

The Painful Process of Decision-Making

This is the ninth 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 One)

ON MARCH 31, 1968, while sitting at my desk in the White House and facing the shiny eyes of the television cameras, I announced four major decisions. I would not accept my party's nomination as candidate for another term. I was stopping most of the bombing of North Vietnam in the hope that it would lead to peace. I had decided to make the expansion and modernization of South Vietnam's armed forces a goal of even higher priority. Finally, to meet existing needs, I had decided to make a small increase in the size of our own military forces in Vietnam.

Many factors helped to shape those decisions. In describing them, I will also be describing the Presidential decision-making process. Many books and articles have been written over the years about the way a President makes his decisions. Some have been written by intimates of past Presidents, others by historians and scholars, and still others by men who were neither. But little information on the subject has

been supplied by the Presidents themselves. They alone know how and why they reached particular decisions and the many considerations that affected them.

A President reaches a major decision through a complicated process. It is often a painful process as well. Many different threads were woven into the final decisions I announced on March 31. The military and political developments in Vietnam were crucial factors in shaping the ultimate result. Another was the condition of enemy forces and the shape of enemy intentions. Still another strand was the diplomatic front, the possibility of getting into meaningful talks with Hanoi. The state of mind and morale on our domestic front was most important. Finally, and underlying much of my thinking on these other matters, was my personal decision to leave the White House the following January.

In April 1967 General Westmoreland submitted two suggestions for possible troop increases. One called for a "minimum essential force." The other described an "optimum force." The first proposal involved an increase of two- and one-third divisions and five air squadrons, about 80,000 men. The second suggested an increase in our forces of four and two-thirds divisions and ten air squadrons, raising our force level in Vietnam by 200,000, to a total



... I shall not seek and I will not accept ...



**LBJ's
Vantage Point**

of 680,000 men by July 1968. The military planners were also considering a program of increased air strikes against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces that were enjoying almost

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complete sanctuary in Laos and Cambodia. Possible ground action against the southern part of North Vietnam was also studied on a contingency basis.

McNamara strongly opposed the proposal for an "optimum force." He thought we should limit the increase to 30,000 men. He advised against ground action in Laos or Cambodia. We were all concerned that entering Laos with ground forces would end all hope of reviving the 1962 Laos agreement, fragile though it was, and would greatly increase the forces needed in Southeast Asia. With an unfriendly Prince Sihanouk still in power in Cambodia, we feared that any action taken there would lead him to ask Peking for help. On bombing, McNamara again proposed concentrating on the area below the 20th parallel. Any ground action against the North, he thought, would bring Communist China into the war with both ground and air forces. He also considered a confrontation with the Soviet Union elsewhere in the world a distinct possibility.

The following day, July 13, I met with McNamara and Generals Wheeler and Westmoreland in the White House family dining room. McNamara told me that he and the military leaders had conferred all morning and had reached "complete accord" on the question of troop levels. The requirement would be in the neighborhood of 45,000 men, he said, and the approved troop strength in South Vietnam should be raised to 525,000 for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1968. After additional study, I approved this proposal.

The first phase of the Communists' winter-spring offensive began in September 1967.

At a breakfast meeting on November 21, I asked my advisers for a status report on the speed-up of our previously scheduled troop movements. I told them: "The clock is ticking. We need to get all the additional troops moved as fast as we can."

During this period McNamara made a major proposal for a new course of action. At our lunch meeting on October 31, 1967, he said that he believed continuation of our current course of action in Southeast Asia would be dangerous, costly, and unsatisfactory to our people. At my suggestion, he returned to the Pentagon after the meeting and set down his thoughts in a long memorandum which I received the next day, November 1.

"The alternative possibilities," he wrote, "lie in the stabilization of our military operations in the South (possibly with fewer U.S. casualties) and of our air operations in the North,

along with a demonstration that our air attacks on the North are not blocking negotiations leading to a peaceful settlement." He recommended stopping all the bombing in the North by the end of the year.

I had already received the views of one former staff member. McGeorge Bundy had been in Washington two weeks previously and had talked with McNamara and other officials.

Bundy's disagreement with McNamara's plan concerned the bombing halt. "The basic objection to an unconditional pause," he wrote, "is simply that the odds are very heavy that you would have to resume, and that if the pause is truly unconditional, the circumstances of any such resumption would be very damaging to us both

at home and abroad." He suggested a bombing pause only if, through direct contacts with Hanoi, we received solid grounds for believing that such a move would be productive.

I sent McNamara's memo to Bundy's successor as national security adviser, Walt Rostow, for comment. He too favored holding our forces to already approved levels. Rostow opposed additional actions against the North and expansion of the war into neighboring countries. He believed that we should "gradually transfer the major burden of the fighting to the South Vietnamese forces." But he opposed an unconditional bombing halt. He thought that it would signify weakness to Hanoi and to our own people. He believed that a bombing halt would lighten Hanoi's burdens and encourage them, if they entered into talks, to protract the negotiations.

I sent the main elements of McNamara's plan, without identifying the author, to General Maxwell Taylor, whom I deeply respected, for his analysis and comments. On November 3 General Taylor sent me his strongly negative reaction. He described the proposal as one form of "pull-back" strategy.

I also sent McNamara's proposals to two long-time friends whose judgment I valued, Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford. I asked them to weigh the arguments pro and con and to give me their opinion on the merits of both. Fortas sent me his reaction on November 5. His reply was strong and persuasive. He had studied the evidence available and thought that it weighed heavily against the suggested bombing pause. "Our duty," he wrote, "is to do what we consider right—not what we consider (on a highly dubious basis with which I do not agree) the 'American people' want. I repeat that I believe they do not want us to achieve less than our objectives—namely to prevent North Vietnamese

domination of South Vietnam by military force or subversion; and to continue to exert such influence as we reasonably can in Asia to prevent an ultimate Communist take-over."

Two days later Clark Clifford sent me his comments. He felt that McNamara's plan would "retard the possibility of concluding the conflict rather than accelerating it."

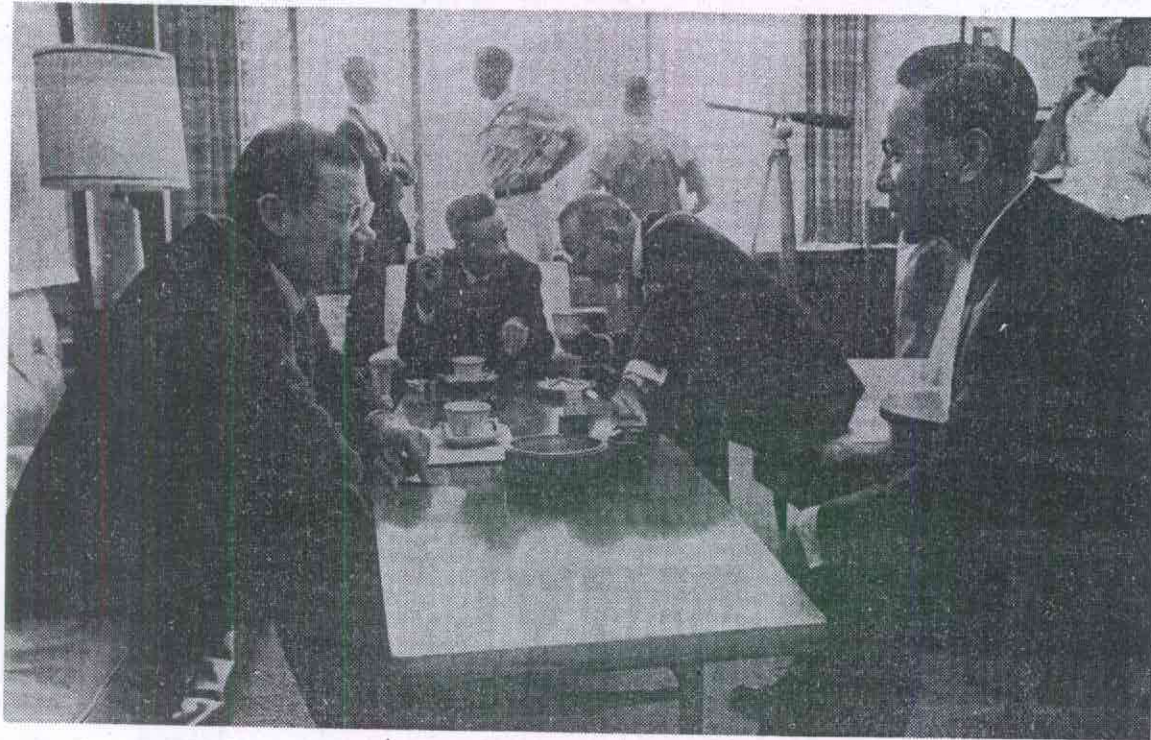
"The President and every man around him wants to end the war," he concluded. "But the future of our children and grandchildren requires that it be ended by accomplishing our purpose, i.e., the thwarting of the aggression by North Vietnam, aided by China and Russia."

General Westmoreland forcefully opposed a bombing halt. He argued that an effective air program required pressure against North Vietnam's entire logistical system, and under any circumstances he considered air strikes up to the 20th parallel "absolutely essential." He was concerned for the safety of American and allied forces near the demilitarized zone.

Westmoreland hoped that the approval level of 525,000 men would be a maximum requirement, but he said it would be "foolish" to announce that it was our limit.

On November 20, in answer to my request, Dean Rusk sent me his personal views of McNamara's proposals. On stabilization of our effort, Rusk agreed with McNamara but opposed a public announcement. "To do so," he said, "would give the enemy a firm base upon which to plan and redistribute his manpower and other assets." Rusk agreed fully with McNamara's proposal to give the South Vietnamese greater responsibility for their own security. Regarding a bombing halt, the Secretary of State said:

"I am skeptical of an extended pause in the bombing because I don't know who would be persuaded. Hanoi would call any pause (i.e., not permanent) an ultimatum. We know of their 'fight



Associated Press

Former Secretary of Defense McNamara confers with South Vietnam's Nguyen Van Thieu, then chief of state, in Honolulu meeting in 1966 while former President Johnson confers with them Premier Nguyen Cao Ky.

and negotiate' strategy discussions. For those in the outside world pressing for a halt in the bombing, no pause would be long enough. No one has said to me that his view would be changed if we had a prolonged pause in the bombing and there were no response from Hanoi."

Rusk did think, however, that we should "take the drama out of our bombing" by cutting back on operations in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. He believed we should carry out just enough bombing in the northern sector to keep North Vietnam's anti-aircraft guns where they were—to prevent them from being moved farther south—and to keep large numbers of North Vietnamese busy with repairing damages and maintaining communications so that they could not move into combat in the South. Finally, he thought we should not permit "a complete sanctuary in the northern part of North Vietnam and thereby eliminate

this incentive for peace."

I pondered McNamara's proposals over the next few weeks. During that period I received many reports pointing to increased offensive action by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. As I read those reports and watched the enemy's offensive take shape, I became convinced we would have to wait until the Communists realized that their military ambitions were unattainable before we could hope to get peace talks started. For my own records, I then took a step that I rarely made during my years in the White House. On December 18, 1967, I wrote a memorandum for the permanent files giving my personal views of McNamara's proposals.

I had decided that a one-sided and total bombing halt would be a mistake at that time, that it would be interpreted in Hanoi and at home as a sign of weakening will. I thought we should continue to hit significant military targets but I insisted we weigh heavily in each case whether U.S. losses might be excessive and whether any strike

might increase the risk of Peking or Moscow becoming more involved. I wanted to remove as much drama as possible from our bombing effort while doing what had to be done. In my memorandum I said that I had not ruled out calling a bombing halt in the future if there were "reason for confidence that it would move us toward peace."

I also expressed my opposition to announcing a policy of stabilization. I felt that such an announcement would only make things easier for military planners in Hanoi. On the other hand, I saw no basis for increasing the already approved level of U.S. forces. Finally, I accepted McNamara's suggestion that we review our military operations with a view to cutting our casualties and speeding the turn-over of responsibility to the South Vietnamese.

On December 21 I met in Canberra with the Australian Cabinet.

I told the Australian ministers I was certain Hanoi was under great pressure to gain some kind of victory and that I foresaw the North Vietnamese using "kamikaze" tactics in the weeks ahead, committing their troops in a wave of suicide attacks.

Looking back on early 1968, I am convinced I made a mistake by not saying more about Vietnam in my State of the Union report on January 17, 1968. In that address I underscored how intensely our will was being tested by the struggle in Vietnam, but I did not go into details concerning the build-up of enemy forces or warn of the early major combat I believed was in the offing. I relied instead on the "background" briefings that my advisers and I, as well as the State and Defense departments, had provided members of the press corps for many weeks. In those briefings we had stressed that heavy action could be expected soon. This was one of those delicate situations in which we had to try to inform our own people without alerting the enemy to our knowledge of its plans. In retrospect, I think I was too cautious. If I had forecast the possibilities, the American people would have been better prepared for what was soon to come.

Our intelligence sources indicated the enemy's next attacks in the winter-spring offensive would be launched around the Tet period, the Vietnamese holiday season during the Lunar New Year.

The enemy's expected offensive flared up early on January 30 in the northern and central provinces. The main assault in the rest of the country began twenty-four hours later.

Why did the enemy commit so much to this assault? It was clear that the leaders in Hanoi were under strenuous pressure to achieve an impression-

making success, however costly. The goals they sought in their Tet offensive were obvious. They hoped to deliver a massive blow that would put the South Vietnamese army out of action. They failed. The South Vietnamese turned back the enemy in every major action and emerged from the experience more confident than ever before. The Communists aimed to topple the South Vietnamese government. They expected their offensive to produce a popular uprising. They failed. In fact, the Saigon government emerged from the experience with greater strength and with more solid backing from the South Vietnamese people than ever before. For the first time the government moved toward full manpower mobilization. Finally, the Communists wanted to

sion. The media seemed to be in competition as to who could provide the most lurid and depressing accounts. Columnists unsympathetic to American involvement in Southeast Asia jumped on the bandwagon. Some senatorial critics and numerous opponents of America's war effort added their voices to the chorus of defeatism. The American people and even a number of officials in government, subjected to this daily barrage of bleakness and near panic, began to think that we must have suffered a defeat.

This is not to imply that Tet was not a shock, in one degree or another, to all of us. We knew that a show of strength was coming; it was more massive than we had anticipated. We knew that the Communists were aiming at a number of population centers; we did not expect them to attack as many as they did. We knew that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were trying to achieve better coordination of their countrywide moves; we did not believe they would be able to carry out the level of coordination they demonstrated. We expected a large force to attack; it was larger than we had estimated. Finally, it was difficult to believe that the Communists would so profane their own people's sacred holiday.

But there were elements of surprise in the other direction as well. We assumed that any coordinated offensive would include a major effort to overrun Khe Sanh; that effort never materialized because of our bombardment. We assumed Viet Cong intelligence could accurately estimate the reactions of the Vietnamese people; their estimate proved thoroughly wrong. Some officials doubted the ability of the South Vietnamese to withstand a massive assault by enemy main-force units; in actual fact, on balance the performance of the South Vietnamese troops was excellent. The Communists expected the nationwide blow they were undertaking to shatter confidence and destroy the organizational fabric of the South Vietnamese government; the government's performance improved after Tet.

So there were many unexpected elements in the Tet affair, some positive, some negative. I was prepared for the events of Tet, though the scale of the attacks and the size of the Communist force were greater than I had anticipated. I did not expect the enemy effort to have the impact on American thinking that it achieved. I was not surprised that elements of the press, the academic community, and the Congress reacted as they did. I was surprised and disappointed that the enemy's efforts produced such a dismal effect on various people inside government and others outside whom I had always regarded as staunch and unflappable. Hanoi must have been delighted; it was exactly the reaction they sought.

erode the resolve of the American people, just as they had brought about the collapse of French will in 1954 by their victory at Dien Bien Phu. This plan had been painfully obvious to us for some time. As I warned a group of Congressmen at a meeting in the Cabinet Room late in the summer of 1967: "Ho Chi Minh thinks he can win in Washington as he did in Paris." I wish I could report that the enemy failed as decisively with that goal as it did with the others.

There was a great deal of emotional and exaggerated reporting of the Tet offensive in our press and on televi-