

# Johnson Denies Fight on Viet Stand

By Murrey Marder  
Washington Post Staff Writer

2/7/70

By former President Johnson's account, what others have called an extraordinary "struggle for the mind of the President" in March, 1968, never happened.

There is massive conflict between the memory and records of Mr. Johnson and the recollections of others—with one major exception. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk publicly stated last year that it was his recommendation to reduce the bombing of North Vietnam. Rusk did not deny there was a profound policy debate; what he denied was that he was a loser in it.

Mr. Johnson's own version of his critical decision announced on March 31, 1968, to de-escalate the war and put a ceiling on U.S. troop levels, itself contains internal evidence of the struggle that involved the top layer of his administration and the nation's elder statesmen.

The bruises show through the transcript of a CBS interview with the former President. Mr. Johnson's hero is Rusk; his villain is former Defense Secretary

Clark M. Clifford, whose account of the events is labeled by the former Chief Executive as "totally inaccurate."

If there was no struggle, if Mr. Johnson made up his mind in early March, on Secretary Rusk's recommendation, to de-escalate the war, and simply did at the end of March what he intended to do all along, then many of the nation's leading officials were the victims of a monumental charade.

Rusk has talked only briefly in public about the internal debate of 1968 which changed the course of the war.

Rusk said in an NBC television interview last March that published accounts of his position in the 1968 debate that portrayed him as Clifford's inflexibly hawkish antagonist were "grossly distorted."

Choosing an extreme metaphor, Rusk said, "I can't recall any occasion on which Secretary Clifford and I wrestled on the rug in front of the President. . ."

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# LBJ Denies 1968 Struggle To Sway Him on Viet Policy

ASSESS, From A1

"In the first place," said Rusk, "I myself recommended on March 3, and on March 5, that we prepare for a bombing halt in Vietnam. At no time was I ever in favor of an additional 200,000 troops in Vietnam."

Neither Rusk nor President Johnson mentioned that in the spring of 1967, Robert S. McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, had proposed an identical bombing halt down to the 20th Parallel. The idea was blocked inside the administration.

As the questioning of Mr. Johnson in the CBS interview showed, even after Rusk's recommendation of early March, Rusk on March 11 testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that all "contacts" showed that Hanoi "would not accept a partial cessation of the bombing as a step toward peace. . ."

Mr. Johnson said Clifford was aware of Rusk's early March recommendation. Clifford has written (Foreign Affairs quarterly, July, 1969) that when he took office March 1, 1968 there were no administration plans for anything but continued escalation of the war.

## Clifford Disputed

There is total public disagreement now between the former President and Clifford about what the President ordered in the wake of the Communists' Tet offensive. They agree only that the military made a long-range request for about 206,000 more U.S. troops.

Clifford said he was directed to head a task force "to determine how this new requirement could be met."

Mr. Johnson emphatically disagrees. He read, in the interview, a Feb. 28, directive to the Secretaries of State and Defense, ordering "recommendations" and "alternatives," not "implementations."

It is unclear if that directive was the same one that created the task force. But it appears incredible that a task force chief who was one of the President's closest advisers, heading a group that included Rusk and the nation's senior security officials, misconstrued the premise of the President's orders.

Mr. Johnson said this task force only produced recommendations for an "immediate" increase of just 22,000 troops, and three more tactical fighter squadrons, plus a reserve call-up which the President disapproved.

But according to Townsend Hoopes, then Under Secretary of the Air Force, who has written a detailed public account of the March, 1968, events ("The Limits of Intervention"), the recommendations of the task force, with which he worked, went far beyond that.

Through reserve call-ups, larger draft calls, and lengthened duty tours in South Vietnam, Hoopes wrote, enough manpower would have been supplied eventually to provide "the remaining 186,000 men requested by Westmoreland" and build up the U.S. world strategic reserve.

## Bombing Step-up

In addition, said Hoopes, presidential security adviser Walt W. Rostow, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Gen. Maxwell Taylor advocated going beyond what other task force members would accept: intensifying the bombing of North Vietnam.

Their recommendations, said Hoopes, were "to expand the targets around Hanoi and Haiphong and to mine Haiphong harbor."

The task force report was said to have been transmitted to the White House on March 7—after Mr. Johnson said he instructed Rusk to "get on your horses" and prepare a plan to do exactly the opposite, to start halting the bombing of North Vietnam.

Mr. Johnson virtually portrays Clifford as a hawk on the bombing halt issue, as compared to Rusk. According to the former President, it was United Nations Ambassador Arthur Goldberg who made "the most important and perhaps most constructive" suggestion—a total bombing halt.

## LBJ Explosion

But according to Hoopes and others, on March 16, the day after the Goldberg memorandum was received, it produced a Johnsonian explosion at the White House. Mr. Johnson reportedly told his inner advisers: "Let's get one thing clear. I am not going to stop the bombing. I have heard every argument on the subject, and I am not interested in further discussion. I have made up my mind. I'm not going to stop it."

Clifford has said he emerged from the task force review utterly dismayed, "convinced that the military course we were pursuing was not only endless, but hopeless." Instead of going along with the prevailing forces, Clifford, according to his account, joined forces with equally dismayed dissenters in the Defense and State Departments and set out to change basic U.S. policy.

That, according to participants, is when the real struggle began "for the President's mind." It spread outside the administration to the nation's "wise men" on foreign policy, secretly summoned on March 25 and 26 to join the battle.

They included former Secretary of State Dean Acheson; former Under Secretary of State George W.

Ball; former White House security adviser McGeorge Bundy; private presidential adviser Abe Fortas (who was in the struggle all along); former Deputy Defense Secretary Cyrus R. Vance; Gens. Omar Bradley and Matthew Ridgway.

This group independently questioned ranking U.S. officials, but they also called in working-level experts, including Philip C. Habib, now chief U.S. negotiator at the Paris talks. The majority conclusion by the "wise men," that American war policy required basic change, "shocked" Mr. Johnson, many of them have privately acknowledged.

He demanded to see the same government experts. The former President said in the CBS interview that much of their information was "inaccurate."

He, nevertheless, also contended he could not have been "shocked" by the "wise men's" recommendations because they turned out to be "in perfect harmony" with Rusk's recommendations—which he accepted in early March.

In other words, the former President is saying there was no struggle for his mind, he changed it himself. That may come as surprising news to those who still bear the bruises of the battle.