

By Lyndon B. Johnson: Bombing Potential Intervention by China Termed Brake on U.S. Response

INSTALLMENT IV

Following is the fourth of 11 installments of excerpts from Lyndon Baines Johnson's memoirs of his Presidential years, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 1 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

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, Aug. 2, a high-priority message came in reporting that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked the destroyer U.S.S. Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin. The duty officer in the White House situation room gathered all the available data, prepared a summary and sent it to my bedroom. The report began:

"Early this morning the U.S.S. Maddox was attacked by three DRV [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] PT boats while on patrol approximately 30 miles off the North Vietnamese coast in the Gulf of Tonkin.

"The Captain of the Maddox returned the fire with 5-inch guns and requested air support from the carrier Ticonderoga on station nearby in connection with reconnaissance flights in that area.

"Ticonderoga jets arrived shortly and made strafing attacks on the PT boats resulting in one enemy boat dead in the water, two others damaged and turned tail for home.

"The Maddox reports no personnel or material damages."

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. The actions and objectives of the patrol were similar to those of Soviet trawlers off our coasts and to the intelligence activities of many nations throughout the world. In an important way our De Soto patrol was far more justified, for Hanoi was sending troops south to kill Americans.

I called a meeting of key advisers later that morning in the White House. We concluded that an overeager North Vietnamese boat commander might have miscalculated. So we decided against retaliation, but I ordered the Navy to continue the patrol, add another destroyer and provide air cover.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1971

North After

Tonkin Attack

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 Aug. 3, 1964.

One 34-A attack occurred on July 30. At the time, the destroyer Maddox had not started its patrol and was 120 miles away. A second South Vietnamese attack took place the night of Aug. 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.

Though we had decided to treat the first North Vietnamese strike against our destroyer as a possible error, we drafted a stiff note to the Hanoi regime. We said that our ships had always operated freely on the high seas, and added: "They will continue to do so." We advised the North Vietnamese to be "under no misapprehension as to the grave consequences which would inevitably result from any further unprovoked offensive military action against United States forces." When prompt delivery to Hanoi proved impossible, we broadcast the note on Voice of America radio and released it to the world press.

Two days later the North Vietnamese struck again at our destroyers, this time at night on Aug. 4. A few minutes after 9 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 U.S.S. 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.

The unanimous view of [my] 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.

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 Adm. 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 specialists 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 a meeting at 6:15 P.M. to discuss in detail the incident and our plans for a sharp but limited response. About 7 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 into further action, and that I did not "want to go in unless Congress goes in with me." I reminded them I had given this advice to President Eisenhower and he had followed it in the Middle East and Formosan crises. In both instances Congress had backed him with resolutions.

As we [had] 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.

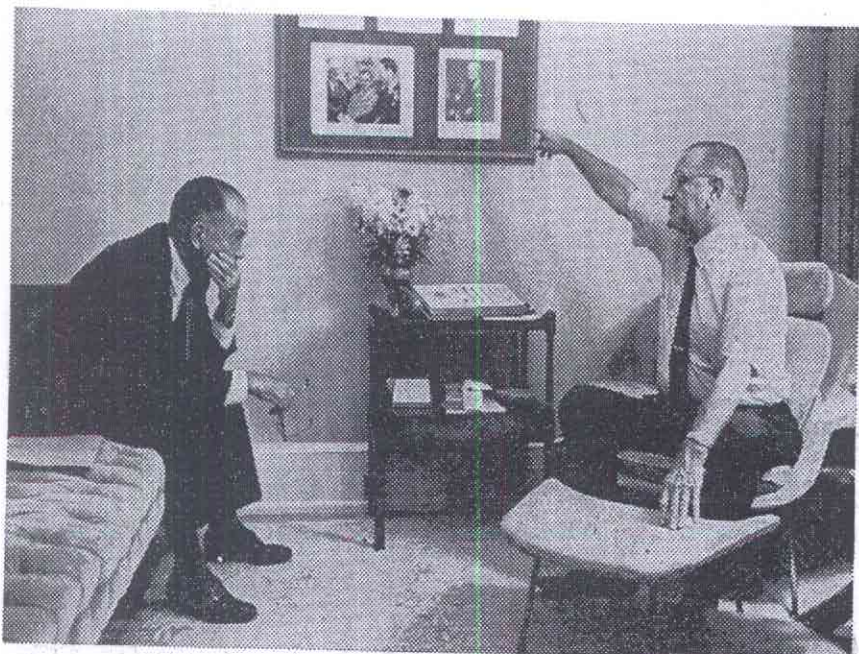
Nine Senators and seven Congressmen joined me in the Cabinet Room for that meeting. McNamara described in detail what had happened in the Gulf of Tonkin and what we proposed to do. I then read a statement that I planned to deliver to the American people later in the evening.

I went around the table asking each Senator and Representative for his frank opinion. Each expressed his wholehearted endorsement of our course of action and of the proposed resolution.

"I think it will be passed overwhelmingly," said Congressman Charles Halleck.

"I will support it," said Senator Fulbright.

I had expected to go on television and radio at 9 P.M. to inform the American people of our decision, but we had to delay for about two and a half hours until the American attack planes were airborne. The timing was important. We did not want to provide the North Vietnamese with enough advance warning to permit them to take precautions. On the other hand, it was important that the first word of the attack come from an official statement by our Government and not from a garbled and misleading version by Hanoi. Another thought was in my mind. We knew that once our planes were in the air, they



Mr. Johnson consulting with Senator J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, during the summer of 1965.

Y. R. Okamoto

would be picked up by Red China's radar as well as by Hanoi's. I did not want the leaders in Peking to misunderstand the reason our planes were over the Tonkin Gulf. They had to understand that the retaliation was aimed only at North Vietnam, not Red China, and that the objective was limited.

The retaliatory air strikes damaged or destroyed 25 enemy boats and 90 per cent of the oil storage tanks at Vinh. We lost two planes.

RUSK brought me the draft of the Southeast Asia Resolution (often mis-called the "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution"), which he and George Ball, in consultation with the Congressional leaders of both parties, had worked out. I approved it and prepared a written message to the Congress to accompany it. In that message I made it clear that I was asking the support of the Congress not merely to reply to attacks on our own forces, or simply to carry out our obligations in South Vietnam, but to be in a position to do what had to be done to fulfill our responsibilities in all of Southeast Asia.

The resolution as finally approved gave Congressional support for the President to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." The resolution also stated that the United States was "prepared as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

The vote in the Senate was 88 to 2, with the negative votes cast by Senators Ernest Gruening of Alaska and Wayne

Morse of Oregon. In the House the vote was unanimous, 416 to 0.

Four Senators, Fulbright and Hickenlooper of the Foreign Relations Committee and Russell and Saltonstall of the Armed Services Committee, introduced the resolution in the Senate and answered questions raised by their fellow Senators. The sponsors had attended a long White House discussion on the subject. During the debate on the Senate floor the following exchange took place between Senator Fulbright and Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky.

Senator Cooper — Does the Senator consider that in enacting this resolution we are satisfying that requirement of Article IV of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty? In other words, are we now giving the President advance authority to take whatever action he may deem necessary respecting South Vietnam and its defense, or with respect to the defense of any other country included in the treaty?

Senator Fulbright—I think that is correct.

Senator Cooper—Then, looking ahead, if the President decided that it was necessary to use such force as could lead into war, we will give that authority by this resolution?

Senator Fulbright—That is the way I would interpret it. If a situation later developed in which we thought the approval should be withdrawn, it could be withdrawn by concurrent resolution. That is the reason for the third section.

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 or 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.

Many advisers in my Administration, in both State and Defense, were concerned that heavy air strikes against the North might cause Hanoi to launch a massive outright invasion of the South or at least to step up significantly the level of the guerrilla war. American officials in Washington and in Saigon agreed that the political and military machinery in South Vietnam was then much too fragile to survive that kind of hammer blow.



Cecil Stoughton.

President Johnson signing the Southeast Asia Resolution on Aug. 10, 1964. Only two men in both houses of Congress voted against it.

Pessimistic reports continued to come to me from my advisers and from the field. Early in January, 1965, Maxwell Taylor sent in a report concluding that "we are presently on a losing track and must risk a change. . . . To take no positive action now is to accept defeat in the fairly near future." That was the view of every responsible military adviser in Vietnam and in Washington. Painfully and reluctantly, my civilian advisers were driven to the same conclusion by the hard facts.

On Jan. 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."

Bundy and McNamara saw two alternatives: either to "use our military power in the Far East and to force a change of Communist policy" or to "deploy all of our resources along a track of negotiation, aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved with no major addition to our present military risks." They said that they were inclined to favor the first alternative—use of more military power — but they believed that both courses should be studied carefully and that alternative programs should be developed and argued out in my presence.

The 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 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."

Word came on the afternoon of Feb. 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. Eight Americans had been killed outright in the attacks, one died later, and more than a hundred had been wounded. Five U.S. aircraft had been destroyed and 15 damaged.

My advisers strongly urged that we answer the attacks by striking four targets in North Vietnam immediately. United States planes would handle

three: the South Vietnamese Air Force would strike the fourth. The targets were Army barracks associated with North Vietnam's infiltration system into the South.

After long discussion I authorized the strikes, provided the South Vietnamese Government agreed. There was little doubt about the latter, since Saigon had been urging retaliation against the North for some time. I also ordered the prompt evacuation of our dependents from Vietnam.

We met again the next morning to review the situation. Three of the four authorized targets had been fogged in; only one had been struck. Should we go back after the other three? The consensus was "no," and I agreed. We all felt that a second-day strike by U.S. planes might give Hanoi and Moscow the impression that we had begun a sustained air offensive. That decision had not been made. However, we all agreed that the South Vietnamese Air Force should go back after its target. The Vietnamese concurred emphatically.

That night Mac Bundy and his specialists returned to Washington from Saigon. About 11 P.M. Bundy came to the

White House to see me. He left with me the report he and his group had developed on their tour of Vietnam.

"The situation in Vietnam is deteriorating," the report began, "and without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable—probably not in a matter of weeks or perhaps even months, but within the next year or so. There is still time to turn around, but not much."

The annex to the Bundy report, prepared mainly by Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, stated at the outset:

"We believe that the best available way of increasing our chance of success in Vietnam is the development and execution of a policy of sustained reprisal against North Vietnam—a policy in which air and naval action against the North is justified by and related to the whole Vietcong campaign of violence and terror in the South."

The idea of attacking North Vietnam with air power had been a feature of several planning exercises and position papers in 1964. But now, I knew, we were at a turning point. Though the Bundy report proposed a course of action we had considered and turned down only three months before, I was impressed by its logic and persuaded strongly by its arguments. I cabled Taylor in Saigon. I told him I wanted him to know that I had decided to carry out a plan for "continuing action" against North Vietnam "with modifications up and down in tempo and scale in the light of your recommendations . . . and our own continuing review of the situation."

On Feb. 13 we notified Taylor and the military command in Saigon that I had approved a three-point program of immediate actions. First, we would intensify the pacification program by all available means. Second, we would carry out "measured and limited air action jointly with the GVN" [Government of (South) Vietnam] against military targets in the North below the 19th parallel. Finally, we would go to the U.N. Security Council and detail the case against Hanoi's aggression.

My advisers had long argued that a weak government in Saigon would have difficulty surviving the pressures that might be exerted against the South if we bombed the North. I now concluded that political life in the South would soon collapse unless the people there knew that the North was paying a price in its own territory for its aggression. There were strong military reasons for our action, as the Joint Chiefs had long argued. Now the weight of the political argument as well had shifted to support intensified action.

FROM the time our planes hit the first military target in North Vietnam early in February, we were subjected to an increasingly heavy propaganda barrage from Hanoi, Peking and Moscow. Before long some American public figures began to repeat the theme. They all ignored the vital fact that we were bombing the North because Hanoi was stepping up its war in the South.

I decided it was time to make another major statement on Vietnam to the

American people. For this purpose I accepted a long-standing invitation from President Milton Eisenhower of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to speak there on April 7, 1965. I listed the essential elements of a just peace: an independent South Vietnam that was "securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others—free from outside interference—tied to no alliance—a military base for no other country."

I then looked forward, beyond war and the coming of peace, to what could happen in that troubled and underdeveloped region of the world.

"For our part," I said, "I will ask the Congress to join in a billion-dollar American investment in this effort as soon as it is under way. And I would hope that all other industrialized countries, including the Soviet Union, will join in this effort to replace despair with hope, and terror with progress."

The Communists' answer came quickly. On April 9 Radio Peking said my offer was "full of lies and deceptions." The following day Moscow called the proposal "noisy propaganda." Two days after that Hanoi's Communist party newspaper described the Johns Hopkins offer as "bait."

ALTHOUGH the bombing of the North remained at a fairly low level during the first few months of what was called the Rolling Thunder campaign, the level of criticism was high.

I had discussed halting the bombing with various advisers. An inter-agency working group was developing a plan for such a pause. Late in April Bobby Kennedy came to see me in the White House. The newly elected Senator from New York had several things on his mind, and one of them was a possible bombing pause. We sat in the small private study next to the Oval Office. I told him that we had been considering a pause for some time and were giving the matter careful study. He suggested that we try it for a few days, even one or two. A brief pause would do no harm, he said, and maybe something useful would come of it. I repeated that we had been discussing such a move and he could rest assured it was receiving very serious consideration.

On May 10 I decided to end the bombing for a limited period. We informed the Russians of our position and asked them to pass the information along to the North Vietnamese. But the Soviets refused to act as intermediaries. We delivered a message to the North Vietnamese Embassy in Moscow for their Ambassador. The note was returned to our embassy the next day in a plain envelope. We later arranged for direct delivery to Hanoi through another government, but that message was also returned.

Hanoi never answered directly but infiltration into the South continued, as did Vietcong attacks. Then Hanoi denounced the pause, and Peking even alleged there was no pause. Once again we had tried to open the door; once again Hanoi had slammed it shut. In

the face of Hanoi's continued posture, we resumed bombing on May 18.

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. This released for offensive action against the Vietcong some of the Vietnamese troops who had been protecting the base.

In March our estimate of Communist troop strength rose to 37,000 in main-force units and 100,000 in regional forces and local guerrillas. That represented a 33 per cent increase over 1964. In a few months the over-all estimate was raised to 153,000. In real combat strength the South Vietnamese had at best about 133 maneuver battalions, and their enemy had 72. That was a ratio of less than 2 to 1, and specialists in guerrilla warfare had long maintained that success against a determined guerrilla enemy called for a ratio of about 10 to 1 in favor of the defense forces.

Among the specific military actions I approved in April 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 Phubai, 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.

The basic mission of the U.S. forces in Vietnam up to mid-May had been to secure the base areas to which they were assigned. This mission had been broadened somewhat to permit active and aggressive patrolling near those bases. In May General Westmoreland asked permission to use his forces in combat support if it became necessary to assist a Vietnamese unit in serious trouble. I granted that permission and announced it in a White House press statement on June 9.

Later in June General Westmoreland requested and received additional authority. This permitted him to commit U.S. troops to combat "independently of or in conjunction with" Vietnamese forces if asked by the Vietnamese and if Westmoreland himself judged that their use was "necessary to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces."

MEANWHILE, another political crisis was boiling up in Saigon. Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat was feuding with Vietnam's Catholics and was also at odds with the Vietnamese chief of state, Phan Khac Suu. On June 12 Quat resigned, announcing that he was turning power back to the military. The generals set up a National Leadership Committee chaired by Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, thus making him chief of state. They also selected an Executive Council, which they called their "war cabinet," and picked Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, chief of the Vietnamese Air Force, to head it with the powers of Prime Minister.

One of the first things General Thieu and Prime Minister Ky told McNamara, who was in Vietnam on a visit, 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 44 battalions they had already requested, there should be another combat division. Their total estimate called for about 200,000 American men in all categories.

There were then 15 American combat battalions either in Vietnam or en route, and a total force level of 75,000. McNamara recommended that the number of battalions be increased to 34. The Koreans had promised to send nine battalions; if they failed to do so, we should make up the difference—a total in that case of 43 battalions. That would raise the level of our forces to 175,000 men, or 200,000 if the Koreans failed to come through as promised.

I wanted to go over this proposal with the greatest care. I realized what a major undertaking it would be. The call-up of large numbers of reserves was part of the package. I summoned my top advisers to the White House on July 21, the day after McNamara returned.

We considered many alternatives. Under Secretary of State George Ball had been less enthusiastic about some aspects of our involvement in Southeast Asia. At the afternoon session I asked Ball to outline his views. His basic thesis was that we could not win a protracted war against local guerrillas in Asian jungles. He thought there was great danger of intrusion by the Chinese Communists. In his opinion, we were losing friends and influence in Europe and elsewhere because of our commitment in Asia. The best thing to do, he thought, was to cut our losses and pull away.

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 on 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.

I told the N.S.C. there were five possible choices available to us.

"We can bring the enemy to his knees by using our Strategic Air Command," I said describing our first option. "Another group thinks we ought to pack up and go home.

"Third, we could stay there as we are—and suffer the consequences, continue to lose territory and take casualties. You wouldn't want your own boy to be out there crying for help and not get it.

"Then, we could go to Congress and ask for great sums of money; we could call up the reserves and increase the draft; go to a war footing; declare a state of emergency. There is a good deal of feeling that ought to be done. We have considered this. But if we go into that kind of land war, then North Vietnam would go to its friends, China and Russia, and ask them to give help. They would be forced into increasing aid. For that reason I don't want to be overly dramatic and cause tensions. I think we can get our people to support us without having to be too provocative and warlike.

"Finally, we can give our commanders in the field the men and supplies they say they need."

I had concluded that the last course was the right one.

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Tomorrow: The civil-rights issue and the Dominican crisis.