

Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War

1. Explain three reasons why LBJ believed the United States needed to be in Vietnam, according to his Johns Hopkins speech. Do you find any of the reasons persuasive? Explain.
2. To what extent were LBJ's private comments on Vietnam consistent with what he was saying publicly? Explain.
3. Based on the two readings, was LBJ justified in escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam? Explain.

Excerpts from Speech Given by President Johnson at Johns Hopkins University, April 7, 1965

Viet Nam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives, on Viet-Nam's steaming soil.

Why must we take this painful road?

Why must this Nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away?

We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure....

The first reality is that North VietNam has attacked the independent nation of South Viet-Nam. Its object is total conquest.

Of course, some of the people of South Viet-Nam are participating in attack on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from north to south....

Over this war and all Asia is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea....

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in South Vietnam?

We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Viet-Nam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Viet-Nam defend its independence. And I intend to keep that promise...

We are also there to strengthen world order. Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Viet-Nam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance. Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Viet-Nam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. We must say in Southeast Asia as we did in Europe in the words of the Bible: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further."...

Our objective is the independence of South Viet-Nam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves only that the people of South Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way. We will do everything necessary to reach that objective. And we will do only what is absolutely necessary.

In recent months attacks on South Viet Nam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary for us to increase our response and to make attacks by air. This is not a change of purpose. It is a change in which we believe that purpose requires...

These countries of southeast Asia are homes for millions of impoverished people. Each day these people rise at dawn and struggle through until the night to wrestle existence from the soil. They are often wracked by disease, plagued by hunger, and death comes at the early age of 40.

For our part I will ask the Congress to join in a billion dollar American investment in this effort as soon as it is underway.

The task is nothing less than to enrich the hopes and the existence of more than a hundred million people. And there is much to be done.

The vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA....

SOURCE: Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, pp. 394-397

LBJ Viewed Vietnam in '64 as 'Damn Mess,' Tapes Show

Presidency: Before buildup, Johnson confides in phone calls that 'I don't think it's worth fighting for.'

February 15, 1997 | *From Associated Press*

Almost a year before he began the large-scale military buildup in Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson called the war "the biggest damn mess I ever saw" and lamented: "I don't think it's worth fighting for, and I don't think we can get out."

Johnson made the complaint in a May 27, 1964, phone conversation with his national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy. Tapes of the conversation, and another the same day with his close friend and political mentor, Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, were released Friday by the LBJ Presidential Library.

They show that six months after he became president, Johnson agonized over what to do about Vietnam and was tormented by the prospect of sacrificing U.S. soldiers to a war he considered pointless.

"It's just the biggest damn mess I ever saw," he said.

Although he believed that public opinion was already against the war, Johnson also worried that Congress might run him out of office if he tried to withdraw.

"They'd impeach a president, though, that would run out, wouldn't they?" he asked.

He also spoke movingly of not wanting to endanger U.S. soldiers in Vietnam.

"I've got a little old sergeant that works for me over there at the house, and he's got six children, and I just put him up as the United States Army and Air Force and Navy every time I think about making this decision," he told Russell.

"Thinking about sending that father of those six kids in there . . . and what the hell we're going to get out of his doing it? It just makes the chills run up my back."

"It does me too," said Russell, then chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "We're in the quicksands up to our neck, and I just don't know what the hell to do about it."

At the time, the government's stated Vietnam strategy involved sending a few thousand U.S. advisors to help train the South Vietnamese to fight the North Vietnamese. The first U.S. soldiers sent officially for combat arrived on March 8, 1965, and their numbers swelled to more than 500,000, of whom 58,000 died.

Minutes after talking with Russell, Johnson repeated his anxiety to Bundy.

"The more that I stayed awake last night thinking of this . . . it just worries the hell out of me," he said. "It's damned easy to get in war. But it's going to be awfully hard to ever extricate yourself if you do get in."

Again he brought up the sergeant as an example.

"What in the hell am I ordering him out there for?" he asked. "What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What the hell is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?"

While historians have written about Johnson's anguish over escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the tapes offer an intimate portrait of just how painful the dilemma was, said Harry Middleton, director of the library.

"He was clearly tormented by it," Middleton said, adding that Vietnam was interfering with Johnson's hopes to enact civil rights and other Great Society legislation.

Although he expressed worries in private, Johnson couldn't be seen publicly as uncertain, said George Edwards III, director of the Center for Presidential Studies at Texas A&M University. Thus he appeared publicly committed to expanding the war.

"No president can be seen as vacillating. He had to be seen as prudent, but also as a strong anti-Communist," Edwards said.