

Going to War in Korea and Vietnam:
The Decisions of Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson

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Two accidental presidents and two unpopular wars. The Korean War will be forever linked to Harry Truman and the Vietnam War to Lyndon Johnson. While much has been written about the outcome of both wars and the lasting impact they had on American foreign policy, much is left unsaid about the decisions to go to war. This paper will examine the decision making of President Truman as he faced the abrupt war in the Korean peninsula and that of President Johnson as he faced the more slowly evolving war in Vietnam. The two were faced with a variety of obstacles including their own interpretation of 20th century history.

Both Truman and Johnson were “accidental” presidents in that they began the presidency by filling out the term of their popular predecessor. But both had faced election in their own right by the time the critical war-making decisions were upon them. While Truman had been validated by his election, Johnson still felt a tremendous need to prove himself and to shape his legacy.

Derisively referred to as the “Second Missouri Compromise” due to FDR’s brokered choice of him as vice president in 1944, Truman faced an uphill battle in proving himself more than an “accidental” president. Just prior to the outbreak of the war in Korea, President Truman had an approval rating of only 37 percent while 47 percent of those polled openly disapproved.¹ Truman demonstrated his decisiveness as he faced the outbreak of war in June 1950 just as he had done so in use of atomic bombs at the end of World War II.

¹ Performance Approval for President Truman. Roper Center Public Opinion Archives. University of Connecticut.

Saturday, June 24, 1950, President Truman left Washington for what he assumed would be a quiet and restful weekend at his home in Independence, Missouri.² He was not scheduled to return until Monday afternoon. At approximately 3:00 p.m. (early morning on the 25th in Korea) peace was shattered along the 38th parallel as Communist troops swarmed across the border. It wasn't until Saturday evening that the first press flashes reached Washington, followed by a telegram from U.S. Ambassador John Muccio in Seoul. Muccio noted that the attack was spearheaded by Russian-made tanks and stated: "It would appear from the nature of the attack and the manner in which it was launched that it constitutes an all-out offensive against the Republic of Korea."³

President Truman was first notified via telephone by Secretary of State Dean Acheson shortly before 10:30 p.m. Saturday. When Acheson relayed to the president the information from Korea and from Muccio's telegram, Truman agreed the situation should be brought before the United Nations Security Council as quickly as possible, and authorized Acheson to take the necessary steps. The President offered to fly back to Washington immediately, but Acheson urged him to remain in Independence for the night with the promise from Acheson that he would notify Truman if his presence were required.⁴

Throughout Saturday night and Sunday morning members of the administration worked to get the United Nations in motion. Meanwhile, Truman, still in Missouri, read in the Sunday papers of the United States request for a meeting of the Security Council that afternoon. At

² Much of the following information is taken from the article "Why We Went to War in Korea" by Beverly Smith that appeared in the Saturday Evening Post on November 10, 1951. In a letter to former President Truman written on July 25, 1955, former Secretary of State Acheson stated that Smith's article was "the best account" of Why We Went to War in Korea. He further reminded Truman that Smith had written the article "after, by your orders, he had seen all our notes and papers." See *Affection & Trust: The Personal Correspondence of Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson 1953-1971*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2010. 109.

³Smith 22.

⁴Smith 23.

12:35 p.m. came another call from Acheson. He reported that General MacArthur's intelligence officers in Tokyo agreed with Muccio's estimate that this was an all-out attack and that American military advisers in South Korea were asking for emergency supplies of ammunition. MacArthur had already agreed to send these. Acheson also shared with Truman a telegram that had come in at 10:35 a.m. from John Foster Dulles, Special Envoy to Japan, who had returned to Tokyo a couple of days before after a visit to Korea. In it, Dulles was the first administration official to propose sending in American military forces if the South Koreans could not handle the attack.⁵

The President decided to return to Washington at once and instructed Acheson to gather the chief military and diplomatic advisers for a dinner meeting at Blair House.⁶ On the flight back, Truman had already made up his mind that the United States must do everything in its power, working with the United Nations, to stop and throw back the aggression of the North Koreans. As far back as 1946, when he told Army Chief of Staff Dwight Eisenhower to send troops to defend Trieste from the Soviets if necessary, Truman had resolved to take whatever steps were required to prevent any part of the free world from forceful dominance by the Soviet Union.⁷

On helping South Korea, in the President's mind, there was no question of whether, but only of when, how and how much, bearing in mind that the Korean attack might be a screen for a larger attack elsewhere.⁸ Truman, like others in American government, was convinced that there was a monolithic conspiracy led by Joseph Stalin to dominate the world.

⁵ Smith 23 &76.

⁶ At this time the White House was under re-construction and the Truman's were living in Blair House.

⁷ At this initial point in the attack, Truman, and others assumed that the North Koreans were being influenced and directed by the Soviet Union.

⁸ Smith 76.

Halberstam notes: “The Harry Truman who flew back to Washington on the afternoon of June 25, 1950, was a man of considerable confidence. He was no longer in Franklin Roosevelt’s shadow, and he had already tested himself before the American people in the grandest competition of them all, a presidential election, and triumphed in a great upset. He was increasingly confident of his ability to make decisions... He did not doubt that he was up to the job. There was no burden from the past, no inner voice that wondered what Franklin Roosevelt might have done. Harry Truman, whatever else, did not look back.”⁹

Truman landed at Washington at 7:15 p.m. and was told en route to Blair House that the UN Security Council had, that afternoon, voted 9 to 0 for the American resolution declaring that North Korea had committed a breach of the peace and called for the immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of the North’s forces to the 38th parallel. It requested UN members to give every assistance in the resolution of the issue and to refrain from giving aid to the North Koreans. That the motion passed at all was due to the fact that the Soviet delegate was at that time boycotting the Council. Truman’s bellicose reaction was “By God, I’m going to let them have it!”¹⁰

At that first Blair House meeting on Sunday, June 25, the driving undercurrent was that this action resembled the pattern of aggression that led up to World War II with the possibility of direct Soviet or Communist Chinese involvement. The memories of Munich and general Nazi aggression were strong in this generation of American policymakers.

Acheson made three recommendations at the Blair House meeting: First, that MacArthur be authorized to send all the ammunition he could spare to South Korea; second, that MacArthur should furnish ships and planes to assist and protect the evacuation of American dependents from

⁹ Halberstam, David. *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*. New York: Hyperion. 2007. 90.

¹⁰ Halberstam 93.

South Korea; and third, that the 7th Fleet be sent to neutralize and protect Formosa to keep the Nationalist Chinese and the Communist Chinese from going to war.¹¹

There was also discussion reflecting the hope that American troops would not be needed in Korea. President Truman gave two orders; that an intelligence recheck be made of other points around the world where the Soviets might strike, and that a military study be made of what efforts might be necessary, if the Soviets actively intervened, to destroy their bases in the Far East.

Shortly before the meeting broke up, President Truman issued his decisions. Besides the two orders just noted, he endorsed Acheson's first two suggestions. He also approved requests including moving Navy ships, including a carrier, from the West Coast and sending jet planes to two small islands near Formosa. He also approved starting the fleet north from the Philippines to Formosa, but held off giving the order for it to complete the journey.¹²

At this point in the event, Truman and his advisers had no idea of the sheer size of the North Korean forces involved. Hastings notes we now know: "The Korean People's Army possessed seven combat-ready divisions, an armored brigade equipped with Russian T-34 tanks, three newly activated divisions, and ample supporting artillery. Since Kim Il Sung's army was founded in February 1948, it had been welded into an intensely motivated, well-equipped fighting force of 135,000 men."¹³

As the news from Korea worsened and it became increasingly clear that the southern forces would not be able to hold Truman met with his advisers for a second time on the evening

11 The fear was that Chiang Kai-shek would use the Korean situation as a cover to send troops to mainland China; or, conversely, that the Communists would see this as an opportunity to invade Formosa.

12 President Truman deferred the decision about neutralizing Formosa until Monday night.

13 Hastings, Max. *The Korean War*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks. 1987. 52.

of Monday, June 26. At that meeting they concluded that the South Koreans were unable to hold Seoul and that they were being driven back with heavy losses in equipment and men. Acheson then put forth the bold suggestion that the Navy and Air Force be ordered to provide the fullest possible coverage for the Republic of Korea's military south of the 38th parallel. Among other suggestions made by Acheson, and approved by Truman, were to move the 7th Fleet to the Straits of Formosa, increase forces in the Philippines, and immediately send a military mission and speedup military aid to Indochina. As the meeting was breaking up, President Truman stated, "Everything I've done in the last five years has been to try to avoid making a decision such as I had to make tonight."¹⁴

On the following morning (Tuesday, June 27) President Truman addressed the congressional leadership to inform them of the situation and of the decisions he had made. That same afternoon, the UN Security Council met again to vote on a resolution calling on its member nations to give all necessary assistance to South Korea. The Soviet Union boycotted this meeting as well.

Truman and his advisers met again late on Thursday afternoon, June 29, when Defense Secretary Louis Johnson presented a directive which authorized US ships and planes to strike targets inside North Korea and authorized the use of Army service troops in South Korea (primarily Signal Corps and transport units), and also certain combat units for protecting ports and airfields in the area of Pusan – which was some 200 miles south of the combat. The President approved this directive in its entirety.¹⁵

Shortly before 3:00 a.m. on Friday, June 30 – less than a week after the outbreak of hostilities – a telegram came into the Pentagon from MacArthur. In a grim report, he stated that

¹⁴ Smith 80.

¹⁵ Smith 86 & 88.

the only way of holding the line and regaining lost ground was to introduce American combat troops. It was his intention, if authorized, to move one combat regiment into the fighting area at once, and to send a further two divisions from Japan to serve as a force for a counteroffensive.¹⁶

At 4:57 a.m. a call was placed to Truman at Blair House. When MacArthur's urgent message was repeated to him, Truman did not hesitate. He immediately authorized the sending of one combat regiment into the fighting and promised a decision on the additional divisions shortly. Within two hours, the first US combat troops were landing by airlift in Pusan.¹⁷

By 10:00 a.m. Truman authorized the sending of two divisions from Japan and the naval blockade of North Korea. He and his key advisers subsequently met with the congressional leadership to inform them of the decision.

At 1:22 p.m. orders were on the way to General MacArthur and the US was committed to the Korean "police action". It must be noted that Truman took these actions without seeking congressional approval or without informing the American people. Many years later, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson would note: Now, your job as President is to decide. *Mr. Truman decided.*¹⁸

But what was it that motivated Truman to make these decisions during this turbulent week? As previously noted, he, and his advisers, were steeped in the lessons of Munich and they felt that allowing the Soviets (as they thought at the time) to attack in Korea would give the green light to aggression elsewhere.

16 Smith 88.

17 Smith 88.

18 McCullough, David. Truman. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1992. 783.

“The critical force in United States policy toward the Far East by the summer of 1950 was the deep bitterness and frustration of the American people about the ‘loss’ of China to the Communists. The defeat of Chiang Kai Shek’s [sic] American-sponsored Nationalist armies had been a profound shock and source of sorrow not only to the legendary ‘China lobby’ but to many Americans who had grown up all their lives with a sense of missionary commitment to China.”¹⁹

Truman was also facing the demagoguery of Joseph McCarthy in the Senate and the many accusations that flowed from his committee. McCarthy, and others, were already condemning the Truman Administration for being riddled with leftists and for being “soft” on communism.

As noted above, Truman, while an “accidental president” who had never wanted the job, had been able to call on vast reserves of self-confidence – boosted by his improbable victory in 1948 – by the time the decisions on Korea became necessary. Those, coupled with his inherent dislike of communism and distrust of Joseph Stalin, were all contributing factors. On top of it all was Truman’s strong sense of fair play and the notion that one neighbor attacking another was simply wrong.

Korea was Harry Truman's war. Under severe time constraints, the President acted without seeking the consent of Congress or the American people. Truman admonished Dean Acheson, his secretary of state: "Dean, we've got to stop the sons of bitches, no matter what, and that's all there is to it."²⁰ And once having made up his mind, he never looked back or second-guessed himself.

Lyndon Johnson possessed a much different personality and faced a much different war in Vietnam. While Harry Truman dealt with a sudden war and did so with confident decision-

¹⁹ Hastings 48.

²⁰ Wolk, Herman S. *Truman’s War*. Air Force Magazine, November 2000, v. 8, n. 11, p. 1.

making and overall self-assurance, Johnson faced a war that had been going on for some time but did so with doubt and hesitancy, coupled with deception and secrecy.

Johnson's indecisiveness was driven by a multiplicity of factors. Like Truman before him, LBJ faced the on-going Cold War and the need for America to be strong in the eyes of the communists abroad and the Republicans at home – or at least to appear so. Also like Truman, Johnson was driven by what he perceived to be the failures that had led to the two World Wars.

We have fought two world wars because of our failure to take a position in time.

When the first war began, Germany did not believe we would fight. ... Thus the Kaiser was led to believe we were complacent and lacked courage. ... During earlier stages of World War II, Roosevelt enunciated the doctrine of quarantining aggressors. But there were protests ... The tactics of these ostriches and their fellow travelers encouraged in deed if they did not induce Hitler to ignore us and the Japs to attack us.²¹

But Johnson had a much more difficult time than did Truman in dealing with his “accidental” presidency. “I took the oath, I became President. But for millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper. And then there was Texas, my home, the home of both the murder and the murder of the murderer. And then there were the bigots and the dividers and the Eastern intellectuals, who were waiting to knock me down before I could even begin to stand up. The whole thing was almost unbearable.”²²

21 Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *Lyndon Johnson And The American Dream*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1976. 95-96.

22 Goodwin, 170.

For Johnson and his generation of politicians, there was a century of American involvement in Asia, the “loss” of China, two decades of cold war accompanied by fear of a nuclear apocalypse, and the certain belief that the world’s conflicts were shifting to the “third world”. Overshadowing it all was the perceived knowledge that the Soviet Union was behind the scenes and manipulating every political and economic conflict in an effort to dominate the world. Dating back to Harry Truman and the two presidents in between, Johnson could see nothing but communist shadows cast by the light of militant nationalistic flames.²³ In his mind, the political climate dictated action.

For Lyndon Johnson, there were also the peculiar traits of his personality that drove the demons within him. He always felt uncomfortable with his education at a small public teachers college in southwest Texas when compared to the east coast, Ivy League education of the Kennedy administration. The “Harvard crowd” as he called them. He felt uneasy with men like Acheson, Dulles, Rusk and Bundy and was sensitive to any sign of their contempt or condescension toward this crude Texan.²⁴ And, indeed, some of the Kennedy group – including the president’s brother Bobby – did find him oafish and laughable, referring to him behind his back as “Uncle Cornpone”.

Johnson saw his choices regarding involvement in Vietnam in very personal terms. He told Doris Kearns Goodwin that if he let Vietnam fall

... there would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy’s commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine. Oh, I could see it

23 Mann, Robert. *A Grand Delusion: America’s Descent Into Vietnam*. New York: Basic Books. 2001. 64.

24 Goodwin 256.

coming alright. Every night when I fell asleep I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: ‘Coward! Traitor! Weakling!’ They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones. At exactly that moment I would generally wake up ... terribly shaken. But there was more. You see, I was as sure as any man could be that once we showed how weak we were, Moscow and Peking would move in a flash to exploit our weakness. They might move independently or they might move together. But move they would – whether through nuclear blackmail, through subversion, with regular armed forces or in some other manner. As nearly as anyone can be certain of anything, I knew they couldn’t resist the opportunity to expand their control over the vacuum of power we would leave behind us. And so would begin World War III. So you see, I was bound to be crucified either way I moved.²⁵

At the time Johnson took office, there were between 15,000 and 18,000 American troops in Vietnam, acting in the capacity of “advisers”. While Kennedy had not focused a great deal of attention on South Vietnam, Johnson began to deal with it immediately upon assuming the presidency. During a November 25, 1963 meeting with American Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, Johnson said, “I’m not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.”²⁶

25 Goodwin 253.

26 Mann 307.

While Johnson may have been focused on Vietnam, the majority of the public was not. In the spring of 1964, 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.

In fact, throughout 1964, Republicans charged Johnson with being too soft on the Vietnam question. In the spring of 1964, as the presidential primaries unfolded, Republican leaders kept up a steady drumbeat of criticism of Johnson's allegedly weak and indecisive policy in Southeast Asia. On February 3, Barry Goldwater told a Minneapolis audience that LBJ and his advisers were "napping" while the war in Vietnam "is drifting toward disaster."²⁷ All of this led Johnson to feel that if he lost Vietnam, the Congress would impeach him.

Johnson was focused in 1964 on winning the fall election. He didn't just want to win; he wanted to win by a landslide. That was the only way, he felt, that he could legitimize his presidency and step from behind the shadow of President Kennedy. The presidency had been a goal for LBJ for many years. He was determined not to let the situation in Vietnam interfere with that victory.

In a telephone conversation with Senator William Fulbright on March 2, 1964, he said, "The only thing I know to do is more of the same and do it more efficiently and effectively [i.e. continue to send advisers] and we got a problem out there that I inherited with Lodge. I wire him every day and say what else do you recommend?"²⁸ It chilled Johnson to think of sending American boys to die in Vietnam.²⁹

27 Woods, Randall B. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2006. 507.

28 Goodwin 196.

29 Dallek 145.

But events in Vietnam and the actions of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong were not going to let Johnson simply do “more of the same”. In August 1964, when American destroyers were reportedly attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats, Johnson found himself obligated to respond. He saw this as an opportunity to reinforce the seriousness of our commitment to South Vietnam but to do so in a limited way. Within twelve hours of receiving news of the incident, the president had dispatched bombers on a reprisal raid over North Vietnam. And two days after that, the administration asked Congress to approve what came to be known as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

The war had no impact on the presidential election of 1964 which was an affirmation to Johnson that the people supported him and more so that they loved him. Having others love him was very important to Johnson and he based his evaluation of others on whether or not they showed the proper amount of love for him. This was to become a major source of Johnson’s anger and hurt as the war went sour and the public, and Congress, began to turn on him.

On November 1, 1964, a Viet Cong attack on Bien Hoa air base in South Vietnam tested Johnson’s determination regarding Vietnam. The attack killed five U.S. servicemen, wounding seventy-six, and destroyed twenty-seven of thirty planes, which were there to signal Hanoi that escalation would bring U.S. air retaliation. Understanding that Johnson would be reluctant to respond during the presidential election, the Communists saw the planes not as a deterrent but an inviting target.³⁰

On Christmas Eve 1964, the Vietcong set off a car bomb at the Brinks Hotel in downtown Saigon which served as a Bachelor Officers Quarters (BOQ) for the Saigon area. Two Americans were killed and fifty-eight others were injured. Even though all of his top in-

30 Dallek 240.

country advisers urged immediate retaliation, Johnson refused. He gave two reasons: first, he did not want to launch a military action at Christmas and second, Johnson worried that any American response might result in reprisals on the part of the enemy. And he simply did not feel American forces in Vietnam were sufficient to handle any large-scale enemy attacks.³¹

Johnson continued to hesitate about fully committing the country to the war in Vietnam. He had, however, by the beginning of 1965, quietly bumped up the number of American advisers to twenty-three thousand troops. (By the end of the year, that number would be at one hundred eighty-four thousand.)³²

On January 27, 1965, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy sent a memo to the President arguing – on behalf of himself and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara – that the current policy of trickling American advisers into Vietnam could lead only to disastrous defeat. Both men recommended using military power in the Far East to force a change in Communist policy. But still, Johnson hesitated.³³

In the midst of this period of indecision, Vietcong guerrillas attacked a U.S. advisers' barracks at Pleiku on February 6, 1965, and nine American soldiers were killed. McGeorge Bundy returned to Washington from Vietnam to present his team's evaluation of the situation there. Having traveled to Pleiku and having witnessed the carnage for himself, Bundy's report called for a policy of graduated and sustained reprisal against North Vietnam, concluding that "without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable." ... The policy of escalation was advocated

31 Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: The Viking Press. 1983. 408-409.

32 Mann 458

33 Goodwin 259.

by every individual at the highest level of responsibility for actions related to national security.³⁴ President Johnson finally agreed that retaliatory bombing was called for.

After Johnson's commitment to some form of bombing, the White House meetings discussed how and when to bomb. The Joint Chiefs favored large-scale strategic bombing aimed at destroying the industrial base of North Vietnam. If all the American air power in the Western Pacific were used, they predicted, it would take only twelve days to complete the task. But most of Johnson's political advisers favored a more limited form of bombing. Fearful that China or Russia might be brought into the conflict if large-scale attacks were launched immediately, McNamara and Bundy argued instead for starting up slowly and then gradually increasing the scope and the intensity of the raids. Step-by-step escalation, they contended, would allow continuous monitoring of the reactions of China and Russia; it would emphasize America's limited objective; and, it might press Hanoi to negotiate in order to prevent the terrible damage that large-scale bombing would inflict.

Johnson made the predictable choice of gradual escalation. It was based on the type of approach he found most congenial: limited bombing represented the moderate path between competing extremes of massive destruction and total withdrawal.³⁵ This would allow him to judge political reaction at home and any possible reaction from the Soviets or Chinese.

But on February 8, after reading Mac Bundy's report on his visit to Vietnam, Johnson decided on systematic bombing of the North. He would now order continuing air attacks. He wasn't happy about it; he wasn't even sure it was the right decision. Since abandoning Vietnam

34 Goodwin 261.

35 Goodwin 264.

was unacceptable, his only alternative seemed to be forceful action. However he didn't want to make this evident to the Congress or the press or the public.³⁶

Though Johnson had made up his mind to initiate sustained bombing, he did not wish to launch the campaign until Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin, who was visiting Hanoi, had left. Consequently, on February 10, when the Viet Cong struck another U.S. base at Qui Nhon on the central coast of South Vietnam, killing twenty-one Americans, Johnson authorized only a retaliatory attack. No mention was to be made of "continuing action" for the time being.³⁷

"Rolling Thunder," as the sustained bombing campaign was named, was initiated on February 13, after Kosygin had left North Vietnam and after the Joint Chiefs had identified a series of targets to be attacked during the next eight weeks.

The bombing campaign led to concern about the security of Danang air base on the part of General Westmoreland in Saigon. On February 22, 1965, he requested of the president two marine battalions to protect the base.³⁸ On the morning of March 8, the requested thirty-five hundred combat marines splashed ashore at Danang. It caused hardly a ripple in Congress or among the American people. Johnson promised this would be a short-term commitment only. But this "short-term commitment" was to increase to 75,000 troops by summer.

On April 1, Johnson increased the troop flow to Vietnam by two more marine battalions and eighteen to twenty thousand logistical troops.³⁹ At an April 20 meeting in Honolulu the administration committed to an additional 40,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam by June – doubling the

36 Dallek 248.

37 Dallek 249.

38 Karnow 415.

39 Karnow 417.

number already there. They also acknowledged that this might not be sufficient and left the door open to more troop additions as needed.⁴⁰

The Vietcong engaged in country-wide ground attacks beginning on May 11. Exceeding their authority, but out of sheer necessity, U.S. advisers began to take command of panicked South Vietnamese soldiers who had been abandoned by their officers.⁴¹ Clearly, to the president and his advisers, the South Vietnamese army was ceasing to function and was facing imminent disintegration.

The culmination of these events was a decision by Lyndon Johnson to make a full, and public, commitment of U.S. forces to Vietnam. He realized he had to do so or face military defeat. While he may have been committed to the decision, he was not yet ready to notify the American people. At a meeting on July 2, he made clear that he wanted to postpone final decisions until the end of the month as he didn't want them to interfere with passage of the voting rights and Medicare bills, both of which were before Congress.

As part of the delaying process and effort to build a broad consensus, Johnson sought the counsel of the "wise men" – a group of prominent, former foreign policy officials, including Dean Acheson and Clark Clifford. On July 8, they advised Johnson that he had no choice but to expand the war to prevent a Communist victory that would jeopardize America's national security around the world. The president now felt he had the backing of the establishment. They advised that he also needed to create national backing for the war by publicly explaining his decisions.⁴²

40 Karnow 420.

41 Karnow 421-422.

42 Dallek 272.

Unwilling to lay all his cards on the table with the American people, Johnson announced the expansion of the war at a press conference rather than in a speech to a joint session of Congress and he did so during the middle of a weekday when the viewing audience would be the smallest. During that July 28 announcement, all he would say was that troop commitments were going up from 75,000 to 125,000, with additional forces to be sent later when requested. Johnson announced that he would not call up reserve units now, though he would give it careful consideration in the future. He also told reporters that his decision did “not imply any change in policy whatever”. To further downplay the action, Johnson surrounded it with talk of his Great Society goals, which he would not allow to be “drowned in the wasteful ravages of cruel wars,” and announcements of Abe Fortas’s nomination to the Supreme Court and John Chancellor’s appointment as director of the Voice of America.⁴³

Johnson’s agony over involvement in Vietnam in 1965 was made plain in a remark to Doris Kearns Goodwin in 1970 after he had left the presidency.

I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved – the Great Society – in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything anywhere on the entire globe.⁴⁴

43 Dallek 276.

44 Goodwin 251-252.

For both Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson the decision to go to war was not an easy one. But for Truman it was a decision made with surety and one from which he never looked back. For Johnson the decision was filled with agonizing second-guessing and was not so much made as it was allowed to be driven by circumstances. Johnson was never comfortable with the decision and was never convinced he had made the right one.

Korea ended in an ongoing and fragile armistice and Vietnam ended in the ignominious retreat of the last Americans from the roof of their embassy as the North Vietnamese marched into Saigon. The outcome of their respective wars, and the resulting plunges in popularity, contributed to both Truman and Johnson declining to run for second terms.

While we can easily see the mistakes of Harry Truman and of Lyndon Johnson, and we can, from a distance in time, analyze and criticize, we must remember the world as they saw it. Not only were both presidents products of their views of history, they were also products of the times in which they lived. For both, those times were dominated by the Cold War and the American obsession that the Soviet Union was determined to dominate the world. Both presidents made their decisions with that thought in mind and both remained convinced of the underlying validity of their views.