

Remember this Chapter - Commitments Deepen

even though they employed more respectable language. Early in 1964 they handed Johnson a series of suggestions that then seemed drastic, but he would gradually adopt many of them.

The joint chiefs prefaced their plan with an inflated version of the "domino theory." South Vietnam was "pivotal" to America's "world-wide confrontation" with Communism, and a defeat there would deal a blow to U.S. "durability, resolution, and trustworthiness" throughout Asia as well as erode "our image" in Africa and Latin America. Given its importance, the conflict could not be confined to South Vietnam, where "we are fighting . . . on the enemy's terms" and under "self-imposed restrictions." The United States should undertake "increasingly bolder measures, among them, joint actions with the South Vietnamese to stage air strikes and commando raids against North Vietnam, and flights over Cambodia and Laos to gather intelligence. American combat forces might also be necessary. But above all, a U.S. commander must assume "the actual direction of the war." In short, they were ready to "Americanize" the struggle.

Johnson subscribed to the adage that "wars are too serious to be entrusted to generals." He knew, as he once put it, that armed forces "need battles and bombs and bullets in order to be heroic," and that they would drag him into a military conflict if they could. But he also knew that Pentagon lobbyists, among the best in the business, could persuade conservatives in Congress to sabotage his social legislation unless he satisfied their demands. As he girded himself for the 1964 presidential campaign, he was especially sensitive to the jingoists who might brand him "soft on Communism" were he to back away from the challenge in Vietnam. So, politician that he was, he assuaged the brass and the brass with promises he may have never intended to keep. At a White House reception on Christmas Eve 1963, for example, he told the joint chiefs of staff: "Just let me get elected, and then you can have your war."

At the same time, though, Johnson was loath to alienate old friends like Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, who had coached him during his early days in the Senate, and Mike Mansfield, his successor as Senate majority leader. He genuinely admired them, and he also counted on their support to promote the Great Society. He could not ignore their concerns about the growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In particular, he listened to Mansfield, a former professor of Asian history who, after all, had been instrumental in pushing for the original American commitment to South Vietnam a decade before. Now the course of events troubled Mansfield, who voiced his anguish to Johnson in private

Stanley KARNSON Vietnam: A History
326 Vietnam Viking Press, New York 1983

conversations and memorandums—just as he had cautioned Kennedy a year earlier.

Mansfield agreed with the joint chiefs of staff that the war could not be confined to South Vietnam. But while they favored its extension into North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, he warned Johnson that the conflict might spread to include China, thereby crushing the United States with "massive costs." A "deeper military plunge" neither was in the U.S. "national interest" nor would "settle the question," he argued; it threatened to "enlarge the morass in which we are now already on the verge of indefinite entrapment." As an alternative, Mansfield recommended an "astute diplomatic offensive" based on President Charles de Gaulle's recent appeals for a neutral Vietnam, and he urged Johnson to solicit French help even if this approach offered only a "faint glimmer of hope."

On July 27, 1965, in a last-ditch attempt to change Johnson's mind, Mansfield and Russell were to press him again to "concentrate on finding a way out" of Vietnam—"a place where we ought not to be," and where "the situation is rapidly going out of control." But the next day, Johnson announced his decision to add forty-four American combat battalions to the relatively small U.S. contingents already there. He had not been deaf to Mansfield's pleas, nor had he simply swallowed the Pentagon's plans. He had waffled and agonized during his nineteen months in the White House, but eventually this was his final judgment. As he would later explain: "There are many, many people who can recommend and advise, and a few of them consent. But there is only one who has been chosen by the American people to decide."

Early in December 1963, Ho Chi Minh and his senior comrades in Hanoi assembled to evaluate their past accomplishments and chart their future strategy. Though they shared the conviction that Vietnam must be reunited under their aegis, they were unsure how to proceed. A new group had seized power in Saigon and a new administration had taken over in Washington. As couched in their jargon, they anticipated a "transitional period that entails complex forms and methods of struggle." True, the Vietcong insurgency had made strides within recent months, having benefited from the turmoil that convulsed South Vietnam during Diem's final days and right after his collapse. From Hanoi's viewpoint, however, the prospects of rapid victory were still remote.

Peasants throughout South Vietnam were abandoning the hated stra-