



CBS NEWS SPECIAL

"LBJ. The Decision to Halt the Bombing
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CRONKITE: Behind the scenes at the White House in the early months of 1968. A decision in the making. The subject: Vietnam.

Cabinet members and military chiefs, experts on the President's personal staff, retired generals and elder statesmen summoned for advice - these were the principals in a drama that journalists and historians have tried to reconstruct ever since. Who played the key roles? What were the compelling factors in Lyndon Johnson's decision to scale down the war - the decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam.

JOHNSON: Secretary Rusk came back and said - while we were evaluating these things, he said, 'Now I think the time's come where we can stop the bombing. Some of them suggested - I think Secretary Clifford suggested, and we and some of the others joined him - that we stop the bombing on the condition that the North Vietnamese do something. And Secretary Rusk said, 'That won't work; it's reciprocity and won't work. We ought to just stop the bombing.' I said, 'Get on your horses and get me a plan!'

ANNOUNCER: CBS NEWS presents the second in a series of special broadcasts in which former President Lyndon Baines Johnson presents his account of great events, issues and decisions. This account was edited from several lengthy conversations with Correspondent Walter Cronkite. They were filmed in the autumn of 1969 at the LBJ Ranch in Texas.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

CRONKITE: The war in Vietnam has bred many controversies, and some of the sharpest have centered on the bombing of North Vietnam, the ally of the Viet Cong guerrillas. From the time the bombing started early in 1965, it was interspersed with pauses, and with offers to suspend the attacks altogether if the enemy stopped infiltrating troops into the South or showed some willingness to negotiate. But the infiltration continued, and there was no negotiation, until the President's dramatic message of March 31, 1968.

JOHNSON: Tonight I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam except in the area north of the Demilitarized Zone where the continuing enemy build-up directly threatens Allied forward positions and where the movements of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat.

CRONKITE: An unconditional halt to the bombing, reinforced by the President's assurance that he sought no political gain from the gesture, that he would not run for office again.

Two startling decisions: the retirement from office - which Lyndon Johnson has said, in a previous broadcast, was in his mind as early as 1964 - and the halt to the bombing of North Vietnam. I asked him when and how did these two decisions first begin to converge.

JOHNSON: I wanted to use the announcement that had to come as a predicate and as a basis for getting all the steam I could toward a possible successful peace move. My advisers told me that in their judgment the build-up was taking place in the late fall of '67, and that a substantial move on the part of the Communists from North Vietnam was in the offing. The troop deployments, the captured documents, the information available to us indicated, while they didn't call it Tet because we really - no one believed that you would have an act of this kind on a holiday after you had an honorable agreement that you would really in effect suspend operations. That was just too much to even believe a Communist would do. So we did not expect it pinpointed at Tet. But General Westmoreland was on the alert, and General Westmoreland did cable me and did inform me from time to time that "we're getting ready for it." He did cancel his leaves of his men and bring them in even at Tet, so he'd be prepared. The South Vietnamese had more difficulty getting theirs back. But when I went to Australia I felt two things: one, that we're going to get an all-out Kamikaze attack, an assault with everything they've got, with their entire stack in for the purpose of trying to roll over us and have another Dienpienphu. Just a question of when and where, but they were right up to it.

Well, obviously no peace effort would get very far during that kind of thing. And I said that to the Australians, and I felt it so strongly that before I left Washington I had an assistant of mine to call the Vatican and to arrange an appointment to see his Holiness for two reasons. One, I wanted him to know that I was willing - that the United States was willing - to stop the bombing, which he'd suggested, and to accept his proposition provided the enemy would stop the infiltration, as had been suggested. We would sign on if the other side would sign on. But second, primarily, I wanted to say that I didn't believe that plan would work, because I didn't believe they'd ever do it because of this build-up, because of these troop deployments, because of these captured documents. Therefore we'd just have to wait until they put their stack in and had to fall back and found that they didn't have the horsepower. And then in the hour of disappointment and their hour of failure, there might be an opportunity.

You know, I don't think the American people - I think I did a very poor job of pointing up to the American people that one time, two times, a dozen times we made substantial overtures to Ho Chi Minh - willing to go anywhere, anytime, talk about anything; just please let's talk instead of fight. And in not one single instance, not one, did we get anything but an arrogant, tough, unyielding rebuff. And yet the next day I would be attacked that I hadn't handled it the right way, that I didn't present it the right way - and not one word about Ho Chi Minh.

And I read the papers now, and I see the people that are critical, and I just wonder how they must feel, how their children are going to feel, when they see that their fathers are up there and here we are engaged in a war where 38,000 of our men have given their lives.

And they're up there on the sidelines kicking and crying and mouthing; and if they are experts in that field, why is it they never find anything that the Communists have done that's wrong? But that was true, that was true. And we have said from the very beginning that all of us believed that Hitler's aggression almost destroyed the world. And we believe that Communist aggression will destroy it if somebody doesn't stand up to it.

So we all go in, in the Southeast Asia Resolution, which they misnamed - they called it the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. It was a shame somebody didn't think of calling it the Fulbright Resolution, like the Fulbright Scholars thing, because Senator Fulbright introduced it with his knowledge, with his approval, his consent. He passed it. He voted for it, 82 to one. Don't tell me a Rhodes Scholar didn't understand everything in that Resolution, because we said to him at the White House and every other member of that Committee that the President of the United States is not about to commit forces and undertake actions to deter aggression in South Vietnam to prevent this Communist conspiracy, unless and until the American people through their Congress sign on to go in. If the President's going in, as he may be required to do, he wants the Congress to go in right by the side of him. Why? Because that's the course of action I'd recommended for President Eisenhower when I was a Senator, when I was the leader and he wanted the commitment for Formosa. That was the action I recommended in the Middle East Resolution.

So the language of that says that "The President is authorized to take whatever action may be necessary to protect our forces and to prevent aggression." Now it never occurred to me that Senator Fulbright, this Rhodes Scholar, didn't understand what was in that language. I called him to the White House and said, This is the reason I want it. I'm not about to go - I didn't ask for a declaration of war because I didn't know what treaty China might have with North Vietnam or Russia might have with North Vietnam. The Communists have these agreements among themselves, and if we declared war against North Vietnam, that might automatically declare war against China and bring them in, trigger the thing, or the Soviet Union.

But I didn't want any doubt about the American Congress. Anyone served in Congress 25 years, as I had served in Congress, wasn't about to undertake the responsibilities and the dangers I had in South Vietnam without the Congress being with me. And the Congress was with me; before that Resolution went up, every single man in that room recommended it and advocated it. And when the roll was called there were 504 that voted for it. And that's something we insisted on - committee hearings before the Armed Services and Foreign Affairs, where Secretary Rusk answered every question. He didn't hurry that committee hearing. But then they called the roll, and Senator Morse - and I respect him - he stood right out and said, "I think this is equivalent of a declaration of war. This authorizes the President to do whatever is necessary to prevent aggression." Well, he was a teacher too. He was from Oregon, he could read that language and understand it.

But when the going got hard, when the road got longer and dustier, when the casualties started coming in, why there were certain folk started looking for the cellar. And they - a good many of them have. And I don't question their right to do so. I don't even criticize them for taking that position, if that's what their conscience dictates. But I just wish their conscience had been operating when they were making all these other decisions, because the Congress gave us this authority in August, 1964 to do "whatever may be necessary" - that's pretty far-reaching; that's "the sky's the limit" - "to protect your troops and prevent aggression."

Now I never used that authority - our troops didn't go in - until July, 1965, almost a year later. I agonized, I explored every possible way. I tried to get these people to talk reason. I tried to keep them from coming in attacking our camps, and killing their people. I tried to get them not to infiltrate. But they were determined to do one thing, and that's take over this little country. And if they take that one over, they were determined to take over others, in my judgment, just as Hitler was.

We have an alliance - we've got forty of them. And the American people had better stop, look and listen on this. They have supported, they have approved, through their representatives, more than forty alliances which represent the word of honor of the United States. Now we either ought to get out of those alliances, tear them up and say we won't keep our word - or we ought to carry it out.

ANNOUNCER: "The Decision to Halt the Bombing" will continue in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

ANNOUNCER: We continue now with "The Decision to Halt the Bombing."

QUESTION: How do you see it, General?

WESTMORELAND: Very, very encouraged. I've never been more encouraged during my entire almost four years in the country. I think we're making real progress. Everybody is very optimistic that I know of who is intimately associated with our effort there.

CRONKITE: Two months after that progress report by the American commander in Vietnam, the enemy went on the attack. This was the offensive that shattered the truce of Tet, the Asian New Year holiday. The tide surged into forty cities and towns before it receded, leaving 45,000 of the enemy dead in the wreckage of South Vietnamese homes. Observers reported the Tet offensive as a challenge to American confidence about the progress of the war. What estimate of the results did the President get from his military chiefs?

JOHNSON: An accurate one, I think, in the light of developments since. One, that the Communists had suffered a disaster, a debacle,

and a serious military loss. I don't think that ever got communicated to the American people. But they lost as many people at Tet as we have lost in the entire war, just that one - that one misguess.

The second thing was the psychology of the thing. Now if we had had a war atmosphere and everybody is "Johnny get your gun" here and, oh, every little child was running up and down the street trying to sell thrift stamps, and every person in uniform when he walked along, people stand by and say, "There's the man that's saving our life," I think that the situation would have been different here. But it was a psychological victory for them in the United States that they could not win from our men on the battlefield. I have never seen some of our stalwarts in our operation in Washington dealing with the Southeast Asia theater that were as depressed as they were after Tet.

The reaction in South Vietnam was quite different from what it was in this country. The people there rose up in arms and I think for the first time brought about a degree of unity that never existed before, and brought about a degree of determination that never existed before. So the people of South Vietnam pulled up their socks and enlistments increased, and the folks started coming in and saying, "Come on, let's stop the kind of things that have happened to us during Tet and let's all of us rally behind the leadership." In this country our folks did somewhat the opposite. Because immediately the voices just came out of the holes in the wall and said, "Let's get out." And that's what Ho Chi Minh had been trying to do all the time - was to win in Washington, what he had won in Paris. To win in this country, in the homes of this country, what he could not win from the men out there that represented us.

CROMKITE: Don't you feel that perhaps we were set up psychologically for that defeat by the optimistic statements from Vietnam and from Washington?

JOHNSON: I'm certain that that may have contributed to it. I'm sure that our people were optimistic, and we must be to win a war. Gloom and doom and defeat and mouthing and griping, really, is not the kind of spirit you want to send your men off to battle with. And, of course, you're never justified in going beyond the facts. I don't think any official ever intentionally did. I think that the statements you're talking about, that there was some basis, that in the middle of a war like this, all of us have optimism sometimes that's not justified. I must have wondered though what the situation was in Hanoi and how many optimistic statements they must have made to their people that were found to have had a great let-down effect after they tried this thing and completely failed. And I think that any objective evaluator that will look at the results would conclude that it was a great military defeat. And they ought to be optimistic about it, and they ought to be happy about it, and they ought to have said, "Men, we salute you. You're a great outfit. General Westmoreland, you called it."

CROMKITE: Mr. President, even as you were being told, and you were telling us, that this was a victory for our side and defeat of the Communist Tet offensive, General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, came back from a fact-finding trip to Vietnam and asked for 206,000 more troops. Did this request shock you, in the first place?

JOHNSON. Well, I think, Walter, you have to - I think you just got a part of the story there. And it would take some time to go into that because there are a good many misapprehensions about it.

Now there were many other situations that were rather alarming at that time on the world scene. I won't go into all of them now because some of them didn't develop. But it was not just confined to South Vietnam. There were other problems that we had that could have required forces. There was always the problem - and I think this was made public - that other nations who were contributing forces might feel called upon in the interests of their own security to pull some of their people out of Vietnam, to protect their own homeland. There's always the possibility that the Communist world that's aligned against us here would create other incidents that would require a beefing up of our forces elsewhere.

So I called in my leaders, the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and others, and said to them, "One of the first things we ought to do is to find out what we must do to insure that our men are capable of victory and have the necessary support, weapons, etc. Therefore, I think it would be wise for General Wheeler to go out and review all that had happened." General Westmoreland didn't initiate the request; the President initiated the request.

So he and General Westmoreland - General Wheeler and General Westmoreland - and others of their staff evaluated the possibilities of losing some of their troops, evaluated the program that they could see ahead as far as a year, evaluated the possibility that some of the units might have to be recalled from this country and might have to perform service elsewhere. And General Wheeler asked that we study, that we consider a program over a year's time that would, if approved, result in a substantial increase of our presence in Vietnam at that time. And that ran over 200,000 - 205,000, plus, 304, I think, or something.

CROMKITE. Mr. President, your then recently appointed Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, in an article in Foreign Affairs Quarterly in July of 1969, and Teddy White, I think, in his book, and others said that you asked your top advisers, top people as to -

JOHNSON. Now let's distinguish between Teddy White and Clark Clifford, because you may have them in the same league, but I don't. Go ahead.

CRONKITE: Let's take just Clifford. Secretary of Defense Clifford said that when you asked them to implement this request for 206,000 more people, expanded their examination of that into a much more detailed re-appraisal of our whole position in Vietnam.

JOHNSON: Now that's totally inaccurate. Now if you would like to, Walter, if I may have the directions, I'll de-classify them now for a moment and show you just how much in error such an assumption can be, regardless of who makes the error. You know, authors can make errors and former government officials can make errors, and even former Presidents can make errors. But the President's directive to men like Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of Defense and Chief of Intelligence and Mr. Rostow is there, that all of them can see. Now it may be that if you'll indulge me that I can read you a portion of it.

The directive was written on February 28: "Memorandum to Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense," and that included a number of professionals on their staff. "As I indicated at breakfast this morning, I wish you to develop by Monday morning, March 4, recommendations" - not implementations. Now there's a lot of difference in the two words. I want your judgment. I want to see what you recommend. I don't have a recommendation yet. In effect I have a plan. That's important - the plan, not the decision.

So when I said there's - be sure on this - when I received the plan, General Wheeler's, that said this is the way we look at it, I said, "As I indicated at breakfast, I wish you'd develop by Monday morning, March the 4th" - this is February 28th - "recommendations in response to the situation presented to us by General Wheeler and his preliminary proposal. I wish alternatives examined."

I didn't say tell me how to implement it. If I had, I'd have probably called in the Chief of Procurement and said, "Where are your ships?" and "How soon can you get this?" And the transportation people and the communications.

"I wish alternatives examined. In particular, I wish you to consider, among other things, the following specific issues: What military and other objectives in Vietnam are additional U.S. forces designed to advance? What specific dangers is their dispatch designed to avoid? What specific goals would the increment of force if recommended" - by you, Mr. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Mr. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford - "aim to achieve in the next six months or over the next year? What probable Communist reactions do you anticipate in connection with each of the alternatives you examine? What negotiating postures should we strike in general? And what modifications, if any, would you recommend with respect to the San Antonio formula?" - last August.

"What major Congressional problems can be anticipated? And how should they be met? What problems can we anticipate in U.S. public opinion? Always thinking of you, Walter. And how should they be dealt with?"

You should feel free in making this report to call on the best minds in this government to work on specific aspects of the problem, but you should assure the highest possible degree of security up to the moment when the President's decision on these matters is announced." Now I submit, sir, and I think you must agree with me, Walter, that my directions to them were more than to implement.

Now during the course of this procedure a trusted public servant - I think in the Pentagon - called in some reporters, or a newspaper reporter from a very well-known newspaper, and said, 'You want to do a little peeping here? Peep here. Johnson's going to order 206,000 men out there. It's going to ruin the country. He's going to do it in the guise of protecting our men, but it's just going to be terrible for us, and us fellows set against the war we ought to really stop this.'

So the headline is: "Johnson's implementing recommendation of Westmoreland for 206,000 - and these men are going." Now what the study produced was quite different from that. They came back and recommended an immediate decision to deploy to Vietnam an estimated total of 22,000 additional personnel, 60 per cent combat. A decision to deploy three tactical fighter squadrons. They recommended early approval of reserve call-up. Now - and an increase in strength adequate to meet the balance of the request to restore strategic reserve in the United States adequate for these possible contingencies which I did not approve.

CRONKITE: Whose recommendation was that, sir?

JOHNSON: This is the recommendation of the group that I appointed, the group that you referred to a while ago as the group that's selected to implement my decision - Westmoreland's plan and my decision to send 206,000. So the effect of it was, Walter, that I expect if you take the plan that we were considering - and the first thing to make clear, it was not a plan for a week or a month, it was a plan for a long-term basis, anticipating many contingencies, and saying that we'd have to determine it in the light of them, just as this recommendation did. But the figure was there that would make headlines - if you added up the total of everything that could be, if everything went bad, if they pulled the troops out, if we had a crisis somewhere else, if we did all these things - was this.

CRONKITE: But now, as these Vietnamese advisers of yours began to study those alternatives, obviously some sort of new thoughts were beginning to emerge - 'pierce' is the word. Secretary of Defense Clifford in his article said that he came to the conclusion that a military settlement in Vietnam perhaps was no longer viable in the light of American objectives and so forth.

JOHNSON: Now, Walter, on that point, I think that's natural. Secretary Clifford had been Secretary of Defense a matter of hours and I don't know anything about the details of his thoughts about a military victory before that time. But the President and the Secretary of State and Mr. Rostow and the entire government had been busy explaining for years that we never anticipated, never expected, never went out, weren't - had no objective for a military victory.

That's pure staw man. The President never had any such feeling as that. The Government wasn't expecting a military victory. We weren't in trying to wipe out militarily North Vietnam. We were just trying to stop them at the bridge and saying, "Don't come in and take this over." That was our plan all the time. We want to win, but win what? A military victory? No. A win that would keep them from taking over and subjugating these people. So I don't know what Secretary Clifford's view was. Secretary Clifford is a very able man, a very wise man, and if he came in to Secretary of Defense expecting us to destroy Vietnam and to go up there and bring them to their knees and win a big military victory, I would be very much surprised. I doubt that he ever felt that way.

ANNOUNCER: "LBJ. The Decision to Halt the Bombing" will continue in a moment.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

ANNOUNCER: We continue now with "The Decision to Halt the Bombing."

CRONKITE: Mr. President, did anything, the developments in Vietnam, the Tet offensive and the result of the Tet offensive, the recommendation of General Westmoreland as relayed through General Wheeler, for more troops, this re-appraisal by your top advisers under your directive to examine alternatives, did any of these things have any influence on you in reassessing your own position as to where we stood in Vietnam and what the future might hold there?

JOHNSON: I did it every day. I think it got a scrutinizing analysis. I think that's reflected by the fact that after this directive of February the 28th, I believe, Secretary Rusk came in and said, "Well, now, in the light of all that I have observed I think the time has now come to stop the bombing above the 20th Parallel." Some of them suggested - I think Secretary Clifford suggested that we stop the bombing on condition that the North Vietnamese do something. And Secretary Rusk said, "That won't work; it's reciprocity and won't work."

CRONKITE: When these other advisers were discussing alternatives, did they know about Secretary Rusk's recommendation to stop the bombing?

JOHNSON: Some of them did. Of course, Mr. Rostow did. Some. There were only one or two in the State Department that knew it. I think Mr. Bundy knew it. I'm not positive about - Secretary Clifford knew it.

CRONKITE: What was your reaction when Secretary Rusk -

JOHNSON: "Get on your horses and get it back to me as quick as you can with your recommendations." I felt pretty generally that way about everything Rusk recommended. He was a deliberate man, a judicious man, a careful man. And he didn't get on his horses as quick as I did on some things. And so he said, all right, he would do that.

So either March the 5th or the 6th, I don't remember, either the next day or the next day, the Secretary came back and said he had a little

paper to read. And he proposed that we not make any conditions to North Vietnam, we just frankly say that the President in this speech that we'd been talking about my making in March - I had to make it in March - never referring to any of those people (we're talking about the March speech that I was going to announce I wouldn't be a candidate) because none of those men were handicapped with that knowledge -

CRONKITE: You mean the people talking about Vietnam were not handicapped with the knowledge about the -

JOHNSON: - that I wasn't going to run except Secretary Rusk and perhaps Secretary McElamara. So we came back and he read a paper and the paper is not far different from the proposal in my speech.

CRONKITE: What were the developments step-by-step from the time Secretary Rusk recommended the bombing halt and you put that recommendation into a speech and tied it together with your decision to not run in '68?

JOHNSON: There were many drafts of statements on everything from fiscal responsibility, to problems of the cities, to problems of the war, military manpower and just dozens and dozens of proposals. But the most important and perhaps the most constructive one was by Ambassador Goldberg, who was respected and who had - who I always enjoyed an affectionate relationship with. We frequently disagreed and got irritated with each other, I'm sure, but he came in and said, "I want to make a recommendation." And he sent me here at the Ranch a personal letter, and a long letter, and it said, "Stop all the bombing." It was clear from the letter that he didn't know that Rusk had proposed the 20th Parallel, and this was a detail because there were very few people who knew that. And when I got back, why, we went into the details of the respective merits of things, including having a hearing for Ambassador Goldberg who came and presented his viewpoint.

Secretary Clifford took the position that you would endanger your troops in the DMZ area, endanger many American lives and be gambling on something that you weren't justified in gambling on, that if there's any disposition on the part of the North Vietnamese to respond, they'd respond if you eliminated the bombing of 90 per cent of their population area. But after we got through with that - that was the middle of the month that he sent me the letter - and we went out to Ambassador Bunker and said, "Here are two suggestions that are pending. One - we didn't call it that, but the Goldberg proposal - "we stop all bombing." And he just came back strong and said, "I just can't. That dog won't hunt. We just cannot get that over, it would just blow everything."

"Then what do you do about the second one?" "Well," he said, "it's got its problems, and there are many, and I don't know what we could do about it," but finally ending up, "If you decide to go that way I'll do my best from this end of the line."

ANNOUNCER: "The Decision to Halt the Bombing" will continue in a moment.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

ANNOUNCER: We continue now with "LBJ" - and CBS NEWS Correspondent Walter Cronkite.

CRONKITE: Late in March 1968, while the Vietnam situation was still under official review, a group of unofficial advisers assembled at the President's request - the "elder wise men," as they were called by Washington insiders. Veterans of government service like Abe Fortas, the Supreme Court Justice and Presidential confidant. Retired statesmen like Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's Secretary of State. And McGeorge Bundy, an architect of Vietnam policy under Kennedy and Johnson. Retired military chiefs like Omar Bradley, the World War II General. And Maxwell Taylor, who had also served as ambassador to Saigon. After two days of meetings, in an atmosphere that some accounts have described as "troubled," they reported to the President on March 26th.

JOHNSON: The substance of their recommendation was, as presented by Mr. Bundy and Secretary Acheson, was that our time was limited, that we should try to do two things, really. One, find some way to increase the build-up that the Vietnamese were making themselves. And second, that down the road to try to find some negotiating stance and find some reason to go to the table. As a matter of fact, the notes made on this meeting with the unofficial "wise men" group indicated that Secretary Acheson felt that we should make a visible sign that there is an effort being made to establish something different, "which is probably the institution of peace talks, which I do not think would get very far," says Mr. Acheson, "but would be an entering wedge to perhaps bring about some kind of cessation or differentiation of our effort."

CRONKITE: When the Bradleys and the McGeorge Bundys and the Dean Achesons, men who'd been pretty hard-line on the Vietnam policy, along with the Administration all the way, came in with softer recommendations, de-escalation, negotiations, did this surprise you?

JOHNSON: I think that some of the information that these men got in the briefing the night before was, I felt, inaccurate, and I think some of them felt it was inaccurate after hearing General Abrams the next morning. But the conclusion that they reached, namely that we ought to try to get the Vietnamese to take on as much as they possibly could because their enlistments had been stepped up after Tet; and namely that we ought to try to find some negotiating stance, even though it might not get very far, but we ought to try it, was in perfect harmony and was the conclusion that Secretary Rusk had reached when he suggested March 4th that we have a bombing pause, and which he repeated in his proposal of March 5th, and which we'd gone out to Ambassador Bunker with 10 days before, and which Ambassador Bunker had cleared and approved, when they were there meeting. So something you're already doing couldn't shock you a great deal. In essence they said two things - and all of them didn't agree on that. But the - it was not a particularly soft or hard line either.

CRONKITE: This brings up another little matter. That former Secretary of State Dean Acheson has said in interviews of recent times that he was - the impression was - "disenchanted" with some of the briefings he got from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and went to

other echelons of the military for his information. He passed on this concern to you. What was your reaction when he told you that? Did you have any such theories yourself?

JOHNSON: Well, I think that every person gives his own evaluation to the weight of testimony of different people. Secretary Acheson was briefed by a great many people in the Government. I asked all of them to make available to him any information that they had, so he was not confined to any straight jacket. If he didn't choose to hear the views of General Wheeler or the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, why that was perfectly agreeable to us for him to select any person he wanted to brief him. But I never had the impression that anyone in the military or in any other place, ever deliberately tried to mislead the President or the Secretary or anyone else.

CROWKITE: Mr. President, on the Dean Rusk proposal of March 4th, the first suggestion of the bombing halt to you, did you get the impression that this, in his mind, was a genuine peace overture in the hope that something might really develop from it, or sort of an appeal to world opinion through making this offer at the time, without any real genuine hope that anything would happen and just setting the stage for whatever the next stage would be?

JOHNSON: I think there was always hope. And I think we had met with a great deal of discouragement because the previous bombing pauses had never produced anything, and most of the people that advocated them felt they would produce something. They had failed. But I think that the Secretary felt that in light of developments that were to come, in the light of the weather conditions that prevailed, and in the light of our military situation in Vietnam at the time, that this was a propitious time that we could take this action with a minimum of danger, and hopefully with good results.

CROWKITE: But it was the idea of Secretary Rusk that once this period of bad weather passed and they had not come to the negotiating table with us, that we would resume the bombing?

JOHNSON: I don't think they had crossed that bridge at that time. I think that good faith required that we put forth our proposal and hope that they would accept it, and that one step would lead to the other, and it would bring them to the table and we could then try to negotiate and talk out our problems rather than fight them out.

CROWKITE: Well, now, how does that attitude of the Secretary's square with the statement he made to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee just a week later - March 11th?

DEAN RUSK: It is quite clear from our recent contacts with Hanoi that they would not accept a partial cessation of the bombing as a step toward peace in any way, shape or form. That does not mean that as we move into the future, that we don't consider examining that and all the other proposals that we can get our hands on and we can think up ourselves.

JOHNSON: Well, I don't think that we knew what they would do until they acted upon it. And even after we had made it, some of the members of the Foreign Relations Committee had grave doubts that they would ever accept it. As a matter of fact, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, after the proposal was made, said that it didn't offer them anything, and he didn't really feel that it would bring them to the table. But that was no reason we shouldn't try.

CRONKITE: Mr. President, it still puzzles me a little that Secretary Rusk would be saying to you on March 4th that let's try a bombing pause because it might lead to something, and a week later go to the Senate and say it can't possibly lead to anything, that they would not accept a partial cessation of the bombing as a step toward peace in any way, shape or form.

JOHNSON: I think that he said, "The time is right, if we want to make a peace overture. And we might be able to create a situation where we can have negotiations, and I would like to go out and ask Ambassador Bunker, who is on the ground, to evaluate my thinking, and to give me his impression of what effect this proposal would have upon the South Vietnamese, as well as the North Vietnamese."

Now that was what Secretary Rusk said. What he said to the Foreign Relations Committee, I don't have it in front of me, but as I heard you read it, I think that he said the various proposals that we had made - he concluded from all the proposals we had made that involved partial cessation that they hadn't been effective, and that they had not given any indication that they would embrace this. Well, they hadn't. And they didn't. And they didn't on March 31st. They didn't even when Senator Fulbright got up and said, "This is not going to do any good. This is not going to bring them to the table." But I think that the impact of the proposal, the announcement that I wasn't going to run, the way it was received in other nations in the world, all those things had some influence on them. And at any event they did come to the table.

CRONKITE: What were your own expectations for the bombing halt? I mean, what did you really think was going to result?

JOHNSON: I hoped for a great deal more than has been achieved. I was desperately trying to show that I was reasonable, that our country would prefer to talk rather than fight, that we were determined not to let aggression take over Southeast Asia, but that we would try to negotiate it out rather than fight it out. And hopefully if we would take this far-reaching step, that they would meet us half-way. And hopefully the other nations of the world, who had not given us very much support and who had sat on the sidelines and found fault with what we were doing to protect liberty and freedom, hopefully they would assess this as a genuine, decent thing to do. And after all, the President was taking himself out of politics, wasn't going to be a candidate. He was going as far as he felt he could go without endangering his troops in the field, and this should bring some kind of response. And I think North Vietnam thought so too, and they did, for the moment, agree to come to the table.

Now we haven't made any progress there. And my hopes have faded away, and my dreams have not been realized. I deeply regret, but I was constantly trying, just as I'd tried on many other pauses that had failed.

No one that sits in the chair of the President wants to be regarded as an unreasonable, unfair, unjust person who likes to wage war. The President wants peace. The Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the Chiefs of Staff want peace just as much as some of the self-announced peace leaders. And it's just a question of what your judgment tells you is likely to bring peace. We thought this had a chance of bringing peace. I must admit it in the light of the North Vietnamese record of having rejected, out of hand, everything we suggested, that there was not much basis to hope that this would get results. But we wanted to try it anyway. And we did try it.

CRONKITE: Thank you, Mr. President.

On March 31st, 1968, the bombing halt went into effect over North Vietnam, except in the area near the Demilitarized Zone. Six weeks later, delegates from Hanoi and Washington began meeting for preliminary talks in Paris. And six months after that, on October 31st, the President extended the bombing halt to all of North Vietnam as another step in mutual de-escalation, and as an incentive to negotiations - negotiations that remained in stalemate long after the end of the Johnson Administration.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

CRONKITE: A November day in Texas, 1963. Two visiting campaigners setting out on a fateful motorcade. A young President riding into the sights of an assassin's rifle. His Vice President riding two cars behind. Here began, abruptly, in the shadow of a national tragedy, the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

JOHNSON: Getting back to the Texas trip, I say much was written about that trip to Texas, Walter, and from my personal knowledge most of what's been written was wrong. And I think most of it was deliberate

ANNOUNCER: Lyndon Johnson's eyewitness account of the assassination of President Kennedy and its aftermath, next in this series of CBS NEWS Special Broadcasts, Saturday, May 2, at 7:30 PM, Eastern Daylight Time, on most of these stations.