WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #33C

In a CBS interview before his death, President John Kennedy remarked that it was up to the South Vietnamese whether "their war" would be won or lost. But the young president had already placed the United States on a course that would make retreat difficult. Like other presidents, Kennedy believed that giving up in Vietnam would weaken America's "credibility." He said that withdrawal "would be a great mistake." It is impossible to know how JFK would have managed Vietnam policy had he lived. But we do know that, when Kennedy gave the approval for the military *coup d'etat* that cost President Ngo Dinh Diem his life, South Vietnam tumbled into political chaos.

In November, 1963, when Kennedy was himself assassinated, there were 16,000 American "advisors" in South Vietnam. Just as Kennedy had inherited Vietnam from President Dwight Eisenhower, so did President Lyndon Johnson inherit Vietnam from Kennedy. Johnson's inheritance, however, was more burdensome because, by that time, only massive American intervention could prevent the collapse of South Vietnam.

Like Kennedy, Johnson subscribed to the Cold War tenets of global containment. He inherited an American commitment to prevent a Communist takeover there as well as a reluctance on the part of American presidents to assume primary responsibility for fighting the Vietcong, who were the Communist-led guerrillas in South Vietnam, and their North Vietnamese allies. Beginning with Harry Truman, one president after another had done just enough to avoid being charged with having "lost" Vietnam to communism. Johnson initially sought to do the same. At the time he took office, LBJ vowed, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." He feared that any other course of action would undermine his political influence and jeopardize his Great Society programs in Congress. But this path took him and the United States inexorably deeper into an expanding military commitment in Southeast Asia.

It did not take long for Johnson to place his stamp on the war. During the summer of 1964, President Johnson received reports that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on the *U.S.S. Maddox* and *U.S.S. C. Turner Joy*, two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. In the first attack, on August 2nd, the damage inflicted was limited to a single bullet hole. Two days later a second attack later proved to be only misread radar sightings. It did not matter if it was a real attack or an imagined one. Johnson believed a wider war was inevitable. Immediately after the reports of the second attack, he told a national television audience that two American destroyers had been attacked by North Vietnamese vessels. Although Johnson described the attack as unprovoked, the destroyers had been monitoring South Vietnamese attacks against North Vietnamese islands – attacks planned by American advisors. Nevertheless, he issued a call to arms and asked Congress for permission to defend U.S. forces in Southeast Asia.

On August 7, 1964, Congress responded with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing 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 Senate passed the resolution with only two opposing votes – cast by Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon and Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska – both Democrats. The House of Representatives passed it unanimously. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave Johnson the freedom to conduct operations in Vietnam as he saw fit. He interpreted the measure as tantamount to a congressional declaration of war. Meanwhile, his national approval rating soared from 42% to 72%.

Despite his congressional mandate, Johnson was initially cautious about revealing his plans to the American people. Later he recalled, "I had no choice but to keep my foreign policy in the wings...I knew that the day it exploded into a major debate on the war, that day would be the beginning of the end of the Great Society." Therefore, in the 1964 presidential campaign LBJ opposed the use of American combat troops in Vietnam. He pledged that there would be no escalation – no American boys would be fighting Vietnam's fight. Privately, although he described Vietnam as "a raggedy-ass fourth-rate country" not worthy of American blood and money, Johnson doubted that he could keep his pledge.

In November, 1964 Johnson won a landslide victory over the Republican nominee for president, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona. With the election safely behind him, Johnson began an American takeover of the war in Vietnam. He made crucial decisions that escalated the war and shaped American policy in that nation for the next four years.

The escalation, beginning in the early months of 1965, took two forms: 1) deployment of American ground troops; and 2) intensification of bombing against North Vietnam. On February 5, 1965, the Vietcong killed eight Americans and wounded 126 more at Pleiku. Further attacks on American soldiers later that same week caused Johnson to order "Operation Rolling Thunder," the first sustained bombings of North Vietnam. These massive bombings were intended to stop the flow of soldiers and supplies into the South. Six months later a task force conducted an extensive study of the effects of the bombing on the supplies pouring down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam into Laos. The task force concluded that there was "no way" to stop the traffic. Over the entire course of the Vietnam War, the United States dropped twice as many tons of bombs on Vietnam as the Allies had dropped in both Europe and the Pacific during all of World War II. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara was surprised that the bombings had little effect on the ability of the Vietcong to wage war in the South. The North Vietnamese quickly rebuilt roads and bridges. They moved munitions plants underground. Instead of destroying the morale of the North Vietnamese, "Operation Rolling Thunder" hardened their will to fight.

In March, 1965 the new American army commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, requested and received the first installment of combat troops. On March 8, 1965, the first American marines waded ashore at Da Nang. By the summer American forces were engaged in "search-and-destroy" operations, thus ending the fiction that American soldiers were only "advisors." By the end of 1965 there were 184,000 American troops in Vietnam. In 1966 the troop level reached more than 380,000. In 1967 485,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam. One year later the total reached 536,000. By 1969, at the height of the American presence, 542,000 American servicemen were in Vietnam.

The massive commitment of American air power and troops devastated the countryside of Vietnam. After one harsh, but <u>not</u> unusual, engagement, an American commanding officer reported that "it became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it." This statement came to symbolize the terrible logic of the war.

The escalating demands of General Westmoreland and Secretary of Defense McNamara pushed President Johnson to Americanize the ground war in an attempt to stabilize South Vietnam. Johnson privately told a reporter early in March, 1965, "I can't run and pull a Chamberlain at Munich" – referring to the British prime minister who appeased Adolf Hitler in 1938. The Johnson administration gambled that American superiority in personnel and weaponry would ultimately triumph. This strategy was inextricably tied to political considerations. For domestic reasons, American policymakers searched for an elusive middle ground between all-out invasion of North Vietnam, which included the possibility of war with China, and disengagement.

"Westy's War," although fought with helicopter gunships, chemical defoliants and napalm, became similar to the trench warfare of World War I – a war of attrition. General Westmoreland admitted as much, when he said, "In effect, we are fighting a war of attrition. The only alternative is a war of annihilation."

Johnson's decision to "Americanize" the war was consistent with the foreign policy principles pursued by all American presidents after World War II. According to the version of the containment theory articulated in the Truman Doctrine, endorsed by President Dwight Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, throughout the 1950s, and reaffirmed by President Kennedy, the United States pledged to oppose the advance of communism anywhere in the world. In 1965, while speaking at Johns Hopkins University, Johnson asked rhetorically, "Why are we in Vietnam? We are there because we have a promise to keep....To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of American commitment." Secretary of State Dean Rusk repeated this rationale before countless congressional committees, warning that Thailand, Burma, and the rest of Southeast Asia would fall to communism if American forces withdrew. American military intervention in Vietnam was <u>not</u> an aberration, but a logical culmination of the assumptions widely shared by the foreign policy establishment and leaders of both major American political parties since the early days of the Cold War.

Vietnam was not an aberration, and the "Pentagon Papers" subsequently made it clear that the United States did not "stumble into a quagmire." Undersecretary of State George Ball consistently warned of disaster: "Once on the tiger's back we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount." It was also clear to Johnson and his advisors from the start that American involvement must not reach levels that would provoke the Chinese or Soviets into direct intervention. This meant, in effect, that a complete military victory was never possible. In 1968 Clark Clifford, the new secretary of defense, said: "It was startling for me to find out that we have no military plan to end the war." The goal of the United States was not to win the war in any traditional sense, but to prevent the North Vietnamese and Vietcong from winning. This meant that Americans would have to maintain a military presence as long as the enemy retained the will to fight.

Johnson, who had remained cautious in 1964, gradually grew more confident that his Vietnam policy had the support of the American people. Both Democrats and Republicans approved his escalation of the war. So did public opinion polls in 1965 and 1966. But then, public opinion began to shift.

As it turned out, American support for the war eroded faster than the will of the North Vietnamese leaders to tolerate devastating casualties. Vietnam was the first war to receive extended television coverage. Every night, Americans saw on their television screens the carnage of war. As a result, it was nicknamed "the living room war." As combat operations increased in 1965, so did the mounting list of American casualties, announced each week on the nightly news with the "body count" of alleged Vietcong dead. Nightly television accounts of the fighting made the official optimism appear fatuous. American journalists began to write about a "credibility gap." They charged that the Johnson administration was concealing bad news about the progress of the war. Systematic opposition to the war on college campuses began in 1965 with "teach-ins" at the University of Michigan. In February, 1966 Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, a Democrat and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, began congressional investigations into American policy. Fulbright was an outspoken critic of the war and raised several questions about the administration's policy. George Kennan, the "founding father" of the "containment doctrine, told Fulbright's committee that the doctrine was appropriate for Europe, but not for Southeast Asia. These hearings received national television coverage.

Johnson complained to his staff in 1966 that "our people can't stand firm in the face of heavy losses, and they can bring down the government." Economic problems put Johnson even more on the defensive. The Vietnam War cost taxpayers $27 billion in 1967, pushing the federal deficit from $9.8 billion to $23 billion. By then, military spending had set in motion the inflationary spiral that would plague the U.S. economy throughout the 1970s.

Out of these troubling developments, an antiwar movement began to crystallize. Its core, in addition to long-standing pacifist groups, comprised a new generation of peace activists, such as SANE (the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy), which in the 1950s had protested atmospheric nuclear testing. After the escalation of the war in 1965, the activist groups were joined by student groups, clergy, civil rights advocates, even Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose book on child care had helped raise many of the students. Although these opponents of the war were a diverse lot, they shared a skepticism about U.S. policy in Vietnam. They made various charges: 1) that intervention was antithetical to American ideals; 2) that an independent, anti-Communist South Vietnam was unattainable; and 3) that no American objective justified the suffering that was being inflicted on the Vietnamese people.

By 1967 opposition to the war had become so pronounced that antiwar demonstrations in New York and at the Pentagon attracted massive support. By May, 1967 even Secretary of Defense McNamara was wavering: "The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

In the war of political will, North Vietnam had the advantage. President Johnson and his advisors grievously underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese commitment to unify Vietnam and expel the United States. Ho Chi Minh had warned the French in the 1940s that "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win." He predicted that the Vietnamese Communists would win a war of attrition, because they were willing to sacrifice all for their cause. While the United States fought a limited war for limited objectives, the Vietnamese Communists fought an all-out war for their very survival.

Just as General Westmoreland was assuring Johnson and the American people that the American war effort in early 1968 was on the verge of gaining the upper hand, the Communists again displayed their tenacity. On January 31, 1968, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year (Tet), the Vietcong defied a holiday truce to launch assaults on American and South Vietnamese forces throughout South Vietnam. The Vietcong unleashed a massive, well-coordinated assault. Timed to coincide with Tet, the offensive struck 36 provincial capitals and 5 of the 6 major cities, including Saigon. The old capital city of Hue fell to the Communists. Vietcong units temporarily occupied the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon. General Westmoreland proclaimed the Tet offensive was a major defeat for the Vietcong, and most students of military strategy later agreed with him. In strictly military terms the Tet offensive was a failure with very heavy Vietcong losses. While Vietcong casualties were enormous, however, the impact of the events on the American public was more telling. The psychological effect of the Tet offensive was devastating. Television brought into American homes shocking live images: the American embassy under siege; and the Saigon police chief placing a pistol to the head of a Vietcong suspect and executing him. The Tet offensive made a mockery of official pronouncements that the United States was winning the war. How could an enemy on the run manage such a large-scale, complex, and coordinated attack? Just before Tet, a Gallup poll found that 56% of Americans considered themselves "hawks" (supporters of the war), while only 28% identified with the "doves" (war opponents). Three months later, "doves" outnumbered "hawks" 42% to 41%. *Time* and *Newsweek* soon ran antiwar editorials urging American withdrawal from Vietnam. Walter Cronkite, the dean of American television journalists, confided to his viewers that he <u>no</u> longer believed the war was winnable. President Johnson reportedly said, "If I've lost Walter, then it's over. I've lost Mr. Average Citizen." Without embracing the peace movement, many Americans simply concluded that Cronkite was correct – the war was <u>not</u> winnable. Polls showed that Johnson's popularity had declined to 35%, lower than any president since Harry Truman's darkest days. Civil rights leaders and social activists felt betrayed as they saw federal funds earmarked for the war on poverty siphoned off by the expanding war. In 1968 the United States was spending $322,000 on every Communist killed in Vietnam. The poverty programs at home received only $53 per person.

The Tet offensive undermined Johnson and discredited his war policies. During the early part of 1968, President Johnson grew increasingly embittered and isolated. It had become painfully evident that the Vietnam War was a never-ending stalemate. Secretary of Defense Clifford reported to Johnson that a task force of prominent soldiers and civilians saw no prospect for a military victory. Robert Kennedy was reportedly considering a run for the presidency in order to challenge Johnson's Vietnam policy. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota had already made the decision to oppose the president in the Democrat primaries. When the 1968 presidential primary season got under way in March, antiwar students rallied to McCarthy as a candidate. He polled 42% of the vote to Johnson's 48% in the New Hampshire primary. It was a remarkable showing for a little-known senator. Each presidential primary thereafter promised to become a referendum on the president's Vietnam policy. In Wisconsin, scene of the next primary, Johnson's political advisors forecast a humiliating defeat for him. One of them stated: "We sent a man [to campaign for Johnson], and all we've heard from him since is a few faint beeps, like the last radio signals from the Bay of Pigs."

Despite his troubles with foreign policy, Johnson remained a master at reading the political omens. On March 31 he went on national television to announce a limited halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and fresh initiatives for a negotiated cease-fire. Then he added a dramatic postscript: "I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President." Discouraged and physically exhausted, President Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek re-election. The Vietnam War had sapped his spirit to that degree.

Although American troops would remain in Vietnam for five more years and the casualties would continue, the quest for military victory had ended. Now the question was how the most powerful nation in the world could extricate itself from Vietnam with a minimum of damage to its prestige.