too smart for its own good, blaming arrogance and deception by the ruling elite for America's ill-fated slide to defeat. In *Dereliction of Duty*, H. R. McMaster laments that the "disaster in Vietnam was not the result of impersonal forces but [of] a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisers . . . and, above all, [the result of] the abdication of responsibility to the American people."¹⁰ Robert Pape calls the American civilian and military leadership's failure to pay sufficient attention "to the relationship between American military action and the *enemy's* goals [the] decisive error" in Vietnam (emphasis in original).¹¹

Undoubtedly, a litany of perspectives and nuances on Vietnam is refracted through history's prism. But no historical reflection, as George Kennan points out, can give us *the* answer: "The historian can never prove that a better comprehension of realities would have prevented any specific calamity or obviated any of the major human predicaments. He can only say that in the law of averages it should have helped."¹² History can tell us what might have been helpful or unhelpful, but it can't tell us, for certain, that if only the actors had done this or that, things would have turned out exactly as desired. Policy and war are sticky. Information is certainly never perfect, and strategy is rarely flawless.

Unlike baseball, there is no "perfect game." Then again, even in baseball, perfection is elusive—as fans and players discovered in June 2010 following the game between Detroit and Cleveland. After the game, consensus could not be reached on whether Detroit pitcher Armando Galarraga did in fact pitch the 21st perfect game in history after instant replay revealed that umpire Jim Joyce mistakenly called Cleveland's runner safe.¹³ The ultimate decision not to award Galarraga with a perfect game angered as many as it satisfied, demonstrating that "truth" is rarely without caveat. What this all means, really, is that not just politics but anything involving people is sticky. No matter the strength of conviction, there is no absolute truth, solution, or satisfaction. Otherwise, wars' problems would fold neatly in their boxes to be shelved. There would be no need to dredge up the past repeatedly, thinking that maybe, this time, if we hold them just right and shine the light just so, wars' confounding mysteries will finally give themselves up. If there were such absoluteness, we could just tally the wins and losses and get on with our lives. But

there isn't. There are only shades. And those shades of Vietnam still echo and rattle and haunt our halls of power. As alluded to in the opening of this paper, images of Vietnam ripple under the surface of current policy just as they have done for decades. The war is part of our national schema, which filters and shapes how we think about conflicts today and informs the how, where, and why of American foreign policy—as very well it should.

At the war's peak in 1968, more than 537,377 American servicemen were deployed to Vietnam, and by its end more than 58,000 troops had died.¹⁴ The United States spent nearly \$200 billion (\$660 billion in current US dollars) on Vietnam.¹⁵ In addition to the costs in men and material, Vietnam incurred great spiritual costs. Resentment, disillusionment, and even an occasional nationalistic amnesia have colored post-Vietnam America, spawned a wide body of literature, and burrowed into the minds of citizens, Soldiers, and decision makers.¹⁶ That Vietnam was such an inflective event means any analysis of the war is ripe with both opportunity and danger. Though no two wars are alike—and no claim is here made that Afghanistan is like Vietnam—contemporary lessons can most certainly be drawn from “America's longest war.” The danger comes in trying to uncover the *real* story and the *real* lessons. Politics and war are convoluted, and truth is elusive. How individuals image events initially may be very different from reality, and both image and reality evolve. For our part, we will accept that the true story and lessons change over time. Vietnam may well be frozen in the past, but it continues to live and evolve through history. As mentioned, countless books and documents exist on the Vietnam War; this paper neither makes any claim to encapsulate or do justice to them nor attempts to overthrow one school of thought for another. Instead, given the influence that Vietnam continues to exert, I thought it appropriate to shake the hornet's nest once again and see what flies out.

Despite the many contrasts between Vietnam and Afghanistan, one undeniably congruent aspect links both wars—each war spans several presidential administrations. Additionally, Vietnam and Afghanistan cost far more in money, people, and time than was ever initially intended, and presidents of both parties were forced to wrestle with these conflicts. Vietnam provides the opportunity to examine war as inheritance from the vantage point of history through a lens of our choosing. In so doing, we might find value for modern decision makers wrestling with their own inherited conflicts. Since Vietnam is today so embedded in our national political and military schema, with both decision makers and pundits drawing on their own images of the conflict, it is appropriate to examine how Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon themselves saw the war. How did each of these three Vietnam-era presidents' images of Vietnam shape their agendas and outcomes? What was pushed forward across

administrations, and how did each ascending president contend with the war's inertia and subsequently formulate his own image to represent the Vietnam problem? What might each president's image reveal about the meta-construct of containment strategy and the overarching tenets and "truths" of the Cold War? Most importantly, perhaps, and the central questions of this essay: *How did each president's image shape agendas, drive outcomes, and determine his successor's inheritance? What can decision makers today learn from this process?*

To that end, we examine primary and secondary sources, drawing out each president's image of the war, his agenda, and the outcomes of his approach. In the parlance of political science, we attempt to treat the Vietnam War as the dependent variable while presidential images and agendas serve as the independent variables. Though we draw on documents, literature, perspectives, and correspondences involving various actors, institutions, principals, and advisers, our units of analysis are the presidents themselves, who represent the aggregate of the foreign policy establishment. The presidents provide the lens through which we seek to ascertain the relationship among image, agenda, and outcomes in national decision making and the degree to which this relationship affects subsequent administrations. Today's battlespace may in fact swell with ever-increasing networks of machines, weaponry, and information and communication technologies, yet war remains a distinctly human affair. As such, the study of war not only leads to but also demands sober consideration of the cognitive forces that drive and shape it. By examining the relationship among image, agendas, and outcomes, current and future decision makers might better anticipate predispositions and minimize the degree to which predilections subvert policy and dissuade effective representation of problems. "We must be clear-sighted in beginnings," wrote Montaigne, "for, as in their budding we discern not the danger, so in their full growth we perceive not the remedy."¹⁷ War is seeded in image, so it is in image where we must look for our clearer beginnings. The following is the road map for this paper:

Chapter 2 establishes an overview of image theory. While it is not the purpose of this study to establish and subsequently prove a theoretical model for explaining presidential behavior and policy, it warrants a review of cognitive theory. Neither this study nor the theories it reviews purport to offer a comprehensive explanatory model for political behavior in war or in peace. However, since it is a purpose to inspire a keener awareness of the influences that cognitive forces have on decision making, some foundational concepts will prove useful. To that end, we explore Stephen Hawking's theory of model-dependent realism; cognitive theories from Robert Jervis, Yuen Foong Khong,

and others; as well as Kenneth E. Boulding's image theory. Cognitive processes in international decision making afford a wide body of literature. We review some of the more salient aspects as a way to present the Vietnam War as a "problem" both defined and "solved" through the belief structures of the presidents.

Though the United States had been involved in Vietnam throughout the Eisenhower administration, chapter 3 begins with an analysis of John F. Kennedy's administration. While Kennedy refrained from the overt commitment of US combat troops to Vietnam, he did greatly increase America's commitments there as he simultaneously pursued a grander vision. Kennedy pushed for broader, unconventional military capabilities, interpreting the new fronts of the Cold War as aligning with "wars of national liberation." Kennedy's approach to Vietnam, like that of all presidents of the era, was also very much informed by Cold War containment theory. Kennedy broached a new dimension, however, by departing from Eisenhower's policies of massive retaliation and sought a nimbler position through what became known as flexible response. Despite Kennedy's "triumph" in 1961, when he resisted pressures from the joint chiefs for combat troops, the young president did increase the number of US advisers from 400 to over 16,000. Additionally, his correspondence with South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, speeches, and policy papers reveal his increasing concerns over Vietnam and his sense of the growing importance of the country to US security interests. These facts, combined with the somewhat complicit nature of the United States' role in the coups and ultimate assassination of Diem in 1963, transformed US commitment from a toehold to a foothold. Vietnam became a "laboratory" not only for new theories on limited war and counterinsurgency but also for the emerging ideals of Kennedy's generation on governance and for the United States' role in the world. Ultimately, Kennedy's zeal set the United States on a course from which there was "no turning back."¹⁸

Chapter 4 examines how Pres. Lyndon Johnson tackled the issues he inherited. The assassination of Kennedy on the heels of Diem's murder left Johnson with some large shoes to fill. In his first speech to the nation, Johnson committed himself to the continuance of Kennedy's policies. The problem was that though Kennedy's policies had firmly planted US boots in Vietnam, the exact shape of the foot to fill them was still not decided. Like many of his political generation, Johnson was committed to protecting the world from Communism. Johnson was determined not to let Kennedy's and the Democrats' rise to power flail under his watch, and a successful Vietnam policy was critical. Losing Vietnam, in Johnson's words, would result in "a mean and destructive debate . . . that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage

our democracy.”¹⁹ Despite Johnson’s concern over losing Vietnam, the war was ultimately a distraction from his real “mistress,” the Great Society programs. And just like a man with multiple wives or a penchant for illicit liaisons, Johnson’s Vietnam policy was dubious, surreptitious, harried, and fraught with intrigue. Johnson was a deft politician, and his closed and even secretive leadership style contrasted sharply with Kennedy’s more open forum for debate. Johnson wrestled with the inheritance he desired—fulfilling Roosevelt’s New Deal legacy—and the inheritance he had, which was the United States’ commitment to Vietnam. The policy debates of 1964 and the ultimate decision in 1965 to send combat troops (and the manner in which it was conducted) provide ample insight into Johnson’s image and how his perceptions interacted with “reality.” By 1968 Johnson’s behind-the-scenes policy development was exposed, and he confronted overwhelming domestic forces. Johnson’s treatment of protestors and the disparity between how he had portrayed progress in Vietnam and how the public came to perceive the war there ultimately ended his presidency.

Chapter 5 explores how Pres. Richard Nixon’s images of the US role in Vietnam influenced how he led his administration. Before even taking office, Nixon sponsored a RAND study and strategic review of Vietnam. Convinced that Johnson’s undulating policies were weak and reflective of a poor understanding of the real international environment, Nixon ascended to office with the vision of aggressively and succinctly putting an end to Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger had a grand vision for rearranging the world and saw Vietnam as a springboard to make that vision a reality. Nixon’s ascendance to the presidency also represented yet another resurrection of his political career, and he simultaneously attempted to re-create himself while he redefined the war. Unable to suppress his obsession with “winning,” Nixon soon prosecuted a “savage policy” aimed at ending the war quickly. The disparity between “the New Nixon” and how he conducted the war exposed him to even more criticism than his predecessor, however, which he was never able to fully reconcile. Still, Nixon continued to pursue and eventually won his “bigger game” through *détente* and a vigorous air campaign that facilitated America’s withdrawal from the war. Nixon formed a new relationship with China and was the first US president to set foot in the Kremlin since the start of the Cold War. At home, however, Nixon attacked his critics and his rivals with the same ferocity thrown against North Vietnam, and ultimately his “honorable peace” is overshadowed by its brutal tactics.

The final chapter summarizes findings on the relationship between image and agendas and attempts to make general conclusions regarding the role that image played in each administration. It also explores broader implications

concerning the relationship among presidential image, war, and inheritance. The study of Vietnam as an inherited war may inform policy makers as they wage America's current wars; furthermore, the findings may also demand a re-evaluation of the inherited assumptions that led us to battle in the first place.

Notes

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

1. Lambeth, *Transformation of American Air Power*, 12.
2. Henriksen, *NATO's Gamble*, 73.
3. *Ibid.*, 85.
4. Woodward, *Bush at War*, 278–79. Apple wrote that “their role sounds suspiciously like that of the adviser sent to Vietnam in the early 1960s” and referenced the Soviet Union’s failures in Afghanistan despite “their good tanks in great numbers.” For additional press reports and questions, see *ibid.*, 262, 269, 283.
5. *Ibid.*, 41, 220, 310.
6. *Ibid.*, 313.
7. Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 97.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 79, 129–30, 254, 332. Goldstein derives six lessons from his analysis of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations between 1961 and 1965: (1) counselors advise but presidents decide, (2) never trust the bureaucracy to get it right, (3) politics is the enemy of strategy, (4) conviction without rigor is a strategy for disaster, (5) never deploy military means in pursuit of indeterminate ends, and (6) intervention is a presidential choice, not an inevitability. See Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*.
10. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 334.
11. Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 210.
12. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 90.
13. Walker, “Selig Won’t Overturn Call.”
14. Thomas and Barry, “Surprising Lessons of Vietnam,” 39. See also Kerry, “Beware the Revisionists,” 40.
15. Bowman, *World Almanac of the Vietnam War*, 358.
16. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 272–81.
17. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 29.
18. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 84, 106, 109–10.
19. Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 252–53.

Chapter 2

From Quarks to Cognition: An Overview of Image Theory

It is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience. . . . The convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office.

—Henry Kissinger, 1979

Wars are by nature inflective political, social, and psychological events and tend to hyperexcite both the polity and public. They exacerbate individual and organizational behaviors, processes, and predilections and the fissures and bonds within and among the various bodies of the democratic decision-making processes. This contention assumes that if war truly is “policy by other means,” then war is waged not just to solve policy problems. How it is conceived and conducted reflect a particular perception of the world. Subsequent chapters examine the administrations of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon not only to identify how each man’s image influenced his war policies but also to trace in part the lineage and effects of presidential image across administrations. Once in office each president faces a fundamental tension between institutional and policy inertia (what Stephen Randolph and others describe as the “state of play”) and his own agenda.¹ Inherited wars offer a unique opportunity to examine the nexus of these two sometimes countervailing and sometimes complementary forces.

There are two general schools of thought, or “lumps” as John Gaddis terms them, about the interplay between the individual and the institution in the formation of grand policy.² Some argue that inertia and events quickly overtake individual agendas and that structural forces inevitably dictate presidential decisions. Others believe that individuals can make a difference and that their perceptions drive outcomes. This paper’s position is that although the interplay between individuals and structure is iterative, individual perceptions matter. Therefore, while the structural state of play during the Vietnam era is covered, how individual perceptions influence events is the focus. As such, the analysis requires understanding key concepts from cognitive theory in foreign-policy decision making and clarifying what is meant by “presidential image.” To that end, we first look briefly at Stephen Hawking and Leonard

Mlodinow's theory of model-dependent realism to demonstrate how theoretical advances in modern physical science correlate to cognitive theories in international relations. We then review key literature of Robert Jervis, Yuen Khong, and others for background on cognitive and schema theory in foreign-policy decision making. Finally, we analyze Kenneth Boulding's image theory as his definitions are used to frame this paper's use of the concept of image. The purpose here is not to develop a new cognitive theory or model. Rather, this work draws on and summarizes major aspects of the existing literature to provide a lens through which to view cognitive influences on presidential agendas and outcomes.

Quantum Physics and Model-Dependent Realism

In their book *The Grand Design*, Hawking (theoretical physicist and cosmologist) and Mlodinow (physicist) draw on theoretical and proven concepts from quantum theory to establish what they describe as a theory of model-dependent realism. Quantum theory emerged in the 1920s as a reaction to the inability of classical Newtonian science to accurately explain and predict the behavior of atomic and subatomic particles.³ While Newtonian science proved quite efficient at predicting the movements of large bodies, scientists discovered that matter at the microlevel exhibited wavelike properties that existing scientific laws could not account for. Newtonian physics was "built on a framework reflecting everyday experience in which material objects have an individual existence, can be located at definite locations, follow definite paths, etc."⁴ In short, Newtonian physics ascribed to objects behaviors that had to comply with an objective set of laws and assumed that, once discovered, those laws afforded accurate predictions of the past, present, and future. Experimenting with and observing subatomic particles, however, demonstrated that matter can and does change its behavior in unpredictable and unforeseeable ways.⁵ The framework for quantum physics thus introduced "a completely different conceptual schema . . . in which an object's position, path, and even its past and future are not precisely determined."⁶

Two key principles emerge from quantum theory that inform Hawking and Mlodinow's concept of model-dependent realism, in turn correlating the physical sciences and cognitive theory. The first is the uncertainty principle, stating that "no matter how much information we obtain or how powerful our computing capabilities, the outcomes of physical processes cannot be predicted with certainty."⁷ The second principle comes from physicist John Wheeler's "delayed choice" experiment, proving that observing a system actually alters the course of that system.⁸ If a system's past, present, and future are

uncertain and if observation influences the course of a system, then a system “has not just one history, but every possible history.”⁹ Furthermore, as opposed to Newtonian physics in which theory derives from an objective reality, reality now becomes the effect of theory. Or as the two physicists posit, reality becomes a reflection of the model used to describe it. A significant consequence of their proposal is that the point of finding an objective “reality” becomes moot and that models have meaning only insofar as they are valuable to the user. Each model is also the product of an individual’s physical and cognitive processes so that usefulness is not a matter of accuracy but of function. As such, models will endure so long as they provide functionality for the user and are reflections of a particular reality. Hawking and Mlodinow further clarify that model-dependent realism

is based on the idea that our brains interpret the input from our sensory organs by making a model of the world. When such a model is successful at explaining events, we tend to attribute to it . . . the quality of reality or absolute truth. . . . But there may be different ways in which to model the same physical situation. . . . If two such models accurately predict the same events, one cannot be said to be more real than the other. . . . Our perception—and hence the observations on which our theories are based—is not direct, but is shaped by a kind of lens, the interpretive structure of our human brains.¹⁰

They explain that both physical and cognitive processes determine how the human brain creates models. During the vision process, for example, signals are transmitted along the optic nerve to the brain. These signals are incomplete and of poor quality due to the blind spot where the optic nerve attaches to the retina. The data is further obscured because the high fidelity of the human eye is limited to about one degree around the center of the retina.¹¹ The data the brain receives through the optic nerve is “like a badly pixilated picture with a hole in it.” To translate the incomplete and blurry data into useful information, the brain combines the data from both eyes and fills “in gaps on the assumption that the visual properties of neighboring locations are similar.”¹² Through a process of interpolation and assumption, the brain translates an incomplete array of two-dimensional data into a three-dimensional model of reality.¹³ Reality is thus created through the process by which the brain patterns data. The human brain invokes what it knows to fill in the gaps for what it cannot see. When the brain is confronted with data that grossly contradicts its own understanding of reality, it will even go so far as to align incoming data to correspond to preexisting and known patterns. As an example of this phenomenon, Hawking and Mlodinow describe how individuals were given eye-glasses that inverted incoming images so that the world appeared upside down. Over time, without having to remove the glasses, the test subjects’ own brains “righted” the world and countermanded the effects of the glasses.¹⁴

Dovetailing on quantum theory and the peculiar and sometimes ambiguous, paradoxical behavior of subatomic particles, they outline some of the key physiological aspects and limitations of the human brain. Through the concepts described in model-dependent realism, they also illuminate how the human brain collects, arranges, and even invents data to create a complete picture of reality. The reality that is created is necessarily model-based because that is how the human brain works. Cognitive theorists describe the belief structures that influence perceptions and decisions in foreign policy in much the same way that *The Grand Design* describes model-based realities. Sometimes referred to as long-term memory, belief structures exist as “mental models” whose architecture is comprised of “a network of linked nodes [of] conceptual information.”¹⁵ New information and stimuli received from the external world are processed through short-term memory and given meaning and context when the incoming stimuli are attached to the preexisting cognitive architecture—much like atoms bonding to a molecule.¹⁶ Belief structures fill in the gaps between individual information packets, and thus cognitive processes contextualize meaning and shape subsequent behavior.

Whether intended or not, Hawking and Mlodinow provide a bridge between the physical sciences and psychology and illustrate how theories in physical sciences have recognized the important influences of perceptions on individual realities and their effects on the physical world. Revolutions in quantum theory and the experiments they cite as proof of its efficacy not only demonstrate how perceptions and cognitive processes create individual realities but also illuminate how the application of perceptions (through observation) can affect the physical world. The relationship the authors establish between observer and reality provides a useful backdrop to the following discussion on cognitive theory because it demonstrates the quantifiable tie between the conceptual and the existential world. If through observation human beings can affect particle behavior, and if quantum theory reliably proves the existence of an infinite number of past and future universes limited only by the imaginings of the human mind, then turning to the perceptions of some of the world’s most powerful leaders as a way to understand a war is not only justifiable . . . but essential.

Schema, Analogies, and Problem Representation

Much has been written on the influence of cognitive forces on decision makers. Both Jervis and Khong have contributed tremendously to the literature and to the understanding of the role cognitive forces play in foreign policy. Khong’s analogical explanation framework draws extensively on schema theory and

brilliantly delineates how analogies influence policy decisions and provide critical cognitive devices to help policy makers perform six central decision-making tasks.¹⁷ Schema theory assumes that the “mind organizes and processes information around some type of internal perceptual or cognitive structure.”¹⁸ Schemas persist in the face of contradictory evidence, acting as “cognitive misers,” and are the “building blocks of cognition.”¹⁹ When North Korea invaded the South in 1950, for example, President Truman’s “cognitive structure” interpreted the North’s actions in light of other instances where the West failed to act against aggression, and the aggression continued. Khong observes that “Truman thus arrived at the axiom that aggression unchecked means general war later.”²⁰ A more recent example is found in the belief of Pres. George W. Bush’s administration that the Clinton administration’s retaliation for the 1998 embassy bombings was weak and invited future attacks: “The antiseptic notion of launching a cruise missile into some guy’s, you know, tent, really is a joke. . . . People viewed that as the impotent America.”²¹ Schemas are cognitive frameworks that tend to codify anticipations and influence how events are interpreted. Just as the schema of Newtonian physics inspired assumptions on the predictable behavior of matter, so do schemas in international policy offer predetermined departure points for how decision makers interpret and respond to particular events.

The significance of schemas as a departure point for decision makers should not be underestimated. When assumptions and predilections are effectively entrenched in the minds of leaders, the process of deciding how to deal with particular policy issues starts downstream of the assumptions embedded within the schema. Jervis describes how schemas are built around preconceived notions of “self” and “other” that lead decision makers to interpret events and behaviors as those preconceived notions would dictate.²² Expectations create a perceived reality where “ambiguous and even discrepant information” is assimilated to reinforce that reality.²³ The influences of predispositions on decision makers are particularly acute when events force a confrontation between a positive self-image and a negative or hostile other. During the Korean War, for example, the United States overlooked the fact that its actions on the peninsula could be interpreted as aggressive and threatening to China’s national security.²⁴ China responded in much the same way the United States would probably respond if the Chinese army were suddenly massed along the Canadian border, yet China’s actions were immediately interpreted as hostile. The United States’ positive self-image denied consideration of the possibility that its own actions could be perceived as contentious. The United States’ general foreign policy schema during the Cold War characterized America and its capitalist allies as “good” and the Soviets and their

Communist allies as “bad.” Interpretation of, and response to, behaviors and events started downstream of these general assumptions.

The Cold War era has many such examples. Graham Allison describes the Soviets’ decision to deploy SS-20 intermediate-range missiles that targeted Europe in the late 1970s as “the most fateful force posture decision of the Soviet government before its collapse.”²⁵ The SS-20 case is compelling because it demonstrates how the Soviet Union’s self-image muted consideration of the West’s perspective. Further, the United States’ reaction to the missiles shows how policy makers failed to understand the SS-20s as part of routine Soviet modernization. Allison describes America’s vehement response to the SS-20s as a product of “organizational repertoires and programs.”²⁶ In another instance, when Czechoslovakia consolidated under the Soviets in 1948, Washington interpreted the move as expansionist, despite having approved Soviet occupation in 1945 and the “elevation of an already dominant Czechoslovak Communist Party.”²⁷ By 1948 American perceptions of the Soviet Union had evolved from potential ally to a personification of a growing Communist threat. Such historical examples testify to the influence perceptions and schemas have on how policy makers interpret and react to events. Perhaps most importantly, schemas shift the starting point for problem representation downstream of the assumptions embedded within the schema. As such, event interpretations and policy decisions may emanate from a faulty or misaligned premise and start events down a path preordained not by objective factors but by subjective perceptions. In this way, perceptions effectively create their own reality.

Another way that policy makers build realities and fill in the gaps when confronted with major policy questions is by drawing on historical analogies. Khong examines how Johnson’s use of historical analogies (Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and Korea) influenced his 1965 decision to commit combat troops in Vietnam. He targets policy makers’ “use and misuse of history” through their cognitive processes.²⁸ Using key findings and theories from social-cognitive research, Khong establishes how decision makers use analogies because the similarities (real or imagined) between events simplify understanding of complex situations.²⁹ He also ascribes principles from schematic processing theory to President Johnson’s decision-making process. Through schematic processing, once an analogy is accessed, it “(1) allows the perceiver to go beyond the information given, (2) processes information ‘top-down,’ and (3) can lead to the phenomenon of perseverance.”³⁰

Similar to the way Hawking and Mlodinow describe how the brain fills in the gaps with known patterns during the vision process, analogies provide “knowledge structures” that help decision makers cope with enormous amounts

of ambiguous information.³¹ However, as both Khong and Jervis point out, the gaps are sometimes “a bridge too far,” and analogies are overstretched. To use a sports comparison, knowledge structures often “outkick their coverage,” and the results are overly “simplistic and mistaken [in their] interpretations of incoming stimuli.”³² According to Khong’s study, when Johnson confronts the 1965 decision to commit combat troops in Vietnam, he misuses the Korean War analogy and allows the assumptions of that analogy to influence his policy despite substantial contrary evidence.³³

Jervis attributes the decisions of Johnson and others to Max Weber’s maxim that it is “not ideas but material and ideal interests [that] govern men’s conduct.”³⁴ He further argues that no political theology based on interest can “explain interventions in countries such as Vietnam.” Vietnam makes sense, Jervis says, only if “decision-makers either place a high intrinsic value on seeing insignificant states remain non-communist or believe in the domino theory.”³⁵ Belief structures, schemas, and the images that constitute them move policy. Alexander George proposes that all political leaders have an “operational code” or “a set of assumptions about the world, formed early in one’s career, that tend to govern without much subsequent variation the way one responds to crises afterward.”³⁶ Building on George’s theories, John Gaddis extrapolates a set of “strategic” or “geopolitical codes” that he suggests define presidential “assumptions about American interests in the world, potential threats to them, and feasible responses that tend to be formed either before or just after an administration takes office.”³⁷ Between 1948 and 1975, the policy of containment was the overarching schema that moved US strategic decisions, and Gaddis argues that five distinct geopolitical codes, each one a variation of an overall containment strategy, define America’s grand strategy after World War II.³⁸

Security Schemas of the Vietnam Era

Gaddis divides each containment strategy into distinct eras that stretch from Truman to Carter. The first era, 1947–49, is characterized by George Kennan’s original strategy of containment that he describes in the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures and in his two essays “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” and “America and the Russian Future.”³⁹ The second era stems from tenets in the NSC’s policy paper no. 68 (NSC-68), reflecting the Korean War’s effects on American policy between 1950 and 1953.⁴⁰ Secretary of State Dean Acheson captured the theme of NSC-68 in a speech to the National War College in 1952: “What we are trying to do is to find ways in which our power as a nation may match our responsibilities as a nation. . . . The job before all of us today is to learn the ins and outs of power and policy so that our nation’s

intentions and the capacities to achieve these intentions may be brought into balance.”⁴¹ During the era of NSC-68, decision makers wrestled with how to effectively incorporate nuclear weapons into productive foreign policies. Reconciling the need to contain Communism with the threat of nuclear Armageddon proved difficult and expensive, and when Eisenhower took office, he initiated the “New Look” policy in an effort to satisfy both growing strategic initiatives and budgetary restraints.

The New Look under Eisenhower describes Gaddis’s third era of containment, between 1953 and 1961. Truman had been unable to develop a “clear strategy for deriving political benefits from . . . nuclear weapons,” and Eisenhower wanted to “regain the initiative.”⁴² Buoyed by technological breakthroughs yet challenged by their costs, the Eisenhower administration determined in 1953 that “the dependence that we are placing on new weapons would justify completely some reduction in conventional forces.”⁴³ Eisenhower was obsessed with not letting the means destroy the ends and believed Truman’s policy of retaliation equated to little more than a tit-for-tat strategy that could not be economically sustained. Eisenhower also felt that Truman’s policies forced the United States to be reactive instead of proactive. Thus, he advocated a more diverse policy that would draw on American technology and international partnerships to counterbalance, thwart, and deter Communist aggression. In his inaugural address, Eisenhower states that the “defense of freedom” is “indivisible” and that all people and continents (Communists excluded) are “equal” and could not be forgotten.⁴⁴ The central idea of Eisenhower’s New Look was that the United States could provide a technological umbrella for its partners that would make Soviet Communist aggression so costly that total war would become nearly impossible. A massive American nuclear arsenal, backed by the will to use it, would deter the Soviets. The arsenal would also facilitate an affordable strategic posture since it would alleviate large-scale deployments.

The United States and the West, from Eisenhower’s perspective, would develop asymmetric technological advantages and blend “nuclear deterrence, alliances, psychological warfare, covert action, and negotiations” that could in aggregate minimize costs and provide the security and time necessary for freedom to blossom in Communism’s stead. Despite Eisenhower’s metered economic policies, the New Look was certainly ambitious. In a letter to Winston Churchill, Eisenhower describes how every Communist advance was a three-fold loss for the West: where the West lost an ally, the Communists gained an ally, and Western prestige was compromised. That Eisenhower held such a broad, zero-sum view of the contest between East and West reveals the amount of faith he placed in the New Look’s umbrella. The New Look departed from

NSC-68 in that it intimately tied the defense of US interests to security policy instead of focusing just on “the repulsion of transitory threats.”⁴⁵ Eisenhower also conceptualized broader, albeit cheaper, means by which the United States could pursue its containment objectives. By 1959, however, events in Vietnam and elsewhere undermined the purported efficacies of Eisenhower’s New Look. Communism appeared on the march, and Kennedy entered office seeking a less binary containment strategy that was both more expansive and flexible. Kennedy desired to deter not only total war but all wars.⁴⁶

Where Eisenhower had sought asymmetry through technology, Kennedy turned containment strategy back toward a symmetrical approach that could better accommodate and match Communist nuclear capabilities as well as their conventional and unconventional capacities. As Kennedy’s presidential adviser Walt Rostow put it, “We have generally been at a disadvantage in crises, since the Communists command a more flexible set of tools for imposing strain on the Free World—and a greater freedom to use them. . . . We are often caught in circumstances where our only available riposte is so disproportionate to the immediate provocation that its use risks unwanted escalation or serious political costs. . . . We must seek, therefore, to expand our arsenal of limited overt and covert countermeasures.”⁴⁷ Kennedy wanted the ability to “act at all levels, ranging from diplomacy through covert action, guerrilla operations, conventional and nuclear war.”⁴⁸ Eisenhower’s administration did open up additional spigots for American power, pursuing both nuclear dominance and an assortment of unconventional and covert operations. But these efforts were always tempered by Eisenhower’s sense of economics and did not go far enough from Kennedy’s perspective. George Herring writes that “the exigencies of the nuclear age” revived the theory of limited war in the mid-twentieth century, marking a significant evolution in and departure from the “American way of war.”⁴⁹

Limited-war theorists such as Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling insisted that governments must limit political objectives and use military action as a way to communicate with the adversary. Military objectives were to “exact good behavior or . . . oblige discontinuance of mischief, not destroy the subject altogether.”⁵⁰ To facilitate the kind of proportionality and precision limited-war theory demanded, Kennedy relied on more expansive civilian controls and a broader array of military instruments. Eisenhower departed from Truman when he sought greater political utility from nuclear weapons. Kennedy, in turn, departed from Eisenhower when he attempted to wrest US political options out from under policies that were overly reliant on nuclear weapons—ushering in the policy of “flexible response.”

The flexible-response era, 1961 to 1969, manifested itself in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Though Kennedy and Johnson distinctly differed in how they pursued flexible-response strategies, the overarching assumptions of the policy were the same. In contrast to World War II paradigms, in which the military served as the “final arbiter of kings,” flexible response required that military force be woven into negotiations. Instead of seeking the adversary’s blanket capitulation, flexible response and limited war introduced an ebb and flow of military and nonmilitary actions whereby nonmilitary instruments of containment became “at least as important as their military counterparts.”⁵¹ A key aspect of flexible response was the tight civilian control over military action and the sometimes excruciatingly metered means by which military force was applied. Both Kennedy and Johnson believed that “force could be orchestrated in such a way as to communicate precise and specific signals.”⁵²

Such an orchestra required a high degree of calibration or fine-tuning in the types and uses of forces. On the one hand, Kennedy emphasized and intensified special forces and covert operations in Vietnam. Johnson, on the other hand, greatly expanded traditional military forces yet curtailed how they were used.⁵³ Whether one views flexible response as “purifying” military force by tying it so intimately to political objectives or sees it as corruptive and undermining military force, the fact remains that the advent of flexible response marks a distinct shift in the way policy makers pursued containment strategies. When Richard Nixon ascends to office in 1969, he again reorients containment strategy and initiates the era of *détente*.⁵⁴

Nixon ushered in a *détente* policy, marking a distinct shift in the relationships between the great powers during the Cold War. The conceptual roots of this new strategy came from Nixon and Kissinger’s belief that containment could be better served “based on a new combination of pressures and inducements that would, if successful, convince the Kremlin leaders that it was in their country’s interest to be ‘contained.’”⁵⁵ Nixon wanted to create an intersection of interests that would serve the purposes of containment as well as dampen the severity of Vietnam’s impact on American policies. Ironically, after having built his career as a staunch anti-Communist, Nixon decoupled (or at least greatly reduced) the tie between ideology and negotiations.

Where Kennedy and Johnson had prosecuted a flexible strategy based on means that could face down Communism on all fronts, Nixon made the interests themselves more flexible. His overtures to China and Russia were possible in large part because he was so well known as a Republican crusader against Communism, and he used this reputation as a bulwark against attacks from American hawks. At the same time, his more reasonable approach to relations with American adversaries appeased the more dovish coalitions. Kennedy

had reacted to the perceived rigidity of Eisenhower's policies, which he believed were too dependent on nuclear weapons, and Nixon reacted to the rigidity of Kennedy's policies, which he believed were too dependent on the transformation of America's adversaries. "No country," writes Kissinger, "can act wisely simultaneously in every part of the globe at every moment of time."⁵⁶ Unlike Kennedy and Johnson, Nixon did not automatically equate "democratic governance" with "good governance" and believed that the degree to which America could transform nations internally was limited.⁵⁷

Détente is discussed in more detail in chapter 4 as Nixon's containment strategy was an integral part of how he sought to reframe the Vietnam War. Nixon's détente strategy is also a key element in the paper's argument that he sought to cultivate and exploit others' perceptions of him to effect his agenda; those points are better reserved for the chapter dedicated to him. The containment strategies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson are introduced in greater depth here to provide the background for their world image and subsequent policies. Introducing the different containment strategies is instructive because they illustrate that within the metaconstruct, subcategories mirror images among presidential administrations.

Containment formed the basic security schema for each of the Vietnam-era presidents, yet the nuances and delineations between each substrategy (operational code) reflect the distinctive way in which each president pursued the same ends. Eisenhower was committed to reducing the costs of containment through technology yet broadened US commitments. Kennedy and Johnson sought to temper military means within specific political objectives, yet they both expanded the means by which the United States would pursue those objectives. Flexible-response strategies and the theory of limited war manifested themselves throughout the 1960s in the Dominican Republic, the Bay of Pigs, and elsewhere.⁵⁸ Still, even within the substrategy of flexible response that carried through both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, each president emphasized different means—with Johnson shifting toward a greater emphasis on ground troops and airpower in Vietnam. Nixon reconceived US interests and the threats to those interests, incorporating Moscow and Beijing into joint efforts for stability through détente. Where Kennedy and Johnson put Vietnam on the front line in the total war against Communism, Nixon moved Vietnam back into the interior lines of the Cold War.

For each administration during Gaddis's five geopolitical eras of containment, the primary objective remained combating Communism and transforming Communist behavior on the macroscale. Containment was the overarching schema, yet each Vietnam-era president perceived how to best effect containment differently and brought to Vietnam his respective image of

means and strategies. These contrasting images are reflected not only in shifts within containment strategy but also in how presidents viewed the adversary and allies and pursued their particular agendas in Vietnam. With a basic understanding of schema and some of the larger belief structures and strategic context of the Vietnam era, we turn now to the theory of image invoked in this paper.

Image

The Cold War was certainly dominated by powerful images and schemata. Perhaps due to the stakes of potential nuclear conflict and the sheer breadth and number of actors involved in the precarious balance between East and West, the Cold War was first and foremost a cognitive war.⁵⁹ The evolution of game theory and other literature during and after the Cold War reflects the emphasis decision makers placed on the iterative, psychological interactions between states.⁶⁰ According to Goldstein and John Freeman, international-relations models fall into three general categories: game theory, psychological theory, and quantitative-empirical theory.⁶¹ Despite the differences among the three categories, states conceive their strategies through two consistent initiatives: reciprocity and cooperation.⁶² Psychological theory emphasizes the role perceptions play in calculating strategies of reprisal and collaboration.

As such, psychological theory affords a more predominant role concerning the influence of individual images on how policy makers interpret, define, and behave in response to policy problems. Based on psychological theory, problems are defined through cognitive constructs and processes that determine a discrepancy between “the preferred state and the perceived current state.”⁶³ In this way, belief structures not only define the desired end state but also define the problem. Inherited war spans administrations and thus provides multiple opportunities for decision makers to represent and rerepresent both the war and the solutions to it.⁶⁴ Over time, policy makers must decide whether to (1) continue the present course, (2) change the basic course but make adjustments, (3) change course but not problem representations, (4) rerepresent the problem, or (5) reconsider fundamental goals.⁶⁵ Since belief structures vary from president to president according to the amalgam of their individual images, no two worldviews and no two perceptions of either a war or its solutions will be exactly the same. Additionally, when and how presidents decide whether to stay the course, change the course, or reconsider fundamental goals depend on their perceptions. If perceptions shape both how a war is defined and should be solved and derive from a worldview com-

prised of a collection of individual images, then understanding the makeup of image is necessary.

In 1957 Kenneth Boulding developed a theory of behavior based on an individual's image of the world. According to Boulding, image is created through an individual's accumulation of subjective knowledge. Individuals perceive themselves as located in a particular space and time; in a network of human relationships, organizations, and emotions; and in a "natural world" that operates according to a set of assumed and "reasonably" reliable operational laws.⁶⁶ Every locus of subjective knowledge also has layers and can be visualized as a series of concentric rings, expanding out from small to large. One's knowledge of his position in space, for example, might include seeing himself at his desk, in his office building, in downtown Manhattan, in New York City, in New York State, in America, on planet Earth, in the Milky Way Galaxy, and so forth. An individual's perceived locations in time and within organizations and human networks in the past are similarly layered.

People reflect upon a past as they remember it, project onto a future as they conceive it, and live in a present as they perceive it. The temporal aspect of image blends with one's identity within and one's perception of organizations and human networks. A doctor with children might concurrently consider herself a mother, a brain surgeon, a hospital employee, the member of a profession, and a wife. Comingled with the doctor's image are a litany of past experiences and affiliations as well as anticipations for the future, based on the different ways she identifies herself, the organizations she works for, and those she competes with and for. How individuals locate themselves and perceive the various human networks of which they are a part is exceptionally complex. Human interactions swirl around a continuously evolving image of self and other. Bounding conceptions of time, space, self, and human networks are sets of natural laws. These laws, either overt or tacit, provide boundaries and define sets of assumptions that build an architecture within which human beings are reasonably able to adapt behaviors and expectations. Gravity, thermodynamics, the progression of time, and the combustion engine all characterize natural laws upon which people generally rely to frame their reality and to conduct their everyday lives. Individuals' understanding of natural laws and the interpretative conclusions they draw from knowledge of their location in space, time, and human networks create a set of expectations. Individuals use these expectations to formulate a calculus of behavior that seeks to apply the aggregated knowledge set to their best advantage.⁶⁷

The disparity between expectations and outcomes can be small or large, but the existence of a gap is an important characteristic of image theory. Although Boulding asserts that image is comprised of knowledge, he purpose-

fully refrains from terming his hypothesis “a theory of knowledge.” “Knowledge,” says Boulding, “has an implication of validity, of truth. What I am talking about is what I believe to be true: my subjective knowledge.” Behavior is governed not necessarily by reality but by perception. Since perceived knowledge comprises image and since that knowledge affects behaviors, Boulding’s central proposition is that behavior depends on image.⁶⁸ Robert Jervis draws on this very concept in his study of perception in international politics when he argues that the real question is not whether a particular perception is correct but how perceptions translate information into decision and action.⁶⁹ Recall the anomalous behavior of subatomic particles encountered by early quantum physicists. Prior to quantum physics, expectations, scientific theories, and experiments were based on a reality perceived through Newtonian science. That scientists were not aware of some of the unique aspects of the atomic world did not mean that these aspects did not exist—quantum mechanics was just not yet a part of their existing image of reality: “The image is built up as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image [and] part of the image is the history of the image itself.” When individuals encounter stimuli that lie outside their experience, the image must account for them. How image accounts for new information forms the basis for Boulding’s second proposition—that the meaning of information (message) is the change it produces in the image.⁷⁰

An iterative relationship exists between image and the information it receives. Every experience, every piece of information, interacts with an existing image in one of three ways. First, the new information can be discarded. Much of what individuals perceive or encounter is in fact discarded as insignificant or “noise.” The human brain is capable of processing only so much information at a time and will filter out what is deemed unimportant or superfluous. Consider the amount of information that floods the senses every minute of every day. As Khong and Jervis demonstrate, this overload is also why analogies and predilections are so prevalent in decision making. Preconceived notions and comparisons provide cognitive shortcuts and a means by which policy makers can quickly understand, interpret, and react to floods of information. Images help decision makers make sense of the world. Just as the eyes and ears tend to ignore background noise or objects that they are not purposefully attuned to, image orients perception so that individuals are inclined to become aware of and latch onto reaffirming experiences and stimuli. Robert Billings describes “new information” as “any signal from the environment perceived by decision-makers after their most recent decision.”⁷¹ Like noise, disconfirming information may be discarded or overridden.

The second way that new information may interact with image is by adding to it: “New information may change the image in some rather regular and well-defined way that might be described as simple addition.”⁷² Information that is additive expands image but does not transform it. For example, an individual might understand that Mars is farther from the sun than the earth. After taking an astronomy class, she might discover that Mars is roughly 40 million miles farther from the sun than the earth. The astronomy student’s image of the solar system is subsequently refined with this knowledge, but her fundamental conception of the solar system remains unchanged. The student may also have learned that light travels at a set speed and that travel beyond the speed of light is not possible. Travel to Mars—relatively close in cosmic terms—would not be proscribed by such a limit, but travel to other suns or galaxies certainly would be. The student would thus have an understanding of the vast expansiveness of space and some of the natural laws that govern and limit humans’ mobility within it. If, however, scientists discovered a way to exceed the speed of light or uncovered a mode of travel that relied not on propulsion but on the actual bending of space so that object could be brought to the traveler rather than the traveler going to the object, then the student’s image of space would be transformed. Transformation is the third possible effect that new information can have on image.

Transformation is a “revolutionary change” to image whereby “a message hits some sort of nucleus or supporting structure . . . and the whole thing changes in a quite radical way.”⁷³ Transformation may completely alter how individuals perceive themselves in space, time, or an organization and can alter their understanding of natural laws. Thomas Kuhn’s description of paradigm shifts in science correlates to how images transform: “Large-scale paradigm destruction and major shifts . . . [are] generally preceded by a period of pronounced professional insecurity” as existing paradigms fail to solve an increasing number of important problems. Copernican astronomy and quantum physics both represent scientific paradigm shifts. Scientific instruments for astronomy did not radically change immediately following Copernicus’s new paradigm, yet what astronomers discovered and how they viewed the universe did. Kuhn also reflects that “the very ease and rapidity with which astronomers saw new things when looking at old objects with old instruments may make us wish to say that, after Copernicus, astronomers lived in a different world.” Kuhn also identifies the “gestalt switch,” a sudden or rapid transformation of the way individuals perceive the world wherein they may “pick up the other end of the stick.”⁷⁴ Image transformation and reorganization are dramatic because images tend to be extremely resistant to change. Barring an obvious

experience that blatantly and comprehensively contradicts image, such as the sudden arrival of aliens, images tend to require a fair amount of convincing.

Boulding notes that “when [an image] receives messages that conflict with it, its first impulse is to reject them as in some sense untrue.”⁷⁵ Jervis describes this phenomenon as *premature cognitive closure*, where “actors are more apt to err on the side of being too wedded to an established view and too quick to reject discrepant information than to make the opposite error of too quickly altering their theories.”⁷⁶ While such resistance to change often marries decision makers to predetermined courses of action, it also provides a stabilizing effect. If every piece of disconfirming information caused a sudden abandonment of image, there could be no order, predictability, or consistency, and policies would oscillate chaotically. Additionally, against the backdrop of assumptions and expectations, anomalies are starker and more readily identifiable. However, a multitude of variables affects how anomalies are handled. Personal investments in past decisions, varying degrees of certainty, fear of being wrong, and the strong desire for particular outcomes are just some factors that can cause individuals to overcommit to existing images.⁷⁷ Thus, images of “fact” must contend with images of “value.”⁷⁸

Boulding points out that how images locate objects “at a certain point in space and time” clearly differs from how images assign value. Imagining Tucson in Arizona, for instance, is different than imagining Tucson as a “good place to live.” Images of value are “concerned with the *rating* of the various parts of our image of the world, according to some scale of betterness [*sic*] or worse-ness” (emphasis in original), and these “scales of valuation” depend on context, experience, and outcomes of particular actions. Value scales are “the most important single element in determining the effect” information has on image and subsequent behaviors. The value placed on a particular belief or perception directly relates to the degree of resistance that perception exhibits toward disconfirming information and/or behavior contrary to that perception. For example, a person of average Christian faith might renounce the existence of God if a gun were held to his head and he were ordered to do so. A more devout Christian, however, might refuse, even if it meant a shot to the head, because his valuing of biblical teachings and of the afterlife is higher than the value placed on his current life. Conceptions of human networks, organizations, and one’s place in them are particularly sensitive to value scales because relationships and allegiances can be exceptionally dynamic. Even the senses, argues Boulding, mediate incoming information through a certain value system that translates raw data into what the brain “knows” to be true: “When an object apparently increases in size on the retina of the eye, we interpret this not as an increase in size but as movement. . . . We consistently

and persistently disbelieve the plain evidence of our senses.”⁷⁹ As previously noted, Hawking and Mlodinow echo Boulding’s descriptions of how the brain translates sensory data.

Context-dependent and dynamic value systems imply that “there are no such things as facts” for individuals or organizations; instead, perceived realities are adjusted to match individual valuation scales.⁸⁰ It is true that individuals, groups, or organizations may share values that result in a common “public” or group image of the world. Human beings are differentiated from the rest of the animal kingdom, however, by their ability to organize information into large, complex images and their capacity for self-reflection and abstract thought.⁸¹ As such, human beings continuously “initiate and receive messages themselves” and internalize the valuation process.⁸² Therefore, while a group may have the proclivity to imagine a certain way due to peer pressures or organizational norms, it is the aggregation of individual valuation processes and individual images that facilitate the group image. The interaction between individual and group image is an important aspect of the political process as described by Boulding’s theory.

Boulding describes political decision making as “a process of mutual modification of images through the processes of feedback and communication.” Political leaders, such as presidents, retain a powerful role in the political process because of the “number of people affected and the magnitude of the effect when decisions are made.” Like any other individual, a president’s worldview is woven from his accumulated experiences and subjective perceptions. Images of self, others, values, time, space, society, and the organizations he presides over all formulate a presidential world image, which he then invokes when setting agendas and making decisions. In democracies, presidential authority comes from below, so while presidents decide, they can do so only after an iterative discussion process that theoretically includes everyone from the woman on the street to the man in the White House. Successful decision making in democracies, therefore, “must exhibit a degree of convergence toward common images of the whole organization,” where the organization includes governmental institutions and the society they represent.⁸³ From his vantage point, a president may be able to change or shape common organizational images. However, whether common organizational images are of his own making or external to his manipulations, he is always accountable to them.

The interaction of two key processes affects the dynamics between presidents and the societies they symbolize: “The first is the process whereby political images are created and distributed [and the] second is the process whereby specialized skills and knowledge are distributed among the people of the society,” according to Boulding. Individuals within a society form political images of leaders,

policies, and world events based in large part upon the source of their information. This does not mean, as some more contemporary information theories posit, that political images are simple reflections of different media outlets. Individual experiences, backgrounds, histories, skill sets, and relationships all affect political image. That politicians can “get the message out” and distribute their brand is true, but political images are a subset of the larger world image, which “is the great interleaving variable between incoming and outgoing information.”⁸⁴ So both message distribution and the individual interpretations of those messages help form political images. Presidents, therefore, must account for the perceptions of the organization they represent and be mindful of the congruency between how their images are projected and perceived.

In large part, Americans view the president as serving a particular role. Images of the role of the president derive partly from the Constitution, partly from history, and partly from the performance and perceptions of those who occupied the office. The role of president is “the center of a complex network of communications both in and out, part of which each occupant . . . inherits and a part of which he creates for himself,” states Boulding. Just as the organization assumes an image of the presidential office and of the man who inhabits it, each president has brought to his station his own images of the office, of himself, and of what he might accomplish through his office, based on a particular view of the world. Symbolic images permeate the political world, and the presidency has been as much an American symbol as it has been a protector and purveyor of symbols. Acting on their individual images, presidents have sought to bridge the gap between the world they preferred and the world they perceived. If, under presidential direction, the Eagle has not flown in search of monsters to destroy, it certainly has sought out its share of Bears and Dragons. By viewing presidential pursuits in war through the lens of image, not only may understanding of the Vietnam War sharpen but also America’s perceptions of itself and of the world. Although there is some truth to the notion that nations are “the creation of their historians . . . who give rise both to the image of the present and the future,” it is perhaps truer that the “shared experience of danger [has] more than anything else created the national spirit.” Nations, then, are not the creation of their historians “but of their enemies.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the correlation between physical sciences and cognitive theory and explored how schemata and belief structure influence decision-making processes. It examined containment theory as an overarching security schema that pervaded the Vietnam era, yet the chapter also revealed that

each president effected that strategy differently, as described by Gaddis's five eras of geopolitical codes. Boulding's image theory was elucidated to demonstrate how image applies in the political process. According to Boulding, image is a summation of subjective perceptions that attempt to locate self, others, beliefs, and organizations along a dynamic value scale punctuated by temporal and geographic factors and in accordance with "reliable" natural laws. Such laws themselves may be subjective and unpredictable. Image is determined through an iterative information process in which the history of the image interacts with incoming messages and reconciles them with the existing image. Information has meaning only to the degree that it results in a change to the image. Information may be discarded, additive, or transformative, but images are resistant to change and often discard or dampen disconfirming information. Through this iterative process, image builds upon itself and continuously recreates "reality," constantly balancing between forcing information to fit into the image and adjusting the image to fit and adapt to external conditions.

Limitations in the processing capacity and physiology of the human brain lend to individuals developing analogies and belief structures. Invoking such strategies allows decision makers to make sense of a complex world. The brain naturally and necessarily patterns information and fills in the gaps. This occurrence is illustrated by the sensory processes that Hawking and Mlodinow as well as Boulding describe and in the cognitive processes that Khong, Jervis, and others portray. The strong correlation between the physical sciences and cognitive theory, using elements from quantum physics as well as from Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions, lends credence to the idea that perceptions have tangible effects on the physical world. Schema and existing physiological and psychological patterns are significant because they often act as departure points in decision making. When presidents inherit war, they not only pick up fighting the war at a point downstream of their predecessors but also must contend with policies and organizational momentum spawned from the schematic premises of their predecessors. How far back presidential heirs reach to evaluate their predecessors' assumptions affects how the new president represents the war and how he develops solutions to it. Additionally, each president has his own set of assumptions that affects how he defines and represents the war. The confluence of both the momentum spurred by his predecessor and his own subjective starting point based on his own presidential image dictates the architecture upon which he builds his own war policies. Presidential image, then, is both sire and heir to war policy in Vietnam.

Arthur Schlesinger asserts that the "American system of self-governance . . . comes to focus in the presidency" and that "the turmoil perennially swirling around the White House illuminates the heart of the American democracy."

Woodrow Wilson called the presidency the “vital place of action in the system,” and Schlesinger posits that the “executive branch alone is capable” of taking the initiative required to break the tendency of the American system toward “inertia and stalemate.”⁸⁶ Presidential image plays a central role in American politics. Image shapes presidential agendas, affects decisions, and provides both motive and opportunity for potentially the most proactive and influential branch of the US government. Given the power of perceptions and the outcomes they shape in the physical world, while image is not the only lens, it is at the very least a meaningful and useful one—particularly when examining the phenomenon of inheriting war.

Notes

1. Dr. Stephen Randolph, professor, National Defense University, Washington, DC, to the author, e-mail, 30 November 2010.

2. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, vii–viii. Gaddis characterizes historians as either “lumpers” or “splitters.” His portrayal is adapted here to show the general—albeit overly simplified—division between individualists and structuralists.

3. Hawking and Mlodinow, *Grand Design*, 50–60. Quantum physics—also referred to as quantum mechanics or quantum theory—emerged in the 1920s coincident with the scientific exploration, observation, and manipulation of atomic and subatomic particles. Traditional Newtonian science was unable to dependably explain or predict the behavior of subatomic particles. Two discoveries of particle behavior were of central significance. First, observation influenced particle behavior. Second, particles existed in multiple states simultaneously. In concert, they defied the objective reality and prescriptions of Newtonian science. Major contributors to the field include Erwin Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, Max Planck, and Richard Feynman. For more reading on quantum physics, see Alastair I. M. Rae, *Quantum Mechanics* (New York: Taylor Francis Group, 2002); Kenneth W. Ford, *The Quantum World: Quantum Physics for Everyone* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and James Gleick, *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).

4. Hawking and Mlodinow, *Grand Design*, 622–24.

5. *Ibid.*, 585–602. Austrian physicists in 1999 demonstrated how alternately firing molecules at two slits in a barrier proved that matter behaved differently depending on whether one or both slits were open. (This “two-slit experiment” was originally performed with light waves in the 1930s.) Newtonian physics would dictate that the same number of molecules would flow through each slit whether or not the other slit was open or blocked. However, scientists found that the number of molecules flowing through each slit would change when the other slit was open. It appeared as if the molecules were “choosing” an alternate path, contradicting Newtonian assumptions that matter behaves in accordance with natural mandates.

6. *Ibid.*, 625–29.

7. *Ibid.*, 665–72. The uncertainty principle was first formulated by Werner Heisenberg in 1926. Heisenberg tells us that “there are limits to our ability to simultaneously measure certain data, such as position and velocity” (*ibid.*, 666).

8. *Ibid.*, 806–15.

9. *Ibid.*, 56–62.

10. Ibid., 60–65, 450–52.
11. Ibid., 453–54. High resolution is limited to an area of about 1 degree around the center of the human retina.
12. Ibid., 454, 457–58.
13. Ibid., 459.
14. Ibid., 458–61.
15. Taber, “Interpretation of Foreign Policy Events,” 31.
16. Ibid., 31, 33–34.
17. Khong, *Analogies at War*, 9–10. Khong adds that “analogies (1) help define the nature of the situation confronting the policymaker; (2) help assess the stakes; and (3) provide prescriptions. They help evaluate alternative options by (4) predicting their chances of success; (5) evaluating their moral rightness; and (6) warning about dangers associated with the options” (ibid., 10).
18. Ibid., 42–43, as adapted from Markus and Zajonc, “Cognitive Perspective,” 143, 201.
19. Khong, *Analogies at War*, 25, 27, as adapted from Rumelhart, “Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition,” 33–34.
20. Khong, *Analogies at War*, 26.
21. Woodward, *Bush at War*, 38. President Bush as quoted during an interview with Bob Woodward.
22. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 68.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 72–73.
25. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 184–85.
26. Ibid., 185.
27. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 73–74.
28. Khong, *Analogies at War*, 255.
29. Ibid., 13–14. For summaries of the cognitive psychological research experiments and theories that Khong draws on, see Markus and Zajonc, “Cognitive Perspective”; and Vosniadou and Ortony, *Similarity and Analogical Reasoning*.
30. Khong, *Analogies at War*, 14.
31. Ibid., 13.
32. Ibid., 14. The notion of knowledge structures “outkicking their coverage” is this author’s own, but it is consistent with what Khong describes as “the phenomenon of perseverance” (ibid.). Jervis describes the theory of “cognitive consistency” in which “belief structures tend toward consistency or balance.” According to Jervis, rational consistency does not imply that interpretations and subsequent behaviors accurately reflect reality but that interpretations and behaviors are consistent with existing belief structures. See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 117–21; and Verba, “Assumptions of Rationality and Non-rationality,” 94.
33. Ball, “How Valid Are the Assumptions?,” 36.
34. Weber, Gerth, and Mills, *From Max Weber*, 280.
35. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 9.
36. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, viii, as adapted from George, “Case Studies and Theory Development,” 43–68.
37. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, ix.
38. Ibid. Gaddis characterizes these codes as (1) George Kennan’s original strategy of containment implemented by the Truman administration, 1947–49; (2) the assumptions surrounding NSC-68 following the Korean War, 1950–53; (3) the “New Look” of the Eisenhower-Dulles administration, 1953–61; (4) the era of “flexible response” in the Kennedy-Johnson administrations,

1961–69; and (5) the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of détente, 1970–79 (ibid.). Gaddis compares the five geopolitical codes to delineate patterns in US grand strategy. This paper draws on Gaddis's structural divisions of US grand strategy into eras of containment to help define the larger Cold War context within which each Vietnam-era president imagined and tried to solve the Vietnam War.

39. Ibid., ix, 24–27, 54, 64, 69. Kennan coined the term *containment* and postulated two fundamental objectives in foreign policy: (1) “to protect the security of the nation, by which is meant the continued ability of this country to pursue the development of its internal life without serious interference, or threat of interference, from foreign powers”; and (2) “to advance the welfare of its people, by promoting a world order in which this nation can make the maximum contribution to the peaceful and orderly development of other nations and derive maximum benefit from their experiences and abilities” (ibid., 26). Kennan was adamant that “complete security or perfection of international environment will never be achieved” and that the best policies indicated “direction” as opposed to final “destinations” (ibid.). For the Kennan lectures and essays, see Kennan, *American Diplomacy*. Gaddis summarizes the three stages of Kennan's containment strategy as (1) “restore the balance of power left unstable by the defeats of Germany and Japan and by the simultaneous expansion of Soviet influence in Europe and Asia”; (2) discover and exploit the schisms between different Communist regimes and fragment “the international Communist movement”; and (3) change the Soviet Union over time by promoting a new conceptualization of international relations, convincing “Russian leaders that their interests could better be served by learning to live with a diverse world than by trying to remake it in their image.” See Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 54–69.

40. Ibid., ix, 88–92, 115. NSC-68 departed from Kennan's version of containment by expanding US commitment from the defending of strategic “strong points” to a wider perimeter defense. NSC-68 more intimately coupled prestige, credibility, economics, and perceptions of national strength to balance of power theory, thus moving containment into nonmilitary domains. This policy document assumed “Western weakness”—that the West could not tolerate even short-term advances by Communists, that alliances were key in preemptively combating Communist advances, and that Soviet behavior could actually help the Western image. It pivoted on the idea of collective security and expanded the aims of US containment strategy. Despite the expansion of containment strategy into nonmilitary domains, however, NSC-68 was still much more military-centric than the containment strategy developed under Eisenhower. For more detail, see NSC-68, 14 April 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1950, vol. 1, 240.

41. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 124, adapted from John Paton Davies, memorandum, 22 September 1950, *FRUS*, vol. 7, 754; and Dean Acheson (address, National War College, 27 August 1951), Acheson Papers, box 69, “Classified off the Record Speeches, 1947–52,” Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, MO.

42. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 144–46.

43. Ibid., 146, adapted from Hagerty Diary, 5 January 1954, James Hagerty Papers, box 1, *Nautilus*, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, KS.

44. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 128. See also Eisenhower, “Inaugural Address,” 6.

45. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 59, 129, 134, 152.

46. Kennedy, “Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs,” 396–406.

47. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 213.

48. Ibid.

49. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 4. See also Weigley, *American Way of War*.

50. Thies, *When Governments Collide*, 9.

51. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 5; and Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 222.

52. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 5.

53. During the Kennedy administration, multiple covert operations against Hanoi and in South Vietnam were conducted. The most notable were those performed by Maj Gen Edward Lansdale. Kennedy authorized the introduction of 400 special forces Soldiers almost immediately in 1961 and cleared them for harassment and sabotage missions in South Vietnam as well as in the North. See Sheehan, *Pentagon Papers*, 80–81, 231–33. President Johnson originally limited Marine and Army actions to within 50 miles of their bases in Vietnam and was extremely restrictive on target selection and prosecution during Operation Rolling Thunder.

54. According to Gaddis in *Strategies of Containment*, *détente* translates from French to mean “calm, relaxation, easing, but it can also mean the trigger of a gun.” In Russian, the closest term to *détente* is *razriadka*, which means “lessening” or “reduction and relaxation.” *Razriadka* can also mean “discharging” or “unloading.” *Détente* implies a releasing of tension (287). The “trigger” that was to release tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States under Nixon was a shift away from policies of “absolute security” toward policies that promoted “relative security.” In *A World Restored*, Kissinger wrote in 1957 that absolute security was not possible because for one state to be “totally satisfied,” all other states had to be “totally dissatisfied.” Therefore, Nixon’s containment strategy incorporated a shared “relative insecurity” among the United States, China, and the Soviet Union (144–46).

55. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 287.

56. Kissinger as quoted in *ibid.*, 277.

57. Nixon, *In the Arena*, 301–5.

58. In 1964 President Johnson sent more than 20,000 American troops to the Dominican Republic to prevent the Communist military regime from retaining power in that country.

59. Cottam and McCoy, “Image Change,” 117–19.

60. For reading on game theory and its influence on US grand strategy, see Thomas C. Schelling’s books *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960) and *Arms and Influence* (1966), published by Harvard University Press. For additional reading on evolutionary game theory and theories on collective cooperation and competition, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); and Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

61. Goldstein and Freeman, *Three-Way Street*, 6.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Billings and Hermann, “Problem Identification,” 54–56.

64. *Ibid.*, 55. Problem representation consists of two key stages: the first stage, location, involves detecting the gap between goals and the perceived current state and then placing the problem into cognitive categories (threat, opportunity, etc.). The second stage, diagnosis, involves a more thorough assessment of the causes and consequences of the problem. Location and diagnosis in aggregate recognize a problem, categorize it, and then embed it in a more or less well-developed causal network. Since most policy problems and especially inherited wars are long term, policy makers are forced to revisit and reevaluate and possibly redefine the problem and solutions continuously.

65. *Ibid.*, 57.

66. Boulding, *Image*, 3–5.

67. “Advantage” is not meant to imply rote rationality or the blind pursuit of self-interest. Rather, individuals will seek behaviors that they perceive as most likely to preserve or attain what is believed to be most valuable. What individuals value most shifts and is context dependent. Value scales and their influence on image and behavior are discussed later in this section.

68. Boulding, *Image*, 6.
69. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 7–8.
70. Boulding, *Image*, 6–7.
71. Billings and Hermann, “Problem Identification,” 62–63.
72. Boulding, *Image*, 7.
73. *Ibid.*, 8.
74. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 44–45, 50, 63, 67–68, 85, 111, 115–16.
75. Boulding, *Image*, 8.
76. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 187.
77. Billings and Hermann, “Problem Identification,” 62–68. Boulding also addresses the degree to which certainty, uncertainty, probability, improbability, clarity, and vagueness all play in how much or how little information transforms image. See Boulding, *Image*, 10–11.
78. Boulding, *Image*, 11.
79. *Ibid.*, 11, 12, 14.
80. *Ibid.*, 14.
81. *Ibid.*, 14–17, 20–28.
82. *Ibid.*, 15.
83. *Ibid.*, 98, 100–102.
84. *Ibid.*, 28, 103.
85. *Ibid.*, 104, 114.
86. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, xv–xvi, xviii.

Chapter 3

Kennedy: “Containment” from Camelot to Cam Ranh Bay

Let every nation know . . . we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty . . . knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.

—JFK Inaugural Address, January 1961

There’ll be great Presidents again . . . but there’ll never be another Camelot.

—Jackie Kennedy, November 1963

During a 1963 interview with *Life* magazine writer Theodore H. White, Jackie Kennedy revealed that she and her late husband had been particularly enamored with the popular Broadway musical *Camelot*, written by Alan Jay Lerner. “Jack had this hero idea of history,” the former First Lady said, “the idealistic view.”¹ White had resurrected the 1,000-year-old Arthurian legend in the 1950s for his novel *The Once and Future King*.² Following the publication of White’s interview with Jackie Kennedy, the JFK administration was inexorably linked with Camelot. Ever since, historians, political scientists, and analysts have produced scores of literature with contrary, overlapping, and shifting interpretations of this mythical kingdom. The literature simultaneously portrays Kennedy as a “martyred politician,” a betrayed king, a charlatan, the consummate Cold Warrior, a hero, a fool, rash, pragmatic, and the “unwitting or deliberate architect of a tragic war.”³ Dean Acheson found nothing stirring in Kennedy, commenting that “he did not seem to me to be in any sense a great man.”⁴ In 1993 Pres. Bill Clinton called Kennedy’s time in office a great and singular episode in “the history of our great Nation [that] changed the way we think about our country, our world, and our own obligations to the future.”⁵ Robert McNamara asserts that had Kennedy lived, the United States would not have escalated its involvement in Vietnam while others insist that the debacles in Vietnam and Cuba define Kennedy’s presidency.⁶

The Camelot legend and the Kennedys’ enduring association with it are once again invoked to examine the kingdom JFK sought, the enemies he believed threatened it, and the mechanisms he imagined could build it. When

Kennedy took the mantle from Eisenhower in 1961, the presidency passed from the oldest elected president to the youngest, symbolizing a “generational imperative” and legitimacy not too dissimilar from the young and unlikely squire pulling Excalibur from the stone.⁷ During his inaugural address, Kennedy said that man now “holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”⁸ The “different world” Kennedy describes in his inauguration speech invokes a sense that all things, good and ill, are possible and that both the *new* government’s potential and the threats it faces are of legendary, even magical, proportion. The legend of the Round Table is often invoked to describe Arthur’s noble and equitable leadership style, but it also reflects a king’s vision for how best to arrange and organize his knights. Kennedy’s rearrangement of governmental institutions bespeaks a president’s vision for how best to position and administer his agents.

Kennedy’s vision for the world was perhaps both noble and inspirational, but what were the consequences of the image he held of his own presidency and of Vietnam? How did Kennedy’s image of the United States’ role in the world and of Vietnam’s place in the security environment drive agendas, and what were the outcomes of those agendas? In the Arthurian legend, Arthur is betrayed by his half-sister Morgan le Fay, who drugs Arthur so that he unwittingly couples with his other half-sister, Morgause. The child conceived through this betrayal was prophesied to destroy Arthur’s kingdom. Were Kennedy’s image and agenda themselves betrayed so that now in retrospect the ill-conceived offspring of Vietnam returns to destroy Camelot? If so, who or what were the betrayers? Who or what were the betrayed? To address these questions, we now examine Kennedy’s own presidential image of the war in Vietnam and how that image tied to agendas and outcomes.

Presidential Image

For the purposes of this study, *presidential image* encompasses images of self, public perceptions, the office of the president and the institutions it commands, presidential values and agendas, perceptions of threats, and the means and methods the president perceives as necessary to overcome those threats. The terms *presidential image* and *image* are used interchangeably. Additionally, Vietnam was by no means the only threat President Kennedy faced, but since it is the subject of this paper, analysis is rooted in how Vietnam was perceived within the larger security environment. Even in the context of Vietnam, there are an infinite number of possible images to draw from, so we purposely limit the scope to those that best correlate to agendas and decisions

discovered in primary and secondary sources. For ease of analysis and explanation, we also attempt to separate different images, but the iterative nature of cognitive processes and the overlap among various images make this difficult. An approach that is too linear might artificially imply direct causality between particular images and outcomes. The same is true for our division among *image*, *agenda*, and *outcomes*. Decision making in politics is messy: agendas and results flow from an extremely convoluted “sausage making” process. Any one decision or outcome may be the result of multiple factors. However, by parceling out some of the more pronounced images, one can better identify a few of the most influential ingredients that pervaded one, if not several, presidencies during Vietnam.

Images of Vietnam, Total War, and a New Generation

In January 1963, Specialist James McAndrew was killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam. In February McAndrew’s sister, Bobbie Pendergrass, wrote a letter asking President Kennedy for an explanation. “I can’t help but feel that giving one’s life for one’s country is one thing,” Pendergrass wrote, “but being sent to a country [that] half our country never even heard of and being shot at without even a chance to shoot back is another thing altogether!”⁹ Kennedy responded to Bobbie Pendergrass in a two-page letter dated 6 March 1963:

The questions which you posed in your letter can . . . best be answered by realizing why your brother—and other American men—went to Viet Nam [*sic*] in the first place. . . . Americans are in Vietnam because we have determined that this country must not fall under Communist domination. . . . Shortly after the division [of Vietnam] eight years ago it became apparent that [it] could not be successful . . . without extensive assistance. . . . By 1961 it became apparent that the trouble in . . . Viet Nam could easily expand [and] that Viet Nam is only part of [the Communists’] larger plan for bringing . . . Southeast Asia under their domination. . . . Viet Nam is now most crucial. If Viet Nam should fall, it will indicate to the people of Southeast Asia that complete Communist domination . . . is inevitable. Your brother was in Viet Nam because the threat to the Viet Nameese [*sic*] people is, in the long run, a threat to the Free World community. . . . For when freedom is destroyed in one country, it is threatened throughout the world.¹⁰

At the end of her letter, Pendergrass assures Kennedy that he is doing a “wonderful job” and that she is in fact a “good Democrat,” but her questions are salient and reflective of the angst and incongruity that continue to plague the Vietnam debate today.¹¹ Moreover, the exchange between Kennedy and Pendergrass reveals key aspects of Kennedy’s presidential image of the war. Kennedy saw Vietnam as a crucial domino in the now total Cold War against Communism, and he believed South Vietnam was incapable of handling the conflict on its own.¹² Kennedy’s letter also reveals an implied, even necessary,

responsibility of the United States to intervene on behalf of the Free World. Finally, through his discourse with Mrs. Pendergrass, we get a sense of Kennedy's belief that leaders should both educate and inspire. An educated man, Kennedy insisted, "must give his objective sense, his sense of liberty to the maintenance of our society at a critical time."¹³ Kennedy's image of a leader as educator also came through during a 1956 speech on Indochina, in which he quoted Thomas Jefferson: "If we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion by education."¹⁴ For Kennedy, Vietnam represented high stakes that the United States could not ignore, and it was up to a new generation to figure out how to pull the sword from the stone.

In May 1961, Kennedy described to a joint session of Congress the new and exceptional threats to freedom and the responsibility the United States had in meeting those threats: "The great battlefield for the defense and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe—Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—the lands of the rising peoples. . . . The adversaries of freedom did not create the revolution[,] . . . but they are seeking to ride the crest of its wave—to capture it for themselves." Kennedy referenced Vietnam and described its struggle for freedom as a "contest of will and purpose as well as force and violence—a battle for minds and souls as well as lives and territory." He continued to say, "We are engaged in a world-wide struggle in which we bear a heavy burden to preserve and promote the ideals that we share with all mankind. . . . The United States must give all necessary aid to local forces with the will and capacity to cope with attack, subversion, insurrection, or guerilla warfare." The United States, Kennedy said, must "foster global progress."¹⁵

Kennedy perceived the consequences of a Communist victory in South Vietnam much as his predecessor had. In 1954 the NSC, under Eisenhower's direction, predicted that the fall of any nation to Communism would inevitably "endanger the stability and security" of Europe.¹⁶ The assumptions behind domino theory pervaded both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. What was different for Kennedy, however, was the preeminence of threat posed by the wars of national liberation that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened to support in 1961. "We are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence," Kennedy told the American Newspaper Publishers Association in April 1961.¹⁷ For Kennedy, the battlespace had expanded, and the new challenges could no longer be met by the tired policies of past generations. "The torch has been passed," Kennedy said during his inaugural speech, to one of the "few generations . . . granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger."¹⁸ From his time as a senator, through

his presidential campaign, and in taking office, Kennedy emphasized putting “distance between himself” and those of Eisenhower’s generation and was preoccupied “with creating a distinct identity.” As president, Kennedy even went so far as to resist being photographed playing golf out of worry that he would be associated with his “more leisurely predecessor.”¹⁹

Kennedy’s belief in the new generation is intertwined with his image of Vietnam, and both are revealed in several speeches he delivered as a senator. In his 1954 speech “The Truth about Indochina,” Kennedy railed against what he saw as a stale and impotent US policy for Indochina. He condemned the platitudes and overused “prophecies” that had repeatedly failed to bring either political independence or a French military victory, noting that prophetic failures had “in no way diminished the frequency of their reiteration.” Kennedy saw the Eisenhower administration as overly passive and imprecise, inclined to ignore unpleasant confrontations with facts surrounding potentially unpleasant foreign policy options. Eisenhower’s massive-retaliation policy and undulating debates concerning Indochina were overly blunt and increasingly obsolescent “in an era of supersonic attack and atomic retaliation.”²⁰ In addition to lambasting the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy also revealed the specifics of how he perceived the struggle in Vietnam.

Commenting on calls to further aid the French, Kennedy stated that “frankly, . . . no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, ‘an enemy of the people’ which has the sympathy and covert support of the people.” Kennedy cautioned against US involvement and an overreliance on military means in a political struggle: “There is no broad, general support of the native Vietnam government among the people. . . . To check the southern drive of communism makes sense but not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is rather to build strong native non-Communist sentiment within these areas and rely on that as a spearhead of defense rather than upon the legions of General de Lattre. To do this apart from and in defiance of innately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure.”²¹

Kennedy warned of the stark political reality in Vietnam while at the same time legitimizing the need to contain the spread of Communism. His hesitations over purely military strategies, criticisms of the Eisenhower administration, and emphasis on governmental solutions all delineate images of Vietnam and the peculiar challenges facing his generation. Victory in Vietnam was necessary but not possible through blunt and outdated policies. Success required a new generation and a new approach. As discussed later, when Kennedy becomes president, these images directly inform his Vietnam policy agendas. Kennedy also imagines a unique role and responsibility for the United States

in Vietnam that will require a distinct break with Eisenhower's policies—a point clearly illustrated in his 1956 speech at the Conference on Vietnam.

Addressing the conference in Washington, DC, Kennedy lamented that too often US involvement is like that of the world's "fireman," rushing in when a fire breaks out with the "heavy equipment" to loud applause, only to leave when the blaze is extinguished. The United States required a long-term vision for Vietnam and an honest recognition for how vital the country's fate was to US security. In an allusion to Eisenhower's domino theory, Kennedy called Vietnam the "keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike[,] . . . the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia."²² Kennedy's meaning was clear. As goes Vietnam, so goes Asia, so goes the world. It is important to note that while Kennedy insisted on a departure from the "fireman" approach, he did not disengage from the underlying assumptions of the domino theory. Containing Communism is an entrenched objective and part of Kennedy's overall security schema. As Robert Jervis observes, "World images that have been created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interests."²³ So while Kennedy views the problem of Vietnam and its solutions quite differently than Eisenhower in emphasizing the need for a more politically, vice militarily, oriented strategy, their shared world image of a monolithic Communist threat drives them both to the same ends—containment. Or so it appears at first glance.

A Pentagon study describes Eisenhower's approach to the Vietnam problem as a "limited-risk gamble."²⁴ Eisenhower pursued containment through a minimum-cost approach and feared the consequences of an overreaching foreign policy. The massive-retaliation nuclear policy was as much an economic calculus as it was a military strategy. And although Eisenhower's strategic fiscal and military decisions between 1955 and 1960 perhaps provided the "gingerbread architecture" for the political, military, and social legislation that manifested themselves under President Kennedy, the latter's version of containment and the means to achieve it were far more expansive.²⁵

Five years prior to succeeding Eisenhower and in a prelude to the near supernatural mandates laid out in his inaugural address, Kennedy reveals just how intimately he views the relationship between Vietnam and American prestige: "Vietnam represents a test of American responsibility and determination. . . . If we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth[,] . . . gave assistance to its life[, and] . . . have helped to shape its future. As French influence . . . has declined in Vietnam, American influence has steadily grown. This is our offspring—we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs."²⁶ Kennedy deeply imbued outcomes in Vietnam with notions of US prestige and responsibility—an image that inevitably

raises America's stakes in Vietnam and that also increases the means the United States is ultimately willing to use to protect those stakes.

Kennedy's more expansive image of US stakes and responsibilities in Vietnam is the backstory to what James McDougall describes as the salient psychological shift that occurs in the transition between Eisenhower and Kennedy. The "new generation" ushered in a "technocracy of politicians, arrogating to government the right to fix a national agenda and order fabrication of techniques, both hardware and management, for its fulfillment."²⁷ Martha Cottam and Dorcas McCoy describe the Cold War as primarily a cognitive conflict "associated with a clear and powerful worldview composed of clearly defined images, scripts, and schemata and a repertoire of tactics that derived from containment."²⁸ The arrangements and accomplishments of institutions and ideologies surrounded the strict material standoff between the United States and Soviet Union. The validity of these respective institutions and ideologies became as important, if not more so, than the competitive military balance of tanks and missiles. High technology such as nuclear warheads, intercontinental jet bombers, satellites, and ICBMs were not just symbols of military prowess—they personified the ideologies and institutions of the societies that produced them. As Paul Edwards describes in *The Closed World*, "The primary weapons of the Cold War were ideologies, alliances, advisors, foreign aid, national prestige—and above and behind them all, the juggernaut of high technology." Edwards's work demonstrates how "ideas and devices are linked through politics and culture."²⁹ Edwards certainly emphasizes technology over image in his observations, but the interplay among perceptions, technology, and decision making are important contributions and helpful in understanding how the Cold War had become a total "competition for the loyalty and trust of all peoples fought out in all arenas." The advent of new technologies coincided with the rise of Kennedy's generation and created an atmosphere of both "fear and euphoria" that permeated a now-total Cold War being fought on all fronts.³⁰ Kennedy's image of the stakes involved, the total threat, and the inefficacies of the old regime in duly meeting the new challenges in this very different world is consistent with the actions he takes as president. However, Kennedy's image was not simply driven by technology; rather, the latter was a part of how Kennedy viewed the potential accomplishments and concurrent responsibilities of the institutions that created the technology in the first place.

An industrialized country armed with the latest technology might be capable, but such a country could become transcendent only through the full expression of democracy's ideals. Infused with new blood and fresh outlooks, America could lead the fight that would conquer not only the Communist monster but also the collective woes of humanity: "For what Pericles said to

the Athenians has long been true of this commonwealth: ‘We do not imitate—for we are a model to others.’”³¹ America was to be the model government on the new frontier of freedom. Faced with the ultimate fear and inspired by the possibility of Utopia, the United States *had* to act. Vietnam was America’s offspring; therefore, the United States had to fortify and raise South Vietnam through transcendent American values, ideals, institutions, and military capabilities. Kennedy’s parental analogy between the United States and Vietnam reflects the dependent image he had of South Vietnam’s government. Cottam describes *dependent image* as the “social comparison in which each perceiver’s country (or in-group) is considered vastly superior to and beneficent toward the dependent [who is] deemed childlike.”³² Kennedy saw America’s position and power as necessary ingredients for bolstering South Vietnam.

One pervasive assumption of the Kennedy administration was that “the Diem regime’s own evident weakness—from the ‘famous problem of Diem as administrator’ to the [South Vietnamese] Army’s lack of offensive spirit—could be cured if enough dedicated Americans, civilians and military, became involved in South Vietnam to show the South Vietnamese, at all levels, how to get on and win the war.”³³ In a letter to Diem in late 1961, Kennedy told the South Vietnamese president that the United States was “prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence” and that American “indignation” had mounted over the “deliberate savagery of the Communist[s].”³⁴ Kennedy’s assurances to Diem exemplified his own belief that the United States should respond to South Vietnam’s plight and marked the continuing trajectory toward increased unilateral US action in Vietnam.

The United States issued a separate “American Statement” at the conclusion of the July 1954 Geneva Accords, which divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel and stipulated cessation of hostilities. Although the United States endorsed the “spirit” of the accords, Eisenhower reserved the right to act if South Vietnam were threatened and held out hope for a united and democratic Vietnam. Officially, the United States called for free elections and democratic unity in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam so that the people of Indochina could achieve “full independence [and] . . . determine their own future.” Unofficially, Eisenhower viewed the accords as a disastrous accommodation of the Communists. A cable from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to the Saigon Embassy in December 1955 reveals the Eisenhower administration’s disillusionment with the Geneva Agreements: “While we should certainly take no positive steps to speed up [the] present process of decay of [the] Geneva Accords, neither should we make the slightest effort to infuse life into them.”³⁵ Despite warnings from the National Intelligence Board that no amount of military action or aid to Vietnam was likely to produce results and

irrespective of memos from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) that highlighted the utter lack of military objectives in Vietnam, Eisenhower committed to a threefold program for post-Geneva Vietnam.³⁶ Eisenhower's program included building up Vietnamese indigenous forces, providing economic aid directly to the Vietnamese, and working with and supporting President Diem. The Geneva Accords mark a significant point of departure for US policy in Vietnam. By pursuing its own agenda and interactions with Diem, the United States supplanted the French in Vietnam. Furthermore, Diem's regime was so unstable and inefficient that it depended on US support for its very existence; thus, South Vietnam became "the creation of the United States."³⁷

Eisenhower's policies are an important factor in understanding Kennedy's own perceptions and policies on Vietnam. Though they were limited in scope, Eisenhower sired increased US obligations in Vietnam. Kennedy inherited this commitment and therefore had a definite institutional momentum and direction when he took office. However, whether Eisenhower fostered a situation from which it was impossible for the United States to disentangle itself might be another matter altogether. The inevitability of Vietnam, based on overarching Cold War paradigms and logic, is certainly a plausible explanation. As George Herring asserts,

The United States' involvement in Vietnam was not primarily a result of errors of judgment or of the personality quirks of the policymakers, although these things existed in abundance. It was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy, the policy of containment, which Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades. The commitment in Vietnam expanded as the containment policy itself grew. America's failure in Vietnam calls into question the basic premises of that policy and suggests the urgent need for a . . . reappraisal of American attitudes toward the world and [America's] place in it.³⁸

This paper, however, contends that the images American presidents held of Vietnam affected US involvement there as well as how each president confronted and conducted the war. The containment schema may very well have influenced presidential choices, but individual images should not be discounted. Herring's macroexplanation for Vietnam undervalues the reinforcing effects individual presidents' images, variances, and perceptions had on their containment and other policies. Could we assume, for instance, that if Nixon had defeated Kennedy in 1960 he would have conducted Vietnam policy in much the same manner as Kennedy? Though counterfactual and impossible to know, this paper argues that the *who* matters because each image is distinct. Kennedy himself was convinced that "one man could make a difference."³⁹ Regardless of the institutional schema, each president's image interprets not only the overarching national security problem but also ways of incorporating problems such as Vietnam into national security strategy. Image is thus the

intermediary between the schema and the existential. So even though Eisenhower may very well have recognized Vietnam as a critical piece in his overall containment strategy, the degree to which he was willing to commit US resources differed from Kennedy's approach. Part of this distinction was driven by the differing perceptions the two men had not only of Vietnam but also of what government was capable of and how it should behave.

In his farewell address, Eisenhower described America as "the strongest, most influential, and most productive nation in the world," but he also warned that the nation's "preeminence" depended as much upon how America used its power as upon its military and material strength. Eisenhower described America's responsibility and challenge to "keep the peace[,] . . . enhance liberty[,] and foster human progress in the face of Communism's hostile, ruthless, and global threat. Eisenhower's farewell address and Kennedy's inaugural address certainly have thematic consistencies. Communism was a global threat to the Free World's progress, and America's unique position and values left the United States with not only the challenge but also the responsibility of leading the fight against it. However, while Eisenhower characterizes the fight against Communism as the "crisis" that "absorbs our very beings," he also quite clearly admonishes policy makers over their tendency to believe that "some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties." For Eisenhower, the military-industrial complex and the absorption of private-sector institutions into the burgeoning federal government could potentially combine with arrogant ambitions, causing not just an imbalance but a squandering of American power, prestige, resources, and future.⁴⁰

Kennedy's perception of Eisenhower's policies as overly passive and undulating is perhaps a product of the contrasting image each man had concerning the role and capabilities of government in solving problems. Where Eisenhower saw his policies necessarily taking the long view, Kennedy saw inaction. The contrasting images affected how each man ultimately represented the problems facing the United States. For example, during a 1959 Thanksgiving weekend retreat with his NSC, Eisenhower asked his staff, "What is the true problem which faces Western Civilization?" In answer to his own question, Eisenhower said,

The question is whether free government can continue to exist in the world, in view of the demands made by government and peoples on free economies, while simultaneously facing the continuing threat posed by a centrally controlled, hostile, atheistic, and growing economy. . . . We have got to meet the [Soviets] by keeping our economy absolutely healthy. . . . We must get the Federal Government out of every unnecessary activity. We can refuse to do things too rapidly. Humanity has existed for a long time. Suddenly we seem to have an hysterical approach, in health and welfare programs, in grants to the states. . . . We want to cure every ill in two years, in five years. . . . To my mind, this is the wrong attack.⁴¹

When Kennedy pledges that America will “pay any price” and “bear any burden” to win the battle “for minds and souls,” he distinguishes his perceptions from those of his predecessor by at once elevating the objectives he believes governments are capable of achieving and by expanding the means by which a government should pursue those objectives. Gaddis observes that “perception of means had shaped both the nature and the extent” of America’s commitments and range of actions “in defense of global equilibrium” under Truman and Eisenhower but that “Kennedy’s more expansive perception of means paved the way for a more activist foreign policy.”⁴² So while both Kennedy and Eisenhower perceive a “total” Cold War and commit to containing the Communist threat, the means and measures each is willing to utilize for containment policy differ. Their preferred strategies reveal the dissimilar images each president had of government. Thus, when Vietnam becomes for Kennedy part of America’s “world-wide struggle,” he is inclined to extend the increased machinations and resources of his own country’s government to the government of South Vietnam (GVN).⁴³ Kennedy’s inclinations for increased assistance to South Vietnam are further compounded by his perceptions of the Diem regime and geopolitical context surrounding Vietnam.

McNamara describes how the “intensification of relations between Cuba and the Soviets [and] a new wave of Soviet provocations in Berlin” created a context within which it was “reasonable to consider expanding U.S. effort in Vietnam” in light of the domino theory.⁴⁴ McNamara admits, however, that despite the weight afforded the preservation of South Vietnam at the outset of the Kennedy administration, President Kennedy and his cadre of advisers (McNamara included) all lacked significant historical, social, and cultural understanding of Vietnam.⁴⁵ In contrast to the abundant institutional expertise available on the Soviet Union, the State Department had ironically been purged of its most competent East Asian and Chinese experts during the “McCarthy hysteria of the 1950s.” Unable to draw on either extensive personal or institutional expertise, Kennedy set about making policy for a region that was “terra incognita.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Kennedy’s image of Vietnam and his subsequent policies were heavily influenced by the context within which he viewed the country and by the US objectives he tied to it. Image readily fills cognitive gaps, and with Vietnam being the “unknown land” for Kennedy, his perceptions of that country adhered to the strategic purposes to be carried out through the conflict and the means by which he believed those purposes could be achieved. Vietnam was seen through the lens of the United States’ cause; therefore, images of Diem coalesced around American-centric ambitions. Characteristics that lent themselves to the Americanesque narrative

and mythology were embraced, while characteristics that ran counter were tolerated, overlooked, or attributed to the mystical unknowns of the Asian culture.

Pres. Ngo Dinh Diem had spent several years in exile in the United States, where he attended a New Jersey seminary. Coming from a long line of Christian Vietnamese, Diem himself was a devoted Catholic and a staunch anti-Communist.⁴⁷ He returned to Vietnam in 1954 and served as Pres. Bao Dai's prime minister. Through a controversial and "rigged" referendum in 1955, Diem replaced Bao Dai as president.⁴⁸ Diem was even less enthusiastic about the Geneva Accords than was the Eisenhower administration. With both overt and covert support from the United States, Diem effectively quashed election efforts prescribed by the Geneva Accords in 1956.⁴⁹ American intelligence estimates, diplomatic cables, and reports reveal that the United States was fully aware of Diem's corruption and authoritarian rule in 1960. Yet Diem's Catholicism and democratic rhetoric "seemed evidence that he shared Western values."⁵⁰ Even a thin veneer of democracy in South Vietnam was too alluring to resist, and Diem's apparent accomplishments in suppressing Communist activity and establishing rule of law, albeit harshly, seemed cause for hope.

As Kennedy assumed office, he confronted not only assessments pointing out the weaknesses and corruption of Diem's government but also the sentimental possibility for what Diem might be able to do if properly fortified and supported through a more proactive US government. A 1959 *Newsweek* article describes Diem as "one of the ablest free Asian leaders."⁵¹ Senator Mike Mansfield attested to Diem's "personal courage, integrity, determination, and authentic nationalism . . . [as] essential forces in forestalling a total collapse in South Vietnam."⁵² That Diem was not perfect was obvious to Kennedy, but Diem's imperfections were counterbalanced by the potential of what the United States could do through him. McNamara observes that the administration's proclivity to value Diem's potential as a democratic revolutionary dedicated to America's cause in Asia obscured the fact that these qualities, even were they true, isolated Diem from his own people.⁵³ Furthermore, the Asian culture was somewhat of a mystery. The strange relationship among Diem; his brother and chief political adviser, Ngo Dinh Nhu; and Nhu's wife, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, reinforced the mystical characteristics of the Diem regime.⁵⁴ In McNamara's words, Diem was an "enigma," and Madame Nhu was "bright, forceful, and beautiful, but also diabolical and scheming—a true sorceress."⁵⁵ Madame Nhu and the mysterious inner workings of the Diem regime both vexed and enchanted Kennedy's administration, and Vietnam—much like Arthur's half-sister Morgause—surreptitiously slid further under the sheets of American policy. The mystique of the Asian culture and the hopeful projection of iconic American values and ambitions skewed Kennedy's image of

South Vietnam. Diem's inconsistencies and misunderstandings between him and Kennedy could be readily attributed to cultural idiosyncrasies and/or overlooked for want of pursuing American objectives.

Image affects interpretation, institutes biases, and discriminates between confirming and disconfirming information. Evidence that is contrary to established perceptions is often overlooked or discarded so that individuals can maintain a consistency in their worldviews.⁵⁶ Kennedy's lack of both personal and institutional expertise on Vietnam created a vacuum that allowed him to supplant a more objective assessment of the situation in Vietnam with what he wanted to accomplish there. As such, Kennedy's view of Vietnam's relationship to US interests, Vietnam's meaning in terms of geopolitical struggles, and the nature and character of the country and its leaders encountered very little initial friction. Under these circumstances, Vietnam comes to be defined through US objectives vice US objectives being derived from Vietnam. This is an important distinction and is evidenced by Kennedy's commitment to the Diem regime despite multiple intelligence reports that revealed the inefficacies and brutalities of his government.⁵⁷ The argument that Diem was the "best the United States could hope for" as justification for Kennedy's commitment to the South Vietnamese president assumes Kennedy's loyalty was a foregone conclusion. Even if Diem were the only option, the fact that Kennedy insisted on pursuing an option reflects an inflated sense of what he believed the United States could help Diem achieve—a belief that contrasted sharply with the sobering accounts from the ground. In November 1961, Kennedy's presidential military adviser, Gen Maxwell Taylor, provided a report that outlined increased US involvement on the ground and a "limited partnership" strategy. The Pentagon's own analysis of Taylor's proposals highlights the Kennedy administration's assumptions that South Vietnam's military, political, and social problems "could be cured if enough dedicated Americans [became] involved" and that US involvement would imbue the South Vietnamese "with the élan and style needed to win." Diem's shortcomings and the inconsistent circumstances on the ground in Vietnam that were not conducive to, or even desirable for, US involvement were overlooked. Vietnam was "the only place in the world where [Kennedy] faced a well-developed Communist effort to topple a pro-Western government" and as such became "a challenge that could hardly be ignored."⁵⁸

Kennedy's vision for what was possible and necessary in Vietnam created an image of the conflict that allowed US missions and purposes in and through the country to overtake a more objective consideration of Vietnam's realities. Kennedy's understanding of Vietnam becomes inexorably bound by what the United States seeks to accomplish there. Vietnam becomes a symbolic expression

of US prestige and commitment to the worldwide struggle against Communism and a reflection of Kennedy's image of the United States. The distinction between Vietnam serving as a symbol and as reflecting Kennedy's image is subtle but significant. Symbols are external and need not necessarily resemble whom or what they come to symbolize. The value of symbols is derived from what is projected onto them, but the fundamental nature and definitional understanding of symbols are not transformed through symbolism. For example, the Liberty Bell is a symbol of American independence, but we still know and define it as a bell. Reflective imaging, however—as occurs when Kennedy comes to define Vietnam through US objectives—transforms definitional understanding so that aspects of Vietnam's character apart from US interests there are obscured or diminished.⁵⁹ Symbols can be powerful and are related to, and often integrated with, image, but image is transformative whereas symbols are representative. So, even though the fact that Vietnam becomes a symbol of US prestige and commitment is powerful, it is Kennedy's perceptual integration of Vietnam into his image of the United States and of the power and potential of government that ultimately transforms the degree, character, and nature of US commitment to the conflict.

Kennedy recognized the political nature of the struggle in Vietnam and was arguably correct in identifying Diem's regime as the fulcrum in the struggle, at least to the extent that lack of strong governance in the South favored Hanoi's cause. During a conversation with his NSC in November 1961, Kennedy revealed his misgivings over a strong US military response in Vietnam and pointed out "how starkly the situation in Vietnam contrasted with the Korean War." Kennedy identified several compelling reasons for not intervening "10,000 miles away to help a native army of 200,000 fight 16,000 guerillas."⁶⁰ Yet Kennedy's hesitance over full-blown military intervention did not equate to tentativeness over a more robust political intervention. As discussed above, Kennedy intimately tied US prestige, interests, and global objectives to outcomes in Vietnam. After the United States suffered its first casualties in Vietnam, Kennedy said during an interview that "we are attempting to help Vietnam maintain its independence and not fall under domination of the Communists. . . . We cannot desist in Vietnam."⁶¹ Consequently, while Kennedy repeatedly insisted that the Vietnamese had to *do it themselves*, the conflict in Vietnam was too important to lose, and the Vietnamese doing it themselves really equated to the Vietnamese government operating as an extension of the machinations of the US government. In this way, Kennedy's images of government, the United States, and Vietnam coalesce and provide insight into the motivations behind the policies and agendas he pursues in Vietnam. That he recognized the political nature of the conflict is to his credit. But just as

military-centric policies have limits and misalignments, so do the same pitfalls exist in political ones.

Kennedy's emphasis on political aspects and his belief in what the US government could accomplish perhaps prolonged the administration's patience with Diem. Conversations, cables, and internal documents concerning Diem's weakness in 1963 closely resembled intelligence and assessment reports from 1961 (which, in turn, reflected those of the Eisenhower administration). Kennedy was partially blind to Diem's obvious shortcomings because the US president's objective-driven images and the importance he placed on success in Vietnam placed Diem on a pedestal—not because Diem was particularly enamoring or capable but because what a successful Diem signified in terms of Kennedy's vision was too enchanting to resist. Diem's pedestal was underpinned not so much by what he could potentially do himself (though his apparent early accomplishments certainly bolstered hopes) but by the promise of what a new generation of US government could do if it were properly organized and mobilized. Diem and Vietnam were both absorbed into and defined through Kennedy's presidential image.

Clausewitz tells us that war is policy by other means, and it is a common lament when wars go awry to decry the failures of policies that undermine, misalign, and/or blur military objectives and capabilities. H. R. McMaster unequivocally states that “the war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965.”⁶² The argument is valid that overly ambiguous political objectives or the misunderstanding of the character of the war or of the adversary often results in military failure. These truths were no less stark for the Americans in Vietnam than they were for the Prussians facing Napoleon. Yet in emphasizing the role of political objectives, one may tend to assume that policy can in fact remedy the myriad strategic problems nations face and that failure results from simply not finding the appropriate political remedy. When Eisenhower warned in his farewell address against hastily seeking solutions through an ever-expanding government, he asserts that some problems lie beyond even the polity's capacity to find clean lines and satisfactory solutions. For Eisenhower, the gears of even the most clear-sighted and capable government could grind only so far. Complex social ills and wars might require “malleable” objectives or even lie beyond the scope of governmental solutions.⁶³ Kennedy's image, however, stands in stark contrast to Eisenhower's despite the fact that both men rooted Vietnam in the context of the Cold War containment policy. Kennedy and his men were convinced that their vigor and intellect could succeed where Eisenhower had failed and that they could

raise government to new heights. “If there was anything that bound the men, their followers, and their subordinates together,” David Halberstam wrote of the Kennedy administration, “it was the belief that sheer intelligence and rationality could answer and solve anything.”⁶⁴

With images of total war, a dependent yet crucial ally, and the imperatives and potential of a new governmental era, Kennedy turned to solving the Vietnam problem. The sword Kennedy pulled from the stone was government. Now the task before him was organizing and revolutionizing government so that it might be reforged into a well-honed and calibrated instrument. With sword in scabbard, Kennedy went in search of his round table so that he might arrange his knights for action.

From Inheritance to Legacy: Kennedy’s New Table

“The United States needs a Grand Objective,” wrote a Kennedy appointee in a memo shortly after the administration took office: “We behave as if . . . our real objective is to sit by our pools. . . . The key consideration is not that the Grand Objective be exactly right, it is that we have one and that we start moving toward it.”⁶⁵ Kennedy’s ascendance coincided with his clarion call to action. Kennedy believed Eisenhower’s administration had been too lax, too committed to increasingly obsolete approaches that were easily outstripped by the complex challenges of modern geopolitical realities. Governmental institutions as arranged by past generations were overly bloated and blunt instruments. Kennedy immediately streamlined the structure of the NSC staff and instituted what he believed to be a more nimble and proactive managerial style, relying on ad hoc task forces.⁶⁶ Additionally, Kennedy bolstered US nuclear capabilities and demanded a more agile US military with modernized conventional forces and an increased ability to conduct irregular warfare. Guerilla warfare was “an international disease” that had infected Vietnam and that the United States had to eradicate.⁶⁷ Kennedy also believed that Communism and guerilla warfare flourished in impoverished and underdeveloped societies and sought to inoculate such areas by removing the “source of disease” through extensive “economic and technical assistance” programs.⁶⁸ In contrast to Eisenhower’s more reserved approach to foreign policy, Kennedy staked out a proactive agenda of “global activism” that sought greater flexibility through a transformed Defense Department and economic policy.⁶⁹ Before we examine some of the specifics involved in Kennedy’s transformative agenda, it is useful to describe at least in part how the characteristics of the

transition between Eisenhower and Kennedy perhaps contributed to the degree, if not the nature, of Kennedy's agenda.

Shortly before taking office, Kennedy and his staff met with Eisenhower and his advisers. Though the records vary as to whether Eisenhower actually recommended direct US military involvement, Eisenhower did emphasize the importance of Laos and Vietnam in stopping the Communists' advance in Asia.⁷⁰ "If Laos is lost to the Free World," said Eisenhower, "in the long run we will lose all of Southeast Asia."⁷¹ Despite Eisenhower's unequivocal statement, McNamara and others from Kennedy's presidential staff left the meeting with the distinct impression that Eisenhower "did not know what to do in Southeast Asia." McNamara recalled that "we received no thoughtful analysis of the problem and no pros and cons regarding alternative ways to deal with it. We were left only with [Eisenhower's] ominous prediction[s], . . . which made a deep impression on Kennedy."⁷² Eisenhower's ambiguity over Indochina and Vietnam, despite the criticality he places on the region in light of domino theory, is partially explained by his economically minded foreign policy. Eisenhower relied on a general nuclear-deterrent strategy, and American military forays in Southeast Asia were extremely limited. Additionally, Indochina sat at the intersection between generally accepted Cold War logic and the growing trend of wars of national liberation. Limited conflicts in Asia and around the globe begged Cold War rationales yet defied existing Cold War methodologies. Eisenhower inherited from Truman the same intractable Vietnam challenge he handed off to Kennedy—namely, how to reconcile grand Cold War strategies with the emerging threat of revolutionary wars.

As Truman's secretary of state, George C. Marshall described the difficulties of discerning a satisfactory policy during France's involvement in Vietnam:

We have fully recognized France's sovereign position. . . . At the same time we cannot shut our eyes to the fact there are two sides to this problem and that our reports indicate lack of French understanding [of the] other side and [the] continued existence [of France's] dangerously outmoded colonial outlook and method. . . . On the other hand we do not lose sight [of the] fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections[,] and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by [a] philosophy of political organization directed from and controlled by [the] Kremlin.⁷³

The Eisenhower administration continued to straddle the line Marshall describes, and although Eisenhower did direct aid and assistance to France and later South Vietnam, he withheld overt US military involvement. As the struggle between Communist and democratic factions intensified and the meaning of the struggle to US interests sharpened in the minds of policy makers, satisfactory solutions remained elusive, and US Indochina policy remained ambivalent. Therefore, within the context of US goals and concerns

regarding Indochina, Kennedy was correct in perceiving Eisenhower's policies as insufficient. As framed by Eisenhower's policies and existing Cold War paradigms, the "Indochina problem was intractable," and Eisenhower handed Kennedy a "problem with no solution."⁷⁴

The lack of specificity on Indochina during the handoff between Eisenhower and Kennedy pushed ambiguity across administrations, inviting Kennedy to form his own image to define the problem and its solutions. According to McNamara, what impressed Kennedy during the meeting with Eisenhower was the criticality of Southeast Asia to US interests in the global struggle against Communism. Eisenhower's characterization of Vietnam with regard to its importance to US interests was little different than Kennedy's own. As such, Kennedy's subsequent agenda derived not so much from a detailed collusion with Eisenhower's perspectives or policies for the future (since few were provided) but from perceptions Kennedy developed while still outside the presidency.⁷⁵ Presidential transitions are "like trying to change drivers of a car on a freeway at very high speed."⁷⁶ The institutional inertia or momentum that carries across presidencies is powerful. In this case, the momentum was commitment to the importance of Vietnam without clear specifics on how to proceed in Vietnam. That lack of detail allowed Kennedy to more freely infuse Vietnam policy with his Grand Objective and image not only of what Vietnam meant to US interests but also of how he believed the United States could transform itself, Vietnam, and the world.

A New Force for a New War

Prior to Kennedy taking office in 1961, Hanoi had established the National Liberation Front, a guerilla group designed to undermine Pres. Ngo Dinh Diem's government in Saigon. Russian premier Khrushchev had also pledged Soviet support for wars of national liberation. The fall of China in 1949, Khrushchev's stated ambitions, Soviet expansion, and the promulgation of Mao's guerilla doctrine throughout the 1950s created an atmosphere where a succession of Communist takeovers seemed "likely . . . wherever lack of national cohesion made states vulnerable . . . to guerilla attack."⁷⁷ Even apart from the relationship between guerilla warfare and the perceived sweep of Communism, irregular warfare and counterinsurgency appealed to Kennedy's sensibilities in that unconventional warfare blended the martial and the political. Unconventional warfare was much more flexible and discreet, marking a distinct break with existing paradigms. Kennedy read the revolutionary writings of Che Guevara and often quoted Mao's maxim that "guerillas are like fish,

and the people are the water in which fish swim. . . . If the temperature of the water is right, the fish will thrive.”⁷⁸ After Laos fell to the Communists, Vietnam “became the test bed for counterinsurgency programs and techniques.”⁷⁹ Kennedy sought the employment of a new breed of American military power in Vietnam. “If freedom is to be saved,” Kennedy told West Point’s 1962 graduating class, “we need a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and a wholly different kind of training and commitment.”⁸⁰

In early spring of 1961, Kennedy created the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam and charged its director, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric, to develop a “program of action” on Vietnam.⁸¹ In Gilpatric’s task force memo for the president, he summarizes that “a state of guerrilla warfare now exists throughout the country,” with a near tripling of “hard-core Communists” between 1960 and 1961.⁸² Gilpatric’s report characterizes Vietcong activities as consistent with the “Communist ‘master plan’ to take over all of Southeast Asia” and makes several political, military, and economic recommendations to Kennedy.⁸³ In National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52, Kennedy immediately approves Gilpatric’s stated US objectives and concept of operations in Vietnam as well as the task force’s political, military, and economic recommendations.⁸⁴ Kennedy’s approval message read as follows:

The U.S. objective and concept of operations stated in the Report are approved: to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam; to create in that country a visible and increasingly democratic society; and to initiate, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a military, political, economic, psychological and covert character designed to achieve this objective. . . . Additional actions . . . [include] the objective of meeting the increased security threat . . . along the frontier between Laos and Vietnam. . . . The President directs an assessment of the military utility of a further increase in G.V.N. forces from 170,000 to 200,000, together with an assessment of the parallel political and fiscal implications.⁸⁵

Gilpatric identified the counterinsurgency plan as “most significant” in halting Communist subversion and called for an urgent and dedicated expansion in US military and economic aid as well as a dramatic increase in unconventional and psychological operations.⁸⁶ The task force report makes clear the urgent need for US “operational flexibility” through increased unconventional, covert, and psychological capabilities and emphasizes that the United States must “impress upon [its] friends, the Vietnamese, and [its] foes . . . that come what may, the United States intends to *win* this battle” (emphasis in the original).⁸⁷ In addition to approving the above, Kennedy also directed “full examination by the Defense Department under the guidance of the Director [Gilpatric] . . . of the size and composition of forces which would be desirable in the case of a possible commitment of US forces to Vietnam.”⁸⁸

George Herring contends that although Kennedy was more willing to wade “deeper into the morass” compared to the limited approach of his predecessor, Kennedy’s actions actually contradicted the impassioned rhetoric of his administration. Kennedy, according to Herring, was “cautious rather than bold, hesitant rather than decisive, and improvisational rather than carefully calculating.”⁸⁹ The evidence begs an alternative view—that Kennedy was precisely calculating, decisive, and bold. Kennedy’s hesitancy was in the application of US military, economic, and political mechanisms in their current form or in the manner by which convention would dictate. Kennedy’s rhetoric was backed by a deliberate conceptualization of what the reformed institutions of government could accomplish, and he did not balk at immediately taking steps to initiate government’s transformation. In fact, Kennedy’s aversion to plodding caution and inaction not only colored his perceptions of the Eisenhower administration but also informed his decisions on whom he chose and trusted to effect his vision and what he charged them to do.

When Kennedy abolished the rigid NSC structure that existed under Eisenhower, he replaced it with a more “collegial style of decision making” and met irregularly with his “inner club” of trusted advisers.⁹⁰ Kennedy was dissatisfied with both the architecture and the people carried over from Eisenhower’s administration. In Kennedy’s view, policies lacked flexibility, and individuals lacked imagination. Two key international incidents in the early months of Kennedy’s administration reinforced this view. The first was the Bay of Pigs debacle in April, and the second was the Laotian settlement in May. The Bay of Pigs was an outgrowth of Eisenhower’s covert CIA operation to arm and train Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro’s government. The Laotian agreement left the Pathet Lao Communist-sympathizer group in control of eastern Laos, benefiting Hanoi’s logistic efforts to support the Vietcong. In both instances, Kennedy found fault with JCS planning and advice.⁹¹ Kennedy’s impression was that the joint chiefs were reluctant and prone to “beat their chest[s] until it comes time to do some fighting.”⁹² Thus, Kennedy’s restructuring of the national security and decision-making structures diminished the role of the JCS, and he turned to men like Maxwell Taylor and Robert McNamara to effect the desired transformation.

Taylor, the consummate Soldier-statesman, had a “reputation as both a warrior and a scholar” that appealed to Kennedy.⁹³ Taylor had railed against Eisenhower’s massive-retaliation policies as too metered, binary, and rigid and called for an increased operational flexibility that would draw on expanded nonnuclear forces and capabilities. Embodying the maxims of Kennedy’s generation, Taylor was appointed military representative of the president in April 1961. His appointment came with a large degree of implied, if not direct,

command authority wherein he could “call directly on any department or agency for the discharge of his responsibilities.”⁹⁴ Most significantly, Taylor had the ear of the president. Taylor’s position subsumed the historical role and influence of the JCS, which was further diminished when Taylor was appointed its chairman in 1962. Instead of the JCS filling the traditional role of providing impartial military advice to the president, Kennedy now had one of his own in charge—an arrangement that, when combined with McNamara’s coincident efforts to transform the Pentagon, helped “Kennedy effect a doctrinal shift that influenced deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam.”⁹⁵

In June 1961, Kennedy adviser Walt Rostow described America’s “central task” in Kennedy’s emerging policy of “nation building” through counter-insurgency as protecting “the independence of the revolutionary process now going forward.”⁹⁶ Vietnam and other underdeveloped countries were at the forefront of Kennedy’s total war against Communism. The administration distinctively believed that with enough “pump priming” and “fine-tuning,” government could do almost anything.⁹⁷ Revitalization of American institutions could better exploit and redirect domestic production, capabilities, and behaviors to new heights, which in turn could be channeled in support of Kennedy’s global agenda. “American money, American technology, and the force of the American example” would be the catalyst and the fuel for democracies abroad and “a bar to the Communists’ grand design.”⁹⁸ McNamara was selected as secretary of defense not because he possessed extensive experience in foreign military and security affairs but because Kennedy believed he “would bring to the military techniques of management from the business world.”⁹⁹ McNamara had proven his mettle as a statistical analyst and control officer for the military during World War II and again demonstrated the efficacy of his management techniques as president of Ford Motor Company. Kennedy believed that those attributes would allow McNamara to transform the Pentagon and maximize military capabilities and outputs. When McNamara brought his Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS) to the Pentagon, he was the youngest secretary of defense ever appointed. At 44, however, he was also one of the oldest in Kennedy’s administration.

The new defense secretary’s approach attempted to quantify force structures according to national security needs and establish systems-analysis procedures that could reconcile desired “outputs” with the costs of “inputs.” The PPBS attempted to eliminate redundancies and nonessential variables, such as inter- or intraservice compromises.¹⁰⁰ In *The McNamara Strategy*, William Kaufmann lists five key assumptions of the PPBS: (1) force structure should derive from tasks and not parochial interests, (2) costs had to be reconciled with benefits, (3) all alternative courses of action were subject to evaluation

and could be measured, (4) short-term planning could be tied to and reflective of long-term goals, and (5) the secretary of defense would have the autonomy, staff, and latitude to make decisions independently of the military services.¹⁰¹ Much like Taylor, McNamara had Kennedy's ear and backing for the implementation of new ideas and organizational approaches that reflected both a change in the relationship among governmental institutions and a shift in the role, nature, and character of government itself.

Perhaps one of the more subtle but dramatic effects of the individuals whom Kennedy placed and what they believed was that ideological congruency and generational affinities insulated the inner circle not only from their own doubts but also from the doubts of others. From the outset, Kennedy received continuous—albeit often contradictory and inconclusive—reports on the situation in Vietnam. JCS memos both called for and warned against military involvement. State Department cables were on one day optimistic over what could be accomplished with Diem and on another day convincingly certain of his imminent demise. Among all the noise, if Kennedy's inner circle did not determine presidential decisions, the relationships the president had with his confidants certainly influenced those decisions. In 1961, for example, despite warnings from various military and State Department officials, Kennedy accepted Taylor's assurance that increased operational roles for US equipment and advisory teams would not result in the United States' inevitable involvement in a ground war.¹⁰² One of the last assessments of Vietnam Kennedy received was the McNamara-Taylor report in October 1963. The joint report came on the heels of months of speculation over the status of Diem's regime and the situation in Vietnam, to include the administration's potential role in a coup against Diem.¹⁰³ The McNamara-Taylor report summarized the following conclusions for Kennedy: (1) the military campaign showed continuing great progress, (2) dissatisfaction with the Diem regime was significant and growing, (3) there was no solid evidence for a successful coup against Diem, (4) the majority of GVN military officers remained more hostile to the Vietcong than to Diem, (5) the loyalties of GVN military officers could swing against Diem if his regime persisted in more repressive policies, and this would undermine favorable military progress, and (6) it was unclear whether the United States could successfully push Diem's regime to moderation, but such pressures were necessary.¹⁰⁴

In addition to recommending a more robust and efficient "strategic hamlet" program, the report also predicted that current US progress justified the potential withdrawal of 1,000 advisers and the possible handoff of internal security operations to the South Vietnamese by 1965.¹⁰⁵ In almost the same breath, however, the report states that the "security of South Vietnam remains

vital to United States security” and that all efforts should seek to defeat the Vietcong insurgency “as promptly as possible.”¹⁰⁶ The report’s tone and assessment are optimistic, yet it still anchors US security on positive outcomes in Vietnam. Recommendations (including condemnation of Diem’s repressive policies and a mixture of carrots and sticks) also assume the pliability of Diem’s behavior through the leverage the United States holds over him. This final set of assumptions concerning Diem’s pliability reflects a pervasive attitude within Kennedy’s White House that “private behavior was susceptible to political control.”¹⁰⁷ The White House’s belief that it could channel Diem’s behavior was merely an extension of the conviction that it could align US domestic and institutional behavior through a series of well-designed programs and policies.

Many in the military questioned Kennedy’s assumptions, criticizing McNamara’s programs and Taylor’s actions. In aggregate, critics believed that the two men overly diminished the influence of the JCS and that they also ripped the ceiling off budgets and missions.¹⁰⁸ McNamara’s Whiz Kids were “the most egotistical people I ever saw in my life,” said Air Force chief of staff Curtis LeMay.¹⁰⁹ Alain Enthoven, who headed McNamara’s systems analysis division, believed that military experience actually discouraged “seeing the larger picture” and that “there was little in the typical officer’s early career that qualifies him to be a better strategic planner than . . . [being] a graduate of the Harvard business school.”¹¹⁰ McNamara’s PPBS program was an expression of Kennedy’s belief that the Defense Department could be manipulated to meet the demands of his ambitious objectives without imposing budgetary limits. The appointment of Taylor both as presidential military adviser and as chairman of the joint chiefs demonstrated Kennedy’s determination to put in place his “own men” as a way to break the inertia of the past. Kennedy was convinced that the proper arrangement of people and institutions, of intellect and action, could trump the more conservative fiscal and military policies of Eisenhower. Even the national economy “could be manipulated to provide the resources necessary to sustain” Washington’s desires.¹¹¹

The highest rate of growth in US real gross domestic product (GDP) under Eisenhower was less than 3 percent, which occurred between 1958 and 1960.¹¹² Twice under Eisenhower, US GDP had shrunk, and Kennedy and his advisers blamed Eisenhower’s “failure to maintain a high growth rate” for three US recessions.¹¹³ Prior to taking office, Kennedy appointed domestic- and international-policy task forces, chaired by economists Paul Samuelson and Allan Sproul.¹¹⁴ In his 6 January 1961 “Samuelson Report on the State of the American Economy” for president-elect Kennedy, Samuelson argues that Eisenhower’s outdated economics stalled the high-growth rates needed to

sustain more substantial US military and policy objectives.¹¹⁵ Samuelson and Walter Heller, Kennedy's chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, successfully convinced Kennedy that economic expansion through Keynesian economic principles was more important than balanced budgets. Keynesian theory argues that naturally occurring individual behaviors and business cycles at the microlevel can cause suboptimal and adverse effects at the macroeconomic level. Government, John Maynard Keynes argues, could and should anticipate and interrupt economic downturns by artificially injecting money supplies and manipulating interest rates, tax rates, and other economic mechanisms.¹¹⁶

Kennedy's economic policies followed the prescriptions of Heller and Samuelson, and the economy became a tool of government to produce sustained growth and stimulate behaviors, forever necessitating the placement of "the political economist at the President's elbow."¹¹⁷ Kennedy's economic hand was much more visible than Adam Smith's, and many were troubled by what they viewed as government's encroachment into the private sector. In anticipation, Kennedy delivered several preemptive speeches in which he laid before the business community the familiar rallying cries of his administration. "In every sense of the word," Kennedy told the National Association of Manufacturers in December 1961, "capitalism is on trial as we debate these issues. . . . The hour of decision has arrived. We cannot afford to 'wait and see what happens,' while the tide of events sweeps over and beyond us. We must use time as a tool, not a couch. We must carve out our own destiny."¹¹⁸ In his 1963 State of the Union address, Kennedy emphasized the need for tax cuts, increased spending, and increased growth:

Now the time has come to make the most of our gains. . . . But recovery is not enough. . . . We have undertaken the most far reaching defense improvements in the . . . history of this country. And we have maintained the frontiers of freedom from Vietnam to West Berlin. But complacency or self-congratulation can imperil our security as much as the weapons of our adversary. A moment of pause is not a moment of peace. . . . Free world development will still be an uphill struggle. . . . In the end, the crucial effort is one of purpose—requiring not only the fuel of finance but the torch of idealism. . . . For we seek not the worldwide victory of one nation . . . but a worldwide victory of men. . . . To achieve this end, the United States will continue to spend a greater portion of its national production than any other people in the free world.¹¹⁹

The following table captures some of the core US economic data between 1954 and 1970. Though not comprehensive, the data clearly shows a distinctive growth trend for the Kennedy-Johnson years as compared to those of Eisenhower.

Table. US economic statistical data, 1954–70

	1954	1956	1958	1960	1962	1964	1966	1968	1970
Real GDP (in billions 1996 dollars)	1,9650.5	2,141.1	2,162.8	2,376.7	2,578.9	2,846.5	3,227.5	3,466.1	3,578.0
Percent change in real GDP	-0.7	2.0	-1.0	2.5	6.0	5.8	6.6	4.8	0.2
Consumer price index (1982–84 =100)	26.9	27.2	28.9	29.6	30.2	31.0	32.4	34.8	38.8
Supply of money (in billions of dollars)	130.3	136.0	138.4	140.7	147.8	160.3	172.0	197.4	214.3
Public debt (in billions)	270.8	272.7	279.7	290.5	302.9	316.1	328.5	368.7	380.9

Reprinted from Campbell R. McConnell and Stanley L. Brue, *Economics: Principles, Problems, and Policies*, 15th ed., ed. Lucille Sutton (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2002), inside front cover, as adapted from Bureau of Labor Statistics, Federal Reserve System; and William Clinton, *Economic Report of the President* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001).

Gaddis observes that McNamara’s revolution in the Pentagon and the Keynesian revolution in economics “implied a rejection of Eisenhower’s administrative style” and marked a significant shift in how government perceived the means it had at its disposal to effect its ends.¹²⁰ McDougall describes Kennedy’s new arrangements not only as transformative of governmental institutions and the relationships within government but also as a distinctive shift in the relationship between government and society.¹²¹ Antoine Bousquet assesses the Kennedy era as reflective of the cybernetic regime that “emerged from the unprecedented technological and industrial effort of WWII” and as driven by the belief that “complete predictability and centralized control” were now possible.¹²² He notes that “scientific methodology was applied more systematically than ever, with operations research and systems analysis comprehensively deployed to solve tactical and strategic problems, . . . fuel[ing] fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence.”¹²³

However we choose to describe Kennedy’s “new table,” it seems clear that the president’s conception of the threats aligned against the United States and the means required to meet those threats clearly influenced his policies. In many ways, Vietnam became a proving ground for Kennedy’s beliefs. A transformed government and military under the auspices of the new generation could find solution and victory where the policies of old had failed.

In May 1961, Kennedy lobbied Congress for the funding and support required for extraordinary times. He described 1961 as a “great opportunity” to fund and effect the transformations required to stem the tides of Communist revolutions.¹²⁴ Swift action was needed, according to the president, and he laid before Congress a litany of budgetary requests that would transform social programs, the military, and foreign aid. Kennedy requested more than \$3.4 billion in additional funding for capabilities and requirements linked to operations in Vietnam.¹²⁵ Of those, the largest increases were slated to the Military Assistance Program (\$2 billion), the presidential contingency fund (\$250 million), and the equipping, retraining, and development of conventional and paramilitary forces (\$100 million). Many of the president’s requests directly reflected the recommendations of Gilpatric’s Vietnam Task Force. Kennedy also acted on advice from his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, whom he had appointed as his personal representative in the newly formed Special Group (Counterinsurgency) Task Force.¹²⁶ The special group, headed by General Taylor, personified the administration’s belief in the need for unconventional solutions, flexibility, and a new, synergistic form of US military power. During his first year in office, Kennedy increased the number of special forces from 1,500 to 9,000 men and authorized the official wearing of the green beret. Kennedy was enamored with special forces because he believed that they could not only bring the required military expertise but also provide the leadership and “nation building” essential to remedying the “underlying national incohesiveness [*sic*]” that left underdeveloped nations vulnerable to Communist subversion.¹²⁷

Mobilization of the American economy and development of special forces and paramilitary capabilities were important corollaries to the “new strategists’ assault on massive retaliation doctrine.”¹²⁸ Kennedy took to heart the postulates set down by Robert Osgood in *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*.¹²⁹ Osgood suggests that limited war required limited aims as well as an intimate link between military force and diplomacy. To avoid both Armageddon and martial impotency, one had to “appropriately limit” military means. The American experience in Korea, said Osgood, demonstrated that “America’s capacity to retaliate directly upon the Soviet Union could not deter Communist aggression in the gray areas [and] that the United States was inadequately prepared to contain Communist aggression by any other means.”¹³⁰ Vietnam and wars of national liberation were the “gray areas,” and Kennedy’s budgetary requests to Congress and administered reforms for the DOD, NSC, and US economy were part of the administration’s transition to a strategy of flexible response.¹³¹ Though covert operations against Hanoi and in South Vietnam had been ongoing since the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy

greatly expanded resources, presence, and operational latitude for these missions. This increased commitment is reflected in Kennedy's approval of Gilpatric's task force requests in NSAM 52, Kennedy's budgetary requests and approved recommendations from the Special Counterinsurgency Group, and his response to General Landsdale's "Resources for Unconventional Warfare, S.E. Asia" report.¹³² Kennedy pushed for the integration of military, political, and psychological elements of national power and was outwardly expansive in his commitment to Vietnam, yet he emphasized and sought solution through limited, covert operations.¹³³ This contradiction was noted by Mrs. Bobbie Pendergrass, whose observations in her letter to Kennedy opened our discussion on the president's image of the Vietnam War. Although a housewife far removed from Kennedy's inner circle, her poignant observations demonstrate that acumen comes as much from outside the Beltway as from within—sometimes more so.

"Please," Pendergrass tells the president, "I'm only a housewife who doesn't claim to know all about the international situation—but . . . can the small number of our boys over in Viet Nam [*sic*] possibly be doing enough good to justify the *awful* number of casualties? It seems to me that . . . we should send enough to have a chance—or else stay home. Those fellows are just sitting *ducks*. . . . If a war is worth fighting— isn't it worth fighting to *win*?" (emphasis in original).¹³⁴ In his response, Kennedy said that Pendergrass's brother, James, must have understood that he could find himself in "a war like this [where] he took part not as a combatant but as an advisor," that James certainly "understood the necessity," and that a full war in Vietnam was "unthinkable."¹³⁵ The logic of flexible response and of containment strategy in general is revealed in Kennedy's statements, as is the intractable Vietnam situation. One of the only requests Kennedy denied Taylor was the general's call for 8,000 combat troops in 1961. McNamara references Kennedy's refusal of a JCS request for more involvement in Vietnam in 1962 as well as Kennedy's statements against combat troops in late 1963 as evidence of the president's commitment *against* a larger war.¹³⁶

George Herring and others propose logic similar to McNamara's, citing Kennedy's noncommitment of combat troops as proof of the president's reserve and of the limitations of his commitment to Vietnam. However, the contrary truth might actually be that Kennedy's constraint of traditional military mechanisms and combat troops illuminates his overcommitment to, and beliefs in, the mechanisms of government he saw as necessary to win the fight in Vietnam and against Communism. From this perspective, Kennedy's transformations were ways to squeeze more out of government so as to increase capabilities to meet ever-expanding objectives. Containment in

Camelot essentially involved an explosion of commitments in which Kennedy sought to supplant blunt mechanisms and policies with a better calibrated, more flexible, and sharper government. Kennedy believed that a new generation of the *right* men, organized the *right* way, could in fact triumph where others had and would fail. This perspective extended to the GVN and culminated in the administration's complicity in the coups and ultimate assassination of Diem.¹³⁷ By the fall of 1963, Diem had become a "seething problem" and stood in the way of direct US manipulations and controls, frustrating Kennedy's efforts to administer reforms and policy through the South Vietnamese president.¹³⁸ Kennedy's at least tacit involvement in the coups against Diem further ratified US obligations not only to South Vietnamese governance but also to the outcomes of the war.

Empty Shoes

During Kennedy's 34 months in office, the number of US advisers in Vietnam grew from fewer than 400 to over 16,000. He expanded the means and the missions of those advisers, resulting in a tenfold increase in US casualties. Kennedy injected the United States into the political processes and maneuverings of South Vietnam, which eventually led to the toppled Diem regime and dramatically increased the US charge to assist South Vietnam. Transformation of America's government moved the US economy from policies of solvency to policies of expansion. It created a Pentagon and national security architecture convinced of their own ability to solve almost any problem through systems analysis and calibrated efficiencies. On one occasion, an aide told McNamara that US efforts in Vietnam were doomed to fail, to which the secretary responded, "Where is your data? Give me something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry!"¹³⁹ Kennedy laid the groundwork for the "Americanization of the war," creating an open-ended commitment that lost "sight of proportion" and transformed the "limited risk gamble undertaken by Eisenhower."¹⁴⁰ Kennedy also greatly improved US military capabilities, particularly with regard to nonnuclear and special forces. Kennedy's insights and enhancements in these areas, however, had not proved their efficacy at the time of his death. As such, divergent attitudes prevailed as to whether or not the United States was "winning" in Vietnam and what level of military and political commitment was appropriate.¹⁴¹ McGeorge Bundy, for example, who would later become Johnson's national security adviser, was convinced that "unlimited commitment in Vietnam was justified," while men like George Ball argued that the United States should withdraw.¹⁴² Kennedy placed American shoes firmly on the shores of Vietnam, but ambiguous results and Kennedy's

sudden death left them empty, and it was Johnson who would have to decide what to fill them with. Kennedy thus “bequeathed to his successor a problem eminently more dangerous than the one he had inherited from Eisenhower.”¹⁴³

Kennedy entered office with the distinct impression that Eisenhower’s passive policies and undulating methodologies failed to fully exploit governmental potential and were grossly inadequate for the extreme and different world the United States faced. Kennedy arms the New Generation with the sword of a transformed and proactive government, infused with intellect and vision and properly organized around his newly fashioned “round table.” Into the breach of a total Cold War, Kennedy pours his vision and his knights, who are tempered in form but not in degree or purpose. As we revisit Kennedy’s presidential image and its influences on agendas and outcomes, it is perhaps now possible to surmise whether Vietnam is in fact the child returned to destroy Camelot.

History and the events that comprise it evolve. One of the advantages of this phenomenon is that as contemporary lives and challenges unfold, the past can be rediscovered as a rich well from which policy makers and strategists might draw fertile lessons and insights. One of the disadvantages of a “living history” is that attempts to fix inflexible events in a box of absolutes can prove futile, misleading, and even dangerous. However, review of the evidence and our current vantage point lead to the conclusion that neither Vietnam nor Kennedy’s heirs betrayed Camelot but that Kennedy was betrayed by his own image. Kennedy’s faith in government and the ambitions he sought through it resulted in large, overextended promises. Moreover, Kennedy tied these promises to results and embedded American prestige and interests in the outcomes for Vietnam—making it such that American retraction from the war could be seen as too costly not only for his own administration but also for subsequent ones. When policy is imbued with the sense that the United States must make good on its promises, regardless of feasibility or changing circumstances, then the value of commitment comes to equal or even exceed the tangible objectives that inspired the promises in the first place. America’s promises and subsequent policies in Vietnam were underwritten by the blood and treasure of the nation. So while it is noble to strive for great societies and grand international designs, it is also dangerous—for even governments have limits. And, if anything, Vietnam defined them for the United States.

Notes

1. White, “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” 159. According to Jackie Kennedy, the late president’s favorite lyrics from the musical were “Don’t let it be forgot; That once there was a spot; For one brief, shining moment that was known as Camelot.”

2. White contextualizes the Arthurian legend for a post–World War II world yet retains many of the original themes.

3. Beck, “Kennedy Image,” 45.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Clinton, “Remarks at the Dedication of the New Museum.”

6. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 86; and Beck, “Kennedy Image,” 45.

7. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197. Gaddis describes the “promise” of the new generation that would break with past policies. In the Arthurian legend, whoever was able to pull Excalibur from the stone would be king. All the knights and lords of England were gathered to try to remove the sword, and all failed. By happenstance, a 16-year-old Arthur came across the sword and removed it easily from the stone, thus becoming king.

8. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address.”

9. “Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961–1963,” CD ROM, 193–94. The archives contain a copy of the original handwritten letter from Mrs. Pendergrass as well as a typed transcript.

10. *Ibid.*, 186–87.

11. *Ibid.*, 194.

12. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 6–7. The rationale of what came to be known as the domino theory was first articulated by the NSC in February 1950 and justified extended military aid to the French in Indochina. “It is important to U.S. security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.” In January of 1954, Eisenhower approved an NSC paper that predicted “the loss of any single country [in Southeast Asia would ultimately lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia, then India and Japan, and finally] endanger the stability and security of Europe.” *Ibid.*

13. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 231. Kennedy was quoted following the Vienna Summit with Khrushchev in June 1961.

14. Kennedy, “Truth about Indochina.”

15. Kennedy, “Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs.”

16. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, doc. no. 2, “1952 Policy Statement by U.S. on Goals in Southeast Asia,” 27–32.

17. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 207.

18. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address.”

19. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–98.

20. Kennedy, “Truth about Indochina.”

21. *Ibid.*

22. Kennedy, “Remarks at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon.”

23. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 9.

24. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 84.

25. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 228–29.

26. Kennedy, “Remarks at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon.”

27. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 405.

28. Cottam, “Image Change,” 117.

29. Edwards, *Closed World*, preface, xiii.

30. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 8–9.

31. Kennedy, “City on a Hill Speech.”

32. Cottam, “Image Change,” 118.

33. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 84.

34. Kennedy to Diem, letter.
35. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 23, and doc. no. 14, 52.
36. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
37. *Ibid.*, 25.
38. Herring, *America's Longest War*, xiii.
39. Patterson, "Bearing the Burden," 195.
40. Eisenhower, "Farewell Address," 1–4.
41. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 138. See also Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 464.
42. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 204.
43. Kennedy, "Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs."
44. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 32.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 32–33.
47. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 59.
48. *Ibid.*, 15, 18, 125, 201, 691. See also Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 20–21. In 1955 Diem won 98.2 percent of the "vote." Pentagon reports described Diem's victory as "too resounding," but that did not deter Washington from reacting with "great alacrity" to his success.
49. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 21–22.
50. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 41.
51. Lindley, "An Ally Worth Having," 31.
52. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 42.
53. *Ibid.*, 41–42.
54. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 691. Diem was a bachelor, and Madame Dinh Nhu became the "First Lady" of South Vietnam. Madame Nhu took an active political role in Diem's government and was often a cause for resistance to Diem's regime.
55. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 42.
56. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 117–21.
57. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 85–87, and doc. no. 16. Shortly before Kennedy took office, an assessment by Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow highlighted the precarious situation in the South as well as Diem's weakness and lack of support from the populace. Once in office, Kennedy received a national intelligence estimate that echoed Durbrow's assessments. The intelligence estimate describes an "extremely critical period for the Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam. . . . More than one-half of the entire rural region south and southwest of Saigon, as well as some areas to the north, are under . . . Communist Control. . . . Discontent with the Diem Government continues to be prevalent among intellectual circles. . . . There has been increasing disposition within official circles and the Army to question Diem's ability to rally the people in the fight against the Communists because of reliance on virtual one-man rule, his toleration of corruption extending even to his immediate entourage, and his refusal to relax a rigid system of public controls" (*ibid.*, 86).
58. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 87–88, 104, 145–46, and doc. nos. 26 and 27, 141–44.
59. The analysis concerning the difference between symbols and image is the author's own, based on the research conducted into cognitive and image theory.
60. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 40.
61. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 110.
62. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 333.
63. Henriksen, *NATO's Gamble*, 197. In his analysis of Operation Allied Freedom, Henriksen quotes General Smith, who asserts that the character of war has changed "from the hard absolute

objectives of interstate industrial war to more malleable objectives.” Henriksen also summarizes Smith, who says that “modern wars are marked by the relationship between political and military activities, since they will evolve and change together” (*ibid.*).

64. Halberstam, *Best and the Brightest*, 57, 153.

65. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 198.

66. *Ibid.* See also Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 420–21.

67. Fairlie, *Kennedy Promise*, 132, 264.

68. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 75.

69. *Ibid.*

70. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 36.

71. *Ibid.* Quoted from John S. D. Eisenhower, Memorandum of a Conference with the President, 31 December 1960, “Staff Notes—December 1960,” Whitman file, Eisenhower Diary Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, KS.

72. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 36–37.

73. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 7–8.

74. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 36.

75. In a note from his memoirs, McNamara describes the manner of handoff between presidents during transitions as “a weakness in our form of government [involving] the lack of an effective way to transfer knowledge and experience from one administration to another.” McNamara assesses that the United States pays a heavy price in policy and outcomes as a result of the somewhat haphazard presidential transition process and compares the inefficacies of the American system to what he sees as the more advantageous ways power is transferred in parliamentary systems. McNamara recalls how in Great Britain and West Germany, for example, defense ministers trained for their positions by serving as opposition party leaders and studying their country’s security issues for many years. McNamara contrasts this with his own “preparation” for serving as defense secretary by working at the Ford Motor Company and calls the meeting between Eisenhower and Kennedy “a poor substitute” for the kind of training and handoff practiced in other countries. See McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 35.

76. Campbell and Steinberg, *Difficult Transitions*, x.

77. Weigley, *American Way of War*, 456.

78. Patterson, “Bearing the Burden,” 208.

79. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 32.

80. *Ibid.* John F. Kennedy as quoted in the *New York Times*, 7 June 1962, 26.

81. US Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 1, *Vietnam, 1961*, CD ROM, 92.

82. Gilpatric to Kennedy, memorandum, 43.

83. *Ibid.*

84. The draft task force report is dated 26 April 1961. See House Committee on Armed Services, *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967*, vol. 11, 42–57. For Bundy to secretary of state, NSAM 52, 11 May 1961, which approves the task force recommendations, see <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam-52.htm>.

85. Bundy to secretary of state, NSAM 52.

86. Gilpatric to Kennedy, memorandum, 43. Gilpatric’s report calls for “as necessary” expansion of the military assistance advisory group with at least an additional 100 US advisers to be dispatched immediately. The report also calls for expansion of International Cooperation Agency procedures so that more US administrators, public health officials, educators, agricultural experts, and so forth could be deployed to Vietnam. Gilpatric asks for a doubling of South

Vietnam's Civil Guard Force and an additional \$49 million in funding, the delivery of US surveillance and early warning radar equipment, and the delivery and stand-up of a more expansive communication and information operations network.

87. *Ibid.*, 43–46.

88. Bundy to secretary of state, NSAM 52.

89. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 75.

90. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 4. According to Maxwell Taylor, the NSC was “little more than a sort of registration office” for decisions that President Kennedy had already “made in the comparative privacy of the oval office.” Taylor, “Trends in National Security Planning.”

91. For more a more detailed account of the Bay of Pigs from within the Kennedy administration, see Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987). For more detail on the Laotian agreement, see Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

92. Ball, *Vietnam-on-the-Potomac*, 90.

93. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 9.

94. *Ibid.*, 12. Taylor stated that “as an irreverent bureaucrat with a low opinion of the committee system,” he “found the Special Group a refreshing exception.” Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 200–201.

95. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 11.

96. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 593–94, 604–9, as quoted from Rostow speech at Fort Bragg, NC, 28 June 1961.

97. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 305.

98. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 224. See also Kennedy, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” 11 January 1962.

99. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 3.

100. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 224.

101. Kaufmann, *McNamara Strategy*, 48.

102. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 101–4. The Pentagon study indicates that despite the controversy and differing opinions, the outcome of the Taylor mission to Vietnam—which called for increased support forces, helicopter companies, an expanded advisory mission, and tactical air support—was essentially already agreed to by the president before Taylor left Washington.

103. *Ibid.*, 158–59, and doc. nos. 33–51, pp. 191–216.

104. *Ibid.*, doc. 47, “McNamara-Taylor Report on Mission to South Vietnam,” 211.

105. The term *strategic hamlet* refers to Sir Robert Thompson's counterinsurgency strategy. Thompson was appointed head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam in 1961 and had the ear of the Kennedy administration. Essentially, strategic hamlets were “fortified combat villages.” Local populations would be moved to these hamlets that were sanitized of Vietcong influence. As more and more hamlets were established and linked together, Diem's government would increase and solidify their control. See Praddos, *Vietnam*, 69–70.

106. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 213.

107. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 305.

108. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 20–21.

109. *Ibid.*, 20. See also transcript, Curtis LeMay, Oral History Interview, 28 June 1971, 7, Oral History Collection, LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

110. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 19. See also transcript, Alain Enthoven, Oral History Interview, 29 July 1970, tape 1, p. 6, LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, TX; and Alain Enthoven

and Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough: Shaping the Defense Program, 1961–1969* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 73–116.

111. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 225.

112. McConnell and Brue, *Economics*, inside front cover.

113. *Ibid.*; and Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 225.

114. Meltzer, *History of the Federal Reserve*, 315–17.

115. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 225–26. See also Paul A. Samuelson's task force report on the economy, 6 January 1961, Kennedy Papers, Pre-Presidential File, box 1071, "Economy—Samuelson Report," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, digital archives, <http://www.jfklibrary.org>.

116. See Keynes, *General Theory of Employment*.

117. Heller, *New Dimensions of Political Economy*, 1–2.

118. Kennedy, "Address in New York City."

119. Kennedy, "State of the Union," 226–30.

120. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 226, 59–62.

121. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 305–7.

122. Bousquet, *Scientific Way of Warfare*, 33.

123. *Ibid.*, 34.

124. Kennedy, "Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs," 396–406.

125. *Ibid.* The amount listed was derived by adding the requested additional funding for the presidential contingency fund, the United States Information Agency, the Military Assistance Program, the reequip and retraining programs, the increase to Marine Corps manning, and the doubling of Army Reserve and deployment forces. The figure is limited to increases only and does not reflect the total amount already approved to each of these programs or the entire budget.

126. Weigley, *American Way of War*, 457.

127. *Ibid.*

128. *Ibid.*, 411.

129. Osgood, *Limited War*, ix, 146, 189.

130. *Ibid.*

131. For more information on flexible response and other major US containment strategies, see Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*; Weigley, *American Way of War*, 441–77; and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

132. See Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 90–91, 130–38; and Weigley, *American Way of War*, 455–57.

133. Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 40.

134. "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961–1963," CD ROM, 193–94. The archives contain a copy of Mrs. Pendergrass's original handwritten letter as well as a typed transcript.

135. *Ibid.*, 186–87.

136. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 148–55; and McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 62, 86–87, 96–97.

137. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 155–209 (see doc. nos. 33–46); and McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 68, 72–77.

138. "Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961–1963," CD ROM, 19, 24, 31, 42–44, 57, 73–75, 105–7. The collection of memos, cables, and policy papers between August and November 1963 reveal increasing tensions between Washington and Diem. At one point, Kennedy initiates investigation into ways to build up anti-Diem forces. In another exchange, it

is revealed that the United States suspects Diem and Nhu might be secretly working to reconcile with Hanoi. A CIA memo in October described Diem's increasingly harsh policies, the growing disillusionment of the Vietnamese people, and Diem's denial of American control and his standing in the way, both of which frustrated the US counterinsurgency supply system.

139. Edwards, *Closed World*, 127–28.

140. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 263–64; and Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 79–84. According to the *Pentagon Papers*, Kennedy started the dilemma that plagued the United States throughout Vietnam—“limited means for excessive ends” (79).

141. “Kennedy Administration: Vietnam Policy Papers 1961–1963,” CD ROM, 67.

142. *Ibid.*, 90–91, 107–9.

143. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 107.

Chapter 4

From Texas to Tet: Johnson's Posse of Lies

Just like the Alamo, somebody damn well needed to go to their aid. Well, by God, I'm going to Viet Nam's [sic] aid!

—Lyndon B. Johnson, 1964

Thus the White House machinery became the President's psyche writ large, transmitting his wishes throughout the Executive Office with a terrifying force.

—Doris Kearns Goodwin, 1976

Once on the tiger's back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.

—George Ball, 1964

I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. . . . But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as an appeaser and we would find it impossible to accomplish anything . . . anywhere on the entire globe.

—Lyndon B. Johnson, 1970

Johnson Saddled

McNamara said of Johnson that he “possessed a kaleidoscopic personality” and was “by turns open and devious, loving and mean, compassionate and tough, gentle and cruel—he was a towering, powerful, paradoxical figure.”¹ Johnson was a man of contradictions and many metaphors. Throughout this study, the reader will find an array of American mythology and metaphors that draws on everything from the pioneer to the promise of outer space. No person is readily encapsulated in a single metaphor, but Johnson proves especially difficult. A markedly enigmatic leader during an extremely perplexing time, he not only attempted to tackle the challenges of his era but also really

believed he could solve the complex issues that have accompanied humankind throughout the ages. In the end, focus ultimately settled on Johnson's fabrications, misrepresentations, and lies that both accompanied and obscured his policies in Vietnam as the organizing metaphor. It is no small gauntlet that is thrown down when a president is called a liar, so it is important to briefly address some distinctions.

Johnson's "posse of lies" is not meant in the insidious sense. This study is not attempting to maliciously paint the president as immoral. It is concerned with determining what perhaps inspired Johnson to lie and, more significantly, the consequences of those lies rather than with judging either the man or the act. Furthermore, lies are neither always bad nor always avoidable. Fundamentally, lies are gap fillers used to force together "what is" with "what is desired" and in this way are little different from the myths, beliefs, and perceptions that frame problems and define our realities every day. Recall that *reality*, as Boulding describes, is not "truth" but what one "believes to be true." In that sense, to varying degrees, every image is a lie. This study previously defined *problems* as the gap between "what is" and "what could and should be." Understood in this way, lies are also ways to solve problems. It is in their implementation, however, that lies present themselves as particularly precarious solutions to problems. An image depends on its ability to translate experience and feedback. When an image encounters disconfirming information, either the image transforms the information or the information transforms the image. Lies can delay—but cannot prevent—one of these two outcomes. The disparity between the existential world and the world as it is perceived eventually widens to the point where the cognitive bridge lacks foundation, and the image collapses. Lies provide a temporary and an especially false bridge.

When Kennedy is assassinated, Johnson sees a Communist plot and starts drawing lines in the sand, turning his attention not just to vengeance but to vindication of the American ideal. He sets about a course that in his mind not only will bring strength to bear against the Communists but also will eradicate the villains of the human condition. When he takes the reins of the presidency, Johnson essentially mounts a posse to carry out his cause. Posses from the American West were often an eclectic mix of armed men deputized in the name of justice. When Johnson rides out, he takes his men, but he also takes with him an assortment of beliefs. Furthermore, the men surrounding Johnson were victims of their own beliefs and often muddied the waters on the situation in Vietnam, making it easier for the president to believe his master narrative. Almost to a man, members of Johnson's administration never considered it possible that a small country like North Vietnam could stand

up to and thwart American power. To them, it seemed perfectly reasonable that America's immense capabilities would readily overwhelm North Vietnam and could do so for relatively little cost. Such optimism reflected perhaps a misunderstanding of the kind of war North Vietnam was fighting and was anchored by an overwhelming faith in American exceptionalism. Johnson was both a perpetuator of and a victim to the sentiments of his time. Presidents are "simultaneously the strongest and the weakest of all national leaders," and none completely escape the shackles placed on them by their advisers, their agents, or the institutions they command.² Ultimately, however, it is the president who sits at the apex of American power. As Gordon Goldstein reminds us in *Lessons in Disaster*, "Counselors advise but presidents decide," and military interventions are a "presidential choice."³ The many pieces that feed national decision making are integrated and channeled to the president and in aggregate give birth to policy through him. Presidents are Gullivers, but they are also the chief executive and choose how to view and use the advice they receive.⁴ This study concerns itself with how presidential image perceives, shapes, and conducts agendas. As such, while it must allow for the influence of Johnson's advisers and of binding political structures, it is Johnson who closes the decision loop. For our purposes, then, it is not as pertinent that Johnson was perhaps lied to or had facts about Vietnam misrepresented to him. What is more relevant is discovering how Johnson's own predilections made him susceptible to lies and misinformation and how his own image affected what he did with those lies and how he contrived his own.

Johnson's lies begin with the myths he armed himself with but eventually grow as the realities of Vietnam and international and domestic politics frustrate his cause. Johnson's ultimate quarry is elusive, but his dedication is iron-clad; Johnson is spurred by that commitment to at first simply malign the truth in dedication to his higher cause. Eventually, however, those small half-truths morph into a destructive posse of lies; where at first Johnson rode and carried those lies into Vietnam, eventually they rode him—saddling and whipping the country and the war until the end of Johnson's presidency.

Image of a New Frontiersman

Lyndon Johnson would often boast that his "ancestors were teachers and lawyers and college presidents and governors when the Kennedys in this country were still tending bar."⁵ Johnson was outwardly proud of his lineage. He recounted tales of family members standing with Crockett and Boone at the Alamo and herding cattle "across Kansas with the first pioneers."⁶ Born in 1908 on the banks of the Pedernales River near Stonewall in southern Texas,

Johnson had a childhood that was quintessential “rural American.” Travel to the closest metropolitan area of Austin meant two days by horse or one day by Henry Ford’s Model T over dirt roads that washed out with every rain. Electricity and pavement took some of the edge off the rugged countryside by the 1930s, but outhouses, straw brooms, and the hand carrying of kindling and water for woodstoves characterized Johnson’s youth. The Johnsons were “country,” but as LBJ continually reminded folks with the recounting of his ancestry, they were “fancy country.” Johnson’s mother, Rebekah, graduated from Baylor, and his father, Sam Johnson, served in the Texas legislature. Still, despite the image of the Johnson family that LBJ purported, they were also farmers and cattle speculators, at times literally living hand to mouth on the edge of economic ruin.⁷

Johnson’s confrontation with poverty at an early age became an enduring part of his presidential image. In one instance, during the Christmas holiday in 1963, Johnson cajoled New York hairdresser Eddie Senz to secretly fly to Washington, DC, to coif Lady Bird, Johnson’s daughters, and his secretaries. “All right now,” Johnson told Senz, “I’m a poor man, and I don’t make much money, but I got a wife and a couple of daughters, and four or five people . . . and I like the way you make them look, [so] bring whoever you need, and we’ll pay for their transportation, but we can’t pay for much else.”⁸ Johnson had worked as a silk-stocking salesman, janitor, and messenger to supplement the costs of his tuition (\$17 a semester plus \$30 per month for room and board) at Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos. During his senior year he also took on a teaching job at a Mexican-American school in Cotulla, Texas, located about halfway between San Antonio and Laredo. Cotulla was segregated, and Johnson’s pupils and their families were impoverished, hungry, and ill treated. After witnessing how his pupils lived without modern amenities, often searching garbage piles for food, Johnson described the treatment of the poor Mexican farm workers as “worse than you’d treat a dog.” Johnson later recounted that “you never forgot what poverty and hatred could do when you see the scars on the hopeful face of a young child.”⁹

As a senator and as president, Johnson vigorously pushed social and economic legislation, declared war on poverty and inequality, and in many ways carried out a crusade against the disparities and hardships he encountered during his youth. Like Kennedy, Johnson saw within government the means to eradicate social barriers and inequity. Also like Kennedy, Johnson had accompanied his own father on numerous political trips and spent time listening, learning, and falling in love with the world of politics. However, the two men orbited two very different worlds. Kennedy had attended an array of private and prep schools in New York and Connecticut, summered in Hyannis

Port, and spent winter holidays at his family home in Palm Beach. Kennedy also graduated from Harvard, and where Johnson's political rounds with his father entailed driving the dirt roads of Texas to talk with farmers, Kennedy accompanied Ambassador Joseph Kennedy on diplomatic trips to Europe—once even bringing his own convertible. Johnson's world was less a pastoral realm filled with knights carrying out a divine charge and more a craggy, harsh landscape where the individual needed not rescuing but empowerment. Johnson's vision was no less ambitious than Kennedy's, but it faced the challenge of reconciling two worlds. On the one hand, Johnson believed in the rugged individualism of his forebearers and demanded of himself and of others the kind of self-reliance, initiative, and culpability that distinguished America's pioneering spirit. On the other hand, he saw the seemingly insurmountable barriers to individual excellence all around him:

The problems confronting [America] were hardly new. The lack of specific training, the denial of civil rights to black Americans, the neglect of the educational needs of our young, the inadequacy of health care, the invisible barriers around our ghettos—all these had been with us for generations. . . . My entire life, from boyhood on, had helped me recognize the work that needed to be done in America. My view of leadership had always been an activist one. . . . Harry Truman used to say that 13 or 14 million Americans had their interests represented in Washington, but that the rest of the people had to depend on the president of the United States. That is how I felt about the 35 million American poor. They had no voice and no champion. Whatever the cost, I was determined to represent them.¹⁰

Johnson's words reveal core tenets of his presidential image. Johnson was the champion of the individual and believed the world belonged to everyone, not just the Ivy educated or the well bred. He hated to see people either obstructed or diminished—especially himself. Whether the barriers were race, bureaucracy, sex, breeding, economics, or oppressive ideologies, Johnson sought to smash them. That he saw himself as a champion of Walt Whitman's "great unwashed" exemplifies his affinity for the impoverished. His mind-set, born of his experiences, demonstrates his belief in the individual. Doris Kearns Goodwin posits that Johnson's sense of rugged individualism and civil responsibility was part of his own "inner need" and reflected the character of the age in which he grew up.¹¹ Johnson believed that a man, with enough will and effort, could make a difference. If that one man were president, he could defeat the monsters that plagued the human condition, and every man, woman, and child could rise and take their rightful place within a Great Society. "Some men," Johnson said, "want power simply to strut around the world and to hear the tune of 'Hail to the Chief.' Others want it simply to build prestige, to collect antiques, and to buy pretty things. Well I wanted power to give things to people—all sorts of things to all sorts of people, especially the poor

and the blacks.”¹² Kennedy saw the machinations of government as a way to build a new world, but Johnson saw government as a way to remove obstacles that prevented individuals from building it themselves. The people and the government that could liberate them needed their president.

Describing the role of the president, Johnson said that “no one can experience with the President of the United States the glory and agony of his office. No one can share the majestic view from his pinnacle of power. No one can share the burden of his decisions or the scope of his duties.”¹³ The president stands alone. If Kennedy resembled the young Arthur, imbued with and leading the destiny of a New Generation, then Johnson was more akin to the often solitary and contradictory heroes from the American West.

America’s heroes of the western frontier were self-reliant and faced daunting odds as they fought for their just cause on the knife’s edge that separates justice and law. Patrick Porter observes that the American identity—indeed, the mythology and history of America’s wars—is replete with examples of the archetypal frontiersman.¹⁴ From the Alamo to Little Big Horn to Vietnam, Porter suggests that American leaders have “nourished” and invoked a “frontier ideology” that encapsulates the country’s “righteous struggle against barbarism.”¹⁵ This frontier ideology allows US presidents to paint America’s wars as a landscape upon which the country can articulate its fate. Furthermore, frontier mythology promotes the idea that America’s wars are expeditions not just of firepower and coercion but of virtue, in which victory both depends upon and reinforces the efficacy of the American ideal.¹⁶ When Johnson compares Vietnam to the Alamo and when he interprets himself as a cross between a “preacher and a cowboy,” he translates the frontier myth into America’s struggle against Communism, his war on poverty, and his role as president.¹⁷ As president, Johnson holed up in the adobe fort, faced daunting odds, and was steadfast in his commitment to a just cause.

Johnson imagined a government that, with him at its behest, could ride in to tame the frontier, free the individual, and then move on. Johnson declares wars on poverty, ignorance, and corruptive ideologies and tilts into the breach in full regalia.¹⁸ Yet he recoiled from the possibility of Vietnam making him a “wartime president.”¹⁹ Johnson’s frontier was wicked.²⁰ There were no simple bands of bad guys who could be cleanly excised with posses and six-shooters. The villains Johnson pursued were nebulous, comingled, and not readily cowed. The stakes Kennedy created in Vietnam, combined with Johnson’s sense of justice, left the new president with fights he could not refuse both at home and abroad. Johnson was also driven by a multifaceted sense of duty and purpose. During an interview with *Washington Star* reporter Isabelle Shelton in 1964, Johnson was asked about his literary and presidential influences.

“The first president I really loved was Jackson,” Johnson revealed. “I had great respect of Jefferson because he believed in the land. . . . Then I loved Jackson because he was a guy that didn’t let ‘em tread on him. . . . And Wilson. I devoured him . . . everything he wrote or said I memorized.”²¹ Johnson thus informed his own presidency with an arrangement of past presidents whose disparate political flavors ranged widely among the rugged “tough guy,” the “nationalist,” and the consummate progressive internationalist and “Kantian liberal.”

Johnson’s multifaceted sense of purpose drove him to attempt reconciling very different worlds. His worldviews embraced the tensions created by the intersection of a complex assortment of domestic and international challenges. On the domestic front, he not only believed in the purposes and aspirations initiated by Kennedy but also thought they didn’t go far enough. Building a Great Society would fulfill Johnson’s own vision and serve as a fitting eulogy to his fallen predecessor: “Everything I had ever learned in the history books taught me that *martyrs* have to die for causes. John Kennedy had died. But his ‘cause’ was not really clear. That was my job. I had to take the dead man’s program and turn it into a *martyr’s* cause” (emphasis added).²² From Johnson’s perspective, Kennedy’s domestic agenda was incomplete, and Kennedy’s sudden departure left a vacuum into which he poured his own presidential image. Johnson’s experiences with poverty and his time spent teaching at the Mexican-American School in Cotulla constituted an essential part of that image. His students described the work Johnson had done and his arrival as “like a blessing from the clear sky,” and Johnson himself believed he could in fact deliver similar blessings to the nation and the world.²³

To carry out his mission, Johnson was forced on the international front to take up the mantle in Vietnam, no matter how distasteful he found it. In 1965 Johnson explained to Martin Luther King during a telephone conversation why he believed the United States had to fight in Vietnam:

I can’t get out. I just can’t be the architect of failure. . . . I can’t lose in Vietnam. . . . I didn’t get us into this. We got into it in ‘54. . . . Eisenhower and Kennedy were in deep. There were 33,000 men out there when I came into the presidency. . . . I don’t want to pull down the flag and come home running with my tail between my legs . . . particularly if it’s going to create more problems [here] than I got out there. . . . On the other hand, I don’t want to get us into war with China. . . . I’ve got a pretty tough problem.²⁴

That Johnson explains his position to the famous civil rights activist demonstrates his delicate balancing of international and domestic demands. Johnson could not let Vietnam derail his domestic agenda, but he couldn’t ignore the conflict. Vietnam was an obstacle to his real love, the Great Society.

The intersection and tension between Johnson's domestic and international policies were just one of the lines between disparate worlds that he had to straddle as he wire-walked Kennedy's administration. "We were moving into unchartered territory," Johnson wrote of his ambitious domestic agenda, "[and] powerful forces of opposition would be stirred. . . . But the powerful conviction that an attack on poverty was right and necessary blotted out any fears."²⁵ Johnson was on the frontier, riding with his posse in search of reconciliation. He was the new journeyman bequeathed the responsibility of bolstering Kennedy's outposts of freedom. If he could liberate all people, then Johnson could move beyond Kennedy and toward the Great Society.²⁶

Johnson's personality was itself an intersection of conflicting lines. He was a doting but unfaithful husband and known for both drinking and gambling. Though often vilified in the press, an April 1964 *Time* magazine article titled "Mr. President, You're Fun" reveals his more jovial and carefree side that charmed even his harshest critics.²⁷ Johnson could be cold and would treat those he disapproved of to the "Johnson freeze-out." He could also be exceptionally considerate. Following Kennedy's assassination, Johnson deliberately and consistently talked with, comforted, and extended courtesies to Jacqueline Kennedy and her family.²⁸ Johnson was bullish, famous for standing only inches from other senators during discussions so he could "breathe into their noses," and even took to physically leaning on people he was arguing with—almost literally twisting arms to get his way. Under Truman as a senator, Johnson grilled Gen Douglas MacArthur during a Senate hearing "in a solicitous manner that nonetheless glaringly revealed the general's ignorance of world affairs," a performance described by another senator as "the biggest honey[f-----] I ever saw."²⁹ Johnson twisted arms but could do so in a way that the recipient might be unaware of the treatment. Even when overtly domineering, Johnson was often motivated by a noble cause. From the powerful office of the presidency, Johnson could carry out his responsibilities to the poor, but he was the "accidental president," in office by virtue of Kennedy's assassination: "I was catapulted without preparation into the most difficult job any mortal man could hold. . . . My duties could not wait."³⁰ Johnson worried about both his preparation and his legitimacy:

Every President has to establish with the various sectors of the country what I call "the right to govern." Just being elected to office does not guarantee him that right. . . . Every President has to inspire the confidence of the people[,] . . . become a leader[, and] . . . develop a moral underpinning to his power. . . . For me, that presented special problems. In spite of more than three decades of public service, I knew I was an unknown quantity to many of my countrymen and to much of the world. . . . I suffered another handicap, since I had come to the Presidency not through the collective will of the people but in the wake of tragedy. I had no mandate from the voters.³¹

As president, Johnson confronted a paradoxical and complicated world with his inherent contradictions and complexities. He perceived these disparate worlds and tried to reconcile them, leading him to fight not one war but many.

Internally, a war raged between Johnson's "proud pioneer" and his insecurities about being on the world stage. Johnson was caught between the world he came from and the world he now sought to lead. He faced a quandary between the inheritance he wanted to fulfill—completing Roosevelt's New Deal (which would also pay homage to Kennedy)—and the inheritance of Vietnam forced upon him by Kennedy. To carry out his fight for the Great Society, Johnson found himself in the crossfire between hawks and doves, driving him to seek out ways to be tough on Communism without sacrificing the resources and domestic support for his social programs. Johnson also faced a war of perceptions; that is, the manner of his ascendance to office left him compelled not only to validate Kennedy's policies but also to prove himself by leaving his own mark upon them. Chapter 3 suggested that Kennedy pushed Vietnam to the front lines of the Cold War. Johnson continued to contextualize Vietnam as an important part of the Cold War, but he folded both the Cold War and Vietnam into the interior lines of his domestic agenda and war on poverty. The front lines of Johnson's fight for the Great Society were the perceptions of Congress (and, more importantly, the public), and he poured into that breach all the energy and resources he could muster. Johnson calculated and manipulated perceptions with the exceptional fervor of a man who believed, much as Hawking suggested, that "individual will" could create reality. The war of perceptions thus became Johnson's primary line of operations.

Only by proving himself, reconciling his inheritance, and convincing the coalitions of the disparate worlds he sought to unify of the efficacy and merit of his programs could he realize his vision. Johnson's fellow students and his teachers, coworkers, and subordinates described him as driven and domineering throughout his life. He would often interrupt conversations and strove to project and create an image of himself in the minds of those around him.³² These tendencies were amplified when Johnson became president not just by virtue of the power and position of the office but also because Johnson surmised an even greater need to shape perceptions so that he could carry out his agenda. Johnson had to build an image of himself in the minds of his countrymen as well as create the appropriate perceptions of his presidency, its policies, and his legacy.

Goodwin describes how Johnson's nature and worldview not only shaped his White House but also exacerbated the tendency for staffers, advisers, and principals to become overly dependent on the president.³³ Drawing on Carl Friedrich's description of the "vacuum" phenomenon in totalitarian societies,

Goodwin observes that Johnson's penchant for control would screen out "options, facts, and ideas" so that "Lyndon Johnson's personality operated to distort truth in much the same way as ideology works in totalitarian society."³⁴ George Reedy described the White House as "the life of a court . . . designed for one purpose and one purpose only—to serve the material needs and the desires of a single man. . . . No one interrupts presidential contemplation for anything less than a major catastrophe. . . . No one speaks to him unless spoken to. . . . No one ever invites [the president] to 'go soak your head' when his demands become . . . unreasonable."³⁵ Already inclined to overbearance and having a penchant for exaggerating his understanding and control of things, Johnson the president now enjoyed the ultimate bully pulpit. When this perch conjoined with his intense motivation to paint the reality he believed necessary to his ends, the effect on policy was both dramatic and tragic:

In this strange atmosphere, the men surrounding the President [became] sycophants. . . . [This] structure proved disastrous for Lyndon Johnson and the nation. He had always functioned best in relationships where the other person had independent power. Then Johnson had to pay attention to the necessities of bargaining, moderating his drive to dominate by a realistic perception of the limitations of his own resources. But when the structure reduced the external limitations, Johnson fell back on his need to dominate. . . . Thus the White House machinery became the President's psyche writ large, transmitting his wishes throughout the Executive Office with a terrifying force.³⁶

Johnson often lamented that the last thing he wanted was to be a "wartime president," yet wars permeated his administration. From the existential threat of the Cold War to the burgeoning conflict in Vietnam to Johnson's own declared war on poverty and the conflicts that raged within him, Johnson was besieged from both without and within. These competing interests and demands mapped the geography of Johnson's presidency. From the high desert of southern Texas and the shantytowns full of America's forgotten to the concrete cacophony of Beltway politics to center stage at the UN assembly and all the way to the jungles of Vietnam, Johnson the New Frontiersman rode the fence lines between his many wars and carried the American people with him.

The following section examines Johnson's presidential image, particularly focusing on how his obsession for controlling perceptions not only reflected his view of the world but also shaped agendas and outcomes in Vietnam. This study analyzes Johnson's initial impressions and approaches to the Vietnam War, looking at how he contended with and perceived the transition from Kennedy's presidency to his own. As American pioneers braved the hazards of the country's wild landscapes to forge the destiny of a nation, they mollified the frontier with a fierce will and often called upon the harsher angels to reconcile the nation they sought with the obstacles that threatened it. Men of justice were called upon to ride forth and press their sacred cause as they

renegotiated the lines of a savage and unforgiving landscape. Johnson believed that his iron will could both create and negotiate not only the lines that separated Vietnam and fractured his domestic agenda but also the divides within himself and his nation. In doing so, Johnson formed his own posse that could ride herd on America's perceptions and harness the reality he needed to prosecute his agenda. Once invested, he could no sooner accept defeat than George Armstrong Custer could have withdrawn or Daniel Boone surrendered. The mythology of the American West, conveyed through history, stories, and film, shows us archetypal heroes who are at once cowboys, pioneers, saviors, villains, and martyrs. Johnson's turn at the presidency and his policies in Vietnam are an expression of these American motifs. Common Western images include glorious last stands or show the flawed hero ambling off into the sunset, the people he saved at his back—their calls for his return echoing off the hillsides.

As Johnson picked up the mantle from Kennedy, he described his duty to continue and expand the fallen president's policies as "the martyr's cause." After Johnson moves the nation through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the 1965 troop decision and toward the war's peak in 1968, what did the country shout into the hills when *he* rode away? What villains and obstacles were vanquished, and which ones remained? Who was surrounded, and what challenges faced the next presidential heir? How successful was the martyr's cause, and who or what was martyred?

A New Seat, a New President, and a New War

Within hours of assuming the presidency, Johnson declared, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."³⁷ During his address before a joint session of Congress on 27 November 1963, Johnson calls for the vigorous recommitment to Kennedy's causes and affirms his dedication to a robust social and international agenda:

The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed. . . . And now the ideas and the ideals which he so nobly represented must and will be translated into . . . action. . . . This Nation has demonstrated that it has the courage to seek peace, and it has the fortitude to risk war. . . . This Nation will keep its commitments from South Vietnam [*sic*] to West Berlin. We will be unceasing in the search for peace. . . . And let all know we will extend no special privilege. . . . We will carry on the fight against poverty and misery, and disease and ignorance, in other lands and in our own. . . . For 32 years Capitol Hill has been my home. . . . An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the Presidency. . . . Let all the world know [that] . . . I rededicate this government to the unswerving support [of its commitments]. . . . This is our challenge—not to

hesitate, not to pause, not to turn about and linger . . . but to continue on our course. . . .
It is a time for action . . . [so] that John Fitzgerald Kennedy did not live—or die—in vain.³⁸

In his address, Johnson attempts to build his own credibility. At the same time, he draws on Kennedy's memory to push a list of social legislation, telling Congress that "no eulogy could more eloquently honor president Kennedy's memory" than passage of bills on issues such as civil rights, taxation, and education.³⁹ During his State of the Union address in January 1964, Johnson again calls on Congress to honor Kennedy by passing the social agenda Johnson is now advocating, stating that Congress "can demonstrate effective legislative leadership by dispatching the public business with clarity."⁴⁰ Johnson believed in the "rightness" of Kennedy's social legislation, but he wanted to take it further and had no qualms about pivoting on Kennedy's memory to do so. It is also telling that while he unequivocally committed himself to Vietnam and the Cold War, his speeches were heavily weighted toward domestic progress and social agendas. Kennedy's early addresses emphasize the "extraordinary challenges to freedom" that international threats (wars of national liberation) posed and call for the country's mobilization to turn outward to meet those challenges. In contrast, Johnson embedded those external challenges within America's "fight against poverty and misery."

For Johnson, the intimacy between Vietnam and domestic politics was driven by more than just what he considered necessary to facilitate his Great Society. There was also a consistency between what he believed was required to build the Great Society and how he thought he could solve Vietnam. Louis Hartz writes in *The Founding of New Societies* that "from the time of Wilson . . . [America] has actually sought to project its ethos abroad," and Goodwin observes that this "American tendency . . . was dramatized" by decision makers in Vietnam and led to viewing the "Vietnamese conflict [as] a battle between two fixed groups of people with different but *negotiable* interests" (emphasis added).⁴¹ Johnson thus approached Vietnam much like it was a round of negotiations in the US Senate, where "everyone had a price" (including Ho Chi Minh). Solving Vietnam, Johnson said, would be "like a filibuster—enormous resistance at first, then a steady whittling away, then Ho hurrying to get it over with."⁴² Johnson's view characterized a distinctly American perception of the world that grossly overlooked the cultural nuances of Vietnam. Vietnamese culture did not share the same view of politics, and the North Vietnamese saw their efforts as part of the *dau tranh* (the struggle), which intimately married politics, morality, and society and could not be bought off with political or economic programs.⁴³

For the North Vietnamese, *dau tranh* could not be divided and horse-traded, which meant that Johnson mistakenly believed that he could win Hanoi over with what essentially equated to internationally appropriated earmarks.⁴⁴ Even Johnson's eventual turn to the graduated bombing campaign in Rolling Thunder and his incremental introduction, expansion, and application of ground forces reflected his quid pro quo bargaining strategy and his deeply held belief that all problems were negotiable. Negotiations between the United States and Hanoi during Johnson's tenure were marked by a string of unproductive meetings during which the participants could hardly even agree on the terms for the discussions, let alone the subject of them. This demonstrates that Johnson and the North Vietnamese were playing not just with different chips but two entirely different games. Johnson's presidential image misrepresented the character and motive of the North Vietnamese and caused him to persist in his attempts to swap the North's war in South Vietnam for American commodities and programs.

In a speech at Johns Hopkins University in 1965, Johnson called for a "billion-dollar American investment" to develop the Mekong River that could bring electricity, jobs, schools, and "the wonders of modern medicine" to Vietnam.⁴⁵ Johnson imagined a future Vietnam that could mirror the developments he had seen "in his hill country forty years before, when the dams had been first built, bringing water, electricity, and hope to the poor farmers."⁴⁶ Johnson wanted to imprint Vietnam with American schools and dams and modernization, turning the "Mekong into a Tennessee valley," and believed that by doing so he could defeat Hanoi and even win it to his cause.⁴⁷ Although Johnson's vision for Vietnam reflected his own experiences emerging from an underdeveloped and impoverished region and even though his agenda for Vietnam coincided with the tenets of his domestic agenda, the ease with which he projected his own image unto Vietnam was due in part to a particular worldview that he had inherited:

When Johnson took the presidential oath, behind him was a century of American involvement and concern with Asia, three Pacific wars, two decades of Cold War accompanied by the feared possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, and a widely held belief—almost a dogma—that the arena of confrontation was shifting to the "third world." But perhaps most significant of all was the fact that an entire generation, many of its members now come to leadership, viewed these events . . . from the perspective of their experience of World War II—that shattering transformation of historical conditions which created an America, not only powerful but supreme [but that had also allowed the forces of darkness to] come perilously close to a decisive conquest.⁴⁸

The leaders of Johnson's generation were all imbued with a sense of America's moral obligation—that America occupied a unique position in the world and that there was no one else to stand watch or hold out in freedom's Alamo. To

varying degrees, they also shared the purpose of spreading the American ethos to forestall the march of Communism's dark forces. The metastructure of containment certainly covered the arc of the Vietnam War. However, each president conceived of carrying out the policy of containment differently, and each man invoked his own presidential image in the development and execution of agendas. Johnson was no different in this regard and set about framing his domestic and international agenda in a way that reflected his own belief structures. While every president must contend with the stickiness of institutional inertia and must both define and fill his own seat at the table of power, the circumstances of Johnson's ascension were especially challenging because Kennedy's men already occupied the round table from which Johnson was now to rule.

"I eventually developed my own programs and policies," Johnson said of his initial years as president, "but I never lost sight of the fact that I was the trustee and custodian of the Kennedy administration."⁴⁹ George Herring observes that Kennedy's replacement of Eisenhower's NSC with an informal, intimate, and ad hoc arrangement allowed men like McGeorge Bundy, Robert Kennedy, and McNamara to hold great sway when Johnson came to power.⁵⁰ On the surface, carryover from the Kennedy administration might seem inconsequential. It would stand to reason that Johnson should have had a feel for Kennedy's policies and an established rapport with his predecessor's closest advisers. Indeed, some of Johnson's own reports as vice president seem to support the idea that he was in line with Kennedy's Vietnam policies.

In 1961 Johnson prepared a report for Kennedy from his fact-finding mission to Asia. In it, Johnson assured Kennedy that the mission had "arrested the decline of confidence in the United States," but he also emphasized that such missions would not "restore any confidence already lost." "We didn't buy time, but were given it," Johnson tells the president and advises Kennedy that he should proceed with the expansion of his Vietnam policies.⁵¹ Johnson shares Kennedy's own sense of urgency for the situation in Vietnam, and the report's conclusions reflect a consistency with Kennedy's views. Among them, Johnson reasserts the pivotal role American prestige will play and that the mobilization and "imaginative use" of American political, technological, and scientific capabilities would be the only hope for beating back Communism, "hunger, ignorance, poverty, and disease."⁵² Johnson also advised that the United States should not look to deploy combat troops but should take on an advisory role and shepherd Vietnam through economic, military, and political assistance "under the very closest Washington direction."⁵³ Years later, Johnson's own initial emphasis on social, economic, and political means, as well as his sanctioned covert military actions in both North and South Vietnam, seemed

in lockstep with Kennedy's initiatives.⁵⁴ When Johnson declared in 1965 that "this is a different kind of war . . . [with] no marching armies or solemn declarations," he echoed the same sentiments Kennedy conveyed during his 1962 speech at West Point: a "different kind of force" was needed "if freedom was to be saved."⁵⁵ Also like Kennedy, as Walter LaFeber points out, Johnson never questioned the "doctrine of Containment" or the tenets of the domino theory.⁵⁶

Such congruencies demonstrate Johnson's alignment with basic Kennedy policies in Vietnam. However, the carryover of key personnel from the Kennedy administration meant that Johnson was reliant on "decision making machinery already in place."⁵⁷ So as situations in Vietnam and at home evolved, Johnson was forced to draw advice from, and pivot on, Kennedy's men. Though Johnson declares in his memoirs that he appreciated and needed his inherited advisers and kept them on out of loyalty, admiration, and even necessity, taped private conversations reveal that he quickly came to resent both his dependency on them and their association with Kennedy.

On 23 July 1964, Johnson speaks with Texas governor John Connally about his concerns over the Kennedy camp, particularly Bobby Kennedy, and the potential impact on the upcoming election. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was demanding that the all-white Mississippi delegation be expelled and replaced with its own delegation of "64 blacks and four whites."⁵⁸ Johnson worried that Bobby Kennedy and his supporters were secretly supporting the Freedom Party to facilitate a fracture within the Democratic Party as part of an effort for the younger Kennedy's run at the presidency. "It may very well be that Bobby has started it," Johnson told Connally. "They've got all the Communists in. . . . Both sides are in on these riots. . . . Hell, these folks have got walkie-talkies. . . . Somebody's financing them big."⁵⁹ Johnson then confesses to Connally what he believes he needs in a vice president and how he lacks his own trusted circle of advisers:

You really need somebody that's a good debater and a good TV performer and can take 'em on because you're tied down so damned hard in this job. . . . You got problems with Khrushchev and Castro. Say they're gonna shoot down your planes the minute the election's over. . . . You've got more damned problems than *I* can handle. I've got old enough and flabby enough that I can't surmount all the obstacles. And I don't have the help and the advice and the counselors and the loved ones around . . . to do it. Every man in my Cabinet's a Kennedy man. . . . I haven't been able to change 'em and I don't have the personnel if I *could* change em. They didn't go to San Marcos Teachers College. . . . It's just agony (emphasis in original).⁶⁰

Johnson had inherited not only a war but an administration. Remitting his image and agenda would thus be "double-dog" difficult. Different backgrounds and perspectives separated Johnson from the Kennedys, and he never quite earned a comfortable place within Camelot. McNamara said that

“although Johnson had been a part of the Kennedy administration for three years, none of us had worked closely with him” and that this must have been cause for some mistrust.⁶¹ Jack Kennedy was well aware of Johnson’s presidential ambitions. Also aware of the contrasts between him and Johnson, JFK arguably selected Johnson as his running mate to help carry the South in the election. To appease Johnson and keep him “inside the tent,” Kennedy sent him on the road or put him in charge of special projects, working his connections on the Hill.⁶² Johnson used to joke that while “Jack was out kissing babies . . . I was out passing bills” and tending the store, but the truth was that Johnson was often excluded or diminished during key policy decisions.⁶³ While the White House deliberated on the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Johnson entertained the German chancellor at his ranch in Texas; the vice president’s voice during the Cuban missile crisis was somewhat muted.⁶⁴

The Cuban missile crisis was an especially inflective event for the men involved. The apparently successful handling of the crisis by Kennedy and his men reinforced their faith not only in themselves but also in the tenets and efficacies of limited war theory.⁶⁵ Following the crisis, McNamara was quoted as saying that “there is no longer any such thing as strategy, only crisis management.”⁶⁶ Kennedy’s men—who became Johnson’s—drew distinct impressions of themselves, their image of the world, and their view of the military from the Cuban missile crisis, all of which served as a critical departure point for their subsequent strategies in Vietnam. Two key assumptions derived from the Cuban missile crisis pushed forward into the framing of US policy in Vietnam: (1) the military needed to be controlled, and (2) crisis and conflict could be managed through an iterative bargaining process. Johnson himself brought to his presidency his own suspicions of the military that were only reinforced by the views of his advisers: “This [---]damn military,” Johnson once said. “I just don’t know when I can trust them and when I can’t.”⁶⁷ Additionally, Johnson spent his years in Congress and as vice president ardently hammering out deals and successfully negotiating often controversial legislation, so he was highly susceptible to the idea that Vietnam could be solved in similar fashion. As such, McNamara, Dean Rusk, and Bundy continued to have great influence during Johnson’s presidency—which led to a mutually reinforcing tendency to want to control things: “Johnson and McNamara saw their principal task in war management as maintaining tight operational control over the military.”⁶⁸

Kennedy’s men believed that they needed to control things, and Johnson believed that he needed to control things. Though they shared overarching principles, Johnson begrudged the fact that he lacked his own confidant. When vetting his vice president for the 1964 election, Johnson adamantly

made clear to Hubert Humphrey that it was “Johnson’s show” and that he expected total loyalty from him if he were chosen for Johnson’s ticket.⁶⁹ Johnson’s emphasis on loyalty in his vice president, his confessions to Governor Connally, and even the close relationships he developed with McNamara and Rusk reveal his longing for allies and his sense that he felt trapped by the men he depended on. To carry out his agenda, he needed loyal men in his corner who could help him shape both events and the perceptions of those events so that Vietnam did not undermine his domestic goals.

Johnson’s decision to escalate in Vietnam was greatly influenced by his reliance on a closed circle of advisers and by his passion not to let Vietnam interfere with the Great Society. In 1964 the effectiveness of Kennedy’s covert military operations as well as the fallen president’s social and diplomatic programs in Vietnam remained unclear. Fearful that Vietnam might inconveniently go awry while he was pressing his social agenda, Johnson was inclined to succumb to suggestions for greater military action. With outcomes indeterminate, Johnson was convinced that if he could rein in perceptions and control the script, then he could orchestrate support for his domestic agenda while still solving the Vietnam problem: “The most important foreign policy problem I faced was that of signaling to the world what kind of man I was and what sort of policies I intended to carry out. It was important that there be no hesitancy on my part—nothing to indicate that the US government had faltered. It was equally important for the world to understand that I intended to continue the established foreign policies of . . . Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy.”⁷⁰

In the run-up to the 1964 election, Johnson’s ability to control the script is challenged as he is simultaneously taken to task by the Republican opposition for not being tough enough on Communism and criticized by members of his own party for being too hawkish.⁷¹ Johnson is “eager for a landslide victory” so that he can gain the legitimacy and independence as president that he both longs for and needs to carry out his agenda. In a conversation with Bundy in March 1964, Johnson vents his frustration and his concerns: “I just spent a lot of time with the Joint Chiefs. The net of it . . . is—they say, get in or get out. . . . I told them, ‘Let’s try to find an amendment. . . . We haven’t got any Congress that will go with us, and we haven’t got any mothers that will go with us in a war.’ . . . I’m just an inherit[ance]—I’m a trustee. I’ve got to win an election.”⁷² Johnson was trying to placate disparate coalitions so that he could address the challenge of Vietnam without sacrificing the support he needed to earn his presidential mandate. As voices of opposition and criticism continued to surface in the press, Johnson became increasingly frustrated and worked tirelessly to control the script. At one point Johnson tells Reedy, his press secretary,

that reporters “are not masters of the White House. They’re just the servants and we give them what we want to give them.”⁷³

As part of his efforts to mediate between the increasing requirements in Vietnam and a polity that was in many ways ambiguous over commitments there, Johnson approved in 1964 a more robust covert campaign against North Vietnam. Labeled Operational Plan (OPLAN) 34A, the operations were designed to bolster South Vietnamese morale, improve South Vietnamese positions, and signal Hanoi that the United States was committed to the fight. The clandestine measures included “sabotage and commando raids against military installations along [North Vietnam’s] coast[,] . . . air attacks against North Vietnamese forces in Laos[,]” and covert intelligence-gathering patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin by US warships, referred to as “Desoto patrols.”⁷⁴ The classified operation would ostensibly keep US activities off the books and out of the public eye. NSAM 288, which formally approved OPLAN 34A, detailed US objectives in Vietnam and retaliatory options if US forces were attacked.⁷⁵ McNamara’s report “Steps to Change the Trend of the War,” 16 March 1964; OPLAN 34A; and NSAM 288 all indicate that Johnson considered success in Vietnam critical to US interests. The documents also reflect the administration’s strong preference for US efforts to remain mostly relegated to supporting the South politically and economically as well as through covert military action.⁷⁶ At the same time, however, NSAM 288 preloaded plans for more overt and escalatory US military action, stating that US policy was “to prepare immediately to be in a position on 72 hours’ notice to initiate the full range of Laotian and Cambodian ‘Border Control actions’ . . . and the ‘Retaliatory Actions’ against North Vietnam, and to be in a position on 30 days’ notice to initiate the program of ‘Graduated Overt Military Pressure’ against North Vietnam.”⁷⁷

Johnson’s initial policies for Vietnam, then, were both declarative and dubious, relying extensively on his ability to develop practical and effective military options while simultaneously keeping the nature and extent of those options under wraps. Johnson was thus hypersensitive to how the press characterized his statements on Vietnam, and he obsessed over how it treated his critics and how his critics treated him. With the election looming and Vietnam refusing to stay quiet through the spring and summer of 1964, Johnson labored continuously to control the narrative by quelling leaks and making carefully calculated statements that were intentionally dubious—or at least seemed to serve mutually exclusive ends.⁷⁸ During a press conference in Los Angeles, for example, Johnson had stated that the North Vietnamese were playing a “deeply dangerous game,” inspiring several editorials accusing Johnson of wanting to invade North Vietnam with force.⁷⁹ In response to the criticism, Johnson turned to McNamara, and the conversation recounted below reveals

the president's want of a well-reasoned and defensible position on Vietnam policy, his desire for quick and positive actions, and the need for his position to be sufficiently ambiguous and thus defensible.

LBJ: I want you to dictate to me a memorandum—a couple of pages . . . so I can read it and study it and commit it to memory . . . on the situation in Vietnam. . . . I'd like for you to say that there are several courses that could be followed. . . . We could send our own divisions . . . and they could start attacking the Vietcong. . . . We could come out of there . . . and let 'em neutralize South Vietnam and let the Communists take North Vietnam. . . . And as soon as we get out, they could swallow up South Vietnam. . . . Or we could pull out and say, "To hell with you, we're going to have Fortress America[,] . . . and here's what would happen in Thailand, and here's what would happen in the Philippines. . . . Or we can say this is the Vietnamese's war . . . and we've got to bring their morale up. . . . We can put in socially conscious people and try to get them to improve their own government . . . and we can train them how to fight . . . And [we can say] that, after considering all of these, it seems that the latter offers the best alternative for America to follow. . . . I would like to have for this period, when everybody is asking me, something in my own words. I can say, why, here are the alternatives and here's our theory . . . [, but] we don't say that we'll win.

[Johnson then asks McNamara if the defense secretary thinks "it's a mistake" to explain his stance on Vietnam and what the United States faces there.⁸⁰]

McNAMARA: I do think, Mr. President, it would be wise for you to say as little as possible. The frank answer is we don't know what's going on out there. The signs I see coming through the cables are disturbing signs—poor morale . . . disunity, a tremendous amount of coup planning . . . Not what you'd expect.

LBJ: Why don't we take some pretty offensive steps pretty quickly then? Why don't we . . . do some of these things that are inclined to bolster them.

[Johnson then expresses his frustrations with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., who he feels has been too hesitant to take effective action, and Johnson tells McNamara to instruct Lodge to be more aggressive and "clear out an area" and to assure South Vietnamese president Gen Nguyen Khanh that the United States is committed but needs Khanh to get better results. McNamara agrees to pass on the president's instructions.]

LBJ: And then you get me this other paper on Vietnam, so that when people ask me questions, I have a smattering of information.⁸¹

McNamara complied and delivered the president a memorandum stating that the United States' "purpose in South Vietnam is to help the Vietnamese maintain their independence. We are providing the training and the logistic support which they cannot provide themselves. We will continue to provide that support as long as it is required."⁸² That Johnson was at first inclined to elucidate in more detail the conundrum US policy faced in Vietnam reveals his belief that if he could present a well-enough-reasoned argument, then the American people could be convinced of the reality as Johnson saw it. That Johnson ultimately drew on McNamara's very much watered-down and ambiguous memorandum reveals both Johnson's reliance on McNamara as well as the president's hesitancy to publicly tilt too far in any direction on Vietnam

policy. The success of Johnson's agenda and victory in the election hinged on his control of the narrative.

With a more robust, albeit covert, strategy in place through OPLAN 34A and the Desoto patrols, and with his mind constantly on the 1964 election and the Vietnam narrative's effects on it, Johnson continued to beef up US missions and potential missions in Vietnam while downplaying them in the press. As reports of imminent disaster roll in from the embassy in Saigon and from the military leadership, Johnson sends Secretary of State Rusk and the defense secretary to Honolulu in June for "a hastily called meeting" with Ambassador Lodge, Maxwell Taylor, and the new American commander in South Vietnam, Gen William Westmoreland.⁸³ The meeting was convened to iron out contingency plans for greater US military actions in Vietnam. After criticism surfaced that Johnson's men were secretly planning "an American war in Asia," Johnson vehemently backpedaled and insisted that he "knew of no plans . . . to carry the war into Vietnam" but that he and his staff were simply looking at alternatives.⁸⁴ It was important to Johnson that the Honolulu meeting be perceived as nothing out of the ordinary or, as Rusk put it, that the meeting was "not a massive orgasm" but instead part of a routine.⁸⁵ The fact was, however, that the Honolulu meeting, in concert with NSAM 288 and internal policy and position papers, put in place deliberate mechanisms for more expansive military action. If the arrow was not yet fully notched and sighted, the giant bowstring of the US military was certainly being drawn back—a fact that Johnson desperately wanted to keep from the public. As the crisis in the Gulf of Tonkin heated up later that summer, Johnson caught wind of Hubert Humphrey's references to US covert operations and Desoto patrols along the coast of North Vietnam. Johnson's response is telling:

LBJ: Our friend Hubert is just destroying himself with his big mouth.

[JAMES] ROWE: Is he talking again? [Rowe was LBJ's longtime friend and a prominent Washington attorney.]

LBJ: Yeah, all the time. . . . Every responsible person gets frightened when they see him. . . . He went on TV and . . . just blabbed everything. . . . [When Humphrey was asked by reporters,] "How would you account for these PT boat attacks on our destroyers when we are innocently out there in a gulf, sixty miles from shore?" . . . Humphrey said, "Well, we have been carrying on some operations in that area . . . where we have been going in and knocking out roads and petroleum." . . . And that is exactly what we *have* been doing!

ROWE: Good Lord!

LBJ: The damn fool . . . just ought to keep his [---]damned big mouth shut on foreign affairs, at least until the election is over. . . . They don't pay him to do this. . . . He is just doing this *free* and he's hurting his government. And he's hurting *us* (emphasis in original)!⁸⁶

Johnson is so upset because his narrative requires that the United States respond only to unprovoked aggression by the North. If it were revealed that the United States was in fact covertly striking targets within North Vietnam and running patrols not 60 miles but within 16 miles of Hanoi's coast, then Johnson would be unable to make his case.

Because of his efforts to satiate hawks and doves, his own push for reelection, and the needs of a war that wouldn't stay quiet, Johnson made a series of fateful decisions and directed a sequence of events to manipulate perceptions during the Gulf of Tonkin crisis that arguably set the tenor of his own Vietnam policy and the arc of the war itself. Though the full record and exact nature and timing of information that Johnson had remains incomplete, declassified tapes and documents nevertheless demonstrate Johnson's tacit and deliberate misleading of the public. Even if one concludes that Johnson acted as best he could, given the facts he had at the time, and misrepresented them to protect sensitive operations, his hurried decision making and eagerness to act reflect a particular policy momentum and linkage to domestic political calculations.

Three months prior to the incident involving US warships and North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson told McNamara that he saw "a glimmer of hope on Vietnam" and wanted policies that got more tangible results.⁸⁷ Johnson asked McNamara if there was "anybody in the military that can come up with something," and told his defense secretary, "I gotta do something. We gotta kill some of these guys."⁸⁸ Johnson's calls for more tangible effects and action in Vietnam were met with reaffirming calls for more direct military involvement from his advisers.⁸⁹ OPLAN 34A and the Desoto patrols gave Johnson a means to expand the US military mission without overtly doing so. The *New York Times* published a series of articles in 1972 that describe the "covert war" Johnson waged in Vietnam between February and August 1964.⁹⁰ During this period, Johnson and his advisers developed and executed extensive military operations in South Vietnam, Laos, and North Vietnam, including bombing missions in Laos and plans for more aggressive bombing campaigns against North Vietnam.

In May, Johnson and his NSC debated a draft resolution for Congress that would "endorse all measures, including the commitment of force" in Laos and Vietnam.⁹¹ However, both McNamara and Bundy argued against going to Congress in May, Bundy saying that "the Administration should seek a Congressional resolution giving general authority for action . . . if and only if we decide that a substantial increase of national attention . . . is a necessary part of the defense of Southeast Asia in the coming summer."⁹² Bundy also suggested that the best "timing" for such a resolution would be after the civil rights bill had cleared the Senate floor. The *Pentagon Papers* reveal that Johnson

elected not to go to Congress sooner because he wanted to conceal both the deteriorating situation in Vietnam and US existing and potential operations there to give his administration “maximum flexibility to determine its moves as it chose from behind the scenes” and because he wanted to maintain a “noncommitted” position.⁹³

While devising operations that could solve the increasingly difficult situation in Vietnam, Johnson metered his decisions based on how congressional and public perceptions of Vietnam would affect his political capital for key legislation and in the upcoming election. As such, Johnson attempted to orchestrate both the timing and content of what was revealed about his Vietnam policies so that he could shape those perceptions. When two American reconnaissance planes were shot down over Laos on 8 June 1964, Johnson had several conversations that reveal how he was attempting to play to both the hawks and the doves and how he believed that more overt US military involvement would require a particular narrative or story line.

[Here Johnson is talking with House Speaker John McCormack, a political ally, about US retaliation for the two reconnaissance aircraft shot down over Laos.]

LBJ: We went in there last night to take out this battery that had shot down these two planes and we destroyed some buildings. . . . If we didn't [respond], why, we'd just destroy ourselves. Now we can't say anything about it. . . . I don't know who we ought to discuss this with, if anyone. . . . But we have . . . shown that we mean business. . . . Would it be your thought we ought to talk to [Charles] Hallek [House Minority Leader] and any of the Republicans about it?

McCORMACK: It's bound to come out. I would think so.

LBJ: I had the feeling I ought to send McNamara to see the armed services people and I ought to send Rusk to see the foreign affairs people. . . . But we've got to keep it to a very limited group. If we don't, it would greatly injure our interests by their talking about it.

McCORMACK: Yeah, the worst of that is when you get a group like that, you know what democracies are.

LBJ: They ought to be sworn to secrecy. . . . Don't discuss it with anyone. I'm gonna discuss it with you and [Governor] Carl [Sanders (D-GA)], [Senator Mike] Mansfield and [Hubert] Humphrey, and we'll try to keep it to that.

[Johnson then talks with Senate Majority Leader Mansfield, a committed dove on Vietnam and one of Johnson's most vocal critics, about the US air strikes in Laos.]

LBJ: I've submitted all the things you've suggested to me and I've got [Adlai] Stevenson down here. . . . We can't go in there with ground troops. The air forces don't get the job done and can't get it done. We are trying every way we know how to appeal to Hanoi and [China]. We've told de Gaulle that we are very anxious to follow any conference route. . . . But we've got to keep our strength here and show that we will react . . . [so the North Vietnamese] will talk to us at all. . . . We don't want to dominate anybody. If they'll just quit advancing, why, then we can get out. . . . I don't want to get in a land war in Asia.

MANSFIELD: I think the best thing to do would be if you would talk to them all together.

LBJ: It always gets out . . . and we don't want to blow it up. 'Cause we sure don't want to give any indications that we're getting involved in a war. . . . I've been playing it down. . . . You-all are voting [on civil rights] this afternoon, aren't you?⁹⁴

The differences in Johnson's tone and approach to the two congressmen are telling. On the one hand, with McCormack, Johnson focuses almost solely on what should be revealed about US operations and to whom, and he emphasizes his position of strength and "meaning business." On the other hand, with Mansfield, Johnson is almost pleading with the dovish senator, emphasizing his desire for restraint and negotiations. Johnson appears to be attempting to convince Mansfield that he had no choice in ordering the retaliatory air strikes and that he prefers and will seek a more dovish and diplomatic approach to avoid "a land war in Asia." Johnson also deftly couples a suggested Vietnam policy that is more in line with Mansfield's thinking with a mention of the pending Senate vote on the civil rights bill.

[Johnson then speaks with McNamara after the defense secretary had briefed a small group of congressmen on the Laos air strikes. McNamara reports to the president the sentiments of some of the congressmen, particularly the more hesitant and skeptical.]

LBJ: We haven't taken any serious losses and we can't put our finger on anything that really justifies this acceleration and escalation of public sentiment that it's going to hell in a hack. . . . Is that a buildup of our critics largely? Have we fed that? Where does it come from that we're losing?

McNAMARA: If you went to . . . the estimators in CIA and said how's the situation . . . I think they'd say it's worse.

LBJ: That's not what Lodge and Khanh think, is it? They think it's a little better, don't they?

McNAMARA: I don't think they really believe that. . . . I think that they both would indicate it's a very weak situation. . . . The CIA estimators, Lodge, many of the rest of us in private would say that things are not good. . . . While we say this in private and not in public, there are facts available in the public domain over there that find their way in the press.

LBJ: While I was talking to you, I have a note from Mansfield, which is interesting: *[Johnson reads Mansfield's note.]* "I do not conclude that our national interests are served by deep military involvement in Southeast Asia. . . . [If the United States is to get more deeply involved] I . . . suggest that the basis for these decisions must be made much clearer and more persuasive to the people of this nation."

McNAMARA: I think he's absolutely right. If we're going to stay in there, if we're going to go strictly up the escalating chain, we're going to have to educate the people, Mr. President.

LBJ: Now, and I think if you start doing it, they're going to be hollering, "You're a warmonger." . . . I think that's the horn the Republicans would like to get us on.⁹⁵

Johnson goes on to highlight the need to expand US social and economic aid to Vietnam. The emphasis Johnson places on Mansfield's note and McNamara's response to it is significant because Johnson now realizes that more

aggressive action in Vietnam will require clear justification. When the USS *Maddox* is attacked on 2 August 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson is given an opportunity to make just such a case.

North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the *Maddox* while the US warship was performing intelligence-gathering missions off the coast of North Vietnam. During the sea battle, the USS *Ticonderoga* launched jet aircraft, three North Vietnamese patrol boats were destroyed, and the *Maddox* was slightly damaged. The North Vietnamese attack came on the heels of joint US and South Vietnamese commando raids against military installations along their coast. Retired admiral Cathal Flynn, in charge of training the South Vietnamese commandos, revealed that Americans did in fact participate in the raids using American ships that would stow their flags once in Vietnamese waters.⁹⁶ Due to America's involvement in the raids and the Desoto patrols operating well within the sovereign waters of North Vietnam, the Johnson administration considered the North's reaction "natural," and McNamara advised the president not to retaliate or draw attention to the incident.⁹⁷

However, while the Laos air strikes remained somewhat off the public's radar, the more dramatic naval battle in the Gulf of Tonkin threatened Johnson's ability to downplay the incident. Of utmost concern was that US operations were most likely the cause of the attacks. If word got out that the United States was in fact the provoker and not the victim of an unsolicited attack, then not only would Johnson's covert war in Vietnam be revealed, but it would become nearly impossible for the administration to make a justifiable case for increased US military involvement. Furthermore, Johnson could not let an attack on US ships go answered out of fear of appearing weak on Communism.⁹⁸

Convinced that he could control the narrative and perhaps seeing an opportunity to create the story line necessary to gain support for more robust military action, Johnson not only sent the *Maddox* back into Vietnamese waters the following day but authorized McNamara and the military to retaliate against any further attacks.⁹⁹ Here was the chance to inform the North that he was serious. John Bayley, communications officer on the *Maddox*, said during an interview that there was no reason to send the ship back into North Vietnamese waters so quickly and that the action was "dangerously provocative." He believed the *Maddox* was "sent up there to be attacked again."¹⁰⁰ Johnson had also ordered additional commando raids on 3 August, demonstrating to the North that America would not back down.¹⁰¹ McNamara's preparations at the Pentagon and all of the contingency plans that had been developed since February were now spring-loaded, and an additional attack on the *Maddox* could be met with a swift and demonstrative US retaliatory strike. Portraying the North Vietnamese as aggressors would justify American action as appro-

priate and worthy of support. Prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson talked with Richard Russell about American reservations for getting involved in Vietnam and how he viewed his options in the blossoming conflict: “If they shoot at us, we’re going to shoot back,” Johnson tells Russell, who then cautions the president that Americans are inclined to not get involved.¹⁰² Johnson says that he shares not only America’s perspective but also Mansfield’s fear of another war; however, his comment that “the fear the other way is more” indicates that he is more wary of nonaction than of action. Johnson then comments,

I think that I’ve got to say that I didn’t get you in here [Vietnam], but we’re in here by treaty and our national honor’s at stake. And if this treaty’s no good, none of ‘em are any good. . . . And being there, we’ve got to conduct ourselves like men. That’s number one. Number two, in our own revolution, we wanted freedom and we naturally looked with sympathy with other people who want freedom. . . . Third thing, we’ve got to try to find some proposal, some way . . . like Eisenhower worked out in Korea.¹⁰³

As such, when reports flow in on 4 August that the *Maddox* is again under attack and McNamara recommends to Johnson that he retaliate, Johnson’s only hesitancy stems from his desire to get in front of the story and ensure that America’s part in potentially provoking the attack remains concealed. “We’ve been playing around up there within the twelve-mile limit,” Johnson said during a conversation with McNamara on 3 August; he also said he knew that the North was reacting to the commando raids with its attack on the *Maddox* on 2 August. Still, the new attacks provided an opportunity to unleash the “ample” retaliatory forces that McNamara assured Johnson were at his disposal and with which he could inflict significant damage against “prestige” targets in North Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ Almost coincident with Johnson’s directive for retaliatory military action, however, were reports from pilots, the captain of the *Maddox*, and CIA analysts that seemed to indicate the second attack on the *Maddox* never happened.¹⁰⁵ Fearful of leaks, Johnson did not discuss the ongoing situation in the Gulf of Tonkin during the 4 August NSC meeting but discussed it privately with McNamara and Rusk over lunch. During the private luncheon, McNamara pushed for a “firm retaliatory strike,” and Johnson agreed.¹⁰⁶ By the evening of 4 August, Johnson was in a race with the press as news of the second attack on the *Maddox* began to surface. “Mr. President,” McNamara told Johnson, “the story has broken on the AP and the UP[,] . . . and it seems to me we ought to agree now on a statement.”¹⁰⁷

The statement to which Johnson agreed simply acknowledged that several North Vietnamese patrol boats had attacked two US warships and that the attack was driven off, with several North Vietnamese patrol boats sunk and American forces suffering no damage or casualties.¹⁰⁸ McNamara, the JCS, and Johnson had all agreed that they would proceed as if an attack had oc-

curred, despite the conflicting evidence—revealing that they were at once eager to avoid accusations of weakness during the election cycle and possibly even more eager to exploit the incident as an opportunity to galvanize American support for greater action in Vietnam.¹⁰⁹

Johnson's assumptions and decision to proceed as if the *Maddox* had been actually attacked are perhaps understandable as erring on the side of caution. However, his subsequent statements to the press regarding America's retaliation for the attacks and, most damnably, McNamara's testimony before Congress that led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution both indicate a deliberate misleading of Congress and the public. Both are readily explained by Johnson's belief that he could and should control perceptions. McNamara's assistant at the time, Alexander Haig, said later during an interview that in the age of modern communications, too often leaders act hastily and need to learn "patience."¹¹⁰ Haig also observed that Johnson's zeal to act and to get his story on Tonkin out stemmed from his embarrassment over not having acted sooner and that Johnson wanted to "beat the next day's papers."¹¹¹ Once Johnson received word from McNamara that American planes were en route to their targets in North Vietnam, the president declared it "great news," hurrying to make his statement from the White House. "Renewed hostile actions," the president said, against US ships have "today required me to order military forces of the United States to take rebuttal."¹¹² Johnson's hand was forced by the aggressive North Vietnamese, and he was taking the appropriate action. No mention was made of exactly what US forces were actually doing in the area. During his own press conference, McNamara told reporters that US warships were operating "thirty to forty to sixty miles" off the North Vietnamese coast and that the *Maddox* was on a routine patrol. When pressed by reporters on the possible relationship between "US patrols" and the attacks (revealing that some in the press were aware of aspects of OPLAN 34A and the nature of the Desoto patrols), McNamara flat out denied any relationship, saying that the United States conducted similar operations "all over the world."¹¹³

When rumors started to circulate that the United States had in fact been conducting covert raids and operations in North Vietnam prior to the first attack on the *Maddox*, McNamara advised the president that he must "state categorically that U.S. forces did not participate in [and] were not associated with any alleged incident of that kind."¹¹⁴ For his part, McNamara towed a similar line when he went to Congress on 6 August 1964 to testify and lobby for what became known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.¹¹⁵ During his testimony, McNamara stated that "our Navy played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, [and] was not aware of any South Vietnamese actions, if there were any."¹¹⁶ Secretary of State Rusk testified that the "North Vietnamese at-

tacks on our naval vessels [were] no isolated event [but] part and parcel of a continuing Communist drive to conquer South Vietnam . . . and eventually dominate and conquer other free nations of Southeast Asia.”¹¹⁷ With the Gulf of Tonkin incident portrayed as a justified American response to North Vietnam’s unprovoked actions and its behavior neatly framed within the insidious and monolithic block of Communist aggression, the resolution cleared both the House and the Senate committees with little difficulty. After its formal passage, an excited McNamara told an equally jubilant Johnson that the president now had “a blank check for further action.”¹¹⁸

Before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was even in front of the legislative branch, however, Johnson gave McNamara the green light to prepare and mobilize for further action. The Pentagon activated an attack carrier group; sent fighter aircraft to South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Pacific theater; moved an antisubmarine task force into Vietnamese waters; and readied selected Army and Marine forces.¹¹⁹ During a speech at the University of Syracuse on 5 August, President Johnson said,

On this occasion, it is fitting, I think, that we are meeting to dedicate this new center to better understanding among all men. For that is my purpose in speaking to you. Last night I spoke to the people of the Nation. This morning, I speak to people of all nations—so that they may understand without mistake our purpose in the action that we have been required to take. On August 2, the United States destroyer *Maddox* was attacked on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin by hostile vessels of the Government of North Vietnam [*sic*]. On August 4 that attack was repeated in those same waters. . . . The attacks were deliberate. The attacks were unprovoked. The attacks have been answered. . . . We welcome—and we invite—the scrutiny of all men who seek peace, for peace is the only purpose of the course that America pursues.¹²⁰

The “scrutiny” that Johnson invited would eventually reveal in 1968 that his administration’s characterization of the attacks was both hasty and misleading. Admiral Flynn said he was “surprised” at the time by the denials and rhetoric of both McNamara and Johnson, believing that the United States was “going to war” and that the leadership had better “level with the American people and Congress.”¹²¹ Johnson said in his memoirs that he was “determined, from the time [he] became president, to seek the fullest support of Congress for any major action. . . . My first major decision on Vietnam had been to reaffirm President Kennedy’s policies. This [the Gulf of Tonkin] was my second major decision: to order the Tonkin attacks and to seek a congressional resolution in support of our Southeast Asia policy.”¹²²

To his credit, Johnson did “go to Congress” eventually, but neither he nor those who worked for him ever leveled with Congress or the American people. Johnson painted a false reality that propelled the United States into an overt shooting war with North Vietnam. Johnson controlled perceptions and

subordinated the truth of his Vietnam policies to his domestic political agenda. In so doing, he “tragically foreclosed the possibility of a grand national debate that might have educated both Johnson and the American people as they faced one of the most important presidential decisions of the century—whether the United States should make a monumental commitment to war in Vietnam.”¹²³ Stephen Walt observes that the leadership of France during its active colonial period in the nineteenth century often took the nation to war based on “little more than ill-conceived propaganda intended to minimize civilian interference in their activities abroad.”¹²⁴ Johnson misrepresented his foreign policy and the circumstances surrounding his actions in Vietnam to prevent his activities abroad from interfering with those at home. By doing so, Johnson accomplished his near-term and more important goal of winning the 1964 election by a landslide and gaining the legitimacy he craved. Johnson successfully created the illusion that would enable him to prosecute his domestic policies, and he probably believed that if he could maintain the veneer long enough, *what he wanted to be true in Vietnam could actually become true*. He just needed the time to figure out the proper mix and sequence of bargains. The “new” New Deal for America would require the right deal in Vietnam.

Throughout the war, all of the variants of bombing campaigns, covert operations, proposed and executed social and economic programs for Vietnam, the introduction of ground troops, and his pressures on both the North and South Vietnamese regimes were mile markers in his search for “the right price” that could bring the conflict to an acceptable end. Johnson sought to add Vietnam to the ever-expanding homestead of his master social agenda. However, Johnson’s perceived presidential mandate after the 1964 election, just like his justification for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and his escalation of the war in Vietnam, was based on false pretenses. That he believed that he could control perceptions and was committed to the idea that Hanoi could be coaxed into bargaining demonstrates just how much Johnson’s own image obscured his interpretation of both the war and his adversary. The unfolding of decisions leading up to the Gulf of Tonkin also reveals just how intertwined Johnson’s image was with the character of his agenda and the manner of its execution.

By the end of 1964, Johnson had secured a seat at the table, but the president he was to the electorate was not the same president who was making the decisions. While he had temporarily reconciled some of his disparate worlds, the glue that held them together was at best a series of expedients and at worst a collection of outright lies. Johnson’s manufactured reality was thus tenuous, and his early manipulations opened up a new breach in a “different kind of war” that ultimately reverberated and came to define not only the United States’ war effort but also his presidency—and, in many ways, the nation he led.

“Limited War” and the Arc of Perception

In 1965 Johnson comes to another crossroads in Vietnam and, like his handling of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, he again manipulates perceptions and misrepresents both the situation in Vietnam and US actions there. As Herring observes, Johnson metered and shaped the delivery of his “war message” so that the media received it “in much the same spirit it was delivered, seriously, but without any sense of urgency.”¹²⁵ Following the elections and the implied mandate from the public, Johnson administered from a position that now included a new authority and the conception that he had been tough on Communists but still sought a moderate approach in Vietnam. “I will not permit,” Johnson said, “the independent nations of the East to be swallowed up,” but that does not mean sending “American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.”¹²⁶ Thus, as Johnson implements the graduated bombing campaign Rolling Thunder in early February 1965, as the first Marines arrive in March to protect the air bases used for the bombing campaign, and as 110,000 servicemen flow into Vietnam between April and August, Johnson tightly controls the message.¹²⁷ With Johnson committed to the tenets of limited-war theory, convinced that Vietnam was a war that could be waged “in cold blood,” and certain that he could control the public reality of the war, it was “no accident” that “the United States went to war without knowing it” in 1965.¹²⁸

As in the run-up to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Johnson had in place a series of plans that supported his agenda for a more vigorous military campaign. Through a strategy of carrots and sticks, these plans could compel North Vietnam to call off the war. The early turn to a graduated air campaign was perhaps a way by which Johnson sought to “overfly” a potential ground war. His hopes ignored multiple CIA and intelligence estimates that highlighted the flawed assumptions concerning the potential impact a bombing campaign would have on the North. Based on a skewed image of the adversary that essentially equated Hanoi to Moscow and thereby conflated both Hanoi’s objectives and Vietnamese society with the characteristics of the Soviet Union, the bombing campaign had little effect on the North’s war effort. Johnson and his advisers had conceptualized Rolling Thunder by looking “to the example of the Cuban missile crisis, in which they had coerced an enemy far more powerful than North Vietnam.”¹²⁹ Johnson initially believed that airpower could find North Vietnam’s price and thus resolve the conflict. Despite the punishment administered by American airpower, the North deftly interpreted the United States’ political position. Gen Vo Nguyen Giap commented in 1967 that “the US imperialists must restrict the US forces participating in a

local war because otherwise their global strategy would be hampered and their influence . . . would diminish.”¹³⁰ From the start, the politburo was committed to its struggle and took a holistic approach that accepted short-term costs for what its members believed was an inevitable long-term victory.¹³¹

Johnson’s entering arguments and assumptions, however, overlooked key factors of the war and of his adversary. Maxwell Taylor said after the war that “we didn’t know our ally. . . . We knew even less about the enemy. And the last, most inexcusable of our mistakes was not knowing our own people.”¹³² The latter of Taylor’s laments is illuminated by the Johnson administration’s belief that it could misrepresent the war to the American people. A cable Taylor issued to Rusk in June 1965 exemplifies his first two points:

Our strategy must be based upon a patient and steady increase of pressure following an escalating pattern while making maximum effort to turn the tide here in the South. This does not mean that we must “win” in the South to bring about change in [North Vietnam’s] attitudes, but rather that the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] must perceive that the tide has turned or is likely to turn. Hopefully at this point the [North] will seek to find some way out, and if and when it does, there could be a “bandwagon” effect that would so lower [Vietcong] morale and so raise that of South Vietnam as to permit bringing major hostilities to a reasonably early conclusion.¹³³

Taylor’s cable is consistent with the agenda Johnson had initiated in February. Assuming that the costs of an air campaign would be relatively “cheap” and that Hanoi could be brought to the table through coercion, Bundy developed a “sustained reprisal” policy.¹³⁴ The policy recommended that the United States “retaliate against any [Vietcong] act of violence,” asserting that continual reprisal would create in the minds of the politburo the connection between Vietcong actions and punishment. This strategy would theoretically dissuade the politburo’s continuing support of the Vietcong and lead it to maintain a “low level” commitment.¹³⁵ Hanoi, however, was fighting a different kind of war than Johnson was, and the United States’ approach only emboldened its cause.

Hanoi was fighting a “total war” while the United States struggled to fight a limited war. Gideon Rose summarizes Johnson’s limited-war strategy as having three key components: “limited bombing in the North (and enemy-held areas in the South); defeating Communist forces in pitched battles in the South’s hinterlands; and ‘nation-building’ in the South’s core.”¹³⁶ In aggregate, Johnson believed he could use these measures to effectively create in the minds of his adversaries a picture of the war that coincided with his own and thus win Hanoi’s capitulation. The United States and North Vietnam, however, were playing different games; consequently, the value scales they used and how they judged costs did not coincide. Throughout the course of Rolling Thunder, the United States dropped over 636,000 tons of bombs and destroyed over half of the North’s oil storage capacity, bridges, and power plants.¹³⁷ The

monetary costs of Johnson's sustained reprisal policy executed through Rolling Thunder were 10:1 in the North's favor.¹³⁸

Even by the summer of 1965, it was apparent that the bombing campaign was not achieving the desired effects. Between February and July 1965, reports poured in that testified to the tenuous situation in Vietnam. Coupled with these reports of pending disaster were various iterations of what would be required to win in Vietnam and what shape the path to victory might take. Westmoreland's continual call for more troops simultaneously spoke of pending doom while optimistically asserting that he could get the job done with the right number of forces. National security adviser Walt Rostow submitted a memo in the spring assuring Johnson that "historically, guerilla wars have generally been won or lost cleanly" and that the forces of the free world, in appropriate numbers, would inevitably prevail.¹³⁹ The deteriorating situation in Vietnam and the seemingly ambiguous results from the impotent policies already in place provided momentum to recommendations that called for more troops. McNamara visited Vietnam in July and immediately recommended upon his return that Johnson approve a dramatic increase in US troops.¹⁴⁰ McNamara's elements for victory were appealing and reasonable, and he was convincing in correlating the achievement of these ends to more US forces. Additionally, within the Johnson administration was a persistent sense that "Vietnam was a fourth-rate, raggedy-ass little country" that could not possibly stand up to any significant application of American power.¹⁴¹

American self-image and Johnson's image of the adversary skewed analysis and influenced decisions that stemmed from, and reinforced, an almost pathological belief in the American myth. South Vietnam was besieged, much like the outnumbered and desperate fighters at the Alamo. American prestige and policy were also trapped in South Vietnam. Secretary of State Rusk wrote in July 1965, "The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the Communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interests throughout the world."¹⁴² The sacred trust of freedom was itself trapped behind the crumbling walls of South Vietnam. The difference, however, was that Johnson could mount a posse that never came for the heroes at the Alamo.

Characterizing the situation in this way, Johnson readily interpreted Vietnam as a case of naked Communist aggression. Not only was he obligated to take a stand to preserve the integrity of his office but also the burgeoning conflict threatened to obstruct his larger domestic agenda. If he could reconcile these

competing demands with a massive yet short-term influx of American troops, then he could both demonstrate his resolve and remove Vietnam from the main table of political discourse. These motivations muted George Ball's prescient cautions and perhaps explain in large part why Johnson "failed to take the American people into his confidence" and why the military strategy, together with its long-term implications, was not "exhaustively debated."¹⁴³

Ball's now-famous memo presented Johnson with a clear delineation between Korea and Vietnam and called into question many of the assumptions shaping the debate over the 1965 troop decision. Johnson was predisposed to the Korean analogy, and Ball attempted to unseat the president's predilections. In the foreword to his memo, "How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Our Viet-nam [*sic*] Policies?," Ball boldly asserts that "South Vietnam is not Korea," adding that "it would be a mistake to rely too heavily on the Korean analogy."¹⁴⁴ Ball provided Johnson with a list of differences between South Vietnam and Korea:

1. We were in South Korea under a clear UN [United Nations] mandate. Our presence in South Vietnam depends upon the continuing request of the GVN plus the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] protocol.
2. At their peak, UN forces in South Korea (other than ours and those of the ROK [Republic of Korea] included 53,000 infantrymen and 1,000 other troops provided by fifty-three nations. In Vietnam, we are going it alone with no substantial help from any other country.
3. In 1950 the Korean government under Syngman Rhee was stable. It had the general support of the principal elements in the country. There was little factional fighting and jockeying for power. In South Viet-Nam [*sic*] we face governmental chaos.
4. The Korean War started only two years after Korean independence. The Korean people were still excited by their newfound freedom; they were fresh for the war. In contrast, the people of Indochina have been fighting for almost twenty years—first the French, then for the last ten against the NVN [North Vietnamese].
5. Finally, the Korean War started with a massive land invasion by 100,000 troops. This was a classical type of invasion across an established border. . . . It gave us an unassailable political and legal base for counteraction. In South Viet-Nam, there has been no invasion—only a slow infiltration. Insurgency is by its nature ambiguous. The Viet Cong insurgency does have substantial indigenous support. . . . As the weakness of the Saigon Government becomes more and more evident, an increasing number of governments will be inclined to believe that the Viet Cong insurgency is, in fact, an internal rebellion.¹⁴⁵

Ball was a carryover from the Kennedy administration; though it is not possible to know what Kennedy would have done had he served through 1965, it is noteworthy that Kennedy at the very least saw the distinct differences between Korea and Vietnam.¹⁴⁶ Ball's memo represents a clear instance of a decision maker taking action that runs counter to a precise assessment. Ball's

analysis not only coincides with what we know today about Vietnam but also reveals that the Johnson administration was privy to the same information. That Ball was ignored and even subsequently ostracized from the Johnson administration makes a compelling case for the strength and influences of belief structures on decision making and aligns with Yuen Foong Khong's assertions about how presidents "misuse" history. Additionally, the decisions that flowed from Johnson's interpretation of the Vietnam War and America's role in it transformed what was still primarily a guerilla war into a conventional confrontation between the United States and Hanoi—thereby turning perceptions into reality.

By the end of 1965, more than 180,000 US troops were in Vietnam. However, Johnson refuted Ball's warnings about the true character of the Vietnam War and ignored his advice that the administration had better be "damn serious with the American people."¹⁴⁷ Brian VanDeMark observes that Johnson "minimized political dangers by minimizing public awareness and debate" so that he could escalate his efforts against North Vietnam without "escalating the war."¹⁴⁸ Each additional step up the escalation ladder was coupled with an equally deliberate move to dampen and/or obscure the reality of that escalation. For instance, Johnson had authorized the deployment of 100,000 servicemen to Vietnam in 1965 as well as an additional 100,000 in 1966, but he revealed publicly that he was sending only 50,000 troops. How Johnson carried out his agenda in Vietnam contrasted sharply with the "parades and fanfare" of previous wars, and "in no real sense did the nation appear to be going to war."¹⁴⁹ Johnson wanted to mobilize the country to build his Great Society—not for Vietnam. Fearing that a more overt war posture might lead to escalation of the Cold War, Johnson—perhaps more significantly—also believed that a nation at the ready for a potentially controversial war would be unable or unwilling to build the society he envisioned.

So Johnson proceeded to wage an "all-out limited war" that quickly turned a tertiary guerilla war into a conventional enterprise that created a "huge, sprawling, many-faceted, military-civilian effort" lacking coordination, cooperation, and clarity of purpose.¹⁵⁰ In his desire not to let Vietnam undermine his larger agenda, he ironically and relentlessly increased US commitment there. Johnson's tight hold over the military—from his notorious Tuesday Lunches to his undulating bombing campaign to what he did and did not permit the military to do—reveals his deep-rooted belief in the efficacy of limited war. As long as Johnson could perpetuate the public perception that US efforts in Vietnam were limited, he could prosecute his agenda. The actual pouring of US resources into Vietnam was less important than how the public perceived the war. Johnson's penchant for control and need to keep a tight rein on the Vietnam

narrative obscured and thwarted the purpose of his war effort—even from those he relied upon to carry it out. In this way and by exerting massive amounts of his own energy and time and the country’s resources, Johnson sought to limit every aspect of the Vietnam War. In keeping with his own paradoxical nature, Johnson thus created in Vietnam the seemingly contradictory situation of a “total limited war.”

Hawking Doves

When Johnson opened the seal in July 1965 and authorized the large deployment of ground troops, public opinion polls showed that 62 percent of the public approved of Vietnam policies while 79 percent were convinced that South Vietnam would fall without US intervention.¹⁵¹ In June of 1966, only 41 percent approved of the job Johnson was doing in Vietnam, and by 1967 favorable opinions of Johnson’s handling of Vietnam had plummeted to 28 percent.¹⁵² The trajectory of public opinion on Johnson and Vietnam coincided with his escalation of the war and the increasing difficulty he had in maintaining control of the narrative. His short-term manipulations, starting with the Gulf of Tonkin, bought him time, but the reality on the ground soon caught up with and surpassed the fiction he portrayed. Vietnam was part of the new and wicked frontier that Johnson had committed the country to and upon which he sought to build the Great Society. The multitude of interests complicated and contradicted Johnson’s goals. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber observe that the social and politic context of complex problems (such as war) creates a “setting in which a plurality of publics is politically pursuing a diversity of goals” and that these goals emanate from different value sets.¹⁵³

In *Every War Must End*, Fred Iklé analyzes the phenomenon and influence of competing domestic coalitions that in war often divide into camps of hawks and doves:

The power structure of a government is not made of one piece—even in dictatorships. Political factions contend for influence, government agencies and military services maintain their own separate loyalties and pursue partisan objectives, and the basis of popular support keeps shifting. During a war, different parts of this power structure become differently committed to the military effort. The more important a group’s role in this effort, the greater the share of the nation’s resources on which it can exert claim.¹⁵⁴

In the fight over resources and in the struggle between competing domestic coalitions, strategies can be “distorted by organizational interests,” and the object of the war (assuming there was one) is lost in the debate over what the war was *really* about.¹⁵⁵ Hawks and doves thus compete for their own interests through determining not only how the war should end but also how and why it started in the first place. In the course of this debate, each side colorfully attempts to “paint” the other and thereby define itself by pointing out what it

is not.¹⁵⁶ Presidents face the challenge of shepherding the competing coalitions and, depending on the balance of equities between the different factions, must adjust their agendas and policies to appease the stronger group while at the same time rationalizing and justifying their actions to the weaker group. Johnson was duly aware that he needed enough support from both the hawks and the doves to effect his agenda; thus, he labored to create a reality palatable to both.

Johnson believed he could invent the future. As long as he could weave the tendrils of his vision through the multitude of congressional and public interests, he could tie together seemingly disparate worlds. Walter McDougall remarks that

to LBJ, the space program was a model of the role government should play in society . . . an expression of limitless power. . . . For the War on Poverty and Great Society, as much as Apollo or Vietnam, were Cold War phenomena, but they were not only that. . . . They were born of a moral vision in which men of power and charity sought to use their gifts for the less gifted. It was possible to eradicate poverty, crime, [and] ignorance[;] whip the Communists[;] and develop the Third World. . . . The power existed and needed only to be grasped.¹⁵⁷

Going to space, however, was an “engineering problem,” and all of the material and technological power of the United States was perhaps ill suited to tackle the equations of “discrimination or poverty or even urban blight.”¹⁵⁸ In many ways, the “final frontier of space” was much simpler than the enduring and wicked frontiers of man. Johnson, therefore, was doubly challenged in harnessing support for his Vietnam and social policies. He needed others to grasp the future he purported and to believe in the present he portrayed.

In 1967 the combined efforts of the United States Air Force and Navy totaled more than 108,000 sorties and 226,000 tons of bombs. South Vietnam received more than \$625 million, which comprised more than “25 percent of the American foreign aid programs for the entire world.”¹⁵⁹ Journalists, members of Congress, and even the casual observer started to seriously question Johnson’s depiction of the war. Public sentiment was confused. “I want to get out,” one subject said during a study on public opinion, “but I don’t want to give up.”¹⁶⁰ Right-wing Republicans and conservative Democrats resented what they saw as Johnson’s undue restraints on the military in what was a “global struggle with Communism” and urged Johnson to “win or get out.”¹⁶¹

The doves were an eclectic mix of pacifists, “New Left” radicals, and antiwar liberals.¹⁶² Though the more rancorous and passionate members of the antiwar movement comprised a relatively small percentage, they enjoyed a stage that allowed them to counter and even outshout Johnson’s own bully pulpit.¹⁶³ Additionally, political leaders, some of whom were once staunch supporters of Johnson’s Vietnam policies, started questioning the war. Kentucky senator Thruston Morton said that the United States had been “planted in a

corner” in Vietnam and that there “would have to be a change.” Senator J. William Fulbright, who had been instrumental in pushing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress, said that the “Great Society was a Sick Society.”¹⁶⁴ Fulbright also claimed that the United States was “showing signs of that fatal presumption, that over-extension of power and mission, which brought ruin to ancient Athens, to Napoleonic France, and to Nazi Germany.”¹⁶⁵

Perhaps most dramatic was the exodus of members from Johnson’s inner circle. White House chief of staff Bill Moyers and George Ball both resigned over policy differences. McNamara, Johnson’s staunch ally and confidant, had by 1967 become disenchanted with the war and advised against many of Johnson’s policies.¹⁶⁶ The immensity of US efforts, which one White House aide described as “the Holy Empire going to war,” combined with dubious results to exacerbate the fissures both within and outside the administration.¹⁶⁷ A leaked Pentagon study published in the *New York Times* revealed that analysts had concluded that a “decisive military victory for either side is unlikely” and that it would take at least five years to win the war even if “US forces were increased to 750,000.”¹⁶⁸ Denied the quick victory he had hoped for and with both his allies and adversaries circling, Johnson found his already dubious war aims in Vietnam further skewed and obstructed by increased dissension at home. In a fashion consistent with his personality and predilections, Johnson reinvigorated his efforts to control perceptions.

Herring reveals that the antiwar movement did not, in and of itself, dictate outcomes in Vietnam and that many Americans were just as ambiguous in their attitudes toward “the movement” as they were to the war.¹⁶⁹ The vocal opposition, however, did reintroduce Vietnam into the arena of public debate. Open discussions on the war, especially critical ones, left too much to chance for a president convinced that his stranglehold on perceptions was critical to success. Thwarted in Vietnam by the Communists, Johnson had to expand his perceptual control to include management of his own beliefs: “Public attitudes toward the war . . . bewildered Johnson. He had made sincere efforts to negotiate but the Communists would not talk.”¹⁷⁰ He believed that his lack of success in Vietnam was not due to any error in judgment on his part or to his decisions but to the inscrutable inability of his adversaries to see the logic of his policies. Robert Jervis discusses the idea of rational consistency while Robert Billings and Charles Hermann explain the tendency of decision makers to place blame for failed policies on others rather than question the validity of those decisions.¹⁷¹ So while Johnson accepted the significance of his adversaries and critics, he never accepted the possibility of their correctness or that his assumptions about them might be false. In Johnson’s mind, his opponents were not only wrong but also an impediment to what he needed to get done.

Consequently, he framed and approached both his critics at home and adversaries abroad in much the same way—he went at them.

Forced by 1967 to withdraw many of his efforts for the Great Society due to the circumstances in Vietnam, Johnson was not about to let “aggression at home” force him to lose in Vietnam. He was embittered and blamed both the North Vietnamese for complicating his war aims and the disgruntled factions at home who just couldn’t seem to get on board with his policies. Feeling that his critics were undermining his domestic and international agenda, he became convinced that the “real enemy” was the “fools and knaves at home who gave encouragement to Hanoi.”¹⁷² Afraid of losing both the war at home and abroad, “Johnson launched a two-pronged offensive to silence his most outspoken enemies and win public support for his policies. Mistakenly believing that the peace movement was turning the public against the war, he set out to destroy it.”¹⁷³

The first prong of Johnson’s offensive was a comprehensive pitch for credibility and good news. Throughout 1967 Johnson labored and travelled across the country to get the word out that America was progressing in Vietnam and that he was, in fact, a legitimate and effective wartime president. Ever mindful that his background and less refined persona might give the impression that he was not suited for complicated foreign policy, Johnson continued to invoke support from a panel of foreign policy consultants, known later as the “Wise Men,” as a way to lend credibility to his policies.¹⁷⁴ Lady Bird wrote in her diaries that Johnson busily hammered away on TV and on college campus tours to get his message out. “What we need more than anything else,” one internal memo stated, “is some visible evidence of our success.”¹⁷⁵

As part of that effort, in August 1967 Johnson established the Vietnam Information Group, whose mandate was to act as a “quick reaction team” that could exploit every opportunity to provide positive information about the war to the public.¹⁷⁶ The Pentagon and State Department were also instrumental in Johnson’s PR campaign, with “off the record briefings” provided to the press or, as Gen William Depuy described them, “key persons in those areas that particularly need some religion.”¹⁷⁷ Sympathetic or “malleable” reporters were given exclusive access, some even being sent to Vietnam where, upon their return, they produced articles describing the “clear signs of progress.”¹⁷⁸ After Johnson directed Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, to “search urgently for occasions to present sound evidence of progress,” it provided studies that tallied progress in security, pacification, and territory which were then presented to the press in “concise, hard hitting briefs.”¹⁷⁹

The second prong of Johnson’s offensive was equally vigorous but much less benign. Dubbed Operation Chaos, Johnson enticed the CIA to conduct

surveillance operations on antiwar leaders and ordered the FBI to disrupt and harass meetings, marches, and movements. Undercover FBI agents would pose as peace-movement sympathizers and attempt to incite groups to “take such actions that would further discredit them.”¹⁸⁰ Johnson sought out sympathetic ears in Congress and tried to convince various members that the peace movement was “being cranked up by Hanoi.”¹⁸¹ Eric Goldman, a Princeton historian who was part of Johnson’s “quiet brain trust,” said of Johnson that the “domestic reformer of the Great Society days had become a war chief.” Goldman also recounted that Johnson described war opponents as “crackpots” who were being “duped and orchestrated by the Russians.” Johnson even went so far as to insinuate that antiwar senators were in cahoots with the Russians since they ate lunch at the Russian Embassy or had staff members whose children dated Russians.¹⁸²

Johnson also went on the offensive in his message, often trying to reason with the public and explain the realities of Vietnam. “Vietnam is not an academic question,” he told troops during a Veterans Day speech. “It’s not a topic for cocktail parties . . . or debate from . . . distant sidelines.”¹⁸³ At a press conference following the March on Washington in November 1967, Johnson described how Americans preferred the “quick victory” in football and war but insisted that Vietnam was not that kind of war. Instead, Vietnam required patience and understanding of a complex situation, and the president called for resolve at home. He also lambasted irresponsible protestors, declaring that their “storm trooper tactics and bullying” threatened free speech and aided the Communists.¹⁸⁴

Johnson’s covert and overt attacks on his critics and his immense positive-spin campaign reflect his presidential image and the agenda it drove. First, while the JCS, State Department, Pentagon, and his advisers presented Johnson with contradictory recommendations, he attempted to buy time and negotiate with the American people.¹⁸⁵ If the public and Congress could only recognize the difficulty of Vietnam and see the logic of his policies, then Johnson could strike a bargain and win support for the war. At the same time, a distinct coercive element characterized Johnson’s public campaign. Those who failed to see his “logic” were punished, investigated, harassed, and portrayed as part of the Communist monolith. Very little in Johnson’s actions indicates that he considered the possibility his policies were failing or even questioned his fundamental assumption about the war or his own country. Just as Johnson perceived and mischaracterized the North Vietnamese as part of a monolithic Communist bloc, so too did he identify his critics as part of the conspiracy. In fact, the lack of progress in Vietnam was even attributable to the undermining evildoers at home. “The main front of the war,” Johnson said during a staff meeting, “is

here in the United States [as the American people are not] as solid in support of my soldiers as Ho's people are solid in support of his troops."¹⁸⁶

Johnson's rerepresentation of Vietnam in 1967 invoked the very same predictions with which he framed Vietnam in 1964. To prosecute his agenda, he needed the American people to believe in a facilitating master narrative, and detractors had to be defined and coerced as if they were illegitimate aggressors. Furthermore, Johnson's obstinacy reflects his continuing belief that, through force of will and management of perceptions, he could dictate circumstances conducive to his desired outcomes. His mantra on the eve of the Tet Offensive in 1968 was "we are not going to yield. We are not going to shimmy. We are going to wind up with a peace with honor which all Americans seek."¹⁸⁷ Like the heroes at the Alamo, Johnson was dug in. Ironically, however, Johnson had created both the walls that he was trapped behind and the forces that threatened to overrun them. While he had inherited Vietnam, he had created the mirage of purpose and progress that was under siege in 1967. When North Vietnam and the Vietcong launched the Tet Offensive in January 1968, a very different reality cascaded across America's television screens. The veneer that Johnson had so painstakingly constructed and believed in was ripped away.

What the Hell Is Going On?

On 31 January 1968, close to 70,000 North Vietnamese Communist troops launched a surprise offensive that stretched from the demilitarized zone along the 20th parallel down to the Ca Mau Peninsula on the southern tip of Vietnam. Immediately prior to attacks with conventional forces, Vietcong sappers blasted their way into the American Embassy in Saigon; a six-hour standoff ensued between the guerrilla forces and embassy security forces. By the end of the first day's volleys, North Vietnamese forces had attacked nearly all 44 provincial capitals, five of the six major cities, 64 district capitals, and close to 50 hamlets. Though certainly not militarily successful, the offensive surprised American forces; its sheer expansiveness and coordination set the US military and political leaders on their heels. Westmoreland's memoirs quoted the general's intelligence officer as saying that "even had I known exactly what was to take place, it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody."¹⁸⁸

During the initial news bulletins on the attack, Walter Cronkite supposedly blurted out, "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning this war!"¹⁸⁹ Whether Cronkite actually said this or it is part of journalism's own myths about the Vietnam War is irrelevant because the sentiment duly captures the collective reaction of the American public.¹⁹⁰ The country was shocked by

the images of Vietcong tearing up the courtyard of the American Embassy and by South Vietnam's coastal and interior cities being apparently overrun. "After years of viewing the war on television," Stanley Karnow writes, "Americans at home had become accustomed to a familiar pattern of images." War coverage between 1965 and 1968 did not hide all of war's realities; images of human suffering on both sides were given their due. But the seemingly endless reels of hovering helicopters, rice fields, and booby traps conveyed a certain plodding monotony "punctuated periodically by moments of horror."¹⁹¹ The war was arduous but remote, and the enemy was shadowy, even cowardly, as he hid and struck, only to fade away again—fearful of confronting American military might head-on. During Tet, however, the enemy was out in force and appeared to have America on the run.

Tran Do, deputy commander of Communist forces in South Vietnam, said of the Tet Offensive, "In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the south. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and this was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result."¹⁹² The politburo's own evaluation of the offensive was even more optimistic:

The protracted offensive and siege campaign . . . together with the simultaneous surprise attacks against the cities . . . threw the Americans and their puppets into a state of great confusion. . . . The Tet General Offensive and Uprising conducted by our soldiers and civilians secured a great strategic victory. . . . We had killed or dispersed 150,000 enemy soldiers, including 43,000 Americans . . . and liberated 1.4 million people. We had struck a decisive blow that bankrupted the "limited war" strategy of the American imperialists.¹⁹³

The Vietnam War did not end with the Tet Offensive. In fact, American and South Vietnamese forces recovered rather quickly, and the North's actions were much more uncoordinated and haphazard than they appeared. In a matter of days, American and South Vietnamese forces recovered nearly all of the territory, cities, and advantage that Hanoi initially gained, with the exception of Hue.¹⁹⁴ North Vietnam launched a second, less dramatic, offensive in February. Between the two campaigns, the United States lost 1,100 men, the South Vietnamese lost 2,300 troops, and it is estimated that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese suffered close to 40,000 deaths.¹⁹⁵ From a military standpoint, the United States and South Vietnamese forces had decimated the Vietcong and inflicted huge materiel and personnel losses on the North's conventional forces. Tet also exposed serious coordination and capability gaps in North Vietnamese conventional doctrine. Even with the element of surprise and an impressively sized conventional force, the North Vietnamese were readily

stopped, destroyed, and rolled back. These facts, however, were lost in the din of initial reporting and perceptions and thus, ultimately, were irrelevant.

In perhaps an ironic twist to Johnson's initial subterfuge during the Gulf of Tonkin incident—characterized by his manufacture of an overestimation of the North's aggression, capability, and threat to American interests—Tet contorted the reality of American military achievements to a false perception of North Vietnamese victory. What mattered was not the reality of Tet in the military sense but what the public perceived to be true. Johnson's manipulations and his struggle to control the narrative boomeranged. He had both unwittingly and purposefully created the conditions for a public opinion backlash from which neither his administration nor its policies could recover.¹⁹⁶

Johnson's dramatic efforts to control perceptions had failed. The arc of public opinion between 1964 and 1968 demonstrates that even a president's ability to control reality is limited. Einstein said that "reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." Image theory postulates that a gap always exists between the "world as it is" and the "world as it is perceived." A core tenet of this study is that perceptions—as articulated through presidential image—influence agendas and outcomes. To endure, however, perceptions and the images they form must find some bedrock, either through experience or reconfirming patterns, upon which to purchase. Though images convert reality, they are not completely ethereal and therefore cannot simply be manufactured. Johnson's failed attempts to create in the minds of the North Vietnamese a certain reality were mirrored in his failure to ultimately affect and control reality for the American people.

Johnson Rides Away

In a national address exactly two months following the Tet Offensive, Johnson spoke on Vietnam and his policies, revealing that he would not seek another term as president. In his opening, Johnson characterizes the importance of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia: "No other question so preoccupies our people. No other dream so absorbs the 250 million human beings who live in that part of the world. No other goal motivates American policy in Southeast Asia."¹⁹⁷ Ironically, the war had become all encompassing. In the speech, Johnson conveyed what he believed to be critical US interests in Vietnam and the signs of American success in the war, attempting to convey the *truth* of the Tet Offensive. In some ways, Johnson came clean with the public, revealing that his administration had authorized an increase to 525,000 men and that the United States would continue in its commitment to Vietnam.¹⁹⁸ He also attempted to clarify US intentions: "Our objective in South Vietnam has never

been the annihilation of the enemy. It has been to bring about a recognition in Hanoi that its objective—taking the South by force—could not be achieved.” Despite flagging US policies and nearly six years of unsuccessful attempts to “create recognition in Hanoi,” Johnson still believed that the United States could find North Vietnam’s price. Johnson also resurrected the words of JFK, telling the American people that he still believed the country was willing to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, [and] oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”¹⁹⁹ Yet Johnson no longer believed that he could lead the nation in its cause:

There is a division in the American house now. There is divisiveness among us all to-night. And holding the trust that is mine, as President . . . I cannot disregard the peril. . . . With America’s sons in the fields far away, with America’s future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world’s hopes for peace in the balance . . . , I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day . . . to any personal partisan causes. . . . Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.²⁰⁰

Johnson’s analogy of Vietnam to the Alamo was accurate but not for the reasons he thought. His paradoxical image and the contradictory realities of the Cold War ultimately trapped Johnson and the foreign policy and military establishment that he led. “The presidency,” Johnson said in his memoirs, “has made every man who occupied it, no matter how small, bigger than he was; and no matter how big, not big enough for its demands.”²⁰¹ Kennedy had engendered a generation with a new vision of government and purpose. During his short time as president, he drew a swath of American commitments and planted his country’s standard along the new frontiers of freedom—recasting the demarcation lines among the United States, its allies, and everyone else. But the lines were blurry. Kennedy left Vietnam as an outpost along an ill-defined frontier, and Johnson believed he could not only better define that frontier but also expand it.

Driven by his deep-seated presidential image and desire to validate that image, Johnson took to forging and manning the new outposts of freedom and to fulfilling the visions of his predecessor as well as his own. Johnson believed that he could hammer out a reality of his choosing. If Kennedy rode the wave of a new generation and in his noble cause overreached in the expectations of what the American government could do, Johnson arrived as if he were leading a posse mounted atop the most powerful nation in the world. Convinced of the efficacy of his iron will that had been proved during so many years in Congress and as vice president—a will seeded and fortified in his rise from an impoverished background all the way to the presidency—Johnson overreached in his belief of what one man could do. Vietnam was

subsumed by this belief and suffered the consequences. The arc of the Vietnam War and of the country between 1963 and 1969 is very much the arc of the man who was president. Johnson took up an inheritance stark with wars, poverty, and strife yet colorful and rich in possibilities. Johnson and the nation were buoyed as if they were in fact on a crest of a wave in 1963. Despite Kennedy's tragic death, he had left Johnson and the country invigorated and determined to meet and rise above the challenges not just of that age but of all ages. Racism, ignorance, hatred, and poverty remained Johnson's targets and were for him even more the root cause of Communism than they were for Kennedy.

But in his fervor, in his absolute dedication to slay the demons of the human condition and uproot the fodder upon which the armies of Communism fed, he sacrificed the masonry stone upon which healthy democracies are built—truth. His own predilections left him vulnerable to obscured representations of the Vietnam War. Additionally, he toiled endlessly to shape the reality surrounding Vietnam and misled the public from the Gulf of Tonkin through the Tet Offensive. He even loosed on journalists the mechanisms of their own government, inciting the CIA and FBI in an effort to discredit and destroy the messengers after he had lost control of the message. His effort and its ultimate failure destroyed him; in his fall, so too fell much of what Americans had clung to at the start of the decade. Despite the passage of so much critical and successful legislation (Medicare, the Civil Rights Act, etc.), race riots and student protests erupted. In 1968 America was on fire, and the streets echoed the cries of the marching disenchanting. The Democratic convention erupted in violence. Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were shot dead. The veneer of victory in Vietnam that Johnson had so achingly struggled to maintain for over five years was ripped away as images poured across television screens. It wasn't just that it appeared as if America were losing, but the television showed war—real war, not the academic theories or no-impact, limited-war notions or abstract rallying calls but the full color of blood and death. That the costs can remain hidden on paper according to Robert Osgood's theories may be true, but that does not mean that the costs of war were not there. Vietnam in 1968 demonstrated graphically that America was in fact in a war—and that she was neither invincible in that war nor above incurring the costs for waging it.

The frontier Johnson sought to conquer was wicked. Johnson's frontier was more than the international and domestic battle lines, stretching beyond the existential world of body counts, bombs, and dollars. What Johnson most needed to conquer was the territory of perception, both in the minds of his adversaries and of the nation that he led. Controlling perceptions, however, and the reconciliation he sought by doing so ultimately proved a bridge too far—perhaps demonstrating that the human mind is the most wicked frontier

of all. Lady Bird described Johnson's torture and, in perhaps one of the wisest assessments of America's Vietnam War, said that the real lesson was never to take on "somebody else's insoluble burdens."²⁰²

Ultimately martyred in Johnson's Alamo, then, were not only his presidency but also his image-driven agendas and the distinctly American myths from which they derived. Johnson embarked at the start of his presidency flanked by a posse of American ideals and myths. In the course of his wars, he added to that posse the misrepresentations and lies that ultimately, like mercenaries swayed by a higher bidder, turned on him. Gunned down, or at least held at gunpoint by the end of his term, was the notion that a country—embodied in the virtuous ideals of one man—could accomplish whatever it set out to do. The faith and promise that had started the decade looking to the stars had fallen like crushed adobe to the dirtied floors of a White House collapsed under the weight of its own lies and myths. In sharp contrast to the archetypal heroes of the American West, no pleas for Johnson's return reverberated across the hilltops as he rode away. Rather, what followed Johnson into the sunset was a cascade of accusations and questions—not the least of which asked the identity of the real enemy, who perhaps had not shadowed the jungles of Vietnam but had occupied the White House the whole time. It is left to Johnson's successor to redefine not only the terrain of America's frontier but also the country's purpose there and the nature of her enemies.

Notes

1. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 98. McNamara said that Johnson reminded him of a verse from Walt Whitman's poem *Song of Myself*: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself; / I am large, I contain multitudes."

2. Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 5–6. In the foreword to the diaries, Stephen Ambrose quotes political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who posits that the president of the United States is the strongest leader in the world because he has the "power to destroy the world at his fingertips." The president is the weakest because "the House controls the money, the Senate controls the treaties, the Congress as a whole has the power to make war, the next election is always just around the corner [and] the bureaucracy is always there" (*ibid.*).

3. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 27–68, 229–48.

4. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 45–47. Waltz compares great powers to Gulliver, pointing out that even the strongest nations cannot escape the structural influences that dictate to varying degrees state behaviors. Much power resides in the executive branch, but presidents are subjected to structural influences that often "select" for them. Still, presidents, like great powers, must decide what to do and how to do it.

5. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 2.

6. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 12. Johnson's fellow San Marcos students said that "Lyndon would have you believe . . . that there wasn't anybody in the Alamo except Johnsons and Baineses" (*ibid.*). See also Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 2.

7. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 3, 5, 7–9. According to Johnson's longtime friend and press secretary, George Reedy, Johnson's mother was "an unrelenting snob who reminded everyone [that] . . . her ancestry included high-ranking Baptist clerics and intellectuals." This image rubbed off on Johnson, and he was driven to prove that he and his family were not "shiftless dirt farmers and grubby politicians." Sam Johnson, however, often ran into financial trouble. In 1924 he lost reelection to the Texas legislature, and "the family was living at the poverty level," eating "cornbread and milk." Watching his proud mother cook over a woodstove made a deep impression on Johnson, and he made fighting poverty a central aim in his life—starting with his determination to bring electricity to the Hill Country (ibid., 3, 5, 9).

8. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 115–16, transcript of recorded conversation, 23 December 1963 at 11:38 a.m., Johnson Tapes.

9. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 7, 8.

10. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 70–71.

11. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 13.

12. Ibid.

13. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, ix.

14. Porter, *Military Orientalism*, 43–45.

15. Ibid., 4, 44–45. Porter relays how the Alamo came to be America's Thermopylae and that Custer's "tragic heroism . . . ennobled the war to tame the landscape and create a bicoastal nation." Porter also suggests that the idea of the "surrounded hero" and "daunting odds" leads to the notion that when American soldiers go abroad to fight, they "take the frontier with them." In so doing, America's "heroic formula becomes about numbers as well as rhetoric." Seeded in the conquest of the Western frontier, "the residue of frontier struggles supplies a language through which to interpret American wars abroad . . . that resurfaced" during America's expeditionary wars against Japan, North Vietnam, and Iraq (ibid.).

16. Ibid., 44.

17. The research conducted during the course of this study included review of numerous audiotapes, transcripts, biographies, memoirs, and primary and secondary sources. This quotation and others in this paragraph are widely available, and the descriptions presented here are a summary of some of the prominent and famous stories, quotations, and remembrances of Lyndon Johnson. See Dallek's books *Flawed Giant* and *Lyndon B. Johnson*, Goodwin's *Lyndon Johnson*, Johnson's *Vantage Point*, and Beschloss's *Taking Charge*.

18. American Public Media, *Vietnam and the Presidency*, audio recording.

19. Ibid.

20. The reference to "wicked problems" is as defined by Rittel and Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," 155–69. Societal, political, and military problems, such as those Johnson was undertaking as president, are wicked in that they lack clarifying traits, demand nebulous solutions, and are not readily identifiable as having been solved. The authors list 10 characteristics of wicked problems.

21. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 294–95, transcript of recorded interview, 21 March 1964 at 3:45 p.m., Johnson Tapes.

22. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 148–49, as quoted from an interview between Johnson and Doris Kearns Goodwin.

23. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 8.

24. American Public Media, *Vietnam and the Presidency*, audio recording, min. 08:00–09:30.

25. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 148.

26. Often associated with the “New Frontier,” Kennedy repeatedly defined the “new frontiers of freedom” and the “exceptional challenges to freedom” as represented by the ever-expanding Communist threat into the third world. Chap. 3 of this paper cites several examples of Kennedy’s speeches that illustrate this fact and shows how Kennedy sought to reorganize and mobilize the government (his knights) to meet these challenges. Not just heir to these policies, Johnson now had to fill in and fortify Kennedy’s commitments. Additionally, he would take his domestic agenda and Vietnam policy well past where Kennedy had left them. The New Frontier is also associated with the space program. While it was Kennedy’s charge to go to the moon, it was Johnson who was put in charge of standing up NASA. Johnson was an avid developer of and believer in the space program and its policies. He also led passage of the Space Act of 1958, campaigned adamantly against Eisenhower’s neglect of space after Sputnik, and chaired the Johnson hearings that dealt with the United States falling behind the USSR in space. See *ibid.*, 110, 126, 132–33, 363; and McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 142, 151–55, 162, 166, 172–76, 417–20.

27. “Presidency: Mr. President, You’re Fun,” 41. According to this article, the president loaded the press corps into his Cadillac for a tour of his ranch, during which he swilled beer from a paper cup and drove upwards of 90 miles an hour, routinely screeching to a halt for crossing pigs or to point out sites. Johnson talked incessantly and had the press corps laughing. At one point, after a correspondent commented on Johnson’s excessive speed, he took off his 10-gallon cowboy hat and used it to cover up the speedometer.

28. Though Johnson’s treatment of the Kennedys was often a source of much contention, especially between RFK and Johnson, Jacqueline Kennedy, through personal letters and statements, made it clear that she both admired and respected Johnson’s consideration for her.

29. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 26–28, 44–45. Even though he was an acting senator, Johnson had enlisted in the Naval Reserve during World War II. Anxious to prove himself “combat worthy,” Johnson convinced Roosevelt to send him on a “fact-finding” mission in the Pacific, where he was essentially a spy for FDR. MacArthur, recognizing that Johnson had the ear of the president, allowed Johnson to observe on a combat mission in a B-26. During the course of the mission, the B-26 took fire, and MacArthur awarded Johnson the Silver Star (none of the other crewmen received a medal). Johnson had charmed and built a rapport with MacArthur. Years later, however, during the Korean War, Johnson grilled MacArthur but did so in such a way that he was able to preserve their relationship while basically hanging the general out to dry during the hearings.

30. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 12.

31. *Ibid.*, 18.

32. Johnson’s boastful stories of his family’s lineage, discussed earlier in the chapter, certainly testify to this fact. Johnson’s mother would also tell anyone who’d listen just how prestigious her family was. Those around Johnson respected his ambition and abilities but were also put off by instances of his sometimes blatant brownnosing. Many in Johnson’s life had the impression that Johnson “wasn’t just doing good; he was taking care of Lyndon.” See Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 17. One of Johnson’s close associates described him as a “son-of-a-bitch, but a colossal son-of-a-bitch,” capturing the immensity of Johnson’s personality and his ability to win others over to his side. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*.

33. Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 323–24.

34. *Ibid.*, 322, as adapted from Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. Dissent, contradictory information, and alternative perspectives were subsumed by the vacuum of Johnson’s strong personality and ideology-driven agenda.

35. Reedy, *Twilight of the Presidency*, 18.

36. Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 324.
37. Wicker, "Wrong Rubicon," 216.
38. Johnson, "Address before a Joint Session," 8–10.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Johnson, "Annual Message to the Congress," 112–18.
41. Hartz, *Founding of New Societies*, 118; and Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 265.
42. Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 266.
43. Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, 213–53.
44. Johnson visited Vietnam and Asia several times as a congressman and as vice president. Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts that ever since his trip to Saigon as vice president, "Johnson had been intrigued by the idea of developing the Mekong River to provide food, water, and power on a scale so immense as to dwarf even the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority]." See Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 266.
45. Johnson, "Address at Johns Hopkins University," 394–99.
46. Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 267. "He could see the fields of rice, rich in harvest, and surrounding fields, lively, bustling villages. New houses. New schools. New hospitals. New roads. New forms of transportation making it possible for the people to travel beyond their place of birth" (*ibid.*).
47. Johnson quoted in Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, 2.
48. Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 254–55. See also Robert Jervis, "Hypothesis on Misperception," *World Politics* 20 (April 1968): 454–79.
49. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 19. In his memoir, Johnson said that he would have "no more considered changing the name of the *Honey Fitz*—the name Jack Kennedy had given one of the presidential yachts—than [he] would have thought of changing the name of the Washington Monument. I did everything I could to enhance the memory of Jack Kennedy" (*ibid.*).
50. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 6.
51. Johnson, "Johnson Report to Kennedy on Vietnam," 53–57.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 314–15. See also *ibid.*, doc. nos. 80 and 81, 357–61.
55. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 32, John F. Kennedy as quoted in the *New York Times*, 7 June 1962, 26. See also chap. 3 of this paper.
56. Williams et al., *America in Vietnam*, 215–16.
57. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 6.
58. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 466.
59. *Ibid.*, 467, transcript of recorded conversation, 23 July 1964 at 5:31 p.m., Johnson Tapes.
60. *Ibid.*, 469–70, transcript of recorded conversation, 23 July 1964 at 5:31 p.m., Johnson Tapes. Johnson worried constantly that Bobby Kennedy saw himself as the rightful heir to his brother's presidency. Despite overt pleasantries between the two men, the relationship was always somewhat tense. Johnson viewed much of what Bobby Kennedy did with suspicion and wondered if he was attempting to run an insurgency against Johnson's presidency. See Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 388, 412, 466–67, 490. Johnson told Kenneth O'Donnell in 1963 that if he needed Bobby to win the 1964 election, he'd take him but that if he didn't, he wouldn't: "I don't want to go down in history as the guy to have the dog wagged by the tail. . . . Bobby and I don't get along, and that's neither one of our faults, but there's no sense" in pretending otherwise. Johnson denied Bobby Kennedy's request to replace Ambassador Lodge in Saigon and, ulti-

mately, his bid to run as vice president on Johnson's ticket, telling McGeorge Bundy, "I want him [Bobby Kennedy] to stay right where he is" (ibid., 411–13).

61. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 98. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk actually became two of Johnson's most trusted advisers throughout his presidency until McNamara's perspective on the war changed, beginning in 1967. Still, Johnson felt surrounded by Kennedy's men, especially in the early years of his presidency.

62. Peters, Schlesinger, and Wilentz, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 68–69. Johnson was appointed to chair the National Aeronautics and Space Council and to head the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Johnson was also extremely useful for his connections in Congress and around Washington, which Kennedy took full advantage of.

63. Ibid., 69–70.

64. Ibid., 70. Johnson's approach to the Cuban missile crisis differed from Kennedy's. He took a harder line, and Johnson's last words when he left the meeting on the crisis were, "When I was a boy in Texas, and walking down the road when a rattlesnake reared up, the only thing you could do was take a stick and chop its head off" (ibid.).

65. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 180.

66. Ibid., 39. For more details on the impact of the missile crisis on Kennedy's men and the carryover of the precepts that their experience bore out, see James G. Nathan, "The Tragic Enshrinement of Toughness," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, *Since 1914*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (New York: D. C. Heath, 1984).

67. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 39.

68. Ibid., 38. See also Caro, *Years of Lyndon Johnson*, 494. Caro quotes an aide who describes Johnson's compulsive determination to micromanage. Even as a young congressman, Johnson insisted on overseeing even the most minute detail and felt that things would go right only if "he was in charge of everything" (ibid.).

69. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 485–86. Humphrey agrees and his loyalty persists even in 1968, when his refusal to speak out against Johnson's Vietnam policies essentially forfeits his own chance at the presidency to Richard Nixon.

70. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 22.

71. Johnson had been briefed by the JCS over the importance of Vietnam to US national security and faced its calls for more robust action in Vietnam. See Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 266. Johnson also confronted intense pressure from Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. During a conversation with his friend and Georgia governor, Richard Russell, Johnson said, "If you don't stand up for America, there's nothing that a fellow in Johnson City [or any other place can do]. . . . They'll forgive you for anything except being weak. . . . Goldwater and all of 'em are raising hell about . . . hot pursuit and let's go in and bomb 'em" (ibid., 402). Democratic senator Mike Mansfield, whose opposition to Johnson's Vietnam policies persisted throughout the war, continually criticized Johnson's seeming lack of commitment there. Mansfield described the potential course in Vietnam as taking "us further and further out on a sagging limb . . . [that would saddle the United States] with enormous burdens in Cambodia, Laos, and elsewhere in Asia, along with those in Viet Nam [sic]." See Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 209–10.

72. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 266–67, transcript of recorded conversation, 4 March 1964 at 7:26 p.m., Johnson Tapes. Johnson goes on to tell Bundy that he is looking for a policy that will keep the North Vietnamese and Vietcong "off base" but that will not interfere with the election. Johnson is looking for middle ground (ibid.).

73. Ibid., 307–8.

74. Herring, *Pentagon Papers*, 84–85. See also Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, doc. no. 63, “1964 McNamara Report on Steps to Change the Trend of the War,” 277–83.
75. Bundy to secretary of state et al., NSAM 288, subj: Implementation of South Vietnam Programs.
76. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 275–83. See *ibid.*, doc. nos. 62 and 63.
77. *Ibid.*, 283. See *ibid.*, doc. no. 64, “US Order for Preparations for Some Retaliatory Action,” 283–85.
78. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 256. In his commentary, Beschloss describes Johnson’s behavior during the run-up to the election as “being determined, if possible, to defer irrevocable decisions on war in Southeast Asia until the 1964 election is over.” Beschloss goes on to say that Johnson is “eager to win the presidency in a landslide,” but to do so, he can appear neither “soft on Communism nor frighteningly ready to take the nation into a war of unimaginable cost—even if this means leaving Americans confused about his inner inclinations” (*ibid.*).
79. *Ibid.*
80. Bracketed comments are the author’s.
81. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 257–60, transcript of recorded conversation, 2 March 1964 at 11:00 a.m., Johnson Tapes.
82. McNamara to Johnson, memorandum. See also Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 260.
83. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 380.
84. For a transcript revealing Johnson’s angst over implications that he and his staff were in fact planning for a larger war, see *ibid.*, 380–82, transcript of recorded conversation, 2 June 1964 at 3:56 p.m., Johnson Tapes.
85. *Ibid.*, 382. Johnson also told Rusk that they were “not playing it [the meeting] any heavier than we can help back here,” to which Rusk responded, “I think we ought to play down any sort of notion of [the] cataclysmic character of this meeting” (*ibid.*).
86. *Ibid.*, 499, transcript of recorded conversation, 4 August 1964 at 1:35 p.m., Johnson Tapes.
87. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS.
88. *Ibid.*, recording of conversation taped 30 April 1964.
89. *Ibid.* See also Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, doc. no. 63, “McNamara Report,” and doc. no. 69, “Summary of Taylor’s Reports to McNamara by Joint Chiefs.”
90. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 234. Sheehan summarizes the articles in chap. 6. Of particular note is that OPLAN 34A differed significantly from “the relatively low-level and unsuccessful intelligence and sabotage operations that the C.I.A. had earlier been carrying out in Vietnam.” The commander of 34A was Gen Paul D. Harkins, chief of the United States Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. Also significant were the multiple reports by McNamara, the JCS, Bundy, and Johnson’s advisers that described a continually degrading situation in Vietnam and the subsequent planning and authorizations for stepped-up US military action that Johnson approved. With these mechanisms in place, for instance, Johnson was able to “order retaliatory air strikes on less than six hours’ notice during the Tonkin incident” (*ibid.*, 239, 245).
91. *Ibid.*, 286–88. See *ibid.*, doc. no. 66, “Draft Resolution for Congress on Actions in Southeast Asia.” See also *ibid.*, “Draft Congressional Resolution,” 24 May 1964; and “Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting,” 24 May 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. 1, docs. 169 and 172.
92. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 390. This is from a memorandum written by McGeorge Bundy on 10 June 1964.
93. *Ibid.*, 41, 238.
94. *Ibid.*, 393–94, transcript of recorded conversation, 9 June 1964 at 12:50 p.m., Johnson Tapes.

95. Ibid., 397–99, transcript of recorded conversation, 9 June 1964 at 6:20 p.m., Johnson Tapes.
96. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 11–13.
97. Ibid., min. 12, recording of conversation between McNamara and LBJ, 3 August 1964 at 12:15 p.m.
98. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS.
99. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 239–41. In retrospect, the administration insisted that the Desoto patrols and the ordering of the *Maddox* back into North Vietnamese waters so soon after the 2 August incident were not meant to be provocative. However, the Pentagon’s own study “makes it clear that the physical presence of the destroyers provided the elements for the Tonkin clash. And immediately after the reprisal air strikes, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton put forward a ‘provocation strategy’ proposing to repeat the clash as a pretext for bombing the North. Of the three elements of the covert war . . . the 34A raids symbolized the ‘unequivocal’ American responsibility that carried with [them] an implicit symbolic and psychological intensification of the US commitment” (ibid.).
100. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 13–14.
101. Ibid., min. 11.
102. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 403.
103. Ibid., transcript of recorded conversation, 11 June 1964 at 12:26 p.m., Johnson Tapes.
104. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, recording of phone conversation between McNamara and Johnson, 4 August 1964 at 10:56 a.m.
105. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS. Navy captain John Harrick, the task force commander for US naval forces in the region, sent a briefing to Honolulu on 4 August in which he said, “I don’t think this happened. Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes appear doubtful.” Harrick attributed the reports to an exhausted and overeager crew and freak weather effects on the ships’ radars. Harrick’s report to Honolulu and the Pentagon suggested “evaluation before any further action.” Everett Alvarez, a pilot from the USS *Constellation*, which launched patrols over the area the *Maddox* was operating in, also reported that he had not seen any indication of enemy activity. Navy commander Robert Laske, the chief naval intelligence officer in Saigon, also reported that “we were watching and saw nothing and heard nothing indicating enemy activity” (ibid.).
106. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 500.
107. Ibid., transcript of recorded conversation, 4 August 1964 at 5:09 p.m., Johnson Tapes.
108. Ibid.
109. See US Dept. of State, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, 608–9. Multiple moderate congressmen made it clear to Johnson that he could not appear soft on Communism. Secretary of Treasury Douglas Dillon pointed out that “there is a limit on the number of times we can be attacked by the North Vietnamese without hitting their naval bases.” McNamara also reflected that the Johnson administration hurried in its summations and decisions, potentially as a result of trying to “beat the press” and get out its own version of the story. See McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 133–35.
110. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 31–32.
111. Ibid., min. 33. Once Johnson ordered retaliatory attacks on 4 August, he literally harried McNamara for word on the American air strikes against targets in North Vietnam and kept the White House press corps on ice in the White House until 11:25 p.m., when he finally was able to make his statement.
112. Ibid., as adapted from Johnson’s national address during an *NBC News* special report, 4 August 1964 at 11:33 p.m.

113. *Ibid.*, min. 36–37.

114. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 508–10, transcript of recorded conversation, 8 August 1964 at 8:24 a.m., Johnson Tapes. As with the press conference with McNamara on 4 August, reporters were questioning whether or not the second attack actually happened and/or whether the United States had been participating in covert operations that may have provoked the North Vietnamese attack. *Washington Post* staff writer Murray Marder’s article “Maddox Incident Reexamined—Miscalculation Theory Weighted in Viet Crisis” was particularly probing. McNamara also told the president that he should “disassociate [himself] from and certainly not admit that any” covert action had taken place. In a portion of the conversation not part of the transcript in the Beschloss text but recounted in the Wheeler documentary, “Into Vietnam,” McNamara told Johnson to say specifically that US forces did not “even enter the area until two days” after the incident.

115. Secretary of Defense McNamara, Dean Rusk, and Gen Earle Wheeler testified before a joint session of Congress concerning the 2 and 4 August attacks on US forces and the American response. McNamara’s purpose was to convince Congress to concede war powers to the president. See Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 44. For the record of the official hearing and testimony, see Senate, *Southeast Asia Resolution: Joint Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Committee on Armed Services*, 88th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1966). In summary, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution states that “the Congress approves and supports the determination of the president, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” [Sec. 2:] “The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations, and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared as the president determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force.” [Sec. 3:] “This resolution shall expire when the president shall determine that the peace and security of the area is [sic] reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.” Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Public Law 88-408, 88th Cong., 2d sess., 7 August 1964. See also Joseph C. Goulden, *Truth Is the First Casualty; The Gulf of Tonkin Affair: Illusion and Reality* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969).

116. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 43. McNamara was responding to questions concerning possible US covert operations and whether or not the United States had participated in operations that may have provoked the North Vietnamese attacks. Though some of the record of the conversation is lost and McNamara himself asserts in his memoirs that he “learned later” that he was incorrect in his assertion, intelligence operations scholar Dr. William Bader observes that McNamara replied at least four times under direct questioning that no US forces were involved in commando raids. “There was no disclosure,” Dr. Bader said (*ibid.*, min. 44).

117. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 506.

118. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 45.

119. *Ibid.*, min. 38–39.

120. Johnson, “Remarks at Syracuse University on the Communist Challenge in Southeast Asia,” 5 August 1964.

121. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 46.

122. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 115–16.

123. Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 257.

124. Walt, "Search for a Science of Strategy," 144. Walt is discussing Douglas Porch's essay "Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," which appears in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). Porch notes the parallels between the French mission *civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) and the US mission to win "hearts and minds" in Vietnam.

125. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 2. Though several news stories predicted the possibility of a "long war," there was a distinct lack of urgency, leaving one writer to describe it as a "strange, almost passionless war." See *New York Times*, 29 July 1965; untitled, *Time* 86, no. 8 (6 August 1965): 17–18; and *Newsweek*, 9 August 1965, 17–18.

126. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 208.

127. Two Marine battalions landed at Da Nang airfield on 8 March 1965 after General Westmoreland successfully convinced Johnson that US air bases needed American security. Vietcong attacks on American installations in early February had led to Operation Flaming Dart, marking the beginning of overt American air raids against North Vietnam. Flaming Dart had quickly evolved into Rolling Thunder by the end of February. A few weeks after the Marines landed at Da Nang, Johnson authorized another 20,000 servicemen, and in July, Johnson approved Westmoreland's request for an additional 44 combat battalions that consisted of approximately 90,000 men.

128. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 2. Dean Rusk had coined the notion of waging war in "cold blood," absent the passions of "traditional war" (*ibid.*, 2–3). Limited-war theory dictated that the nation could wage war without enduring the overt societal, economic, and material impacts that historically accompanied war. See Osgood, *Limited War*; and Thies, *When Governments Collide*, 9.

129. Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 65. The idea that force could be used as a "signaling device" was also a key tenet of limited-war theory.

130. Võ, "Big Victory, Great Task," 207.

131. As adapted from Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 196. The North was not inclined to horse-trade with Johnson and actually benefited from the bombing campaigns against it because Rolling Thunder galvanized the populace, helping to perpetuate the idea that it was fighting for the sacred cause of unification against an unjust giant. Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 136–39.

132. Maclear, *Ten Thousand Day War*, 417.

133. Rose, *How Wars End*, 165–66, quoted from cable no. 4035, Taylor to Rusk, 3 June 1965, NSC History—Deployment in Vietnam.

134. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 423–27.

135. *Ibid.*

136. Rose, *How Wars End*, 166. See also Stephen P. Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War," *International Security* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 83–113.

137. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 542–72. See *ibid.*, doc. no. 118, McNamara memorandum, subject: Opposing Increase in War Effort, 14 October 1966, 542–51; doc. no. 26, McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, memorandum, subject: Bombing, May 1966, 141; and appendix, "Extracts from CIA/DIA Report: An Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam through 12 September 1966," 551. See also DOD, *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 4, 136. Analysts had calculated the effectiveness of Rolling Thunder as early as 1967.

138. Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 134.

139. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 447–48. See *ibid.*, doc. no. 101, Rostow to Johnson, memorandum, subject: Victory and Defeat in Guerilla Wars, 20 May 1965.

140. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 456–57. McNamara was optimistic about a "quick" US victory if the military were given more troops. He outlined nine elements that would lead to "a

favorable outcome”: (1) Vietcong stops attacks and drastically reduces incidents of terror and sabotage; (2) North Vietnam reduces infiltration to a trickle, with some reasonably reliable method of our obtaining confirmation of this fact; (3) US and South Vietnam stop bombing of North Vietnam; (4) South Vietnam stays independent (hopefully pro-US but possibly genuinely neutral); (5) South Vietnam exercises governmental functions over substantially all of South Vietnam; (6) Communists remain quiescent in Laos and Thailand; (7) North Vietnam withdraws regular army forces (People’s Army of Vietnam [PAVN]) and other North Vietnamese infiltrators from South Vietnam; (8) the Vietcong and National Liberation Front transform from a military to a purely political organization; and (9) US combat forces (not advisers or the Agency for International Development) withdraw (*ibid.*, 458).

141. Tuchman, *March of Folly*, 321.

142. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 194–95, Rusk to Johnson, memorandum, subject: Deployment, 1 July 1965, in vol. 6, tabs 357–83, NSC History, box 43, National Security Files, LBJ Presidential Library, <http://www.lbjlibrary.org>. McNamara observes that the majority of the administration shared Rusk’s sentiments.

143. *Ibid.*, 169, 205–6. McNamara explains that Johnson’s misleading of Congress and of the American people resulted from “two bitter choices: subterfuge versus the twin dangers of escalatory pressure and the loss of his social programs” (*ibid.*, 206).

144. Ball, “How Valid Are the Assumptions?,” 36.

145. *Ibid.*, 37.

146. McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 40–41.

147. VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 185.

148. *Ibid.*, 54, 67–79, 113. For example, Maxwell Taylor was directed to reveal policies and American actions through “inconspicuous background briefings,” and both Johnson and Bundy believed that they had an “education problem” regarding the American public. See Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 125–26.

149. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 131.

150. Bundy quoted in Charlton and Moncrief, *Many Reasons Why*, 120. Komer notes that nobody had definitive responsibility and quotes Bundy as saying, “I don’t think we had an effective war governing mechanism in Washington at any time” (Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, 82–85). The architecture of Johnson’s military efforts was troubling and inefficient. Chester Cooper also remarks that both the State Department and Pentagon failed to centralize their massive efforts into any high-level office or individual until much later in the war. Despite the massive endeavor that Vietnam was turning into, leadership’s attentions were divided. See Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, 1970).

151. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 128.

152. Lubell, *Hidden Crisis*, 254–60.

153. Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” 167–69.

154. Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 59–60.

155. Walt, “Search for a Science of Strategy,” 156.

156. This concept of “otherness” is elucidated in Patrick Porter’s *Military Orientalism* and Robert Jervis’s *Perception and Misperception*.

157. McDougall, *Heavens and the Earth*, 406.

158. *Ibid.*, 413.

159. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 21.

160. Lubell, *Hidden Crisis*, 254–60.

161. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 170. Herring quotes Democratic House member L. Mendel Rivers.

162. *Ibid.*, 171. Pacifists opposed all wars on moral grounds. The "New Left" represented a small but vocal contingent that included mostly upper-middle-class youth on college campuses who viewed Vietnam as a "classic example of the way the American ruling class exploited helpless people to sustain a decadent capitalist system." Antiwar liberals did not generally oppose the war on "systemic grounds" but thought that Vietnam, unlike Korea or World War II, lacked the moral justification for US intervention and that the United States' involvement there undermined its fundamental US principles (*ibid.*). See also Charles DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

163. Figures such as Jane Fonda and Muhammad Ali, as well as social leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, gave celebrity and momentum to the antiwar movement.

164. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 175.

165. Powers, *Vietnam*, 118.

166. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 510–18, 77. Secretary McNamara's 19 May memorandum to President Johnson was especially critical of expanding the war effort and recommended scaling back on troops and bombing as well as looking for a compromise with the North (*ibid.*, doc. no. 129, 577–85).

167. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 21.

168. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 263.

169. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 173.

170. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 258.

171. For Jervis's discussion on rational consistency, see *Perception and Misperception*, 118–95. For a discussion on the impact of attribution, nonattribution, and how decision makers process confirming and disconfirming information, see Billings and Hermann, "Problem Identification."

172. Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 261.

173. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 183.

174. The Wise Men were made up of "such establishment luminaries as Eugene Black, Allen Dulles, Robert Lovett, and John McCloy" (Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 125). Active throughout the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the group often included political leaders and former military members.

175. *Ibid.*, 132.

176. *Ibid.*, 143. The Vietnam Action Group was designed to "break the siege" of the critics. Johnson also established the Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam, ostensibly a citizen's group but in actuality populated with Johnson supporters who could essentially churn out propaganda favorable to Johnson's cause. See *ibid.*, 144; and Herring, *America's Longest War*, 182–83.

177. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 144.

178. For example, *New York Times* reporter Hanson Baldwin was sent on a three-week trip to Vietnam. For his series of articles describing the progress in Vietnam positively, Herring adapted information from box 96 of the Hanson Baldwin Papers and from the Baldwin articles, *New York Times*, 23 November and 3, 6, and 17 December 1967.

179. As adapted by Herring in *LBJ and Vietnam* from Saigon cable 7867, 7 October 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers, National Security Files, box 99. See LBJ Presidential Library, <http://www.lbjlibrary.org>.

180. As quoted by Herring in *LBJ and Vietnam* from DeBenedetti, "CIA Analysis," 31–25.

181. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 182.

182. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 366–67.

183. “War: Rancors Aweigh,” 23.

184. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 146–47. See also *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon Baines Johnson*, 1967, vol. 2, 1045–55.

185. Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 573–88. See *ibid.*, doc. nos. 124, 125, 128, 129, 130. See also Herring, *Pentagon Papers*, 174–207. McGeorge Bundy, who by 1967 was officially out of the administration but still advised on policy matters, wrote a memo to Johnson advising against escalating the war. William Bundy, the assistant secretary of state, wrote a somewhat ambiguous and contradictory memo that seemed both for and against escalation. General Westmoreland, General Wheeler, and the JCS produced a report that called for the introduction of more troops. McNamara’s report cautioned against further escalation and recommended seeking negotiations with the North.

186. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 146, as adapted from Tom Johnson’s notes on LBJ’s conversation with Chalmers Roberts, 16 October 1967, and Tom Johnson’s notes on meeting, 3 October 1967, Tom Johnson Notes, box 1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers, LBJ Presidential Library.

187. Public Broadcasting Service, *American Experience: LBJ*, pt. 1, “Beautiful Texas,” program transcript, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/transcript/lbj-transcript>.

188. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, 321.

189. Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 158. Oberdorfer offers a more thorough account of the Tet Offensive. For a more recent version, see Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). See also Karnow, *Vietnam*.

190. Johnson was also shocked by the Tet Offensive. Though he was more in the know than the public, skewed reports from his military commanders and the overriding power of his own perceptions, which could not allow for the possibility of Hanoi thwarting—let alone defeating—American power, contrasted sharply with what looked initially like an American defeat.

191. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 523.

192. *Ibid.*

193. Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam*, 223–24. The politburo’s numerical claims included the destruction of 43 percent of the American war-reserve supplies in Vietnam and 4,200 “strategic hamlets.” While its claim on casualties and actual material damage may have overreached, the net effect ultimately led to a serious weakening of America’s war-fighting ability. In the politburo’s words, it successfully “initiated the strategic decline of the American imperialists in their war of aggression against Vietnam, and created a decisive turning point in the war” (*ibid.*).

194. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 193–95. Hue was an exceptionally bloody and protracted battle. The United States and South Vietnam lost close to 500 men in the retaking of Hue, and there were close to 100,000 civilian refugees as well as a massive bombing and artillery campaign. Several thousand South Vietnamese were apparently executed by the North Vietnamese forces. Nixon references the Battle of Hue in his speech following his administration’s incursion into Cambodia as justification for his bold and aggressive actions (*ibid.*).

195. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 189–92.

196. Robbins, “Anchorman.” Johnson reportedly said during a staff meeting that “if I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America” (*ibid.*).

197. Johnson, “Address to the Nation,” 469.

198. *Ibid.*

199. *Ibid.*

200. *Ibid.*

201. Johnson, *Vantage Point*.

202. Wheeler, “Into Vietnam,” VHS, min. 3.

Chapter 5

From San Clemente to Saigon: Nixon's Five O'Clock Shadow

We will not make the same old mistakes, we will make our own.

—Henry Kissinger, 1969

The China initiative also restored perspective to our national policy. It reduced Indochina to its proper scale—a small peninsula on a major continent.

—Henry Kissinger

We're playing a much bigger game—we're playing a Russia game, a China game, and an election game, and we're not gonna have [South Vietnam] collapse.

—Richard Nixon, 1972

*Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow. . . .
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

—T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 1925

A “Winning Image”: Beards, Boy Scouts, and the Ugly King

In 1960 John F. Kennedy challenged Richard M. Nixon to a series of televised debates. Nixon accepted eagerly, confident that he could school the relatively inexperienced senator from Massachusetts. After all, Nixon had been a House member, a senator, and a vice president who not only ran the country while Eisenhower was ill but also had accumulated a long record both domestically

and internationally.¹ Nixon was one of the most visible and active vice presidents, often serving as Eisenhower's attack dog, and he was famous for his strong stance against Communism. Comparatively, Kennedy seemed a squire taking on a seasoned statesman. On the radio, the outcome was very much as Nixon had predicted. The majority of listeners overwhelmingly judged the vice president victorious. The debates, however, also drew the largest television audience in US history, and the camera judged Nixon harshly. Against the advice of his staff, Nixon refused makeup, and his seemingly permanent five o'clock shadow appeared even more pronounced, contrasting sharply with his pallid skin.² During the debate, pools of sweat were readily visible on Nixon's chin, almost as if he were drooling, and his narrow eyes and stubborn beard created an image that was at once shadowy and sallow. Kennedy, on the other hand, resembled a "bronzed warrior," looking young, relaxed, athletic, and well tanned. The disparate images of the two men readily overshadowed the differences and merits of their arguments, and the television audience sided decisively with the young senator.

Kennedy had charmed both the press and the public while Nixon's countenance proved a liability. Consistent with his political history, Nixon waged a vigorous campaign, attacking Kennedy for his youth and pointing out that the White House could not be a "training ground."³ Nixon ultimately lost by little more than 100,000 votes. Despite the closeness of the election and some questions that arose concerning vote counting in Chicago and Texas, Nixon publicly conceded and did not officially protest the results.⁴ The 1960 debates forever changed how candidates campaigned and the way Americans voted—with television replacing the old-fashioned hand-shaking and convention format. Moreover, Nixon staffer and biographer Roger Morris observes that Nixon was permanently scarred by the experience and concluded he would "never again be caught short . . . or let his opponents outdo him, or trust the system to work the way it's supposed to."⁵

Following his failed presidential campaign, Nixon made a bid for governor in 1962 in his home state of California, where he was soundly defeated by Democratic incumbent Jerry Brown. At the press conference after the election, Nixon's bitterness and frustration were apparent. The defeated candidate marched out on stage and lambasted the press corps, essentially blaming them for his loss: "You've had a lot of fun[,] . . . you've had an opportunity to attack me[,] . . . [but] you won't have Nixon to kick around anymore."⁶ The consensus was that Nixon's political career was over. He took a job as a Wall Street lawyer and announced publicly that he would not run in the 1964 presidential election.⁷ Private life proved difficult for the lifelong politician, however, and before long he emerged from shadowy obscurity. Within six months

of his failed run for governor, Nixon appeared on the Jack Parr show, playing piano, poking fun at himself, and coming across as a much softer, friendlier, and humble man. Though he did not run for president in 1964, he did storm the country in support of the Republican Party, visiting 35 states and stumping for 135 candidates—making a key contribution to the Republican congressional comeback in 1966. No longer in the spotlight, Nixon worked from behind the scenes, and there was “hardly a Republican that [didn’t] owe him a favor.”⁸

He won the Republican nomination for president in 1968 as the “New Nixon,” not only cashing in the political capital he had built during the intervening years within the Republican Party but also pivoting on a well-cultivated image.⁹ The New Nixon was part of an evolving mythology he was continually trying to build.¹⁰ In 1967 he launched an extensive tour of four continents, building his stature as an international statesman. John Ehrlichman observes that Nixon had a “core fire” to be president and believed his unique vision and leadership should guide the country.¹¹ Part of that vision is revealed in Nixon’s 1967 article, “Asia after Viet Nam.”¹² Published in *Foreign Affairs*, the article presents a well-reasoned, stately argument that acknowledges America’s war weariness yet cautions against both isolationism and belligerence.¹³ Through the article, Nixon recasts himself and at the same time gives a prelude to his vision for restaging Vietnam and the Cold War. America’s yearning for answers and solutions provided fertile soil for the New Nixon and his vision.

Not everyone bought into it, however. Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey scathingly criticized the notion of a reformed Nixon. During a campaign speech, Humphrey reminded everyone that Nixon had undergone numerous “renovations,” claiming that the Republican candidate had had his “political face lifted so many times” that there couldn’t possibly be anything new.¹⁴ Critics were vehemently skeptical, and Nixon’s shadowy side was not so easily painted over. Many still recalled the financing scandal of 1952, and sentiments had not ranged far from Adlai Stevenson’s comments during the presidential campaign of 1956.¹⁵ After Eisenhower’s heart trouble, Stevenson warned the American people that voting for the Republicans would literally put Nixon within a heartbeat of the presidency. “Every piece of scientific evidence we have,” Stevenson said, “indicates that a Republican victory tomorrow” means that Nixon will be president within four years, “and I recoil at the prospect of Mr. Nixon” as custodian of America with his hands on the hydrogen bomb.¹⁶

Nixon’s reemergence in 1968 was a continuation of his ongoing and deliberate effort to subdue the darker angels of his image and to cultivate the mystique that would win him the presidency. He had a keen, even romanticized attach-

ment to his roots and blended both European and American motifs in his attempt to create a “Nixon mythology.”¹⁷ Born in 1913 in Yorba Linda, California, Richard Milhous Nixon was named for the twelfth-century English monarch Richard “the Lion-Hearted.”¹⁸ The Nixon family coat of arms is emblazoned with the phrase *Toujours Prêt*, which translates as “always prepared.”¹⁹ Nixon took this sentiment to heart, and the words are not that different from those of the Boy Scout motto Be Prepared. Not many people, either in Nixon’s time or in our own, would envision Nixon as a Boy Scout. His Quaker roots, however, and his self-espoused virtues created—in his own mind at least—a puritanical self-image and moral separateness. All of these variables fed the Nixon mythology and jelled with Nixon’s belief that he was experienced, selfless, disciplined, hardworking, possessed of moral courage, confident, coolheaded, and dedicated to a great cause.²⁰ Unlike his two predecessors, he did not enjoy extramarital affairs and often openly disapproved of Henry Kissinger’s trysts and reputation as a playboy.²¹

Nixon’s romanticized image of his modest roots, moral superiority, and namesake had him convinced he was a “brave warrior-champion, wielding the ax of righteousness.”²² In the eighth grade he wrote that he wanted to pursue a career in politics and law because he “believed he could do some good.”²³ Nixon was born for a cause and “cast himself as a self-made man, a resilient fighter, and a nationalist champion.”²⁴ Kissinger added to Nixon’s repertoire, and while the two men could not have been more different, they also reinforced each other’s mythologies and in aggregate formed Nixon’s presidential image. In an interview Kissinger states,

I’ve always acted alone. . . . Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse, the cowboy who rides all alone into the town, the village, with his horse and nothing else. . . . He acts, that’s all, by being in the right place at the right time. . . . In a sense . . . I’m a fatalist. I believe in destiny. I’m convinced of course, that you have to fight to reach a goal. . . . I believe more in human relations than ideas. I use ideas but I need human relations.²⁵

Nixon thought of himself as one of what he would later describe as “the forgotten Americans of the silent majority” and exalted himself as their voice, their champion, their lead cowboy.²⁶

The president also pushed his staff to further develop his mystique and to draw upon European and American mythology to create the Nixon myth. Jeffrey Kimball surmised that Nixon thought that leadership pivoted more on *how* a president is perceived to do things than *what* he actually does.²⁷ Nixon believed in myth and was obsessed with the creation of his own:

One reason why it is frequently so difficult to sort out myth from reality in reading about political leaders is that part of political leadership is the creation of myths. . . . The politician,

no less than the actor or filmmaker, knows that to bore his audience is to lose his audience. . . . [Politicians] must appeal to the heart. . . . We cannot find the stuff of leadership in the dry pages of history. . . . We have to look to the spirit of the man [and] . . . to legends. Legends are often an artful intertwining of fact and myth, designed to beguile, to impress, to inspire, or sometimes simply to attract attention. But legend is an essential ingredient of leadership.²⁸

Nixon believed he was a unique leader who could blend the European hero with the American cowboy and infuse them with his own “Nixonness.” He tenaciously prepared for politics from an early age and never stopped conjuring his image.²⁹ In 1968 Nixon campaigned as the architect of a new world order and as the peacemaker. The grave challenges of the Cold War and Vietnam demanded new leadership: “We live in an age in which individual reaction to crisis may bear on the fate of mankind for centuries to come.”³⁰ Many saw his “new brand of leadership,” however, as just another hue of an amorphous politician famous for shape-shifting.

Ehrlichman said of Nixon that “we all knew him differently” and that even Nixon’s wife could not have “told you who the real Richard Nixon was.”³¹ Nixon biographer Ralph de Toledano describes Nixon as a man “with no set ideology” while historian Garry Wills characterizes him as the “plastic man.”³² Nixon’s many layers reflected a penchant for political expediency, and critics wondered if in fact there was anything solid at his core. In his memoirs, Nixon reveals at least one enduring element of his views on foreign policy:

As I looked at America’s position in the world and examined our relations with other nations, I could see that the central factor in 1968 on the eve of my presidency was the same as it had been in 1947. . . . America now, as then, was the main defender of the free world against the encroachment and aggression of the Communist world. For twenty-five years, I had watched the changing face of communism. . . . Never once in my career have I doubted that the Communists mean it when they say that their goal is to bring the world under Communist control. . . . But unlike some anticommunists . . . I have always believed that we can and must communicate and . . . negotiate. . . . They are too powerful to ignore.³³

Throughout his many facelifts, Nixon never strayed far from this philosophy, fundamentally little different from what Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson believed. What separated Nixon were not so much the ends but the means he believed necessary to achieve them. From his perspective, not only had American foreign policy been “held hostage” by the unsophisticated meanderings of both Johnson and Kennedy, but also his Democratic predecessors had misused and piddled away American power.³⁴ The right leader could effectively apply American power against North Vietnam and at the same time reorient larger Cold War interests. To Nixon’s thinking, his predecessors lacked the sophistication to keep more than one or two balls in the air at a time; subsequently, Vietnam had wrongly been allowed to bind US foreign policy.

Nixon promised to free South Vietnam from the Communist threat in a way that would also free the United States from its war there. Furthermore, he suggested that he could do all of this while transforming Cold War relationships among the great powers and overcoming the inertia of stagnating American power. Though perhaps politically expedient, the promise had great appeal to the American people, and Nixon banked on his new mystique and the promises that came with it as a strategy to win the presidency. Once in office, he would invoke his own myth as a mechanism to win in Vietnam and to reshape the Cold War. For Nixon, presidential power derived from the mythology surrounding the man who held the office. To that end, he wanted to differentiate himself from Kennedy, “who did nothing but appeared great,” and from Johnson, “who did everything but appeared terrible.”³⁵

There were many shades to Nixon, and his makeover in 1968 could not long subdue the prickly stubble of his personality, nor did any amount of makeup long hide his absolute commitment to victory. Nixon wanted to enter the arena and believed that once he was there, he could redirect his own destiny and that of his country toward hitherto unseen levels of greatness. One of his favorite movies, which he watched repeatedly in the White House, was *Patton*. In the opening scene, George C. Scott stands in front of an American flag and rallies his troops with his philosophy on victory: “Americans love a winner. . . . The very thought of losing is hateful to America.”³⁶ This sentiment perhaps forms the core that so many looked for in Nixon. It wasn’t just about gaining power and keeping it but about winning the judgment of history. After Nixon’s final speech as president, Henry Kissinger told him that he would be judged as one of the nation’s greatest presidents, to which Nixon responded, “That depends, Henry, on who writes the history.”³⁷ William Costello points out that “Nixon’s family name is a mutation of the Gaelic words meaning *he faileth not*.”³⁸ Even after his resignation and the collapse of South Vietnam, Nixon persisted in conveying his victory and his history, never fully accepting his part in either the failings of his policies or of his presidency.

The mythology he cultivated served his commitment to winning. He believed his mystique would help him win the power of the presidency, the war in Vietnam, peace abroad and at home, and a heroic ruling from history that would allow him to restructure great-power politics. Such grand victories, however, required more than fables, and Nixon prepared for and exercised his power both brilliantly and ruthlessly. With Kissinger at his side, Nixon “organized government to concentrate power . . . in the White House” and purposely appointed “weak” individuals to the Departments of State and Defense.³⁹ There was no doubt that America’s foreign policy would be Richard Nixon’s foreign policy, and it was not without great achievements. He was the first

American president since the start of the Cold War to set foot in the Kremlin. America's relationship with China was reframed, Nixon secured the first-ever arms-control summit with Moscow, and America's direct involvement in Vietnam did end. Still, despite these accomplishments—for all the promises of peace, virtue, and leadership, and no matter how much such promises satiated public appetites for resolution and reconciliation—Nixon's game shocked the polity and the public. The hero of America's forgotten did not whittle peace from a soapbox. This Boy Scout had a beard. He was the consummate Cold Warrior and a wizard of realpolitik who had crossed and recrossed the River Styx only to return again in yet another political resurrection as president. Nixon was elected on a platform to end the war and unify the country. When he started hammering out his peace, though, it was not a Quaker or knight or even a statesman the nation saw but the machinations of an ugly king looking to win. The hour of the Vietnam War had grown late. The decade waned. America now turned under the five o'clock shadow.

The following sections examine how Nixon sought to reframe himself and the Vietnam War, analyzing the role that his mythology played in shaping agendas and outcomes. Did the New Nixon effectively shave off the old, and was he truly a peacemaker? If so, what kind of peace did he make and at what cost? America's ground war officially ends in 1973, Nixon resigns in 1974, and Saigon falls in 1975. Was this a decent interval? An honorable peace? A necessary iteration in a larger game? Or something else? Finally, what does the war's ending tell us of its beginning, and what might this reveal about inherited war?

A New Myth for an Old War

Nixon was once asked, "How is it that you can deal with evil forces, an evil empire, like the Soviet Union?," to which the president responded, "Because I'm evil." Nixon also later stated that "you've got to be a little evil to understand the people out there. You have to have known the dark side of life."⁴⁰ The above is not meant to imply that Nixon was wholly sinister but that he was very much aware of his dark side and of its utility. He believed it gave him insight and could serve certain ends. When it came to Vietnam and Russia, for example, Nixon deliberately pivoted on perceptions of his "irrationality" and even "madness" to coerce his adversaries. He was also conscious that the more shadowy aspects of his character could be a liability, especially under public lighting. So Nixon often struggled to balance the various aspects of his nature, promoting or subduing each in accordance with his purpose. The darker shades often cropped up, however, even when he was ostensibly engaged in a noble cause.

Nixon rose to notoriety as a congressman during the Alger Hiss hearings in 1948.⁴¹ Nixon was only a junior member of the Un-American Activities Committee, but his doggedness ultimately resulted in Hiss's conviction. The high drama of the hearings offered Nixon a stage to go after Truman, the Democrats, and the Communists. Whether he was motivated more by his conviction that Hiss was actually a Communist or by political opportunity is debatable. Those around him at the time, however, observed that the trial became personal for Nixon, and he came to see it as a competition.⁴² Nixon's run for the House of Representatives in 1946 was also shaped by a crusade against Communists. He ran as the champion of the forgotten man and painted his Democratic opponent Jerry Voorhis as a New Dealer, actually passing out flyers identifying Voorhis as an ex-Socialist and Communist sympathizer.⁴³ Nixon later said of the campaign, "I had to win. Of course I knew Voorhis wasn't a Communist."⁴⁴

Nixon's reputation emerged as a ruthless campaigner and staunch anti-Communist. Helen Gahagan Douglas, his Democratic opponent for Senate in 1950, gave him the moniker "Tricky Dick" after he smeared her as a Communist and New Dealer.⁴⁵ Nixon's ruthlessness left waves of bitterness in his wake. "People react to fear not love," he once told H. R. Haldeman. "They don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true."⁴⁶ He didn't just defeat opponents; he "destroyed them."⁴⁷ Part of Nixon delighted in the angst he caused. His well-crafted television address after the 1952 slush-fund scandal purposefully mirrored Roosevelt's fireside chat, and Nixon's use of his dog, Checkers, and allusions to his wife's "cloth coat" rankled Democrats and "delighted his friends."⁴⁸ Following the speech, there was still some question as to whether or not Eisenhower would keep Nixon on his ticket. During a conversation, Nixon told Eisenhower, "General, there comes a time, even in your life, when you have to sh[---] or get off the pot."⁴⁹ Nixon's audacity was neither rank nor party-sensitive.

Given his political roots and often cantankerous public displays and ruthlessness, it is understandable why so many doubted the new, softer, middle-of-the-road Nixon who hit the campaign trail in 1968. But the country was hungry for leadership. The polity was triangulated by the context of Vietnam, Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, and the sense that America was spiraling out of control domestically. Nixon's resurgence toward the nation's highest office was facilitated by the breach in the political lines that these three factors created. Remove any single factor, and arguably there is no new Nixon, no Kissinger, and no Woodward and Bernstein. But in reality, those breaches existed. The great man "acts" and does so by "being in the right place at the right time," and Nixon once again positioned himself for a rendezvous

with destiny.⁵⁰ Having seized both opportunity and circumstance, Nixon made a successful run at the presidency, mirroring his attempts to triangulate American foreign policy. His image lathered, Nixon turned to the Vietnam War.

For the new president, the war in Vietnam was both old and new. As a congressman and as vice president, Nixon had journeyed “the labyrinth of Indochina” and had formed distinct impressions concerning the conflicts there.⁵¹ Nor had he remained quiet during the intervening years. Nixon harried Johnson and the Democrats. A series of press releases and newspaper articles between 1965 and 1967 captures Nixon condemning the infighting within the Democratic Party, saying that the “behavior of a small segment of our population” was costing the United States the war.⁵² What made Vietnam “new” was that Nixon would now hold the reins. He simultaneously reframed himself and the war, attempting to “straddle the political center of foreign-policy issues” with an implied “secret plan to achieve peace with honor.”⁵³ Just as his conjuring for the new Nixon started well before he took office, so did his preparations on Vietnam.

Nixon had prepared his own version of containment and ushered in the era of détente.⁵⁴ Henry Kissinger described the Nixon administration’s “bigger game” détente strategy as an approach that sought the flexibility of the Kennedy-Johnson era yet with the cohesiveness and long-range view of the Eisenhower administration.⁵⁵ Kissinger believed that a need existed for a “philosophical deepening” in US policy and that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had lacked an adequate “conception” of the world.⁵⁶ Confrontations between the United States and the Soviet-Communist world had obscured larger US interests and goals, and Vietnam had to be reunderstood as “a small peninsula on a major continent.”⁵⁷ In his 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article, Nixon called for a new relationship with China.⁵⁸ Détente still had as its core objective the containment of Communism. What delineated Nixon’s strategy from those of his predecessors, however, was a recasting of interests and threats in the broader context of great-power politics. For Nixon, it was no longer necessary for the United States to bear sole responsibility for international security. In fact, Nixon and Kissinger both felt that basing American policy on the belief that the United States could transform international society to match its own image was both an illusion and dangerous.

The United States had limits, Kissinger argued, and overinvestment in trying to “win” the bipolar competition between America and the Soviet Union wasted resources and misread the “reality” of international life.⁵⁹ From the perspective of the Nixon administration, the world was multipolar; the primary interest of the United States was international stability, which relied not on ideological cohesion between countries but on the behaviors of all countries. Nixon

believed that simply drawing policy lines in accordance with ideological lines falsely and counterproductively parceled policy in a way that ran counter to US interests. “The world had changed,” Nixon told the Chinese president in 1972, and the United States was breaking “with the old pattern” and would “look at each country in terms of its own conduct rather than lumping them all together” based on a particular philosophy.⁶⁰ Eisenhower had sought asymmetric superiority through technology. Kennedy and Johnson had pursued symmetrical superiority on all fronts not only to beat the Soviets in total war but also to outmaneuver them in guerilla war, economics, prestige, and conventional war. Nixon’s policy shifted containment strategy from the pursuit of superiority to one of sufficiency: this would allow for acceptable differences between the United States and its rivals.⁶¹ The primary interest of the United States—stability—was not possible without the contributions of the Soviet Union and China.⁶²

Détente redefined US interests and threats, placing both in a wider context. The key to affecting Soviet behavior, the Nixon administration believed, was to understand the “ambiguous tendencies” of Moscow that could produce both harmful and helpful outcomes.⁶³ Instead of using Vietnam to push the Soviets and Chinese through competition, Vietnam could be used to draw the Soviets and Chinese in. US policy had to balance the need for competition with the need for cooperation. Kissinger argued that policies in Vietnam had invigorated a military competition with the Soviets and that efforts to achieve superiority over the Soviets only made them less likely to negotiate.⁶⁴ Instead of pursuing policies that forced Moscow’s undesirable tendencies, détente required engagement with the Soviets on “substantive issues.”⁶⁵ Though the Kennedy administration had at least been aware of the possibility of more closely tying Vietnam to US-Soviet and US-China relations, it was under Nixon that triangular diplomacy emerged.⁶⁶

For détente to be successful and to effectively reframe Vietnam and the Cold War, Nixon worked his policies even before taking office. Prior to Nixon’s inauguration, Kissinger commissioned a RAND study, the results of which were made available in December 1968.⁶⁷ The study proved an influential tool and framed the context for Nixon’s initial agenda in Vietnam. Its timing also reflects that Nixon was proactive and not about to settle for the kind of simple handoff that Kennedy had received from Eisenhower on Indochina in 1960.⁶⁸ Whatever conclusions might be drawn with regard to Nixon’s meddling in policy issues prior to his taking office, his attempts to understand the problems he would face as president have merit. The RAND study defined US victory as “the destruction, withdrawal, or dissolution of all (or most) VC [Vietcong] forces and apparatus, the permanent cessation of infiltration, and

the virtually unchallenged sovereignty of a stable, noncommunist regime . . . with no significant Communist political role except on an individual, 'reconciled' basis."⁶⁹ Victory, then, was thus defined little differently by Nixon's administration than by Kennedy's or Johnson's. What changed were the means and assessments of exactly how the United States might achieve these ends.

In an attempt to delineate not only objectives but also the methods required, the RAND study posited several alternative outcomes and strategies. Outcomes proposed included assured GVN control of all of South Vietnam (aka "victory"), mutual withdrawal without political accommodation, political accommodation (with mutual troop withdrawal), and territorial accommodation.⁷⁰ Military strategies were reduced to two basic options: (1) continuing "pressures on Hanoi through the current strategy, threats of escalation, or actual escalation"; and (2) reducing "the U.S. presence in South Vietnam, which, by making U.S. presence more sustainable, could be another form of pressure."⁷¹ The political climate at home meant Nixon was under immense pressure to ease US commitments in Vietnam, but he was also bound by a deep belief in upholding US commitments: "For the United States, this first defeat in our Nation's history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the world."⁷² Nixon could not simply "bring the troops home." Both American prestige and the prestige of the administration were heavily vested in Vietnam, and he was unwilling to sacrifice either. Nixon could have simply withdrawn from Vietnam, blamed the war on the Democrats, and focused on broader, great-power politics. That he didn't reveals not only that he retained significant commitment to Cold War notions such as domino theory but also that he was unwilling to concede to Communist aggression—and that he was perhaps convinced that he could and should win where others had failed. In another address, Nixon captured this sentiment, saying that America could not, "when the chips are down . . . act like a pitiful giant."⁷³ At the same time, Hanoi had up to that point been unresponsive to coercive US military efforts. The challenge confronting Nixon lay in finding ways to make military efforts more effective while still maneuvering toward "peace."

Both Nixon and Kissinger wanted to reorient American policy but were unwilling to give in on Vietnam.⁷⁴ Kissinger observes that the "new Nixon Administration was the first of the postwar generation that had to conduct foreign policy without the national consensus that had sustained its predecessors largely since 1947. . . . We faced not only the dislocation of a war but the need to articulate a new foreign policy for a new era. . . . The Vietnam War would end. . . . Could we shape a new consensus that could reconcile our idealism and our responsibilities, our security and our values, our dreams and our pos-

sibilities?”⁷⁵ Though controversial, the Vietnam War was largely supported throughout the Johnson administration, and the popular collapse came only after the nation believed itself misled.⁷⁶ Nixon, then, faced not only a complex and difficult war but also a polity increasingly distrustful of its leaders and of the merits of US involvement in Vietnam. Add in the nuances and challenges of the Cold War, and the way ahead for the new president was particularly sticky. He believed himself up to the challenge, however, and remained convinced that by consolidating power he could guide the nation and solve the war. “This is no time for consensus government,” Nixon declared in 1965. “It’s a time for leadership,” and 1969 presented an opportunity to prove his merits.⁷⁷

In a *Foreign Affairs* article, Kissinger characterized the limits to American commitment: “First, the United States cannot accept a military defeat or a change in the political structure of South Viet Nam [*sic*] brought about by external military force; second, once North Vietnamese forces and pressures are removed, the United States has no obligation to maintain a government in Saigon by force.”⁷⁸ Gideon Rose surmises that Nixon believed he could remove “certain limits on American operations in Indochina,” threaten further escalation, and pressure Moscow “to restrain its proxy” while encouraging South Vietnam to play a larger role.⁷⁹ In aggregate, Nixon’s initial strategy—comprised of de-Americanization, Vietnamization, pacification, détente, and negotiations—relied upon “irresistible military pressure.”⁸⁰ National Security Study Memorandum 36 denotes the assumed timelines for Nixon’s strategy, with projected dates for full transfer ranging between December 1970 and December 1972.⁸¹ The memorandum assumes (1) efforts will start on 1 July 1969, (2) current North Vietnamese and Vietcong force levels, barring an agreement on mutual withdrawal, (3) accurate projections of South Vietnamese force levels, (4) the only de-escalation will be from the phased withdrawal of American troops, and (5) vigorous efforts will be made to equip and train South Vietnamese forces.⁸²

Both Nixon and Kissinger were confident in their strategy and assumed it would work quickly. Cooperation and buy-in were needed from South Vietnam, however. Nixon talked with South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu in July 1969, assuring him that the United States was committed to the South’s cause. Obviously worried by the American drawdown, Thieu pressed Nixon on the possibility of a protracted war and the extent to which he could rely on US support. Nixon’s response is telling:

We know that we are progressing, that the other side is growing weaker. Therefore, if the enemy gives no indication of wanting to negotiate seriously . . . we should review the evidence. The long road is risky; there are too many backseat drivers. . . . We should . . . adopt a flexible and reasonable posture to keep public opinion in support of us.

[Thieu then raised concerns about a possible offensive by the North once American troops were withdrawn. Nixon replied that he had a plan, referencing earlier discussions on the use of American military ground power and airpower. Nixon then urged Thieu toward secrecy.]

We should not disclose to the enemy what we propose to do. . . . Another disadvantage in making public disclosures . . . is the fact that critics at home will not be satisfied. . . . Consequently, let us have a plan, but let us keep it secret among ourselves.⁸³

In Nixon's mind, the reality of his drawdown and plan was somewhat different than what he portrayed publicly. The above conversation took place less than a week after Nixon revealed what became known as the Guam Doctrine.⁸⁴ Deposed king and Cambodian prime minister Norodom Sihanouk praised Nixon's approach, saying that if the United States "brings aid without conditions and without physical intervention . . . [it] will certainly have more hope of seeing the flood of Communism contained than if [it] assumes this task with [its] soldiers."⁸⁵ The public perceived Nixon as maneuvering toward peace and taking a less direct approach. As his conversation with Thieu reveals, however, Nixon very consciously reserved the right to find peace on his terms.

A key aspect of Nixon's strategy relied not just on the use of force but the threat of force, which he believed was made all the more real by his reputation as a hard-liner. So while he marched his "better angels" publicly through ostensibly moderate policies aimed at ending the war, he also drew upon his dark side to effect those policies. Reflecting on his own "Nixonness," he wrote in his memoirs,

I was sure that [Leonid] Brezhnev and [Alexei] Kosygin had been no more anxious for me to win in 1968 than [Nikita] Khrushchev had been in 1960. The prospect of having to deal with a Republican administration—and a Nixon administration at that—undoubtedly caused anxiety in Moscow. In fact, I suspected that the Soviets might have counseled the North Vietnamese to offer to begin the Paris talks in the hope that the bombing halt would tip the balance to Humphrey in the election—and if that was their strategy, it had almost worked.⁸⁶

He certainly believed in and stroked the Nixon myth. Moscow had some concern over dealing with the new American president. Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, however, writes that at the time, he felt he had a fair understanding of the new American president.

No one in the Soviet leadership, including the most zealous supporters of communism, ever talked seriously about any concrete prospects for communism in the United States. . . . In my boldest thoughts I never looked beyond the idea of our two systems peacefully converging somehow. . . . But did Richard Nixon really believe in the communist threat in the United States, or was it just a convenient means to climb the political ladder? To my mind, the latter was more likely.⁸⁷

Dobrynin's assessment in 1969 was that Nixon's anti-Communism was really "a factor related to the foreign policy struggle" and "translated from a domestic issue to the more rarefied plane of relations between nations," thus providing

an opening for dialogue.⁸⁸ Nixon was a cold warrior and realist, and the Soviets, though wary, felt they understood the American's calculations. Soviet premier Brezhnev asserted that "you can do business with Nixon."⁸⁹

Yet Nixon's world image was rooted in history, and he proclaimed that "beneath the struggle among Vietnamese lies the larger, continuing struggle between those nations that want order and those that want disorder."⁹⁰ Similar to Kennedy's descriptions of Vietnam as part of the worldwide Communist revolution, Nixon seemed to believe that peripheral wars were a subset of the larger clash between ideologies. The French history in Indochina, the lessons from Munich and Korea, and the United States' own experiences in Vietnam up to that point shaped Nixon's perception that a "larger game was afoot." Nixon's image of the Vietnam War and his subsequent approach are interesting because, although he caged it in a Cold War context (with enduring Cold War themes), he and Kissinger also sought to disassociate ideology from the struggle. The "deepening philosophy" Kissinger called for in American policy was recognition that ideology had corrupted both the means and the ends of the United States' struggle. Policy needed to account for the realities of the security environment and the futility of changing the nature of countries. Instead, America needed to learn to deal with nations as they were.⁹¹

Reframed in this way, Nixon's Vietnam policies can be understood as a means by which the administration sought to "win" while simultaneously changing the context of the game.⁹² Appeals to anti-Communist sentiments may have been more expediency than philosophy. It was not that Nixon suddenly came to love Communism but that "victory and peace with honor" was more about the preservation of American (read Nixon's) prestige and less about the stamping out of evil ideologies. Nixon envisioned a new world that ranged beyond the binding architectures of his predecessors. To his mind, Johnson had squandered numerous diplomatic opportunities and had overly restricted US military power. Nixon believed that his own approach was more sophisticated and that his unique abilities could better exploit all of the American power at the president's disposal. In 1968 he stated that a better use of military strength "could have ended [the war] with far less than we are now using."⁹³ Nixon sniped continually from the sidelines before he was president. Once in office, he continued to unveil a new version of himself, the war, and the United States' approach to it. Reflecting on the plan he revealed in July 1969, Nixon commented,

The Nixon Doctrine announced on Guam was misinterpreted by some as signaling a new policy that would lead to total American withdrawal from Asia and from other parts of the world as well. . . . The Nixon Doctrine was not a formula for getting America out of Asia, but one that provided the only sound basis for America's staying in and

continuing to play a responsible role in helping the non-Communist nations and neutrals as well as our Asian allies to defend their independence.⁹⁴

Nixon's peace equated to winning America's continuing ability to influence events. Doing so required preserving American prestige. Kissinger once commented that Nixon entered the presidency "when the forces of history were moving America from a position of dominance to one of leadership."⁹⁵ The difference between dominance and leadership was that the former reflected "objective strengths" while the latter reflected "others' . . . perceptions."⁹⁶ Nixon believed his own unique attributes could shape perceptions of America's leadership. To that end, he found utility in both the "good" and the "bad" Nixon.

In a last gasp at peace (and arguably at a Democratic presidential victory), Johnson halted bombing of the North as the election approached in 1968. During that time, Nixon conducted his own political manipulations behind the scenes. Between 1967 and 1968, Anna Chennault acted as the administration's special liaison to South Vietnamese president Thieu. Though she played a distinctly different role than that of Madame Nhu during the Kennedy administration, Nixon thus found himself involving his own "Dragon Lady" in his Vietnam policies. Chennault was connected both in DC and in Saigon, and she would visit Saigon to inform Thieu that "Nixon would be a strong supporter of Vietnam," hinting that Thieu should "hold back" from any agreements arranged by Johnson.⁹⁷ During this period, Kissinger also served both as Nixon's spy and unofficial emissary. As peace talks between the Johnson administration and the Vietnamese reached a "delicate stage" in Paris, Kissinger surreptitiously whispered in the ears of all parties while simultaneously keeping Nixon abreast of developments.⁹⁸ Nixon used the inside information from both Chennault and Kissinger to frame Johnson's efforts as a "cynical, last minute attempt" to get Humphrey elected.⁹⁹ Nixon's full statement on the matter actually asserted that he was "on Johnson's side" and that he did not believe Johnson was working toward a bombing halt for political reasons. However, by raising the possibility of Johnson's ulterior motives, he effectively tainted the negotiations and the administration's credibility. Additionally, the nefarious communications between Nixon's agents and the South Vietnamese indicate that Nixon was in fact manipulating events. South Vietnamese ambassador Bui Diem told President Thieu in several cables, "Many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm. . . . I am regularly in touch with the Nixon entourage."¹⁰⁰

Nixon played "the innocent," publicly insisting that he just "couldn't believe" Johnson was up to no good. Yet he worked behind the scenes to undermine Johnson's efforts and, even in his declarations of support for the president,

raised the specter of doubt. Tricky Dick had come out of the woodwork to influence the election and events in Vietnam. Once elected, Nixon continued his shaded conjuring.

In an address to the nation on 3 November 1969, Nixon rerepresented himself, the war, and the nation's agenda in Vietnam:

Tonight I want to talk to you on a subject of deep concern to all Americans and to many people in all parts of the world—the war in Vietnam. I believe that one of the reasons for the deep division about Vietnam is that many Americans have lost confidence in what their Government has told them about our policy. The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace unless they know the truth about that policy.

[Nixon thus contrasts himself with his predecessor and cages his approach to Vietnam as rooted in "truth." He at once attempts to solidify his own image while convincing the nation that "this time, it's going to be different" and that the country can trust him. He then goes on to "clarify" why the United States is involved in the first place and the situation that he inherited.]

[When I took office] the war had been going on for four years. 31,000 Americans had been killed in action. The training program for the South Vietnamese was behind schedule. 540,000 Americans were in Vietnam with no plans to reduce the number. No progress had been made at the negotiations in Paris. . . . The war was causing deep division at home [and abroad].

[Nixon then discusses that the "easy course" would be to quit the war and to lay it at the feet of his predecessors. He is bound, however, by a greater duty.]

But I had a greater obligation than to think only of the years of my administration and of the next election. I had to think of the effect of my decision on the next generation and on the future of peace and freedom in America and in the world. . . . The great question is: How can we win America's peace?

[Nixon then summarizes some of the broader history of conflict in Indochina and Vietnam and emphasizes the many atrocities committed by the Communists. After effectively painting the "ugly Communists," Nixon then highlights the importance of US prestige and invokes images of Kennedy and Eisenhower's visions—raising both the specter of the Communist threat and contrasting it with the "hope" of America. Nixon then ties America's hope to the proposals he put forth on Guam and at the United Nations.]

I initiated a pursuit for peace on many fronts. . . . We have offered the complete withdrawal of all outside forces within 1 year. We have proposed a cease-fire under international supervision. We have offered free elections under international supervision with the Communists participating. . . . And the Saigon Government has pledged to accept the result[s]. . . . We have not put forth our proposals on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. . . . We have declared that anything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future.

[Nixon's "plan" appears overwhelmingly reasonable and sophisticated, effectively contrasting the "peacemaker" with the stubborn and uncooperative Communists. It was a somewhat gross mischaracterization, however. Everything was "not negotiable." Hanoi and Nixon were operating from two distinct, mutually exclusive premises. Despite his overtures for "peace and negotiation," Nixon's plan rested on the premise that he could, through greater force and diplomatic maneuvering, pressure Hanoi to capitulate with the very same

terms that Johnson pursued. Hanoi, for its part, would not negotiate “under duress,” and therefore bombing them to the negotiating table remained a nonstarter. Nixon then details his extensive efforts that started even before his inauguration and highlights the role of the Soviets and China. He then punctuates Hanoi’s stubbornness by relaying his interchange with Ho Chi Minh, giving himself credit for making extensive efforts for peace and stating that Ho Chi Minh “flatly rejected my initiative.” Nixon proceeds to outline his strategy.]

I laid down in Guam three principles. . . . First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments. Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us. . . . Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance.

[Nixon explains his principles of de-Americanization and Vietnamization, purporting that both are already yielding results.]

The policy of the previous administration not only resulted in our assuming the primary responsibility for fighting the war, but even more significantly did not adequately stress the goal of strengthening the South Vietnamese. . . . In July . . . I changed General [Creighton] Abrams’s orders so that they were consistent with the objectives of our new policies. . . . Our air operations have been reduced by 20 percent[, and] . . . we are finally bringing American men home. . . . The South Vietnamese have continued to gain in strength. . . . Enemy infiltration . . . is less than 20 percent of what it was over the same period last year . . . [, and] United States casualties have declined . . . to the lowest point in 3 years.

[Nixon’s estimations greatly oversimplified and exaggerated the progress being made on the ground and gave the nation the false impression that, under his leadership, the war was just about won. That the United States would suffer an additional 30,000 casualties before the end is a stark testament to the extent of Nixon’s misrepresentation of the direction the war was taking. Though he cautions that some “flexibility” may be required going forward, he hammers home the notion that he is taking the strong but “peaceful” route.]

Fifty years ago, in this room and at this very desk, President Woodrow Wilson spoke words which caught the imagination of a war-weary world. He said: “This is the war to end war.” His dream for peace after World War I was shattered. . . . Tonight I do not tell you that the war in Vietnam is the war to end wars. But I do say this: I have initiated a plan which will end this war in a way that will bring us closer to that great goal . . . the goal of a just and lasting peace.¹⁰¹

The allusion to Wilson was a particularly deft way to paint himself as the “peacemaker.” Nixon also wove images of American exceptionalism into the speech and pledged to uphold the historic virtues of his country. He appealed to the “silent majority,” insisting that he wanted peace as much as they did. Above all, Nixon vowed that he could preserve America’s honor and resolve Vietnam in a way that would distinguish himself from his predecessors. Longing for peace and eager for resolution both abroad and at home, the American people wanted to believe that Nixon could extricate them from Vietnam, and Nixon played to these desires.¹⁰² The American public, however, had pinned its hopes for a quiet and honorable peace on a man who not only had a dark side but also often embraced it.

The Utility of Madness

The situation Nixon faced in Vietnam was not too dissimilar from that which the French confronted nearly two decades before.¹⁰³ The difference was that the French were trying to reclaim and maintain a physical empire while Nixon's challenge was preserving an empire of the mind where America's prestige was the coin of the realm. To that end, he believed he could capitalize on his more sinister side and use the "bearded Nixon" as a way to coerce his adversaries. In the domestic political arena he let his darker shade operate behind the scenes, but he felt that to be effective on the international stage, he would have to bring the ugliness into the light. Gerald Astor comments that Lyndon Johnson "justly earned a reputation for manipulating and shading the truth" and that Nixon was equally "adept" at such management of people and facts. What set Nixon apart, however, was that "he also sought by devious means to tweak minds."¹⁰⁴ Richard Reeves points out that Nixon often relished press coverage and perceptions that painted him as unpredictable, strong, and even a little mad.¹⁰⁵ Nixon "believed there was an advantage in persuading adversaries, foreign and domestic, that there was something irrational about him, that he was a dangerous man capable of any retaliation, up to and including the use of nuclear weapons."¹⁰⁶

Jeffrey Kimball's extensive review of source materials led him to the conclusion that while there was no "smoking gun" with regard to Nixon ever using the term "madman theory," there was enough evidence to surmise that Nixon believed in and cultivated its tenets.¹⁰⁷ In *A Grand Delusion*, Robert Mann quotes a conversation between Nixon and Haldeman: "I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace."¹⁰⁸ The conversation reveals that Nixon deliberately cultivated and sought to utilize the "madman myth" while also recognizing his crusade against Communism as a political expediency.

Ironically, Nixon was actually often excruciatingly rational and calculating. According to former members of the JCS and his staff, Nixon ran the security council like a board meeting and never "made a decision on the spot."¹⁰⁹ Nixon once revealed at a press conference that his father told him that he would have to "scratch it out" to make something of himself because there was no way he could "get by on his looks."¹¹⁰ Nixon had learned, however, not only how to compensate for his "looks" but also how to exploit them. He was extremely calculating as to which face he showed to whom and when. As long

as the different realities and different Nixons he purported remained separate, his calculations were generally successful. Even after his fall and for years after Watergate, his version of history was widely accepted and influential, albeit not comprehensively so. Within the context of the Vietnam War, however, the many shades of Nixon inevitably cropped up. Nixon believed in the uncertainty principle, drawing on lessons from Berlin and the use and threat of force throughout history. He admired Eisenhower's massive-retaliation strategy and thought madness had its merits. As he took the reins of America's military might, he was both the "old" and the "new" Nixon, reframing himself as he sought to reframe America's longest war. While drinking with an associate in 1964, Nixon revealed why he sought the presidency: "Because I know the f[-----] Commie mind. But they don't know mine. I really think I could do something. I really believe I could make a contribution to peace."¹¹¹ America and the world were about to learn some things, both about Nixon's "mind" and his "peace."

The Hammer of Peace

For over 15 years, "Nixon had consistently taken belligerent positions on the war in Vietnam, usually advocating more militant strategies than Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson."¹¹² His concentration of power in the executive branch, penchant for action, and determination to win meant that his darker side would not remain long subdued. Kissinger wrote in *Diplomacy* that Nixon had "exceeded" the tolerances of the Democrats' "dove platform" within nine months of taking office.¹¹³ Nixon believed his military and diplomatic plan would bear quick fruit and became frustrated when that did not happen. He imagined the conflict in Vietnam not just as a national conflict but as a personal challenge from Hanoi, Moscow, Beijing, the Cambodian rebels, the Vietcong, and his critics at home. Roger Morris said Nixon believed that his adversaries were "testing his mettle."¹¹⁴ Sensing that both his and his nation's character and will were being tested, Nixon was determined that the enemy should know that neither the United States nor its president could be intimidated.

In the summer of 1970, Nixon demonstrated his and his nation's resolve in an act that marked a departure from his predecessor's policies and the "new Vietnam War" he had described in the spring. Nixon had been secretly bombing supply routes in Cambodia since 1969. By 1970 his frustration with the war led him to openly send waves of B-52s against suspected sanctuaries in Cambodia. The air raids were followed by American and South Vietnamese ground teams. The decision to "invade" Cambodia was made in private. He

told only Kissinger of the decision beforehand, revealing what was dubbed Operation Menu to the State and Defense Departments only after the forces were already en route.¹¹⁵ Nixon did discuss the possibility of a Cambodia operation with his other principals, but they were not receptive to the idea of using US troops for the operation. Haldeman's diary entries from this period are telling. At one point, a frustrated Nixon declared, "Damn Johnson, if he'd just done the right thing we wouldn't be in this mess now."¹¹⁶ In typical Nixon fashion, the president bypassed protests from the secretary of defense and others. Nixon communicated directly with General Abrams, who was convinced that sanctuaries in Cambodia were critical to Hanoi's war effort. Besides Abrams, Kissinger was the most in favor of the president's operation, and Haldeman noted that his support was as much about demonstrating Nixon's authority as it was about any potential mission.¹¹⁷

Despite the protests, Nixon committed to the Cambodian operation. Morris and several other staffers resigned over the president's decision. By the time Nixon "briefed" Congress, "he did not tell his audience that . . . the bombers were already on their way." The administration also schemed and "faked the paperwork detailing the targeting objectives," and Kissinger insisted that Cambodia was not "neutral" because "as many as four North divisions operated from within that country with impunity."¹¹⁸ Kennedy had expanded US counterinsurgency missions and resources, and Johnson had exercised covert operations. Starting in 1967 and under the code name Daniel Boone, special teams of Americans and local Vietnamese mercenaries repeatedly crossed into Cambodia to gather intelligence on North Vietnamese positions, material, and resources.¹¹⁹ The difference in the spring of 1970 was that Menu was conducted in the public's eye and contrasted sharply with the image of Vietnam that the president had so diligently cultivated. International and domestic audiences were shocked, and waves of protest erupted across the country. Nixon attempted to assuage the public's consternation in a speech delivered on 30 April 1970.

The president reminded his audience that he had reserved the right to remain flexible in ending the Vietnam War and had stated unequivocally that he "would not hesitate to take strong and effective measures" if the Communists remained obstinate.¹²⁰

For the past 5 years . . . North Vietnam has occupied military sanctuaries all along the Cambodian frontier. . . . These Communist occupied territories contain major base camps, training sites, logistics facilities, weapons and ammunition factories, airstrips, and prisoner-of-war compounds. For 5 years, neither the United States nor South Vietnam has moved against these . . . sanctuaries because we did not wish to violate the territory of a neutral nation. . . . In contrast to our policy, the enemy in the past 2 weeks has

stepped up his guerrilla actions. . . . Cambodia, as a result of this, has sent out a call to the United States . . . for assistance.¹²¹

In response to Nixon's claims, Cornell University professor George Kahin was asked by members of Congress to "fact-check" the president.¹²² Kahin pointed out that the United States had been involved to varying degrees in clandestine activity in Cambodia since the 1954 Geneva Convention: "For most of the last 15 years the U.S. has opposed Cambodian neutrality and applied various kinds of pressure to get it to assume an anti-Communist stance in alignment with American policy objectives."¹²³ Kahin also noted that the International Control Commission had evidence for more than 760 incursions into Cambodia by South Vietnamese forces between 1964 and 1965.¹²⁴ The professor's paper concludes, "It is appalling for the Administration to define the legitimacy of President Nixon's act strictly in terms of American law and precedent. Cambodia is a sovereign state. Since the U.S. acted without consulting its government, our invasion is a violation of international law."¹²⁵

Kahin's observations are telling but must still be considered within the political context. Nixon was not the only president to end-run formalities and international law or to bend the truth, and he certainly would not be the last. The effectiveness of Operation Menu is debatable, but from a military strategic standpoint, the principles were sound. Airpower, combined with both covert and overt ground operations, played a critical and effective role in dampening Hanoi's war effort.¹²⁶ According to Brig Gen Tran Dinh Tho, limitations placed on Nixon's Cambodian incursion as well as its timing in the war resulted in "little more than a temporary disruption of North Vietnam's march toward domination of all of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam."¹²⁷ Furthermore, Nixon's critics could only gain from disparaging his policies, so while the "facts" used to lambast the Cambodian campaign were "true," they were not necessarily untainted by ulterior motives. Johnson once characterized the presidency as akin to being a jackass in the rain—all you could do was stand there and take it. Certainly, the criticism lobbed at Nixon over Cambodia can be partially explained as simply paying the price for holding the nation's highest office. But such an explanation is incomplete. Nixon was lying. Furthermore, the future he painted for his presidency, the war, and the country contrasted sharply with his actions and policies.

America had little tolerance for any more dissonance over Vietnam policies, and the administration's honeymoon was over. The ugly king stood revealed, and the nation went looking for razors to shave the darkness from Nixon's face. Nixon said in his 30 April speech that he would "rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the

cost of seeing America become a second-rate power.”¹²⁸ Whether Nixon truly would have martyred himself for a policy is debatable, but his presidency was at risk from the firestorm that ensued following his actions in Cambodia. He only added fuel to the fire when during a press conference he offhandedly comforted a veteran’s wife by calling her husband a “hero” and the antiwar protestors “bums.”¹²⁹ Vietnam was now “Nixon’s War,” and his America was cleanly divided, from his perspective, into heroes and bums. Sixteen months into his presidency, he still enjoyed support for his war effort, but he had very effectively exacerbated divisions at home. The tragic and violent protests at Kent State and Jackson State were two of more than 800 sit-ins and demonstrations that rocked the country in the spring and summer of 1970. Nixon was butting up against the new “new generation” that perceived things quite differently than did the president.

When Nixon talked of “peace,” “success,” and American “values,” those words held dissimilar connotations for those who were against the war than they did for him. Internal memorandums meant to explain the riots of 1970 mentioned several key factors. First, whereas Nixon imagined a peace that involved a self-determinant and American-friendly Vietnam, students imagined peace to mean the immediate end to killing.¹³⁰ Second, success for the administration meant a tempered and orderly withdrawal from Vietnam while protestors envisioned an immediate dissolution of US involvement in an “immoral” war.¹³¹ Third, Nixon’s conceptualization of winning and of overcoming the “deep divisions” pivoted on what the emergent generation of Americans perceived as an archaic and obstructive worldview.¹³² Kenneth Boulding reminds us that perceptions are reality and that in the minds of young Americans, Cold War constructs and notions of “national honor” artificially divided and corrupted their reality.¹³³ It was not that the new generation was unconcerned about national honor. Rather, it believed that Nixon had to end the war immediately to preserve the nation’s values while the president believed he had to hammer out an acceptable peace, or the nation would lose face. Many believed that the means Nixon considered necessary to win that acceptable peace were costing America her honor. In short, the president and those who opposed his policies were proceeding from “vastly different assumptions,” and this clash of worldviews played out across the campuses and on the airwaves.¹³⁴

The domestic strife created a “bunker mentality” for the White House. Embittered by his critics, Nixon continued to characterize them as thugs—often blaming protestors and the press for the war’s length and difficulty.¹³⁵ He created an “enemies list” and constantly pushed his staff to keep an eye on the press and exert pressure on it. Nixon’s staff commented that “going to work felt like

going to war with the press.”¹³⁶ When the *Pentagon Papers* broke in the *New York Times*, Nixon was furious and felt that his worse fears had been confirmed. Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, who had participated in Nixon’s 1968 RAND study on Vietnam, released top-secret documents to the *New York Times* that revealed the inconsistencies and subterfuge of American Vietnam policies.¹³⁷ Though the information in the *Pentagon Papers* predated his administration, Nixon worried that an inquisitive press would only be emboldened by the study and start scratching harder at his own policies—threatening his mystique. He formed a group of private detectives known as “the plumbers,” using them to harass and investigate potential troublemakers. Those who found themselves on the enemies list would be barred from the White House or come under immediate scrutiny by the Internal Revenue Service. In a move that was a prelude to Watergate, Nixon ordered his heavies to break into the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, Ellsberg’s psychiatrist.¹³⁸ Fielding had been called to testify, and Nixon wanted dirt on Ellsberg that could be used to discredit him.

The extent and range of Nixon’s shadowy activities that led to Watergate and the subsequent cover-up are well known and fill volumes beyond their treatment here. Nixon attacked adversaries he faced in politics as ruthlessly as those he faced on the battlefield, and he was willing to use any means at his disposal to achieve victory. His ambivalence toward rivals and authority figures and the vehemence with which he attacked those who opposed him were manifested in the agendas and outcomes of his presidency and in Vietnam.¹³⁹ How he perceived the institutions he ruled affected not only how he treated them but also how he conducted and applied his power. As the political controversy started to heat up at home, Nixon looked for ways to end the war in Vietnam and secure his presidency and legacy.

Prior to the escapades with Ellsberg’s psychiatrist and well before the 1972 election, Nixon turned his eye on Laos and viewed a potential operation there as a way to validate South Vietnam’s forces while disrupting Hanoi’s war effort. Code-named Lam Son 719, the bold, slashing attack would cut a swath into North Vietnam’s critical logistics line along Route 9 west of Khe Sanh.¹⁴⁰ The aggressive plan would use American airpower to soften the lines for elite South Vietnamese ground forces. Its shortcoming, however, was its failure to consider “Vietnamese realities” by overestimating the capabilities of South Vietnamese forces and underestimating the North’s commitment to protecting its logistics.¹⁴¹ Militarily, Lam Son 719 put the South’s forces in a situation for which they were not prepared. Additionally, South Vietnamese president Thieu had issued orders to halt the attack “when casualties reached 3,000,” thereby blunting any hope of speed and momentum.¹⁴² The premature and uncoordinated nature of Lam Son 719 resulted in a rout of the South Vietnamese

forces, and the shortcomings of Nixon's allies were revealed—thus undermining a key pillar of his strategic plan.¹⁴³ Bureaucratic complications and command-and-control problems plagued the South Vietnamese army, exacerbating gaps in its military capabilities and amplifying the communication and coordination problems with US forces.¹⁴⁴

Lam Son 719 “changed the trajectory of the war,” leaving lasting impressions with Nixon and the North Vietnamese.¹⁴⁵ In the *White House Years*, Kissinger describes Lam Son 719: “The operation, conceived in doubt and assailed by skepticism, proceeded in confusion. It soon became apparent that the plans on which we had been so eloquently and frequently briefed reflected staff exercises, not military reality.”¹⁴⁶ The abject failure of the Laos operation reinforced Nixon's predilections and his image of the CIA and of the military. He believed that both institutions lacked the kind of creative leadership necessary to win the war. “As you know,” Nixon wrote in a 10 May 1972 memo to Kissinger, “I have very little confidence in the CIA insofar as in developing programs that are imaginative. . . . I just have a feeling that they are more interested in numbers.”¹⁴⁷ In another memo to Kissinger a few days later, Nixon conveyed, “I do not pretend to have any knowledge or experience whatever in military matters. But I do know that military men generally are noted for the courage and loyalty of their character and notorious for the plodding mediocrity of their strategy and tactics.”¹⁴⁸ As the war progressed, Nixon became increasingly convinced that the peace he sought would require his strong hand and leadership. “The [---]damned Air Force has to take some [---]damned risks,” Nixon complained, “just like they did during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II.”¹⁴⁹

Like Johnson, Nixon thus took tighter control of the military. Nixon, though, was prepared to unleash a much fuller spectrum of American fury on the North Vietnamese and their allies. He said during a conversation in the White House, “I don't think anybody realizes how far I am prepared to go to save this. . . . We have no option but to win this. . . . Whatever is necessary to stop this thing has to be done.”¹⁵⁰ As Nixon revved up the US military machine, he worked secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese through Kissinger in Paris. When negotiations stalled in the fall of 1971, Nixon told Kissinger, “They've got to fear that in some way I'm going to do a hell of a lot more.”¹⁵¹ Nixon simultaneously blended hard-line diplomacy and stepped-up military operations, believing that the Nixon myth could coerce North Vietnam and change relationships among the great powers. In a conversation with Chinese prime minister Zhou Enlai, Kissinger pivoted on Nixon's mystique:

I would like to make one other U.S. domestic political point. The only president who could conceivably do what I am discussing with you is President Nixon. Other political

leaders might use more honeyed words but would be destroyed by what is called the China lobby in the U.S. if they ever tried to move even partially in the direction which I have described to you. President Nixon, precisely because his political support comes from the Center and right of Center, cannot be attacked from that direction, and won't be attacked by the Left in a policy of moving toward a friendship with the People's Republic of China.¹⁵²

Nixon was building toward his 1972 summit with China and using Peking as a way to gain leverage against the Soviet Union, which he could then use to pressure North Vietnam. White House staffers said that Nixon reveled in the "great-power game," and he strategically linked China, Russia, and Vietnam as a way to triangulate and overcome his enemies. In the spring of 1972, Kissinger made it clear to Soviet ambassador Dobrynin that North Vietnam was launching large-scale attacks "armed 90 percent with Soviet-made weapons."¹⁵³ Recalling the exchange and the meetings that followed, Dobrynin said that it was obvious "the Nixon administration was attempting to draw Moscow into the diplomatic game with Vietnam."¹⁵⁴ Having visited China in February, Nixon was working toward a summit in Moscow; escalation in Vietnam threatened to thwart his efforts. The American president could not appear weak and had to respond to the North's military action, but his ultimate goal of building a larger peace and better relations with his more formidable allies hung in the balance. After much haranguing and maneuvering, "the final verdict of the Politburo was to go ahead with the summit, because its members recognized that the alternative would amount to handing Hanoi a veto over our relations with America."¹⁵⁵

The Soviets' decision to go ahead with the summit illuminates a larger point with regard to the Nixon administration. American policy, as Nixon lamented, had effectively come under siege in Vietnam during the Johnson administration. Though Vietnam continued under Nixon to bind politics both at home and abroad, Nixon's reframing of the context within which he viewed Vietnam was liberating. Kennedy had pushed Vietnam to the front lines of the Cold War. Johnson folded Vietnam back into his domestic policy, where it became a gravity-well to his Great Society, foreign policy, and presidency. On Nixon's turn, he reelevated the Cold War but did so while he recalibrated some of the critical American assumptions of the past. Instead of seeking to stamp out Communism *carte blanche*, Nixon worked to find seams where both the Soviets and the United States could find mutual interests and benefit. This thawing allowed the subjugation of Vietnam to larger US and Soviet interests. Dobrynin's description of this evolution in Cold War policies is particularly salient: "It consolidated the policy of peaceful coexistence and opened the way to promoting our relations with the United States, notwithstanding

our ideological differences . . . and our commitment to the dogma of ‘international solidarity’ with the ‘victims of imperialism.’ That was probably the first time that ideological considerations gave way to common sense.”¹⁵⁶

As Nixon worked China and Russia to exert pressure on North Vietnam, he also shocked Hanoi with vigorous assaults on its war effort. Hanoi had grown confident after Lam Son 719 and foresaw an opportunity to crush resistance in the South. In the spring of 1972, Hanoi launched the Easter Offensive, believing that it could simultaneously foment uprisings in the South’s countryside while taking up strategic positions with its conventional forces in urban areas. Against the advice of both Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and General Abrams, Nixon responded with a furious air campaign code-named Linebacker. “With Kissinger encouraging him to signal to the enemy” that he had lost his mind, “Nixon’s purpose was to psychologically shock the other side while damaging its logistical capabilities.”¹⁵⁷ In discussing the operation, Nixon said,

Under no circumstances can I, with all the things I believe, fail to use the total power of this office—with the exception of nuclear weapons, that I cannot do, unless it’s necessary. . . . The power of this office [is] to see that the United States does not lose [to] put it quite bluntly. Now, I’m being quite precise. South Vietnam may lose, but the United States cannot lose. It means whatever happens in South Vietnam, we are going to cream North Vietnam. . . . So I’ve determined . . . that for once we’ve got to use the maximum power of the country against a s-it-ass---- country to win the war.¹⁵⁸

To that end, the objectives for Linebacker included mining Haiphong Harbor as well as conducting aggressive strikes against railroads; key command-and-control facilities; storage, support, and transshipment areas; and enemy defenses.¹⁵⁹ The lowest priority was assigned to enemy defenses because Nixon wanted to make Hanoi hurt. He also wanted to ensure that the campaign distinguished itself from Johnson’s gradualism, directing the military to “bomb those bastards like they’ve never been bombed before.”¹⁶⁰

The North Vietnamese launched the Easter Offensive as part of a “strategic offensive posture in South Vietnam to defeat the American ‘Vietnamization policy,’ gain a decisive victory in 1972, and force the U.S. imperialists to negotiate an end to the war from a position of defeat.”¹⁶¹ The politburo hoped to quickly overrun resistance in the South and banked on the Vietcong successfully rallying the people in the South toward revolution. Hanoi was somewhat taken aback by the savagery of Nixon’s response: “The war against the Americans became very complicated in all areas: military, political, and diplomatic. Our armed forces [confronted] . . . the two most powerful, modern armed services of the U.S. imperialists. The fighting during the summer of 1972 was arduous and savage in North and South Vietnam and on the battlefields of Laos.”¹⁶²

Nixon's use of airpower was effective in blunting the North's offensive, but airpower could not fully root out and destroy the entire critical, albeit low-tech, infrastructure that Hanoi depended on. Even though the United States wielded forces armed with the most modern technology available, North Vietnam's sheer manpower and commitment—often shaded under dense jungle canopies—defied America's efforts. Also at play was Hanoi's commitment to "continue the strategic offensive in South Vietnam . . . and to reach, no matter what the cost, the strategic goals that we had set forward."¹⁶³ In short, Hanoi was willing to accept whatever Nixon dished out and endured the long, painful struggle. North Vietnam was "probably the most thoroughly mobilized society in humankind's long and violent history. The government was able to turn every element of national power toward its ends."¹⁶⁴ By 1973 North Vietnamese imports from China were reduced by 40 percent, and Hanoi had lost 70 percent of its power grid.¹⁶⁵ Movement of men and materiel along the Ho Chi Minh Trail had actually increased, however, and Hanoi gained position for its forces throughout South Vietnam.

Perhaps recognizing Nixon's tenuous position at home, the North calculated that continued direct confrontation with the United States would be both costly and unnecessary. Nixon won reelection decisively in 1972, but the Watergate scandal was percolating, and he faced growing opposition from Congress and the public. Just as he had arranged every means at his disposal to throw at Hanoi, so had Nixon gone "all in" during his reelection campaign. Besides the now notorious break-ins of 1972 and the subsequent cover-up, Nixon had undermined the Republican Party by selfishly hoarding the war chest for his reelection.¹⁶⁶ As a result, the Democrats swept back in control of the House and Senate. A famous picture of Nixon on the eve of his victory shows him brooding and melancholy. Despite his reelection, he knew that the resurgence of the Democrats would undermine his rule and rightly anticipated their vigorous investigation of Watergate. The confluence of Nixon's bombing campaign, his triangular diplomacy, and perhaps a prescient understanding of the American political system inspired Hanoi to sue for peace in the fall of 1973.

The 1973 Paris Accords proceeded under several preliminary conditions. First, the Thieu government, southern neutralists, and the Vietcong would form a "tripartite electoral commission."¹⁶⁷ Hanoi agreed to let Thieu remain in office so long as the Communist Party was afforded representation. A cease-fire would also be in place on all sides. The process leading up to the accords actually started in 1972. Haldeman describes the plan worked out by Kissinger and the North Vietnamese:

Henry started to outline the agreement from his secret red folder [and] made the point that we got a much better deal by far than we had expected. The net effect is that it leaves Thieu in office. We get a stand-in-place cease-fire on October 30 or 31. They have to agree to work together to set up a Council of National Concord and Reconciliation, but any action by this council has to be by unanimous vote, so it can't effectively hurt Thieu. . . . The cease-fire would be followed by a complete withdrawal of troops within 60 days and a return of the POWs within 60 days. We'd have everything done by the end of the year.¹⁶⁸

The Nixon administration was quite satisfied with the conditions, but President Thieu was not. The biggest breakthrough of the preliminary deal was that Hanoi relented on its insistence that Thieu would have to be removed from power. Thieu believed that leaving North Vietnamese forces in place and affording the Communist Party a voice in his government merely delayed his ouster from office. We now know that Thieu was spot-on in his objections, but as Nixon had already made clear, the administration was concerned only with the United States' victory.¹⁶⁹ With Thieu stalling, Hanoi attempted to pressure the United States by broadcasting details of the draft agreement.¹⁷⁰ Thieu became only more obstinate, and the talks in the fall of 1972 proceeded through a series of starts and stops, finally breaking off completely in December. Nixon had tried a series of carrots and sticks to coerce Thieu, promising both the delivery and the withholding of military and financial aid.¹⁷¹ Nixon wanted the deal that Kissinger had arranged with the North but also wanted to support his ally. Additionally, the American president had concluded that his vigorous bombing campaign and deft diplomatic dealings had forced Hanoi to the table, so he was willing to reach for his hammer once again.

It wasn't the hoary elf who visited Christmas cheer upon Hanoi in 1972 but the dark-bearded and glowering American president wielding a B-52. Between 18 and 28 December, the big bombers rained steel down on North Vietnam. For all the fury, there was little significance, and when talks between Le Duc Tho and Kissinger resumed in January, the parties arrived at essentially the same conditions established in October. A shift occurred regarding President Thieu, however. In a 17 December letter, Nixon cordially yet firmly let Thieu know exactly where he stood:

Over the last two months . . . I have kept you scrupulously informed of the progress of the negotiations. I have sought to convey to you my best judgment of what is in our mutual interest. I have given you every opportunity to join with me in bringing peace with honor to the people of South Vietnam. General Haig's mission now represents my final effort to point out to you the necessity for joint action and to convey my irrevocable intention to proceed, preferably with your cooperation, but, if necessary, alone. . . . Let me emphasize . . . that General Haig is not coming to Saigon . . . [to negotiate] with you. The time has come for us to present a united front . . . and you must decide now whether you desire to continue to work together or whether you want me to seek a settlement with the enemy which serves U.S. interests alone.¹⁷²

Nixon knew that it would be better to have Thieu involved than not and had no qualms about using military power in the interim while he realigned the South Vietnamese president's understanding of things. But Thieu had overplayed his hand in Nixon's game. It was five o'clock, and the American president was hell-bent on bringing Vietnam to a close before dinner. He was more than willing to use the hammer of peace to do so—but it was Nixon's hammer and Nixon's peace.

The Hollow Peace

The Peace Accords were signed in Paris on 27 January 1973. The military arrangement left large portions of North Vietnamese forces in place throughout Vietnam, which meant that combat after the cease-fire was “inevitable.”¹⁷³ Nixon's peace depended upon the “interlocking understandings with others and . . . the strategic realities of the conflict.”¹⁷⁴ Nixon banked on his mastery of great-power politics to sustain the peace in Vietnam. He had won, but the victory thinly covered the ugly truth that in winning, he had sown the seed for defeat. His commitment to “win at all costs” had cost the Republican Party, the South Vietnamese, and his country. The decent interval of his second term expired before the decent interval of peace in Vietnam, but both nonetheless collapsed. Cong. John Murtha (D-PA) commented that a

president's strength lies not in his simply being commander in chief, but in his public support and the perception of his power. President Richard Nixon, for instance, was reelected in 1972 in a 520–17 electoral vote landslide. By 1974, though . . . he was powerless. As Watergate unfolded that year, Nixon was virtually confined to the White House. Even as the North Vietnamese were violating the Paris Peace Accords that Nixon had himself secretly authorized and supervised, he could not react. . . . His approval rating in February was 27 percent. The weaker he became, the more the North Vietnamese ignored the peace agreement.¹⁷⁵

The Vietnam War under Nixon, like his presidency, was dramatic in its buildup but failed to end cleanly. The slow spiral of South Vietnam and the cascade of indictments and corruption surrounding Nixon were corrosive.

Whether it was hiring men with his own money to rifle through psychiatrist's files, bugging the Democratic headquarters, breaching the borders of sovereign nations out of his own frustration, or bombing his adversaries into oblivion, Nixon was willing to do whatever it took to win. Furthermore, the peace he wrought in Vietnam was an illusion, conjured just as much as the New Nixon was conjured—from an amalgam of manipulated perceptions, strong-arming, selfishness, misrepresentations, and lies. Nixon accomplished both great and terrible things. Vietnam may very well fade in the grand annals of history as a subtext to a larger Cold War victory, but that is for others to

determine. What we can know is that within the boundaries of Vietnam, the American victory Nixon brought came with empty promises. Americans' faith in their government, the US economy, and the stature and confidence of America's military was tarnished. Nixon's victory and his presidency hung like a guillotine over the nation of Vietnam and over his own country.

South Vietnamese forces and Saigon fell to a major Communist offensive in 1975. Called to testify after he and Pres. Gerald Ford had asked Congress for \$722 million in US aid for South Vietnam, Kissinger was asked if America could do anything to prevent a Communist takeover. "There is no certain answer to that question," Kissinger said. "I wish there were."¹⁷⁶ Commenting on Nixon's achievements through détente, John Lewis Gaddis writes, "It is difficult to think of anything [he] could have done that would have produced a more dramatic shift in world power relationships of greater benefit to the United States. . . . For the first time since the Korean War, it was Russians, and not Americans, who faced rivals more determined to contain them than to contain each other."¹⁷⁷ Yet Nixon ran the country as if it were "his own preserve," and despite his accomplishments, the shadowy aspects of his nature incurred costs.¹⁷⁸

Nixon's story reveals the limits of image. He imagined himself the peacemaker, the exceptional leader, and the architect of a new world order, but his vision could shape reality only so far. Just as he and Kissinger believed that American power had limits and just as there was no such thing as absolute security, so was the power of his myth limited in imposing his image upon the world. It is difficult to occupy and control multiple realities at once. Quarks might find it perfectly natural to shift readily between states, sometimes even choosing after the fact where they've been and how they got there. But for people, it's not so easy. Presidents' histories are sticky, even dubious, and can serve as anchor and catapult, friend and foe. Nixon, perhaps more than others, was especially attuned to his dual-sided nature, both light and dark. He suppressed each when necessary, but he also embraced and nurtured them. In the end, he did succeed where others had failed, but he never was quite able to create the reality he desired. Nixon the villain won out, and out of his fear of persecution he behaved in ways that guaranteed his prosecution. He succumbed to the very five o'clock shadow that threatened, won, sustained, and lost his presidency. That same shadow dimmed what was a new dawn in the Cold War and obscured the peace so that the country felt not so much honored as hollow and deceived.

On Image, Nixon, and Inheritance

The next chapter presents broader conclusions, but since Nixon rounds out the slice of Vietnam examined by this study, it is appropriate to hint at some of our findings. Nixon effectively redefined the Vietnam problem for the United States, but in reframing it, he only delayed the outcomes seeded by Kennedy and Johnson. Nixon's presidency makes an interesting case for the study of images, agendas, and outcomes because Nixon vehemently believed in the power of myth and dedicated so much time developing and exploiting his own. Ultimately, however, even a president is somewhat bound by structural forces, and while myth is indeed powerful, it is often only temporarily so. This is particularly true in the case of Nixon because not only was his own self-image swirling with competing shades and contradictions but also his emphasis on winning meant that his presidential image sought expediency over substance. Commenting on Kissinger and Nixon, Kimball states that "neither was a hollow man in the sense of lacking convictions about society, politics, economics, or diplomacy, but both were pragmatically flexible in response to circumstances. They also seemed to lack moral compunctions about using unethical means to achieve their ends and were ruthless players in the arena of power and politics."¹⁷⁹

Flexibility is an important trait in a president. This study has often asserted that rigid belief structures bound decision makers and prevented them from seeing the "world as it is" or at least from seeing it more clearly. Yet Nixon demonstrates that the converse is also true. Latching onto victory is a valid philosophy, and we wouldn't want our presidents to shy away from winning. But there is a point at which the object presidents seek to win is surpassed by the aim of winning, and Nixon exemplifies this fact. Beliefs need to be underwritten by more than just "success" if they are to hold together and sustain themselves effectively through the course of policy. Despite the sometimes amorphous nature of assertions made by presidents, they and their nation often vigorously pursue the vision described in them. It is important, then, that such visions find at least some bedrock in morality and purpose beyond simply achieving them.

The totality of the Vietnam War cannot be laid at Nixon's feet. But his policies there, as well as the direction in which he took the war and his country, do reflect his presidential image. Whether we believe Nixon's center was hollow, shaded, or both, how he ended Vietnam is at once an expression of the man and of the Vietnam War. For all the sound and fury leading up to the 1973 Peace Accords, the ending for the United States was more whisper and whimper than bang. Vietnam started and ended ambiguously. From Eisenhower's

inchoate policies to Kennedy's covert investment with broad commitments to Johnson's quiet slide, Nixon's turn to the "decent interval" merely continued the confusion that surrounded America's longest war. How wars begin may very well determine how they end. Wars that start muddled will most likely end so. Such wars make for a sticky inheritance and can taper in their endings as surreptitiously and insidiously as they snowball in their beginnings, lingering and haunting the halls of power long after the reports of rifles have ceased and the helicopters have left.

Notes

1. During a trip to Russia, for instance, Nixon confronted Khrushchev in an impromptu televised debate.

2. Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 42–45. Nixon's television adviser had tried to tell the vice president that his skin had a "translucent quality," but Nixon was adamantly against wearing makeup.

3. *Ibid.*, transcript, quoted from a Nixon 1968 campaign speech.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, DVD, min. 44.

6. *Ibid.*, quoted from a 7 November 1962 press conference.

7. Nixon made clear he had no intention of running in 1964 prior to his run for governor of California and reiterated that assertion after Kennedy was assassinated. He believed that Kennedy would easily hold the White House for eight years; after JFK was assassinated, Nixon also believed that the mood of the country was such that Johnson would easily win reelection.

8. Espar, "Quest," transcript.

9. Multiple press releases, biographies, and scholarly works use the term *New Nixon* to describe him at multiple points in his political career.

10. The Nixon mythology/myth is explained throughout this chapter. Summarized, it consists of a blended story line that marries romantic American and classic European motifs but that also infuses the heroic archetypes with distinctive leadership values deriving from Nixon's own perception of what makes leaders great. Nixon romanticized his heritage and deemed himself as possessing the same qualities that distinguished men like Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, and Joseph Stalin.

11. Espar, "Quest," transcript.

12. Nixon, "Asia after Vietnam," 111–25.

13. *Ibid.*, 123–24. Nixon urges "containment without isolation" with regard to China and states that "there is no room for heavy-handed American pressures" in Asia's future. Nixon illuminates the "failed" policies in Vietnam as well as the cold realities of a surging Russia and China but does so in a tempered manner, thereby promoting himself as a "middle of the road" realist with vision and answers (*ibid.*).

14. Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 63–64. Humphrey referenced Nixon's political campaigns for the House and Senate as well as his makeovers in the 1952 and 1960 elections. Humphrey also reminded everyone that Nixon had reinvented himself in 1962 and 1964.

15. After Nixon was selected as vice president, accusations arose that he had received illegal contributions from a group of wealthy businessmen. Though the allegations ultimately proved false, the scandal threatened Nixon's remaining on Eisenhower's ticket. In response, Nixon

conducted a television address that was the first of its kind—bypassing the press and going directly to the American people. In what was later named the “Checkers speech,” Nixon appealed to the public and insisted on his innocence. Nixon portrayed himself as a “regular Joe,” making several references to his dog, Checkers. Critics viewed Nixon as extremely manipulative.

16. Adlai Stevenson, quoted in Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 42.

17. Here we borrow from Jeffrey Kimball’s discussion of the role of mythology in Nixon’s political career (*Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 1–15).

18. Morris, *Richard Milhous Nixon*, 41.

19. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 7.

20. Nixon, *Leaders*, 1–6. In the first chapter of *Leaders*, Nixon describes “leaders who changed the world” and lists many of these qualities. Adamant over the differences between “management and leadership,” Nixon felt that all great leaders who “changed the world” had overlapping characteristics (*ibid.*). See also Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 5–6.

21. Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*. In several instances, Haldeman notes Nixon’s disapproval of Kissinger’s more relaxed morays.

22. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 7.

23. Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 8–9.

24. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 6–7.

25. Quoted in Fallaci, *Interview with History*, from his interview with Henry Kissinger, 29, 41–42. Kissinger and Nixon have been dubbed by some historians as “Nixinger,” and while the two came from disparate backgrounds and couldn’t have been more different in many ways, they also shared core images of the world. Gerald Astor notes that Kissinger “admired Austria-Hungary’s Crown Prince Metternich” and the success the prince had at bringing nearly “fifty years of peace to Europe [through] balance of power negotiations.” Astor also observes that Kissinger was apparently undisturbed by the prince’s arrangement, which “oppressed millions and sowed the seeds of World War I” (*ibid.*, 145). Nixon also looked outward to the broader international stage and was very much aligned with Machiavelli’s notion that fear and hate were much more useful to leaders than love. Whatever the disparity between the two leaders, the myths and images of Nixon and Kissinger intertwined to form Nixon’s presidential image.

26. Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 3–7, 10.

27. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 1. According to Kimball, Nixon said, “What an individual does is irrelevant to his ability to lead; the whole point is how he does it” (*ibid.*).

28. Nixon, *In the Arena*, 329–30.

29. Espar, “Quest,” transcript. Nixon’s cousin recalled the president as a boy standing on a stump and “campaigning” for different policies and presidents. Haldeman’s diaries and numerous biographers recount Nixon’s obsession with perceptions and his calculations for developing his mystique. Kimball also observes that Nixon was “remembered as a perpetual office seeker who was sanctimonious in references to his own behavior but ruthless in his attack on others” (*Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 4).

30. Quoted by Kimball in *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 6.

31. Espar, “Quest,” transcript.

32. *Ibid.*, DVD, min. 30. Kimball also quotes Wills from *Nixon Agonistes*, 540.

33. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 425–26 (Warner Books).

34. *Ibid.*, 424. In *No More Vietnams*, Nixon also laments that “never in history has so much power been used so ineffectively as in the war in Vietnam” (44–45).

35. Nixon as quoted by Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 1.

36. Franklin J. Schaffner, dir., *Patton* (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1970).

37. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs*, 1083–84 (Grosset & Dunlap).
38. Costello, *Facts about Nixon*, 17.
39. Roger Morris during an interview, in Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 74. See also Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 88–92, 340–42.
40. Sidey, “Man and Foreign Policy,” 4, 312. Numerous biographers also observe several instances when Nixon recalled his time in school and characterized himself as consciously trying to “appear good” even though he knew he wasn’t wholly so. He knew he was no angel, but what mattered was that his teachers thought so.
41. Nixon was the junior member on the House Committee of Un-American Activities. Initial evidence against Hiss, who had served Roosevelt as an attorney, was shaky. Testimony by Whittaker Chambers indicated that Hiss had been involved in espionage. Unwilling to let the case go, Nixon risked his reputation by putting himself in the spotlight and pushing the investigation. Ultimately, Hiss was convicted after sensitive material was found hidden in a pumpkin in Hiss’s garden. The discovery of the “Pumpkin Papers,” as they came to be known, cast Nixon as an “iconic Communist hunter.” Espar, “Quest,” transcript.
42. *Ibid.*, DVD, min. 19–21.
43. Black, *Richard M. Nixon*, 81–84. Nixon passed out flyers titled “Facts about Jerry Voorhis” and during the campaign maligned his opponent’s voting record as both ineffective and supportive of Russia.
44. As quoted in Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 18.
45. Nixon was even more ruthless in his campaign against Douglas. The 1950 senate campaign between Douglas and Nixon is ranked seventh in Kerwin C. Swint’s top-25 dirtiest political campaigns of all time. For fuller detail on the campaign, see Greg Mitchell, *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady: Richard Nixon vs. Helen Gahagan Douglas—Sexual Politics and the Red Scare, 1950* (New York: Random House, 1998).
46. Espar, “Quest,” transcript.
47. Roger Morris during an interview (*ibid.*, DVD, min. 28).
48. The Truman administration was undergoing criticism at the time for the First Lady’s mink coat, and Nixon purposefully chose the format and subject matter to “stick it in the eye” of the Democrats. See Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 38.
49. Black, *Richard M. Nixon*, 241.
50. Quoted in Fallaci, “Henry Kissinger,” in *Interview with History*, 29. See also 41–42.
51. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 16.
52. *Ibid.*, 30–31. In 1967 Nixon commented that “it is essential that the enemy be convinced that he cannot win the war militarily, that he cannot win it through a change in public opinion in the United States” (*ibid.*, 30). Nixon asserted that the war could be won by unifying world opinion behind a united America.
53. Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 10.
54. As introduced in chap. 2 of this paper, *détente* translates from French to mean “calm, relaxation, easing, but it can also mean the trigger of a gun.” In Russian, the closest term to *détente* is *razriadka*, meaning “lessening” or “reduction and relaxation.” *Razriadka* can also mean “discharging” or “unloading.” *Détente* implies a releasing of tension. The “trigger” that was to release tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States under Nixon was a shift away from policies of “absolute security” toward policies that promoted “relative security.” Kissinger wrote in 1957 that absolute security was not possible because for one state to be “totally satisfied,” all other states had to be “totally dissatisfied.” Therefore, Nixon’s containment

strategy incorporated a shared “relative insecurity” among the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. See Kissinger, *World Restored*.

55. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 40–44.

56. *Ibid.*, 11, 39–43.

57. *Ibid.*, 1049.

58. Nixon, “Asia after Vietnam,” 121–23.

59. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 278–89.

60. Nixon as quoted in *ibid.*, 282.

61. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 280–84.

62. *Ibid.*, 280. See also Nixon’s *Third Annual Report to Congress on United States Foreign Policy*, 9 February 1972 (*ibid.*, 204–5). Full report is available at *The American Presidency Project*, Public Papers of the Presidents, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3736&st=&st1=>.

63. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 288.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 287.

66. “Kennedy Administration,” CD-ROM, 170. An internal memo from 1963 discusses the possibility of a diplomatic “triple play” that would get the Russians out of Cuba and the United States out of Vietnam by using the French as intermediaries in Vietnam. Kennedy was looking for a policy that could exploit the convergence of US-Russian and French interests. Nixon was much more successful at finding the nexus of great-power interests and, through secret negotiations and maneuvering, leveraged Soviet interests against outcomes in Vietnam. The term *triangular diplomacy* reflects the way Nixon maneuvered these negotiations. For more reading on US-Soviet relations during the Nixon administration and on triangular diplomacy, see Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 191–315; Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*; and Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*.

67. Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 48. Kimball’s book “plumbs . . . millions of documents” and source materials related to Nixon’s Vietnam policies (*ibid.*, 1). For the purposes of our study, we draw on the source materials Kimball compiled. Unless otherwise noted, the memorandums, speeches, policy documents, transcripts, and archival material quoted in this chapter are drawn from Kimball’s compilations in *Vietnam War Files*, and we treat the sources as primary. Kimball’s work is well known, and this particular volume provides an excellent and admittedly much more accessible resource for locating the primary policy materials. If Kimball’s narrative or editorializing is used, it is footnoted as such. Otherwise, quotations and citations are directly from the source material as reprinted in Kimball’s work. Citations provide the document title followed by Kimball’s assigned document number and the page number in his collective volume.

68. The handoff between Eisenhower and Kennedy on Vietnam is discussed in chap. 3 of this paper. See also McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 35–37.

69. “Vietnam Policy Alternatives,” transcript of RAND study, in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 2.8, 48.

70. *Ibid.* Each of the possible outcomes listed includes a brief assessment of its feasibility and potential benefits and ways that the United States might effect them.

71. *Ibid.*, 49.

72. As quoted from Nixon’s “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” 901–9.

73. “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia” (televised speech, 30 April 1970), as shown on Espar, “Quest,” DVD, min. 87. Nixon delivered this speech shortly after announcing the US incursion into Cambodia.

74. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 65.

75. *Ibid.*

76. See Tet and the “arc of perception” in chap. 4 of this paper.
77. “Nixon Urges U.S. to Press Attacks on North Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 12 February 1965, 13.
78. Kissinger, “Viet Nam Negotiations,” 230.
79. Rose, *How Wars End*, 168.
80. Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 11. Kimball defines each term: *de-Americanization*: “the gradual withdrawal of American troops”; *Vietnamization*: “the strengthening of Saigon’s armed forces and government”; *pacification*: “antiguerrilla operations”; and *détente*: “diplomacy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and negotiations with the Vietnamese Communists in Paris in both public and secret venues” (ibid.).
81. “Vietnamizing the War,” National Security Study Memorandum 36, 10 April 1969, in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 3.21, 77.
82. Ibid.
83. “Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon and Thieu,” 30 July 1969, in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 3.22, 78–79.
84. At a press conference on 25 July 1969, Nixon addressed questions concerning the future of Vietnam, Asia, and his policies. Nixon insisted that Asian nations should be responsible for defending themselves but provided a caveat that the involvement of nuclear powers changed the equation of self-determination. Nixon’s statement alluded to the involvement of Russia and China and bespoke of the interests of the United States in Vietnam. Though dubious, public perceptions were that Nixon had a clear strategy for the way ahead. Depending on where one sat, the Guam Doctrine (later renamed the Nixon Doctrine) implied either withdrawal or escalation.
85. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 460.
86. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 427 (Warner Books).
87. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 197. Dobrynin was the Soviet ambassador to the United States throughout most of the Cold War, and his insights offer a unique perspective from “the other side.”
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid., 256.
90. Whalen, *Catch the Falling Flag*, 283.
91. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 255–57, 265–68.
92. Stephen Randolph asserts that Nixon’s strategy of détente, as well as his forming and administering of the US government and its power, reshaped “the geostrategic landscape” and that “the war in Southeast Asia assumed a whole new complexion.” See *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 21.
93. Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2118–19.
94. Nixon, *Memoirs*, 488 (Warner Books).
95. Quoted by Rose, *How Wars End*, 163.
96. Ibid. Rose summarizes Kissinger, saying that this transition made “policy-makers even more obsessed than usual with the credibility of American commitments” (ibid.).
97. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 56. Anna Chennault was the widow of World War II aviation ace and hero Lt Gen Claire Lee Chennault.
98. Ibid., 58.
99. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs*, 327 (Grosset & Dunlap). Nixon said in his memoirs that it was “Johnson’s last chance to redeem his record, and I could not begrudge him the effort . . . [but] I was convinced” he had ulterior motives. Nixon’s 26 October statement read, “I am told that top officials in the administration have been driving very hard for an agreement on a

bombing halt, accompanied possibly by a cease fire, in the immediate future. . . . I am . . . told that this spurt of activity is a cynical, last minute attempt by President Johnson to salvage the candidacy of Mr. Humphrey. This I do not believe" (ibid. 404–5). In typical Nixon fashion, he raised the specter of Johnson's ulterior motive yet ostensibly took Johnson's side.

100. Hung and Schecter, *Palace File*, 24; and Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History*, 244. See *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 59. Stanley Karnow also notes that "Thieu balked at sending diplomats to Paris until four days before Nixon's inauguration," further indicating that Nixon's play directly impacted President Thieu's calculations during the peace talks of 1968 (*Vietnam*, 586).

101. Quoted from Nixon's "Address to the Nation," 3 November 1969, 901–9.

102. The day following the speech, the *New York Times* described a "large and normally undemonstrative cross section of the country" flooding the White House with supportive telegrams and letters. There appeared to be a boost in public opinion and support for the war and for Nixon. See *New York Times*, 5 November 1969. Two weeks later, during the "moratorium" when 500,000 protestors flooded the capital, Nixon disregarded its significance, convinced that he had the majority of Americans on his side.

103. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 16. "The Vietnam predicament that Nixon faced as president paralleled that faced by French leaders in 1953. Their seven-year-old military effort to restore France's colonial grip . . . was in serious jeopardy. Military and political failure in Vietnam, the threat of greater Chinese involvement in support of the Vietminh, and war-weariness at home had driven France's leaders to consider withdrawal through a negotiated settlement. . . . Taking steps toward a diplomatic solution, the French believed that an honorable withdrawal required the stabilization or even improvement of their military position—a course Nixon would also follow as president" (ibid.).

104. Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2130.

105. Reeves, *President Nixon*, 57. Reeves refers to an instance when *ABC News* reported that Nixon would bomb the North if it didn't cooperate during the peace talks. After the report, a Nixon staffer commented, "Good, RN is for this" (ibid.).

106. Ibid.

107. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 76–86. According to Kimball, Haldeman recorded in his notes that Nixon spoke the words "mad bomber" at a meeting in 1973. Kimball also points out that Nixon's public and private statements before, during, and after his presidency are replete with references to irrationality, unpredictability, disproportionate force, risk taking, blackmail, toughness, audacity, defiance, and similar qualities and poses (ibid.).

108. Mann, *Grand Delusion*, 630–31.

109. Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2138.

110. Televised interview aired on Espar, "Quest," transcript.

111. Quoted from an interview conducted by Tom Wicker in *One of Us*, 272.

112. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 39.

113. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 677–79.

114. Interview aired on Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 84.

115. Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2162–70. Congress was not informed of the plan either. Haldeman notes in his diaries that Nixon was extremely agitated and "really driving at Cambodia." According to Haldeman, Nixon knew he was on thin ice legally when it came to any military push into Cambodia. Concerned about the apparent lack of progress in the war and waning public support for his policies, Nixon was determined to get results (*Haldeman Diaries*, 153–56).

116. Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 153.

117. Ibid., 156. Haldeman's entry from 27 April reads, "K takes whole deal as test of P's authority, and I think would go ahead even if plan is wrong, just to prove [the president] can't be challenged" (ibid.).

118. Astor, *Presidents at War*, 2162–70.

119. Ibid., 2154.

120. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," 405–6.

121. Ibid., 406.

122. Professor Kahin was a scholar of modern Southeast Asian studies and considered an expert on the region and on US policy there. Senators George McGovern, Mark O. Hatfield, Charles E. Goodell, Alan Cranston, and Harold E. Hughes asked Kahin to address Nixon's points in detail (Williams et al., *America in Vietnam*, 283).

123. George McTurnan Kahin, "Cambodia: The Administration's Version and the Historical Record," paper, 1970, as transcribed in ibid., 283–87. As an example, Kahin describes the US special forces and CIA campaign in 1966 to pressure Cambodian president Sihanouk by supporting opposition forces.

124. Ibid., 285. The United States had also been repeatedly bombing Cambodia during the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

125. Ibid., 287.

126. Stephen Randolph cites numerous instances when airpower, combined with ground troops, either thwarted the North's military buildup or knocked back offensives. The North was extremely dependent on its sanctuaries as well as its logistic trails that required those sanctuaries. Nixon and Abrams's strategy was sound. During Operation Commando Hunt and in response to North Vietnam's Easter Offensive in 1972, Nixon's use of airpower and ground forces at the very least delayed Hanoi's victory. Though Randolph notes that the Linebacker campaign "never managed to eliminate military imports," it did levy "a heavy toll on equipment and supplies." Air assets also blunted the North's "offensive in the South," and Nixon administered a "cascade of firepower" that crippled Hanoi's offensive power (*Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 64–58, 336–40).

127. General Tho, quoted in Sorley, *Better War*, 213. General Tho served as the assistant chief of staff, J-3 (operations directorate), Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, and participated in the combined planning for US and Army of the Republic of Vietnam operations in Cambodia. In 1979 the US Army Center of Military History published his monograph, *The Cambodian Incursion*, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA324718&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.

128. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," 407.

129. Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 88.

130. Williams et al., *America in Vietnam*, 290–91.

131. Ibid., 291.

132. Ibid.

133. Ibid.

134. Ibid.

135. Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 93–94.

136. Interview with Nixon's special counsel, aired on Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 99.

137. Both the abridged and original versions of *The Pentagon Papers*, as published by the *New York Times*, are cited throughout this study; full reference information is available in the bibliography.

138. Black, *Richard M. Nixon*, 732–34.

139. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 13.

140. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 13–14.

141. *Ibid.*, 14.

142. *Ibid.*, 14–15. One of the main objectives of Lam Son 719 was to prove the mettle of the South's army, so the United States was not willing to commit its own ground forces to the operation. President Thieu had requested but was denied mechanized brigades. Although the attack was a good idea, the timing was poor, and Nixon's eagerness for action and his want of a quick solution forced a bold and potentially effective plan prematurely.

143. De-Americanization and Vietnamization were essential elements of Nixon's plan for honorable US withdrawal and handoff. The images of Lam Son 719 "froze the American public's perception of their South Vietnamese allies. Vietnamization had faced its first major test, and to all appearances had proven an abject failure" (*ibid.*, 15).

144. Sorley, *Better War*, 181–83. General Abrams lamented that the rotating nature of US advisers, combined with the often inconsistent US military policies, made effective training difficult and that the South's commanders were sometimes left in the lurch. South Vietnamese command relationships were also dubious. Commanders were "never able to gain a firm grip on the operation or create any real unity among the American and various South Vietnamese forces." The operation also suffered intelligence leaks, and the North was aware of the attack well in advance. See Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 15–16.

145. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 17.

146. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1002.

147. Nixon-Kissinger memorandum, untitled, 10 May 1972, quoted in Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 227–28.

148. Nixon-Kissinger memorandum, untitled, 15 May 1972, quoted in *ibid.*, 228.

149. Nixon as quoted in *ibid.*, 88. Nixon was equally frustrated with Abrams, believing the ground commander had "screwed up Laos." Speaking to Adm Thomas Moorer, chairman of the JCS, Nixon said, "From now on, you get those reports in to me. Second thing is, I want Abrams braced hard." Nixon was frustrated by what he perceived as a lack of enthusiasm and aggressiveness during a counteroffensive along the demilitarized zone. "The most consistent theme," in the weeks following Laos, "was the White House's frustration with the military. . . . [Nixon] felt he had given the members of the military too much leeway . . . and they had let him down. He was determined to leave little latitude" in the future (*ibid.*, 81).

150. Nixon during taped Oval Office conversation, 4 April 1972, as quoted in *ibid.*, 93.

151. "Transcript of Oval Office Conversation, September 17, 1971," in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 5.29, 193–94.

152. Transcript of memorandum of conversation, Kissinger and Zhou, 10 July 1971, China/Vietnam Negotiations, NSC Files, in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 5.28, 191.

153. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 243.

154. *Ibid.*, 243–50. Dobrynin said it seemed obvious that Nixon was on the verge of launching major military actions against the North. His administration was concerned that escalation of the conflict in Vietnam might stall or kill the upcoming summit between Brezhnev and Nixon in Moscow. Though Dobrynin recalls that Nixon perhaps overestimated the amount of influence Russia had on Hanoi's leadership, he reveals that the Soviets were eager to resolve Vietnam and saw the potential gains from better relations with the United States as outweighing their obligations to North Vietnam. As the United States ramped up military operations following the North's Easter Offensive, "the summit literally hung in the balance" (*ibid.*, 248). Moscow worried that Nixon might go even further and unleash some new "shock tactic" against the North. Additionally, it was not easy for Moscow to forgo its support of Hanoi. "The

Politburo discussed the delicate situation in Vietnam several times. It was caught in a dilemma between wanting to stop the American bombing and wanting to go ahead with a summit" (ibid., 247).

155. Ibid., 248.

156. Ibid., 249. Though Dobrynin characterized the shift in the Soviet mind-set, we could easily replace the Soviets' dogma with "frontiers of freedom" and "victims of Communist aggression."

157. Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 30–31.

158. Transcript of Executive Office Building conversation, 4 May 1972, White House Tapes, in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 6.11, 220–21.

159. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 190. Randolph summarizes the US Air Force's "North Vietnam Interdiction Plan" that formed the basic concept of operations for Linebacker.

160. Nixon quoted in ibid., 183.

161. Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam*, 283.

162. Ibid., 299.

163. Ibid.

164. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 339.

165. Ibid., 338.

166. Interview with *Washington Post* reporter David Broder, aired on Espar, "Quest," DVD, min. 115. Broder described Nixon's actions as manically "selfish."

167. Rose, *How Wars End*, 173.

168. Notes of Oval Office conversation, 12 October 1972, in Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 513–14.

169. See Nixon's statement cited previously in this chapter: "South Vietnam may lose, but the United States cannot lose."

170. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 686.

171. Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 252–53, 257. Thieu was unmoved by these enticements and in November issued what Kissinger described as Thieu's 69 "preposterous" changes in the October agreement (ibid., 257).

172. Nixon to Thieu, letter, 17 December 1972, transcribed in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, doc. 6.40, 276–77.

173. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 333.

174. Ibid., 335.

175. Astor, *Presidents at War*, 26.

176. Kissinger, testimony before the US Senate, Committee on Appropriations, Emergency Military Assistance, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 15 April 1975, Washington, DC, as transcribed in Williams et al., *America in Vietnam*, 312–15.

177. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 295.

178. Rose, *How Wars End*, 163.

179. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 65.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power—not only at home, but throughout the world. It has poisoned our domestic debate. So we paid an exorbitant price for the decisions that were made in good faith and for good purpose.

—Henry Kissinger

This study examined three presidents in Vietnam and the effects their image had on the agenda and outcomes of America's longest war. In seeking to convey the more salient points and aspects of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, we invoked the often useful but infinitely limited literary device of metaphor. No matter how consistent are the images of Camelot's mythical king, America's frontiersman, or the shadow with Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, respectively, the caricatures inevitably fall short. Each president is an amalgam and could be described 100 different ways, and none would be wrong. Neither would any one description be wholly correct. Presidents, like their policies, are an iterative accumulation of experiences and interactions. In the full refraction of history's prism, they are at once revealed to be stunningly similar to the way we elect to perceive and portray them while still defying encapsulation. Like T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, presidents are not so easily "formulated," no matter how intently we pin them to the wall.¹ In this way, wars are little different than the men who wage them. Still, the metaphors and the explorations of presidential image through the lens of cognitive theory have led to some conclusions regarding the relationship among each president, his image, and Vietnam as an inherited war.

First and foremost, analysis of the three presidents confirms Kenneth Boulding's contention that images evolve through an iterative process of interaction. Though predilections are stubborn—and the many examples throughout the study demonstrate Kennedy's, Johnson's, and Nixon's enduring commitment to existing beliefs—often the most salient examples of the influence of images came from their interactions with the "real world." Presidential image involves not only the personal worldview projected by each of the presidents but also their integration of both confirming and disconfirming information. Domestic pressures, public perceptions, and opinions of the presidents and

their policies, as well as the interactions of particular policies with the war on the international stage, all congealed to form each man's presidential image. Also influential were political equities in that domestic political gains or losses sometimes drove presidential agendas even more than the worldviews that spawned them. At a minimum, however, each man's existing belief structure influenced how he dealt with externalities (such as an uncooperative press or domestic dissent). These interrelationships not only heighten the need for leaders to be cognizant of their proclivities but also illuminate the integral role the public plays in shaping presidential image.

The study also reveals that even though each Vietnam-era president adhered to the same containment metastructure, each man individually perceived the means best suited to achieve its prescriptions. Even Johnson and Kennedy, who were from the same political party and shared numerous overlapping assumptions about the role of government, differed in how they levied their agendas to push back Communism, transform American society, and win in Vietnam. While dynamic circumstances and changes on the ground certainly played a role between Kennedy's demise and Nixon's rise, the respective contrasts between each man are attributable in large part to the individual images of each president. This seems consistent with the assertions of both Stephen Hawking and Boulding, where beliefs or models effectively create reality through perceptions. Each man helped shape, if not create, many of the circumstances surrounding his Vietnam policies and forced onto his successor the ramifications wrought through his presidential image.

Current decision makers should pay heed to the role that image played in each Vietnam-era president's policies and their outcomes and be especially mindful of the effects presidential image had on the successor's state of play. Kennedy's inheritance and subsequent policies demonstrate the importance of transitions. When presidential transitions include a war or another problem deemed paramount to national security, it must be effectively handed off. When both the problem and the solutions are ill defined, preconceptions and presidential image have more room to "fill in the white space." Eisenhower's handoff of Vietnam to Kennedy amounted to little more than "it's important, complicated, and difficult." The consequence was Kennedy's almost blanket departure from past policies. Such departures are not always bad, but the danger lies in the premature dismissal of context and circumstances that at the very least might better inform the new president on the way ahead. Marked departures from past policy stances in the absence of deliberate collusion between the incoming and outgoing administrations amplify the tendency to dismiss or overlook previous rationales. Wicked problems are inherently inchoate, providing ample opportunity for decision makers to define them

through their own image. If the new administration is already inclined to rebel against its predecessor, then this tendency is exacerbated. Furthermore, if the heir's image is rooted in the same assumptions that his predecessor held, as was the case with Johnson, disconfirming information can be readily dismissed. The result with Johnson was a doubling down on previous policies, with little to no inquiry into the validity of their assumptions.

Henry Kissinger said that "it is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience. . . . The convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office."² Predilections are enduring and stubborn even in the face of experience. Biases become even more defiant when decision makers are denied a deliberate, detailed, formal, and cooperative interchange with their predecessor. With Kennedy lacking both firsthand experience and experience by proxy, his perception of Eisenhower's passivity and ineptitudes regarding Indochina policies was only reinforced by the lack of a detailed handoff.

Chapter 2 elucidated how the human brain fills in patterns, drawing on theories from Boulding, Hawking, Robert Jervis, and Yuen Foong Khong. Both the social and the physical sciences postulate how what "we believe" becomes "what is" and how beliefs may even redefine "what was." Objective "facts" do remain. Vietnam happened. The question is the degree of influence that presidential image exhibited on the war. When Kennedy looked to Vietnam, he saw the "new frontiers of freedom" and staked out America's claim and commitment there. He reorganized the government and rallied it to Vietnam, which became the new front line of the Cold War. Johnson subsequently labored to fortify America's position there, but he did so by folding Vietnam into the interior lines of his larger quest for a Great Society. In so doing, Johnson found that the Vietnam War acted as a sinkhole both to his cause and his presidency. Nixon reached into that dark hole and attempted to place Vietnam back on the map as a small peninsula among much larger continents. Perceptions influenced—and sometimes dictated—the agendas and subsequent outcomes for both Johnson and Nixon.

Johnson obsessed over controlling perceptions. His manipulations were driven by a need to overcome his own insecurities as well as buy time in Vietnam to prosecute his social agendas. In "Theory of Victory," J. Boone Bartholomees asserts that victory is ultimately a matter of "opinion" and that in America domestic opinion matters the most.³ His observations should not be confused to mean that opinion supersedes the practical applications and conduct of war. Vietnam was not merely a public relations campaign, but opinions did matter. In fact, many have claimed that American public opinion was

the Clausewitzian center of gravity for this war. In the end, military force, diplomacy, economic incentives, and coercions are ways by which presidents seek to influence and change their adversary's behavior. According to Clausewitz, the *object* of war is capitulation of the enemy while the *aim* is attacking the enemy's means to resist. Belief structures and the perceptions that flow from them are means of resistance. Johnson's failings in Vietnam were driven by his inability to successfully create the reality he desired in the minds of both his countrymen and his enemy. His unsuccessful negotiations with Hanoi were in large part due to the different value scales of the American and North Vietnamese leaders—the two sides were playing very different games. Additionally, the gap between what “was” and what he wanted others to believe had for Johnson grown too wide. As Louis Halle astutely observes,

All nations cultivate myths that endow them with dignity and when occasion arises, give nobility to the causes in which they fight. . . . Myths belong to the conceptual world by which, alone, we are able to interpret the existential world that constitutes our raw environment. . . . We men have to live, then, in two worlds at once, the conceptual and the existential, and our central problem is to maintain the correspondence between them. It is when these two worlds diverge excessively that we find ourselves in trouble. . . . Under circumstances of conflict between individuals or societies . . . the respective conceptual formulations of the parties tend to diverge . . . [and] fear, hatred, and the need for self-justification find their expression in conceptual falsification, whether innocent or deliberate.⁴

Even more than Johnson, Nixon believed in the power of myth and worked hard to “tweak minds” and shape perceptions. In discussing the upcoming 1972 election with his staff, Nixon told H. R. Haldeman that he needed to be perceived as a “fighting president” and was therefore in need of “an enemy.”⁵ Nixon lamented how Kennedy had “mesmerized” the public, and the attorney from Yorba Linda pushed his staff to cultivate a more effective “Nixon” myth. Haldeman commented in his diaries that “no one loves him, fears him, or hates him, and he needs to have all three.”⁶ As Vietnam became Nixon's war and the perceptual gaps between the president and the public widened, he cast a long shadow of fear, hatred, and self-justification.

Presidential image played out across three administrations in Vietnam. Despite the fundamental metastructure of containment and the Cold War, each president pursued common ends in distinctive ways. How each perceived himself, the government and its institutions, and the security environment influenced the nature and character of his policies and their outcomes. Kennedy and Nixon both summoned the country to greatness during their inaugural addresses, but each man had his own understanding of what “greatness” meant and how to get there.⁷ Kennedy envisioned a greatly expanded government and institutional mechanisms, but Nixon imagined a smaller,

less ambitious government.⁸ Nixon also differed with Kennedy and Johnson over the idea that America should transform other nations:

In foreign policy we are faced with a choice of insisting on Democratic rule around the world or of accepting the existence of the non-democratic regimes that have arisen in cultures different from our own. At the philosophical level, we should endorse Locke's concept of natural rights. In practice, however, we must recognize that often nations lack the traditions and institutions to make democracy work. Democratic government does not automatically mean good government. . . . Our country developed its democratic political institutions over centuries, [and] we should not expect others to replicate them overnight.⁹

Nixon conceptualized Vietnam as part of a “much bigger game” and reframed the war to align with his understanding of America's interests. For good and ill, the images presidents held affected their war policies; the subsequent outcomes were bequeathed to their successors.

At the end of this study, we also might ask how the exploration of presidential image has shaped or reshaped our understanding of Vietnam and inherited war. I cannot say for certain that the world would be a better place had we not gone to Vietnam. Historians and scholars lament the missed opportunity to stop Hitler sooner, and the naïveté of British prime minister Neville Chamberlain is axiomatic. Hindsight affords a luxurious perch from which to judge. The “couch of reason” is not often available, however, in the frantic world of presidents. Johnson's quandary left him damned if he did and damned if he didn't. The Hippocratic oath demands that doctors first “do no harm.” In politics, finding an option that eliminates all harm is not always easy, and presidents are often challenged with determining what will do less harm. Francis Bacon said that more comes from failure than from success, and while we can assess the costs of Vietnam, it is much harder to determine the benefits. Without Vietnam, all of the political missteps and inefficacies of presidential leadership may have remained shadowed, and we would be without their benefit today. Similarly, American military reform may have taken a different path—or none at all.

Vietnam cost the United States nearly \$200 billion, more than 58,000 lives, and over 300,000 wounded.¹⁰ Though the figures vary, it is estimated that the Communists lost some 600,000 men, and South Vietnam approximately 500,000.¹¹ Nearly 800,000 South Vietnamese fled their country.¹² Less quantifiable but just as significant were the costs the war incurred upon the American psyche. The relationships among the American government, the military mind, and the public's perceptions of the institutions built to protect and represent them were forever changed. Whether the gains were worth the costs is not for this author to judge. Given today's fights, however, as we wrangle through our own inherited wars, we should not limit ourselves to asking only

questions of worth. The larger question for policy makers is the degree to which image affected *why* we fought in the first place and *how* we fought once we were there. Presidential image matters no less today than it did in Vietnam and serves as a salient starting point in coming to understand today's fight.

Final Thoughts

Analysis of Kennedy's, Johnson's, and Nixon's presidential images does more than provide access to how their predilections and belief structures drove agendas and outcomes in Vietnam. It also offers an excellent lens through which to view our own understandings and beliefs about Vietnam, our presidents, our wars, and our country. Every new war receives unto its fields the ghosts of wars past, reincarnated through the incantations of presidential image. If we expect certain limits in presidential behavior and disapprove of either the wars they choose or how they fight them, then we must turn to our own expectations of government and understanding of war. It is easy to throw stones, especially through time, but it is much more difficult to consider, understand, and engage problems of national interest from the perspective of those who face such wickedness every day. While it may not be possible for each of us to share the view of the Oval Office, we can turn to history, self-reflection, and current affairs. Only when informed might we find the purchase required to see when presidents' judgments are clouded or when their rhetoric abuses history. If, however, we leave not just the decisions but the understanding of history solely to the decision makers, then certainly we have no right to feel abused when presidents drive us to places we would rather not go. Presidents are endowed with a sacred trust, but so too are those who elect them. Images, the wars they drive, and the inheritances they bequeath are not simply the business of presidents. Ultimately, the image, the war, and the inheritance are our own.

A Note for Future Study

The connection between individual image and the inertial state of play is crucial in inherited wars. In the expanse of Vietnam this study examined, each president was presented within a particular metaphor that was then tied to his agendas and outcomes. Though the preceding study of image is satisfactory and attention was paid to the interaction between each image and the momentum inherited from the previous administration, it is that very nexus of those transitions that warrants further research. Preliminary findings derived from each president's image lead us to believe that Kennedy, Johnson, and

Nixon may signify three broad categories or types of presidents in inherited wars. Respectively, they are the visionary, the shepherd, and the reframer.¹³ Each president must react to the trajectory of the war and contend with the political environment he inherits while at the same time implementing his own agenda. Wars that transcend administrations funnel both spectral and tangible threats forward so that heirs must immediately contend with dramatic perils to American interests and ideology—whether real or perceived.

Regardless of size and scope, wars are an automatic crisis that hyperexcites the polity. Further, the immediacy of crisis that inherited wars present means that each bias, predilection, and image from which presidents draw is immediately in play—analogies and other cognitive shortcuts are the first and sometimes only fallback position. At the same time, inherited wars have a momentum of their own, and the contest between the individual and the structure takes center stage. In the arc of Vietnam, the progression from visionary to reframer followed the course of each administration. This does not necessarily mean, however, that each president was inherently a visionary, shepherd, or reframer. The same president might very well oscillate among categories in his policies. We cannot draw conclusions as to whether party affiliation, the war's duration, or the point at which each president takes over affects the type of war president he becomes. Presidential image, however, proves a good place to start.

Notes

1. See T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917). The quotation refers to the following verse: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin / To spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways? / And how should I presume?" Eliot, *The Waste Land, Prufrock and Other Poems* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), 1–5.

2. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 54.

3. Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," 26.

4. Halle, *Cold War as History*, 412.

5. Transcript of Oval Office conversation, 17 January 1972, in Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 397–98.

6. *Ibid.*, 398.

7. In Nixon's inaugural address, he said, "I ask you to share with me today the majesty of the moment. In the orderly transfer of power, we celebrate the unity that keeps us free. . . . This is our summons to greatness." Kennedy, in his inaugural address, said, "Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. . . . Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need . . . but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out . . . a struggle against the common enemies

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of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself." See Nixon, "First Inaugural Address"; and Kennedy, "Inaugural Address."

8. Chap. 3 discussed at length Kennedy's vision and realignment of government. Johnson shared Kennedy's premise, and both departed sharply from Eisenhower's more conservative fiscal and social policies. Chapter 4 also discussed Johnson's desire to fulfill Roosevelt's and Kennedy's vision by creating the "new" New Deal through his Great Society program. In his memoirs, Nixon contrasts himself with these visions by recounting a speech he delivered in 1945: "I described my view of the two conflicting opinions about the nature of the American System. . . . One advocated by the New Deal is government control in regulating our lives. The other calls for individual freedom and all that initiative can produce. I hold the latter viewpoint." See Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs*, 35.

9. Nixon, *In the Arena*, 305.

10. Williams et al., *America in Vietnam*, 300–301.

11. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 1–8.

12. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 270.

13. These are loose, potential categories that may signify the arc of inherited wars. The visionary creates the stakes and goals; the shepherd manages the goals and the correlating and competing commitments while trying to satisfy the stakes his predecessor created; and the reframer redefines the stakes and goals and rematches resources to "the new war." William Strauss and Neil Howe propose an interesting generational theory in their book *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997). They suggest that four distinct generations make up repetitive 100-year cycles of human history: hero, prophet, nomad, and artist. Generational theory might not only shed light on the characteristics American presidents displayed during Vietnam but also prove useful in the further examination of inherited wars—particularly regarding the potential categories of shepherd, visionary, and reframer.

Abbreviations

GDP	gross domestic product
GVN	government of (South) Vietnam
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
NSAM	national security action memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
OPLAN	operational plan

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