

Summary and Synopsis of Dereliction of Duty

Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that led to Vietnam

A book by H.R. McMaster, Harper Perennial, copyright 1997

(H.R. McMaster is currently National Security Advisor in the Trump Administration)

The disaster of the Vietnam War would dominate America's **memory of a decade that began** with great promise when Kennedy was elected president in November, 1960. He chose Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense and Dean Rusk as Secretary of State, both retired military. **The Bay of Pigs shattered Kennedy's** sense of euphoria during his first months in Washington. Reeling from a wave of public criticism and aware of increasing troubled relations with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kennedy needed someone to be: *"My advisor to see that I am not making a dumb mistake as Commander in Chief"*.

He chose Max Taylor a reputed combat commander in World War 11 to advise him on military affairs and lead the JCS. Taylor had written, *The Uncertain Trumpet* which suggested that many different gradations of action should be taken in response to aggression – from economic pressure to limited warfare before all out bombing. Taylor was intelligent, witty and charming. Kennedy also named him as his "personal military advisor." Congress had designated that job to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They were to be the **President's "principal military advisors,"** as a result they lost power.

When Taylor took over as chairman of Joint Chiefs, he discovered they were still embittered **over what they regarded as Kennedy's unfair criticism** of them in the wake of the Bay of Pigs. Max Taylor and Secretary McNamara were in agreement which impressed Kennedy and inspired confidence. Historian Robert Divine observed that *"Vietnam can only be understood in relation to the Cold War."* **Indeed, Cold War crises during Kennedy's first months as president** shaped his advisory relationships. Consequently, Robert McNamara and Max Taylor came to formulate and impose their ideas about foreign policy into both Kennedy's and Johnson's administrations.

Kennedy, obsessed with Cuba and Fidel Castro, had worked on a covert program to undermine the Cuban government and assassinate Castro. October 16 McNamara offered an alternative to the Joint Chiefs recommendation for full-scale air strike, blockade, and invasion of Cuba. He suggested a U.S. blockade of Cuba, searching approaching ships and the removal of offensive weapons. The strategy worked and McNamara gained even more power and political clout.

President Kennedy dramatically increased economic and military aid to the American-backed government in Saigon. By the summer of 1963, 16,000 military advisors were in South Vietnam. Before World War 11 America had no interest in Vietnam. However, the U.S. took notice when Japanese troops landed there in 1940. Japan needed Vietnam to access China and the oil-rich Dutch East Indies. Millions were starved while the Japanese took control of **Vietnam's** farms and exported their rice.

Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese patriot who had traveled the globe, was then living in Moscow. He recognized that welcoming the Japanese as liberators was like *"driving the tiger out the front door while letting the wolf in through the back."* Ho disguised as a Chinese journalist, left

Moscow and returned to his native land for the first time in 30 years. He appealed to nationalists and helped form and lead a resistance movement against the Japanese. Communist in ideology, Ho's **Vietminh was the strongest of the nationalists group seeking independence.** In August 1945, after the defeat of Japan, the Vietminh filled the power vacuum and on September 2, Ho Chi Minh **declared Vietnam's independence.**

Franklin D Roosevelt had made self-determination part of his vision for the postwar world. Harry S. Truman rejected trusteeship of Vietnam in favor of conciliating France and Europe. The U.S. watched passively as France moved to reclaim Indochina. First in the south, then in the north. By mid-December 1945 increasing tensions between the French and Vietnamese nationalist gave way to direct military conflict with the Vietminh leading the effort against the French. The First Indochina War had begun. The fear of global Communism along with U.S. loyalty to its European allies impelled America to support **the French. At the end of the 1940's against the backdrop of iron curtain's descent over Europe and the Communist victory in China,** Truman concluded that Ho Chi Minh was part of the Soviet-sponsored monolithic Communist movement.

Meanwhile the French **attempted to counter Ho's popularity and curry favor** with the U.S. by creating a **veneer of independence for Vietnam under Emperor Bao Dai's** puppet government. Ho had studied and appropriated the ideas that had sparked the American and French revolutions in the 18th century as well as in Russia in 1917. His reputation as a learned ascetic devoted to the Vietnamese people contrasted with Bao Dai's **philandering, and record of collaboration** with the French and Japanese. The Vietnamese people loved Ho Chi Minh.

Despite growing American support, the French effort in Vietnam faltered. The elusive, determined and increasingly competent Vietminh with the aid of equipment and supplies from Communist China inflicted a series of defeats on the French. By 1952, French casualties in the war had exceeded ninety thousand. The Vietminh had lost even greater numbers. By 1953, it **was clear they could outlast the French. In 1952 Truman's National Security Council postulated that "the loss of any of the countries of Southeast Asia to Communist aggression would have critical psychological, political and economy consequences."** U.S. foreign policy was to prevent that from happening.

During the Korean War, President Dwight D. Eisenhower continued support for the French in Indochina. Vietminh forces overran the French garrison on May 7, 1954. Only 73 of the more than 15,000 men at Dien Bien Phu escaped. Vietminh losses were estimated at 25,000. Ho Chi Minh, however, had told a French visitor at the outset of the conflict. **"You can kill ten of my men for every one of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win."**

The end of the French signaled a new beginning for the U.S. In July 1954, the U.S. gave oral endorsement to the Geneva Accords, which temporarily ended the hostilities in Vietnam and partitioned the country into north and south. It limited the introduction of foreign troops into the region and called for general elections to unify the country by July 1956.

Ngo Dinh Diem, a young man living in Paris became the prime minister. He long advocated Vietnamese independence but **reject Ho's Communist vision. A bachelor and devout Catholic,** Diem had spent two years studying in the U.S. Not long after his return to Vietnam as prime minister Diem, with the assistance of his brother, organized a referendum to oust Bao Dai. Diem received almost all the votes – because the election was rigged. Diem supporters had stuffed ballot boxes. **Despite his undemocratic practices he became America's ally** in the fight

against Communism. The CIA helped thwart several attempts to over-throw him and propped up his fledgling government.

In 1956, we assumed full responsibility for training and equipping the South Vietnamese Army. We established a military and advisory group in Saigon. Meanwhile, the Eisenhower administration worked outside the Geneva agreements to weaken Ho's North Vietnamese regime through psychological warfare and covert operations. Diem, with the approval of the U.S. government, refused to hold the elections called for in the Geneva Accords, and the boundary between North and South Vietnam became another frontier that separated **the "free world"** from world Communism." **In the late 1950's it appeared that Diem had worked a miracle in South Vietnam.** With the aid of the CIA and Catholics who had fled there he consolidated his power. However, his aloof political style and religion prevented him from gaining real popular support. He failed to eliminate Vietminh resistance, and Ho, preoccupied with economic difficulties and consolidation of political power in the North, had not yet unified all of Vietnam under control of Hanoi.

Although Kennedy was willing to send U.S. military advisers into South Vietnam and mount covert operations in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, he drew the line on sending U.S. combat units. On Nov. 11, 1961, Kennedy decided to commit U.S. advisers to South Vietnam in excess of the number permitted in the Geneva Accords. He believed that increased Viet Cong activities in South Vietnam and Laos justified crossing that threshold. U.S. military presence ballooned without a definite examination of U.S. policy. Although our advisors fought alongside South Vietnamese units and U.S. pilots were flying combat missions over South Vietnam, Kennedy denied that Americans were involved in combat. By early 1963 it seemed that the tripling of American advisory efforts had stabilized the situation.

May 1963 there was a Buddhist uprising against the government of Catholic Diem and his brutal repression of the revolt angered citizens. On June, 11 the first self-immolation by a Buddhist **occurred.** **Nhu's** units invaded the main pagodas of Saigon, arrested Buddhist clergymen and inflicted great damage on their holy places. Officials with the Kennedy administration became increasingly concerned as a significant portion of the populace began to connect American support **with Nhu's callousness.** The U.S. refrained from stopping the brutality. Thinking that there was no alternative, Kennedy's administration agreed that Diem had to go. Kennedy publicly announced a decision to withdraw one thousand advisers from South Vietnam by Christmas and suspended aid to the country, but he failed to establish a clear policy toward the Diem government.

Even though there was little in-country backing for an anti-Diem coup, the U.S. helped over-throw his government. Kennedy provided no additional direction. Referring to his initial cable authorizing Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to conspire against Diem he privately admitted, **"we fucked that up."**

Whatever their differences, the Chiefs had been united in their opposition to the Diem coup. Although Diem had handled the Buddhists roughly and the brutality of his brother Nhu was disquieting, the military officers viewed the war against the Viet Cong **as the "major problem"** in South Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs did not think that anyone was capable of taking Diem's place. They resented the administration's disregard for their advice and the secrecy under which the coup plotting had been carried out, referring to it scornfully as the **"Asian Bay of Pigs."**

An aide informed Kennedy **of Diem and Nhu's fate**: the former U.S. allies in the fight against Communism lay dead in the back of an American-made armored personnel carrier with bound hands and execution-style bullet wounds in the back of their heads. President Kennedy was shocked. He had not realized that his failure to give clear instructions to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge would have such unpleasant consequences. He wondered if the new government in the South would have the will and capability to continue the fight against the Viet Cong. McNamara informed Kennedy that U.S. forces were steaming toward Vietnam to deter the Viet Cong from taking advantage of the turmoil in Saigon. Instability in the South presented the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese sponsors with an opportunity to exploit the situation. The deteriorating situation forced the U.S. to consider deepening its involvement in South Vietnam. On November 23rd, **an assassin's bullet bequeathed the decision about how to proceed to Kennedy's vice president, Lyndon Johnson.**

Along with the issue of Vietnam, President **Johnson inherited Kennedy's closest advisers and the relationships that had developed among them.** Unsure of how to proceed Johnson said: ***"We'll stand by our word, but I have misgiving. I feel like a fish that just grabbed a worm with a big hook in the middle of it."*** McNamara emboldened by his success in the Cuban missile crisis would come to dominate **Johnson's cabinet.** He began overriding and often recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The new president's preoccupation with consensus and unity came from his insecurity and distrust of his advisers. At times, he manifested a kind of paranoia about any dissent. His quest for reassurance and support, rather than wide-ranging debate on foreign policy, colored his relationship with the weakened Joint Chiefs. His close advisors began to exert more influence and shield Johnson from the truth. It was they who **developed America's** policy toward Vietnam.

In 1941 Lyndon Johnson had taken a five-week leave from his office in the House of Representatives to fulfill his campaign promise to volunteer for military service. After gaining a commission as a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy, he secured an assignment to the Pacific as part of a three-man observation team. One of **Roosevelt's aides wrote in his diary** that Johnson was anxious to be in a danger zone to enhance his appeal to the electorate. On June 9, 1942, he got his wish. He rode on a B-26 bombing run from an airfield in New Guinea. While approaching the target **area, Johnson's plane** experienced a mechanical malfunction and came under attack from Japanese fighters. The pilot nursed the aircraft back to base and landed it smoothly on the runway.

The plane to which Johnson had initially been assigned was not as fortunate and crashed into the ocean, killing the entire crew and one of his fellow observers, Francis Stevens, who had **taken Johnson's seat. The next day Johnson headed for home.** During a brief stopover in Australia, Johnson and his surviving fellow observer met the commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who told Johnson that he was awarding him the Silver Star Medal for gallantry during his ride on the B-26 bomber. No other crew member, not even the pilot who landed the crippled plane, received a decoration. A week after his return to the U.S. LBJ was out of uniform and back in the House of Representatives.

Despite his limited experience, Johnson assumed the demeanor of a war-weary veteran. He **told reporters of his "suicide Mission" against the Japanese and "the harrowing flight home under fire."** **The press caught up** in the emotional fever of the war and eagerly embraced his deliberate misrepresentation of his service. Johnson told his rural Texas constituents that he

was simply happy to have survived. In December of 1942, when a reporter asked him if he had been in combat, Johnson replied, **“Yes, I was, I was out there in May, June and part of July. We exchanged greetings [with the enemy] quite often. They paid us very busy visits every day for a time.”** In Johnson’s account, enemy fire had **“knocked out” the engine that had malfunctioned.** He even told a reporter that the men with whom he had served in the 22nd Bomber Group had called him **“Raider” Johnson.** Although he once told a journalist that he didn’t deserve the Silver Medal and told a receptive audience that he had refused the honor, he arranged to have the medal bestowed upon him in public—**several times.** Johnson’s willingness to forgo the truth would color his relationship with his principal military advisors and shape the way that the U.S. became more deeply involved in the Vietnam War.

McNamara’s desire to please the boss and his need for reassurance generated an immediate rapport between the two. The president already held his defense secretary in high regard, and McNamara soon established himself as the most indispensable member of Johnson’s cabinet. A month after taking office the president worried that he would have to report a cost overrun of \$400 million in defense spending for fiscal 1964. McNamara, who had a knack for manipulating numbers offered a solution. He volunteered to underestimate deliberately what moneys were spent for defense and later feign surprise when spending exceeded his department’s forecast.

The able McNamara saved the president from considerable embarrassment with Congress. When Gerald Ford confronted McNamara with charges that Navy yards had been withheld from base closure lists to protect Democratic constituencies, the defense secretary blamed incompetent naval officers for the omission. McNamara boasted to Johnson that he had deflected Ford’s criticism by telling him that *“the Navy didn’t know their ass from a hole in the ground.”* Johnson praised him to Sargent Shriver as the most “valuable” man in his administration. *“He just gives you the answers and he gives you cooperation, and he’s a can-do fellow.”* Later, when the president wanted to conceal from the American public and Congress the cost of deepening American involvement in Vietnam, McNamara’s can-do attitude and talent for manipulating numbers and people would prove indispensable.

On January 22, 1964, the Joint Chiefs set out to break down restrictions of the use of American military force and gain from the Johnson administration a firm commitment to see the war through to a positive result. Johnson’s position was to **“assist the people of that country with their contest against the Communist conspiracy”** but stay on neutral ground. The Joint Chiefs memorandum, however, listed **“victory” as the unqualified objective of American military force.** They recommended that the US. **“put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions which now limit our effort and undertake a bolder action which may embody greater risks.”** They argued that the U.S. was currently fighting the war on the enemy’s terms, and warned that the U.S. would ultimately have to commit its own forces in support of the combat action with South Vietnamese in direct actions against North Vietnam.

Four days after the Joint Chiefs sent their memo to McNamara, an event in South Vietnam again brought the country to the urgent attention of the U.S. government. On January 30th tanks and infantrymen of the South Vietnamese Army quickly surrounded the Joint General Staff Headquarters and arrested General **“Big” Minh and the key members of his government.** South Vietnamese 1 Corps commanding general Nguyen Khanh, reacting to rumors that members of the Minh government were considering a **“neutralization” agreement** with North Vietnam, quickly seized power in a bloodless coup that took the U.S. Embassy completely by surprise. To avoid

the embarrassment of having to recognize yet another successful military coup, President Johnson decided not to acknowledge the change in South Vietnam's government.

McNamara's strategy of gradual pressure seemed to "solve" the president's problem of not losing Vietnam while maintaining the image that he was reluctant to escalate the war. If the Chiefs had successfully presented their position that the U.S. needed to act forcefully to defeat the North, they might have forced a difficult choice between war and withdrawal from South Vietnam early on. Through their own actions as well as through the manipulation of Taylor and McNamara, they missed their opportunity to influence and formulate a strategic concept for involvement in Vietnam. Thereafter they always found themselves in the difficult position of questioning a policy that the president had already approved. [As military, they had to support their commander-in-chief.] So, the intellectual foundation for deepening American involvement in Vietnam was laid without the participation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Many began calling Vietnam **McNamara's war since he developed** policy and ran the show. His response: *"I don't object to it being called McNamara's war. I think it is a very important war and I am pleased to be identified with it and do whatever I can to win it."* He told the press that restraint was necessary and that U.S. soldiers are not engaged in *combat except in the course* of their training the Vietnamese. . . . The bulk of the air effort by South Vietnamese forces does not involve exposing any of **our men.**"

Meanwhile Johnson drew his advisory circle even tighter as the election approached. He was running against Berry Goldwater who complained that the President was **"soft on Vietnam."** The Joint Chiefs met to prepare a memorandum expressing concern over the lack of definition even a confusion in respect to objectives and suggested courses of action. Citing their responsibility as military advisors, they argued that the military objective should be to accomplish the destruction of the North Vietnamese will. McNamara did not send their memo on to the president. He withdrew it saying he was unsure that their wording accurately reflected what the Chiefs had discussed in the meeting.

When Max Taylor found it expedient to do so he misled the JCS, the press, and the NSC. He deliberately relegated his fellow military officers to a position of little influence. He assisted McNamara in suppressing JCAS objections. He shielded the president from views of his less politically sensitive colleagues while telling the Chiefs that their recommendations had been given full consideration thus relegating the nation decisions makers with a flawed strategy for fighting what seemed to them a war without precedent.

There was tremendous pressure from the president to cloak the military effort in South Vietnam until after November election. In a **May 13 editorial in the Wall Street Journal** titled **"Error Upon Error" observed that** *"It is almost impossible to figure out what is the U.S. Strategy," and declared that "the evidence indicates the lack of any plan."*

Like the Diem coup in November 1963, the American response to reported attacks on U.S. Navy destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August 1964 marked a turning point in the Vietnam War. After a first attack on American destroyers, to which Lyndon Johnson chose not to retaliate, he finally ordered air strikes on North Vietnam in response to confused reports surrounding an alleged attack that probably did not occur.

Preoccupied with the campaign, Lyndon Johnson was determined to make only those foreign policy decisions that would help him politically. To enhance his chances for election he and

McNamara deceived the American people and the Congress about events and the nature of the American Commitment in Vietnam. They used a questionable report of a North Vietnamese **attack on American naval vessels to justify the president's policy** to the electorate and to defuse Republican senators and presidential candidate Barry Goldwater's charge that Lyndon Johnson was irresolute and "soft" in the foreign policy arena.

Although the president was preoccupied with the domestic political aspects of Vietnam, the American people persisted in regarding it as a foreign policy issue. Johnson's advisors, therefore had to justify Vietnam policy decisions made solely on the basis of electoral concerns. They advised speakers to temper their policy defense with a pledge that *"preventing Communist domination of South Vietnam is the highest importance to U.S. national security."* Democratic candidates were to remind the electorate of **"the domino effect: if South Vietnam falls, so too will Burma and India to the west and the Philippines to the east."** Speakers were encouraged to baffle people with ambiguity and subtle qualification and to end their speeches with a tribute to **Lyndon Johnson's wisdom and patience.**

No matter how much presidential authority Taylor carried with him when Johnson named him Ambassador to Vietnam, he could not overcome his absence from the center of decision making. In his absence Robert McNamara gained even more influence with the president, in part, **by keeping the ambassador's recommendations away from Johnson's eyes.**

McNamara had Lyndon Johnson make a public declaration that would, in Bal's words **"appear fierce."** The president's statement was designed to placate members of Congress who favored direct retaliation for the Tonkin Gulf incident. McNamara thought it best that the president **"lie low."** If pressure to take retaliatory action continue to mount, Johnson could reveal to the public that there were some covert activities already under way in the South against the North.

On August 4, Robert McNamara received an urgent intelligence report based on North Vietnamese radio transmission. The report warned that the Turner Joy and the Maddox, on patrol off the coast of North Vietnam, might soon be subject to another North Vietnamese attacks. This aroused McNamara into a flurry of activity. He telephoned the president with the news. Johnson asked him how long it would take to conduct a bombing raid on North Vietnam even though no attack was confirmed.

Johnson asked Congress to immediately pass a resolution allowing for retaliatory action to demonstrate that the government was solidarity behind him. Which they did. Lyndon Johnson **not only wanted to win the election he wanted to win "bigger than anybody had won ever."** A one-time strike on North Vietnam would allow him to continue as "the candidate for peace" while demonstrating that he was neither indecisive nor timid.

When Oregon's Democratic senator Wayne Morse interviewed General Sheeler, accompanied by McNamara and Rusk in the Foreign relations and Armed Service Committee, he knew that **the Maddox had not been on "routine patrol" but had been gathering intelligence** when the incident occurred. The official also said that **"there was a hell of a lot of confusion"** surrounding the August 4 attack on the Maddox and Turner Joy. He asked the tough questions "Did we provoke the North Vietnamese response?" McNamara assured the senator that the U.S. Navy *"played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, was not aware of any South Vietnamese actions, if there were any. I want to make that very clear."* McNamara went on the state that the **Maddox "was not informed of, was not aware, had no evidence of any, as far as I know today, has no knowledge of any possible South Vietnamese actions."** Later in the hearing he

acknowledged that some shelling of North Vietnamese islands had occurred, but again denied U.S. knowledge of the action.

McNamara had done well for the president. The Secretary of Defense successfully misled the senators and representatives by misrepresenting America's role in the attacks and by glossing over the confusion surrounding the August 4 incident.

When asked whether he knew of any incident involving South Vietnamese vessels and North Vietnam, he replied, "No, none that I know of... They operate on their own. They are part of South Vietnamese Navy. . . operating in coastal waters, inspecting suspicious incoming junks, seeking to deter and prevent the infiltration of both men and material. A reporter pressed him, "Do these junks go North, into North Vietnamese waters?" McNamara responded, "They have advanced closer and closer to the 17th parallel, in some cases I think they have moved beyond that in an effort to stop infiltration closer to the point of origin."

Sitting silently next to McNamara, General Wheeler, dressed in his uniform lent indispensable **credibility to his defense secretary's remarks. Although he did not make any false statements to the senators or congressmen, by not revealing the truth he showed the president that he would go along with his and McNamara's attempts to** mislead Congress and the American people. Wheeler's attendance at McNamara's side and his tacit support of the defense secretary's effort to obscure the nature of American military policy in Vietnam served as Wheeler's trial by fire. Although his influence as a military advisor was low, Wheeler had become a valuable "shield" to protect the administration from attacks on its decisions regarding Vietnam.

Before he arrived in Washington, Ambassador Taylor sent a cable recommending that the United States "accept the fact" that a stable government in South Vietnam was "unattainable" and recognize that there was "no George Washington in sight" to assume the leadership of the South Vietnamese people. Taylor thought that the United States should accept greater responsibility for the fight against the Viet Cong because the South Vietnamese government was too weak. He suggested that strikes against North Vietnam would help "hold South Vietnam together" and "create conditions required for a [negotiated] settlement on favorable terms with Hanoi. He said, to attain domestic and international approval, the United States would ideally, initiate attacks in response to a North Vietnamese act similar to the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Air strikes "could be orchestrated to produce mounting pressure on the will of Hanoi" that would result in North Vietnam "calling off the insurgencies in the South Vietnam and Laos. [This was wishful thinking.] In closing Ambassador Taylor recommended that the United States "take the offensive and play for the international breaks."

On September 12 destroyer patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin resumed activities. Five days later destroyers reported firing at and hitting several North Vietnamese patrol boats. Like the alleged first incident, however, the reality of the North Vietnamese attack was in doubt. The president was reluctant to act without conclusive evidence. He already had his congressional resolution and his authorization for military action. This had defused Senator **Goldwater's criticism of his Vietnam policy.** "Hell," Johnson said, "those dumb, stupid sailors were probably just shooting at flying fish." So, the president rejected the Joint Chief's and Secretary of State's recommendations for reprisal strikes because he and his advisors were afraid of losing control even though a **press report on the latest "incident" in the Gulf had nearly forced his hand** to take a strong stand on Vietnam.

Persistent governmental instability gave rise to renewed calls for negotiations and/or withdraw from Vietnam. **Senator Russel suggested separately to Johnson and McCone that to “save face” the U.S. “bring a man to the top of the government in South Vietnam who would demand that the U.S. withdraw its forces from the country.” Westmoreland argued that unless a “fairly effective government” existed in South Vietnam, “no amount of offensive action by the US either in or outside South Vietnam has any chance by itself of reversing the deterioration underway.”**

Meanwhile, events in South Vietnam during September and October 1964 caused some to question the value of American’s **commitment to Saigon**. **General Khanh’s proclamation of a new constitution in mid-August sparked renewed protest from the Buddhists.** After opponents forced him to withdraw the constitution, Khanh suffered a mild nervous breakdown, but returned to government on September 3.

Ambassador Taylor, having been pressured by Johnson to put the Saigon government in order, blamed Khanh for the government’s **lack of stability**. **Khanh presented another new constitution on October 20** which Taylor reviewed and edited. Then warned the South Vietnamese **politicians and generals that he “did not wish to be presented with a slate of government officials with whom he could not work.”** When several days later, Tran Van Hungo was named the next prime minister, Taylor scolded the Vietnamese for not consulting him. He thought that Tran was incompetent, stubborn and handicapped by poor health and began reviewing all nominees for cabinet positions. **To enhance the government’s chance of survival, Taylor** began coaxing likely competitors for power to either to leave the country or to participate nominally. It was clear to any informed observer that the Saigon government existed only because of constant U.S. intervention.

LBJ confided to McGeorge Bundy. ‘. . . .**looks like to me that we’re getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don’t see what we can ever hope to get out of this. It’s the biggest damn mess that I ever saw. It’s damn easy to get into war, but it’s going to be harder to ever extricate yourself if you get in.**” Circumstances were beginning to demand he consider alternative courses of action and make difficult decision. Still he sought to avoid or postpone indefinitely an explicit choice between war and disengagement from south Vietnam. However, in the ensuing months each decision he made moved the US. closer to war, although he seemed not to recognize that fact.

Although LBJ had authorization from congress for air raids against Laos, and intensification of reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam, and South Vietnam, he was anxious to keep these decisions from the America people. He kept this secret telling his advisors **that he would “shoot at sunrise” anyone who leaked this information to the press.**

LBJ knew how dramatically this action against North Vietnam would contrast with his persona as the peace candidate during the election. He had told a crowd in Manchester, New Hampshire, **that his administration would “start dropping bombs” only as a “last resort”** and that he planned to get them [the South Vietnamese] to save their own freedom with their own men.” **The New York Times editorialized, “If there is to be a new policy now, if the Asia war is to be converted into an American war, the country has a right to insist that it be told what has changed so profoundly to justify it.”**

November 1 was set aside as a day of celebration in South Vietnam in honor of the new civilian government under Tran Van Huong. The presidential election in the U.S. was only two days away. If the Viet Cong intended to disrupt both the South Vietnamese holiday and Lyndon

Johnson's last campaign push, the attack on Bien Hoa was the ideal time. Fourteen miles northeast of Saigon, Viet Cong guerillas crept through the rice paddies, palm groves, and villages outside the airfield and set up their mortars. As the new day began, they initiated a thirty-nine-minute barrage. Four U.S. service men were killed and seventy-two wounded or injured. The attack damaged or destroyed seventeen of the thirty-six B-57 aircraft in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong escaped. Johnson decided it was too close to the election to respond. Bundy reassured Taylor that the president and his closer advisors **had "weighed carefully" his recommendation** and did not consider the attack on Bien Hoa **"a major escalation in itself."** Comparing it to **"recurrent attacks on US personnel and equipment playing military roles"** in order to decrease its significance, Rusk admitted to the Ambassador that the decision was **"inevitably affected by the election timing.** He promised stronger action from LBJ in the future.

Johnson's reluctance to approve a bombing program ran deeper than his concern over the stability of South Vietnamese government. Vietnam demanded his attention when he could least afford to give it. Preoccupied with putting the finished touches on his Great Society program for Congress, he planned to push 150 bills in as many days. He knew he had to win congressional support for this program in the first year of his presidency.

When Taylor returned to Saigon, he undertook LBJ's charge to straighten out the South Vietnamese government and proceeded with all the subtlety of a colonial governor. Taylor invited a score of senior South Vietnamese commanders, including a group of influential officers **to General Westmoreland's** residence where he told them that the United States could no longer support South Vietnam if the military continue to engage in political intrigue. He exacted from the generals a pledge to support the fledgling civilian government of Prime Minister Tran Van Huong and his interim legislative body -- the High National Council. Separately Taylor notified **Huong that if the South Vietnamese government demonstrated "minimum" effectiveness, the U.S. would consider commending a program of "direct military pressure" on North Vietnam.** In the mean-time the U.S. would monitor the government's progress and take military action **directed toward "reducing infiltration and warning the government of North Vietnamese of the risk it is running."**

General Westmoreland's steak dinner probably gave the South Vietnamese generals a bad case of indigestion. Although they depended on U.S. support, they were painfully aware of their **country's historical struggle** against domination. These proud men resented any implication that **they had become "puppets" of the American Government, something that, in addition to a personal affront, would be a boon to Communist propagandists and an obstacle to gaining popular support.** Taylor incorrectly believed that his guidance **had been "well received."**

Taylor provoked a Khanh again when his instructions were not carried out. Taylor said the **South Vietnamese general had "outlived his usefulness,"** When Khanh, frustrated, offered to quit as commander of the South Vietnamese armed forces, Taylor suggested that he not only resign but leave the country. Just before Christmas the rift between the ambassador and the South Vietnamese became public. Accusing Taylor of **"activities beyond imagination,"** Khanh stated publicly **that the ambassador was "not serving his country well" and suggested privately to Premier Huong that the South Vietnamese government declare Taylor "persona non grata."**

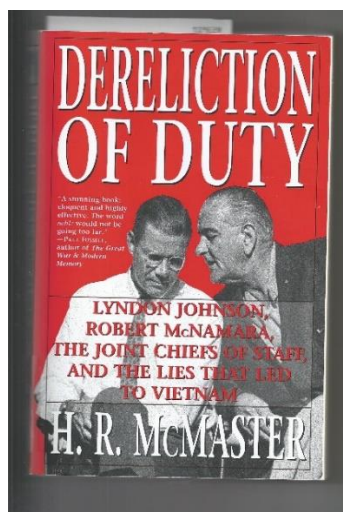
Taylor told Washington, **"We are in the midst of a first-class governmental crisis in Saigon."** He **described the problems as "infighting on three fronts-- the gov't versus the Generals, the Generals versus the US Ambassador, and the Buddhist versus the gov."** Gone was any hope of

any improvement in the South Vietnamese government. On Christmas Eve, a power explosion destroyed the Brinks Hotel, an American bachelor officers Quarter in Saigon. Viet Cong terrorists had planted a car bomb in the parking garage. The blast killed two Americans and left sixty-three others injured. Taylor was anxious to launch a reprisal, but he acknowledged that several factors militated against an early retaliate. Amid the turmoil in Saigon, some American officials actually suspected the South Vietnamese government agents planted the bomb. Any strike would most likely have to be an exclusively American operation

Because the president and his key policy makers were preoccupied with the election no strategic concept guided them, they never considered alternatives to the ostensibly inexpensive policy of containment. Everyone—the president, his closest civilian advisors and the Joints Chiefs —had taken the path of least resistance.

Rather than explore alternative courses of action, planners such as McNaughton and McWilliam Bundy rationalized that committing the U.S. military to a war in Vietnam and losing would be preferable to withdrawing from what they knew was an impossible situation. They believed that if the U. S. demonstrated that it would use military force to support its foreign policy, its international status would be enhanced, regardless of the outcome. Years afterward McNamara recalled that he had a constant personal dread of escalation. McNamara's **empty promises of** future action, combined with his requests that the JCS re-examine plans for a large-scale war in Asia, finally overcame the Joint **Chief's initial discontent with the president's** reluctance to retaliate and end the war.

The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the New York Times or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C. even before Americans assumed sole responsibility of the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war; indeed, even before the first American units were deployed. The disaster in Vietnam was not the result of impersonal forces but a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisors. The failings were many and reinforcing; arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest, and about all the abdication of responsibility to the American people.



On a personal note



Brian, Dean and Matt Belov's uncle Morrie, husband of Catherine Belov Bryan, died in the Vietnam War.

Blackshear M. Bryan, Jr. or "Morrie" was born in 1929 at West Point during his father's tenure as assistant football coach. He attended the Academy, graduating with the class of 1954. He accepted a commission with the Air Force, then transferred to the U.S. Army in 1963. Serving in Vietnam he was cited twice for heroism during his tour. On September 22, 1967, as he was rounding out his tour in Vietnam, Major Morrie Bryan was killed in a crash of his U-21A during a training mission as he attempted to avoid trespassers on the runway.