

# How History Dealt With LBJ and His Vietnam War in Three Key Areas: Escalation, Management and the Tet Offensive Articles

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We are continually faced with new evidence, doubts, questions, insights and perspectives about a costly, divisive tragedy called the Vietnam War in which an estimated three million Vietnamese and sixty thousand Americans died.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of books and articles have been written on all aspects of this first 'televised' war and the output does not seem to be abating. David Anderson claimed that 'The Vietnam War may already be the most written about war in U.S. history',<sup>2</sup> and, more recently, Gary Hess wrote that the lack of consensus in major aspects of interpretation stems from the 'hawks' and 'doves' debates within the presidential administration and the media of the war years:

Those contemporary debates have essentially continued in retrospective writing, with revisionists carrying forward the 'winnable' war argument and orthodox writers following in the dovish 'unwinnable' war tradition.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is a survey of prominent historiography regarding three aspects of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Vietnam policy: his escalation of the war and the rationale for it; his management of the war; and his response to the Tet Offensive and its subsequent impact in the United States. Contemporary views will be examined, including those of the Administration itself, those written

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1 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xiii. Robert McNamara in film documentary, *The Fog of War*, gives slightly different figures. Refer to Fn 40. <<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8653788864462752804>> Accessed 20 July, 2012.

2 David Anderson, 'The Vietnam War', in *A Companion to American Foreign Relations*, ed. Robert Schulzinger, (Maldon: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 309.

3 Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), ix.

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in the period immediately after Johnson's departure from the White House up to 1990, and those from 1990 to the present; a period which benefits from both distance and availability of new archival evidence in the United States,<sup>4</sup> China, Russia and Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson became 'accidental' President on 22 November 1973 and 'inherited' the Vietnam problem. Historians are in general agreement that the Cold War – with its policy off-shoots of containment, the domino theory and alliances<sup>5</sup>– was at the heart of U.S. rationale for involvement in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> A line of five consecutive U.S. Presidents from Harry Truman to Richard Nixon<sup>7</sup> all adhered to what Godfrey Hodgson identified in 1976 as a 'liberal consensus'; that the survival of a 'free and independent' South Vietnam was crucial to the American system:

The fact remains that they [the Presidents] did share the same basic political assumptions: the primacy of foreign over domestic issues, the paramount importance of containing communism [and] the need to assert the supremacy of the White House as the command post of a society mobilized to meet external danger. So did their staff and advisers. And so too did their running mates and close rivals.<sup>8</sup>

There is no consensus however on the validity of this rationale. David Anderson asserted in 2007 that the Vietnam War was a war of choice. The Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon Administrations chose to define the survival of South Vietnam as being of vital strategic interest in the containment of Soviet and Chinese power.<sup>9</sup> Frank Logevall, in *Choosing War*, wrote 'there was nothing preordained or inevitable about the slide into major war in Vietnam'. He argued that 'viable alternatives existed'.<sup>10</sup> His perspective presents a major conceptual shift from earlier literature. For example, twenty years earlier, Gleb and Betts observed: 'To argue that American leaders could have withdrawn is not sufficient. Of course they could choose, but that does not mean they possessed real choice'.<sup>11</sup>

The Gleb and Betts thesis has been supported and developed by many others over the years who portray Johnson as a 'captive' to the decisions made by previous administrations. Alfred Steinberg,

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4 In response to the John F. Kennedy Assassination Record Collection Act of 1992, the Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, in 1994 started to release its entire collection of tapes made by, and for, Johnson which covered the period 1963-69. This was contrary to Johnson's express verbal instruction that they be kept under seal until at least 2023. As Michael Beschloss wrote in 1997, the tapes would be 'a vital new means of understanding Lyndon Johnson'. M. Beschloss (ed.), *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 567.

5 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization).

6 Anderson, 'The Vietnam War', 311.

7 Although historians often add Roosevelt to this group, he is intentionally excluded here because he was dead before Churchill made his 'iron curtain' speech in 1946. Roosevelt reluctantly acquiesced in the French attempt, with Britain's support, to restore its pre-World War II empire, and as such, the U.S. became involved. 'FDR had hoped to lead Indochina toward independence. He detested French behaviour in Indochina, condemning the French as 'poor colonizers' who had 'badly mismanaged Vietnam and its neighbours'. B. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1909), 128-9.

8 G. Hodgson, 'The ideology of the Liberal Consensus', in *America In Our Time: From World War II to Nixon What Happened and Why*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 73-4.

9 D. Anderson, 'No More Vietnams: Historians debate the Policy Lessons of the Vietnam War', in *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*, eds. David Anderson and John Ernst, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 14.

10 Logevall, *Choosing War*, xvi.

11 Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1979), 244.

an early advocate of the ‘captive thesis’, asserted in his 1968 biography, *Sam Johnson’s Boy*,<sup>12</sup> that Johnson, as quoted in R. Divine, was:

a child of the 1930s, obsessed with the fear of appeasement and the supposed lesson of Munich [and] a confirmed Cold War Warrior, a hawk who consistently advocated defence spending and wanted to turn the country into a ‘national armed camp’.<sup>13</sup>

Bruce Schulman, writing almost thirty years later, agreed: ‘Johnson’s experience with World War Two and the Cold War taught him that aggression must be repulsed and communism contained’.<sup>14</sup> And Johnson in his memoir, *The Vantage Point*, seemingly agreed and implied that he was ‘captive’ to precedent and continuity in his Vietnam policy:

No one who had served in the House or Senate during the momentous years of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s could fail to recall the many highs and lows of our performance [in Foreign Affairs] as a nation. Like most men and women of my generation, I felt strongly that World War II might have been avoided if the United States had not given an uncertain signal of its likely response to aggression in Europe and Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in a conversation with his biographer Doris Kearns, Johnson claimed that ‘he had no choice but to escalate the war’.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Johnson, in both his memoir and conversations with Kearns, may have had the ulterior motive of trying to salvage his own credibility for posterity. This is suggested by his keenness to emphasise continuity with President John F. Kennedy’s policy and thus perpetuate the idea that he was following what Kennedy had really started, that is, putting America on a war footing in Vietnam. Johnson had no scruples when it came to manipulating the posthumous popularity of Kennedy to achieve his own outcomes.

I was convinced of the broad lines of his [Kennedy’s] policies, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere had been right. They were consistent with the goals that the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945.<sup>17</sup>

Eric Goldman, writing contemporaneously with Johnson, agreed in *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, that ‘no more Munichs’ was a shaping influence. However, he rejected the ‘captive’ thesis and posited: ‘to picture Lyndon Johnson’s decisions as emerging from the capture of his thinking by particular individuals or some group is to misunderstand the man’.<sup>18</sup>

The role of human agency is an important one in the Vietnam story. To ignore the Johnson personality would be as wrong as it would be to ignore the structural factors at work mentioned

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12 Alfred Steinberg, *Sam Johnson’s Boy: A Close-up of the President From Texas*, (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

13 Quoted in R. Divine, ‘The Johnson Literature, in *The Johnson Years Volume One: Foreign Policy, The Great Society, and the White House*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1987), 7.

14 Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 127.

15 L. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 42, 46. This book was in fact largely written by several former White House aides including Walt Rostow and Doris Kearns. They did all the research and wrote the first drafts and Johnson made the final revisions.

16 Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), 251.

17 Michael Beschloss (ed.), *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 256.

18 E. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, (London: MacDonald, 1969), 378. It should be noted that in the Preface, Goldman revealed that he was a special consultant to Johnson for two years and nine months, until his resignation in autumn 1966. He claimed, however, he was never in the high echelons of power and was not an insider; his book was not an insider’s book.

above. It was an essential feature in his management of the war. Johnson's personality shaped policy on two levels: an 'ideological' level and an 'operational' level. In other words, what he stood for, and how he interacted with his advisors in effecting this philosophy. There is consensus that Johnson had a strong and dominant, if not domineering personality. But what is contentious is the weight scholars attribute to these two levels in assessing his policy. It is inconceivable to portray an American president as a minor player in the Vietnam story. Some scholars writing in 1980s characterised him as 'uninterested in international relations'. Goldman described Johnson as someone who:

preferred to think about and deal with domestic relations than international affairs; lacked extensive acquaintance with foreign leaders or significant knowledge of foreign civilizations [and] had no carefully thought out conception of the workings of the international system.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, Waldo Heinrichs believed 'that the mind and personality of Johnson were well endowed for diplomacy [and] that his intelligence, memory, and energy would serve him well in foreign affairs'.<sup>20</sup> Doris Kearns added another dimension to this perspective. She wrote (in her characteristic psycho-analytical style):

In dealing with foreign policy however, he was insecure, fearful, his touch unsure. His greatest anxiety was to avoid making a serious error rather than achieve great things. He felt that as long as his policies were approved by those men, who represented established wisdom, he was at least, insured against appearing foolish or incompetent.<sup>21</sup>

In short, a lot of the early literature tended to argue that Johnson was callow and disinterested in foreign affairs; an idea further fuelled by Johnson's oft quoted statement to Doris Kearns in 1970: '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'.<sup>22</sup>

Even Lady Bird in 1965 seemingly believed her husband was ill-fitted to foreign policy. She wrote: 'I just hope that foreign problems do not keep mounting, they do not represent Lyndon's kind of Presidency'.<sup>23</sup> Bruce Schulman confirmed the extent to which this view was accepted when he claimed: 'Nearly every Johnson-watcher, from the President's wife to his arch enemies, believed him to be out of his element in foreign relations'.<sup>24</sup> But Schulman did not adhere to this view himself having made the important observation that, 'it is easy to exaggerate Johnson's weakness as warrior and diplomat'.<sup>25</sup> After all, Johnson, as Vice President, made eleven trips outside the United States, more than any other Vice President.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, on these foreign trips Johnson often demonstrated a strong and committed foreign policy perspective. A. J. Langguth recounted that in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>20</sup> Waldo Heinrichs, 'Lyndon B. Johnson: Change and Continuity,' in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968*, eds. Warren Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, 256

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>23</sup> Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 60.

May 1961, Johnson, in Texan campaign style, addressed a bemused crowd of onlookers in the South Vietnamese countryside and bellowed praise for the South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem,<sup>27</sup> as a leader: ‘who would fight Communism in the streets and alleys, and when his hands are torn ... fight with his feet’.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, at a state dinner later that evening, Johnson heaped more praise on Diem and referred to him as the ‘Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia’.<sup>29</sup> Johnson’s remarks suggest he exceeded his brief as a Vice President on a fact-finding mission. Spencer Tucker, the editor of *The Encyclopedia of Vietnam War*, hinted at Johnson’s influence and observed that within one week of his return to Washington, Kennedy agreed to the South Vietnamese army being increased from 170 000 to 270 000.<sup>30</sup>

Other scholars have also challenged the depiction that Johnson was not interested in foreign affairs, and have identified an active interest and involvement in shaping foreign policy, but they have commonly assessed his role negatively.<sup>31</sup> In 1979 John Stoessinger wrote that Johnson ‘overwhelmed’ his advisors with the sheer force of his personality. ‘They sensed what he wanted to hear and gave it to him.’<sup>32</sup> But Larry Berman doubted that Stoessinger’s evidence for such an assertion is reliable and wrote:

For proof, Stoessinger quotes David Halberstam’s ‘juicy’ example of loyalty Johnson-style: ‘I don’t want loyalty, I want *loyalty*. I want him to kiss my ass in Macy’s window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses. I want his pecker in my pocket.’ This is of course, delightful material for the lecture circuit but offers no empirical evidence for explaining the actual dynamics of decision choice.<sup>33</sup>

Johnson’s method of personal persuasion became known as ‘The Treatment’,<sup>34</sup> and is well documented and is a variation of Larry Berman’s earlier ‘Caligula Syndrome’ thesis, whereby intimidated advisors only offered Johnson the advice they thought he wanted.<sup>35</sup> *Machismo* was the characteristic means by which Johnson effected his intimidation and persuasion.

Robert Dallek, in his reflectively titled *Flawed Giant*, portrayed Johnson in psychological terms reminiscent of Doris Kearns.<sup>36</sup> He described Johnson as a man who was ‘deeply troubled’, and ‘at times came frightening close to clinical paranoia’. A man who exposed his private parts, invited

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27 Ngo Dinh Diem was President of South Vietnam from October 1955 until his assassination in November 1963.

28 A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-75*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 130.

29 Ibid. See also Spencer Tucker (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History, Second Edition* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 807.

30 Ibid.

31 Michael Lerner, ‘Introduction: Lyndon Johnson in History and Memory’, in *Looking Back at LBJ: White House Politics in a New Light*, ed. Michael Lerner, (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2005), 5.

32 John Stoessinger, *Crusaders and Pragmatists*, (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1979), 185.

33 Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 6.

34 Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 44-5.

35 Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, 3-7.

36 Kearns biography of Johnson is at times very perceptive and entertaining but it needs to be read with a proviso best expressed by Robert Divine: ‘One cannot help but wonder if the astute politician (Johnson) was not engaged in one last act of manipulation, using Kearns as his way of presenting an appealing image of himself to posterity’. Divine, ‘The Johnson Literature’, 19. Fred Greenstein in *Evolution of the Modern Presidency: A Bibliographical Survey*, (Washington: American Enterprise Institute For Public Policy, 1977), 23, elaborated further: ‘[Kearns’s book is] a difficult if not impossible work to validate and hence evaluate’.

people into his bathroom, and urinated in sinks; techniques that Dallek interpreted as control devices intended to shock people.<sup>37</sup> More recent scholarship though, has tended to view the personal impact of Johnson on foreign policy as wanting, and paints a picture of a president whose diplomatic record is marked by frustration and failure.<sup>38</sup>

In his first year in office Johnson had a low-key approach to managing the War, not through lack of interest, but rather for political reasons. So the day-to-day operations were left to advisors Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk<sup>39</sup>. He did not want to make any pronouncements about Vietnam that could impact on his election victory. His priority was to win power in his own right with a landslide. This would free him from the shadow of Kennedy and 'legitimize' a Johnson agenda. The 'Maddox incident' propelled him into decisive action, and prompted his first major step in escalation.<sup>40</sup> He took a 'dawkish'<sup>41</sup> approach, with the dispatch of sixty-four bombers on a reprisal raid over North Vietnam. He also used the furore created by the Maddox Incident, to rapidly and skilfully push through Congress the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which provided him with 'legitimacy' in future actions. According to Logevall the 'Maddox Incident' proved to be one of the most controversial episodes in a controversial war:

It requires understanding that American officials engaged in deliberate and repeated deception about what went on in the gulf in the days surrounding the affair [so the Administration could] reaffirm its commitment to [Vietnam] and find a way to jump-start the flagging effort in South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup>

Jack Valenti, a former White House aide, provided insight in his 1965 memoir into Johnson's thinking at the time of his 'Americanization' of the war, an escalation of an entirely different magnitude to previous escalations. Valenti recalled that Johnson said:

There are two basic troubles within me. First, that Westerners can ever win a war in Asia. Second, I don't see how you can fight a war under direction of other people whose government changes every month.<sup>43</sup>

Goldman identified Johnson's judgement of public opinion as playing a role in the shaping of Vietnam policy in his attempt to clip the wings of the 'hawks' who he perceived as more of a threat than the 'doves to his standing in the country'.<sup>44</sup> Johnson's 'dawk' policy in this context can therefore be seen as an attempt to build a Vietnam policy around consensus similar to his domestic

<sup>37</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), x.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen and Tucker, (eds), *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World*. This is a collection of ten essays in which all ten authors depicted a president whose foreign policy skills left a lot to be desired.

<sup>39</sup> Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Maddox Incident', also known as the 'Gulf of Tonkin Incident', refers to the skirmish that took place on 2 August 1964, in the Gulf of Tonkin, between the U.S. destroyer Maddox, four U.S. jet fighters, and three North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The three North Vietnamese boats and one of the U.S. jets were damaged, and four Vietnamese were killed. A second skirmish was reported to have taken place on 4 August. This was later proved to be wrong. For further information on this topic see: Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and its Consequences*, (New York: Penguin, 2005), and, Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Johnson hated this term but some commentators used it to describe a policy that laid somewhere between a 'dove' and a 'hawk' approach. See Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, 403.

<sup>42</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, 196.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Valenti, *A Very Human President*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), as excerpted and reprinted in Schulman, 223.

<sup>44</sup> Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, 403.

policies.<sup>45</sup> Like Presidents Truman, Kennedy, and Eisenhower, Johnson initially tried to prevent a communist takeover of Vietnam without a major commitment of U.S. troops. But by the spring of 1965, the military and political situation had so deteriorated that General Westmoreland ‘warned LBJ that South Vietnam would fall without immediate and massive escalation of American military power’.<sup>46</sup> For Logevall ‘The long 1964’, roughly the eighteen months from late August 1963 to late February 1965, marked the most important period in the entire thirty-year American involvement in Vietnam. During this period, Johnson decided to ‘Americanize’ the war, to virtually take over the fighting from the South Vietnamese. Johnson used ‘credibility’ to justify the policy and argued that U.S. prestige in Southeast Asia was at stake because for ten years U.S. administrations had been expanding their involvement in South Vietnam associating such expansion with American security.<sup>47</sup>

The ‘Americanization’ policy has been a point of contention among historians and this stems from the different emphasis placed on factors such as structure and personality. Logevall attached more explanatory power to the short-term and personal factors than to long-term and impersonal ones. He saw attempts to apply structural explanations, such as those by Michael Hunt, to Johnson’s escalations as problematic ‘because they don’t really explain all that much’,<sup>48</sup> and could also be equally applied to opponents.<sup>49</sup> According to Logevall, the cumulative weight of fifteen-plus years and sheer momentum (or inertia) caused the ‘phenomenon of escalation’, in which an initial set of decisions starts a chain of processes, each more difficult to control than the predecessor, each widening the area of action.<sup>50</sup> The renowned historian George C. Herring, writing earlier than Logevall, identified a ‘tit for tat’ response by Johnson to North Vietnamese aggression.<sup>51</sup> For example, Operation Rolling Thunder was a response to Vietcong raids on the U.S. airbase at Pleiku. This ‘tit for tat’ argument complements the short-term and personal explanatory factors of Logevall.

Interpretations and perspectives have continually been adapted and modified in the structure versus personality, and the ‘dove’ versus ‘hawk’ debates. Application of the Cold War paradigm to what was an internal conflict in Vietnam has been criticised for overlooking the nationalism of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese communists as well as for failing to understand the internal politics of Vietnam.<sup>52</sup> Viewpoints critical of the official rationale for the war have become the orthodox interpretation of which there are many different shades. For example there is the ‘quagmire’ theory, in which the U.S. gradually became trapped into military commitment.<sup>53</sup> The leaking, by Daniel

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45 Ibid., 407-8 and 412.

46 Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 220.

47 Logevall, *Choosing War*, xiii.

48 Ibid., 384-5.

49 Michael Hunt, ‘Commentary: The Tree Realms Revisited’, in *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, ed. Michael J. Hogan, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Michael Hunt epitomised the structuralist analysis when he argued that at the nation’s founding, a shaping ideology was spawned, which contained three principle components: a vision of national greatness; a belief in a racial hierarchy, in which native Americans, Blacks, and Asians ranked below Whites; and fear of revolution. Most scholars accept that some element of this ideological triad shaped policy in Vietnam.

50 Logevall, *Choosing War*, 384.

51 George C Herring, ‘The War in Vietnam’, *The Johnson Years Volume One*, 27-8.

52 George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, (New York: Delta, 1969). Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political Analysis*, (New York, Praeger, 1967).

53 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

Ellsberg, of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 spawned a new raft of scholarship. Ellsberg and Leslie Gelb developed the so-called 'stalemate argument'.<sup>54</sup> Radical historians like Gabriel Kolko progressed the 'stalemate argument', and contended that it was not the lack of political courage but rather an American drive for hegemony and world order, that saw all revolutionary movements as enemies that had to be defeated.<sup>55</sup> By the late 1970s and early 1980s criticism of the administration's thinking about Vietnam developed into 'flawed containment' theory or the liberal-realists' perspective. It was argued that containment, as conceived to counter Soviet power in Europe after WWII, had only limited value in application to Southeast Asia because the post-colonial nations of Indochina were not connected to the U.S. either economically or historically, unlike Western Europe.<sup>56</sup> The liberal element of the argument came from the recognition that the nationalist aspirations were not unlike historic American values.<sup>57</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a conservative revisionist school emerged to challenge the liberal-realists. They largely accepted the official reasoning that intervention was necessary to contain communism and defend American internationalism.<sup>58</sup> For revisionists the dissolution of the Soviet Union confirmed the validity of the strategy. For them,

the sound and ultimately successful Cold War grand strategy, required Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to escalate U.S. involvement, rather than withdraw without a major effort. Once Vietnam is viewed in the context of the Cold War, it looks less like a tragic error than a battle that could hardly be avoided.<sup>59</sup>

At the beginning of 1968 Johnson genuinely believed that a settlement in Vietnam was within reach.<sup>60</sup> As the Vietnam War dragged on, it became 'an acid eroding Johnson's political base, until it destroyed his Presidency', wrote Allen Matusow in 1984.<sup>61</sup> Bruce Altschuler, in his book on the polls, concurred. He stated: 'During the steady escalation of the war from late 1965 until March 1968, Johnson's job ratings, both overall and on Vietnam, were in decline'.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, in Johnson's response to declining popularity, a policy of 'minimum candor' exacerbated the situation

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David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, (New York: Random House, 1964).

54 Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*. Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972). The crux of the stalemate argument is that it was understood early that there was no good solution to civil war in Vietnam but the U.S. persisted in war, rather than admit its mistake and risk the loss of political power.

55 Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

56 Anderson, *No More Vietnams*, 18-9.

57 George C. Herring was one of the first to synthesize the 'flawed-containment' thesis in his groundbreaking book, *America's Longest War*. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (New York: Wiley, 1979). David Anderson and John Ernst as former Ph.D. students of Professor Herring, dedicated their book, *The War That Never Ends*, to him and wrote that Professor Herring's book 'currently in its fourth edition has served as the basic textbook on the war for thousands of students since it first appeared'. As a result of its 'clarity and force of [its] logical, well-documented analysis', it 'gained the respect of students and scholars from across a broad spectrum of ideological and cultural backgrounds'.

58 They concentrated their research not on the origins of containment, but on how the U.S. fought the war and how it could have been successful. Civilian and military leaders came in for criticism for unrealistic planning and underestimating the capability of the enemy. Three prominent exponents, former army officers, of the conservative revisionist school are: Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975*, (Novato: Presidio Press, 1988). Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Role in Vietnam*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1985). Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, (Novato: Presidio Press, 1982). Former CIA director, William Colby provides an 'insider' perspective in *Lost Victory*, (New York: Contemporary Books, 1989).

59 Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict*, (New York: Free Press, 1999), 256.

60 Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, 502.

61 Allen Matusow, *The Unravelling of America: A History of American Liberalism in the 1960s*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 376.

62 Bruce Altschuler, *LBJ and the Polls*, (Gainesville: University Press, 1990), 45.

and resulted in a 'credibility gap' that caused the press, and much of the public, to further doubt official government pronouncements.<sup>63</sup>

On the last day of January 1968, North Vietnam launched its Tet Offensive on over one hundred South Vietnamese towns and cities, to the initial surprise of both the Americans and South Vietnamese.<sup>64</sup> Most scholars interpreted this as the turning point in the war and in the 1968 Presidential election. It fomented popular discontent and irretrievably compromised Johnson's credibility. Westmoreland's military plans were discredited because with 1100 Americans and over 2000 South Vietnamese killed in the first two weeks of the Offensive, it was clear that 'Vietnamization' of the war had rested on sand. Furthermore, after two years of heavy bombing, and with 500 000 U.S. troops on the ground and 800 000 South Vietnamese soldiers, the U.S. could not prevent the Viet Minh from carrying on the war.<sup>65</sup> Schulman saw evidence of this discontent in the Democratic presidential primary on 12 March 1968. Johnson won with 49 percent of the vote, but his little known opponent, Eugene McCarthy polled a healthy 42 percent, a close call and widely interpreted as a defeat for the Johnson Administration. This finally prompted Robert Kennedy to announce his own candidacy for the presidency.<sup>66</sup> Randall Wood noted:

All across the nation, The Tet Offensive caused Americans to verbalize doubts that had been lurking in their subconscious: Was there a viable nation south of the seventeenth parallel? How could the U.S. military command be caught so off-guard?<sup>67</sup>

Wood posited that the effect on Americans was to generate feelings of confusion, frustration and impatience and he quoted a telling comment from one housewife: 'I want to get out but I don't want to give in'.<sup>68</sup> This ambivalence was reflected in the nation at large. Opinion surveys undertaken in the first week of February – immediately after Tet – showed an equal divide, a 41 per cent disapproval and 41 per cent approval of the war: proof that 'Antiwar protest on college campuses were by no means representative of American opinion as a whole'.<sup>69</sup> Tet is widely believed to mark the 'turning' of television news. Elements of the press had been critical of Johnson's war in Vietnam but television presentations had been favourable or neutral, and open to influence from Johnson himself. On 17 February, 1968, Walter Cronkite, considered by many to be the most trusted person in the country, marked this turn when he said on CBS, 'We are mired in stalemate'.<sup>70</sup>

History has measured the short to medium-term costs of the war in human and economic terms, but has also identified the long-term psychological cost to national confidence and pride.<sup>71</sup> This psychological cost is manifested in the realisation that the United States was not an invincible post-war power with unlimited influence. For Americans this was a war that did not go away:

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63 Ibid., 45.

64 See the reference in Fn73 for a recent analysis of the Tet Offensive.

65 Ibid., 20-27.

66 Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, Clark Clifford had replaced Dean Rusk as secretary of Defence in March.

67 Randall Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, (New York: Free Press, 2006), 825.

68 Ibid.

69 Walter LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 28.

70 Ibid., 30.

71 McNamara claimed in the documentary film, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert McNamara*, that by the end of the war one half of every tax dollar or 10 percent of the national budget was being spent on the war, and 3,400,000 Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans had been killed.

The Vietnam War continues to haunt us ... resurfacing predictably on anniversaries of the end of the war or when a contemporary foreign policy issue seems to echo the experiences of the 1960s.<sup>72</sup>

Hess's recent book, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, confirmed this perspective.<sup>73</sup> A cursory glance at the chapter headings reveals that, after all these years, the debate is still alive and kicking, and the soul searching not diminished.<sup>74</sup> Scholars do agree on basic facts: Johnson was aware of the Cold War rationale that shaped American foreign policy in the post-war years, and he did dramatically escalate American involvement. They, however, agree on little else. Contention regarding Johnson's personal management of the war and his 'choice' to escalate seems therefore likely to persist among historians.

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72 Marilyn B. Young, and Robert Buzzanco (eds), *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), xi.

73 Hess, *Vietnam*.

74 The seven chapter headings in this book are very informative because they reveal current points of contention: Chapter 1. From the Streets to the Books: The Origins of an Enduring Debate; Chapter 2. A Necessary War or a Mistaken War?; Chapter 3. 'Kennedy Exceptionalism' or 'Missed Opportunity for Peace' or 'Lost Victory?' – The Movement toward War, 1961-1965; Chapter 4. The Revisionist Critique of the 'Strategy for Defeat'- The Clausewitzian Alternative; Chapter 5. The Revisionist Critique of the 'Other War'- The 'Hearts-and-Minds' Prescription for Victory; Chapter 6. The Media and the War Shaping and Reflecting Public Opinion?; and Chapter 7. The Tet Offensive; A decisive American Victory or a Prolongation of Stalemate?

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