

CBS NEWS SPECIAL

LBJ: "Why I Chose Not to Run"

as broadcast over the

CBS TELEVISION NETWORK

Saturday, December 27, 1969

7:30 - 8:30 PM, EST

PRODUCED BY CBS NEWS

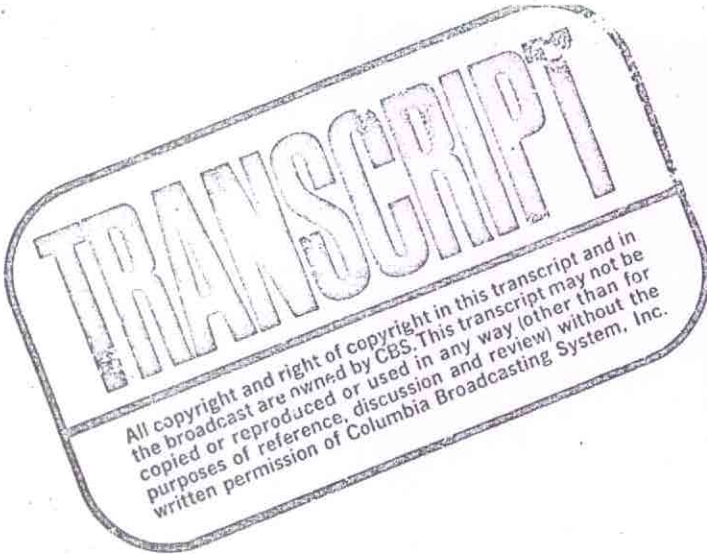
REPORTER: Walter Cronkite

PRODUCER: John Sharnik

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Burton Benjamin

ANNOUNCER: This has been a CBS NEWS EXTRA: "November 22nd and the Warren Report."

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CRONKITE: Lyndon Baines Johnson. Private citizen of Johnson City, Texas. Proprietor of the LBJ Ranch. Eleven years in Congress, twelve in the Senate, five years in the White House. His Administration was one of causes and controversies: civil rights and poverty, education and health care, the issues of the cities, the war in Vietnam. Even his retirement was controversial.

Mr. President, many of the reports since you left the Presidency have suggested that you were run out of the Presidency. Is there any aptness to that analysis?

JOHNSON: Well, I don't think I'd be very objective about that, Walter; I don't think so. But I haven't - it hasn't concerned me. I haven't answered it. If it gives the coiners of it satisfaction, then I don't want to deprive them of it, if they enjoy it. But I don't think that it's an accurate phrase at all. And if you're asking me in an indirect way whether I had any doubt about my election as President, the answer is an absolute, positive, "No."

ANNOUNCER: CBS NEWS presents the first of a series of special broadcasts in which former President Lyndon B. Johnson discusses the events, the issues and decisions of his Presidency and of his earlier career in government. In this opening broadcast, he presents for the first time his own account of the decision to retire from the nation's highest office.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

CRONKITE: On March 31, 1968, Lyndon B. Johnson, 36th President of the United States, delivered from the White House a message of peace framed in an unexpected announcement. The message: he would halt the bombing of North Vietnam as an invitation to the peace table. The announcement: he would not be a candidate for re-election to the Presidency.

The bombing-halt itself - the story behind that decision - will be the subject of a later broadcast. In this hour: the unexpected retirement. In a guest house on the LBJ Ranch, Mr. Johnson discussed that subject with me in a series of recent conversations.

Mr. President, on March 31, 1968, a Presidential election year full of surprises, perhaps the most surprising announcement of all to the American people was yours in the words, I believe: "I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term." Now, in the calm of almost two years later, are there any regrets, any second thoughts about that decision?

JOHNSON: No, I don't think so. There's some disappointment that the results that I hoped would flow from it - namely peace in the world - have not as yet come; but I'm still hopeful.

CRONKITE: What are you doing in your retirement? Or is it retirement? Do you, perhaps, still harbor some political ambitions?

JOHNSON: Walter, for really the first time in all of my life, for the first time that I can remember, I'm just doing exactly what I want to do. I read more than I've ever had a chance to read before.

I spend more time with my family than I've ever had a chance to do before. I work on my books.

In addition to that, I enjoy the outdoors. I grew up here on this river. I love this section of the state and the people who inhabit it. And someone asked me, "Why don't you travel more? Why don't you go with Mrs. Johnson on some of these trips that she makes and so forth?" And I said, "I'm sure I will. I'm sure the time will come when I soak up all that I need here. But the reason I'm not doing it now is that I can't find the place that I think would give me as much enjoyment as where I am."

CRONKITE: Is there anything you miss about the job? Did you enjoy the job of being President?

JOHNSON: Of course, I miss it, but as I said at the last press conference I had out here, most of it I miss good. President Nixon said to me, "How did you feel when you weren't President any more?" And I said, "I don't know whether you'll understand this now or not, but you certainly will later. I sat there on that platform and waited for you to stand up and raise your right hand and take the oath of office, and I think the most pleasant words that I ever - that ever came into my ears were 'So help me God' that you repeated after that oath. Because at that time I no longer had the fear that I was the man that could make the mistake of involving the world in war, that I was no longer the man that would have to carry the terrifying responsibility of protecting the lives of this country and maybe the entire world, unleashing the horrors of some of our great power if I felt that that was required. But that now I could ride back down that avenue, being concerned about what happened, being alarmed about what might happen, but just really knowing that I wasn't going to be the cause of it, that that went over to some other man. That's a feeling that I don't think you'll ever know until you experience it. But you will experience it when the man who succeeds you takes that oath, and when you do, most people won't believe you because they'll - they'll think you always want power. But the men who really get power and have power are generally people who don't want power; and the fellow that has power is the one that uses it sparingly, because you can throw it away very quickly with arrogance and autocracy and without consultation; and you can dissipate it, and most Presidents do. I'm sure that I had less power the day I went out than I did the way I went in. And it wasn't by choice. But it was because of actions that I felt when I took them had to be taken for the good of the nation."

I said to someone the other day that one of the things I enjoyed most was being able to go to bed after the ten o'clock news at night and to sleep until daylight the next morning. I don't remember ever having an experience like that in the five years I was in the White House. The real horror was to be sleeping soundly about three-thirty or four or five o'clock in the morning and have the telephone ring and the operator say, "Sorry to wake you, Mr. President," and by the - there's just a second between the time the operator got me on the line until she could get Mr. Rostow in the Situation Room, or Mr.

Bundy in the Situation Room, or maybe Secretary Rusk or Secretary McNamara, Secretary Clifford. And you went through the horrors of hell that thirty seconds or minute or two minutes. Had we hit a Russian ship? Had an accident occurred? We have another Pueblo? Someone made a mistake - were we at war? Well, those experiences are gone. You say, "Don't you miss them?" Sure you miss them. But I really never did want those calls to begin with; I would have liked to have missed them when I was there.

CRONKITE: I don't suppose anybody ever awakens a President with good news.

JOHNSON: Not at four o'clock in the morning.

CRONKITE: Well, now, was this a sudden decision to renounce the candidacy on March 31st? When did you really cast the die in your own mind?

JOHNSON: It was the late afternoon of March the 31st that I decided on the route and the time and the content of the announcement I made on March the 31st. The fact that I did not want to serve another term in the Presidency was arrived at much earlier. It goes back, I guess, to '55. I can't ever convince anybody, and I have no intention or desire to do so, but I have had rather serious questions in my own mind about being President of this country. I don't say that arrogantly, but the question had been put to me a good many times.

In the fall of '55, when I was here at the Ranch, Senator Kennedy's father, Joe Kennedy, called me and he said that he had talked to Senator John Kennedy and that they had concluded that they would like to support me for President, and they would support me for President in the '56 election, and they wanted the go-ahead to do so. And I told them that I had no ambitions to be President, that I would not be a candidate for the Presidency, that I thought it would be a mistake for me to be a candidate.

The next year in Chicago I was a candidate. Local situation. Mr. Rayburn announced me as the favorite son, and that was an honor that he wanted to pay me and the people of Texas did pay me. I was nominated at the convention in '56, and I was nominated at the convention in '60, and I was nominated at the convention in '64. My view did not change very much during this period.

One of the wisest and certainly the most trusted counselors I've had has been my wife. In May I asked her to sit down and take all the things that I thought, and all the things that our good friends thought, and evaluate them and decide whether I should permit myself to become the party nominee in '64. Well, all those things, Mrs. Johnson came down and said, "Yes, you've got to run again. But if you do, you've got to do it with the understanding and with the knowledge that three months - three years and three months from the time you take the oath, and that would make it March, 1968, you can say to the people that you're not going to succeed to another term."

CRONKITE: That memo of Mrs. Johnson's to you was in May, 1964?

JOHNSON: May, '64. And I examined it and talked to a good many people about it, some members of my Cabinet, certainly my close friends, boys that I'd grown up with, men that knew me real well - Governor Connally, Senator Russell, Judge Moursund and, I say, others in official life. And I concluded that she was wrong, that we should not undertake another term as President because of the divisiveness that I could see ahead, because of the feeling of the Negro militants that was then asserting itself, because of the reaction of the South, and the attitude of the people of the North toward the South and vice versa, and the reaction of the press media and how they reacted to things I said and did - my manner, my style, and how I - from my viewpoint, how they twisted and imagined and built and magnified things that I didn't think were true at all. I never thought it was the President's credibility gap, I thought it was their credibility gap. But they owned the papers and the networks; I didn't. And they come out every day. And they could talk about my credibility, but there wasn't much I could do about their credibility.

So I wrote this announcement. And I said, in effect, almost what I said in March four years later: that I want the convention to select the best man among you, and I assumed it would be Bobby Kennedy or Hubert Humphrey or - they were the two most outstanding ones. I expressed that in several conversations that I have the notes on. And this is what I said: "The times require leadership about which there is no doubt and a voice that men of all parties and men of all sections and men of all color can and will follow. I have learned after trying very hard that I am not that voice, or that leader. Therefore I shall carry forward with your help until the new President is sworn in next January, and then I will go back home as I've wanted to since the day I took this job." And that was written on August 26, at 11:06.

CRONKITE: Now this is the summer of '64.

JOHNSON: Nineteen-sixty-four. And Mrs. Johnson read this statement, and wrote me this note and said: "Beloved" - and I knew the way she started off that she didn't agree with me - "To step out now would be wrong for your country, and I can see nothing but a lonely wasteland for your future. Your friends would be frozen in embarrassed silence and your enemies would be jeering. I am not afraid of time or lies or defeat. In the final analysis I can't carry any of the burdens that you have talked of, so I know it's only your choice, but I know you're as brave as any of the thirty-five Presidents. I love you always. Bird."

I took that and I wrestled with it a great deal. As I often have, I took her judgment instead of mine. And I undertook the campaign and I undertook the next four years. But finally on the night of March 31, at 9:27, I said what I'd wanted to say all those years, and she, at last, was in complete agreement with me. And after all, that's what mattered most.

CRONKITE: I sort of get the idea through all of this that you weren't really terribly keen on being President of the United States.

I wonder how that squares with the sort of popular version of you, the man, as one who looked forward to using this political power of the Presidency.

JOHNSON: Walter, we never see ourselves, I think, as others see us, and I don't think that I can ever explain to you or the American people something that's so deeply embedded in their beliefs as the fact that Lyndon Johnson was an extremely ambitious man who sought power, who enjoyed using it and whose greatest desire was to occupy the top job in American political life. That has never been my feeling. First of all, it's been very clear to me that I had certain serious disadvantages which would ultimately preclude my becoming the - completing my term as President as I would like to complete it. Those disadvantages I thought were upbringing, brought up as a - in a poor setting, limited educational advantages, geography, where my mother was when I was born and the prejudices that exist, and in general summed up in one sentence, a general inability to stimulate, inspire and unite all the people of the country, which I think is an essential function of the Presidency. Now I have never really believed that I was the man to do that particular job, that with all of my experience and my training and whatever expertise I had in the 35 years of public service, that in the last analysis, the people of every section would say: "You tell us where to go and we'll go." I just never did believe that, because I hadn't had that experience, and for that reason I don't think I had any insatiable appetite to grab any more than I'd bitten off. I always felt that every job I had was really too big for me.

Second, I have been beset by health problems all my life and while when I finished the Presidency I think I had been in as good health as I had ever been, I never see Woodrow Wilson's picture there in the Red Room in the White House - I never looked at it that I didn't think: Could it happen that I would wind up here in this bed with a stroke, confined with responsibilities of the job, with the men in the field, with the great divisions in the country, and have to rely on a staff to carry out my instructions from - stretched out on a bed somewhere? I'd been treated for serious, almost fatal heart attack, in '55. My blood pressure dropped to zero, and when you go through a situation like that, you never forget it; it's always there. So I think that all was in the picture every time someone said to me, "Do you want to be President?"

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

CRONKITE: Mr. President, you said that in making your decision that you had to announce in March of '68 or early on in the spring -

JOHNSON: But that was the final day. That was the end of the three years, three months. That was the day that precedent, the legal precedent we had in modern times - President Truman - and then he got criticized some for not giving Adlai Stevenson a little more time. I was sure I'd get criticized some for not giving the Democratic hopefuls a little more time. But that was the last day, we thought, and the clock ticked right up to nine o'clock, and we just had three hours left to March.



CRONKITE: Well, if it were politically important that you give that decision early on in the spring, then in '64, you must have been really playing with a time bomb on the thing by letting it run up into August right on the eve of a convention which was all geared to renominate you.

JOHNSON: Yes, and I guess the lateness of the date when I really firmed up that decision was one of the reasons that I went ahead in '65.

CRONKITE: Do you have any idea why that debate that you had with some of your most intimate counselors in 1964 about whether you would run again never leaked to the press? Several people knew about it, and yet a lot less important decisions did leak to the press. A lot of important ones did.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think so. I think this is one I controlled and these were my people. When I'm dealing with the State Department, their Foreign Service personnel, there are people who want to go along with Senator Fulbright. There are people who are kind of sponsored by some Senator who may have brought them in. I had a test one time. I said, "Whenever you see a man in the State or Defense Department's picture, one-column picture, in a certain newspaper, that is usually his pay-off. That's his little bribe." It's not money, but it's really a bribe for his accessibility and his willing to give them guidance from time to time, which is another way of saying that we give you this information. But in this case I talked to people that I had known for years, that had my interest at heart more than they had their own fame and their own future. You could no more get George Reedy to break a confidence, or Walter Jenkins, or Judge Moursund or men of the type of Rusk or - those involved in the '68 thing.

Now there wasn't a month that passed between that convention and March 31 that we didn't think of that three years and three months. The thing that really tied it down more than anything else was conversations I had in the early spring with Governor Connally, in which he said he had all of it he wanted, and he wasn't going to run. Nothing could get him to run in his judgment except if I needed him to carry this state.

CRONKITE: Mr. Connally told you in the spring of 1967 that he was not going to be a candidate for Governor of Texas again in 1968?

JOHNSON: That's correct. And I told him I had no reason to argue with him or debate with him, and I thought that was a good conclusion on his part, and I thought mine would be the same, that certainly I wasn't going to ask him to stay in even if mine were - but I would suggest he go and take that action. In October I met with Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara, and Mr. Rostow and Mr. Helms, and I said to them that if I were making an announcement today, I'd announce I was not going to run. And they looked in kind of shocking belief and I think Secretary McNamara said, "Well, now, you don't want to get cute," something of that kind.

CRONKITE: When was this? October -

JOHNSON: October '67. I knew what I wanted to say and I knew how I wanted to say it. We took that statement, and I asked Mrs. Johnson to look at it and see what she could do about it, and she modified it some. The statement said, "I will - I do not - I will not be a candidate." And she put in, "And I will not accept the nomination." And she firmed it up pretty strong with her own handwriting, and we took that statement, and after she firmed it up I thought she gave it back to me. Instead of that she laid it on the telephone by my bed.

CRONKITE: Now when was this, Mr. -

JOHNSON: That was in January.

CRONKITE: January, 1968, leading up to the State of the Union message.

JOHNSON: Just before the State of the Union. So after I read all those things I wanted that night before the television, I got to that last page, and I reached in my pocket. I don't think I would have used it, but just to see it was there, and give me the comfort, and maybe pull it out and - the balance was there. I don't know what I would have done if it had been there. I don't think I would have done it then. But it wasn't there, and I didn't have to confront the problem.

I went back and said to Mrs. Johnson, "Why'd you keep that announcement?" And she said, "I gave it back to you." And I said, "No you didn't," and we both looked through my pockets and went in, and there it was by the telephone table. So then the question from then on was what - what date?

CRONKITE: What changed your mind then about announcing it on that State of the Union day?

JOHNSON: There were a good many arguments made that it would be inconsistent to achieving what we wanted to achieve - cooperation with the Congress, cooperation with our Allies, and a major peace overture - for me to go up and say to Congress that I recommend that you do all of these things, and together we are going to get peace, and together we're going to have a tax bill, and together we're going to have an open housing bill, and together we're going to have these measures for the benefit of the consumers, and so forth, and then conclude it by saying, "But I'm quitting. I'm throwing in the towel, and you go on and do this by yourself."

And some of my counselors felt that the effect that the last paragraph of the speech would have would be to kill all the other paragraphs, and achieve nothing. And we ought to at least get the measures introduced, and we ought to at least get the Committee to consider them, and we ought to at least let some time elapse from the time you set all of these worthy goals. And I had expressed to Mr. Rostow and others that I was positive that I could not get a peace conference get them to a peace table, that I was positive that I could not get a tax bill, that I was positive I could not cool the cities as a candidate, because I was convinced that there were forces in my own

party, that there were forces in the molders of public opinion in this country that would continue to oppose a tax bill, to arouse questions - raise questions that would make peace impossible, that would continue to agitate in the cities for the effect it would have on the President who would be the Democratic nominee.

The thing I wanted most, and that I regret most about the March 31st decision, was I wanted to bring the enemy to the peace table for productive discussions. And one of the most disappointing experiences of my Presidency was right while those words of mine were still ringing in the ears of the people of this country and the world, and comment being made by all the leaders and people importuning me to change my decision, some of my own Democratic Senators in the Senate were up attacking my proposal and saying that under no circumstances could Ho Chi Minh ever accept the proposal that I had made, that I hadn't made it except the Twentieth Parallel, and I ought to have made it all-oughtn't to bomb North Vietnam at all, regardless of the position of our men, regardless of the danger involving them.

CRONKITE: Mr. President, we're going to go into all those decision-making processes in the Vietnam matter on a future broadcast. Right now, while this bombing halt question was being considered, debated within your councils, a lot of other things, obviously, were happening particularly on the political front. Immediately after the Tet offensive the anti-Vietnam spokesmen rose with new denunciations of your policy: Senator McCarthy had entered the New Hampshire primary and had done very well there on an anti-Vietnam platform; Senator Robert Kennedy had entered the race for the Democratic nomination. How did all of these political developments affect your March 31 decision?

JOHNSON: Well, I'm sure they'd have made it easier if I'd had any disposition towards another decision. I remember Senator Kennedy's proposal that we appoint him as a chairman of a commission of outsiders that would go into the Vietnam question if I would admit that our policy was wrong and failing, and we should change. Secretary Clifford met with Senator Kennedy and Mr. Sorensen, and that was not any problem for me. I came in the office of President prepared to protect the prerogatives and the strength of the office of the Presidency, and I didn't think that our system ever contemplated a President turning over the functions of Commander-in-Chief to a civilian commission, and to admit to the world and the enemy and to his own country that he didn't believe in what he was doing and was against it. So I just said that, frankly. And I was told that Senator Kennedy was going to announce that if I didn't do this - and I wouldn't say my Texas upbringing had anything to do with it, but I considered that a very - that required a very firm answer and a very quick one. Because it didn't bother me whether Bobby Kennedy ran against Nixon or ran against Humphrey or ran against McCarthy. Of course Bobby didn't know this. So that was that.

The McCarthy vote in New Hampshire and the activity of the young people and the adulation of the academic community and the attention it received did puzzle me. In the time, critical time that their

President was going through, to have a man who was really - who wanted to be Vice President, and who had been my friend and been in my home a good deal, and things of that nature, to - without discussing it or going into it with me - just to go up and put on this kind of a campaign it - I wouldn't say it shocked me, because after you've been in politics thirty-five years there just isn't anything - very few things surprise you. But it was something I didn't expect. I didn't expect him to get the votes that he got there, although he didn't get a majority of the votes. The President's name wasn't on the ticket. But it did surprise me that even against the stand-ins, that he would get that vote. But it didn't bother me because, after all, somebody else was going to have to deal with that problem. Well, that disposed of that.

The first person, I think, to come in to see me after March 31 - well, the first one called me was Mrs. McCarthy. Within the hour she had called, after hearing my announcement. And then in a day or two, Senator Kennedy came in with Mr. Sorensen. And we had a very friendly conversation. We reviewed all the events of the world situation, and I tried to explain it to them what was in my mind. I think they had a better understanding of it, and Senator Kennedy said, "You're a very courageous and very dedicated man." That was the last conversation I had with Senator Kennedy, and I'm glad it ended on that note because in the public mind all the time we were spending a lot of our time conniving and fighting each other, and I never spent any of mine doing that, and I don't know how much of his, if any, he spent. But that was the public impression.

CRONKITE: Mr. President, if you had not already made a decision that you were not going to run, would you have looked upon the results of the New Hampshire primary and the forthcoming Wisconsin primary as indications that you were indeed in serious political trouble, leading up to the Democratic convention?

JOHNSON: If you're asking me in an indirect way whether I had any doubt about my election as President, the answer is an absolute, positive, "No." Now you can call that egotistical, and you can call that arrogant, if you want to. But I call it professional evaluation.

I don't think you really seriously thought that McCarthy would sweep the country or the nomination or that Kennedy would, or that whoever else - McGovern - would. Nixon's a very formidable candidate, but I had more doubts about what would happen in the '64 campaign than I had about what would happen in the '68 campaign.

CRONKITE: Did any of your trusted advisers come to you before the March 31st decision and say that they thought you were in political trouble, and perhaps could not get re-elected?

JOHNSON: No, but everyone that saw me, that had any political connection, discussed the problems we had and what we ought to do about them, and they appealed to me to go out and go into primaries and to do more. Speaker McCormack urged me to go into Massachusetts and Larry O'Brien urged me to go into Massachusetts and my leaders urged me to go into Pennsylvania, and they all wanted me to go into

Indiana, and situations like that. That happened. I'm sure that there must have been some that read the press and saw the developments and concluded that this would be a rough year politically. All of us knew that.

But, well, look at the November results, where just a few votes - not even a million votes; just a few thousand votes - would have made President Hubert Humphrey instead of Richard Nixon. Now I have great admiration for Mr. Humphrey, but I think that in the light of the campaign that the Vice President waged without much money, and in the light of the views he expressed in connection with the war - and he had to carry the opposition to the Administration and then he had - his own position in Salt Lake City was a kind of a reassessment. And in the light of the problems we had financially, and in the light of the fact that the President was trying as best he could with these people coming to the table there in May, trying to wrap up a peace agreement, I think all of those detracted from his possibilities. Now with the powers of the office, with the people that were available to me, with the support I'd received from the financial community and the business community and the labor community and the farm community, that in some instances we did not find present in November, I don't have any doubt, but I don't think it makes any difference - that was just my judgment. Maybe everybody else thinks that we wouldn't have been elected at all. But the polls don't show that. The polls didn't show it at the time. The wish was father to the thought of a lot of people in New Hampshire when they could see that even though Senator McCarthy didn't get a majority of the votes, it was the most magnificent victory that they had ever participated in. And you heard from those folks. And the Johnson City Record Courier, or the Fredericksburg Standard wasn't circulating nationwide, and they didn't get over our viewpoints.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

CRONKITE: Mr. President, you mentioned that you felt that Vice President Humphrey's Salt Lake City speech in, I believe, September, 1968, backing away somewhat from the Administration position on Vietnam - I believe your words were "limited his possibilities" or something in the election. How do you square that with the fact that the polls showed that his popularity improved after the Salt Lake City speech?

JOHNSON: My feeling about the Salt Lake City speech was this - and it was different from the feeling, I think, that Vice President Humphrey had himself, that night when he talked to me. My feeling was that in that speech he left the impression that he would stop the bombing, and that communicated to the country and to the world a shift of policy in this country, a change of position. He did not, in his discussions with me over the telephone, indicate that was his purpose. But I believe that it was interpreted by the South Vietnamese and by others in this country as representing a change in policy. Candidate Nixon did not make any change in policy. I think as a result that the South Vietnamese had become concerned enough that they decided they wouldn't go to the peace table 'til after the election, or that they would hold back. So for several days there, we had a very difficult position, and the people didn't have much hopes of immediate prospects of peace. So I think it hurt us in the election.

CRONKITE: So you don't think that the public's feeling that he had backed away from the Administration position on Vietnam had anything to do then with his increased popularity thereafter?

JOHNSON: I'm not familiar - I haven't analyzed the poll which you refer to. I generally believe - I think that you can prove almost anything by polls.

CRONKITE: But you're the fellow who believes in the polls.

JOHNSON: I've given a lot of study to them. I think a lot depends on how the question is asked, when it's asked, and things of that nature. And I'm not familiar with these details that you're talking about. I do believe that if we'd gone to the peace table, that you wouldn't have needed a poll to see the effect of it. If the South Vietnamese had not drug their feet, and come on in and said, "Yes, sir, we're going to be here, things are moving," I think the people would have moved accordingly. And I think it would have been in the direction of the Democrats.

CRONKITE: You know, despite the fact that you believed it to be an unequivocal statement on March 31, there were a lot of people, particularly among the press, I suppose, who did not really believe that you were out of the race for good, and that you might be available for a draft. And they saw an evidence of this in the fact that you urged that the convention stay in Chicago, although there were some who were suggesting that it be moved because of the possibility of demonstrations there. Why would you have wanted the convention to stay in Chicago, if that convention wasn't going to have any effect on your political future?

JOHNSON: Well, first: I didn't insist on any site. That is the first thing that's wrong with the statement. I couldn't have cared less where you had the convention. I don't know where you get that kind of impression. But you all generate a lot of things sometimes, but I don't think you can point to any insistence on my part with the people, whoever they were, that made the choice, that it be in Chicago. The convention of '64 was held in Atlantic City. I don't know of any special reason why the convention had to be in Chicago. I would have thought that if it could have been worked out, and both people could have had their convention in Chicago, it being in the central part, that it would have saved the networks a lot of money. And I never like to see money wasted, even by networks.

But in retrospect, if I'd have known of the great trouble that was going to be caused, the bitterness that would be felt by influential people about Chicago, I think I might have said, "Well, let's go in and have it down where you won't have to set up again, down in Miami." But I wasn't in the business of trying to determine where it would serve the best interests of either the committee or the networks or anyone else. I had other things to do at that time. And contrary to what you've heard, and some said, I wasn't running the Democratic National Committee on a day-to-day basis.

CRONKITE: Then you did not intervene in any way to keep the convention in Chicago?

JOHNSON: I couldn't have been less interested in where they had the convention, as long as they had a convention and it was - it didn't bring any protests.

CRONKITE: Well, now, Mr. President, I'd like to ask you this: If in the spring of 1968 your hopes for getting meaningful peace negotiations going with the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, had worked, would you have been subject to a draft? Might you have reconsidered and run again?

JOHNSON: Definitely not. No.

CRONKITE: Under no circumstances?

JOHNSON: The statement made that clear. The first draft of the statement implied that I wouldn't be a candidate. Wouldn't - didn't want the nomination and so forth. But we made clear when we read it and saw the possible interpretation, someone might say, "Well, you could be drafted." Mrs. Johnson struck it out and wrote in different words. And I don't think anybody can read that statement and think it had any meaning except what it did say. And that was this statement, or these pertinent paragraphs: "With American sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office, the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President. But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong and a confident and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace, and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause, whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice, that duty may require. Thank you for listening. Good night and God bless all of you." So on March 31, I said what I had felt back in 1955 when I talked to President Kennedy's father, and what I had said in '56 following the convention in Los Angeles, and what I had said in '60 in refusing to become a candidate 'til July, and what I had said in '64 the day before the convention nominated me for a second term as President of the United States.

(ANNOUNCEMENT)

CRONKITE: Behind the scenes at the White House, in the early months of 1968, a decision hung in the balance, along with the President's retirement. It would become a landmark of American policy and a subject of speculation and debate ever since.

JOHNSON: Secretary Rusk - the Secretary had come back - said, while we evaluated many things, said, "Now I think the time has come where we can stop the bombing." Some of them suggested - I think Secretary Clifford suggested that we - and some others joined him - 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 it won't work. We ought to just stop the bombing." I said, "Get on your horses and get me a plan."

ANNOUNCER: Lyndon Johnson's own account of "The Decision to Stop the Bombing," next in this series of CBS NEWS Special Broadcasts, Friday, February 6th at 10:00 P.M. Eastern Standard Time on most of these stations.