

'Others to Blame'

LBJ Fixation On Viet War



—Pierotti—Ben Roth Agency

By Don Bacon

WASHINGTON — (NNS) — According to those who have gotten close to Lyndon Johnson since he left the White House — and very few have — he has become a man obsessed with the Vietnam war.

The only journalist who has been able to interview the former President, Walter Cronkite of CBS, found that Johnson has developed "a real fixation on the Vietnam war."

Cronkite, who filmed nearly 100 hours of interviews with Johnson in 1969 and 1970 (as part of a \$1 million contract between LBJ and CBS), discovered to his own surprise that Johnson still vehemently believes in the war.

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"He believes he was right," Cronkite told a reporter. "He fails to understand the credibility gap. Usually, in men of his nature, retrospect brings candor, and they admit that not every step they took was right. though they did the best they could, et cetera. With Johnson it's none of that. He finds others to blame for the failures, not himself. It surprised me very much."

Surrounded by at least a million security classified documents that he took with him from the White House, the former President has been passionately constructing his own history of the war.

Top secret messages, cablegrams, memos and studies — such as the 47-volume Pentagon report that fell into the hands of the New York Times — are the foundation upon which the LBJ version of the war has been built.

The Johnson explanation of Vietnam is now ready to be published this fall as six chapters of his first book on the Johnson presidential years.

Vindication?

From the beginning, Johnson has believed the Vietnam documents would clear away the confusion over his role in escalating the war and would vindicate him. He has felt that if the public could only study the secret papers, as he has, it could then understand how and why the United States got so deeply and

tragically involved in Southeast Asia.

Pleading his case for a favorable judgment from history, as all Presidents do, Johnson was depending on the documents for his salvation.

When Johnson got back to Texas he even tried to speed up the removal of security restrictions on documents of his administration. He wanted scholars and the public to have access to those papers now — while the important histories of his reign were being written — not 20 to 30 years from now.

“He just was not sure in his own mind that it was necessary to keep all these papers under wraps for so long,” said Harry J. Middleton, director of the LBJ Library, where a vast horde of war-related documents are stored in a guarded vault.

Classification

Under existing regulations, the departments or agencies most directly involved determine when security-related documents can be declassified.

On most such documents, classification is automatically lowered at intervals of three to 12 years, but usually cannot be removed entirely without the express consent of the agency or department most affected.

At Johnson's request, representatives of State and Defense spent some weeks poring over the classified papers in the LBJ Library's possession. “They came up with the judgment that the classification rules should not be tampered with,” said Middleton, “and that it would not be in the national interest to modify those rules at all.”

So now a good part of those war-related classified papers have been spread across the pages of various newspapers.