**LBJ AND VIETNAM: AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY**

*LBJ saw the war as a personal challenge, responded on a personal level, and thereby poisoned his Presidency and robbed himself of the chance of greatness* Historian Larry King

**LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON (1908-1973)**

* LBJ was an old-fashioned man, his values were relics of an earlier time, he was confident & believed that every problem had a workable solution, he said the US was a “can-do” people capable of **anything** they willed, US was God’s chosen, life was survival of the fittest and that’s what the US is.US “exceptualism”, we are superior from British, German, Chinese, Russians, etc.
* LBJ believed the US could not lose a war, Minutemen at Lexington, the Alamo
* When Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford told, US may have to fight in Vietnam for 20-30 years, LBJ exploded, he invoked how his father stood up to the Ku Klux Klan, TR carry big stick, FDR beats Hitler and Tojo
* LBJ said Truman lost China to Communists through his failure to act militarily against them
* LBJ said JFK started US in Vietnam, LBJ was obsessed with fear of failure, looking indecisive and weak, he believed in the worldwide Communist Conspiracy, that they had killed JFK in Dallas
* 512/1961 As VP on a “fact Finding” trip to South Vietnam, LBJ was impressed with President Ngo Dinh Diem calling him a Statesman, on 11/2/1963 JFK approved a military coup of Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu who were murdered – JFK horrified would be murdered 3 weeks later

**36th PRESIDENT OF THE US**

* On the Domino Theory LBJ said *“I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way of China”* (loss of Vietnams would lead to all Southeast Asia)
* LBJ was preoccupied with Domestic Policy: building schools, fighting poverty, full employment, “*The Great Society*” – Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1916-2009) focused on Vietnam, The General Election 1964 LBJ doesn’t want GOP’s AUH2O to make Vietnam an issue
* Gulf of Tonkin Incident 8/2/1964 USS Maddox in international water attacked by North Vietnam torpedo boats
* Gulf of Tonkin Resolution 8/7/1964 Congress authorizes LBJ to use force in Vietnam Senate 88-2, House 414-0
* LBJ defeats AUH2O by largest popular majority in history, Senate 68-32, House 294-130, LBJ paints AUH2O during campaign as warmonger (the infamous “Daisy” ad)
* Like JFK, LBJ believed losing Vietnam =losing white house *“It would shatter MY presidency, kill MY administration…The loss of China which led to Joe McCarthy was chicken\*\*\*\* compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam”*
* LBJ fears that RFK will tell everyone “*I was a coward, an unmanly man, a man without a spine”*

**VOICES AGAINST WAR IN VIETNAM**

* LBJ Wanted war in Vietnam, all his major advisors, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, they were called “The Best and Brightest” all agreed on military intervention in Vietnam
* CIA when asked about the Domino Theory disagreed, said only Cambodia would fall with Vietnam
* Under Secretary of State George Ball opposed war in Vietnam and wrote a long memorandum saying bombing North Vietnam would not chage their policy, just make them send more troops, Ball said our allies in Europe believe Vietnam would be a fruitless struggle diverting US from where it s/b focused – Europe – LBJ saw the memo and had Ball present it to him – he then made no comment and ignored it

**WAR BEGINS FOR US COMBAT TROOPS SPRING 1965**

* Viet Cong attack Pleiku US advisors base their Camp Holloway 2/7/1965, 12 Hours later US aircraft bombed North Vietnam for the first time *“how could he be expected to ignore that? There they came thousands of ‘em, barefoot and howling in their black pajamas and thrusting homemade bombs, it had a damned* *insult, a calculated show of contempt* (for HIM*)…The worst thing we could do would be to let this Pleiku thing go by. It would be a big mistake; it would open the door to a major misunderstanding”* Three weeks late LBJ ordered continuous bombing raids in the North ‘*to force the North Vietnamese into negotiations”*, only 120 days after Pleiku US troops were involved in full scale combat, 8 US troops were killed , the start of over 50,000
* LBJ priorities have shifted away from Domestic Policy to Vietnam: *“Well, I guess we have to touch up these North Vietnamese a little bit…We’ll eat the Communists first, then we can look around and maybe give something to the poor”* – In the argument Guns vs Butter, Guns came first
* LBJ saw **HIS** policy in Vietnam a continuation of Ike and JFK but increasingly the war was called **HIS** war – Counter Insurgency failed, try bombing, bombing failed try Enclave Theory, when that failed try Search and Destroy Mission and a Pacification Program
* LBJ took North Vietnamese opposition as personal, **HIS** pride, **HIS** ego, **HIS** vanity – the troops were **MY** boys, **MY** helicopters, **MY** planes, **MY** pilots – Walt Rostow became **HIS** intellectual because he supported the war

**ATTITUDES ABOUT VIETNAM WAR CHANGE**

* By mid-1966 LBJ is unhappy with some of his cabinet because they have recanted their support and now reject **HIS** war – LBJ couldn’t forgive McGeorge Bundy after deserting to the Ford Foundation, no longer the brilliant t statesman but merely “*a small kid that’s all*”
* Bill Moyers quit to be an editor at Newsweek, once almost surrogate son suddenly became “*a little puppy I rescued from sacking groceries”*
* George Ball who had been right about Vietnam was “*a chronic belly acher”*
* Defense Secretary McNamara doubted to press, rudely shuttled off to the World Bank
* VP Hubert Humphrey voiced concerns, but LBJ said “*HHH wasn’t a real man, he cried as easily as a woman”* HHH will be Democratic nominee vs Nixon in 1968 General election
* When Lady Bird expressed doubts LBJ said “*of course she had doubts, it was like a woman to be uncertain, Has Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) got anything like that?” –* (married early in life, Ho and his wife didn’t live together after 1927)

**LBJ AND THE TET OFFENSIVE**

* The Tet Offensive 1/30/1968 to 3/28/1968 would shock US public, they took part of US Embassy in Saigon, LBJ lied at press conference telling US troops knew of the coming attack, it wasn’t a surprise – now it was clear the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were capable of embarrassing US – At Hue and Khe Sanh the US public saw that victory was not close
* Senator Eugene McCarthy (D MN) challenged LBJ in New Hampshire Primary and took **42%**
* LBJ had lost the trust of US people *“I shall not seek and will not accept the nomination of my party for another term” March 31/1968*

**LBJ IN EXILE IN HIS TEXAS ST HELENA**

* LBJ stops coloring his hair & grows it long, angry with US people because they “*abandoned*” him
* Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin assists LBJ writing his memoir, The Vantage Point but said she would draft chapters for him with documentation but LBJ would say NO, it wasn’t like this – he never seemed to know or understand when and how he had gone wrong

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