

Clifford's Assignment:

This is the 10th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"THE MAKING OF A DECISION" VIETNAM 1967-1968 (Part Two)

The two weeks before and two months following Tet represented a period of activity as intense as any of my Presidency. My advisers and I followed developments in Vietnam on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis.

I had decided by this time to send General Wheeler to Saigon for consultations with Bunker and Westmoreland. I thought we would benefit from a full assessment by this level-headed and experienced soldier. I asked him to go over the entire situation with Westmoreland and to form his own judgment of what should be done. I instructed him to find out what Westmoreland felt he had to have to meet present needs, and what he thought future needs would be for troops, equipment, or other support. Finally, I wanted Wheeler to find out how the South Vietnamese army was performing and what additional help we could provide to enable it to fight more effectively and improve more rapidly.

Wheeler and Westmoreland undoubtedly presumed that a large buildup of our armed forces was possible, if not likely. They also anticipated a high-level review of our war strategy. This had influenced their suggestions as to what could be done to strengthen our position in Vietnam.

Their preliminary proposal was that we consider assigning about 108,000 men over the next two months, prepare another 42,000 by September, and program a final group of 55,000 by the end of 1968. The total to be readied for possible assignment was slightly more than 205,000.

At the February 27 meeting McNamara presented three options for consideration. One was to accept the Wheeler-Westmoreland proposal. This would require an increase in military strength of about 400,000 men, he said, and an expenditure of an additional \$10 billion in fiscal 1969. The second option was to combine the military increase with a new peace initiative. At

'Give Me the Lesser

of Evils'

that point Rusk stated that if we made a peace proposal, it should be specific. He suggested that we might stop bombing at the 20th parallel, or stop bombing altogether if Hanoi would withdraw military forces from Quang Tri province, just below the DMZ. McNamara's third option was to maintain the status quo on troop commitments and change our strategy, protecting only "essential" areas and reducing offensive operations in unpopulated regions.

I returned to Washington at 2 a.m. on February 28. Wheeler arrived from Saigon four hours later, and we met for breakfast.

It was Wheeler's judgment that Westmoreland needed a reserve force of "about two divisions." He recommended that we seriously consider the three-phase increase he and Westmoreland had worked out.

I asked Secretary McNamara how we could raise the troops to meet the Wheeler-Westmoreland proposal, if we decided to do so. McNamara said that we would have to call up about 250,000 reserves for all services, mostly for the Army. We would have to extend enlistments by six months for men already in service. He estimated that we would have to increase our budget by \$10 billion in 1969 and by \$15 billion in 1970.



Clark Clifford meets with Mr. Johnson in July, 1967, in one of many conferences on ways to get Hanoi to the peace table.

United Press International

I asked him whether he accepted the forecast that we would have to expect to give up territory if we did not send men in the numbers being discussed. McNamara said he disagreed. He thought that adding 200,000 men would not make a major difference, since the North Vietnamese would probably add men to meet our increase. He believed that the key was the South Vietnamese

army—how fast it could be expanded and how well it would fight.

I told my advisers that I was not prepared to make any judgment at that time. We needed answers to many questions. I asked Clark Clifford to head a group to consider these demanding problems. The last thing I

said was: "Give me the lesser of evils. Give me your recommendations."

I know that one of the first things the Clifford group had done was to make a sharp distinction between present needs and capabilities and the longer-run question of strengthening our overall military position during the next year. The full report I received at the meeting of March 4 made that distinction clear. A copy of the group's written report was distributed to everyone at the table. The report first described the Wheeler-Westmoreland proposal for troop increases and Wheeler's suggestions for building up our strategic reserves at home. By calling up reserves, increasing draft calls, and extending terms of service, the total package would have increased our armed forces by 511,000 men by June 30, 1969.

The Clifford group recommended: an immediate decision to send approximately 23,000 additional men to Vietnam; a strong representation to the South Vietnamese urging them to improve their performance; early approval of a reserve call-up of about 245,000 men; reserving judgment on the total 205,000 package and examination of requirements "week by week"; an in-depth study of possible new "political and strategic guidance" for our operations in Vietnam and of our overall Vietnam policy; "no new peace initiative on Vietnam."

On bombing policy, opinions in the Clifford group were divided. Some wanted a "substantial extension of targets and authority" including mining Haiphong harbor; others proposed only a "seasonal step-up through the spring," without new targets.

The report and its attachments addressed the various questions I had raised in my directive of February 28. Some questions were answered in detail; others required additional study and analysis. As I read the Clifford group's report and its attachments and listened to the discussion around the Cabinet table, I detected among a few advisers a sense of pessimism far deeper than I myself felt. I had much greater confidence in Westmoreland and his staff in Vietnam than many

people in Washington, especially Pentagon civilians. I also had more confidence in the ability and determination of the South Vietnamese people to defend themselves. On the other hand, I was deeply conscious of the growing criticism we were receiving from the press and from some vocal citizens.

The aspect of the Clifford group's report that troubled me most was its totally negative approach to any possible negotiations. On the basis of remarks made earlier by Rusk, McNamara, and others, and knowing the opinions held by various civilians in the Pentagon and the State Department, I had begun to hope that some new approach might emerge from this study. Rusk said that there were indications that Hanoi might make some changes in its position; but he said he had to describe the possibilities of peace talks as "bleak" at that moment. Later in our discussion I raised again to this subject. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, who had been working with Katzenbach, Rostow, and others in a special Vietnam study group, had concluded with them that a peace initiative might be possible when the worst of the enemy's offensive was over. He said he thought we should make a peace move "no later than May or June."

At that point, Rusk turned to me and suggested that we could stop most of the bombing of the North during the rainy season without too great a military risk. I knew Rusk never raised this kind of matter without considerable thought. That morning he had sent me a memo prepared by a group of British intellectuals, including economist Barbara Ward, which had been referred to him by British Ambassador Sir Patrick Dean. It was not Rusk's usual practice to forward such items immediately to me, so I realized that he was taking the content seriously. The memo described the general situation in Vietnam, and considered and rejected either withdrawal or a massive invasion of the North. Then, in the key paragraph, the memo stated:

Is there an alternative? The Communists have invented one which America might adopt. It is called "fighting and negotiating." At some convenient point this spring, Amer-

ica should do two things simultaneously, stop the bombing of the North and mobilize more men for Vietnam. It should announce that it will talk at any time, appoint negotiators, appeal to world opinion, remind Hanoi of its offers to talk and conduct a major peace offensive. At the same time, it would reinforce its armies in the South and continue the talk of "pacification."

I knew that this proposal was on Rusk's mind at our March 4 meeting. So when he suggested the possibility of a bombing halt, I turned to him and said: "Really get on your horses on that." He said he would.

As our meeting drew to an end, I asked General Wheeler whether he had informed Westmoreland that we would send 22,000 combat and support forces by June 1. Wheeler said that he had not—that he had been waiting for my decision. "Tell him to forget the 100,000," I said. "Tell him 22,000 is all we can give at the moment."

The next day, March 5, I met at lunch with my senior advisers. We resumed the discussion of the previous day and talked about the complications of dealing with a problem such as Vietnam by gradual steps as compared with firm and decisive action early in a crisis. Rusk speculated that if the President's advisers had recommended and President Kennedy had approved sending 100,000 men into Vietnam in 1961, "it might have saved things." I pointed out that Republican candidate Richard Nixon was then criticizing us for not being tougher in our conduct of the war.

We then discussed the *Pueblo* and its crew. When we concluded this review, I asked Rusk about his suggestion the night before for a bombing halt. Rusk replied that he had given it considerable thought. He suggested that we include the following paragraph in the speech I was planning to make on Vietnam:

After consultation with our allies, I have directed that U.S. bombing attacks on North Vietnam be limited to those areas which are integrally related to the battlefield. No reasonable person could expect us to fail to provide maximum support to our men in combat. Whether this step I have taken can be a step toward

lower levels in the government, especially by Pentagon civilians.

It was obvious that the sources for the story did not know or understand what was going on in my mind, and they were not party to my dealings with my senior advisers; nor did they understand the decision-making process. A few people with strongly held opinions were trying to put pressure on me through the press to see things their way. I also felt that there was more than a little political motivation behind their action, since the article appeared two days before the New Hampshire primary. I was convinced that this story, and others like it that would inevitably follow, would create controversy and solve nothing. Such reports would further arouse congressional critics and give Hanoi an impression of increased divisiveness in our country. It might help prolong the war. The fact was that I had firmly decided against sending anything approaching 206,000 additional men to Vietnam and already had so informed my senior advisers.

That same morning, March 20, Ambassador Bunker answered the questions Rusk had raised concerning a bombing halt. The Ambassador was clearly skeptical about any early move of this kind. He thought that in the wake of Tet many Vietnamese would misunderstand another peace initiative. It was most important, he said, that we consult the South Vietnamese leadership before making a move of this kind. He thought it likely that Hanoi would respond, not by taking a real step toward peace but by trying to give the impression it had taken such a step. Getting down to the specific proposals, Bunker said a total bombing pause "would create the greatest difficulties."

General Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy commander in Vietnam, had returned with Wheeler. The three of us met in the family dining

peace is for Hanoi to determine. We shall watch the situation carefully.

Rusk then read a memorandum he had prepared. He pointed out that for the next month or so northern North Vietnam would be subject to the monsoon season, so we would not make a major military sacrifice if we stopped the bombing. We could resume if the North Vietnamese launched an all-out attack on Khe Sanh or on South Vietnam's major cities. Rusk was opposed to sending official representatives "all over the world" to try to convert the bombing halt into negotiations, as we had during the thirty-seven day pause in December 1965-January 1966. He said that we should simply wait for Hanoi's response. The Secretary of State urged that we avoid "theological debates about words" and put the problem instead on the "de facto level of action." If Hanoi failed to act, we would resume bombing. Rusk emphasized that it was important "not to embroider the statement with all sorts of 'conditions' or 'assumptions.'"

I met on March 8 with my senior advisers for another review of Vietnam and a discussion of future plans. By that time, Clifford and the Joint Chiefs had determined that instead of the 22,000 additional troops they had suggested earlier, the figure could now be raised to 33,000. This recommendation presupposed the calling up of selected reserves to active duty. I asked the group for further study. Then one of my advisers mentioned the original proposal for a total deployment of 205,000 men.

"I am not going to approve 205,000," I said. I made it clear that I did not favor this proposal, or anything approaching it.

On Sunday, March 10, Rusk came to the White House for lunch.

That morning, The New York Times carried a story under the headline: "Westmoreland Requests 206,000 More Men, Stirring Debate in Administration." This report claimed that the Wheeler-Westmoreland contingency plan had touched off "a divisive internal debate within high levels of the Johnson administration." I suspected where the story had come from after comparing its content and tone with some of the more pessimistic assessments compiled in previous weeks at

room of the White House on the morning of March 26.

I had scheduled a meeting that day with a group of outside advisers, the so-called Wise Men. I asked the generals to join our discussion and to give the advisers a firsthand description of the military situation.

I was glad that Wheeler and Abrams were there to report on recent developments. I knew that all the outside advisers had been treated to a heavy diet of pessimistic press reports on Vietnam over the past seven or eight weeks. I knew too that staff officers from the State and Defense departments and the CIA had given them a fairly gloomy assessment the night before. I was bothered because that assessment did not square with the situation as I understood it. Later I called in the briefing officers to find out whether they knew something I did not know, or if they had given the Wise Men information that was not reaching me. They insisted that was not the case. I think the explanation was in part that the briefers, in passing on some judgments about Vietnam, especially concerning the situation in rural areas, had used outdated information. In any case, I decided that the briefings had been much less important in shaping the views of these outside advisers than was the general mood of depression and frustration that had swept over so many people as a result of the Tet offensive.

We were moving down to the wire. I had decided that I should announce by the end of March my decision to withdraw from consideration as a candidate for reelection.

The troop proposal had been refined and was almost in final condition. I planned to combine disclosure of those figures with the announcement of a bombing halt at the 20th parallel.

My biggest worry was not Vietnam itself; it was the divisiveness and pessimism at home. I knew the American people were deeply worried. I had seen the effects of Tet on some of the Wise Men. I looked on my approaching speech as an opportunity to help right the balance and provide better perspective. For the collapse of the home front, I knew well, was just what Hanoi was counting on. The enemy had failed in Vietnam; would Hanoi succeed in the United States? I did not think so, but I was deeply concerned.

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Rusk Is Hero in LBJ Account

By Chalmers M. Roberts

The excerpts from former President Johnson's memoirs presented here yesterday and today are the high point of his Vietnam account. The outline long has been known; many of the details, especially about Secretary of State Dean Rusk, are new.

Here we have what the Pentagon Papers did not have or had only in part: the intimate thinking of Rusk, Clifford, McNamara, Fortas, McGeorge Bundy, Rostow, Bunker, Westmoreland and Wheeler. The long-time role of Gen. Wheeler, incidentally, as we now know it though more from other sources than from Mr. Johnson's account is worthy of a full-fledged historical examination.

In many ways, as Mr. Johnson tells his story, the President seems a man making Solomon-like judgments among the competing proposals of his advisers. We hear his reaction, we are given some of his quotations but there is precious little to indicate that he himself introduced new ideas, new proposals. It appears, rather, that he picked and chose from what was put before him.

Yesterday's installment

shows that Mr. Johnson sensed that something was coming—the Communists' Tet offensive of 1968—but what is missing is the sense of disbelief of the evidence so clearly spelled out in Don Oberdorfer's new book, "Tet!" The most Mr. Johnson can bring himself to do is to concede that it was a "shock" and to berate the "emotional and exaggerated reporting."

In today's installment Mr. Johnson goes to great length to expose as a fallacy the idea so prevalent just after his March 31, 1968, speech that there had been what soon thereafter was described as a massive "struggle for the mind of the President." He also goes into detail to deride The New York Times story about the discussion on sending another 206,000 men to Vietnam, seeing in it all sorts of mean motives.

Dean Rusk is obviously Lyndon Johnson's hero. He documents the fact that Rusk on Feb. 27 proposed the limited bombing halt he announced on March 31. There are no direct barbs at Clifford but plenty of quotes from the defense secretary to show that it was very late in the game before he turned from hawk to dove.

What we have in this ac-

count of 1967-68, especially in today's excerpts, is a presidential overview. A great deal of pertinent detail, for those who will have to put it together in some calmer time as history, is in the Pentagon papers, in the Oberdorfer book and, especially as to Wheeler's role, in "Roots of Involvement" by Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel. None can stand alone for a total history; to weave them together will be a monumental task.

The Wise Men, that collection of senior advisers out of office, figure heavily in most accounts of how the March 31 decision came about. But the former President, though his account of what transpires is along familiar lines and has been omitted from the excerpts, sloughs off their advice as having been too much influenced by "the general mood of depression and frustration" in the wake of Tet and as not squaring with "situation as I understood it."

Here, probably, is the key. The "situation" to the President centered on the hard military facts. To so many others it had a high content of the new mood at home and in both Vietnams, North and South.

Looking back from today's

vantage point, the March 31 decision was the great turning point of the war, a turn forced by the Communist assault at Tet whatever the cost was to the enemy. It meant both a lid clamped on the flow of troops to Vietnam and a partial bombing halt that led by fall to a total bombing halt. It meant, as well, the beginning of the talks in Paris.

But there is no sense of this in Mr. Johnson's account. Nowhere does he concede defeat of his past policies. Nowhere does he say that March 31 turned the war around in such a way that the new President the next year would be in a position to begin a long-range de-escalation and withdrawal. Mr. Johnson might well take credit for setting the scene for President Nixon. But that evidently is not the way he then viewed it.

The most he allows himself is the thought, in conclusion, that "the enemy had failed in Vietnam; would Hanoi succeed in the United States?" And as a last desperate effort, it seems in retrospect, to prevent that he took himself out of contention for another term in the White House.

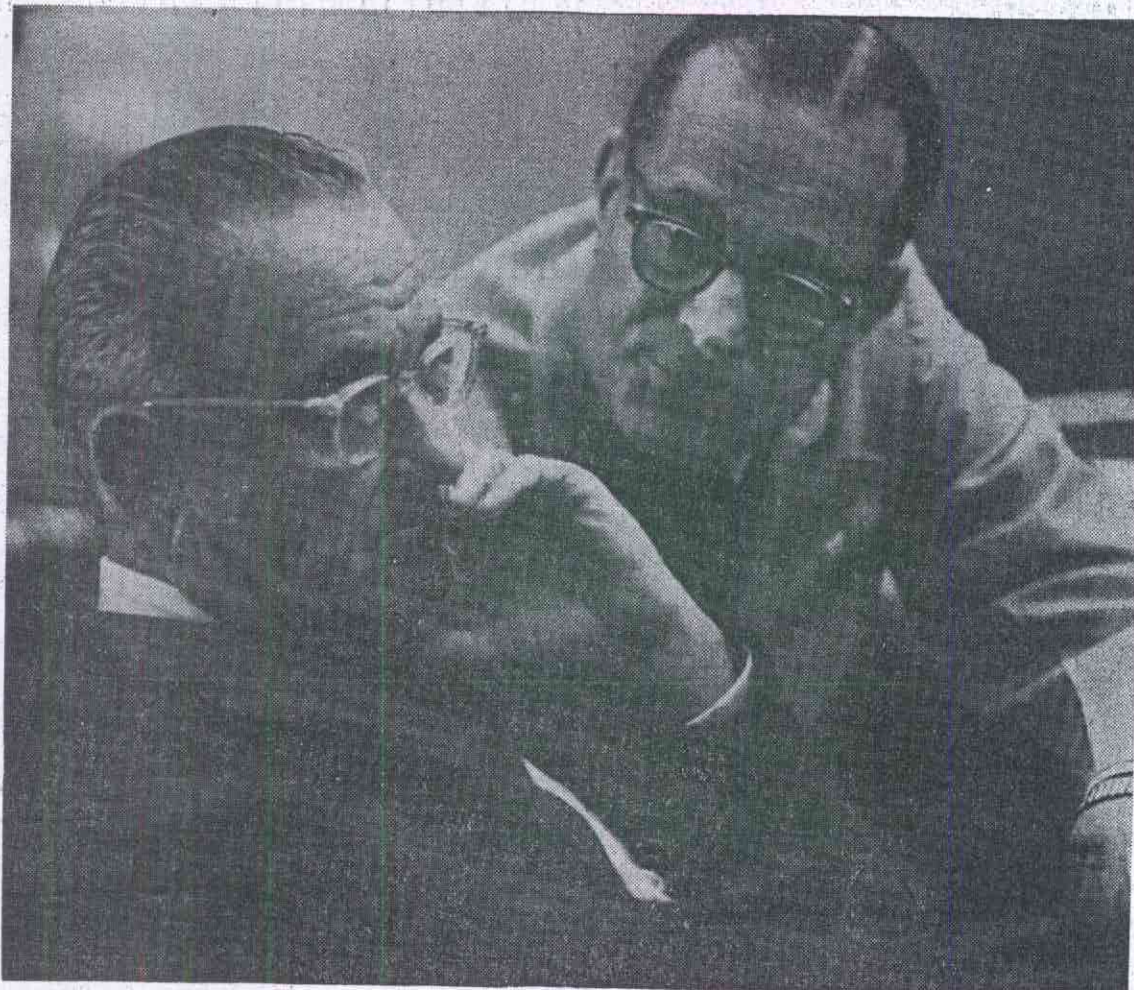


Photo by Y. R. Okonofe

President Johnson and Sen. Earle Wheeler discuss Vietnam needs in 1965 to help break stalemate.