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BILL MOYERS JOURNAL

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## TRANSCRIPT:

November 20, 2009

**BILL MOYERS:** Welcome to the Journal.

Our country wonders this weekend what is on President Obama's mind. He is apparently, about to bring months of deliberation to a close and answer General Stanley McChrystal's request for more troops in Afghanistan. When he finally announces how many, why, and at what cost, he will most likely have defined his presidency, for the consequences will be far-reaching and unpredictable. As I read and listen and wait with all of you for answers, I have been thinking about the mind of another president, Lyndon B. Johnson.

I was 30 years old, a White House Assistant, working on politics and domestic policy. I watched and listened as LBJ made his fateful decisions about Vietnam. He had been thrust into office by the murder of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963-- 46 years ago this weekend. And within hours of taking the oath of office was told that the situation in South Vietnam was far worse than he knew.

Less than four weeks before Kennedy's death, the South Vietnamese president had himself been assassinated in a coup by his generals, a coup the Kennedy Administration had encouraged.

South Vietnam was in chaos, and even as President Johnson tried to calm our own grieving country, in those first weeks in office, he received one briefing after another about the deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia.

Lyndon Johnson secretly recorded many of the phone calls and conversations he had in the White House. In this broadcast, you're going to hear excerpts that reveal how he wrestled over what to do in Vietnam. There are hours of tapes and the audio quality is not the best, but I've chosen a few to give you an insight into the mind of one president facing the choice of whether or not to send more and more American soldiers to fight in a far-away and strange place.

Granted, Barack Obama is not Lyndon Johnson, Afghanistan is not Vietnam and this is now, not then. But listen and you will hear echoes and refrains that resonate today.

**MALE VOICE:** The President is coming right on...

**BILL MOYERS:** There were no BlackBerries or e-mail then. Lyndon Johnson relied on the telephone and seemed always to have at least one in hand. He consulted not just within the government but far and wide, with everyone on everything. Here, in office a little over two months, with bad news arriving daily from Vietnam, he reaches out for commiseration to an old friend, the newspaper publisher John Knight.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What do you think we ought to do in Vietnam?

**JOHN S. KNIGHT:** I never thought we belonged there. Now that's a real tough one now, and I think President Kennedy thought at one time we should never, that we were overcommitted in that area.

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**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, I opposed it in '54. But we're there now, and there's only one of three things you can do. One is run and let the dominoes start falling over. And God Almighty, what they said about us leaving China would just be warming up, compared to what they'd say now. I see Nixon is raising hell about it today. Goldwater too. You can run or you can fight, as we are doing. Or you can sit down and agree to neutralize all of it.

**BILL MOYERS:** Neutralizing South Vietnam would have meant an international agreement, declaring the nation off-limits to all outside influence, ending efforts by North Vietnam to re-unite the two countries divided since 1954.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** But nobody is going to neutralize North Vietnam, so that's totally impractical. And so it really boils down to one of two decisions-getting out or getting in [...]

**JOHN S. KNIGHT:** Long-range over there, the odds are certainly against us.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Yes, there is no question about that. Anytime you got that many people against you that far away from your home base, it's bad.

**BILL MOYERS:** LBJ shares the prevailing Cold War mentality that Communism is an aggressive menace that, like today's War on Terror, had to be opposed, no matter what or where. That's why John F. Kennedy had sent several thousand military advisers to South Vietnam. Like Kennedy, Johnson hopes to keep our presence there to a low profile.

As Republicans like former Vice President Richard Nixon and presidential hopeful Barry Goldwater call for an escalation of military force in Vietnam, LBJ wants to keep the situation on hold while he struggles to figure out the options with secretary of defense Robert McNamara.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I would say that we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. Now we, we could pull out of there, the dominoes would fall, and that part of the world would go to the Communists. We could send our Marines in there, and we could get tied down in a Third World War or another Korean action. The other alternative is to advise them and hope that they stand up and fight [...] Now this nation has made no commitment to go in there to fight as yet. We're in there to train them and advise them, and that's what we're doing. Nobody really understands what it is out there and they don't know, and they're getting to where they're confused. And they're asking questions and they're saying why, why don't we do more? Well, I think this, you can have more war or you can have more appeasement. But we don't want more of either [...] But we do have a commitment to help the Vietnamese defend themselves.

**BILL MOYERS:** Johnson is about to send McNamara on a fact-finding mission to Saigon the capitol of South Vietnam, but some in the Press interpret the trip as laying the groundwork for a vast land war in Asia. The President wants McNamara to knock those rumors down.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I'd like for you to say that there are several courses that could be followed. We could send our own divisions in there and our own Marines in there and they could start attacking the Vietcong and the results would likely flow from that.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** Uh hmm.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** We could come out of there and say we're willing to neutralize. And let'em neutralize South Vietnam and let the Communists take North Vietnam. And as soon as we get out, they could swallow up South Vietnam and that would go. Or we could pull out and say, to hell with you, we're going to have Fortress America. We're going home [...] Or we can say this is the Vietnamese war and they've got 200,000 men, and they're untrained, and we've got to bring their morale up, and they have nothing really to fight for because of the type of government they've had. We can put in socially conscious people and try to get 'em to improve their, their own government and then what the people get out of their own government and we can train them how to fight [...] And that, after considering all of these, it seems that the latter offers the best alternative for America to follow.

**BILL MOYERS:** That same day, March 2, 1964, McNamara shares with Johnson an urgent memo from the Joint Chiefs of Staff insisting that "preventing the loss of South Vietnam was of 'overriding importance to the United States."

Johnson says to some aides, "Don't they think I know that?" That same evening, he tests talking points he has devised with McNamara on one of his old colleagues, the influential Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. No matter what choice he makes, LBJ will need the support of Senator J. William Fulbright.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** So maybe if we can just get our foreign policy straightened out, now, of course-

**J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT:** Yeah, get that damn Vietnam straightened out. Any hope on that? [...] That's the most difficult one, I think at the moment [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I want to take one minute here to read you what I think is the best summary of it we have [...] We can withdraw from South Vietnam. Without our support [...] Vietnam will collapse and the ripple effect will be felt throughout Southeast Asia, endangering independent governments from Thailand, Malaysia and extending as far as India on the west, Indonesia on the south and the Philippines on the east [...] Number two, we can seek a formula that will neutralize South Vietnam [...] but any such formula will only lead in the end to the same results of withdrawing support [...] Three, we can send the Marines, a la Goldwater [...] but if we do our men may well be bogged down in a long war against numerically superior North Vietnamese and Chi Com forces 10,000 miles from home. Four, we continue our present policy of providing training and logistical support for the South Vietnam forces. This policy has not failed. We propose to continue it. Secretary McNamara's trip to South Vietnam will provide us with an opportunity to again appraise the future prospects of this policy, and the further alternatives that may be available to us [...]

**J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT:** That's exactly what I'd arrive at under these circumstances, at least for the foreseeable future.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** All right. Now, when he comes back, though, and we're losing what we're doing, we got to decide whether to send them in or whether to come out and let the dominoes fall. That's where the tough one's going to be. And you do some heavy thinking [...] Do some heavy thinking, and let's decide what we do.

**BILL MOYERS:** The President meets with the Joint Chiefs to hear their arguments. What they say is disturbing. Their options are stark. He wants some middle ground, as he says in this call to his White House Assistant for National Security McGeorge Bundy, who had famously kept his cool at John Kennedy's side during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I spent a lot of time with the Joint Chiefs. You ought to have been up here, I didn't think of it-

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Well I was over at the Pentagon. They love to be private, Mr. President.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** All right. Well, anyway, remind me in the morning to go over all-

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** I would like to catch up with you, yes sir.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** The net of it is though, that they say, get in or get out.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Yeah.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** And I told them, let's try to find an amendment that will-we haven't got any Congress that will go with us and we haven't got any mothers that will go with us in a war. And nine months I'm just an inherited-I'm a trustee. I've got to win an election. Or Nixon or somebody else has. And then you can make a decision. But in the meantime, let's see if we can't find enough things to do to keep them off base, and to stop these shipments that are coming in from Laos, and pick a few selected targets to upset them a little bit, without getting another Korean operation started.

**BILL MOYERS:** To stop supplies coming south from Hanoi through Laos, the President approves the secret bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail by mercenaries flying old American fighters.

There's been another military coup in Saigon. Hoping to bolster the new government, McNamara goes there to make what seems to be an open-ended commitment, promising the South Vietnamese that, quote, "We'll stay for as long as it takes. We shall provide whatever help is required to win the battle against the communist insurgents."

But he returns to Washington bearing news of an army nearing collapse, and tells the President he must quickly send more military assistance. With one eye on that worsening situation and another on the coming election, Johnson turns for support to an old friend and mentor. Senate Armed Services Chairman, Richard Russell of Georgia.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What do you think about this Vietnam thing? What, what, I'd like to hear you talk a little bit.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** Frankly, Mr. President, if you were to tell me that I was authorized to settle it as I saw fit, I would respectfully decline and not take it.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** [chuckles]

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** It's a, it's a, it's the damn worst mess I ever saw, and I don't like to brag. I never have been right many times in my life. But I knew we were going to get into this sort of mess when we went in there. And I don't see how we're going ever to get out without fighting a major war with the Chinese and all of them down there in those rice paddies and jungles [...] I just don't know what to do.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, that's the way that I've been feeling for six months.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** It appears our position is deteriorating. And it looks like the more we try to do for them, the less that they're willing to do for themselves [...] It's a hell, a hell of a situation. It's a mess. And it's going to get worse. And I don't know what to do. I don't think that the American people are quite ready for us to send our troops in there to do the fighting. And if it came down to an option of just sending the Americans in there to do the fighting, which will, of course, eventually lead into a ground war and a conventional war with China [...] If it got down to that or just pulling out, I'd get out. But then I don't know. There's undoubtedly some middle ground somewhere [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** How important is it to us?

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** It isn't important a damn bit, with all these new missile systems.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, I guess it's important to us-

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** From a psychological standpoint.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I mean, yes, and from the standpoint that we are party to a treaty. And if we don't pay any attention to this treaty, why, I don't guess they think we pay attention to any of them.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** Yeah, but we're the only ones paying any attention to it.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Yeah, I think that's right [...] I don't think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I know, but you go send a whole lot of our boys out there-

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Yeah, that's right. That's exactly right. That's what I'm talking about. You get a few. We had 35 killed-and we got enough hell over 35-this year [...] The Republicans are going to make a political issue out of it, every one of them, even Dirksen.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** It's the only issue they got [...] It's a tragic situation. It's just one of those places where you can't win. Anything you do is wrong [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Now, the whole question, as I see it, do we, is it more dangerous for us to let things go as they're going now, deteriorating every day-

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I don't think we can let it go, Mr. President, indefinitely.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Then it would be for us to move in?

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** We either got to move in or move out. I -

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** That's about what it is.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** You can make a tremendous case for moving out [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, they'd impeach a President though that would run out, wouldn't they? I just don't believe that-outside Morse, everybody I talk to says you got to go in, including Hickenlooper, including all the Republicans none of them disagreed with him yesterday when he made the statement "we have to stand." And I don't know how in the hell you're gonna get out unless they tell you to get out.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** If we had a man running the government over there that told us to get out, we could sure-get out.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** That's right, but you can't do that ...

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** Of course you'd look pretty good, I guess, going in there with all the troops and sending them all in there, but I tell you it'll be the most expensive venture this country ever went into.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I just haven't got the nerve to do it, and I don't see any other way out of it.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** It's one of these things where "heads I win, tails you lose."

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, think about it and I'll talk to you again. I hate to bother you, but I just-

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I wish I could help you. God knows I do 'cause it's a, it's a terrific quandary that we're in over there. We're just in the quicksand up to our very necks. And I just don't know what the hell is the best way to do about it.

**BILL MOYERS:** That same day, a morose President calls his National Security Adviser.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I will tell you the more I just stayed awake last night thinking about this thing, the more I think of it, I don't know what in the hell it looks to me like we're getting into another Korea [...] I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out. And it's just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** It is. It's an awful mess.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** And we just got to think about-I look at this sergeant of mine this morning. Got six little old kids [...] and I just thought [...] what in the hell am I ordering him out there for?

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** One thing that's occurred to me [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Now we have to get [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Now, we've got a treaty but, hell, everybody else's got a treaty out there and they're not doing anything about it. Now, of course if you start running from the Communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Yeah, that's the trouble. And that is what the rest of the, that half of the world is going to think if this thing comes apart on us. That's the dilemma. That's exactly the dilemma [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What action do we take though?

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Well, the main object is to kill as few people as possible while creating an environment in which the incentive to react is as low as possible. But I can't say to you this is a small matter. There's one other thing that I've thought about, that I've only just thought about overnight. And it's on this same matter of saying to a guy, "You go to Korea" or "You go to Vietnam and you fight in the rice paddies." I would love to know what would happen if we were to say in this same speech, "And from now on, nobody goes to this task who doesn't volunteer." I think we might turn around the atmosphere of our own people out there if it were a volunteers' enterprise. I suspect the Joint Chiefs won't agree to that. But I'd like to know what would happen if we really dramatized this as "Americans Against Terror" and "Americans Keeping Their Commitment" and "Americans Who Have Only Peace As Their Object" and "Only Americans Who Want To Go Have To Go." You might change the temper of it some.

**BILL MOYERS:** In 1964 we're drafting 17,000 Americans into the military every month. When Bundy suggests that we may limit domestic opposition to our growing involvement in Vietnam by using only volunteers to fight there the President doesn't buy it. He's got the election on his mind, alright, but there is something else eating away at him.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Did you see the poll this morning? 65 percent of 'em don't know anything about it and of those that do, the majority think we're mishandling it. But they don't know what to do. That's Gallup.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Yes, yes.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** It's damned easy to get in a war but it's gonna be awfully hard to ever extricate yourself if you get in.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** It's very easy. I'm very sensitive to the fact that people who are having trouble with an intransigent problem find it very easy to come and say to the President of the United States "Go and be tough."

**BILL MOYERS:** For six months, LBJ has been serving as the accidental president, and he is determined to be elected in his own right. But always in the shadows is the slain Kennedy's brother, Robert, who still serves as Attorney General.

Their relationship is complicated to almost Shakespearean proportions, Johnson wanting to court the younger Kennedy, but also feeling threatened. There is speculation that Bobby wants to be LBJ's running mate, and rumors that he's privately complaining the President relies too heavily on the hawkish advice of the military.

Bobby Kennedy brings the matter up in a conversation that is, as always, a delicate dance between two men in perpetual distrust.

**ROBERT KENNEDY:** I have not been involved intimately with the-on the Southeast Asia, Vietnam. Just those two National Security Council meetings [...] I would think that that war would never be won militarily. But, where it's going to be won really is the political war and the best talent is of course over at the Pentagon because you have Bob McNamara. But that same kind of talent really has to be applied to doing what needs to be done politically in that country [...] Because the military action obviously will have to be taken but unless the political action is taken concurrently, in my judgment, I just don't think it can be successful [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** We're not ready to have a declaration of war, or war by executive order. We are trying every way we can to soup up what we've got and stabilize it. And to find some way to call upon people to help us preserve the peace and have some diplomatic programs and political programs instead of just sending out 20 extra planes [...] Now I have talked to the Congress and I'm telling you, it's gonna be very difficult to wage much more effort out there than we are with any of their approval.

**ROBERT KENNEDY:** Yes, I can see that.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Mansfield is just-you know, he's for pulling out. Humphrey said, "Well, we're not doing any good." The Frank Churches said, "We don't want any part of it." The Dick Russells and the twenty-odd in that group say, "We ought never to have ever been in there. And let's- The French found that out, and we didn't go along with the '54 accords. And what the hell are we doing in there anyway? And Dulles and Eisenhower got us in there and we oughtn't have stayed." Yet when you go to reason with 'em and say, "Well how in the world you gonna get out?" They'll say, "God, if some government would ask us to get out, it'd be wonderful." But it's saddening to talk to 'em about it [...] I think it's most-hottest thing we got on our hands and the most potentially dangerous.

**ROBERT KENNEDY:** I didn't want to, uh, put myself in there.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** You put yourself in everything that you've ever been doing. Just forget that stuff now. I've told you that about three times. You're wanted and needed and, uh, we care. And we must have all the capacity we have, and all the experience [...] You're even needed more than you were. So, just handle it that way. Now, I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean that, and I don't need to say it. And I'd just say, "Much obliged, and thank you" if I didn't want it. I sincerely want it.

**BILL MOYERS:** What LBJ doesn't welcome is the stream of stories from reporters in Vietnam undermining his efforts to keep the bad news there from influencing the election at home. He asks McNamara what's going on.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I've been trying to evaluate this thing. We haven't taken any real serious losses and we can't put our finger on anything that really justifies this acceleration of, and escalation of public sentiment that's going to hell in a hack since you were out there in March. Is that a build-up of our critics largely? Have we fed that? Where does it come from we're losing it? [...]

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** The CIA estimators, Lodge, many of the rest of us in private would say that things are not good. They've gotten worse. And you see it in the desertion rate. You see it in the morale. You see it in the difficulty to recruit people. You see it in the gradual loss of population control. Now while we say this in private and not public, there are facts available in the public domain over there that find their way in the press. And I think this is one way that our people get this feeling of,

of the fact that we're not moving ahead.

**BILL MOYERS:** Those reporters on the ground have it right. The President's middle path is nearing a dead end. Vietcong guerillas are spreading across the countryside while South Vietnamese soldiers are quitting the fight faster than Americans can train them.

The President tells McNamara of a memo he has received from Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, a Democrat.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What he comes out and says is he thinks we ought to get out of there, which we can't and are not going to. And if we don't, then we've got to educate the people as to why we're in there.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** That's right. Well, I think he's absolutely right. If we're going to stay in there, if we're going to go strictly up the escalating chain, we're going to have to educate the people, Mr. President. We haven't done so yet. I'm not sure now is exactly the right time.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** No, and I think if you start doing it, they're going to be hollering, "You're a warmonger."

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** That's right. I completely agree with you. So this is the-

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I think that's the horns that the Republicans would like to get us on. Now if we could do something in the way of social work, in the way of our hospitals, in the way of our province program [...] and in the way of remaking that area out there, and giving them some hope and something to fight for, and put some of our own people into their units and do a little better job of fighting without material escalation for the next few months, that's what we ought to do.

**BILL MOYERS:** The President's hopes for a kind of 'New Deal' for South Vietnam are stymied by the corruption and incompetence of the government there, which is again on the verge of collapse, even as the enemy - the Vietcong - are consolidating more and more control in the countryside. The walls are closing in, and the President turns once again to his old mentor in the Senate, Dick Russell.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I'm confronted with-I don't believe the American people ever want me to run. If I lose it, I think that they'll say I've lost, I've pulled in. At the same time, I don't want to commit us to a war. And I'm in a hell of a shape. I can't do-I just don't know.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** We're just like the damn cow over a fence out there in Vietnam.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** That's right and Laos. And I've got a study being made now by the experts which I want you to come over some night and have a drink and see, of how important the two of them are, whether Malaysia will necessarily go and India will go and how much it'll hurt our prestige if we just got out and let some conference fail or something.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I know all those arguments.

**BILL MOYERS:** The President tells Russell of the advice he's received from his neighbor and fellow Texas rancher, A.W. Moursund.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** But they say that, well a fellow like A.W. Moursund said to me last night, -damn, there's not anything that'll destroy you as quick as pulling out, pulling up stakes and running, that America wants by God, prestige and power. And they don't want-I said, yeah, but I don't want to-I don't want to kill these folks. He said, I don't give a damn. He said, I didn't want to kill 'em in Korea, but said, if you don't stand up for America, there's nothing that a fellow in Johnson City-or Georgia or any other place-they'll forgive you for everything except being weak.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** Well there's a lot in that. There's a whole lot in that.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Goldwater and all of 'em raising hell about go on, let's hot pursuit. Let's go in and bomb them [...]

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** It'd take a half million men. They'd be bogged down in there for ten years. And oh hell no.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** We never did clean Korea up yet.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** No it ain't clean yet. We're right where we started [...] I didn't ever want to get messed up down there. I do not agree with those brain trusters who

say that this thing has got tremendous strategic and economic value and that we'll lose everything in Southeast, in Asia if we lose Vietnam. I don't think that's true. But I think as a practical matter, we're in there and I don't know how the hell you can tell the American people you're coming out. There's just no way to do it. They'll think that you've just been whipped, you've been ruined, you're scared. And, it'd be disastrous.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I think that I've got to say that, we're-I didn't get you in here, but we're in here by treaty and our national honor's at stake. And if this treaty's no good, none of 'em are any good. Therefore we've-we're there. And being there, we've got to conduct ourselves like men. That's number one. Number two, in our own revolution, we wanted freedom and we naturally looked with other people, with sympathy with other people who want freedom and if you'll leave 'em alone and give 'em freedom, we'll get out tomorrow. That's the second thing. The third thing, I think, we've got to try to find some proposal, some way that, like Eisenhower worked out in Korea, that we can-

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I wouldn't eliminate the United Nations or some agreement, because I think people, if you get some sort of agreement all the way around, would understand it.

**BARRY GOLDWATER:** Yesterday, it was Korea. Tonight, it is Vietnam. Make no bones of this. Don't try to sweep this under the rug. We are at war in Vietnam. And yet the President, who is the Commander-in-Chief of our forces, refuses to say -- refuses to say, mind you, whether or not the objective over there is victory. And his Secretary of Defense continues to mislead and misinform the American people, and enough of it has gone by.

**BILL MOYERS:** Barry Goldwater's acceptance of the Republican presidential nomination comes just a couple of weeks before a dramatic turn of events. While supporting South Vietnamese commandos harassing the North an American destroyer, USS Maddox, comes under fire from North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Now I wish that uh you'd give me some guidance on what we ought to say [...] I just talked to a New York banker, I just talked to a fellow in Texas, they all feel that the Navy responded wonderfully and that's good. But they want to be damned sure I don't pull 'em out and run, and they want to be damned sure that we're firm. That's what all the country wants because Goldwater's raising so much hell about how he's gonna blow 'em off the moon, and they say that we ought'n to do anything that the national interest doesn't require. But we sure ought to always leave the impression that if you shoot at us, you're going to get hit.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** Well I think you would want to [...] issue instructions to the commanders to destroy any uh force that attacks our force in international waters.

**BILL MOYERS:** Still hesitant, still seeking the middle path, the President decides against retaliation. Instead, he sends a diplomatic message to Hanoi warning of "grave consequences" if there are further attacks.

And there are, or so he's told, more attacks, the next day, on the Maddox and a second destroyer, the Turner Joy.

The first reports are confusing and the attacks unconfirmed, but when the Joint Chiefs recommend retaliatory strikes, this time the President agrees. He knows Saigon is looking to him for a sign of strength, he fears Hanoi will exploit a sign of weakness, and he's wary of providing Republican opponents with a political windfall. With reporters besieging the White House for a response, the President goes on television at midnight.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** My fellow Americans--

**BILL MOYERS:** He announces that U.S. fighter jets, for the first time, have attacked naval and oil facilities in North Vietnam.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Our response for the present will be limited and fitting. We Americans know, although others appear to forget, the risk of spreading conflict. We still seek no wider war.

**BILL MOYERS:** When polls show 85% of the public supported his decision, the President whips through Congress a resolution, giving him a free hand to use armed force to prevent further attacks on American military.

Politicians who had privately confided to him their grave doubts about going to war in south East Asia, now applaud.



**REPORTER:** Senator are you satisfied that the vote by the congress when it comes will be sufficiently impressive to make it clear to the communists that we mean business in that area?

**J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT:** I've no doubt about that. I'm certain that it will be.

**RICHARD RUSSELL:** I think that we have to retaliate vigorously and effectively. Every time that the American flag or the armed forces of our country are fired upon. Particularly in international waters.

**BILL MOYERS:** Information, long classified, would eventually confirm that the American ships had not been attacked that second time but were reacting to radar shadows on a dark night. The President himself raises doubts about what happened after the fact. But with the gulf of Tonkin resolution he now has a blank check for escalating the war.

On November 3, 1964, Lyndon Baines Johnson wins a landslide victory over Barry Goldwater - receiving 61% of the popular vote, and a margin of 16 million votes -- giving his party large majorities in both houses of congress. He is finally President in his own right.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I, Lyndon Baines Johnson, do solemnly swear.

**BILL MOYERS:** But he does not have long to relish the moment. There's another military coup in South Vietnam. And more troops from the North are infiltrating into the country, now with weapons from China and the Soviet Union. Just a week after his inauguration the President receives a memo from his secretary defense and his National Security Advisor, we have reached the fork in the road - they say - "The time has come for harder choices." they recommend more military force.

Wanting more information and time the President sends Bundy to Vietnam for a personal review. While he's there, Vietcong guerillas attack a military barracks in Pleiku, killing eight Americans and wounding scores of others.

LBJ orders immediate air strikes against a handful of targets in the North Vietnam, and Bundy reviews the damage at Pleiku.

**ANNOUNCER:** Before leaving for home Mr. Bundy flew to the 8th field hospital to visit the men wounded in the guerilla attack. 108 men were wounded, 79 of them seriously.

**BILL MOYERS:** Bundy is stunned by the blood and suffering, and on the way home he writes the President that "Without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable." On February 10 he calls the President with more bad news.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Mr. President, we've had another bombing, as you may have heard.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** No.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** A barracks in a town called Bin Dia, and we don't yet have - no Qui Nhon is the town. We don't yet have casualty reports, except 21 wounded. But the whole building collapsed, so the chances are there'll be something more [...] We probably ought to be very careful, that this is a U.S. barracks, to tie into this enterprise something Vietnamese, so that we don't get in a position that only white men get avenged [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I would tell Wheeler to have his group getting their recommendations together as best they can and considering every possible angle. Not getting inflammatory or bombastic, but let's proceed-

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Coolly.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Coolly and thoroughly and promptly and adequately.

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** Right.

**BILL MOYERS:** Johnson's top advisers unanimously urge the President to authorize the sustained bombing of North Vietnam. Hoping such raids might end the struggle quickly, and prevent the need for committing more soldiers to a ground war, he gives the okay to operation rolling thunder, which will pound the North Vietnamese for the next three years. Hardly has he issued the order than the government in Saigon falls yet again, and Vietcong terrorists bomb the US embassy in Saigon.

**ANNOUNCER:** It is all part of a carefully planned and continuing campaign of terror against both American and South Vietnamese civilians.

**BILL MOYERS:** Nothing seems to be working. Soon after, the President approves two more marine battalions for Vietnam, but when his top officials meet in Hawaii in April, they conclude bombing cannot do the job alone and ask for another nine battalions. McNamara explains.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** I think we can all be in agreement that we've got to do more to win in the South. I think the introduction of U.S. troops that will be involved will be agreed upon by the various parties [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What is their appraisal of the situation there? What do they think about all these statements about the Chinese coming in? [...]

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** None of us feel that the Chinese are likely to come in, in the near term. They are reasonably optimistic that over the next three to six months, with additional U.S. combat troops in there-and there's still a little disagreement as to how many there should be there ultimately, but no disagreement as to how many there should be in the next 90 or 120 days-they feel that they can sufficiently stiffen the South Vietnamese and strengthen their forces to show Hanoi that Hanoi cannot win in the South. It won't be that the South Vietnamese can win, but it will be clear to Hanoi that Hanoi can't win. And this is one of the objectives we're driving for [...]. Despite some of these favorable signs, there is in the background this very large Vietcong build-up over the last several months and the concentration of Vietcong strength in the center of the country, which could break out at any time and cause serious trouble to us. And they're very much afraid of some catastrophic loss at Bienhoa or Danang or one of these areas. And it's to protect against that that they now agree that there should be some U.S. combat troops introduced [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Are we taking every precaution we ought to take against any unforeseen catastrophic, uh-

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** I think so. This is one of the subjects we've discussed at great length today. To avoid possible catastrophe at Bienhoa, where we have a huge concentration of equipment and U.S. forces and also at Danang, I think we would all recommend to you [...] introduction of a brigade at Bienhoa and several additional battalions at enclaves along the coast. This, both to protect us against catastrophe and also to relieve some of the South Vietnamese and to allow some of our units to participate in counterinsurgency operations. And as a result of all this, to show the North Vietnamese that they can't win in the South.

**BILL MOYERS:** June 5, 1965. More bad news. The Saigon government is again in crisis. The Vietcong have launched a new offensive during the monsoon season, making it harder to defend ground forces from the air. A cable from the American ambassador, General Maxwell Taylor, is blunt "It will probably be necessary to commit U.S. Ground Forces to action." An anxious President calls his secretary of defense.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** What's happening in the fighting?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** Well, we've had a very unhappy week. The losses have been extremely high. I would guess that in terms of killed, wounded, and missing in action, the total will be substantially in excess of a thousand. We've had several serious setbacks, including an attack on a district town by a Vietcong battalion-size force only ten miles from Saigon. I think we're beginning to see the use of that Vietcong reserve that we've all known was there but hadn't been utilized up to the present time [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Are you scheduled to get any more people in there anytime?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** Three more battalions, combat battalions, are scheduled to go in mid-July. You've already approved that. That will make a total of 13 combat battalions. There are ten there now, three to go in within the next 30 to 45 days. There are additional logistical personnel going in as well. The total today is on the order of- oh I suppose it is 49 or 50,000 today [...] So there'll be roughly 70,000 there sometime, I guess, at the end of August.

**BILL MOYERS:** For several weeks the President has been depressed. He seems resigned to the inevitability of escalation. On June 8th he calls Senate Majority Leader Mansfield, who has written to urge him not to bomb Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam. His tone is weary, worried, and stressed.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I don't see exactly the medium for pulling out [...] Rusk doesn't know that I'm thinking this. McNamara doesn't know I'm thinking this. Bundy doesn't. I haven't talked to a human. I'm over here in bed. I just tried to take a nap and get going with my second day, and I couldn't. I just decided I'd call you.

But I think I'll say to the Congress that General Eisenhower thought we ought to go in here and do here what we in effect did in Greece and Turkey, and so forth [...] President Kennedy thought we ought to do this, and he sent these people in here and I have thought that we ought to stay there. But all of my military people tell me and my economic people that we cannot do this to the extent of the commitment we have now. It's got to be materially increased. And the outcome is not really predictable at the moment [...]

Our 75,000 men are going to be in great danger unless they have 75,000 more. My judgment is and I'm no military man at all, but I study it every day and every night and I read the cables, I look back over what's happened in the last two years, the last four really, and if they get 150, they'll have to have another 150. And then they'll have to have another 150. So, the big question then is, what does the Congress want to do about it, under these circumstances? Ah, I get, I know what the military wants to do. I really know what I think Rusk and McNamara want to do. And Bundy. But I'm not sure - and I think I know what the country wants to do now - but I'm not sure that they want to do that six months from now [...]

But, unless you can guard what you're doing, you can't do anything. We can't build an airport, by God, much less build an REA line. And it takes more people to guard us in building an airport than it does to build the airport. And the same thing's true, we could use hundreds of millions on economic projects if we can get them built[...]

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** Yeah, but some people seem to think that we're just building it for the Vietcong to take over.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, it could very well be. It could very well be. But I rather, I have the feeling from the way Bill Fulbright talked, I don't know whether I sensed it or not, that the feeling on the Hill was that we ought to be doing more of that and that might be a better answer than the bombs [...] Do you think that we ought to send all these troops without a debate?

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** No, sir. I think that uh, we've got too many in there now. And uh, we've been bombing the North without any appreciable results showing for us in the South [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** But what do we do about his request for more men? Don't we have to, if it assumes the proportions that I can see it assuming, shouldn't we say to the Congress, what do you want to do about it?

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** Well, I would hate to be the one to say it because, as you said earlier, it's 75,000, then it's 150,000, then it's 300,000. Where do you stop?

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** You don't.

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** Where do you stop?

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** You don't. I mean, if you, it looks like to me, I don't see where the, to me, it's shaping up like this, Mike-you either, you either get out or you get in. [...] I think we've tried all the, all the neutral things. And we think they are winning. Now, if we think they're winning, you can imagine what they think.

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** Yes, they know they're winning.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** And if they know that, you can see that they're not anxious to find any answer to it.

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** That's right.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** We seem to have tried everything that we know to do. I stayed here for over a year when they were urging us to bomb before I'd go beyond the line. I have stayed away from their industrial targets and their civilian population ...

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** Yeah, but Hanoi and Haiphong are stripped clean, and have been for months. And you bomb them, you get nothing. You just build up more hatred. You get these people tied more closely together because they are tied by blood, whether from the North or the South.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I think that's true. And I think that you've done nearly everything that you can do, except make it a complete white man's war.

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** If you do that, then you might as well say goodbye to all of Asia and to most of the world.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, I think that's probably, I think that's right. Therefore, where do you go?

**MICHAEL MANSFIELD:** Well, you don't go ahead [...] You don't pull out. You try to do something to consolidate your position in South Vietnam. And that may take more troops. It certainly will take more Vietnamese, I think, when-

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** They're getting more of them in, Mike, but they're going out the other end. They're deserting just like flies.

**BILL MOYERS:** The commander of America's forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, cables Washington. He wants 41,000 combat troops right away and 52,000 more later. And, he adds, he will need "Even greater forces" to "Take the war to the enemy." McNamara says "We're in a hell of a mess."

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** It gets down to a question of numbers then. [...]

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** That's right [...] Westmoreland recommended ten additional battalions over and above the 13 you've already authorized, which would have a strength of something on the order of 45,000 men. I would recommend five battalions with the strength of about 25,000 men. So, we're talking about [...] the difference of 20,000 people. But they're all combat people. And it's quite a difference in risk in my opinion. Really this is the difference and this is a hard one to argue out with the Chiefs, because in the back of my mind, I have a very definite limitation on commitment in mind. And I don't think the Chiefs do. In fact, I know they don't.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Do you think that this is just the next step with them up the ladder?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** Yes. Well, they hope they don't have to go any further. But Westmoreland outlines in his cable the step beyond it. And he doesn't say that's the last.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Well, I don't guess anybody knows.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** I don't think anybody knows, that's right. But I'm inclined to think that unless we're really willing to go to a full potential land war, we've got to slow down here and try to halt, at some point, the ground troop commitment [...]

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Do you know how far we're going to go?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** No.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Or do the Joint Chiefs know? What human being knows? [...] Now, we don't say that putting these people in is going to win, but we say if you don't put them in, you're going to lose substantially what you have. Now we don't want to promise, you do, but this is more of a holding action in the hope that through the monsoon they'll change their mind and time will play. Instead of being rash, we're trying to be prudent. Now isn't that really what we're trying to do? No, not a damn human thinks that 50,000 or 100,000 or 150,000 are going to end that war. And we're not getting out. But we're trying to hold what we got.

**BILL MOYERS:** Holding what we've got proves hard to do. On the 18th of June, South Vietnam gets its tenth government in 20 months. A few days later Vietcong mortars destroy three U.S. Aircraft at Da Nang. President Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara realize they will need more boots on the ground. Where will they get them? Listen.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Assuming we do everything we can, to the extent of our resources, can we really have any assurance that we win? I mean, assuming we have all the big bombers and all the powerful payloads and everything else, can three Vietcong come in and tear us up and continue this thing indefinitely, and never really bring it to an end? That's one thing I want to look at. The second thing I want you to look at [...] can we really, without getting any further authority from the Congress, have all out support or sufficient, overwhelming support to work successfully, to fight successfully? [...] I don't know whether those men have ever thought, in making their calculations: One, whether we can win with the kind of training we have, the type of power. Ah, and two, I don't know whether they've taken into their calculations whether we can have united support here at home ...

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** I think Mr. President that, there are two thoughts on that. First, if we do go as far as my paper suggested, sending numbers of men out there, we ought to call up reserves. You have authority to do that without additional legislation. But I doubt that you would want to use it. Almost surely, if we called up reserves, you would want to go to the Congress to get additional authority. This would be a vehicle for joining together support. Now you would say, "Well, yes, but it

also might lead to extended debate and divisive statements." I think we could avoid that. I really think if we were to go to the Clarks and the McGoverns and the Churches and say to them, "Now, this is our situation. We cannot win with our existing commitment. We must increase it if we're going to win, in this limited term that we define, in this limited way we define 'win,' it requires additional troops. Along with that approach, we are embarking upon or continuing this political initiative to probe for a willingness to negotiate a reasonable settlement here. And we ask your support under these circumstances." I think you'd get it from them under those circumstances. And that's a vehicle by which you both get the authority to call up the reserves and also tie them into the whole program.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Now that makes sense.

**BILL MOYERS:** July 28, 1965.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I have asked the Commanding General, General Westmoreland, what more he needs to meet this mounting aggression. He has told me and will meet his needs.

I have today ordered to Vietnam the Air Mobile Division and certain other forces which will raise our fighting strength from 75,000 to 125,000 men almost immediately. Additional forces will be needed later, and they will be sent as requested. This will make it necessary to increase our active fighting forces by raising the monthly draft call from 17,000 over a period of time to 35,000 per month, and for us to step up our campaign for voluntary enlistments.

**BILL MOYERS:** By year's end there will be 184,000 troops in Vietnam, even as 90,000 South Vietnamese soldiers are deserting. Before it's over, in 1975, 2.5 million American military will serve in Vietnam.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** I do not find it easy to send the flower of our youth, our finest young men, into battle. I have spoken to you today of the divisions and the forces and the battalions and the units. But I know them all, every one. I have seen them in thousand streets, of a hundred towns, in every state in this union - working and laughing and building, and filled with hope and life. I think that I know, too, how their mothers weep and how their families sorrow. This is the most agonizing and the most painful duty of your President.

**BILL MOYERS:** Now in a different world, at a different time, and with a different president, we face the prospect of enlarging a different war. But once again we're fighting in remote provinces against an enemy who can bleed us slowly and wait us out, because he will still be there when we are gone.

Once again, we are caught between warring factions in a country where other foreign powers fail before us. Once again, every setback brings a call for more troops, although no one can say how long they will be there or what it means to win. Once again, the government we are trying to help is hopelessly corrupt and incompetent.

And once again, a President pushing for critical change at home is being pressured to stop dithering, be tough, show he's got the guts, by sending young people seven thousand miles from home to fight and die, while their own country is coming apart.

And once again, the loudest case for enlarging the war is being made by those who will not have to fight it, who will be safely in their beds while the war grinds on. And once again, a small circle of advisers debates the course of action, but one man will make the decision.

We will never know what would have happened if Lyndon Johnson had said no to more war. We know what happened because he said yes.

That's it for the Journal. I'm Bill Moyers. See you next time.

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