

'Lyndon Johnson's War'. Is This a Fair Comment on US Involvement in the War in Vietnam?

Written by Ciaran Gallagher

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CIARAN GALLAGHER, JAN 26 2008

U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a slippery slope. Starting with Harry Truman and assistance given to the French in fighting the Vietminh in the early 1950's to Dwight Eisenhower and his support for the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam while they fought against the North, and on to Lyndon Johnson's decision to "Americanize" the war which resulted in ultimate failure. Yet can America's failure in Vietnam be solely blamed on one man? Popular thought seems to suggest that it was the inability of Lyndon Johnson, more commonly referred to by his initials, LBJ, to judge the situation in South East Asia that caused America to suffer the biggest military embarrassment in its history to date. However, a closer look at the facts, suggest that the blame should be shared with his predecessors, in particular Ike Eisenhower.

Dwight Eisenhower inherited the "Vietnam Problem" from Harry Truman. Truman had pushed American supplies to assist the French in their battle with the Vietminh. When the French admitted defeat in 1954, the Geneva Conference brought together key nations from both sides to decide a peace agreement. The United States were unwilling guests at the table, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles is said to have turned his back when Chinese delegate Chou En-Lai offered a handshake.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]--> The result of negotiations was to be a United Vietnam, which would be temporarily separated until elections in 1956. Dulles and Eisenhower declared the Geneva Accords a "disaster" as Communist leader Ho Chi Minh was strongly expected to win the elections. It was believed that the "loss" of Vietnam would almost certainly lead to the "loss" of Laos, then seen to be tactically more important.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[2]<!--[endif]--> This was known as the "Domino Theory" and was used by Eisenhower to explain the importance of Containment, which suggested that you let Communism exist within its current borders but as soon as it begins to expand nations will fall under its control one after the other like dominos. And it is these theories that dominate American policy toward South East Asia and the rest of the third world throughout the Cold War.

In order to rectify this problem, Eisenhower created The South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in order to "support a friendly noncommunist South Vietnam."<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[3]<!--[endif]--> The creation of SEATO and American support of South Vietnam as an independent state completely opposed the Geneva Accords which claimed that the separation of Vietnam "should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary". Therefore America had broken an international agreement in order to fulfill its own policy of containment. And it is this point, the actual existence of a South Vietnam that is often airbrushed over when reviewing American involvement in Vietnam, despite its undeniable importance.

Its importance finds credence, in that Ho Chi Minh, and his followers the Vietminh, were Vietnamese Nationalists and not Communists as had been thought by numerous administrations in Washington.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]--> It was Minh who had declared an independent Vietnam on 2nd September 1945, ironically quoting numerous parts of the American Declaration of Independence.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<!--[endif]--> And it was mistook Communism that led the U.S. to align itself with some "inherently unstable" regimes"<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[6]<!--[endif]--> one of which was that of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. Described as "a messiah without a message." He was only in power as "there [was] no one to take

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his place who would serve US interests better.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[7]<!--[endif]--> And so the United States began “nation-building” in a nation that should never have existed. Eisenhower began to furnish South Vietnam with \$1 billion of economic and military aid in order for them to defend themselves against the “Communist” North.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[8]<!--[endif]--> This being despite the fact that relations between Hanoi and Beijing were terrible, based on the fact that China had been trying to invade Vietnam for hundreds of years, and also due to Ho’s “hostility to all foreign control, Communist or capitalist.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[9]<!--[endif]-->

As a leader, Diem was little more than a despot, whose rule can be summarized in a line he personally added to the South Vietnamese Constitution, “The President is vested with the leadership of the nation.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[10]<!--[endif]--> He did his utmost to crush his political opponents and silence his critics, throwing in jail, those who called for free elections.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[11]<!--[endif]--> Yet it was enough for Secretary of State Dulles that he was, “competent, anti-Communist and vigorous.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[12]<!--[endif]--> The United States had an obligation as part of SEATO to defend South Vietnam, and so they overlooked many of Diem’s misdemeanors. However within South Vietnam itself, unrest was building rapidly, both among members of the Vietminh and non-communists, this manifested itself into rebellion, which in 1959 was supported by the leader of North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh. US backing of Diem continued under Eisenhower’s successor, John F. Kennedy. By time Kennedy had become President, the tide in Vietnam was strongly in favour of Ho Chi Minh, Diem had requested more American aid, yet before he agreed, Kennedy asked his Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson to go to Saigon to assess the current situation. When he returned, Johnson’s advice was that the United States, could either, “help these countries to the best of our ability or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defences to San Francisco and a “Fortress America” concept.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[13]<!--[endif]-->

Kennedy decided to help; he increased the number of military advisors overseas so that by time he left there were 16,500.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[14]<!--[endif]--> Yet there were two key Cold War events that happened during Kennedy’s Presidency that played a key role in terms of the situation Lyndon Johnson faced when he came to office. These were the Cuban Missile Crisis and the coup in November 1963 that resulted in the execution of Ngo Dinh Diem. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was the clearest example of how big the stakes were within the Cold War. By coming within a hairs breadth of nuclear war, the Kennedy Administration, many of which remained under President Johnson, knew the threat that the Soviets posed and how important it was to contain them by whatever means necessary. An expansion of communism would expand Soviet power and influence, and an increased sphere of influence for the Soviets, especially in South America where revolution was rife, would threaten American national security.

The death of Ngo Dinh Diem is of great importance as the Kennedy administration knew about it and allowed it to go ahead. The Kennedy Administration had grown weary of Diem as his brutish acts were being linked back to his American support. Despite mixed opinion from Kennedy’s advisors, the decision was finally taken and Diem had to go. By allowing this the United States then had an obligation to the nation of South Vietnam and to Diem’s successor, meanwhile instability in the South gave North Vietnam an opportunity to exploit, which left the United States considering deepening its position in Vietnam. Yet on the 22nd November these decisions no longer rested with John Kennedy, assassinated while visiting Dallas, Texas, his Vice President Lyndon Johnson succeeded him and the key decisions were now his.

When he first came to office Johnson and his administration got a big shock. Things in Vietnam were not going as well as expected. Diem’s death had left a void of power within South Vietnam and the desertion rate among South Vietnamese was high. The Viet Cong had expanded its territorial control, increased its troop supply and had a steady supply of weapons along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Johnson now faced a decision that neither Kennedy nor Eisenhower had to face. Risk the lives of American soldiers, something he had previously said he wouldn’t do, in order to secure South Vietnam from the Communists. The domino theory had said that it was imperative for America to go into Vietnam, to stop the possibility of revolution starting up elsewhere and for American credibility. Previously referred to as a “Paper Tiger” by the Chinese, America’s image as a strong world leader who stood by its allies was key in the battle of hearts and minds during the Cold War, yet was it worth sending “American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves?”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[15]<!--[endif]-->

'Lyndon Johnson's War'. Is This a Fair Comment on US Involvement in the War in Vietnam?

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Johnson was now stuck with a problem that he did not want. Feeling like “a catfish that had just grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook in it” he knew sacrifices had to be made. A life long Democrat, Johnson longed to emulate his hero Franklin Delano Roosevelt, with his own version of “New Deal” which he called “The Great Society”. Aimed at lowering poverty and increasing civil rights, The Great Society, was an ambitious plan which Johnson knew would be controversial in Congress. He knew that members of the Senate would “use the war” against him, and so he had to “give up the woman [he] really loved-The Great Society- in order to get involved with that bitch of a war”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[16]<!--[endif]-> The involvement of US troops in Vietnam, which first occurred on March 8th 1965, took political attention and economic aid away from the great society.

Johnson described the situation he was in as “a god-awful mess.” A firm believer in the policy of containment since he assessed the situation in Vietnam for President Kennedy, Johnson was not the “war hawk” many of his critics make him out to be. In fact, two of his administration’s “doves” are among his strongest defenders, “Rare is the voice that counselled caution” claimed Clark Clifford, while George Ball maintained that “Among all the top command, Johnson was the most reluctant to expand America’s involvement.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[17]<!--[endif]-> Johnson’s reluctance can be seen to stem from the fact that this is only twenty years after World War Two, and so doesn’t want to be seen as going easy on his opponents, as Dwight Eisenhower told him “Munich’s win nothing”,<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[18]<!--[endif]-> in reference of course, to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler before the war. General Eisenhower went on to say that “You have to go all out!...we’re not going to be run out of a free country that we helped to establish.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[19]<!--[endif]-> It could be claimed that what Eisenhower really meant was that they weren’t to be run out of a nation that he established. For Johnson, though he agonised over it for a long while, many saw “simply no alternative” to war and it was here “where President Johnson’s situation differed from those of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[20]<!--[endif]->

Under President Kennedy, the United States had resolved to bring all its personnel home from Vietnam by Christmas 1965, they began by removing one thousand troops within ninety days, which would be New Years Eve 1963. One of the criticisms of Johnson is that the escalation of the war is not what Kennedy would have done. Critics argue that NSAM 263, which issued the removal of American advisors from Vietnam, was a way out of the conflict and that by issuing NSAM 273, four days after the death of President Kennedy and completely reversing America’s policy, shows the “war hawk” in Lyndon Johnson, and has even led to suggestions that he was somehow involved in the death of his predecessor. However, this completely misses the point that NSAM 263 was issued in October and Kennedy died in November, in between was the overthrow of Diem which was a seismic shift in the make up of South Vietnamese politics. And indeed, was not adverse from remaining in South East Asia to see that the job was done. In one of his last press conferences he claimed, “In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but Southeast Asia, so we are going to stay there.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[21]<!--[endif]-> In fact, on the day he was shot in Dallas, President Kennedy was expected to give a speech which would describe America as the “watchmen on the walls of freedom” and would declare that “assistance to nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task.”<!--[if !supportFootnotes]->[22]<!--[endif]->

And so with American troops now involved in the conflict in Vietnam, and the Gulf of Tonkin resolution giving President Johnson ultimate control over the conflict things looked optimistic, yet still the war continued to go badly. And so the possibility of a negotiated settlement came up. This was unlikely given that the Viet Cong would accept nothing less than all of Vietnam, they were nationalists after all. Withdrawal of American troops would be even worse; it would really give the edge to the Soviets as the US had backed out and no idea what it would do to US relations with other third world nations, could they depend on the US or would they run out on them as well.

And so the options available to Lyndon Johnson weren’t many, and of the ones that were available, none were truly attractive. Instead, in a similar fashion as he found himself thrown into the presidency, he found himself thrown into the middle of a civil war in Southeast Asia. The conflict that existed then in 1963 was not his doing, it was the work of the men he had succeeded, Dwight Eisenhower, a man who could not allow for the Geneva Accords to go ahead,

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who felt that the concept of democracy could be overridden for American security interests. Even when funding the newly created South Vietnam most of the \$1 billion in aid went on funding the military rather than helping build political institutions or any kind of civic structure. Of course we can all speculate on what ifs, one of the largest speculations that dominate the history of American involvement in Vietnam is whether President Kennedy would have taken the same action as Johnson did. And although Kennedy's statements on Vietnam are somewhat conflicting, this may seen as part of a larger point, the destruction of Camelot. John Kennedy, with his youthful good looks, effortless charm and oozing character represented a new dawn for America, his death leads America to question what might have been; "no Vietnam, no defeat, no budget deficit, better social programmes, better race relations. A more confident, harmonious America. Camelot realized." And so some anger and resentment at this not coming to pass is placed on his successor, a man almost completely opposite to Kennedy both in the way he looks and the way he represents America.

In truth, though he undeniably made some very bad decisions, to label the Vietnam War as "Lyndon Johnson's war" is far too simplistic and doesn't really explain why America were there in the first place. Instead it paints a picture of Johnson pre-empting American involvement in the region, when in fact America had been involved for more than a decade before. It also ignores Lyndon Johnson's severe inner conflict over what action to take in Vietnam and how to correctly deal with it. It also is a complete absolution for Eisenhower and Kennedy even though they set up a political house of cards that fell on top of Johnson. And so Johnson was burdened with this civil war nine thousand miles away, when his main concern was making Americaa better place. This by no means absolves Lyndon Johnson, but perhaps allows you to empathise and maybe even sympathise with him. If one did want to label Vietnamas someone's war, then perhaps the argument could be made that it was "America's war" as the two constants in the war, that really drive American involvement are the Domino Theory and containment. These policies run through from the Eisenhower era in the early 1950's to Johnson in the late 1960's and it is only when Richard Nixon comes into power and sees that they are failing that they are somewhat abandoned and negotiations begin. Of course, a word should be said for the Vietnamese people themselves, often overlooked in the literature on the war, it was their determination that meant they could lose ten times as many men as the Americans and still end up recording a victory. In a sense, the Vietnam War as most Americans understand it is no more than the Vietnamese War of Independence.

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‘Lyndon Johnson’s War’. Is This a Fair Comment on US Involvement in the War in Vietnam?

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'Lyndon Johnson's War'. Is This a Fair Comment on US Involvement in the War in Vietnam?

Written by Ciaran Gallagher

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