

The Office or Ideology?: A Study of Presidential Conduct on Foreign Affairs

Adam Davis

### Acknowledgements

The research methods I've employed while writing this paper have been learned through consistent trial and error during my time at Trinity. As such, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the professors in the history and political science departments for pushing me to grow as a student and writer while simultaneously providing unwavering support. A special thank you goes to Dr. Crockett for his guidance in helping me through the research process' preliminary stages and Dr. Hermann for his consistent encouragement as both an advisor and professor. I'm similarly appreciative of Dr. Turek's assistance throughout this summer period. Her feedback and suggestions proved integral to the quality of this paper from beginning to end. A final thank you goes to my parents, without whose support, none of my academic endeavors could have ever come to fruition.

## Introduction

August 30, 2021, marked the official conclusion of President Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan, bringing an unceremonious conclusion to America's longest war. Dissension in opinion among the chattering class was substantially less interesting to me at that time than the gravity of witnessing the country retract inwards after decades of conflicts overseas in the broader Global War on Terror. Whatever discontent one may have with Biden's technique, it is indisputable that his willingness to follow through on a central foreign policy campaign pledge is a mark of distinction among his recent predecessors, Republican or Democrat. Being a part of Generation Z, those born from 1997 to 2012, I have only ever known a post-911 America hyper-fixated on security and overseas adventurism. The former is embodied by the Patriot Act and the advent of the TSA, while the latter can be seen through American involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. As the United States extended itself abroad, internal divisions fomented as citizens became increasingly skeptical of their country's governing institutions after repeated military failures in far-away regions. My experience studying politics as a young American, witnessing firsthand the rapid polarization along ideological lines resulting, in part, from these debacles, was a major source of inspiration for this project.

The chief goal of this paper is to provide clarity to the following question: why do American presidents act discordantly on foreign policy while in office compared to how they campaigned? Whether George W. Bush promoting a domestic-policy-centered vision in the leadup to the 2000 election or Barack Obama gaining worldwide enthusiasm for his anti-war sentiment, the issue appears pervasive to commanders across the ideological spectrum. The three presidents under examination are Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson,

leaders whose decisions altered America's role in three major overseas conflicts. The first rationalization, from here on referred to as *View A*, asserts that this phenomenon is less a matter of individual beliefs and more a byproduct of the office itself. As the Commander-in-Chief, the president assumes virtually all responsibility during times of crisis, forcing them to act in a proactive manner on foreign policy. George Bush's pivot to a more aggressive foreign posture results from his fear of a second major domestic terrorist attack occurring under his watch. Being the highest political office in America, it would be fanciful to imagine that presidents do not concern themselves with public opinion. Strength, or at the bare minimum being perceived as strong, is among the most vital qualities citizens look for in a president, necessitating shifts in administrative policy on foreign affairs when not doing so jeopardizes the standing of the United States and, thus, its leader.

*View B* does not run counter to all of the aforementioned assertions but takes issue with the notion that a president's foreign policy posture is not influenced by his prior political precepts. Undergirding the three presidents being studied is an acceptance of liberalism in one form or another. Liberalism, for the sake of keeping this paper limited in scope, does not encompass pre-set economic or social codifications but is merely the acceptance of a positive outlook on human nature and the ability to bring about permanent progressive change through certain policy maneuvers. Wilson, Roosevelt, and Johnson were all highly ideological men with visions for how their domestic reforms could bring about a lasting positive impact on the lives of everyday Americans. This view argues that such a frame of mind was not limited to far-reaching domestic policy but also the calculations on how best to handle foreign policy challenges. Motivated by an acceptance of the right to self-governance and the superiority of the democratic process, all three presidents entered their respective conflicts with liberal ideals in mind.

## Woodrow Wilson: In Light of View A

Being attuned to the vicissitudes of public opinion, Woodrow Wilson's central objective during his first term in office was to keep the United States out of war. His neutrality easily won the support of the vast majority of Americans while also allowing him "to play a part of impartial mediation and speak the counsels of peace."<sup>1</sup> Unbeknownst to its administrators at the time, Germany perpetuated a public relations disaster of historic proportions when, without warning, it torpedoed the *Lusitania*, killing 1,198 men, women, and children, among them, 124 Americans. The display of indiscriminate cruelty towards innocent civilians shocked the American public consciousness, becoming a permanent fixture of its citizen's memories in a manner akin to the September 11 terrorist attacks.<sup>2</sup> Germany would never recover from this souring of public opinion, which ultimately sent the United States on the trajectory to war. In spite of this, Wilson showed extreme trepidation toward entering the European conflict, writing privately:

"the worst thing that could possibly happen to the world would be for the United States to be drawn actively into this contest - to become one of the belligerents and lose all chance of moderating the results of war by counsel as an outsider."<sup>3</sup>

Economic interests also played a role in Wilson's evolving political calculations, as the president feared that declining exports would cause stagnation and a recession that could pose an existential threat to the American economy, a significant plank in both of his presidential campaigns.<sup>4</sup> In the early days of the war, Wilson's chief imperative was maintaining open channels of international commerce, encouraging all combatants to adhere to the rules of naval

---

<sup>1</sup> Printed in *PWW*, XXX, 393-4. Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson to Galt, Aug. 19, 1915, *ibid*, XXXIV, 261. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 60-1.

<sup>4</sup> N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), 14.

warfare expressed in the Declaration of London of 1909.<sup>5</sup> Increased reports on the carnage facing soldiers on the western front in the summer of 1916 reinforced Americans' commitment to neutrality,<sup>6</sup> forcing Wilson to recognize political reality and avoid a direct clash with Germany, at least until he secured a second term as president. Writing privately to the Ambassador of Great Britain on the president's behalf, Secretary of State Robert Lansing repeated the administration's insistence on seeking a peaceful resolution, noting:

The president still believes and has reason to believe that, were it possible for him to give the necessary assurances to the Government of Austria, which fears radical dismemberment and which thinks that it is now fighting for its very existence, he could in a very short time force the acceptance of peace upon terms which would follow the general lines of his recent address to the Senate regarding the sort of peace the United States would be willing to join in guaranteeing.<sup>7</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt, flanked by a contingent of Republican elected officials, took Wilson's hesitance as an affront to American sovereignty. Calling for a more aggressive show of force, he griped:

"it is our own attitude of culpable weakness and timidity, an attitude assumed under pressure of the ultra-pacifists, which is primarily responsible for this dreadful loss of life and for our national humiliation."<sup>8</sup>

No longer able to deflect criticism from his right, Wilson saw military preparedness as a pathway to victory in 1916 without ensuring America's entry into the European theater. On December 7, he proposed a program of national defense to Congress which, if adopted, would see an appreciable increase in the size of the Army and Navy.<sup>9</sup> As stated in the 1916 Democratic Party Platform:

---

<sup>5</sup> Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing Corporation, 1979), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Lansing, *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain*, 1917, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1917Supp01v01/d36>.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in "Colonel Roosevelt's New Crusade," in *Literary Digest*, LII (June 3, 1916), 1618. Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>9</sup> Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 62.

We therefore favor the maintenance of an army fully adequate to the requirements of order, of safety, and of the protection of the nation's rights, the fullest development of modern methods of seacoast defence and the maintenance of an adequate reserve of citizens trained to arms and prepared to safeguard the people and territory of the United States against any danger of hostile action which may unexpectedly arise.<sup>10</sup>

Following this announcement, Wilson embarked on a speaking tour, seeking to counter his political opponents with his new military proposal. To his most ardent critics, Wilson affirmed his position that

“we shall not ask our young men to spend the best years of their lives making soldiers of themselves. We shall not alter our attitude toward it because some amongst us are nervous and excited.”<sup>11</sup>

Publicly, Wilson remained loyal to his peace pledge but dispensed with any notion of administrative cowardice. The president's growing concerns about the Central Powers were compounded following the attack on the unarmed French steamer *Sussex*. Four Americans were among the eighty casualties.<sup>12</sup> Discouraged by the revelation, Wilson put the United States' tenuous peace position in the Germans' hands. On April 18, 1916, he demanded that the nation restrict its naval operations in accordance with the accepted rules of cruiser warfare without insisting that they cease the use of submarines altogether.<sup>13</sup> Germany's acceptance of these terms on May 4 staved off hostility between the nations, bolstering Wilson's image as a savvy foreign policy statesman. The development also reaffirmed the president's belief that lasting harmony between the competing European powers was possible should the Allies seek negotiations in good faith.

Despite his diplomatic efforts, however, circumstances in February and March made Wilson's task of securing peace between the combatants nearly impossible. On February 25, a

---

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “1916 Democratic Party Platform,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273203>.

<sup>11</sup> Annual message, Dec. 8, 1914; *PWW*, XXXII, 421-23. Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 73

<sup>13</sup> Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 74.

German U-boat sank the British passenger liner *Laconia* without prior warning, killing two Americans among other civilians. Before he could formulate a coordinated response, the president faced news of a German plot that would have induced Mexico into declaring war on the United States should the latter formally enter the European conflict. Immortalized by the telegraph bearing his last name, Arthur Zimmerman's efforts would have ceded Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in the event of armed conflict. This letter, with already strained relations between the United States and Mexico, along with continued submarine warfare, shattered Wilson's faith in Germany's intentions.

News of the letter also set off a public outcry rivaling that of *Lusitania's* sinking, eroding what little credibility Germany had left with the American people. Attacks on three American merchant ships: the *City of Memphis*, the *Illinois*, and the *Vigilancia*, led Wilson's cabinet to unanimously recommend belligerency.<sup>14</sup> Previously, anti-interventionist factions were more in accord with public opinion than war agitators. February, a month before the attacks, had seen the outgrowth of anti-war rallies throughout the country. Indeed, the sudden shift to aggression by the United States is all the more remarkable given its populace's consistent hesitation to get involved in the bloody conflict. The president remained solemn about the developments, with the Secretary of the Interior, Franklin Knight Lane, writing the following:

“He is to be for recognizing war and taking hold of the situation in such a fashion as will eventually lead to an Allis' victory over Germany. But he goes unwillingly.”<sup>15</sup>

With the Russian Revolution in full tilt, these attacks proved convincing to Americans that the war was, in fact, a struggle for democracy, giving them the moral imperative to

---

<sup>14</sup> Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 116-17.

<sup>15</sup> F. K. Lane to G.W. Lane, April 1, 1917, *PWW*, XLI 517. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 117.

intervene. Even after Wilson's Administration steered the country toward war, their territorial stated ambitions were decidedly limited:

“We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.”<sup>16</sup>

The solemn declaration reflected Wilson's consistent hesitancy to a full-blown conflict; the fluctuating circumstances and shift in American attitudes put him in an unenviable position, leaving the country embroiled in a war he sought so desperately to avoid.

---

<sup>16</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Why We Are At War*, (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1917), 55.

## Woodrow Wilson: In Light of View B

“It may be found before long that Germany is not alone responsible for the war, and that other nations will have to bear a portion of the blame in our eyes. The others may be blamed, and it might be well if there were no exemplary triumph and punishment. I believe thoroughly that the settlement should be for the advantage of the European nations regarded as Peoples and not for any nation imposing its governmental will upon alien people.”<sup>17</sup>

The efforts of Wilsonians may be best described as an attempt to enshrine a peaceful world order guided by liberal-capitalist internationalism.<sup>18</sup> Such a system would, consequently, be shielded from the excesses of imperialism fervor of the political Right and revolutionary economic efforts of the Left. Wilson viewed America as a forward-thinking model for the European continent to follow, a country that renounced excessive militancy in favor of rationalism, liberalism, and regulated capitalism. Put plainly, the Wilsonian vision for America was for the country to act as a transformative agent, guiding Europe out of barbarism, discord, and imperialism toward a new age of prosperity and global cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

Wilson’s liberal bent was not only relegated to his foreign policy calculations toward Europe. In fact, his commitment to transitioning away from traditional imperialist doctrine played an outsized role in his foreign policy strategy with China, prodding him to seek commercial expansion into the country during his first term.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Wilson’s policy towards Latin America sought the creation of a new hemispheric economic system, with the various

---

<sup>17</sup> A memorandum by Herbert Bruce Brougham, December 14, 1914, PWW, XXXI, 458-60. Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 116-17.

<sup>18</sup> N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America’s Response to War and Revolution*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America’s Response to War and Revolution*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America’s Response to War and Revolution*, 18-19.

nations connected to the United States through free trade.<sup>21</sup> With these policies in place, the president became keenly aware of America's increasing financial power on the world stage, further reinforcing his commitment to an ambitious European strategy. Although doubtful at best in hindsight, Wilsonians genuinely believed that their world system would make traditional imperialism obsolete throughout the European continent, ushering in a golden age of economic expansion and opportunity. Colonel House, one of the president's advisors, envisioned such a world in his 1912 utopian novel, *Philip Dru: Administrator*. In this novel, America succeeded in its quest to bring Germany into an Anglo-American-dominated world order, within which:

“disarmaments were to be torn down, zones of influence clearly defined, and an era of friendly commercial rivalry established.”<sup>22</sup>

Such were the prevailing attitudes among many in the president's inner circle.

Wilson, in principle, opposed widely accepted methods of imperialist exploitation, including territorial expansion and annexations, protectionism, armed conflict, and over-bloated military budgets. These pervasive norms, in his eyes, lead to wildly irrational behavior culminating in a devastating continental dispute. And yet, unlike Vladimir Lenin, who viewed war between imperialist nations as an inevitable result of capitalist expansion, Wilson retained his belief in a peaceful Europe, so long as it was governed by the political precepts he deemed necessary to sustaining a coherent world order.<sup>23</sup> It was for this reason that the submarine warfare waged by Germany posed such a risk to Wilson's idealizations, as it curtailed America's expansionist goals and undermined freedom of the seas and the enforcement of international law. This conviction played a central role during the president's 1916 speaking tour, putting the

---

<sup>21</sup> N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), 19.

<sup>22</sup> E.M. House, *Philip Dru: Administrator* (New York, 1912), 273. Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, 32.

imperative of maintaining freedom of the seas to ensure free trade as one part of America's broader moral duty.<sup>24</sup> As historian Gordon Levin has argued,

“in short, Wilson's response to Germany submarine warfare proved that a propensity for war in defense of the particular and universal values of American liberal-nationalism was latent in his thought well before the actual entry into the war.”<sup>25</sup>

Among cabinet members, House and Lansing fervently characterized America's entry into the war as an inevitable defense of Allied democracy fighting a belligerent and aggressive German autocracy.<sup>26</sup> By 1916, using German submarine warfare as an impetus, the pair abandoned the notion of medication through diplomacy and soft power, instead opting for the enforcement of liberal internationalism at the end of a rifle. Writing in private correspondence, Lansing expressed his view

“that modern civilization is threatened by military absolutism and that the only hope of a permanent peace lies in the triumph of the principle of Democracy.”<sup>27</sup>

Further justification of the war came in the form of Wilson's Fourteen Points, legitimizing the Allied struggle as a war against imperialism and emphasizing the need for self-determination among all nationalities, free trade, and the prospect of an enduring world order guaranteed by a League of Nations. Conceivably, such a commitment would stifle attempts by Allied powers to seize excessive recompense through territorial annexation, but as the adage goes: man plans, God laughs. Justifying his entry into the war through Wilsonian principles, the president intended to fundamentally remake Germany into a country that acted with increased restraint, but this could only be achieved after a decisive military defeat, culminating in the destruction of imperialism and the emergence of a democratic society.

---

<sup>24</sup> N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34.

<sup>25</sup> Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, 35-6.

<sup>26</sup> Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Lansing to Edward N. Smith, Feb. 27, 1917, Lansing MSS. Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, 40.

There is no formal correspondence revealing the moment Wilson turned to war or what the overriding cause of changing attitudes was. The Zimmerman note, when combined with consistent attacks on American vessels, put the United States in an unacceptable security posture. Furthermore, while crucial to a shift in opinion among Wilson and Americans more broadly, the president's fixation on a league of nations, and the chance he now had to enact that vision, may have weighed equally, if not more so, in his calculations. Securing the war's end offered the opportunity for Wilson to fundamentally reshape international affairs. It strikes this author as dubious to imagine that such an ambitious, outspoken, and opinionated man made a consequential decision without those considerations in the forefront of his mind. Ironically, America's entry into the war jeopardized the very experiment Wilson sought to enact. By emboldening the Allies willing to cooperate with the United States to ensure victory, the groundwork for Germany's foundation after the war now laid in the hands of those who had no interest in ceding their international influence for the sake of broader peace. Indeed, the summits following the war's end only sowed the seeds of a far more devastating continental conflict, one spearheaded by an aggrieved German Reich lacking any moral compunction toward its enemies, real or perceived.

## Roosevelt: In Light of View A

A rapidly changing international political arena, with unforeseen levels of carnage, death, and despair, was a vital factor behind Roosevelt's foreign policy considerations in the years presaging American involvement in World War II. The threat of fascist movements, as typified in the unsuccessful coup against the Vargas regime in Brazil, alongside Germany's considerable aerial capacity and invasion of Poland, led the president to seek heightened levels of military preparedness.<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt also saw the spread of fascism as a threat to the cooperation between the United States and Latin American nations, leading Hull, at the president's behest, to seek continental solidarity with American principles against foreign influence.<sup>29</sup> Warning against the dangers of inaction with Democracies in increasing peril, Roosevelt said the following in his State of the Union Message on January 4, 1939:

“The mere fact that we rightly decline to intervene with arms to prevent acts of aggression does not mean that we must act as if there was no aggression at all. Words may be futile, but war is not the only means of commanding a decent respect for the opinion of mankind.”<sup>30</sup>

Years before America joined the Allies in France, Roosevelt braced for the war's potential outgrowth. The president also rejected the notion that the Neutrality legislative reforms had contributed to the current peace, instead believing that they served to further embolden a hostile power with little intent on adhering to international norms of conduct. Public opinion moved increasingly in the direction of limited American involvement, with a poll from 1939 revealing “that 66 per cent of the public favored selling war materials to England and France if they were fighting Germany and Italy.”<sup>31</sup> In the Asia-Pacific region, against the warnings of

---

<sup>28</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 175.

<sup>29</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 177.

<sup>30</sup> FDR, “Diary and Itineraries,” Dec. 15, 1938, FDRL. Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 179.

<sup>31</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 183.

Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who feared an intensification of American-Japanese hostilities, Roosevelt announced a deal, with the backing of the Treasury, lending the Chinese government \$25 million for the delivery of tung oil over the next three years.<sup>32</sup> Even after this move, the president remained cautious about direct opposition. Despite a June 1938 poll revealing that 84 percent of Americans opposed the continued export of military goods into Japan, Roosevelt saw the move as politically risky, alienating moderates seeking a compromise between the two nations and preempting armed conflict where none may be necessary.<sup>33</sup> Despite his strong reservations about Nazi Germany, Roosevelt remained committed to keeping the United States out of the war, telling his Cabinet to only focus on the conflict's outgrowths "because we were not going to get into the war."<sup>34</sup>

Roosevelt's extreme reluctance to even favor a particular combatant was reinforced by available polling data. The polls revealed,

"while more than 80 per cent of the public favored the Allies in the fighting and while between 50 and 60 per cent of the public consistently supported aid to England and France, the majority of this second group unequivocally wished to keep the United States out of war."<sup>35</sup>

More detrimental was a widespread belief among those surveyed that

"the President is playing the European war as an end to be elected for a Third Term."<sup>36</sup>

With increased Soviet aggression against Finland and no end to Germany's territorial aims in sight, FDR became increasingly pragmatic in his approach to the war. Privately, Roosevelt's advisors warned that Germany could outlast the Allies both militarily and economically, signifying a war of attrition that could leave the continent primed for further

---

<sup>32</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 193.

<sup>33</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 194.

<sup>34</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 199.

<sup>35</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 201.

<sup>36</sup> *The Gallup Poll: 1935-1949*, poll of Sept. 3, 1939. Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 201.

communist or fascist expansion. Although increasingly concerned, Roosevelt refrained from giving a speech about such a threat to free trade and international order out of fear that it would be taken as a justification for military escalation in the 1940 election.<sup>37</sup>

Hitler's invasion of Denmark and Norway gave the president the opportunity to encourage a shift in thought among the American people, telling a reporter that it was

“a grand thing [that current events will force] a great many more Americans to think about the potentialities of the war. Today we can have no illusions. Old dreams of a universal empire are again rampant.”<sup>38</sup>

Roosevelt's reluctance to address the matter first came from fear of creating domestic political complications during an election year and the practical considerations that England and France would be unable to retake lost territory from the seemingly unstoppable Wehrmacht. These concerns lead the president to reject requests from British and French officials for destroyers, considering the request to be overly onerous, strategically risky, and “politically inopportune.”<sup>39</sup> The rejection was also guided by political fervor at home about a lack of domestic defense capabilities, leading to calls among members of both political parties for the president to seek increased industrial mobilization in a similar manner to the requests foisted on Wilson. To safeguard American security, Roosevelt aimed to expand aid to Britain and France but remained hesitant to push a policy that may undermine his political position in 1940. These consternations were relieved following the miracle of Dunkirk, after which the share of Americans who supported supplying air force planes to England and France grew from 47 to 80 percent.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 214.

<sup>38</sup> Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries, 1938-1941*. Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 219.

<sup>39</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 221-2.

<sup>40</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 228.

Despite documents later revealing the Nazi's lack of interest in a direct attack on America in late 1940, their territorial gains and military record forced any sensible political leader to prepare their defenses accordingly. Increased Japanese aggression following June Allied losses in Europe put the president in a bind, but, as expected, he again resisted attempts to take provocative steps, having been nominated on a platform of "no participation in foreign wars unless attacked."<sup>41</sup> While Roosevelt wanted to cement his neutral attitudes for political expediency, he did not want that to be mistaken for a position of weakness, telling a crowd on October 12 that: "the people of the United States reject the doctrine of appeasement."<sup>42</sup> Though an increasingly large share of Americans supported conscription, Roosevelt remained paralyzed by fears of Republican isolationist attacks, showing tepid support privately among his advisers but avoiding any public identification with the issue. A rise in support for Wilkie, according to October polls, led Roosevelt to forcefully declare in a Boston speech:

"I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."<sup>43</sup>

Following the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the largest invasion in human history, Roosevelt faced renewed pressure to bar Japan from receiving oil exports, as the country was widely expected to join Hitler's forces in the effort to overwhelm Soviet troops. The president's hesitancy, given the war's increasingly unstable nature, led to internal criticism. Roosevelt still held out hope for deferring combat in the Pacific for as long as humanly possible. A burgeoning acceptance of the inevitability of war with America among Japanese officials coincided with an increasingly hostile American public, with 69 percent of respondents favoring the risk of war

---

<sup>41</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 239.

<sup>42</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 242.

<sup>43</sup> "Documents Related to FDR and Churchill," National Archives, September 23, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fdr-churchill>.

with Japan before letting the island nation assume more authority in a December 5 poll.<sup>44</sup> The attack on Pearl Harbor dissipated any sympathy Americans had for prominent isolations, with the public thrown into full-fledged war fervor. In the years after the incident, some attempted to blame Roosevelt for the attack and even insinuate that he deliberately put Americans in harm's way to preempt the conflict he always wanted. This sentiment is wholly discordant with all available documentation from the years leading up to America's entry into the war. Instead, it appears that these isolationist factions vastly underestimated the ambitions of Imperial Japan, a mistake seldom since repeated by prominent American politicians.

---

<sup>44</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, 310.

## Roosevelt: In Light of View B

“For it becomes clearer and clearer that the future of the world will be a shabby and dangerous place to live in if it is ruled by force in the hands of a few. I hope that we shall have fewer American ostriches in our midst. It is not good for the ultimate health of ostriches to bury their hands in the sand.”<sup>45</sup>

To Roosevelt, the avoidance of war was quite simple: aggressive powers must cede their imperialist ambitions to avoid a calamitous conflict. “Do we really have to assume that nations can find no better methods of realizing their destinies than those which were used by the Huns and Vandals fifteen hundred years ago?”<sup>46</sup> he asked. Rejecting British pleas to pressure Poland to make concessions in the wake of an impending German invasion, Roosevelt and his advisers recognized Hitler’s Reich as the uncooperative menace it was. Repeated attempts to appease the belligerent power would further make a mockery of the United States and its key European allies.

Boisterous elements of an isolationist political coalition began to make political headway by September of 1939, conducting “keep-America-out-of-war” rallies and using radio addresses to warn against adjustments to the Neutrality law that would favor one combatant over the other.<sup>47</sup> Roosevelt repeatedly dismissed isolationist critics, saying

“no one in a responsible position in national, state, or local government has ever suggested in any shape, manner or form the remotest possibility of sending American boys to fight in Europe.”<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> FDR: *Personal Letters, 1928-1945*, II, 965. Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 215.

<sup>46</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, 185.

<sup>47</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, 203.

<sup>48</sup> Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, 213.

Still, to avoid hurting Allied morale, Roosevelt reaffirmed that lasting peace in the continent could not come through

“oppression, starvation, or cruelty, or human life dominated by armed camps. It cannot be a sound peace if small nations must live in fear of powerful neighbors.”<sup>49</sup>

Nor was military expertise always the guiding voice on international issues:

“Roosevelt made decisions on a number of occasions that changed military strategy or went against the advice of his military advisers. Those were, almost by definition, political decisions. And those decisions were shaped by his assumptions and broad political strategies.”<sup>50</sup>

Roosevelt was, in many respects, a political pragmatist above all else, as demonstrated when he extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union in the face of domestic opposition. While Roosevelt reaffirmed America’s commitment to lasting peace following negotiations over Czechoslovakia, he understood that a world war would have a lasting impact on the United States.<sup>51</sup> It is for this reason that he wrote the following in a private letter to Adolf Hitler in September 1938:

“The Government of the United States has no political involvements in Europe, and will assume no obligations in the conduct of the present negotiations. Yet, in our own right, we recognize our responsibilities as a part of a world of neighbors. The conscience and the impelling desire of the people of my country demand that the voice of their government be raised again and yet again to avert and to avoid war.”<sup>52</sup>

Following the buildup of tensions between Poland and Germany, Roosevelt again wrote to Hitler, this time urging him to recognize the former country’s right to sovereignty and making a personal appeal on behalf of “peace-loving men and women everywhere.”<sup>53</sup> Roosevelt also

---

<sup>49</sup> Hull, *Memoirs*, I, 739-40. Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 217.

<sup>50</sup> Warren F. Kimball. *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>51</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to Czechoslovakia, Germany, Great Britain, and France on the Threat of War,” 1938, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209174>.

<sup>52</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, Letter to Adolf Hitler Seeking Peace,” 1938, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209205>.

<sup>53</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to Adolf Hitler on the Poland Crisis,” 1939, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209874>.

wrote to President Moszicki of Poland, encouraging him to refrain from “acts of hostility” while ongoing negotiations between his country and the Third Reich continued.<sup>54</sup> As we now know, this plea largely fell on deaf ears. Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, plunging the world once more into a global conflict, one that would claim more lives than any other war in history. Poland would go on to lose around 200,000 soldiers in the war, though the conflict’s worst excesses came with the mass execution of innocent civilians by German firing squads and, later, death camps.

With the possibility of avoiding conflict altogether gone, Roosevelt felt compelled to prevent massive loss of life among civilians, instructing all participants in the war to refrain from air bombing in the following letter:

I am therefore addressing this urgent appeal to every Government which may be engaged in hostilities publicly to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities, upon the understanding that these same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all of their opponents.<sup>55</sup>

While Roosevelt initially proposed neutrality, following his victory in the 1940 election, he quickly shifted to a defense of democracies fighting aggression. As such, under the authority of the Lend-Lease Act, he supplied Britain and China with planes, guns, and ammunition to assist in their respective struggles.<sup>56</sup> Despite premonitions about their conduct, FDR extended this assistance to the Soviet Union, whose sacrifice on the Eastern Front proved integral to the Allied defeat of Hitler’s Wehrmacht, perhaps most notably in the Battle of Stalingrad which resulted in the destruction of Germany’s 6th Army.

---

<sup>54</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to President Moszicki of Poland,” 1939, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209915>.

<sup>55</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, An Appeal to Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Poland to Refrain from Air Bombing of Civilians,” 1939, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209957>.

<sup>56</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, Report to Congress on the Operations of the Lend-Lease Act,” 1941, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209641>.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was the catalyst for America's entry into the war, but FDR already suspected that Imperial Japan would be unwilling to engage in continued negotiations with the United States. As he wrote in his message to Congress on December 15, 1941,

“the Japanese Government, it is true, repeatedly offered qualified statements of peaceful intention. But it became clear, as each proposal was explored, that Japan did not intend to modify in any way her greedy designs upon the whole Pacific world. Although she continually maintained that she was promoting only the peace and greater prosperity of East Asia, she continued her brutal assault upon the Chinese people.”<sup>57</sup>

Underneath FDR's sentiments across various documentation is a commitment to democratic principles and human rights that pariah states like Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan treated with little regard, if not outright disdain. Roosevelt's willingness to fight the powers in a protracted war came after heavy deliberation about America's security interests to be sure, but, if the documents discussed are any indication, there was little need to convince him of the war's moral dimension following repeated failed attempts to make either nation see reason. As Kimball writes:

“The United States entered World War II in part because of the failure of a policy of deterrence in the Pacific, in part because a Europe dominated by an aggressive, hostile Hitlerian Germany threatened the political, social, and economic welfare of the United States.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Message to Congress on the History of Relations Between the United States and Japan” 1941, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210458>.

<sup>58</sup> Warren F. Kimball. *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 19.

## Johnson: In Light of View A

More so than the two presidents previously discussed, Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy views were clouded by his insecurities over being perceived as an illegitimate successor to the charismatic John F. Kennedy and worries that mismanagement of foreign affairs could permanently hinder his ambitious domestic reforms. Foreign policy exasperated Johnson, a man who felt the need to dominate every situation and person within his sphere of influence. As was the case with his domestic proposals, Johnson viewed his conduct on foreign policy as an extension of President Kennedy's legacy. The late president took a public stance of opposing a Communist takeover of South Vietnam and increased the number of military advisers in the region from 675 to 16,700 in accordance with this aim.<sup>59</sup> An exact blueprint, however, remained elusive. Kennedy's inclinations suggested that American commitment in the area would only extend to a certain point, repeatedly refusing requests from military chiefs for combat troops and even telling political aides that he intended to fully withdraw American personnel following the 1964 election.<sup>60</sup> Despite the uncertainty of his predecessor, Johnson remained committed to the South Vietnamese cause, telling officials in a meeting:

“Don't go to bed at night until you have asked yourself, 'Have I done everything I could to further the American effort to assist South Vietnam?'"<sup>61</sup>

Johnson was between a rock and a hard place on the issue of Vietnam. As chronicler Robert Dallek has argued, “

Given existing assumptions about the Cold War and public feeling in America about the imperative of meeting global challenges from Moscow and Beijing to assure the survival of the United States, no President, especially an unproven, unelected one, could simply

---

<sup>59</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 98.

<sup>60</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 98.

<sup>61</sup> Wicker, *JFK and LBJ*, 205. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 99-100.

have withdrawn without some real hope that the South Vietnamese could have held off a Viet Cong-North Vietnamese takeover.”<sup>62</sup>

Among his advisers, the situation seemed increasingly perilous without direct American involvement. Robert McNamara warned that, without a quick reversal of fortune, the affair would likely end with Vietnam entirely under Communist control.<sup>63</sup> Richard Russell, a close friend to President Johnson, also warned that simply walking away now would irreparably injure America’s image under his watch and invite the country’s enemies to act in an increasingly aggressive fashion.<sup>64</sup> As McNamara put it,

“the stakes in preserving an anti-Communist South Vietnam are so high that, in our judgement, we must go on bending every effort to win.”<sup>65</sup>

Ted Sorensen, perhaps the closest adviser to JFK, was the most notably dissenting voice in the administration, cautioning Johnson to hold the line for public appearances but also prepare an exit plan to avoid further embroilment in a lost cause.<sup>66</sup> Johnson, though, remained reluctant to make a statement that could be construed as defeatist on the matter, wanting to project strength and confidence during a tumultuous transition period. With the 1964 election looming, Johnson sought to put the issue on hold, hoping that 15,000 American advisers and troops from the Republic of Vietnam could prevent further incursions by Communist forces.<sup>67</sup> Privately, Johnson urged a plan for

“selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam after appropriate diplomatic and political warning and preparations.”<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 101.

<sup>63</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 101.

<sup>64</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government and Vietnam*, III, 4-5. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 103.

<sup>66</sup> Sorensen to LBJ, Jan. 14, 1964. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 104.

<sup>68</sup> McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, April 29, May 22, 1964. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 105.

Although the president believed he could make a compelling case to the general public on Vietnam, he wished to keep the matter under lock and key to avoid making it a prevalent issue for voters. After all, a Gallup poll from the spring of 1964 revealed that 63 percent of the public gave little or no attention to the conflict in Southeast Asia, while an additional 25 percent had heard nothing about the fighting at all.<sup>69</sup> Allowing war fever to sweep the nation would not only endanger the prospect of passing a civil rights bill before election day, it may be the undoing of Johnson's political career entirely.

Although it may seem hyperbolic, winning the election was a matter of life or death for Johnson. Dallek notes that "throughout his career, inner doubts translated into worries about losing elections, even when every political calculation suggested otherwise. It was as if his survival depended on winning; defeat seemed to threaten his identity, not just his professional life but his reason for existing."<sup>70</sup> The chief threat to Johnson's reelection prospects was the potential for Republicans to critique his mismanagement of foreign affairs, making him out to seem incompetent and in over his head for an office that he was never elected to. By June, Vietnam proved to be an irritant that Johnson could not simply dismiss. Goldwater critiqued the administration for being too weak in response to Communist agitation, while the public and many members of Congress were confused about the very nature of the conflict. The president had to confront the fact that, without more significant American military and economic support, the possibility of a stable regime in South Vietnam capable of withstanding attacks from its Northern border was increasingly implausible.<sup>71</sup> Despite this realization, Johnson again refused to make the war a central issue, though he did not wish to abandon the cause entirely. Russell

---

<sup>69</sup> *Gallup Poll*, III, 1882. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 106.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 122.

<sup>71</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 143.

again urged caution, not believing that the South Vietnamese could be counted on to manage their own affairs while also rejecting the notion that Americans would willingly agree to send their sons to fight for a war they could not fully comprehend.<sup>72</sup> On the second point, Johnson agreed entirely, fearing a backlash among the public if their sons and fathers were sent to wage war overseas. To allay such fears, Johnson confirmed his intentions not to expand America's involvement in the war on June 12, though he also refused to commit to any withdrawal.<sup>73</sup> Polling on Vietnam became increasingly erratic as November approached. A July Gallup poll found that 38 percent of Americans believed Vietnam was being poorly managed, while a Lou Harris poll found that fifty-eight percent of the country had a negative view about the job Johnson's Administration was doing in the region.<sup>74</sup> Matters were made worse when, on Sunday morning, August 2, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats engaged the USS *Maddox* in international waters, leaving Democratic congressional leaders to collectively push Johnson to act in a bolder fashion, lest he open himself up to charges of weakness from Goldwater and his Republican allies.<sup>75</sup> Johnson needed little convincing, telling McNamara,

“I'll tell you what I want. I not only want those patrol boats that attacked the *Maddox* destroyed, I want everything at that harbor destroyed; I want the whole works destroyed. I want to give them a real dose.”<sup>76</sup>

The president moved swiftly to draft a resolution after the incident and meetings with the National Security Council. Treating the initial assessment as entirely legitimate, his public remarks over the next twenty-four hours asserted that U.S. forces had done nothing to provoke

---

<sup>72</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144.

<sup>73</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 146.

<sup>74</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 147.

<sup>75</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 147.

<sup>76</sup> William Bundy, *MS History of the Vietnam War*, chap. 14, 19-22. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 150.

the attack, an apparent inconsistency. In an address at Syracuse University, Johnson doubled down on this claim:

“The attacks were deliberate. The attacks were unprovoked. The attacks have been answered. Aggression - deliberate, willful, and systematic aggression has unmasked its face to the entire world.”<sup>77</sup>

On August 7, Johnson’s proposed Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed with near-unanimous support from the House and Senate, affording him congressional approval for

“all measures deemed necessary by the Commander in Chief to repel and counter future attacks on the Armed Forces of the United States.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite this development, Johnson remained publicly committed to the cause of peace, telling voters that he was not “ready for American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys.”<sup>79</sup> His reluctance to commit to a full-scale war does little to absolve him from the irresponsible rhetoric he used in the days following the Gulf of Tonkin incident before he received further clarification. Worse still, a liberal interpretation of the resolution led Johnson to believe that he had the authority to wage a broader war in Vietnam when no formal debate had taken place. The cascading series of events after the resolution’s passage that made escalation in Vietnam a near-certainty are rooted, fundamentally, in this opportunistic streak. Johnson’s obsession with public perception and deep insecurity over his place in history made the thought of American withdrawal from Vietnam a virtual impossibility, permanently altering his standing with an increasingly disillusioned electorate in a tragic twist of irony.

---

<sup>77</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government and Vietnam War*, II, 304-5. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 153.

<sup>78</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 153.

<sup>79</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 154.

## Johnson: In Light of View B

“I’m not going to let Vietnam go the way of China. I told them to go back and tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word, but by God, I want something for my money. I want ‘em to get off their butts and get out in those jungles and whip hell out of some Communists. And then I want them to leave me alone, because I got some bigger things to do right here at home.”<sup>80</sup>

There was never a scenario in which Lyndon Johnson would willingly cede South Vietnam to Communist control without a fight. Allowing the country to fall under the sway of a Soviet client state would severely undermine Johnson’s image at home, putting his most cherished domestic reforms into doubt. Additionally, Johnson viewed Vietnam as an opportunity for him to display his leadership prowess, as Kennedy had done during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Prestige is power to ambitious political actors like Lyndon Johnson, and the mark of cowardice, should he withdraw, was a public relations nightmare that he was unwilling to endure. As Dallek summed up concisely:

“Johnson saw Vietnam as a test of American resolve abroad. But he also thought it had the potential for disturbing consequences at home. He wanted quick and effective action against the Communists in Vietnam as a way to head off losses overseas and stalemate on domestic reform.”<sup>81</sup>

Johnson, a seasoned politician, also feared that an image as a hapless statesman would greatly jeopardize his standing with the American people before the 1964 presidential election. His paranoia over an election loss was intensified by the Republican Party’s selection of Barry Goldwater to serve as its nominee, a senator committed to an uncompromising conservative disposition that rejected many aspects of federal governmental authority. Johnson’s aides feared

---

<sup>80</sup> Bill Moyers, “Flashback,” *Newsweek*, Feb, 10, 1975, cited in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100.

<sup>81</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 100.

that Goldwater and his supporters constituted a grave threat to traditional American governance, representing an extreme previously rejected within the confines of the Republican Party with the nomination of candidates like Dwight Eisenhower over Robert Taft. Describing the Goldwater phenomenon, journalist Richard Rovere said the following of his most fervent proponents:

“the spirit of compromise and accommodation was wholly alien to them. [They aimed at] total ideological victory and the total destruction of their critics. They wished to punish as well as to prevail.”<sup>82</sup>

Forebodings about the threat of a Goldwater Administration were not relegated to the nation’s political class. Indeed, a September survey of America’s 12,000 psychiatrists revealed that 1,189 believed he suffered from paranoia, making him unfit to serve as Commander in Chief.<sup>83</sup> While Johnson held consistent leads in the polls, thirty-eight percent of Americans rated his administration as fair or poor, while forty-four said it was good, a precarious place to remain with the election drawing near.<sup>84</sup> Portraying Goldwater as rash, inconsistent, and paranoid could sufficiently sully his reputation. To this end, Johnson directed millions of dollars for television ads showing Goldwater as the extremist ideology he believed him to be. The most famous of these attacks was the “Daisy” ad, depicting a girl picking flowers as a voice counts down from ten, ending with a nuclear explosion. As viewers watched the mushroom cloud form, Johnson declared:

“these are the stakes - to make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark. We must love each other or we must die.”<sup>85</sup>

Following the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, Johnson wanted to strike a moderate tone with voters on foreign policy. While campaigning for reelection, he reaffirmed his pledge to “not

---

<sup>82</sup> Tristram Coffin to George Reedy, July 24, 1964. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 167.

<sup>83</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 167.

<sup>84</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 169.

<sup>85</sup> TheLBJLibrary, “Daisy Ad,” (LBJ 1964 Presidential Campaign Commercial), 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cwqHB6OeUw>.

permit the independent nations of the East to be swallowed up by Communist conquest” while also opposing sending

“American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.”<sup>86</sup>

With politics in a constant state of flux,

“His [Johnson’s] only certainty in the summer of 1964 was that election politics dictated an image of himself as a firm but cautious defender of the national security.”<sup>87</sup>

Johnson’s strategy was undoubtedly effective, as he easily trounced Goldwater in states across the country save a few in the Deep South and the senator’s home state of Arizona. In the aftermath of his victory, Johnson remained set on securing a negotiated settlement with increases in military action to progress talks in the interim. Johnson’s acquiescence to the buildup of America’s military presence in the region came partly out of fear that allowing South Vietnam to fall under his watch would allow for the reemergence of a McCarthy-like figure that galvanizes the American Right.<sup>88</sup> He would later tell an advisor:

If I left the woman I really loved - the Great Society - in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate that would shatter my presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy.<sup>89</sup>

It was fear, fear that America would swing sharply to the right should he fail, and fear that Vietnam would descend into a Communist puppet state, which drove Johnson’s efforts to defend Saigon and expand America’s commitment to the cause. On February 13, following the identification of military targets by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, America commenced with operation “Rolling Thunder,” a bombing campaign that signaled a renewed commitment to South

---

<sup>86</sup> PPP: LBJ, 1963-64, II, 1126-27. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 238.

<sup>87</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 239.

<sup>88</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 245.

<sup>89</sup> Kearns, LBJ, 251-2. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 246.

Vietnam's security interests.<sup>90</sup> By the end of the month, he agreed to send U.S. marines to defend an air base at Danang, though only for defensive operations.<sup>91</sup> Justifying the war as a crusade for democratic values, Johnson said the following in an address to Johns Hopkins students:

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change. This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Viet-Nam.<sup>92</sup>

Criticism that came in the wake of these decisions felt profoundly personal and unfair to Johnson, who placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the North Vietnamese authorities for refusing to engage in peace negotiations. Still, he refused to reconsider his policy objectives, viewing a loss in Vietnam as a prelude to increased aggressions in Asia and across the world from America's enemies.<sup>93</sup> As he put it:

“our national honor is at stake in southeast Asia, and we are going to protect it, and you might as well be prepared for it.”<sup>94</sup>

Johnson's conjecture aside, even Vice President Huberty Humphrey, was skeptical of the administration's hasty response:

Today in Vietnam we lack the very advantages we had in Korea. The public is worried and confused. Our rationale for action has shifted away now even from the notion that we are there as advisors on request of a free government—to the simple argument of our “national interest.” We have not succeeded in making this “national interest” interesting enough at home or abroad to generate support.<sup>95</sup>

To Johnson, the threats to America's security interests should Vietnam fall, along with the right-wing backlash that could set any expansion of progressive economic reforms back decades,

---

<sup>90</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 249.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 256.

<sup>92</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Address at Johns Hopkins University: Peace Without Conquest” 1965, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-johns-hopkins-university-peace-without-conquest>.

<sup>93</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 260.

<sup>94</sup> PPP: LBJ, 1965, II, 725-26. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 273.

<sup>95</sup> Humphrey, *Memorandum From Vice President Humphrey to President Johnson*, 1965, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v02/d134>.

made a Communist victory in South Vietnam indefensible. Johnson Even during the height of student protests across America's campuses, Johnson instructed an aide not to

“pay any attention to what those little shits on the campuses do. The great beast is the reactionary elements in the country. Those are the people that we have to fear.”<sup>96</sup>

To fully understand Johnson's frame of reference, one must first consider how he viewed himself in relation to his historical predecessors. For Johnson, being a good president was insufficient; he wanted to be remembered as one of America's great leaders alongside the likes of Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, and his personal hero, Franklin Roosevelt. That the Vietnam War proved to be his ultimate undoing came as a blindside to a man centrally concerned with shifting the role of government in the lives of ordinary Americans. As Johnson later recalled, he

“could see and almost touch [his] youthful dream of improving life for more people than and in more ways than any other political leader, including FDR. I was determined to keep the war from shattering that dream, which meant I simply had no choice but to keep my foreign policy in the wings.”<sup>97</sup>

Seeking to avoid emboldening America's right-wing and permanently altering the world's system of collective security guided many of Johnson's actions in the leadup to full-scale war in Vietnam, but it cannot be escaped that conflict's reverberations will permanently overshadow his domestic accomplishments in the eyes of historians and Americans alike.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York., 1991), 417. Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 280.

<sup>97</sup> Kearns, *LBJ and the American Dream*, 282-3. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 276.

<sup>98</sup> Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 63.

## Conclusion

While the information written in the preceding pages is not always novel, this author's interpretation and method of examining presidential conduct on foreign policy are. How one chooses to weigh the arguments presented is a matter of individual choice. Whether you believe *View A* or *B* favorably is less important than finding merit to either of the claims in some portion of the paper. I will consider this project a success if just one of the subsections challenges our collective understanding of a past president's decision-making in the run-up to a major war. After an extensive analysis of internal documents revealing internal administrative deliberations, it is my view that an obsession with public perception is the most impactful variable on a president's conduct in any arena, foreign or domestic. As such, *View A* is more explanative for inconsistencies in how they act while in office than their broader ideological vision. This is for one primary reason: the nature of America's governmental system. While absolute despots like Hitler, Stalin, or Mao may shape their state's actions on foreign policy to conform with a curated utopian aspiration, American presidents must remain more grounded in the views of their citizens because of voting. It is for this reason that Hans-Hermann Hoppe criticized democracy on economic grounds in his 2001 book, *Democracy: The God That Failed*. Because the most salient objective for an American president at any time is to get reelected, he will contort his administration to achieve this aim by expanding deficit spending, proposing new social safety programs, or cutting taxes to gain popular support. I firmly believe that this extends to foreign policy, as presidents try to meet the mood of the country, as exemplified by the more skeptical attitudes on America's role as the world's police by the two most recent administrations. If correct, future presidents will continue to meet this rapid shift in opinion among the electorate, ushering in a new period of retrenchment on global affairs to redress internal anxiety.

## Bibliography

- Cohen, Warren I., et al. *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Dallek, Robert. *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Dallek, Robert. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
- “Documents Related to FDR and Churchill.” National Archives, 2016.  
<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fdr-churchill>.
- Humphrey, Hubert. *Memorandum From Vice President Humphrey to President Johnson*. Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v02/d134>.
- Kimball, Warren F. *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman*, Princeton University Press 1991.
- Knock, Thomas J. *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Question for a New World Order*. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Lansing, Robert. *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain*. Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1917Supp01v01/d36>.
- Levin Jr., N. Gordon. *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to the War and Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Link, Arthur S. *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, Peace*. AHM Publishing Corporation, 1979.
- Peters, Gerhard., et al. “Address at Johns Hopkins University: Peace Without Conquest.” The American Presidency Project,

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-johns-hopkins-university-peace-wit-hout-conquest>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Franklin D. Roosevelt, An Appeal to Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Poland to Refrain from Air Bombing of Civilians." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209957>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Letter to Adolf Hitler Seeking Peace." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209205>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to Adolf Hitler on the Poland Crisis." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209874>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to Czechoslovakia, Germany, Great Britain, and France on the Threat of War." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209174>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to President Moszicki of Poland." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209915>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Report to Congress on the Operations of the Lend-Lease Act." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209641>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "Message to Congress on the History of Relations Between the United States and Japan." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210458>.

Peters, Gerhard., et al. "1916 Democratic Party Platform." The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273203>.

TheLBJLibrary. "Daisy Ad," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cwqHB6QeUw>.

Wilson, Woodrow. *Why We Are At War*. Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1917.