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Opening Pandora's Box: The Genesis and Evolution of the 1964 Congressional Resolution on Vietnam

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On 7 August 1964, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution swept through Congress, signalling the beginning of a new era in the American commitment to Southeast Asia. Within a year, Lyndon B. Johnson used the broad and ill-defined grant of authority to significantly escalate the U.S. military presence in Vietnam with the introduction of combat troops. Historians consider the Tonkin Gulf Resolution to be a watershed event in the American Vietnam saga, the turning point that allowed Johnson to conduct an undeclared war without direct congressional sanction. What many scholars have failed to recognize, however, is that the resolution itself was less a turning point than a culmination of months of planning and preparation by an administration which anticipated the necessity of escalating the conflict in order to save South Vietnam from communism.

Originally intended by Johnson and his foreign policy advisers as a choice to include Congress in the decisions on Vietnam, the resolution was only sought in the wake of the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf in August 1964.¹ The resolution and the subsequent escalation of the Vietnam conflict have been the focus of a voluminous amount of research

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1. Questions persist regarding the authenticity of the attacks in the Tonkin Gulf which prompted the August resolution. The most thorough history of these events is found in Edwin E. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996). Moise presents convincing evidence to support the contention that the second attack did not occur, although he discounts accusations that the United States had planned the sequence of events in the gulf during the first week of August 1964 and denies that the second incident was a deliberate fabrication on the part of the administration or the military. The latter conclusion is supported by the recently released Johnson presidential telephone recordings, which show the confusion among decision-makers over the accuracy of the incident report.

by historians. Yet, scholarly preoccupation with these subjects has relegated the history of the resolution proposal to obscurity in the literature. A few sources recognize that administration officials had proposed and debated the idea of a congressional resolution as early as February 1964. Most of these references, however, discuss only the crucial months of May and June, and then usually in only a few lines or paragraphs.² In light of the importance of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in the debate over Vietnam, the war powers, and the “imperial presidency,” this neglect is remarkable. The process which ultimately culminated in the congressional resolution parallels the Johnson administration’s planning for increased American involvement in Southeast Asia in early 1964 and should be seen as critical to the events which followed in August and beyond. The policy-making process itself, moreover, is important to examine in detail because it enhances our understanding of Vietnam policy deliberations in 1964 and demonstrates how domestic political considerations influenced those decisions.

While the administration was certain that more needed to be done to stabilize the government of South Vietnam in early 1964, Johnson was driven by two separate and often conflicting impulses: his desire to include Congress in any decision committing a significant number of American troops to combat; and his instinctive and nearly obsessive need to win the November 1964 election, which would allow him to carry out his vision of the Great Society and escape from the legacy of Camelot. These competing—and often conflicting—domestic political considerations complicated the administration’s decision on when or even if to seek a congressional resolution.³ Quite beyond the

2. The only sources which treat the draft resolutions with any degree of depth are William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 4 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1986–1996), esp. 2:231–75; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 357–62; Moise, 22–45; and Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York, 1997), 145–50. Each of these books, however, considers the resolution generally within a broader context. Beyond these assessments, no scholar has given the subject more than perfunctory treatment within a larger study, and most of these fail to recognize how early in Johnson’s tenure this idea was proposed. See for example Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, 1995), 121–23.

3. For an in-depth look at the effects of domestic politics on the American foreign policy process, see Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789–1994* (Baltimore, Md., 1996). One of the shortcomings of Small’s argument on the importance of domestic politics to U.S. foreign policy is his definition of domestic politics, which ends up being so broad as to lack any explanatory value. For the purposes of this article, domestic politics is construed to mean Lyndon Johnson’s domestic agenda and electoral concerns, and the administration’s relationship with Congress.

specifics, the debate over the resolution's introduction illuminates the importance of 1964, especially the months prior to the Tonkin Gulf incidents, as perhaps the most critical year of America's involvement in Vietnam.⁴

Even prior to the assassination of John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963, the United States confronted an increasingly serious situation in Southeast Asia. Just three weeks prior to Kennedy's death, the South Vietnamese premier, Ngo Dinh Diem, had been overthrown and killed in an American-sponsored coup. The instability of the political and military situation in the region—already acute prior to the dual assassinations—intensified and resulted in Vietnam being a high priority for Lyndon Johnson immediately upon entering the Oval Office.⁵ Four days after taking the oath of office, Johnson approved his administration's first official policy statement on Vietnam, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273. Drawing on the conclusions of a recent policy conference in Honolulu, NSAM 273 essentially ratified the Kennedy administration's position on Vietnam. It announced American support for the new Saigon government and stated that aid levels would be maintained consistent with U.S. assistance to the fallen Diem regime. Further, NSAM 273 emphasized that the war would remain a primarily South Vietnamese effort; the United States would continue to provide support and training and serve in an advisory capacity. While not intended as a comprehensive statement of American policy, NSAM 273 did indicate the administration's intention to stand by its ally. As the president told a joint session of Congress on 27 November, "This nation will keep its commitments . . . [in] South Vietnam."⁶

4. The developments in 1964 have received surprising little detailed attention from scholars. Among those who argue that 1964 was a critical year for American involvement in Vietnam are Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, Gibbons, and Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif., forthcoming 1999).

5. The growth of American involvement in Vietnam is discussed in a number of studies, including Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York, 1988); and George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986).

6. National Security Action Memorandum No. 273, 26 Nov. 1963, "NSAM 273, South Vietnam," box 2, National Security Action Memoranda, National Security File (hereafter NSF), Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter LBJL), Austin, Tex.; and Speech, Johnson to Joint Session of Congress, 27 Nov. 1963, "President's Joint Session of Congress (11/27/63)," box 1, Speech File, NSF, LBJL. The Honolulu meeting took place on 20 November 1963. The *Pentagon Papers* characterize NSAM 273 as an interim, "don't rock-the-boat" measure whose central significance is that despite the changes wrought by the dual assassinations in November 1963, American policy would remain substan-

Despite this show of good faith, Johnson and his advisers demonstrated a growing concern about Vietnam in the last weeks of 1963 and began to reconsider their options.⁷ During this period of reassessment, Johnson broached the subject of a congressional resolution for the first time. The new president had extensive experience with the questions of executive-legislative control over foreign policy and the use of American troops and force overseas. During his tenure in Congress and as Senate majority leader, he participated in the debate surrounding the Korean War and the crises between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan over Quemoy and Matsu in the mid-1950s. As vice president from 1961 to 1963, he looked over Kennedy's shoulder during the Berlin and Cuba crises. As a result, Johnson had well-defined ideas about the proper relationship between the two branches of government in these matters. As Jack Valenti, one of Johnson's closest advisers, told a conference on Vietnam in 1991, "Being sprung from the loins of the Congress, he [Johnson] was very, very disgruntled and discontented with the fact that we were messing around in Southeast Asia without congressional approval. This disturbed him greatly."⁸

Johnson repeatedly stated that he objected to the way Harry S. Truman committed American forces to action in Korea without a mandate from Congress. According to Valenti, if a president had attempted to follow Truman's precedent while Johnson was majority leader, "by God, Lyndon Johnson would have torn his balls off."⁹ Another Johnson

tively the same. See *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam*, Senator (Gravel edition), 4 vols. (Boston, 1971), 3:17–20 (hereafter *PP* (Gravel)). Other scholars have dissented from this opinion. In *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992), John Newman contends that Kennedy intended to completely withdraw America from Vietnam and that Johnson, through NSAM 273, reversed that plan and deepened the U.S. involvement in the conflict. See also Robert Dallek, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Making of a Tragedy," *Diplomatic History* 20 (Spring 1996).

7. Johnson was unsure about the American commitment in Vietnam overall. On several occasions he expressed his reservations about remaining involved in South Vietnam, but feared what his political opponents and the public might do if he unilaterally withdrew. As he told Senator Richard Russell on 27 May 1964, "Well, they'd impeach a President though that would run out, wouldn't they?" Telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to Russell, 27 May 1964, LBJL.

8. Ted Gittinger, ed., *The Johnson Years: A Vietnam Roundtable* (Austin, Tex., 1993), 18–19. In 1991, McNamara stated that Johnson left no doubt about his desire to include Congress. He quoted Johnson as saying, "By God, I'm going to be damn sure those guys are with me when we begin this thing." See Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 347.

9. Gittinger, 19, 177. On 28 June 1950, the day after Truman unilaterally committed U.S. troops to Korea, Johnson "told President Truman that I admired and was grateful for his courage. . . . I promised to do everything I could as a Senator to contribute to the

adviser recalled that members of the bureaucracy were aware of his disapproval of Truman's failure to consult Congress: "We understood that, should the occasion arise, he intended to be governed by [Dwight] Eisenhower's precedent."¹⁰ Johnson praised Eisenhower for his preemptive request for a congressional resolution granting him discretionary authority to deal with the Quemoy-Matsu crises. But Johnson also believed that Eisenhower erred in failing to procure a congressional resolution in support of his decisions and actions in Vietnam following Dien Bien Phu. (It should be noted, however, that both the Quemoy-Matsu and the Middle East resolutions were based partially on drafts of an Indochina resolution considered by the Eisenhower administration in 1954.)

Although many of Johnson's advisers felt that American actions in Vietnam—both current and anticipated—were covered legally by the terms of the 1955 Manila Pact (SEATO), the president did not want to rely on mere legalities as a means of support for his administration's policies. Johnson believed that although a declaration of war would be too excessive, congressional authorization of policies which put American forces in harm's way would provide a greater base of support for the administration. Moreover, a congressional resolution would serve as a badly needed message of confidence and support for the Saigon regime. Thus, when Johnson told Secretary of State Dean Rusk in December, "If we stay in South Vietnam much longer or have to take firmer action, we've got to go to Congress," he did so more for the sake of domestic support for the administration than out of a perceived lack of legal standing.¹¹

The situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate as 1964 began. Johnson and his advisers kept a close watch on the tenuous conditions and refused to discount the possibility that increased involvement might be required to protect American interests and credibility in South Vietnam. As the compilers of the *Pentagon Papers* opined, the situation "was deteriorating so rapidly that the dimensions and

success of the President's policy." See Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963–1969* (New York, 1971), 47–48 (the text of the letter is in the appendix). This is somewhat inconsistent with later recollections by Johnson and others concerning Johnson's criticism of Truman for taking action in Korea without resort to Congress for approval or prior notification. See, for example, *ibid.*, 115.

10. Walt Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1972), 505.

11. John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago, 1995), 16; Gibbons, 1:272–76; Johnson, 48; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, ed. Daniel S. Papp (New York, 1990), 426–27, 445; and Robert Turner, *The War Powers Resolution: Its Implementation in Theory and Practice* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1983), 2n.

kinds of effort so far invested could not hope to reverse the trend."¹² The disintegration of the political and military situation, combined with the increasing resolve and determination of Saigon's enemies, challenged the administration to develop a more effective policy in Southeast Asia that would at once protect and stabilize South Vietnam and satisfy its own foreign policy imperatives. Toward this end, Walt W. Rostow, then the head of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, spoke in January 1964 about "the advisability of undertaking contingency planning, should Johnson decide to act more strongly against Hanoi." Shortly thereafter, the administration initiated a series of studies and planning exercises to determine the most effective—and politically acceptable—course of action in the event it became necessary to modify and/or escalate the American role in Vietnam.¹³

Despite Johnson's recognition of the potential desirability of a congressional resolution in December 1963, there is no official discussion of this option in the documents until February 1964. In a 12 February memo to Rusk, Rostow told the secretary of state that all of the elements necessary for a "most attractive Southeast Asia script" were in place and suggested that the president privately consult with congressional leaders about the situation in Vietnam. Following a positive response, Johnson should publicly go before Congress, explain the importance of Southeast Asia to American interests, and request a resolution "empowering him to employ all the diplomatic and other resources at our command to insure that the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 are complied with."¹⁴ With one stroke, the president would be in a position to deal with the problems in the region with a free hand and, presumably, be able to bring the conflict to a satisfactory resolution.

Rostow followed with a second memorandum the next day in which he outlined the contents of any potential resolution that the administration would send to Congress. In Rostow's opinion, a congressional resolution was a key element in any effort to increase American pressure on Hanoi. He argued that if Johnson wished to secure congressional cooperation, he needed to stress three main points: the continued violation of the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords, the American commitment to Southeast Asia under the SEATO pact, and the continuing commitment—since the Eisenhower administration—to the independence of South Vietnam. Rostow argued that the United States should

12. *PP* (Gravel), 3:42.

13. Karnow, 358; Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 505; and *PP* (Gravel), 3:106.

14. Rostow to Rusk, 12 Feb. 1964, "Southeast Asia," box 13, Papers of Walt W. Rostow, LBJL.

use every means at its command, diplomatic and military, to enforce compliance with the Geneva agreements and meet its obligations in the region. The only way to achieve American aims without substantial military engagement, he concluded, would be to give a demonstration of unity and determination by the president and Congress and "draw a line in the dust" against Communist aggression. Concurrently, the administration would implement a publicity campaign to inform and persuade the American public of the need to take action in Southeast Asia.¹⁵

According to Stanley Karnow, nearly every senior official in the administration concurred with Rostow on the need for "some kind of congressional prop to underpin the administration" as it planned for a larger American presence in Vietnam. Beginning with the Offshore Islands crisis of 1955, the congressional resolution had been used by the executive during the Cold War for two purposes: first, to declare congressional support for actions the administration had already taken and might have to resume or increase; and second, to demonstrate a congressional posture of firmness to deter others from bringing on a potentially dangerous situation. Given the domestic political difficulties associated with a declaration of war, not to mention the international tensions of the Cold War, the congressional resolution offered a convenient alternative. Recent precedents by Eisenhower and the congressional tendency during the Cold War to defer to the executive in matters of foreign policy and troop commitments made this avenue one which appealed to Johnson and his advisers, both for its show of unity and its authorization of further American action.¹⁶

Five days after Rostow's second memo, Johnson met with Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John McCone, General Maxwell Taylor, and the members of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee. At this meeting, Johnson directed that "contingency planning for pressures against North Vietnam should be speeded up," with a particular emphasis on those measures that would "produce the maximum credible deterrent effect on Hanoi."¹⁷ It is important to remember that while several differ-

15. Rostow to Rusk, 13 Feb. 1964, *ibid.* LBJL.

16. Karnow, 359. In February 1953, Johnson stated, "I want to make absolutely sure that the Communists don't play one branch of government against the other, or one party against the other. . . . The danger is they'll think we're fat and fifty and fighting among ourselves. . . . If you're in an airplane and you're flying somewhere, you don't run up to the cockpit and attack the pilot." Quoted in Karnow, 360.

17. Gibbons, 2:213, 233-34; and *PP* (Gravel), 3:154. The chairman of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee was William Sullivan and its principle members were included John McNaughton, Defense Department; Maj. Gen. Rollen H. Anthis, special assistant to

ent options were being considered during the early months of 1964, these were essentially hypothetical scenarios that would provide the background and foundation for future actions; no substantial increase in American involvement in Vietnam occurred during this period of planning. Of course, some measures—such as OPLAN 34-A and other covert U.S. operations—were organized and implemented.¹⁸ Overall, however, the administration remained in a holding pattern on Vietnam as it contemplated the available alternatives.

Yet subtle signals from Johnson and others showed the direction in which American policy was heading. In a speech at UCLA on 21 February, the president reaffirmed the American commitment to the support of South Vietnamese freedom, cautioning “those engaged in external direction and supply” of Saigon’s enemies that “this type of aggression is a deeply dangerous game.” Johnson’s speech was a thinly veiled threat aimed at Hanoi, the Viet Cong, Beijing, and Moscow, suggesting that they risked an expansion of American involvement in the war if they continued on their present course. Although Johnson later disclaimed any inference that the United States wanted to escalate the conflict, White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger told reporters following the speech that the president’s remarks meant that the United States might feel compelled to expand the conflict to North Vietnam or even China in order to fulfill its commitments to South Vietnam.¹⁹

Soon after the UCLA speech, Rostow met with Rusk and told him that if “the President says that [Hanoi is playing a ‘deeply dangerous game’], we’d better get ourselves in a position to back up our play.” Out of this meeting came the creation of a working group charged with formulating a draft congressional resolution dealing with the Southeast Asia situation. Rostow later recalled that the contingency planning undertaken by this and other groups within the government “in no way reflected a decision by Johnson to engage American forces

the Joint Chiefs of Staff for counterinsurgency and special activities; Maj. Gen. Lucius Clay, Jr.; William Colby, CIA; Joseph Mendenhall, State Department; Walter Stoneman, Agency for International Development; and William Jordan, State Department.

18. Operations Plan (OPLAN) 34-A was an offshoot of earlier programs designed to put pressure on the North Vietnamese via covert operations. For more detail, see John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York, 1991), 200–207; Moise, esp. 5–22; and Gibbons, 2:210–14.

19. Speech, Lyndon B. Johnson at UCLA, 21 Feb. 1964, “President’s UCLA Speech 2/21/64,” box 1, Speech File, NSF, LBJL. Salinger’s background briefing immediately produced a domestic backlash that forced Rusk to publicly downplay any speculation that the administration intended to “go North.” See Philip Geyelin, *Lyndon Johnson and the World* (New York, 1966), 187–88.

in Vietnam," and existed primarily to propose and define the alternatives and options available to the administration.²⁰ As Michael Forrestal noted in an interview in 1969, these planning committees existed because administration officials, particularly McNamara, felt they "had run out of intellectual capital" and that if they had not considered the locus of possible responses to the trends already apparent in Vietnam, they would be unprepared in the event of a crisis situation that called for rapid action.²¹

Administration officials spent the remainder of February analyzing options and defining potential responses to the situation in Vietnam, including a draft congressional resolution. Robert Johnson, Rostow's deputy at the Policy Planning Council, forwarded the *ad hoc* committee's preliminary recommendations to the chairman of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee, William Sullivan, on 1 March. The memorandum, entitled "Alternatives for Imposition of Measured Pressure Against North Vietnam," came with four attachments, including the first draft congressional resolution. Unfortunately, the memorandum remains classified; however, the *Pentagon Papers* contains a detailed description of the plan which appears to have been the basis for the committee's report. In discussing overt American actions against Hanoi, the working group cautioned that "public justification of our actions and [their] expressed rationale must be based primarily on the fact of Northern support for and direction of the war in the South in violation of the independence of South Vietnam." In order to establish this justification, they outlined a series of public informational, international diplomatic, and domestic political steps, including a congressional resolution.²²

In a separate memorandum, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy expressed serious reservations about the efficacy of various courses of action that had been proposed in the event of increased American involvement in Southeast Asia. He believed that the military actions that had been proposed would normally require a declaration of war. He recognized, however, that such a move carried heavy domestic overtones and would not be necessary if only punitive actions were taken. Left unstated was the understanding that any declaration of war would have substantial international implications as well. On the other hand, Bundy believed that to ignore Congress would be unsatisfactory since the United States did not face an immediate threat in Southeast Asia. In the absence of

20. Gittinger, 20; and Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 505.

21. Transcript, Michael Forrestal Oral History Interview, 3 Nov. 1969, by Paige E. Mulhollan, 26, LBJL.

22. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 505; Gibbons, 2:235.

overt provocation by the North Vietnamese, any offensive or escalatory actions taken by the administration without at least consulting Congress would have produced an immediate backlash that would have seriously damaged both executive-legislative relations and public support for Johnson and his policies.

The best answer, in his mind, was a resolution along the lines of the Offshore Islands Resolution under Eisenhower. Yet Bundy showed a reluctance to fully endorse this course of action either. His skepticism regarding Johnson's "doubtful friends . . . on the Hill," combined with a concern over asking for a resolution and then not taking commensurate action immediately thereafter, made a resort to Congress seem less palatable. His immediate solution, "though not a perfect [one]," recommended that Washington begin applying pressure on Hanoi—such as a blockade—and "await the resolution for other actions."²³

Johnson shared Bundy's concern about the administration's support on Capitol Hill, especially his "doubtful friends" on the pivotal Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In a conversation with Undersecretary of State George Ball on 2 March, the president suggested that someone from the administration should brief the members of the committee on the situation in Vietnam after noticing "about four Senators this morning raising hell about the uncertainty and everything." Johnson believed that "we ought to go over the alternatives with them and try to let them see we're doing the right thing."²⁴ Despite the misgivings about potential congressional opposition, however, the resolution was not one of the alternatives the administration was ready to suggest to members of Congress.

Bundy's reticence in pushing ahead with the congressional resolution proposal indicated the lack of consensus within the administration regarding what needed to be done to stabilize the Saigon regime and pressure Hanoi while concurrently maintaining an acceptable domestic posture. It was obvious to everyone concerned that the status quo was inadequate and changes needed to be made, but what

23. William Bundy to Sullivan, McNaughton, and Yarmolinsky, 1–2 Mar. 1964, "Vietnam Memos & Misc. Vol. IV," box 2, Country File, Vietnam, NSF, LBJL. While Bundy does not identify who the "doubtful friends" in Congress were, he does discuss the proposed neutralization of South Vietnam. This likely refers to (among others) Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana, who had written several letters to Johnson concerning Mansfield's support of neutralization. For Mansfield's letters to Johnson, see Mansfield to Johnson, 7 Dec. 1963 (also 6 Jan. and 1 Feb. 1964), "McGeorge Bundy, vol. 1, 11/63-2/64," box 1, Memos to the President, NSF, LBJL. On neutralization, see Fredrik Logevall, "DeGaulle, Neutralization, and American Involvement in Vietnam, 1963–1964," *Pacific Historical Review* 61 (February 1992).

24. Telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to Ball, 2 Mar. 1964, LBJL.

those changes would be remained unclear. The absence of a core Vietnam policy would lead the administration to make decisions based on immediate and transitory—rather than long-term—concerns and would eventually result in momentous decisions being made without any meaningful debate over the fundamental question of why American was in Vietnam. In addition, Bundy's comments reflect the uncertainty over how to include Congress in the decision-making process on Vietnam. The dilemma faced by the president and his advisers was how to accomplish this goal without placing limitations on the administration's freedom of action and opening Johnson's Vietnam policy to congressional and public scrutiny—and criticism.

Domestic considerations figured prominently in early 1964. Not only was Lyndon Johnson gearing up for the coming election campaign, but he was also preoccupied with securing congressional approval for his proposed "War on Poverty" and other domestic legislation, especially the pending civil rights bill. Faced with a substantial domestic agenda, the president hesitated to make any significant—and politically dangerous—foreign policy decisions. While the actual situation in Vietnam and Southeast Asia weighed heavily on Johnson, it was often only a secondary (or even tertiary) concern. Domestic priorities claimed the lion's share of the president's personal and institutional resources during the first half of 1964, as Johnson sought to maximize his popularity, achieve legislative success, and avoid or postpone potentially divisive decisions on Vietnam.²⁵

Doris Kearns has written that the "word went out that tough decisions on Vietnam should be deferred as long as possible. . . . Opinion surveys showed that more than two-thirds of the American public said they paid little or no attention to what was going on in Vietnam. Johnson wanted to keep it that way." Although this claim has been disputed by William Bundy, other sources verify that Johnson wanted to avoid any sort of public debate or crisis over Vietnam until at least November.²⁶ A note in the personal papers of Johnson's military aide,

25. Gibbons, 2:238; Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, 1976), 251; and Waldo Heinrichs, "Lyndon B. Johnson: Continuity and Change," in Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963–1968* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 18. The recently released Johnson White House telephone transcripts clearly demonstrate the administration's domestic political focus—especially Johnson's obsession with the November elections—and its influence on foreign policy decisions. Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (New York, 1997), contains an edited version of the tapes from November 1963 through the beginning of August 1964.

26. Kearns, 197–98; Vaughan Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Lawrence, Kans., 1983), 71; and Prados, *Hidden History*, 48. Prados states, "For many Americans, first notice of the Vietnam War came with the Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964.

Major General Chester V. Clifton, Jr., dated 5 March and written on White House letterhead, indicated two items which Clifton had apparently either discussed with or heard from the president. The note stated that there should be “No joint resolution of Congress” regarding Vietnam and that no steps should be taken “that would lead us to a Korea situation before November.”²⁷ This short note suggests two things: first, the president was not completely sold on the concept of a congressional resolution, despite his comments in December; and second, both points reflect the apprehension extant within the administration of a crisis over Vietnam that would imperil both legislative and electoral success in 1964.

Indeed, on 2 March, Johnson told his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, “I just can’t believe that we can’t take fifteen thousand advisers and two hundred thousand [South Vietnamese] people and maintain the status quo” until the election.²⁸ Two days later, after a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff where the president had been advised to “get in or get out,” Johnson complained that the administration did not have “any Congress that will go with us, and we haven’t got any mothers that will go with us in a war.’ And [in] nine months I’m just an inherited—I’m a trustee. I’ve got to win an election.”²⁹ Both comments demonstrate that Johnson’s primary concern was the election; nevertheless, it is clear that if any significant action were to be taken, Johnson preferred to have Congress and the public on board.

As a result, the administration’s contingency planning continued and Vietnam remained a central topic of discussion throughout the foreign policy and national security establishments. Ironically, the papers and memoranda produced by the Vietnam Coordinating Committee and other groups espoused the desirability of rallying both

Before that, large though it might loom in White House councils, Vietnam barely registered in the American consciousness.” William Bundy rebuts Kearns by saying that if “the word went out,’ it never reached me. On the contrary I can recall at least one strong injunction from LBJ to call it as we saw it, regardless of politics or the election. Of course the election played a part. . . . But explicit mention of that sort described here [in Kearns] was rare, and never came to me.” Quoted in Gibbons, 2:241n. In his unpublished manuscript on the war, Bundy states, “never in my hearing was it discussed whether a particular decision would help or hurt the President’s chances” in November. See Unpublished manuscript, William P. Bundy, Papers of William P. Bundy, box 1, LBJL, chap. 13, p. 35 (hereafter cited Bundy manuscript, chapter:page).

27. Note, 5 Mar. 1964, “Meetings with the President (Vol. I),” box 1-3, Files of C. V. Clifton, NSF, LBJL. The note does not indicate who the author or the recipient is; however, it is fairly safe to assume that Clifton received these instructions from Johnson directly or indirectly.

28. Telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to McGeorge Bundy, 2 Mar. 1964, LBJL.

29. *Ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1964.

public and congressional support behind American actions directed at and/or in response to aggression by Hanoi.³⁰ The dichotomy (if not outright contradiction) of promoting support of administration policy in both the capitol and around the country while attempting to keep Vietnam outside the national consciousness typifies the tightrope the administration attempted to walk during this period.

As the planning process continued to percolate through April and early May 1964, the president's campaign began to occupy more of his time and attention. According to Forrestal, it "was very hard to get to him," and "when he was in town, the last thing he wanted to be bothered with was Vietnam." When asked if it were true that Johnson did not consider Vietnam a "front burner" issue during his campaign, Forrestal stated that everything Johnson did in 1964 pointed to the election: "He did everything to convey to his associates that their principal job in foreign affairs was to keep things on the back burner." As Forrestal recalled, Johnson instructed his subordinates to "keep a lid on" Vietnam in order to avoid "headlines about some accident."³¹

Meanwhile, the situation in Vietnam continued to degenerate. The Viet Cong campaign intensified in early April, prompting the South Vietnamese government to approach Washington about increasing its participation in the conflict. Although the administration took no significant military steps, Rusk and other high-ranking officials visited Saigon to confer with the government of General Nguyen Khanh and the embassy staff, visit combat zones, and demonstrate American resolve and support for Khanh and South Vietnam. Unfortunately, these moves did nothing to ameliorate the pressing military problems faced by the South Vietnamese government. According to *Time*, "the nasty guerrilla conflict in South Viet Nam [was] beginning to look more and more like a full-scale conventional war." Further, the war reached the point where it became sufficiently divisive to warrant public review in the United States. A CBS documentary which aired on 1 April, "Vietnam: The Deadly Decision," concluded that the United States stood on the brink of a major decision. The administration either had to find an honorable way to extricate the country from Vietnam or face with the prospect of a long and possibly indecisive war. The clairvoyance of this program notwithstanding, events continued to illustrate the

30. Gibbons, 2:236.

31. Forrestal Oral History Interview, 20–23. See also Thomas J. Schoenbaum, *Waging War and Peace: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, Johnson Years* (New York, 1988), 418; and Robert Schulzinger, "It's Easy to Win a War on Paper": The United States and Vietnam, 1961–1968," in Diane B. Kunz, ed., *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations During the 1960's* (New York, 1994), 192.

problems facing Johnson and his advisers.³² Indeed, there was a growing sense of urgency that the contingency plans being devised by the administration would soon need to be implemented.

By the end of May the planning for a congressional resolution shifted into high gear, and once again domestic considerations played a vital role. Former Secretary of State and informal Johnson adviser Dean Acheson warned White House political aide Douglass Cater on 18 May that Vietnam could prove to be “tricky” in the middle of the campaign and “thought the President ought to . . . try and protect himself.” Acheson urged the president to pay closer attention to Vietnam’s potential ramifications on the forthcoming elections. Johnson agreed, making it clear that he did not want Vietnam to become his Achilles’ heel in the campaign. Thus, the president placed a renewed emphasis on the congressional resolution option as a means to cultivate congressional and public support.³³

Johnson clearly vacillated on the political desirability of a resolution. While in principle he favored executive-legislative cooperation in such matters, his options were constrained by a multitude of factors, most importantly his domestic priorities and his focus on the November election. The president endorsed a congressional resolution in May less for pressing military or strategic reasons than to protect his domestic political flank. A congressional resolution would shield him from pressures from the right and would compel his probable opponent, Republican Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona, to support Johnson’s decisions in Vietnam or face further isolation from the electorate. Thus, political expediency and military-strategic considerations combined to stimulate further discussion on the increasingly attractive idea of a congressional resolution.

At a meeting with his advisers on 20 May, Johnson requested that planning be stepped up in order to better define his options. Two days later, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy—William’s brother—reported that four groups were working on major proposals. George Ball led the group involved in drafting alternative forms of a potential congressional resolution that would give Johnson “a full range of choice with respect to the way in which [he] would seek Congressional *validation* of wider action.” According to Ball, his group

32. Kahin, 210–11; Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York, 1976), 48; “Southeast Asia,” *Time*, 24 Apr. 1964, 33; and Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990* (New York, 1991), 110–13.

33. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 20th anniv. ed. (New York, 1992), 403; Karnow, 357; Cater to Johnson, 19 May 1964, “President’s George C. Marshall Speech,” box 1, Speech File, NSF, LBJL; Gibbons, 2:252; and Douglas Brinkley, *Dean Acheson: The Cold War Years, 1953–71* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 239, 241.

agreed that a resolution was essential before taking action against North Vietnam, but that it should be "sufficiently general in form not to commit you to any *particular* action ahead of time."³⁴ Ball's comments reflect a clear sense of caution along with a decided unwillingness to back the administration into a corner or commit the country by default to any specific course of action.

Notwithstanding this caution, the importance of a resolution for its political value abroad was also a major consideration, both for its effect on South Vietnam and on other interested nations. The administration considered the potential boost in morale and reaffirmation of American support for South Vietnam that a resolution would provide to Saigon to be pivotal. George Kahin has argued that Johnson's braintrust considered the resolution a way to "give a psychological boost to Saigon's military leadership while providing greater flexibility and scope for the exercise of American military power in Southeast Asia," while concurrently furnishing the president with a domestic aegis for his policy. Further, leaders in Hanoi, Beijing, Moscow, and Paris would be assured of Washington's position concerning the situation in South Vietnam. As important as this would be normally, administration officials believed that it was even more critical in an election year.³⁵

Cater, in a 23 May memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, expanded on this external justification for a congressional statement:

The communists base their strategy on the premise that the free nations are soft and irresolute. This year, they may also anticipate that the United States, engaged in an election campaign, may turn its attention homeward and neglect its responsibilities abroad.

We cannot allow them to make such a miscalculation. Each of the five Presidents preceding President Johnson has acted to preserve the free world's strategic interests in Asia. Congress has repeatedly declared support for this commitment. . . .

There is need now to reconfirm that commitment. In doing so, we make our determination crystal clear. We serve notice to friend and foe alike that the independent countries of Southeast Asia will not become pawns of American party politics.³⁶

Cater's memo points once again to the credibility issue stressed by Johnson's advisers, but it also addresses another critical point—the

34. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 1:350 (emphasis added), 359–62 (hereafter *FRUS* with year and volume).

35. Kahin, 217.

36. Cater to McGeorge Bundy, 23 May 1964, "Meetings on Southeast Asia Vol. I," box 18, Files of McGeorge Bundy, NSF, LBJL.

relationship between the American democratic process and foreign policy, an issue which has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Observers such as George Kennan have commented on “the domestic selfconsciousness of the American statesmen.” According to Kennan, American politicians, when considering matters of foreign policy, tend “to be more concerned for the domestic political effects of what he is saying or doing than about their actual effects on our relations with other countries.” Walter LaFeber has argued that “conducting a successful foreign policy for the United States requires a dual approach: constructing a strategy that is workable abroad, and developing a political explanation that creates and maintains sufficient consensus at home.” The linkage here is important, for it demonstrates how domestic issues collide with and shape foreign policy in the United States. In this case, Cater makes a plea for action to prevent a political confrontation inimical to American interests abroad. This added dimension further clouded an already murky picture in which decisions on Vietnam and on the resolution were tied inextricably to domestic politics.³⁷

The working draft of the resolution and other contingency plans were submitted to the National Security Council (NSC) on 24 May for discussion by the Executive Committee (Excom).³⁸ Johnson did not attend, but given his managerial and decision-making style, it is likely that the president used this forum in order to sound out his advisers and submit his own opinions by proxy. The draft resolution defined the American position very clearly, arguing that North Vietnamese aggression and systematic disregard for the 1954 Geneva Accords had infringed on the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of South Vietnam and Laos. Yet it remained vague in terms of what actions the resolution would sanction. The draft asked Congress to authorize the president to “use all measures, including the commitment of armed forces,” in pursuit of defending Southeast Asia—leaving the parameters of such a commitment open to interpretation. The resolution also placed the onus of responsibility on the governments of South Vietnam and Laos to ask for assistance without specifying

37. Kennan, 176; and Walter LaFeber, “Johnson, Vietnam, and Tocqueville,” in Cohen and Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson*, 31. The influence of domestic politics on U.S. foreign relations is discussed in Charles W. Kegley, Jr. and Eugene R. Witkopf, eds., *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence* (New York, 1988); Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy*; and Logevall, *Choosing War*.

38. A copy of the agenda for the meeting has a handwritten note stating, “All working papers. No official standing.” See Agenda, Executive Committee Meeting, 24 May 1964, “Meetings on Southeast Asia, Vol. 1,” box 18/19, Files of McGeorge Bundy, NSF, LBJL.

what conditions would merit such a request, clearing the way for an increase in American involvement without the political ramifications of a unilateral response.³⁹ Despite the imprecise language, the draft was generally well received and formed the basis for discussion and a revised version of the resolution.

The revised draft text that emerged from the Excom deliberations closely resembled the original and reflected the continuing concern which the Excom and the administration expressed over the perception of its Vietnam policy, especially domestically. A handwritten note, most likely made by McGeorge Bundy, questioned whether to include a stipulation that the United States was prepared "to use all measures, including the commitment of armed forces" to maintain the independence of South Vietnam and Laos. The national security adviser asked rhetorically, "must this be in. Reveals our estimate of scope of operation."⁴⁰ The importance of this comment could easily be overstated. But for critics who have argued that the Johnson administration knew well in advance of the need for massive American ground forces in Vietnam, it underscores the contention that the administration dealt in bad faith with Congress and the American people regarding the situation in South Vietnam.

The members of the Executive Committee gave their support to the idea of a resolution despite certain conditional reservations. McNamara recalled later that he felt that if the decision to use American combat, rather than merely advisory and training, forces in Southeast Asia were to be made within two to three months, the administration should immediately go forward with a resolution. Otherwise, waiting to approach Congress would neither jeopardize the strategic situation nor negatively impact the political status quo.

Rusk believed that the overriding concern in determining the efficacy of a resolution was to ensure that it did not put the president in a precarious position. He voiced concerns on two fronts. First, the instability and lack of support for General Nguyen Khanh in South Vietnam was "somewhat difficult for us to defend" until Khanh took steps to improve his position with dissenting domestic groups. Rusk cautioned that "while the South Vietnamese are not fighting for the U.S., they must create an image of being willing and able to fight for [rather than among] themselves." The secretary of state wanted to ensure that the United States got the maximum out of Khanh in terms of full support of his regime by the South Vietnamese people before approach-

39. *FRUS, 1964-1968*, 1:356-58.

40. Draft Resolution on Southeast Asia, "Meetings on Southeast Asia, Vol. I," box 18/19, Files of McGeorge Bundy, NSF, LBJL (emphasis in original).

ing Congress to seek a resolution which would redefine and deepen the American commitment to Saigon. These reservations aside, Rusk hoped to avoid any actions on the part of the United States that could give Khanh's enemies a chance to move against him.

Second, Rusk asserted that the Excom had to counter public reports and perceptions that electoral concerns prevented Johnson from taking decisive steps in Vietnam to resolve the conflict. He thought that a major speech by the president would be required in the near future to reassert the administration's position by hammering away at "the same thing over and over again" and counter media reports out of Saigon that all was "doom and gloom." Concern over public opinion was a consistent feature of administration strategy. At every level of planning, administration officials included provisions to inform and educate the public in order to maximize support for Johnson's Vietnam policies.⁴¹

The apprehension shown by Rusk and the administration in general over possible negative public reaction to its Vietnam policies reflects the continuing role public opinion played in the administration's foreign policy-making. Melvin Small has argued that public opinion plays a greater role in the development of diplomatic and military strategies in the United States than in most other nations. In his own words, "Johnson envied his counterparts in other capitals who did not have to worry about [domestic] obstacles to policymaking."⁴² These obstacles led the members of the Excom to recommend that a public information campaign similar to those previously proposed would have to be initiated in conjunction with any actions that either increased involvement in Vietnam or caused the public to be more aware of the situation in Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the most important topic discussed at the 24 May meeting involved the timetable for presenting the resolution to Congress. McGeorge Bundy reported to Johnson the following day that the Excom had concluded that the resolution should be withheld "until Civil Rights is off the Senate calendar" in late June. Again, the desire to focus administration efforts and expend political capital on the domestic agenda overrode any possible discussion of an immediate resort to Congress over Vietnam. The options discussed at the NSC meeting and outlined in this memorandum, as well as a step-by-step

41. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 1:369, 371; McNamara, 120; and Minutes, Summary Record of Meeting on Southeast Asia by Bromley Smith, 24 May 1964, "Presidential Decisions—Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, Vol. 1," box 38, NSC History, NSF, LBJL.

42. Summary Record of Meeting, 24 May 1964, 6; Melvin Small, "Public Opinion," in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 165, 175.

blueprint by the Pentagon for increasing military pressure on Hanoi, were viewed as being preliminary steps which could "be conducted in such a way as to leave a free choice on the timing of such a resolution." Opinion was divided between two alternatives: submitting the resolution prior to the Republican convention in late July to maximize its political utility; or delaying until later in the summer irrespective of the domestic political considerations.⁴³ Although the Excom debated the pros and cons of each timetable, Rusk, McNamara, and the others did not reach a decision on when to submit a resolution. The discussions did underscore, however, the emphasis which the administration placed on both legislative and electoral imperatives in formulating a revised policy on Vietnam.

Vietnam was not, however, the only problem facing the administration during the spring of 1964. Between mid-May and mid-June, a Communist offensive in Laos triggered what William Bundy characterized as "intense consideration" of extending military action into Laos and North Vietnam. Although the Communist offensive did not succeed, it did force the administration to reevaluate its position. Bundy later wrote, "if the Communist drive in Laos had reached close to the Mekong Valley it is entirely possible that a serious program would have been initiated," including a congressional resolution, to drive the Communists back.⁴⁴ With both Laos and South Vietnam facing mounting pressure from Communist forces, the principals from the Excom—along with other key officials from Washington and Saigon—met in Honolulu the first week in June to continue discussing the administration's options regarding the deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia.

Prior to the conference—which William Bundy described as "a full gathering of the clans" with an "apprehensive-to-gloomy mood"—Johnson met with Democratic congressional leaders and Senate Republicans for consultations on Vietnam.⁴⁵ According to the *Pentagon Papers*, Johnson held these meetings with the intent of including Con-

43. McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 25 May 1964, "McGeorge Bundy, Vol. 4, 5/1-27/64," box 1, Memos to the President, NSF, LBJL; *FRUS 1964-1968*, 1:350; *PP* (Gravel), 3:167-68; and Gibbons, 2:255. In reality, submitting a resolution to Congress during the summer could have been a campaign liability; it would have allowed Goldwater to call Johnson a "chicken" more loudly if the president did not take full advantage of it.

44. Bundy manuscript, 13:1, 22. On 6-7 June, another potential crisis arose when two U.S. Navy reconnaissance planes were shot down over Laos. Johnson ordered retaliatory strikes against Communist positions on 9 June. In the aftermath of the reprisal raids, the situation stabilized and the administration seemed to move away from the brink of making a major change in its Southeast Asia policy. See telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to Mansfield and Johnson to McNamara, 9 June 1964, LBJL.

45. Bundy manuscript, 13:18.

gress in taking “any steps which carry with them substantial acts and risks of escalation.”⁴⁶ These meetings were held in part to assuage members of Congress, and ultimately the media, about the purpose of the Honolulu conference. As Johnson told Rusk on 2 June, Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon publicly accused the administration of planning a war in Asia at the Hawaii meetings, and reporters were predicting a dramatic decision would emerge from the conference.⁴⁷ The charges made Johnson uneasy, so he brought his former colleagues to the White House to clarify the administration’s intentions. With this groundwork proceeding in Washington, the question of whether to pursue a resolution was debated in Honolulu.

The debate centered on whether the other actions under consideration, military and otherwise, required a resolution in order to be implemented. Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the American ambassador to South Vietnam, questioned the need for a resolution if the United States were to confine its actions to “tit for tat” retaliatory raids on North Vietnam rather than the more intense bombing he advocated. This reservation aside, most of the officials at the conference, particularly McNamara, Rusk, and McCone, argued vociferously in favor of a resolution. McNamara said the United States might be required to make major deployments on the ground to guarantee South Vietnamese defenses against not only retaliatory strikes by the North, but also against any possible escalation of the conflict by Hanoi or Beijing. It might be necessary, he continued, “to deploy as many as seven divisions” in Vietnam—a decision which undoubtedly required a “political foundation.” Rusk concurred, noting that the military requirements of an increased commitment might involve the call-up of reserves, always a sensitive political issue with the Congress. He also stated that American public opinion over the administration’s Southeast Asia policy was badly divided and that the president therefore needed the “affirmation of support” which a resolution would supply. Finally, McCone saw the resolution as a deterrent to both North Vietnam and the People’s Republic of China in taking action against the South, although General Taylor pointed out that Chinese intervention was unlikely in any event.⁴⁸

46. *PP* (Gravel), 3:73, 174.

47. Telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to Rusk and McGeorge Bundy, 2 June 1964, LBJL.

48. *FRUS 1964–1968*, 1:432; and Gibbons, 2:261. The agenda of the Honolulu conference included “developing plans to reverse North Vietnamese military and political gains in the South, strengthening the crumbling South Vietnamese government,...and sell increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam to the American people.” See Brinkley, 240. For a specific look at Lodge’s views, see Anne Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam: A Patriot Abroad* (New Haven, Conn., 1995).

The Honolulu Conference pointed to the growing consensus among Johnson's advisers of the desirability of pursuing a resolution. While their justifications for supporting the proposal differed, by the end of the three-day conference the resolution was well on its way towards becoming administration policy. Yet unanimity did not prevail. In addition to Lodge's conditional reservations, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy "foresaw great difficulties in obtaining approval of a Congressional resolution if the Administration's course of action was not crystal clear," echoing William Bundy's previous concern over the lack of a well-defined Vietnam policy. He felt that the administration needed to delay its approach to Congress until events warranted such a tactic.⁴⁹ Kennedy had discussed the possibility of a resolution with Johnson at the end of May as well. At that time, he argued that the war would never be won militarily; rather, it would be won in the political arena. Further, Kennedy did not consider the country ready for a "declaration of war," which is how he viewed a congressional resolution.⁵⁰ Kennedy's dissenting viewpoint, however, remained a minority opinion, and the resolution proposal retained its priority among the policy alternatives being considered.

Upon their return to Washington, Rusk, McNamara, and the others involved in the planning continued to refine the proposed scenarios. On 5 June, McNamara outlined a six-step "South Vietnam Action Program"; step IV called for a congressional resolution supporting American policy in Southeast Asia in mid-July. Five days later, the Excom held a meeting at the White House to discuss potential obstacles to the passage of the resolution. The group deliberated over yet another draft resolution, this one based on the language of the Middle East Resolution of 1957. The record of the meeting indicates that the group felt that the resolution conveyed "a firm posture" while emphasizing a "readiness to negotiate" and willingness to rely on the offices of SEATO and the United Nations, rather than American intervention, to resolve the situation in Southeast Asia. The ultimate objective on the political side would be to "enlist the support of as many Senators as possible," excluding the intractable Senator Morse, to ensure rapid passage and "gain maximum support."⁵¹

The discussion then turned to a paper submitted by McGeorge Bundy entitled "Alternative Public Positions for U.S. on Southeast Asia for the Period July 1–November 15." This memorandum addressed some of the political difficulties faced by the administration and how

49. Minutes, Summary Record of Meeting on Southeast Asia by Bromley Smith, 10 June 1964, "Presidential Decisions—Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, Vol. 1," box 38, NSC History, NSF, LBJL.

50. Telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to Kennedy, 28 May 1964, LBJL.

51. FRUS, 1964–1968, 1:462, 490.

a congressional resolution would affect them. In addition, the chronological boundaries delineated in the title reflect the administration's overwhelming preoccupation with the campaign and the desire to keep tight control on policy until *after* the election. Indeed, Bundy elaborated on this point in the first sentence. The administration wanted to "make its position on Southeast Asia clear and strong as possible in the next five months" during the campaign. The immediate decision facing the administration, he wrote, was "whether or not . . . [to] seek a Congressional resolution giving [Johnson] general authority for action" the president deemed necessary. Moreover three imperatives existed if a decision was reached to pursue a resolution: first, it had to be general in tone; second, it had to be submitted to Congress immediately following the passage of the civil rights bill; and third, no resolution should be sought without careful research that indicated the likelihood of "rapid passage by a very substantial majority." The answers to these questions would determine if a resolution would be sought.⁵²

Bundy went on to argue that the defense of the resolution would "require a substantial increase in commitment of U.S. prestige and power to success in Southeast Asia." This aim would necessarily require a major public campaign by the administration aided by "early and outspoken support" by congressional leaders in order to achieve the measure of bipartisan backing that Johnson craved. The former Harvard dean concluded by discussing a timetable for submitting the resolution to Congress, citing advantages in an "early" resolution that would give the United States the latitude to choose among several possible courses of action and, concurrently, to signal a renewed "firmness of purpose" in international capitals, especially in Southeast Asia.⁵³ Bundy's memorandum seemingly contained the basic steps that would pave the way for the resolution to stand up to congressional and media scrutiny and ensure its success.

Yet in a signal that Johnson might be hedging his bets regarding the resolution, the memo also addressed what might happen without a resort to Congress. Bundy cited both pros (no risk of a political contest at home nor public awareness that could amplify an error) and cons (losing a major base of commitment and authority) to a resolution, and asserted the need to determine whether the administration's flexibility would be circumscribed if a resolution were not pursued. In this discussion—which reflected a nuanced consideration of the resolution proposal rather than a simple dichotomy—he touched on

52. *Ibid.*, 1:493–96.

53. *Ibid.*, 1:495.

several factors: alternative forms of bipartisan support; actions permissible without a resolution; and the short window of opportunity—due to domestic political considerations related to the passage of the civil rights bill—of three weeks to get a resolution through Congress and the attendant peril of moving too quickly. Bundy reached the following conclusion: “On balance, it appears that we need a Congressional Resolution *if and only if* we decide that a substantial increase of national attention and international tension is a necessary part of the defense of Southeast Asia in the coming summer.” He solidified this opinion in a separate memo to Johnson the same day: “We think the risks outweigh the advantages, unless and until we have a firm decision to take more drastic action than we currently plan.”⁵⁴

One reason for the sudden uncertainty about the resolution was the debate over the civil rights bill during the spring of 1964, one of the toughest legislative battles of Johnson’s career. Moreover, during this same period, congressional Republicans became increasingly vocal in their criticism of the administration’s policies on Vietnam, denouncing what they perceived to be a “no-win” policy. To illustrate their displeasure, a resolution introduced on 21 May called for the administration to explicitly declare its determination to defend South Vietnam—essentially a demand to win or get out. Other critics called for an immediate end to the American presence in Vietnam. Yet the general climate of opinion on Capitol Hill remained “cautious or non-committal,” with most members of Congress waiting for a presidential initiative. While the resolution might have made some headway in this direction, civil rights remained Johnson’s top priority at the moment. The bill passed through the House without great difficulty, but Republicans and southern Democrats threatened a filibuster in the Senate. Finally, on 10 June—coincidentally the day of the NSC meeting on the resolution—Johnson managed to convince Senate minority leader Everett Dirksen, who had expressed misgivings regarding Vietnam, to support the bill. Dirksen called for cloture on the bill and led the way towards its passage in late June.⁵⁵ One could be for-

54. *Ibid.*, 1:495–96 (emphasis added); and McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 10 June 1964, “McGeorge Bundy, Vol. 5,” box 2, Memos to the President, NSF, LBJL. McNamara stated in the discussion that he had recommended thirteen actions which could be taken without a resolution that would “go quite far.” See Summary Record of Meeting, 10 June 1964.

55. Gibbons, 2:264–66; H. W. Brands, *Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (New York, 1995), 225; Kearns, 192; Johnson, 158–60; and Borner, 97. The Republican position on the Vietnam War is a fascinating subject which has been neglected by scholars. For a brief survey of topic, see Terry Dietz, *Republicans and Vietnam, 1961–1968* (New York, 1986).

given for reading too much into this meeting, yet it is worth considering. In light of the subsequent postponement of the resolution proposal, is it possible that Johnson and Dirksen consummated a deal involving civil rights and the resolution? Quite possible.

Johnson came out of the battle over civil rights faced with a dilemma. He had expended an extraordinary amount of political capital on legislation he truly believed in, but he remained confronted with the deteriorating situation in Vietnam and potential challenges from both sides of the aisle in Congress. Paradoxically, requesting a resolution on the heels of this vicious political fight would at once provide Johnson with a weapon to fend off challenges from the right while pitting him against his own party, whose solidarity over Vietnam had begun to crack. Johnson did not fear a full floor vote on a resolution, but he had serious misgivings about the opposition in the committee rooms, especially in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The president wanted to avoid a “Pyrrhic battle” with his own party during an election year.⁵⁶ Thus, the pendulum swung away from the idea of a congressional resolution despite the fact that as late as the 10 June meeting of the Excom it had been accepted that a resolution would be pursued. Johnson clearly felt that an approach to Congress at this stage would be detrimental to his relationship with Congress and to his domestic political support.

Support for the administration’s Vietnam policy from the Democratic party in Congress had begun to decline. Until recently, the president only needed to concern himself with political mavericks such as Senators Morse and Ernest Gruening of Alaska, both outspoken critics of current policy who adamantly pushed for an American withdrawal from Vietnam. Yet Johnson’s “doubtful friends” now included such notable legislators as Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield of Montana and Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas. Although neither spoke out publicly against the president, each had private reservations about Washington’s commitment to Saigon and approached Johnson to express their concerns. Mansfield wrote a series of letters to his former colleague in late 1963 and early 1964 in an attempt to convince Johnson to reconsider the neutralization proposal.⁵⁷ Fulbright, who would later shepherd the Tonkin Gulf Resolution through the Senate contrary to his better judgment, was apprehensive regarding America’s role in Southeast Asia and met frequently with Johnson to discuss the issue.⁵⁸ The shifting political climate in the Congress re-

56. Halberstam, 402, 404.

57. See note 24 above for the citation on the Mansfield letters to Johnson.

58. The emerging Democratic dissent is discussed in Logevall, *Choosing War*, chaps. 4–5; Woods provides an in-depth examination of Fulbright’s position.

quired the president to take steps to ensure that he did not take any action that could undermine support for his domestic agenda. As a result, Johnson endeavored to steer clear of any decision on the resolution until he could be assured of a favorable reception on Capitol Hill.

Congress was not the only place where Johnson encountered opposition. Robert Kennedy had emerged as Johnson's rival within the Democratic party and had the support of many Kennedy loyalists within the administration. The two men's relationship deteriorated—although it had never been very good—as the American commitment to Vietnam grew. Yet in June 1964 they seemed to be on the same page regarding the resolution. Kennedy had been on record as opposing the resolution in May, and his feelings had not changed. Johnson, on the other hand, had equivocated about his feelings for months. On 9 June, the two had a long telephone conversation mainly concerning the resolution proposal. Kennedy related some of the debate in Honolulu and informed Johnson that he felt that an approach to Congress about Vietnam “poses all kinds of problems.” Johnson agreed. “You can't do anything about that [the resolution] until you get rid of this problem we've got up there now [the pending Civil Rights legislation].” Johnson was “fearful that if we move without any authority of the Congress that the resentment would be pretty widespread and it would involve a lot of people who normally would be with us.” Yet Johnson was also concerned that if the administration did ask for a resolution, it would be subject to a protracted debate—which he wanted to avoid—unless the groundwork had been laid prior to submission.⁵⁹

Despite the president's concerns and Kennedy's input, however, no official decision was reached regarding the fate of the resolution proposal. Rostow still held out hope that his brainchild would not be stillborn. He wrote William Bundy on 11 June and addressed one of the chief concerns of the Excom, positing that a resolution would not be difficult to obtain “if the President made up his mind that he needed it.” Moreover, the Vietnam Coordinating Committee prepared a revised draft resolution on 11 June that contained alternative language for two of the three sections which allowed for greater flexibility in discussions surrounding the draft. Section 2 had two versions: one based on the 1955 Middle East Resolution which based American actions on the UN charter; and the other based on the 1962 Cuba Resolu-

59. Telephone conversation transcript, Johnson to Kennedy, 9 June 1964, LBJL. For a discussion of the Johnson-Kennedy rivalry, see Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud that Defined a Decade* (New York, 1997).

tion, which granted a broader mandate of authority to support South Vietnam. Section 3 also had two versions: the first left the grant of authority open-ended, while the second stipulated that it would expire in January 1965.⁶⁰ These options would increase the flexibility of the administration's approach to Congress and reflected a recognition of the need to appeal to disparate audiences.

In response, William Bundy made a final attempt to convince Johnson to pursue a resolution. Bundy had become one of the resolution's strongest proponents by this point. He later commented that he considered a resolution to be "the strongest possible deterrent to Hanoi's pressing its local advantages in Laos and South Vietnam would surely be a Congressional expression of U.S. steadiness and willingness to go further if need be."⁶¹ On 12 June he presented a comprehensive argument in favor of a congressional statement, specifically detailing what he foresaw as the likely development of events. Employing the prevailing domestic political logic, Bundy believed that a resolution was the "action that commends itself" to promoting the flexibility of "the Executive in the coming *political* months" more than any other conceivable course of action. He outlined a procedure whereby the resolution would be drafted in consultation with congressional leaders to ensure rapid passage and avoid extensive and divisive debate. Further, he alluded to the window of opportunity during the week of 22 June that was "virtually inevitable from a political standpoint" at the conclusion of the Civil Rights debate when the Democrats were "feeling virtuous." Bundy also added a second paper the next day dealing with the presentation of the resolution in which he recognized that "this is an election year" which made "such an affirmation of extra importance."⁶² Clearly, support for the resolution remained high within the administration well into June. Nevertheless, these last-ditch lobbying efforts by Rostow and Bundy failed to shield the resolution from the shifting political winds.

The decisive meeting regarding the resolution proposal took place on 15 June. In addition to William Bundy's papers, several other memoranda were on the table, but the tone of the debate and the outcome of

60. Rostow to Bundy, 11 June 1964, "Southeast Asia," box 13, Rostow Papers, LBJL; and *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 1:513–15. An intriguing counterfactual to consider is how the American escalation might have changed—or even if it would have occurred—had the Tonkin Gulf Resolution contained an expiration clause as did the alternate version of Section 3. At the very least, the renewal of a closed-end resolution would have prompted a public debate (in the absence of a triggering event) over the American commitment in South Vietnam.

61. Bundy manuscript, 13:23.

62. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 1:507–12, 515–16; and Karnow, 361.

the discussion were essentially predetermined. Despite the support of William Bundy and Rostow, the group "disposed of the issue [of the resolution] summarily," and McGeorge Bundy channeled the group toward consideration of actions that would remain available to the administration in the event that they decided not to seek a Congressional resolution.⁶³ Bundy's intent was obvious: there were a variety of acceptable political and military options available to the administration which would allow the United States to demonstrate firmness without risking either major escalation of the conflict in Vietnam or political pitfalls at home while concurrently maintaining maximum flexibility.

Johnson had clearly changed his mind and abandoned the resolution, sacrificing it on the altar of political expediency. The president's reasoning was sound: although the situation in Southeast Asia continued to deteriorate, it had not reached the point where American action requiring a resolution was imminent. Thus, it would be foolhardy and reckless of Johnson, the consummate politician, to "risk appearing like a warmonger to voters" during his bid for election. Instead, he hoped to maintain the moderate image he had attempted to cultivate in contrast to Goldwater's rigid conservatism. Johnson's finely honed political senses warned him to back away from the resolution in June and avoid it if possible before November, relying instead on actions that would be less public.

Despite being tabled on 15 June, the congressional resolution remained a viable option for Johnson, and the administration began to lay the groundwork with key members of Congress in anticipation of eventually submitting a resolution. Indeed, at a dinner at the White House on 26 July, Johnson told Fulbright that he would soon go to Congress to request a resolution dealing with Vietnam.⁶⁴ Yet as William Bundy later commented, the "felt sense of domestic political factors" weighed heavily on the side of not taking action during the summer of 1964. Johnson's advisers "accepted it as firm policy that President Johnson would not make any new decision or again seriously consider expanding the war, at least until after the election."⁶⁵

Ultimately, the Southeast Asia Resolution steamrolled through the House and Senate with only two dissenting votes in the wake of the

63. Bundy manuscript, 13:25.

64. Woods, 348; and William C. Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist* (Kent, Ohio, 1988), 22. Moise doubts that the administration would have risked questions that would have come by presenting the resolution to Congress "cold" in response to the overall situation in Vietnam, thus consultation was critical. See Moise, 30.

65. Bundy manuscript, 13:36, 14:10-11.

Tonkin Gulf incidents. The outpouring of patriotism which ensured the overwhelming acceptance of the resolution provided Johnson with the best of all worlds—bipartisan support, domestic political protection (albeit temporary), and the means to augment the American involvement in Vietnam with congressional sanction. Unfortunately, this consensus would quickly degenerate, and the divisions that emerged within the United States would contribute mightily to the failure of America's Vietnam policy.

So what are we to make of the draft resolutions which were proposed, debated, and ultimately rejected by the Johnson administration in the spring of 1964? Perhaps the most fundamental question to ask is why Lyndon Johnson and others in the administration believed that a resolution would be required at all. Clearly, the situation in Vietnam was growing progressively worse during the first half of 1964. Johnson and his advisers realized that the status quo on the ground in Vietnam would soon be hopeless without a major commitment of American troops—indeed, perhaps unwinnable in any case—and thus planning commenced for the eventual escalation of the conflict. Approaching Congress for a resolution seemed like a natural step as the bureaucracy began formulating options for intervention. Not only was there ample precedent for a resolution, but Johnson supported the idea of getting Congress on board in light of his own experiences.

The international consequences of a resolution cannot be overlooked. It would, Johnson and his foreign policy advisers believed, reassure the world community, particularly those nations with a stake in the outcome of the war, of American determination and commitment to support the South Vietnamese government. Concurrently, Saigon would receive a psychological boost that administration officials anticipated would strengthen the resolve of the South Vietnamese army, stabilize the deteriorating political and military situation, and terminate the seemingly endless string of "revolving door" regimes. The international angle is one which Johnson's foreign policy advisers—the Bundys, McNamara, and Rusk in particular—stressed in their deliberations and which is linked to the desire to preserve and augment American credibility and prestige in the eyes of its allies and adversaries.

The administration also hoped that a congressional resolution would provide a domestic foundation for its Vietnam policies, specifically those which would expand the American commitment in Southeast Asia. Domestic considerations—the November election, Johnson's desire to formally include Congress in important foreign policy ventures, and Johnson's Great Society agenda—influenced discussions on

the resolution proposal at every juncture. Yet each of these considerations was a double-edged sword, both justifying and militating against a resolution. For example, a resolution would serve as a means of acquiring congressional support for the administration's Vietnam policies. Yet at the same time, Johnson feared the ramifications of an extended debate by Congress—both in terms of his administration's position at home and for the message it would send to interested foreign observers. Concerns about Vietnam blowing up in his face to frustrate his election campaign and fears about the fate of his Great Society legislation led to reservations about pursuing a congressional statement. Nevertheless, Johnson continued to consider a resolution until June. Although they pulled him in different directions, these often conflicting but omnipresent domestic considerations always played a key role in Johnson's calculations on the resolution proposal.

The vagaries of domestic politics have long been recognized as a factor in American foreign policy. Over 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that democracies tend to have "confused or erroneous ideas on external affairs, and decide questions of foreign policy on purely domestic considerations."⁶⁶ Although the decision on the resolution was not made on the basis of domestic factors alone, Tocqueville's comments are instructive. Concern over public opinion and electoral success can lead American politicians to pursue foreign policies "excessively geared to short-term calculations," as William Quandt has argued. Regarding the resolution proposal, William Bundy later explained that the need to deal with critical domestic issues resulted in a foreclosure of other business and interposed "a crucial obstacle to any course of action that envisaged a careful and considered expression of Congressional support through a Congressional Resolution."⁶⁷

Bundy's comments and the policy-making process demonstrate the degree to which domestic considerations permeated the discussions on the resolution. Johnson always kept one eye on his domestic priorities and the potential Republican—and eventually Democratic—response to any change in his Vietnam policy. He realized that a resolution could open a Pandora's box of questions that might destroy the sup-

66. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1990), 1:232–36. The quote is from George Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, expanded ed. (Chicago, 1984), 176. See also Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy*. In *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process*, 4th ed. (New York, 1991), Charles W. Kegley, Jr. and Eugene R. Witkopf discuss the role of public opinion and elections on the making of U.S. foreign policy. See esp. 300, 304.

67. William B. Quandt, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of American Foreign Policy," in Kegley, Jr. and Witkopf, eds., *Domestic Sources*, 88; and Bundy manuscript, 13:34.

port he enjoyed—both electoral and legislative—in 1964. With the successful battle over civil rights behind him and the electoral contest against Goldwater looming ahead, Johnson decided to err on the side of caution and hold the line on Vietnam through the election—that is, until external events altered his calculations.

Yet, the fact remains that no resolution was sought in May or June; it was not until the attacks on American destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf that the administration ultimately approached Congress for a statement on Vietnam, suggesting two critical and related questions about the timing of Johnson's request. First, why was the resolution proposal abandoned in June? And second, why did Johnson reverse course in August and submit a resolution to Congress? The answer to the former lies in the administration's analysis of the situation it faced at the time. Despite the fact that Vietnam loomed large as a potentially devastating problem for the administration—both in actual terms and in terms of their self-defined credibility and prestige—Johnson and his advisers believed that the situation in Laos and South Vietnam were not beyond salvage, thus they would "try to carry through the November elections on a 'middle road' program that avoided stronger or wider actions." The situation "was simply not at a crisis level in a visible way"; nothing was "at the point where a wholly convincing case of actual (as opposed to impending) crisis could have been made."

In the end, the case against the resolution seemed overwhelming, especially given the concern demonstrated by Johnson and his advisers over how to explain the need for a resolution to Congress and the public without placing Johnson's domestic priorities in jeopardy. Indeed, one of the central participants argued later that he could not "see how one can escape the intangible weight of the American political situation at this period. Not only was it an election year, but one charged with a very special atmosphere": the Kennedy legacy, Goldwater's conservative challenge, and Johnson's efforts to win his own mandate. Moreover, it is explicitly clear from administration documents and the White House telephone transcripts that Johnson was obsessed with the November election. Johnson wanted Vietnam to go away until after he was safely ensconced in the Oval Office for four more years. Therefore, the election was an important component in the June decision on the resolution. Perhaps the most succinct statement about why the resolution was shelved in June came from William Bundy:

[T]o try to put forward a resolution at that point would increase the sense of concern and alarm without any clear picture of what we intended to do or what we might confront. In other words, it was not really on all fours at that stage. . . . It would be a political football rather

than a declaration of national will, as the cards then lay. I think that was what influenced the President to pull back from the idea.⁶⁸

Indeed, as Walt Rostow wrote several years later, by the middle of the decade, the United States faced a situation unique in its history—a “convergence” of domestic and foreign crises of unprecedented proportion occurring at virtually the same time. The result of the confluence of such acute problems as Civil Rights and Vietnam—combined with Johnson’s Great Society programs—caused American political life to be severely strained and demonstrated what Rostow called the “Tocqueville oscillation”—the domestic imperatives that fundamentally affect American foreign policy.⁶⁹ In June 1964, the resolution would have been an additional complication Johnson could not afford, and as a result he deferred the proposal.

Why, then, did the administration alter its position? What had changed so drastically from June to August that led Johnson to abandon the arguments made in June which led to the resolution’s postponement? The most obvious answer is the simplest and most compelling—the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf. They provided Johnson with the perfect pretext to submit a resolution to Congress and avoid divisive debate as a matter of patriotism and expediency. Yet Johnson must have realized the impeccable timing of the attacks for his own situation. Recall his conversation with Fulbright in late July in which he suggested a resolution would be forthcoming. Between the end of the Republican convention in July and the beginning of the Democratic convention in September, Johnson had an opportunity to further marginalize Goldwater on the one issue where the president conceivably could be vulnerable—Vietnam. The resolution, which Goldwater supported, at once removed Vietnam as a campaign issue and stole Goldwater’s rhetorical ace-in-the-hole. Although Edwin E. Moïse convincingly demonstrates that there was no American conspiracy in August in the Tonkin Gulf, the timing could not have been better for Johnson to ask for a resolution.⁷⁰ Whereas in June the resolution had more liabilities than assets, by August the pros outweighed the cons.

In the final analysis, the historical importance of the career of the resolution proposal, as William Bundy concluded, “seems less in what was done than what was not.”⁷¹ Fully intending to cooperate with

68. Bundy manuscript, 13:1, 23, 30–32; FRUS, 1964–1968, 1:516–18; Gibbons, 2:271; and Gittinger, 22.

69. Walt W. Rostow, “Domestic Determinants of U.S. Foreign Policy: The Tocqueville Oscillation,” *Armed Forces Journal* 27 (June 1970): 16G–H.

70. See note 1 above for Moïse’s argument on the Tonkin incidents.

71. Bundy manuscript, 13:28.

Congress to achieve a bipartisan policy toward Vietnam, the Johnson administration had to forego the congressional resolution proposal in June due to a combination of domestic political factors and the lack of a crisis situation in Vietnam. While a strategically sound concept, it surfaced at a tactically inopportune moment and only became a reality due to extenuating circumstances. The national debate a resolution would have generated in June—or at any time in 1964 in the absence of external events—could have dramatically altered the course of the American involvement in Vietnam. Yet no debate occurred. Ultimately, the contingency planning and attitudes of 1964 set the stage for the major decisions made in 1965 and beyond. The importance of 1964 in the history of the American experience in Vietnam is without question, and scholars must reevaluate their conclusions about the war and the Johnson administration's actions in light of the actions taken and deferred in this crucial year.