“A Day of Reckoning Is Coming”

Section 1

Lyndon Johnson’s main concern in the fall of 1964 had been his election contest with Barry Goldwater, not the war in Vietnam. For a President engaged in an exhilarating and undeniably successful campaign, Vietnam seemed a distant and unwanted problem. But the din of American electoral politics could not obscure South Vietnam’s accelerating decline. However much LBJ wished to avoid the issue, Saigon’s mounting troubles posed new and inescapable choices for his administration.

To prepare himself for these choices, Johnson established an interagency task force shortly before the election. This board had been charged with reviewing America’s commitment in the region and recommending appropriate courses of action to the President through a “Principals Group” composed of LBJ’s top advisers. It represented, “the most comprehensive” Vietnam policy review “of any in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations.”

The Principals Group first met on the morning of November 3, 1964, about the time Johnson cast his election ballot in Texas. Although its members focused their attention on Vietnam, their deliberations occurred in an atmosphere punctuated by a trio of recent international events which generated new pressures on the administration to stand fast in Southeast Asia.

Less than three weeks before, on October 15, Nikita Khrushchev had been abruptly ousted as head of the Soviet Union and replaced by a pair of new leaders: Leonid Brezhnev as First Secretary and Alexei Kosygin as Premier. Khrushchev’s sudden overthrow created considerable apprehension in Washington as to the course of Soviet policy under the new regime. This apprehension stemmed in part from America’s limited understanding of Soviet leadership changes. Power had changed hands in Russia only twice before since the Bolshevik Revolution, both times prompting chaotic disruption in Soviet affairs.¹ What, U.S. analysts wondered, would be the consequences of this latest shift? Abandonment of

¹ George Kennan had pointed out that the inherent instability of leadership changes in the Soviet Union was always going to be a problem for the US.
Khrushchev’s emerging “peaceful co-existence” with the United States?\(^2\)

Narrowing of the Sino-Soviet\(^3\) split, as Kremlin contenders vied for control by courting Peking? Lacking clear answers to these questions, many experts believed America had to reaffirm its international commitments—including support of South Vietnam—in order to deter renewed Soviet adventurism.

The day after the Kremlin’s purge, China had exploded its first atomic device over Lop Nor, a salt-encrusted lake bed in the barren Taklamakan Desert. Although U.S. intelligence had anticipated this event for some weeks, it nevertheless intensified a principal fear of contemporary Washington—the image of an aggressive China threatening the security of Southeast Asia.

This fear reflected deeply rooted perceptions. Johnson and his advisers viewed China in 1964 much like Truman and his advisers had viewed Russia after World War II—as a militantly expansive force to be contained until mellowed by internal forces or external pressures. Washington’s image of a belligerent China drew much of its color from Peking’s own rhetoric. For years, Mao and his followers had persistently denounced U.S. “imperialism,” while ridiculing America as a “paper tiger.” By pulling Uncle Sam’s beard, China served its competition with Russia for leadership of the communist bloc. But Americans interpreted these propaganda attacks far differently. Peking’s bellicose rhetoric seemed to confirm Washington’s perception of a hostile power determined to impose its hegemony over Asia.

A nuclear China intensified these fears, while raising new strategic concerns. Pentagon officials, who vividly recalled China’s punishing intervention in the Korean War, now faced an army of two and a half million, equipped with atomic weapons. The combination appeared a potent threat, no longer checked by an American nuclear advantage.

More important than any military gain, however, was the psychological leverage which Washington attached to Peking’s nuclear capability. By becoming the first Asian nation to master the atom, U.S. officials believed China had

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\(^2\) Khrushchev, in order to supply material goods to his people, had attempted to cut back on military spending, thus necessitating a more peaceful approach to Soviet relations with the United States.

\(^3\) China and the Soviet Union were now competing for the leadership position of the worldwide Communist movement.
dramatically strengthened its influence in a region—Southeast Asia—which many considered a crucial ideological battleground between Peking and Washington.

Domestic political factors greatly intensified these anxieties. For Democratic leaders of the 1960s, the issue of China prompted haunting memories of the recent past. All remembered the “loss” of China and its McCarthyist reaction, so devastating to the Democratic Party. They also remembered the Korean agony, which had bled Truman of his congressional and public support. For Johnson, these remained darkly instructive lessons. As he later recalled:

I knew Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.

LBJ seemed determined, even obsessed, with avoiding Truman’s ordeal. This dread of a conservative backlash—much more than personal pride or fear of another “Munich”\(^4\)—conditioned Johnson’s basic attitude toward Vietnam. As he had remarked in private shortly after assuming the presidency: “I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.”

Renewed fears about China had been followed by a third and final shock in Vietnam. On November 1, Vietcong guerrillas, using captured U.S. ordnance, had shelled the large American airbase at Bienhoa, twelve miles north of Saigon, killing five Americans and destroying five B-57 jet bombers. The Bienhoa attack had marked an important turning point in the war. Previously, the Vietcong had concentrated their strikes on South Vietnamese targets; now, U.S. forces had come under direct attack. This brazen assault on American forces seemed an ominous challenge to the administration, one testing Washington’s military commitment in the region.

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\(^4\) Appeasement.
Section 2

Into this atmosphere of increased pressures stepped the Principals Group on Vietnam. Its members, operating in a climate of heightened international tensions, would shape the direction of Vietnam policy far into the future. How that direction came to be defined reflected accommodation among conflicting viewpoints within the administration.

The White House had selected William Bundy, older brother of Johnson’s national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, to head the Principals Group. Bundy was already heavily involved in Vietnam planning. For nearly four years, he had been at or near the center of Vietnam decision-making—first as director of the Pentagon’s military assistance program to Saigon from 1961 to 1964, then as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, his current post.

From the beginning, Bundy had harbored a strong commitment to American policy in South Vietnam. In 1961, that policy had included support for Ngo Dinh Diem. But as Diem’s popularity and effectiveness had declined, Bundy had lost faith in his ability to rally the South Vietnamese people against the communist insurgency.

Like many in Washington, Bundy had welcomed the 1963 coup against Diem, believing it offered new opportunities to create a stable and democratic government in Saigon. But those opportunities had never materialized. Instead of ushering in political stability, Diem’s ouster had unleashed furious social and political turmoil exacerbated by military interference in government affairs.

This tension between Bundy’s sense of responsibility for Saigon’s present and his skepticism about Saigon’s future manifested itself in his first report to the Principals Group. Although Bundy feared the loss of South Vietnam, suggesting that it “would be a major blow to our basic policies,” he questioned whether South Vietnam could, in fact, be saved, given its endemic political problems. “The basic point,” Bundy observed, “is that we have never thought we could defend a

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5 In November of 1963, the White House had authorized a plot by South Vietnamese generals to overthrow South Vietnam’s president, Ngo Dinh Diem. What the White House had not authorized was Diem’s murder.

6 This interference by the military into South Vietnam’s political life only got worse in the coming years. By 1968, South Vietnam’s government was about as stable as Lindsay Lohan.
government or a people that had ceased to care strongly about defending themselves, or that were unable to maintain the fundamentals of government.”

Bundy blamed this inability on South Vietnam’s troubled history. Political burdens from Saigon’s past pressed heavily against its future. South Vietnam had much to overcome, he said, including:

A bad colonial\textsuperscript{7} heritage of long standing, totally inadequate preparation for self-government by the colonial power\textsuperscript{8}, a colonialist war\textsuperscript{9} fought in half-baked fashion and lost, [and] a nationalist movement taken over by Communists ruling in the other half of an ethnically and historically united country, the Communist side inheriting much the better military force and far more than its share of the talent….

“These are the facts that dog us to this day,” Bundy confessed. He could not escape them, whatever his fears about the loss of South Vietnam. Caught between these conflicting realities, Bundy seemed hesitant—unsure what course to follow.

The Joint Chiefs’ representative on the Principals Group, Vice Admiral Lloyd Mustin, was more certain. He expressed the military’s belief that action against North Vietnam was the answer to problems within South Vietnam.

Mustin’s and the Joint Chiefs’ recommendation stemmed from their radically different perception of South Vietnam’s troubles. They identified external aggression, not internal instability, as the primary problem. For this reason, improving Saigon’s effectiveness seemed, to them, an incidental goal at best. Mustin and the Joint Chiefs sought little from a South Vietnamese government; they simply wanted a government which would “afford [a] platform upon which the … armed forces, with US assistance, prosecute the war.”

With Bundy and Mustin stressing such different problems, the Principals Group seemed incapable of agreeing on options for the President. But there was a third member of the group whose thinking bridged their division: John McNaughton.

\textsuperscript{7} French
\textsuperscript{8} French
\textsuperscript{9} The French Indochina War, 1946-1954.
McNaughton had joined the Principals Group as Robert McNamara’s personal representative. It was his close association with the Defense Secretary that had first drawn McNaughton into Vietnam planning. McNamara had enlisted a man of similar intellectual temperament, who shared his boss’s penchant for translating the facets of a problem into statistical probabilities in order to facilitate precise, objective decisions. He was a brilliant lawyer and able bureaucrat whose rigorous analytical manner had earned McNamara’s respect.

McNaughton’s standing in the Principals Group benefited from McNaughton’s position in relation to Bundy and Mustin. McNaughton’s thinking reflected a precarious compromise between competing perspectives on Vietnam. He shared Bundy’s misgivings about Saigon’s political future, understanding that “progress inside SVN [was] important” but suspecting that it was “unlikely despite our best ideas and efforts….”

This realization, paradoxically, led McNaughton to support Mustin’s call for increased military pressure against Hanoi. If the South Vietnamese government could not be made more stable and effective, then the only solution, he thought, lay in weakening the Vietcong’s ability to challenge that government.

McNaughton knew such action would not address the fundamental issue. “Action against North Vietnam,” he admitted, “is to some extent a substitute for strengthening the government of South Vietnam.” But because McNaughton saw little hope of solving the root problem of Saigon’s political disorder, he chose to focus on a secondary one—Hanoi’s support of the insurgency—which seemed more amenable to American action.

McNaughton included action against North Vietnam in the options he proposed to the Principals Group. They were: continuing along present lines, which he labeled Option A; escalating immediately and heavily against North Vietnam, which he labeled Option B; and escalating gradually—first against infiltration routes in Laos, then against North Vietnam itself—which he labeled Option C.

McNaughton’s options seemed to lack any attention to the propriety of withdrawal. This was not the case. He considered withdrawal an inevitable result 10 Capitol of North Vietnam.
of Option A. McNaughton deliberately rejected this course in favor of Option C. “If Option C is tried and fails,” he argued, it “would still leave behind a better odor than Option A: It would demonstrate that [the] US was a ‘good doctor’ willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied, and hurt the enemy badly.”

McNaughton wanted the United States to continue playing the “good doctor”—ministering to a patient he considered beyond resuscitation—in order to dramatize America’s anti-communist resolve. By this logic, a hopeless case actually required more intensive treatment—deepening America’s commitment in the face of South Vietnam’s deepening failure—if only to prove Washington’s determination—its toughness—to the rest of the world.

McNaughton’s logic prevailed. Bundy believed Option C offered more hope than the deteriorating status quo inherent in Option A, and appeared “more controllable and less risky” than the major escalation contemplated under Option B.

Although Bundy endorsed Option C, he feared the domestic political repercussions of military action that failed to produce quick, decisive results. Bundy sensed Option C was “inherently likely to stretch out and to be subject to major pressures both within the US and internationally.” Such a scenario reminded him of America’s experience during the Korean War. For these reasons, Bundy retained an uneasiness toward McNaughton’s recommendation, even as he endorsed it.

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Section 3

As Washington readied for major decisions on Vietnam, President Johnson pondered the possibilities and limits of his election victory. The voters had given LBJ an enormous mandate and comfortable margins to his party in both houses of Congress. Armed with these congressional majorities, the President seemed destined to achieve his cherished domestic program. Nothing, it now appeared, stood between LBJ and the fulfillment of his Great Society.

But Johnson, the seasoned politician, knew better. He realized this blessing was also a potential curse—that his mandate was a fragile and ephemeral
commodity in the world of political rivalry and jealousy. LBJ reflected on this irony to friends at the time. “When you win big, you can have anything you want for a time,” he said. “You come home with that big landslide and there isn’t a one of them who’ll stand in your way.” “No,” he sneered, “they’ll be glad to be aboard and to have their photograph taken with you and be part of all that victory. They’ll come along and they’ll give you almost everything you want for a while, and then”—LBJ paused for a moment—”they’ll turn on you. They always do.” He could almost see it. “They’ll lay in waiting, waiting for you to make a slip and you will. They’ll give you almost everything and then they’ll make you pay for it. They’ll get tired of all those columnists writing how smart you are and how weak they are and then the pendulum will swing back.”

Johnson seemed haunted by the prospect of a confrontation with Congress, strangely obsessed with political constraints in this, the afterglow of his greatest political triumph. These fears sprang from an experience in LBJ’s early political career. Johnson had first entered Congress in May 1937, just three months after Franklin Roosevelt had introduced his notorious Supreme Court reorganization bill. LBJ never forgot how Congress had seized on FDR’s court-packing plan, attacking the President and crippling his political effectiveness just months after his landslide victory in the 1936 election. Now, after the 1964 election, Johnson feared a repetition of Roosevelt’s ordeal. He had no illusions about the present Congress’s ability to humble him in the same way a past one had humbled FDR.

LBJ intended to avoid this fate by steering clear of any issue, such as Vietnam, which might provoke his opponents on the Hill. Johnson explained his concern to staff aides in early 1965. “I was just elected President by the biggest popular margin in the history of the country, fifteen million votes,” he told them. But that margin had begun to slip. “Just by the natural way people think,” LBJ said, “I have already lost about two of these fifteen.” “If I get in any fight with Congress,” he hastened to add, “I will lose another couple of million, and if I have to send more of our boys into Vietnam, I may be down to eight million by the end of the year.”

11 In 1935, the Supreme Court had overturned a few pieces of New Deal legislation. FDR had suggested and pushed a piece of legislation that would have increased the number of justices on the Court from 9 to 15, thus allowing FDR to “pack the court” with six more liberals who would be friendly to his New Deal legislation.
of the summer.” In Johnson’s mind, Vietnam seemed as big a threat to his Great Society as the Supreme Court bill had been to Roosevelt’s New Deal.

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Section 4

These were the pressures bearing on the President when William Bundy arrived at the White House on the afternoon of November 19 to brief him about the Principals Group’s efforts. Three members of the Principals Group—Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy—also attended this meeting.

LBJ asked William Bundy to summarize the Principals Group’s proposals. Bundy outlined three choices: Option A, which he characterized as a continuation of present policies; Option B, which he termed a “hard/fast squeeze” against North Vietnam; and Option C, which he described as a slower, more controlled squeeze against Hanoi.

Utilizing what bureaucrats called the “Goldilocks Principle,” Bundy had presented a list of options heavily structured toward Option C. Option A, given Saigon’s rapid deterioration, seemed “too soft”; Option B, carrying substantial hazards of a wider war, seemed “too hard”; but Option C, which fell between these two, seemed “just right” and, therefore, most attractive and most acceptable. It appeared to avoid the pitfalls of A and B—preserving South Vietnam’s future at least risk. To underscore his preference for Option C, Bundy described it to Johnson as the most sophisticated alternative—one which required a high degree of control Bundy felt sure Washington could manage. Here is where the Principals focused their attention. But rather than analyzing the merits of Option C, they simply concentrated on its execution. The decision, itself, seemed a foregone conclusion.

The Principals suspected Option C might provoke increased North Vietnamese infiltration into the South—so strongly, in fact, that Rusk and Bundy suggested introducing American ground troops near the DMZ to deter such a reaction. Ball expressed serious doubts about committing U.S. combat forces, citing France’s experience during the Indochina War. He considered an air campaign “better,” because it would avoid “the French dilemma.” Though
opposed to American ground intervention, Ball seemed amenable to American bombing.

The Principals finally addressed the issue of negotiations, proposed by the Principals Group as an adjunct to escalation. They displayed little interest in this side of the equation. Bundy saw “no hurry,” he said, in pursuing early talks. Like the others, he wished to strengthen Washington’s bargaining leverage before approaching the negotiating table.

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Section 5

The Principals Group submitted its final report on Thanksgiving Day, November 26. Bundy and McNaughton endorsed gradual escalation [Option C] against North Vietnam, even as they raised doubts about its effectiveness. They expected bombing to weaken the Vietcong, but not to vanquish it, because the VC’s “primary” strength remained “indigenous.” They expected bombing to inhibit North Vietnam’s infiltration of men and supplies, but not to stop it, because Hanoi, “even if severely damaged … could still direct and support the Viet Cong … at a reduced level.”

Why did Bundy and McNaughton recommend a course promising such meager results? The answer lay in Bundy’s assessment of the American interests at stake. Bundy depicted Washington’s commitment to Saigon as a crucial symbol of its global credibility. Losing South Vietnam meant “a major blow” to that credibility, he asserted, undermining others’ faith in America’s resolve. Because of this, Bundy deemed the preservation of a non-communist South Vietnam essential, whatever the limits of escalation against North Vietnam.

With Bundy’s political considerations in mind, McNaughton evaluated the proposed options. Although he favored Option C, McNaughton astutely analyzed the other two. Option A promised further deterioration, perhaps leading to American withdrawal.

Option B, on the other hand, offered greater military results, tempered by the danger of a wider war. Hanoi and the Vietcong might be bombarded into a
settlement, McNaughton wrote, but only at “considerably higher risks of major military conflict … with Communist China”—a prospect few wished to invite.

That left Option C, which McNaughton considered “more controllable and less risky” than Option B and more likely than Option A “to achieve at least part of our objectives, … even if it ended in the loss of South Vietnam….”

McNaughton’s assessment of the various options, though persuasive, masked deep contradictions. He had dismissed Option A because it meant eventual American defeat, yet he suspected a similar outcome even under Option C. He had discounted Option B out of fear of a wider war, but could not anticipate with certainty how the enemy would respond to “controlled” escalation under Option C. McNaughton had embraced Option C because it provided room for both his fear of losing South Vietnam and his doubts about saving it.

The same day Bundy and McNaughton tendered their final report, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor12 arrived in Washington for the upcoming White House meeting on December 1. Taylor brought with him a long and gloomy report on the South Vietnamese situation, which one administration official later characterized as “the bluntest high-level appraisal in the whole story of American policy in Vietnam.”

Taylor reported that the Vietcong had made dramatic gains in recent months, increasing in number as their control over the countryside expanded. Saigon’s pacification program13, meanwhile, had slipped so badly that it now required “heroic treatment to assure revival.” He blamed this deterioration on the current South Vietnamese government, whose “continued ineffectiveness” stifled military progress. The Ambassador doubted this—or any other—government could master Saigon’s political divisions. “Indeed,” he wrote, “in view of the factionalism existing in Saigon and elsewhere throughout the country, it is impossible to foresee a stable and effective government under any name in anything like the near future.”

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12 US Ambassador to South Vietnam.
13 The pacification program was similar to what the US had done in the Philippines in the early 1900s. Medical care, building schools, roads and sewage systems. This is the type of work that the character of Colonel Kurtz had done in the film, Apocalypse Now, during his initial tour of duty in Vietnam in 1962-63.
Since South Vietnam seemed unable to halt its decline, Taylor believed the United States had to perform this task for it, by pressing attacks against North Vietnam. The Ambassador expressed some anxiety about this approach. “These actions may not be sufficient to hold the present government upright,” he confessed. But he saw no alternative to escalation, given Saigon’s desperate condition. Here lay the fundamental reason for Option C. Bundy and his colleagues viewed escalation primarily as a desperate remedy for South Vietnam’s political decline.

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Section 6

George Ball was a maverick on Vietnam. Ball’s skepticism toward bombing derived from his experience as a director of the Strategic Bombing Survey at the end of World War II. Charged with assessing the impact of Allied bombing on the German war effort, Ball had been struck by its limited effect on civilian morale and industrial production. If Germany—a modern, industrialized nation with numerous strategic targets—had endured heavy bombing and continued its military production, how could the United States compel North Vietnam—an underdeveloped, agrarian country with few strategic targets—to cease its support of the Vietcong through human transport down hundreds of miles of jungle trails?

Ball’s earlier career had also sensitized him to the political frustrations of Western involvement in Vietnam. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ball had worked closely with the French government during its protracted ordeal in Indochina. He had witnessed the terrible disruptions unleashed by France’s colonial adventure, dividing its people and poisoning its politics for nearly a decade. Ball shuddered to see America incur similar frustrations by going to war in Vietnam.

Because of his separation from Vietnam policymaking during the Kennedy years, Ball could view the consequences of JFK’s decisions with a detachment which Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy, who had been more deeply involved, could not. This detachment encouraged him to question the basic assumptions governing America’s commitment to South Vietnam as that country’s deterioration quickened and the option of escalation gained currency in the new LBJ administration. At the
end of September 1964, he had begun work on a memorandum challenging the conventional verities on Vietnam and the wisdom of American military intervention. Recognizing the sensitivity of this endeavor, Ball had proceeded cautiously. He had worked on his memo away from the State Department, dictating most of it into a tape recorder at home. For two weeks, Ball later recalled, “I’d get up at three or four in the morning … go into [my] library … and dictate through the night.”

Ball had completed his lengthy study in early October and sent copies to Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy. The four had spent two Saturday afternoons the following month discussing Ball’s memorandum. His conclusions had rankled Rusk and Bundy; they had “absolutely horrified” McNamara. “He treated it like a poisonous snake,” Ball remembered, regarding it “as next to treason that this had been put down on paper.”

Chilled by his colleagues’ reaction, Ball had hesitated to pass his memo to President Johnson. Instead, he had chosen to wait. Ball explained this decision in his memoirs:

The President was then engaged in his election campaign and was troubled with a thousand problems. It did not seem a propitious time for a confrontation, so I decided to wait until I could get his full attention.

Once the campaign ended, Ball had delayed another three and a half months before sending his memo to Johnson. Why had Ball hesitated so long before passing his lengthy dissent to LBJ? Not out of personal fear of Johnson; Ball enjoyed a comfortable relationship with the President. Johnson knew Ball opposed deeper American involvement in Vietnam. But he also knew Ball would never publicize his opposition. “George,” LBJ once said to him, “you’re like the school teacher looking for a job with a small school district in Texas. When asked by the school board whether he believed that the world was flat or round, he replied: ‘Oh, I can teach it either way.’” “That’s you,” laughed Johnson, “you can argue like hell with me against a position, but I know outside this room you’re going to support me.”

Policy, not personality, explained Ball’s delay. Ball had never opposed the idea of bombing per se. He sensed its dangers and limitations, as he had warned the
President earlier in January and February, but considered those dangers and limitations tolerable—hoping, as he did, that bombing would produce negotiations leading to a politically acceptable American withdrawal. As long as LBJ contemplated only bombing, Ball therefore kept the memo to himself. But by late February, Ball had begun hearing rumblings within the State Department and Pentagon about the need for U.S. combat forces to protect the launching sites of air strikes against the North.

Such rumblings touched the deepest fear in Ball—the specter of an American land war in Vietnam. This prospect unnerved him, evoking haunting memories of France’s nightmare a decade before. Unalterably opposed to U.S. combat involvement, Ball now saw the force of events pushing Johnson toward that very abyss. As a result, Ball finally decided to act. He gave his memo to Bill Moyers at lunch on February 24, who passed it to the President that afternoon.

Ball’s memo swam against the rushing tide of current thinking on Vietnam. Ball dismissed the thesis that bombing Hanoi could somehow rectify Saigon’s grave political problems. “Even if [South Vietnam’s] deterioration is checked,” he wrote, “there seems little likelihood of establishing a government that can (a) provide a solid center around which the broad support of the Vietnamese people can coalesce or (b) conduct military operations with sufficient effectiveness to clean up the insurgency.”

Why had America committed itself to such a weak entity? The “primary motive,” Ball concluded, was “unquestionably political.” The United States was in South Vietnam to demonstrate its anti-communist resolve—its commitment to global containment.

Since political calculations precipitated Washington’s involvement, Ball felt the costs of that involvement should be measured in political terms. America’s commitment to South Vietnam should be judged by its impact on “U.S. prestige,” “the credibility of our commitments elsewhere,” and its “effect on our alliances.” If judged by these criteria, Ball believed the U.S. effort in South Vietnam would fail.

To begin with, South Vietnam suffered unusual—if not unique—problems which undermined its symbolic importance to the free world. South Vietnam, in
Ball’s words, was simply “not Korea”; America’s commitment to Saigon lacked the significance of its earlier commitment to Seoul. He explained why:

a. We were in South Korea under a clear UN mandate. Our presence in South Vietnam depends upon the continuing request of the GVN\textsuperscript{14} plus the SEATO\textsuperscript{15} protocol.

b. At their peak, UN forces in South Korea (other than ours and those of the ROK) included 53,000 infantrymen … provided by fifty-three nations. In Viet-Nam we are going it alone with no substantial help from any other country.

c. In 1950 the Korean government under Syngman Rhee was stable. It had the general support of the principal elements in the country. There was little factional fighting and jockeying for power. In South Viet-Nam we face governmental chaos.

d. The Korean War started only two years after Korean independence. The Korean people were still excited by their newfound freedom; they were fresh for the war. In contrast, the people of Indochina have been fighting for almost twenty years—first against the French, then for the last ten years against the NVN. All evidence points to the fact that they are tired of conflict.

e. Finally, the Korean War started with a massive land invasion by 100,000 troops. This was a classical type of invasion across an established border … It gave us an unassailable political and legal base for counteraction. In South Viet-Nam there has been no invasion—only a slow infiltration. Insurgency is by its nature ambiguous. The Viet Cong insurgency does have substantial indigenous support. … As a result, many nations remain unpersuaded that Hanoi is the principal source of the revolt. And, as the weakness of the Saigon Government becomes more and more evident, an increasing number of governments will be inclined to believe that the Viet Cong insurgency is, in fact, an internal rebellion.

South Vietnam was a chaotic and dispirited regime plagued by a tangled web of internal and external subversion, not a vibrant polity threatened by direct aggression. Its peculiar problems diminished America’s political objective of defending democracies against communist expansion.

\textsuperscript{14} Government of Vietnam.
\textsuperscript{15} Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, one of the many collective security pacts signed by the US as recommended by NSC\#68.
South Vietnam’s precarious situation also undermined the purpose of U.S. military escalation. What benefit, asked Ball, were air attacks against Hanoi if Saigon’s political turmoil continued? Reducing North Vietnamese support for the Vietcong on behalf of “a disorganized South Vietnamese Government … unable to eliminate the insurgency” would “at best bring a Pyrrhic victory,” he wrote.

Even this scenario, which assumed some success against North Vietnam, seemed overly optimistic to Ball. Hanoi had committed itself to the reunification of Vietnam long ago. And now, with South Vietnam in the throes of political confusion, that goal appeared close to fruition. American military pressure would not change Hanoi’s perception. As long as North Vietnam “believes victory is near,” Ball wrote, “it will probably be willing to accept very substantial costs from United States air action.”

And inflict substantial costs in return. Air power constituted Washington’s greatest military advantage. Hanoi understood this, and would react to American bombing by assuming that each party was now free “to fight the kind of war best adapted to its resources.” Land troops comprised North Vietnam’s particular advantage. If the United States unleashed its massive air power, Ball felt the North Vietnamese “would be clearly tempted to retaliate by using ground forces, which they possess in overwhelming numbers.”

Such an outcome foreshadowed what Ball considered the gravest misperception of all: that Washington could somehow anticipate, much less control, the consequences of escalation. Ball mocked the notion, popular among men like Taylor, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, that military force, carefully applied and gradually increased, could be managed and contained:

It is in the nature of escalation that each move passes the option to the other side, while at the same time the party which seems to be losing will be tempted to keep raising the ante. To the extent that the response to a move can be controlled, that move is probably ineffective. If the move is effective, it may not be possible to control—or accurately anticipate—the response.

War was an unpredictable and unruly tiger, and once “on the tiger’s back,” said Ball, “we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.” Instead, he feared the tiger would carry America deeper and deeper into the morass of Vietnam.
Bombing would lead to increased infiltration; increased infiltration would lead to attacks on the bases launching air strikes; these attacks would lead to U.S. ground forces to protect the bases; U.S. ground forces would lead to a revolutionary change in the management of the war; an Americanized war would lead to domestic frustration and bitterness more serious than Korea a decade before.

The logic of events frightened Ball, prompting him to weigh the political costs of escalation against the political benefits of continued involvement. He summarized the prevailing assumption:

… the United States must successfully stop the extension of Communist power into South Viet-Nam if its promises are to have credence…. [F]ailing such an effort our Allies around the world would be inclined to doubt our promises and to feel that they could no longer safely rely upon American power against Communist aggressive ambitions.

Here was the driving force of American action, the principle on which so much planning hinged. It had guided U.S. policy in Southeast Asia for years and, in the process, had approached the status of dogma. Ball was willing to play the heretic, to ask whether America’s allies viewed its effort in Vietnam as Americans assumed they did.

This was no easy task. Having devoted great effort to South Vietnam’s cause, Americans wanted to believe its allies considered that effort worthwhile. But Ball thought not. He acknowledged the painful reality of Allied thinking on Vietnam:

They fear that as we become too deeply involved in a war on the land mass of Asia, we will tend to lose interest in their problems. They believe that we would be foolish to risk bogging ourselves down in the Indochina jungle. They fear a general loss of confidence in American judgment that could result if we pursued a course which many regarded as neither prudent nor necessary.

From this picture emerged a radically different perception of America’s political stakes in Vietnam. “What we might gain by establishing the steadfastness
of our commitments,” Ball wrote, “we could lose by an erosion of confidence in
our judgment.”

Ball had brought the argument back to his main contention—that the costs of
Washington’s political commitment should be measured in the broadest political
terms. If viewed in this light, policymakers might see that escalation “would create
everous risks for the United States and impose costs incommensurate with the
possible benefits.”

Ball had spoken forcefully and passionately against escalation. But he had
also spoken belatedly. Ball had withheld his memo from Johnson during the
pivotal months when LBJ moved ever closer to bombing. He had hesitated to step
forward and, in doing so, had done little to check the escalatory momentum. Ball
had failed to assert his convictions as the pressure for intervention had grown.

But it was still not too late. The bombing of North Vietnam had yet to begin.
The President now had Ball’s memo, and the continuing freedom to choose his
policy.

Johnson studied Ball’s memorandum during the evening of February 24.
The next morning, Bill Moyers called Ball to say the President had read and reread
his memo. Late on the afternoon of February 26, Ball, McNamara, and Rusk met
with the President in the Oval Office to discuss Ball’s long and critical
memorandum. Johnson had examined the document carefully. He questioned
several of Ball’s contentions, even recalling the specific pages where they
appeared. LBJ seemed concerned, if not convinced, by his arguments.

McNamara was less impressed. As he had in several previous meetings,
McNamara discounted the hazards of bombing. “George here,” he said, “is
exaggerating the dangers.” “It is not a final act,” he added. Bombing was
controllable. Its risks were manageable, McNamara contended, and far less serious
than those of withdrawal.

Rusk did not share McNamara’s confidence. He understood Saigon’s
troubles too well to expect much from bombing. But Rusk feared the loss of South
Vietnam more than he doubted the efficacy of bombing. The President had to go
forward, he said, despite the risks of escalation.
Ball failed to convert Johnson. LBJ would proceed with the bombing. The President had already decided; his thinking had gone too far toward major escalation.

Finally, on March 2, 1965, over one hundred U.S. war planes launched from carriers in the South China Sea and airbases in South Vietnam struck the North Vietnamese ammunition depot at Xombang. The long-awaited air offensive against Hanoi, code-named ROLLING THUNDER, had begun.

The bombers which roared across the DMZ that day symbolized a deeper crossing for the United States. Johnson had committed America to direct participation in the war. LBJ had reached this decision only after much agonizing and delay. But from it would flow, almost immediately, a host of sweeping consequences both for his presidency and his country’s involvement in the Vietnam War.