Post 10-20-71

Congress Responds To Tonkin Incident

Associated Press

Mr. Johnson and Dean Rusk: The Secretary feared the reaction is "we will not pursue our commitments . . ."

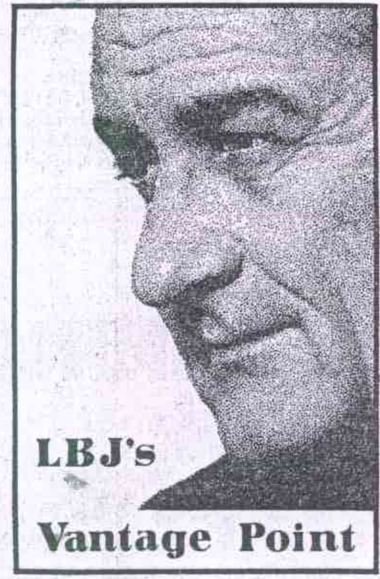
This is the fourth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE VIETNAM 1964-1965"

In August 1964 an unexpected crisis developed, one that threatened for a time to change the nature of the war in Vietnam. During the early hours of Sunday morning, August 2, a high-priority message came in reporting that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked the destroyer USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Maddox was on what we called the De Soto patrol. One purpose was to spot evidence of Hanoi's continuing infiltration of men and war supplies into South Vietnam by sea. Another was to gather electronic intelligence.

Another form of naval activity, not connected with our patrol, was going on in the area. During 1964 the South Vietnamese navy made small-scale strikes against installations along the North Vietnamese coast. The purpose was to interfere with Hanoi's continuing program of sending men and supplies into the South by sea. Senators and Representatives designated to oversee our intelligence operations were fully briefed on these South Vietnamese activities, and on our supporting role, in January 1964, again in May, twice in June, and again in early August. Secretary McNamara described the operations, codenamed 34-A, in a closed session with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on August 3, 1964.



LBJ's Vantage Point

One 34-A attack occurred on July 30. At the time, the destroyer Maddox had not started its patrol and was 120 miles

See JOHNSON, A12, Col. 1

—The Washington Post

President Johnson confers with Gen. William Westmoreland, left, and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.

JOHNSON, From A1

JOHNSON, From A1

away. A second South Vietnamese attack took place the night of August 3 when the De Soto patrol was at least 70 miles away. It was later alleged that our destroyers were supporting the South Vietnamese naval action. The fact is our De Soto commanders did not even know where or when the 34-A attacks would occur.

Two days later the North Vietnamese struck again at our destroyers, this time at night (midmorning Washington time) on August 4. A few minutes after nine o'clock I had a call from McNamara. He informed me that our intelligence people had intercepted a message that strongly indicated the North Vietnamese were preparing another attack on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf. Soon we received messages from the destroyer Maddox that its radar and that of the USS C. Turner Joy had spotted vessels they believed to be hostile. The enemy ships appeared to be preparing an ambush. The Maddox and C. Turner Joy had changed course to avoid contact, but they then sent word that the enemy vessels were closing in at high speed. Within an hour the destroyers advised that they were being attacked by torpedoes and were firing on the enemy PT boats. As messages flowed in from Pacific Command Headquarters, McNamara passed along the key facts to me.

We had scheduled a noon meeting of the National Security Council to discuss the situation in Cyprus, and several key advisers had assembled for that session.

I closed the NSC meeting and asked Rusk, McNamara, Vance, McCone, and Bundy to join me for lunch. The unanimous view of those advisers was that we could not ignore this second provocation and that the attack required retaliation. I agreed. We decided on air strikes against North Vietnamese PT boats and their bases plus a strike on one oil depot.

During the afternoon additional intelligence reports flowed in. We intercepted a message from one of the attacking North Vietnamese boats in which it boasted of having fired at two "enemy airplanes" and claimed to have damaged one. The North Vietnamese skipper reported that his unit had "sacrificed two comrades." Our experts said this meant either two enemy boats or two men in the attack group. Another message to North Vietnamese PT boat headquarters boasted: "Enemy vessel perhaps wounded." Clearly the North Vietnamese knew they were attacking us.

Action reports continued to arrive from our destroyers, and from the Pacific Command. A few were ambiguous. One from the destroyer Maddox questioned whether the many reports of enemy torpedo firings were all valid.

I instructed McNamara to investigate these reports and obtain clarification. He immediately got in touch with Admiral U. S. G. Sharp Jr., the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and the Admiral in turn made contact with the De Soto patrol. McNamara and his civilian and military specialist went over all the evidence in specific detail. We wanted to be absolutely certain that our ships had actually been attacked before we retaliated.

Admiral Sharp called McNamara to report that after checking all the reports and evidence, he had no doubt whatsoever that an attack had taken place. McNamara and his associates reached the same firm conclusion. Detailed studies made after the incident confirmed this judgment.

I summoned the National Security Council for another meeting at 6:15 p.m. to discuss in detail the incident and our plans for a sharp but limited response. About seven o'clock I met with the congressional leadership in the White House for the same purpose. I told them that I believed a congressional resolution of support for our entire position in Southeast Asia was necessary and would strengthen our hand. I said that we might be forced to further action, and that I did not "want to go in unless Congress goes in with me."

I was determined, from the time I became President, to seek the fullest support of Congress for any major action that I took, whether in foreign affairs or in the domestic field.

Concerning Vietnam, I repeatedly told Secretaries Rusk and McNamara that I never wanted to receive any recommendation for action we might have to take unless it was accompanied by a proposal for assuring the backing of Congress.

Because of this, it became routine for all contingency plans to include suggestions for informing Congress and winning its support. As we considered the possibility of having to expand our efforts in Vietnam, proposals for seeking a congressional resolution became part of the normal contingency planning effort. But I never adopted these proposals, for I continued to hope that we could keep our role in Vietnam limited.

With the attack on our ships in the Tonkin Gulf, the picture changed. We could not be sure how Hanoi would react to our reprisal strike. We thought it was possible they might overreact and launch an all-out invasion of South Vietnam. They might ask the Chinese Communists to join them in

the battle. Any one of a dozen things could have happened, and I wanted us to be ready for the worst. Part of being ready, to me, was having the advance support of Congress for anything that might prove to be necessary. It was better to have a firm congressional resolution, and not need it, than some day to need it and not have it. This was the thinking behind my decision to ask Congress for its backing.

My first major decision on Vietnam had been to reaffirm President Kennedy's policies. This was my second major decision: to order retaliation against the Tonkin Gulf attacks and to seek a congressional resolution in support of our Southeast Asia policy.

* * *

The idea of hitting North Vietnam with air power, either on a reprisal basis or in a sustained campaign, had been discussed inside the government in Saigon, and in the American press for a long time.

However, during my first year in the White House no formal proposal for an air campaign against North Vietnam ever came to me as the agreed suggestion of my principal advisers. Whenever the subject came up, one or another of them usually mentioned the risk of giving Communist China an excuse for massive intervention in Vietnam. Rusk was concerned that putting direct pressure on North Vietnam might encourage the Soviets to raise the level of tension around Berlin, in the Middle East, or elsewhere. I fully concurred. Our goals in Vietnam were limited, and so were our actions. I wanted to keep them that way.

Acting on the September 1964 order, the military forces made plans to retaliate by air against the North if the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong hit U.S. forces or carried out some kind of "spectacular" attack in South Vietnam. Twice before the year was out I was asked to put those contingency plans into effect.

On January 27, 1965, Mac Bundy sent me a memo saying that he and Bob McNamara were "pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat." They had reached a critical moment in their thinking and wanted me to know how they felt. They argued that the time had come to use more power than we had thus far employed.

As Bundy put it:

"The Vietnamese know just as we do that the Vietcong are gaining in the countryside. Meanwhile, they see the enormous power of the United States withheld, and they get little sense of firm and active U.S. policy. They feel that we are unwilling to take serious risks. In one sense, all of this is outrageous, in the light of all that we have done and all that we are ready to do if they will only pull up their socks. But it is a fact—or at least so McNamara and I now think."

The January 27 memo concluded by pointing out that Dean Rusk did not agree with the McNamara-Bundy assessment. Rusk knew things were going badly, and he did not claim that the deterioration could be stopped. "What he [Rusk] does say," the memo stated, "is that the consequences of both escalation and withdrawal are so bad that we simply must find a way of making our present policy work. This would be good if it was possible. Bob and I do not think it is."

When I asked McCone what he would recommend he made several positive suggestions, including bombing selected targets in North Vietnam, starting at the 17th parallel and working north on a progressively intensive basis.

This was the atmosphere and the trend of thinking in official Washington when word came on the afternoon of February 6 that the Communists had carried out major attacks on the U.S. Army advisers' barracks at Pleiku and on a U.S. Army helicopter base about four miles away, as well as on several Vietnamese targets.

After long discussion I authorized the strikes, provided the South Vietnamese government agreed.

We had also advised the Russians of the reason for our retaliation and had assured them that Kosygins' visit to the Far East had no connection with our timing. The North Vietnamese had chosen the time by attacking our men and installations.

But the Viet Cong continued their terrorism, sabotage, and attacks. As a result, we went north again on March 2 to attack an ammunition depot and a naval base. We then stopped bombing again for a period of eleven days. After that, our attacks became more frequent.

The policy of gradual but steady reprisal against North Vietnam for its continuing aggression in the South had been put into action. This was my third major Vietnam decision.

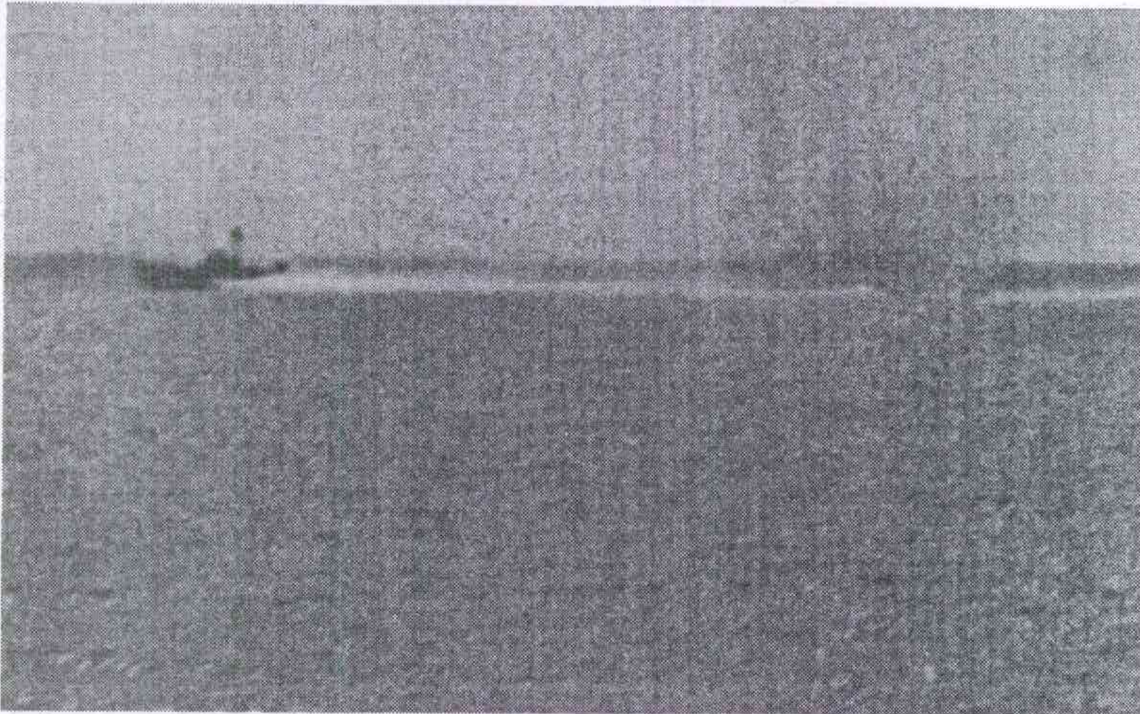
* * *

At 9 p.m. on the night of April 7 I stepped to the podium of an auditorium on the Johns Hopkins campus and into the glare of television lights, for the speech was being broadcast live.

The United States would negotiate without preconditions. This was my fourth major Vietnam decision.

* * *

My fifth, and by far the hardest, Vietnam decision lay ahead. Through-



U.S. Navy Photo

The Navy says this photo, taken from the destroyer Maddox on Aug. 2, 1964, shows one of three North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacking in the Tonkin Gulf. The Defense Department first made the photo public on Dec. 22, 1967.

out the 1950s and especially after 1958 the regime in Hanoi had totally ignored the provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1954. In the face of this situation, President Kennedy had decided in 1961, in answer to an appeal from the Vietnamese government, that our self-imposed restrictions on military equipment and personnel were both dangerous and legally meaningless. After the basic decisions of December 1961 to step up aid to the South Vietnamese, President Kennedy had increased our military advisory force from about 700 to more than 16,000 by the time I took office. We had also improved both the quality and quantity of weapons and other supplies going to the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Once sustained bombing of the North began, my advisers and I were convinced that the Communists would make the air base near Danang a high-priority target, since many air strikes were launched there. The Vietnamese authorities shared our conviction. In March I agreed to General Westmoreland's request that we land two Marine battalions to provide security for the Danang air base.

On April 1 and 2 I met in the White House with Taylor and my principal advisers to consider carefully various recommendations that had been made. The proposals that came to me were a compromise among the views of three groups: those (especially in the armed forces) who wanted to move fast and in strength; my civilain advisers and Ambassador Taylor, who thought we should proceed, but more deliberately; and in a few who opposed any significant involvement in the ground war.

Among the specific military actions I approved were: an 18,000- to 20,000-man increase in U.S. logistic and support forces; deployment of two additional Marine battalions (for a total of four) and one Marine air squadron to the Danang-Hue area, with one of the battalions to go to Phu Bai, near Hue, to protect communications facilities and an airfield in that area; a change in mission for the Marines to permit "their more active use" under rules to be approved by the Secretaries of State and Defense.

This did not mean, as has been frequently interpreted, that the Marines were to have an unlimited combat role. It did mean more aggressive patrolling and limited counterinsurgency combat operations in the vicinity of the Marine bases. I took seriously the reservations that Max Taylor had cited concerning the difficulties American troops might have operating in jungles against a guerrilla enemy. I wanted to be sure that our men could do the job and that they would not be fighting at a disadvantage.

I was not ready to send additional men without the most detailed analysis. As part of this survey, I asked Sec-

retary McNamara to go to Vietnam again in July to confer with the Vietnamese leaders and with our own military and civilian officials.

One of the first things General Thieu and Prime Minister Ky told McNamara was that they were convinced that American and perhaps other foreign forces would be needed to hold back the Communist attackers. When McNamara asked for their estimate of how many might be needed, the Vietnamese leaders said they thought that in addition to the forty-four battalions they had already requested, there should be another combat division. Their total estimate called for about 200,000 American men in all categories.

McNamara returned to Washington on July 20 and reported to me immediately.

"It should be understood," McNamara said, "that the deployment of more men (perhaps 100,000) may be necessary early in 1966, and that the deployment of additional forces thereafter is possible but will depend on developments."

He suggested that we ask Congress for the authority to call up 235,000 men in the reserves and the National Guard. He also proposed increasing the size of the regular armed forces by 375,000 men through increased recruitment and draft calls and extensions of tours of duty. The total increase in the military forces would then be 600,000 men by the middle of 1966. We would also have to ask Congress for an additional supplemental appropriation.

I summoned my top advisers to the White House on July 21, the day after McNamara returned.

Dean Rusk expressed one worry that was much on my mind. It lay at the heart of our Vietnam policy. "If the Communist world finds out that we will not pursue our commitments to the end," he said, "I don't know where they will stay their hand."

I felt sure they would *not* stay their hand. If we ran out in Southeast Asia, I could see trouble ahead in every part of the globe—not just in Asia but in the Middle East and in Europe, in Africa and in Latin America. I was convinced that our retreat from this challenge would open the path to World War III.

A President searches his mind and his heart for the answers, so that when he decides on a course of action it is in the long-range best interests of the country, its people, and its security.

That is what I did—when I was alone and sleepless at night in the Executive Mansion, away from official cables and advisers; when I sat alone in the Aspen Lodge at Camp David; when I walked along the banks of the Pedernales River or looked out over the Texas hill country. In those lonely vigils I tried to think through what would happen to our nation and to the world if we did not act with courage and stamina—if we let South Vietnam fall to Hanoi.

This is what I could foresee: First, from all the evidence available to me it seemed likely that all of Southeast Asia would pass under Communist control, slowly or quickly, but inevitably, at least down to Singapore but almost certainly to Djakarta. I realize that some Americans believe they have, through talking with one another, repealed the domino theory. In 1965 there was no indication in Asia, or from Asians, that this was so. On both sides of the line between Communist and non-Communist Asia the struggle for Vietnam and Laos was regarded as a struggle for the fate of Southeast Asia. The evidence before me as President confirmed the previous assessments of President Eisenhower and of President Kennedy.

Second, I knew our people well enough to realize that if we walked away from Vietnam and let Southeast Asia fall, there would follow a divisive and destructive debate in our country. This had happened when the Communists took power in China. But that was very different from the Vietnam conflict. We had a solemn treaty commitment to Southeast Asia. We had an international agreement on Laos made as late as 1962 that was being violated flagrantly. We had the word of three Presidents that the United States would not permit this aggression to succeed. A divisive debate about "who lost Vietnam" would be, in my judgment, even more destructive to our national life than the argument over China had been. It would inevitably increase isolationist pressures from the right and the left and cause a pulling back from our commitments in Europe and the Middle East as well as in Asia.

Third, our allies not just in Asia but throughout the world would conclude that our word was worth little or nothing. Those who had counted so long for their security on American commitments would be deeply shaken and vulnerable.

Fourth, knowing what I did of the policies and actions of Moscow and Peking, I was as sure as a man could be that if we did not live up to our commitment in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, they would move to exploit the disarray in the United States and in the alliances of the Free World. They might move independently or they might move together. But move they would—whether through nuclear blackmail, through subversion, with regular armed forces, or in some other manner. As nearly as one can be certain of anything, I knew they could not resist the opportunity to expand their control into the vacuum of power we would leave behind us.

Finally, as we faced the implications of what we had done as a nation, I was sure the United States would not then passively submit to the consequences. With Moscow and Peking and perhaps others moving forward, we would return to a world role to prevent their full takeover of Europe, Asia, and the MIDDLE East—after they had committed themselves.

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LBJ Adds Some Facts, Omits Others

By Chalmers M. Roberts

Additions and omissions mark former President Johnson's account of the 1964-65 escalation of the Vietnam war, it is evident from the excerpts from his book published today.

Probably the single most disputed issue in Mr. Johnson's conduct of the war was the alleged Aug. 4, 1964, attack in the Tonkin Gulf by North Vietnamese boats on two American destroyers, the Maddox and Turner Joy. Mr. Johnson declared then, and reaffirms in his book, that the evidence of the attack was conclusive. As a result he sought and got the Tonkin Gulf Resolution from Congress.

But his critics contend the attack either never took place or even if something did occur Mr. Johnson blew it up out of all proportion because he already was determined to strike North Vietnam from the air. At least three books have now been written about the affair and the thrust of each has been on the critical side.

American intercepts of North Vietnamese messages were heavily relied upon at the time to prove that the attack took place. Their texts, however, have never been made public though Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in 1968 did summarize them for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and show the texts to the senators in private. Now the former President quotes from two of the messages and concludes that "clearly the North Vietnamese knew they were attacking us."

The quotes will not satisfy the doubters. Why did not Mr. Johnson reveal the complete texts, they will ask? And why not, indeed. Cryptographic protection is the usual answer but it is not convincing, given the nature of current procedures at the time. Mr. Johnson thus would seem only to have reopened the argument.

In this installment of his memoirs the former President discusses four of the first five major Vietnam decisions. The Tonkin retaliation was one of them; the Johns Hopkins speech another; the policy of reprisal by air another. The fifth "and by far the hardest" was sending ground troops to Vietnam to join the battle.

As the former President describes all these decisions, each was reached with great soul searching. Yet, read as a whole in hindsight, there was an inevitable progression from one to the other, especially from Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against the North, to the shipment of massive numbers of troops to the South.

As he so often did while in office, Mr. Johnson saw his actions as steps logically following the policies of his two predecessors, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. Omitted from today's excerpts are descriptions of Gen. Eisenhower's personal encouragement to Mr. Johnson.)

The air war simply was not enough; only ground forces could save South Vietnam. In March, 1965, Gen. William Westmoreland's request for the first two Marine battalions was granted. Then on April 1 came the big decision to beef up the manpower though the Army forces still were described as "logistic and support." It would be only a matter of time, however, until combat forces would have to go as such.

Mr. Johnson's account of the April 1 decision lists three steps as "among the specific military actions I approved." But the Pentagon papers made public something the former President totally skips: his instructions to avoid telling the American public about the major steps he was taking. This was contained in the National Security Action Memorandum 328, over the signature of McGeorge Bundy, to the Secretaries of State and Defense and the head of the CIA detailing Mr. Johnson's "decisions."

It was this memorandum which contained the statement that "the President desires" that "premature publicity be avoided by all possible precautions" on the key new military steps. "The President's desire," the memo concluded, "is that these movements and changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy."

If this decision then was to be painted as "wholly consistent with existing policy" how can it now be "by far the hardest" of five decisions Mr. Johnson had then taken about the war? Herein lies part of the credibility gap that plagued him in office and which today's installment fails to dispel.