

# The War and a Political Downfall: How Johnson Decided

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Four newsmen trooped into the White House basement sanctum known as "the situation room" slightly more than a year ago at the invitation of Walt W. Rostow, the President's adviser for National Security Affairs.

The date was Jan. 31, 1968. Rostow had asked the reporters in to demonstrate, through captured enemy documents, that the allied cause was winning in South Vietnam and that the enemy had begun to unravel under the impact of superior American firepower.

Spread across several desks in the office was a huge map of Khesanh, then besieged by an encircling North Vietnamese force. The highly classified map was detailed almost down to the last shellhole.

Rostow greeted his visitors and after a few minutes disappeared into his office, leaving the newsmen in the company of a briefing officer. It wasn't long before the journalists, all experienced in the ways of the White House, noticed an unusual pattern of activity about them.

With increasing frequency the door would open in the National Security Council's communications nerve center and a hand would deposit slips of white note paper on the adjoining desk

of a Rostow aide. After receiving the fourth or fifth message, the aide grimly ordered: "Get this right up to Walt."

One of the newsmen couldn't help noticing. "What's up?" he asked.

"Looks like some trouble in Saigon," the aide replied with a thin smile.

What neither Rostow, nor the reporters, nor anyone in Washington realized at the moment was that the joint TET offensive of the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam was beginning to roll against Saigon and other South Vietnamese cities.

What no one in the Situation Room could have dreamed was that the chattering teletypes—linked both to the beleaguered United States Embassy and the American military command in Saigon—presaged that morning the political downfall of Lyndon B. Johnson and a dramatic turn of this Nation's policy toward disengagement from the war in Vietnam.

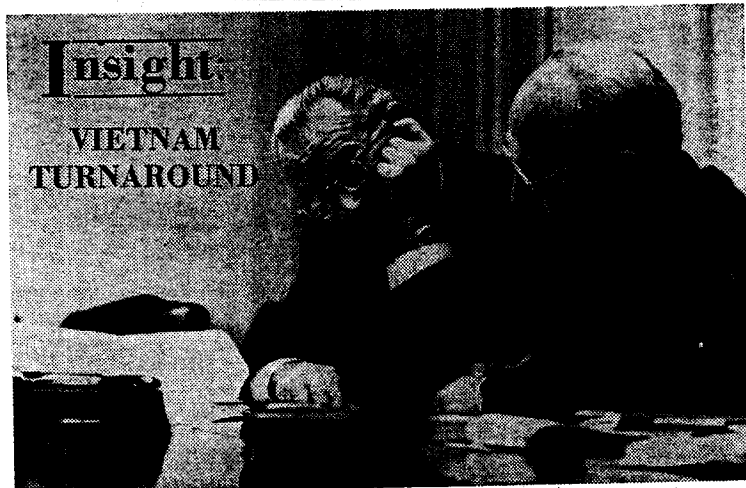
Nevertheless, the newsmen sensed that something was up and as they left the Situation Room, one of Rostow's assistants had to remind them: "Don't you want to take your copies of the captured documents?"

In the weeks ahead the Tet juggernaut would shatter the painstakingly nurtured myth of steady Allied progress both in the war and the work of pacification in South Vietnam. This view of the war had been—and contin-

ued to be—proselytized by a profoundly dedicated group of public servants at the top of the Administration: Rostow, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker, war commander Gen. William Westmoreland and his deputy for pacification, Robert Komer.

This group became a powerful force in the post-Tet Vietnam reappraisal or-

dered by the President for continuing along the course toward the long-sought and long-denied military victory. However, they faced in then newly appointed Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford a shrewd and persistent antagonist—who would eventually prevail in the "internecine imbroglio" that raged within the Administration. That struggle for the President's



The President and adviser Rostow, a point of the "Iron Triangle."

mind was joined at the beginning of March when Clifford assumed the Defense Department job and persisted almost to the very day that Mr. Johnson announced his withdrawal from the Presidency on the last day of that month.

Clifford fought the early engagements, by and large, alone. He drew his support from a small group of top civilian aides within the Pentagon and the State Department.

One of these officials drew this picture of Clifford's role in the March reappraisal: "He came into the Administration with an enormous amount of capital and he decided to spend it all on this issue. He did just that—and was successful."

The principal theater of battle was an ad hoc Vietnam task force to which Clifford, one of the President's oldest and most trusted Washington confidantes, was appointed chairman on the very day he took over the Pentagon.

Among those on the group were the two men who would become Clifford's chief adversaries in the days ahead—Rusk and Rostow. It included Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard M. Helms, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William P. Bundy and other members of the President's top advisory family.

"Originally we were supposed to analyze Westmoreland's request for more troops and see how it would affect the country," said one participant. "But the task force review actually became a re-evaluation of the overall American position in Vietnam. No one—certainly not the President—had any idea it would turn out this way."

In fact, it became the ultimate debating society for deciding the nature of the American commitment to South Vietnam.

Tet eventually shattered many of the White House illusions about Vietnam and stripped advisers like Rostow of their aura of dogged infallibility.

But Mr. Johnson was still uncertain about the situation here at home. He had around him certain political advisers—Democratic Party Chairman John Bailey was one—whose rosy view of his re-election prospects was as much an article of faith as the pre-Tet complacency of the Rostows and Komers on the President's staff. And they, too, had statistics to support their case.

The polls, for example, looked fairly good. Dr. Gallup reported after Tet that the President still enjoyed the approval of nearly half the electorate. Indeed, his standing in the polls of January and February 1968 was higher than at any time since the Glassboro conference with the Soviets in late 1966.

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nates informed of what he was telling the President, this official said, and this had "the effect of suppressing free discussion; he made the Department's case to the President by himself and rarely brought the rest of the civilians collectively into the act."

Clifford, on the other hand, talked frankly to his civilian subordinates of his own reservations about the war and discovered that these reservations were shared rather widely — by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Nitze, by Air Force Under Secretary Townsend Hoopes, by Assistant Secretary for Manpower Alfred Fitt, by Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs Paul Warnke.

#### Bubbled into Open

Under Clifford's prodding the Pentagon, an observer of that period reported, became a place where "the ferment bubbled out in the open". And for the first time, a Defense Secretary discovered "how numerous and more or less like-minded" his subordinates were on the disastrous course of the war.

Nitze took a notably dovish stand and at least one other official, Fitt, drew up his resignation as a protest against past policy. (He changed his mind after the President's speech of March 31).

Reinforced by this small, but loyal contingent, Clifford conducted the meetings of his Presidentially-appointed task force in his private Pentagon dining room — for periods of time on a daily basis. There were torrents of special studies and papers dealing with such questions of which reserve units would have to be called and which contracts expanded to meet the Westmoreland request.

#### Effect, Widespread

What was going on in their minds and affecting the evolution of their thought was not merely Tet nor the cost in lives and money of Vietnam. They were forced to also consider, as one leading figure in those conversations recalled, "the effects on the United States, on other nations of the world, and on our whole economy . . . Obviously, the divisiveness in the United States was growing with such acuteness that it was threatening to tear the United States apart . . .

I felt we were at a terribly critical point and the decision had to be

Moreover, the political intelligence coming to the White House from the provinces of America—and from New Hampshire, in particular—seemed to confirm what the polls were saying.

Eugene McCarthy was impressing no one with his haphazard campaign against the President in New Hampshire. He might get, the experts said, 15 per cent of the vote.

That's the way such non-admirers of the President as Sen. Robert F. Kennedy saw the situation, too. McCarthy, Mr. Kennedy was saying at the time, might well "destroy" the peace movement in America by his pitiful showing in New Hampshire. To Mr. Kennedy, the President looked invincible.

So confident were the President's political managers in New Hampshire, that they took advertising time on New England radio stations to make an issue of Vietnam: "The Communists in Vietnam," the ads said of the McCarthy-Johnson confrontation, "are watching the New Hampshire primary . . . to see if we here at home have the same determination as our soldiers . . . Don't vote for fuzzy thinking and surrender."

By that time it was early March and supporting the boys in Vietnam seemed to be good politics. The most passionate Republican critic of the war, George Romney of Michigan, had by this time dropped out of the race for the Presidency, a fact suggesting that mere criticism of the war was not enough to win in 1968.

#### Saw It Otherwise

That was the conventional wisdom, at any rate. But there were people who didn't see it that way. One was James S. Rowe, the old political warhorse, the old Washington lawyer, who had become one of Lyndon Johnson's principal political operatives. He kept telling people that McCarthy was going to do well in New Hampshire, that he might get 40 per cent of the vote.

Another who rejected the common wisdom was a young Pentagon alumnus, Leslie Aspin, who had been sent out to Wisconsin late in February to prepare the way for the President in the April 2 presidential primary.

Aspin had been one of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's "Whiz Kids" in the Pentagon. He had been assigned to the team evaluating the effects of American bombing in North Vietnam, had concluded that the effects—at best—were nil, and had decided that the war was unwinnable. But he was, nevertheless, working for Mr. Johnson in Wisconsin for a variety of reasons.

McCarthy, Aspin said the weekend before the New Hampshire primary, "is going to win some delegates here . . . We are at the mercy of events in Saigon and Washington and we have no control over them. If Hue or Khes-anh should fall, the lights could go out for us. But if the Pueblo crew should be released or there should be some other favorable development, the ef-

fect might be positive."

Rowe was saying the same thing in memoranda to the President and he would later say that "Tet destroyed us."

#### Bad News Incredible

The point here is that just as there was a "bad news" network in Vietnam before Tet (a network that was blocked off from the President), so was there a "bad news" network in the United States which was likewise blocked off from the President—and from other politicians, too, such as Robert Kennedy. The "bad news" was not "credible" and was therefore not believed.

Thus, the results of the March 12 primary in New Hampshire (McCarthy got 40% of the vote) caused in the White House the same shock and consternation that had been caused by the Tet offensive more than a month before.

For the first time, it came home personally to the President that his program of domestic pacification—meaning popular support—was in no better shape than his program of pacification 12,000 miles away in the paddies and hill country of Vietnam.

This was quickly confirmed by Dr. Gallup. Between Tet and the primary in New Hampshire, Mr. Johnson's standing with the American public dropped from the 50 per cent level to well under 40 per cent. More importantly, the polls showed for the first time since Lyndon Johnson had assumed the Presidency, that the people who approved his performance were far outnumbered by the people who disapproved. A majority, in fact, was against him.

This pseudo-scientific finding coincided with the intuitive feelings of people like Rowe and Aspin who sensed, weeks before the pollsters, that the American people had soured on Vietnam and that the huge "neutral" or "undecided" bloc in the country had swung sharply to the "dove" side after Tet and after American military commanders told the Pentagon they wanted another 206,000 troops for the war.

#### Kennedy Convinced

Of more immediate political significance to the President was the fact that Robert Kennedy had finally come around to the Rowe-Aspin-McCarthy point of view: the Vietnam war was a heavy, heavy 'albatross' around the President's neck.

On March 16—four days after the New Hampshire primary—Mr. Kennedy announced his candidacy for the Presidency.

By this time it was evident in Wisconsin—if not all over the country—that the tide running against the President and against his policies in Vietnam was irresistible. McCarthy's people in Madison and Milwaukee—a ragtag bunch of amateurs—were so cocky that they offered Mr. Kennedy a job licking envelopes—but nothing else.

Campaign money was pouring in; there were so many McCarthy volun-

teers no one knew how to handle them or find productive work for them to do.

The McCarthyites were, in a word, euphoric. So was Mr. Kennedy after only 48 hours as a candidate.

He was greeted on his maiden campaign foray by the largest political crowds in the history of Kansas. — 15,000 at Kansas State University at

Manhattan, 17,000 at the University of Kansas at Lawrence. They tore at his clothing, mobbed his motorcades, cheered themselves hoarse and responded, above all, to his acid denunciation of the war in Vietnam and his biting denunciations of the President. "Give it to him, Bobby," they screamed. And he did.

The President, at this time, gave no outward sign that he was shaken by either Tet or by the political developments that seemed to be overwhelming him here at home. In both public and private, he continued to justify his policies abroad and to minimize his difficulties at home. But in a revealing, off-the-record statement March 18 to a gathering of newsmen he made what appears in retrospect to be the first hint that he may have realized that his political career was at an end.

#### Would Meet Issues

He would deal with whatever issues arose in the coming campaign, he said on that occasion, but "I have other things to deal with, too — two daughters with husbands away, a wife who wants to plant trees. There are primaries and elections . . . but you have to deal with first things first. I think you all would feel better about your President giving his attention to things that are most important. In my judgment, primaries and the convention and the election are not as important every morning as a decision that might bring a wider war. We are not going to have a wider war."

A few hours after that soliloquy — on the night of March 18 a dozen prominent members of the American Foreign Policy Establishment sat down (at the President's urgent request) for a dinner at the White House:

George W. Ball, former Under Secretary of State.

Arthur Dean, a Republican lawyer from New York who had been a Korean war negotiator for President Eisenhower.

Dean Acheson, Secretary of State in the Truman Administration, author of the Cold War "containment strategy" in Europe.

Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, retired commander of U.N. troops in Korea.

Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

and a Vietnam adviser to President Kennedy.

Cyrus R. Vance, former Deputy Defense Secretary and a troubleshooter par excellence for President Johnson.

McGeorge Bundy, Rostow's predecessor as special assistant for national security affairs to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Douglas Dillon, President Kennedy's Treasury Secretary.

#### All Main Advisers

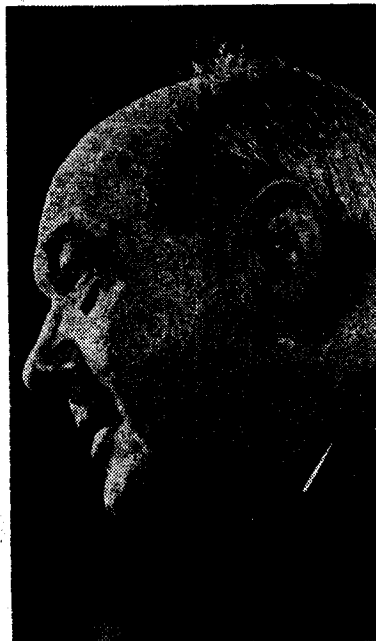
General Omar Bradley, the old Army commander from World War II.

Robert Murphy, a roving diplomat in the Roosevelt and Truman eras.

Henry Cabot Lodge, the former Ambassador to Saigon.

Abe Fortas, the Supreme Court Justice who was always at Mr. Johnson's side in times of trouble.

All of the President's main advisers were there, too—Defense Secretary



Dean Rusk

Clifford, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Rostow, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Richard Helms, head of the CIA, plus a bevy of Under Secretaries and lesser lights.

During dinner, the dozen outsiders—Ball, Vance, Acheson, et al—closely questioned the insiders (Clifford, Rusk, Rostow, et al) about the situation in Vietnam, and its effect on the domestic situation in the United States.

The “insiders” were later dismissed and as the night wore on, the “outsiders” called in another group of Government officials, younger, less important men whose judgments were highly valued. They included Philip Habib, a Vietnam expert from State; George Carver, a CIA analyst; and Gen. William DePuy, the counter-insurgency specialist who worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

#### Candid Assessment

These three junior officials gave, by all accounts, an unusually “candid” assessment of the situation in Vietnam, an assessment marked by Habib’s deep pessimism. The “outsiders” were impressed by their reports, Habib’s in particular. Carver and DePuy, while “candid,” remained extremely “hawkish,” according to reliable reports.

Late that night—on the 18th—the meeting of the “outsiders” adjourned. They convened at the White House the following morning to talk among themselves.

It was quickly apparent that new attitudes had emerged since their last gathering four months before. Bundy, Acheson and Vance had joined Ball and were now distinctly “dovish.” Bradley, Lodge and Dillon had shifted from hawkishness, one participant said, to a significant state of “ambiguity.” Murphy and Fortas stuck to the hard line.

A few hours later—at lunch—the views of the outsiders were made known to the President. Someone suggested to Mr. Johnson that he had better take into account in his subsequent decisions the impact of Vietnam on the coming elections. To which the President is said to have replied: “That’s the least thing that would affect me.”

#### A Crucial Element

The divided counsels he got at this March 19 luncheon are regarded now as a crucial element in his change of policy on Vietnam. But other pressures were boring in on him, too.

There was, to begin with, Gen. William C. Westmoreland’s startling request of March 9 for 206,000 additional troops. It was startling because in the immediate aftermath of Tet Westmoreland had assured the President and the Pentagon that the Communist offensive would be crushed in two or three days. It wasn’t. Instead, the fighting spiraled. Dozens of district and provincial capitals came under assault. The enemy dug in at Hue and other sym-

bolic cities for a long and difficult fight.

As the casualties mounted, as the fighting escalated “Westy panicked,” according to one White House adviser. By this account, “he just lost his nerve” and submitted to the President a “panicky” request for more troops.

#### Clifford Shocked

One of the persons most shocked by this request was the new Defense Secretary, Clark Clifford. He had no firm over at the Pentagon on March 1 but he was well aware of the record of the American military commanders in the field.

It was a record, as he was later to recall, of repeated promises to “get the job done” if only a few more troops, a few more planes, a few more billions were made available.

Those promises were fresh in his mind when the Tet offensive erupted; they were fresh in his mind when Westmoreland’s request for a huge new commitment of troops reached his desk.

And at that point he decided to do some serious rethinking about his own attitude toward the war and about the ultimate outcome of it all.

For days on end in early March he conducted almost continuous reviews of the situation and when that process had ended, came to several crucial conclusions:

- That the war could not be won militarily under the existing ground rules which prohibited an invasion of North Vietnam.
- That those ground rules would not

and should not be changed because of the danger of a wider war with China or Russia.

- That invasions of Cambodia or Laos to destroy the enemy’s “sanctu-

aries” would also widen the war unacceptably.

- That the only rational course for the United States was to attempt to disengage itself from Vietnam through

some military accommodation with the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front. And that it should disengage in a manner acceptable to South Vietnam.

Having reached these conclusions—all of which challenged the very premises of past American policy in Vietnam (especially the premises of Rusk, Rostow and the Joint Chiefs)—Clifford began what was later called a “struggle for the mind of the President, with no quarter asked and no quarter given.”

This struggle persisted through the month of March, a period that brought the results from New Hampshire, that brought Robert Kennedy into the presidential race, and that brought the 12 “wise men” — the outsiders — to the White House on March 18 and March 19.

No one has yet revealed who, among the President's advisers, was most strenuous in opposing Clifford in this struggle. Abe Fortas, of course, was as hawkish as ever. So were Rostow and Rusk, according to the available evidence.

#### Cards to Play

But Clifford had some cards to play, too. For one thing, the 12 “wise men” called in by the President on March 18 had bolstered Clifford's case by their divided counsels to Mr. Johnson. Acheson and Bundy in particular, impressed upon the President their change of heart on the war.

Beyond that, Clifford was finding support within the Pentagon.

This support had been there, it turned out, for many months before Clifford succeeded the exhausted Robert S. McNamara. But it had not surfaced before because McNamara, according to one high civilian official at Defense, “had run things out of his pocket . . . rather like Rusk.”

McNamara “rarely” kept his subordi-

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Clifford and Johnson: the battle for the President's mind.

made. Hell, you had a recommendation for 200,000 more men to go in. The basic conclusion was for changing the course of the war. Should there be more troops, and what should be done about the course of the bombing — you got shadings of views on that.”

Nevertheless, after some two weeks of meetings and debate the majority on the task force endorsed Westmoreland's request for more troops. Clifford was vastly outnumbered by the men who had sponsored and managed the U.S. escalation in Vietnam.

On the other hand, a contrary recommendation — for scaling down the bombing and moving toward disengagement was made to the President on March 19 by the group of 12 “wise old men” who had convened in the White House for an overall war appraisal.

Clifford, too, had pressed for a modified halt in bombing as the first “crawl” toward peace. In fact, the President later on referred to the partial halt as “the Clifford Plan” — at times with accents of irony when there seemed to be no response on the battlefield.

Averell Harriman, the crusty old diplomat who later became chief American negotiator in Paris, had reservation about the timing of any bombing halt.

But Harriman's sense of frustration and disillusionment came out some time later when he is reported to have declared, “Vietnam is not worth the life of one American boy.”

As March ran its course, the struggle for the President's mind became ever more intense. His own mood of doubt and frustration was suggested in remarks he made privately during this period, remarks that came after the New Hampshire vote, after Mr. Kennedy's entry into the race, and after the

sharp decline in his standing in the polls:

“There are a lot of people in this country working full time around the clock to lose the war for us in this country. There are a good many people who are powerful and influential who would like to see us pull out and quit. I believe they had this feeling all through but it is coming through now and they are becoming more vociferous. . . . They (the North Vietnamese) have more hope of winning the war in Washington than they do in Vietnam.”

It was not only the McCarthys and Kennedys and bearded peaceniks who were urging on him a new course, however. There were the Cliffords and there were his loyal political followers.

“My politicians in Wisconsin and everywhere else seemed to be moving toward the doves,” one of the President's leading political strategists later recalled. “. . . We began thinking in terms of what should be done in Wisconsin; we thought something dramatic in terms of Vietnam should be done to affect the primary. We were

saying that from the point of politics and quite apart from the good of the country, something ought to be done. . . . When they (the generals) asked for 206,000 more troops, that scared hell out of the politicians."

The political currents of that period were not lost on the Pentagon or the State Department, either. One official of State remarked: "One of things rebounding on the debate very much during the critical weeks of March was the New Hampshire primary and Bob Kennedy's entry into the Presidential race."

#### None Had an Inkling

Thus, the tide against further escalation of the war, the tide pushing the President toward a gesture of conciliation and a search for peace, seemed to be running strong and swift. But no one—least of all Clifford—had any inkling of what the President might ultimately decide.

Indeed, Clifford and his allies within the Administration became convinced at one point late in the game that their cause was lost. The President's oratory was the source of that feeling. In mid-March in speeches before the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion he made the most impassioned defenses of his war policy he had ever uttered. He was visibly impressed by the response to those speeches, even though there was martial bias in his audiences.

Later, the Clifford group came to see these speeches as a counterattack on their position inspired by Rostow and Rusk.

Privately, however, Mr. Johnson remained impassive, tugged on the one side by the Cliffords in his Administration and, on the other, by Rostow, Rusk and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon who remained rigid in his belief that the United States should simply do more of the same.

The Rostow-Rusk-Bunker alliance was described by one official during this period as America's own "Iron Triangle" as unyielding to opposition as the Iron Triangle defense of the Marines at the DMZ.

Finally, as the end of March neared, a decision was made by the President to address the American people on his future course of action. What he would say, however, remained a mystery.

Innumerable speech drafts were pre-

pared, and the President began reading the papers carefully for insights into what should be done. He was particularly impressed by an article handed to him by Acheson. It had appeared on the editorial page of the Winston-Salem (N.C.) Journal and had been written by Wallace Carroll, who had formerly worked in Washington for The New York Times.

#### Shift of Views

Carroll made an eloquent argument that the United States was being spread too thin, that had become powerless to affect events elsewhere in the world. Carroll's views, Acheson told the President, were his own views. This shift from hawk to dove by the former Secretary of State reportedly had a major impact on Mr. Johnson's thinking.

On March 30 and March 31 there was a stream of visitors to the White House, including former Defense Secretary McNamara and former White House Assistant Horace Busby, both of whom had a hand in the final drafts of the President's speech.

Late on that last day of March, the "inner circle" around the President had dwindled to Clifford, McNamara and Rusk. None of them knew for certain then that the speech the President would make that night would not only reverse American policy in Vietnam, but would mark the end of Mr. Johnson's political career. On that latter point, he confided during the day only with Busby and Mrs. Johnson.

A little while before he was to submit himself to the television cameras and to the judgment of his countrymen, the President turned to one of his favorites on the staff—Harry McPherson—and asked him softly:

"Harry, do you know what I'm going to do tonight?"

McPherson paused for a moment to think and suddenly it all dawned on him.

"Yes, Mr. President," McPherson replied, "I think I do."

And that is what Lyndon B. Johnson did on the night of March 31, 1968.

Several members of the staff of The Washington Post assisted in the preparation of this insight report. They included Murrey Marder, Philip Geyelin, Chalmers M. Roberts, George C. Wilson, Warren Unna and Meg Greenfield.





Culmination of the battle: President Johnson's announcement of the bombing halt to Rostow, Clifford and Gen. Wheeler.

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