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The Bundy Revisionists and the Remaking of McGeorge Bundy

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors  
in Political Science

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## *Introduction*

### *Challenging the Bundy Revisionists: McGeorge Bundy and Presidential Leadership during the Vietnam War*

As the Obama Administration looks to the past for guidance on Afghanistan, a contentious debate continues to rage over the United States' failure in Vietnam. At the heart of this controversy lies the question of whether responsibility for the Vietnam quagmire should be placed squarely on the shoulders of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson or shared with their top advisors. Recent scholarship has focused primarily on a narrower debate over the role and influence of McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Kennedy and Johnson. Representing one side of the debate, David Halberstam famously argued that presidential advisors like Bundy should be held accountable for their influential role in the disaster that was the Vietnam War.

Halberstam's basic argument, that Johnson's main advisors had particular conceptions and made crucial decisions which significantly contributed to the United States' failure in Vietnam, has been highly influential and remains widely accepted to this day.<sup>1</sup> According to Halberstam, the decisive recommendations, decisions, and actions of McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, and Dean Rusk, considered "the best and the brightest" of their generation, led America ever deeper into the Vietnam quagmire. He does not contend that they forced Johnson's hand against his better judgment, but rather that they employed their considerable influence to convince the

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<sup>1</sup> For a compelling defense of the traditional Halberstam view on Vietnam, see Andrew Preston's *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam*. Preston employs extensive documentary evidence to argue that advisors in general, and McGeorge Bundy in particular, escalated the Vietnam conflict despite internal opposition, external pressures, and a clearly flawed strategy.

often uncertain president to heed their largely flawed, hawkish advice. In short, very smart men made very poor decisions and the American people paid the price in lives.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional Halberstam view that advisors significantly influenced presidential decision-making on Vietnam has been strongly challenged in recent years. Determined to break the Halberstam hold on the American public, political scientist Gordon Goldstein and historians Francis Bator, Frederik Logevall, Evan Thomas, and Kai Bird represent the opposing side of the debate. According to their revisionist school of thought, advisors like Bundy did not play the crucial role attributed them by Halberstam. Quite the contrary, the Bundy revisionists argue that the whole idea that Johnson was significantly influenced by his Harvard educated advisors is “just plain silly.”<sup>3</sup> They offer a bold denigration of the Halberstam’s thesis, challenging the notion of influential advisors and emphasizing the dominance of Lyndon Johnson.

The Bundy revisionists flatly reject the notion that Johnson was significantly influenced by his advisors’ advice. Rather, they argued that, for all intents and purposes, Vietnam was Lyndon Johnson’s War. One of the most celebrated champions of this revisionist school of thought, Francis Bator concludes that Johnson “ran his own show.”<sup>4</sup> The bottom line picture that emerges from the Bundy revisionists’ arguments is threefold. First, presidential advisors were relatively insignificant when it came to the Vietnam decision-making process. Second, the most important lesson that can be learned from the Vietnam War is the dominance and centrality of the commander-in-chief. Third, McGeorge Bundy was neither a particularly influential

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<sup>2</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Francis Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection.” *Diplomatic History* 32.3 (June 2008): 309-340, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.23.

advisor nor a particularly strong advocate of expanding the United States' role in South Vietnam.

The aim of this thesis is neither to censure Bundy nor denounce the competence or intentions of the Bundy revisionists. Rather, its aim is to advance our understanding of Bundy's role in the Vietnam decision-making process by scrutinizing Bundy's and the Bundy revisionists' views and setting the record straight based on the available evidence. It is primarily a critique of the Bundy revisionists' efforts to rewrite Bundy's place in history. In remaking the role of McGeorge Bundy, they have advanced and popularized the flawed argument that advisors are merely supporting actors in the commander-and-chief's play.

As provocative and appealing as the Bundy revisionists' view may be, the declassified documents serve as a compelling indictment of their contention that a dominant Lyndon Johnson called the plays on Vietnam while his submissive advisors sat on the sidelines of war. On the whole, the Bundy revisionists have engaged in the rewriting of history to the point of historical mythmaking. Bundy's advice that we not get lost in the "maze of memos" was well-suited to his and the Bundy revisionists' central argument that Johnson's advisors were relatively insignificant, but to take that advice would be a disservice to any comprehensive analysis of the Vietnam War and the role of advisors in influencing presidents' decisions.<sup>5</sup> As I navigated through the maze of memos, the significant influence that advisors had on Johnson's decision-making on Vietnam and Bundy's role as a strong, consistent, and persuasive advocate of expanding the U.S. effort in South Vietnam became increasingly clear. In short,

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon M. Goldstein. *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2008), p.27.

Bundy's actual role and advice was very different than the Bundy revisionists have suggested.

Though the evidence goes not support Bator's conclusion that Johnson "ran his own show," Evan Thomas applauds Bator's rejection of the Halberstam view. According to Thomas, the problem was not that LBJ listened too closely to his advisors. Rather, "the real tragedy was that LBJ did not listen to Bundy, or to his brother Bill, or to McNamara. And, possibly, that the Harvards did not try harder to make him." In making this argument, Thomas presents a curiously, if not conveniently, oversimplified summation of Halberstam's thesis, that "the Harvards led LBJ into the Vietnam quagmire, rather against his better judgment."<sup>6</sup> Thomas' contention that Bator proves that "the truth is quite the opposite" can suggest only one thing; that LBJ led the Harvards into the Vietnam quagmire against their better judgment.<sup>7</sup>

Gordon Goldstein recently popularized the Bundy revisionist school of thought through his widely read work *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*. As Obama was considering next steps in Afghanistan in October 2009, Goldstein's must-read book was being passed around the White House. Vice President Joe Biden read it. Deputy National Security Advisor Tom Donilon read it before giving it to White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel.<sup>8</sup> Emanuel read it in a weekend and tried to pass it on to Obama, but Obama was already reading his own copy, so Emanuel gave it to senior White House advisor David Axelrod instead and

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<sup>6</sup> Evan Thomas, "Evan Thomas Comment on Francis M. Bator's "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection"" *Diplomatic History* 32.3 (2008): 341-42. pp.341-342.

<sup>7</sup> James McAllister, Review of "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection" *H-Diplo*, No 190. 25 July 2008. <<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/dh/dh2008.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> George Stephanopoulos, "The Must-Read Book for Obama's War Team." September 22 2009. ABC News.

suggested that he read it. Though the Obama Administration has been wise to look to the past to find guidance for the future at this crucial moment in American history, the lessons that Goldstein's revisionist work offers on the policymaking process during the Vietnam War are flawed.

Making a case highly reminiscent of Bator's and Thomas', Goldstein argues that Bundy was a brilliant, yet flawed and insignificant advisor. According to Goldstein, Bundy's role in the Vietnam decision-making process was largely that of a "staff officer" who dutifully executed presidential decrees.<sup>9</sup> The true architects of the war and the men who should bare full responsibility for its failure were thus Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Arguing that the Harvards were little more than supporting actors in Kennedy and Johnson's drama, Goldstein lends support to historian Kai Bird's contention that Bundy could often do little more than grab hold of Johnson's coattails as the president hastened toward a wider war.<sup>10</sup> An archetypal Bundy revisionist, Bird concludes that because the domineering Texan at the helm of the White House was in it to win it, there was nothing that Johnson's advisors could have done to prevent him from escalating the war effort. Offering a similar argument, Fred Logevall concludes that "From 23 November 1963 it was 'Lyndon Johnson's War.'"<sup>11</sup>

The recent revisionist literature on Bundy's role in the policymaking process during the Vietnam War raises two central concerns. First, many of Bator, Goldstein, and Bird's arguments are based largely on conversations and interviews with Bundy in

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<sup>9</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.150.

<sup>10</sup> Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 348.

<sup>11</sup> Logevall, Fredrik, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p.390.

the 1990s. Second, their close personal relationships with Bundy may have influenced their views. After leaving the White House in 1966, Bundy rarely spoke of his involvement in the Vietnam War. It was not until the 1990s, when Bundy was in his mid-70s, that he chose to revisit the question of Vietnam in any great depth. Bundy's newfound willingness to discuss the war was ostensibly motivated by the publication of Robert McNamara's somewhat apologetic memoir *In Retrospect*, a work which examined his role during the Vietnam War and which produced fierce condemnation of McNamara for cowering in Washington while thousands of American boys died in the jungles of Vietnam. When Bundy publicly commended McNamara on *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* in 1995 for producing so sincere an account of his involvement in Vietnam, a panelist turned the heat onto Bundy, accusing him of being equally as complicit in the Vietnam calamity as McNamara. Something about the television appearance appears to have struck a chord with Bundy. Within days of the broadcast Bundy called Goldstein requesting assistance in writing his own memoir and retrospective analysis of the United States' involvement in Vietnam. As Bundy's death in 1996 made publishing the original conception of the book impossible, Goldstein set about writing a different book which was informed by his work with Bundy but which drew a combination of Bundy's and his own conclusions.

The product of Goldstein's efforts, *Lessons in Disaster*, is based principally on Goldstein's extensive conversations with Bundy in the years before his death. Much like Goldstein, Kai Bird's arguments are based largely on a series of interviews he held with Bundy in the mid-1990s. Adopting a similar approach, Francis Bator, a long time friend of Bundy and former Deputy National Security Advisor to Johnson, based many

of his assertions on interviews with Bundy conducted in the final years of his life.

While arguments based largely on Bundy's retrospective assertions about a war he played a part in losing over three decades ago are not without value, it stands to reason that they should be subjected to rigorous scrutiny.

The Bundy revisionists' dependency on the former National Security Advisor's retrospective assertions is particularly disconcerting given that, whether or not true, Bundy's views largely exculpate himself. Though Bundy's eventual decision to speak about Vietnam was historically significant, Goldstein's assertion that in the final years of his life Bundy labored under the weight of a powerful perceived obligation to history is doubtful. Despite acknowledging that he had played a part in a great failure in a draft fragment of a book he had been working on at the time of his death, Bundy dedicated most of his efforts to arguing how small a part in the Vietnam drama he had played. In the years after he left the Johnson Administration, Bundy neither dwelled over the Vietnam War nor justified his role in it. At a cocktail reception following a talk Bundy gave in 1976, journalist Ron Javers asked Bundy if he had screwed up in Vietnam. Bundy smiled coolly and replied, "Yes, I did. But I'm not going to waste the rest of my life feeling guilty about it."<sup>12</sup> Twelve years later, when David Talbot asked Bundy about Vietnam, he replied that he was not prepared to sort it out yet.

Unfortunately, it seems as though Bundy never did sort it out. Even when revisiting the question of Vietnam in the mid-1990s, he does not seem to have experienced a profound personal transformation with respect to his role in the Vietnam War as Goldstein argues. Bundy's prior arrogance did not make him wince, nor did his

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<sup>12</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, pp.18-19.

bold statement that “South Vietnam is and wants to be ours” give him pause.<sup>13</sup> If Bundy was riddled with regret over his role in the Vietnam War, he never revealed it. Though Bundy wondered what his most serious mistakes had been as the United States became entrenched in the Vietnam quagmire, he left that question largely unanswered. Until his death, Bundy continued to place the blame for Vietnam largely on Johnson<sup>14</sup>

The substantial degree to which the Bundy revisionists’ conclusions reflect Bundy’s retrospective conclusions is cause for concern. Kai Bird’s conclusion that Bundy opposed seeking a congressional resolution in August 1964 is particularly demonstrative of the problem of relying too heavily on oral history interviews. Given Bundy’s retrospective assertion that he knew the firmness of Johnson’s decision to seek a congressional resolution in August 1964 because he had been the first to question it, one might be inclined to accept Bird’s argument that the decision to pursue the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was predominantly Johnson’s decision. However, the evidence does not support Bird’s conclusion. Not only is Bird mistaken in asserting that the decisive Tonkin decision was made without Johnson consulting any of his central advisors, in reality the decision was made after Johnson had consulted with many of his advisors.<sup>15</sup> Despite his retrospective claim to the contrary, Bundy had not opposed seeking a congressional resolution. In a staff meeting on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1964 Bundy said that “for his own part, he welcomed the recent events as justification for a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.66.

<sup>14</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.150

<sup>15</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.289.

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting, August 5, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 290.

The considerable parallels between Goldstein, Bator, and Logevall's conclusions and Bundy's retrospective views should be similarly scrutinized. Goldstein's incongruous portrayals of Bundy as the star of his generation and the unsurpassed mind of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations on the one hand, and as a "supporting player" and subservient "staff officer" on the other play a central role in his work.<sup>17</sup> Goldstein and his fellow Bundy revisionists often try to have it both ways. By emphasizing the insignificance of advisors, Goldstein is better able to defend Bundy's retrospective assertion that that the Vietnam War should be studied predominantly through Kennedy and Johnson, the two men who had the final authority over questions of war and peace.<sup>18</sup> Much like Goldstein, Bator's central conclusions that the traditional Halberstam view is "mostly nonsense"<sup>19</sup> and that presidents should bare the responsibility for the Vietnam War largely mirror Bundy's retrospective views.

Though Thomas rightly commends Bator for refuting the myth that Johnson was a mere pawn of his advisors, he fails to consider that Bator may simply be replacing one false truth with another. Johnson's advisors certainly did not force the president into Vietnam against his better judgment, but neither did Johnson lead his advisors into the Vietnam quagmire against their better judgment. Johnson consistently listened to, and often, though not always, heeded the advice of his top advisors. Bundy's early and consistent recommendation that the United States should expand its

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<sup>17</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.28.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.29.

<sup>19</sup> Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," p.25.

role in South Vietnam unquestionably shaped both the president's decisions and the United States' path to war.

The Bundy revisionists' efforts to rewrite Bundy's role in the Vietnam War raise three crucial questions. First, was Bundy highly influential as National Security Advisor to Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and 1965? Second, was Bundy an advocate or a skeptic of expanding the United States commitment to South Vietnam? Third, what did Bundy's influence add up to?

The first and second questions must be briefly addresses before the third. First, was Bundy highly influential as National Security Advisor to Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War? In a word, the answer is yes. Advisors in general, and Bundy in particular, played a crucial role shaping Johnson's decisions on the war effort. Second, was Bundy an advocate or a skeptic of expanding the United States' commitment to South Vietnam during his tenure as National Security Advisor? In a word, the answer is that he was an advocate. Bundy was one of the earliest and most consistent advisors of escalation. He recommended the continuation of the late President Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam in November 1963, supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, flatly recommended escalation in his Fork-in-the-Road memorandum in January 1965, and did not encourage Johnson to be substantially more transparent with the American public regarding the war effort. Throughout his time in the White House, Bundy strongly believed that the Vietnam War should be fought and would be one.

Third, what did Bundy's influence add up to? Bundy influence added up to him persuasively advising Lyndon Johnson to "do more" in South Vietnam in 1964 and

1965. Bundy maintained that position until the 1990s at which point he began to revise his own role in the conflict, arguably for the benefit of his historical reputation. The Bundy revisionists helped Bundy revise his role, often taking the arguments that (1) Bundy had not been a particularly influential advisor and that (2) Bundy had not been a very determined advocate of the war even farther than Bundy argued himself in the 1990s. Bundy's retrospective views and the Bundy revisionists' views are not borne out by the evidence.

As Johnson said himself in January 1965, his was not a “‘Lincoln Cabinet,’ (i.e., one which votes for an action unanimously, only to have the President decide against the action).”<sup>20</sup> Johnson was not a domineering man who always led the way when it came to decision-making on Vietnam. Though Johnson understood that the ultimate responsibility for foreign policy decisions was his, his decisions were significantly influenced by the views of others. Bundy was not a subservient staff officer any more than Johnson was a pawn of his inherited advisors. He was an influential National Security Advisor who maintained strong, relatively hawkish views and advice on Vietnam throughout his tenure in the White House. As such, both Johnson and his top advisors should be held accountable for the decisions which led to the United States' entrance into, escalation of, and ultimate failure in the Vietnam War. Though the buck certainly stops at the president, the responsibility for war and peace, success and failure, lays on the shoulders of many. Advisors, not only presidents, make crucial decisions which shape the course of events. The Vietnam War was not Lyndon Johnson's War, Robert McNamara's War, or McGeorge Bundy's War. It was the

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<sup>20</sup> Notes of President Johnson's Meeting with Congressional Leaders, January 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 30.

Johnson Administration's War. Had the United States won in Vietnam, Johnson and his advisors would have shared the praise for its success. Given that the United States lost, they must share the responsibility for its failure.

This argument is based on an extensive analysis of hundreds of declassified documents as well as hundreds of pages of McGeorge Bundy's personal papers which were released by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in 2004.<sup>21</sup> Throughout my research, the intention has been neither to condemn nor to exonerate individual actors in the Vietnam drama. It is not about blame. It is about accountability. It is about holding presidents and their advisors accountable for their views and influence and holding political scientists and historians accountable for the scholarship they publish. Though the debate over Bundy's stance on the war and the extent to which Bundy influenced Johnson's decision-making on Vietnam will surely continue to rage long after this thesis, the evidence provided should bring us much closer to understanding the relationship between Johnson and his top advisors.

The following chapters will provide an extensive analysis of McGeorge Bundy's role, influence, and advice as National Security Advisor. Chapter one will serve as a prelude, focusing on the development of Bundy's worldview and setting the stage for the subsequent analysis of Bundy's role and recommendations as National Security Advisor. Chapter two will focus on 1964, Bundy's first year in the Johnson administration. A liberal hawk at the outset of his tenure in 1964, Bundy encouraged Johnson to reaffirm and expand Kennedy's commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam and supported a Congressional resolution that would allow the administration

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<sup>21</sup> In July 2004 Mary Bundy donated the Papers of McGeorge Bundy to the John F. Kennedy Library. These papers cover the period between 1940 and Bundy's death in 1996. The collection includes fragments of text and other materials for a book Bundy had been working on about the Vietnam War at the time of his death.

to expand the war effort in South Vietnam as it saw fit, particularly in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Chapter three will focus on 1965, Bundy's penultimate year in the White House and a crucial time in the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Bundy became an increasingly determined advocate of escalation in 1965. Moreover, Bundy did not strongly advise Johnson to be substantially more transparent with the American people regarding the war effort in 1965 as he would later claim. This chapter will also briefly address Bundy's departure from the Johnson Administration in 1966. The concluding chapter of this thesis will offer my final analysis of Bundy's role, advice, and influence over Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War. My aim will have been to challenge the argument made by the Bundy revisionists as well as demonstrate the significant influence that advisors have on presidential decision-making by establishing Bundy as a window into the crucial relationship between Johnson and "the best and the brightest." My hope is that by resolving Bundy, we will have come much closer to resolving the larger story.

## Chapter One

### *The Making of a National Security Advisor: McGeorge Bundy's Worldview*

The Bundy revisionists portray Bundy as a man who did not speak his own mind and who often allowed himself to be dominated by Johnson. They contend that Bundy neither substantially shaped the decision-making process on South Vietnam nor forcefully advocated expansion of the war effort. Francis Bator put it bluntly, contending that “there were ‘no peers’ in the (Johnson) administration.”<sup>22</sup> According to this view, Lyndon Johnson made the decisions and McGeorge Bundy quietly and reluctantly followed along.

Bundy's background and worldview is completely at variance with the Bundy revisionists' portrayal. Bundy was a leader who was confident in his beliefs and eager to express his views. From childhood forward, Bundy demonstrated a can-do attitude, a substantial degree of comfort with holding prominent positions, and a readiness to speak his mind. He was first in his class at Groton, a member of Skull and Bones at Yale, a junior fellow in Harvard's Society of Fellows, and the youngest individual to serve as the Dean of Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University. A 1961 *New York Times* article noted that as dean of Harvard Bundy “gained repute as one of the nation's leading educators, political scientists and academic authorities on international relations.”<sup>23</sup>

Long before entering the White House, Bundy had established himself as an opinionated and respected member of the foreign policy elite. John Kenneth Galbraith,

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<sup>22</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.4.

<sup>23</sup> “Career of Bundy Story of Paradox: Republican Backed Kennedy -- Yale Graduate Serves as a Dean at Harvard,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), 1961, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/115293353?accountid=15054> (accessed February 7, 2011).

who served with Bundy as both a Harvard faculty member and as one of Kennedy's advisors, later said of Bundy that, "He never took second place anywhere, whether at Harvard or at the White House...He had an intelligence and instinct that always made him a senior figure. As a colleague, he was one of the professors whom all of us admired. He had an intelligent opinion on a wide range of subjects. Later, working with John F. Kennedy, there were very few political positions I took without talking them over with Mac."<sup>24</sup>

As Galbraith's comments suggest, Bundy had never been the type to allow himself to be dominated by others or to keep his views to himself. This was particularly clear during his first months in the Kennedy administration, during which he made both his views and his presence known. Within months of setting foot in the White House, Bundy had transformed the National Security Advisor position from a staff officer role into a much more meaningful and influential advisory role, creating a platform from which he would later advocate escalation in South Vietnam.

Bundy's background explains not only how, but also why, Bundy would become a forceful advocate of expanding the United States' effort in South Vietnam. Dating back to his days at Yale, Bundy believed that communism was inherently hostile to American democracy, liberty, and freedom. An internationalist who supported an expansive U.S. role on the international stage, Bundy considered the United States "the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose."<sup>25</sup> Bundy's internationalist perspective, moralistic-legalistic approach to

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<sup>24</sup> Ken Gewertz, "McGeorge Bundy Dies at 77," *Harvard Public Affairs & Communications*, 19 Sept. 1996, <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/1996/09.19/McGeorgeBundyDi.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Preston, Andrew, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p.30.

foreign affairs, and belief in the importance of maintaining American credibility had been shaped substantially by his long-time mentor, Henry Stimson. Bundy's Stimsonian beliefs that United States should reform the international system according to American ideals, that U.S. credibility needed to be maintained, and that strong military force was both necessary and justifiable in pursuit of American objectives were not only bedrocks of his worldview, but also fixtures of postwar U.S. foreign policy and foundations of American involvement in South Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> Bundy's recommendation that Kennedy should consider committing combat troops to South Vietnam in 1961, and his consistent forceful advice that Johnson should expand the war effort in 1964 and 1965, were entirely in line with his worldview.

#### *Bundy's Background and Worldview*

McGeorge Bundy was raised as a Boston Brahmin. His distinguished pedigree did not come from his father Harvey Hollister Bundy, but rather from his mother Katherine Lowell. In Boston, to be a Lowell was to be important. The Lowell's were widely recognized as one of the First Families of Boston, among the most esteemed members of the historic, upper-class East Coast Establishment. As Bundy's sister Mrs. G. Andelot Belin later observed, "Mother never forgot for a minute that she was a Lowell...It was assumed in the family that none of us would want to become bus drivers. Mother took this position that you had this tradition, so why not use it, and I suppose we did... For her, things were black and white. It's an outlook that descends

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<sup>26</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.12.

directly from the puritans and we all have it. But Mac has it more than the rest of us.”

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Bundy was well aware that he had been born into a life of privilege and was more than willing to take advantage of it. He was not boastful of his family connections, but he did use them often and to great avail throughout his life. Like many Boston Brahmin children, Bundy attended Groton, an elite New England preparatory school which instilled within its students discipline, honor, and lasting conviction in the righteousness of Establishment values. Young boys were bred to become the right kind of people and as such were introduced to the right kind of people and encouraged to build connections that would serve them well in the future. Bundy learned early in life not to wash his dirty laundry in public and that power and prestige were to be embraced and celebrated. Quite fittingly, Groton’s motto was “Cui servire est regnare,” to serve is to rule. Even at a young age Bundy was recognized for his excellence and influence, graduating first in his class and serving as editor-in-chief of the monthly *Grotonian*, president of the drama society, and captain of the debating team. On one occasion, Bundy delivered an impressive lecture on the Duke of Marlborough from a blank sheet of paper. Upon graduating from Groton, Bundy made the trek to New Haven to attend Yale University, the only school to which he applied.

While at Yale, Bundy developed a reputation as a highly intelligent, influential young man. He was Phi Beta Kappa, a member of Skull and Bones, class orator, secretary of the political union, and a columnist for the *Yale Daily News*. Concerned that Bundy and a few of his peers would be more intellectually advanced than their

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<sup>27</sup> Halberstam. *The Best and the Brightest*, p. 48,

fellow Yale freshman, Bundy's Groton history teacher, Richard Irons, arranged for special advanced standing freshman courses for them, one of which was taught by distinguished historian David Owen. Owen was so impressed by Bundy's intellect that he later told Irons that he doubted that there were two men on the Yale faculty who could have written as impressive a paper as Bundy's "Is Lenin a Marxist?"

It was during his years at Yale that Bundy's worldview began to crystallize. His tendency to frequently and forcefully speak out on national and international issues earned him the nickname "Mahatma Bundy." In 1938 Bundy swore to reverse the isolationist attitude that prevailed among both the faculty and students on the Yale campus. As Bundy watched the situation in Europe deteriorate over the following two years, he became increasingly frustrated with the ambivalence of peers. In June 1940 he wrote an essay in which he passionately called on young Americans to embrace the righteous cause of resisting Germany's drive for hegemony. He wrote, "I believe in the dignity of the individual, in government by law, in respect for the truth, and in a good God: these beliefs are worth my life, and more; they are not shared by Adolf Hitler, and he will not permit them to me unless he has to...I believe that if we are to have our way and not his, we must act swiftly and vigorously; such a course involves sacrifice and evil, but to a smaller degree than the alternative of surrender."<sup>28</sup>

Bundy's worldview was further shaped by his brief stint in the military. In 1942 Bundy joined the Office of Facts and Figures in Washington, which was disbanded shortly thereafter. Determined to serve in the army despite his relatively poor eyesight, Bundy memorized the eye chart and joined the Signal Corps in 1942.

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, *A Summons to the Free* (New York, Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941). McGeorge Bundy, "They Say in Colleges," 1940.

He rose from private to captain, serving on the staff that planned the invasions of Sicily and France. After serving as an aide to Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, Bundy leveraged his family connections and requested a transfer to the infantry so that he could fight in the last stages of the war against Japan. Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Bundy's longtime friend and mentor, proudly arranged the transfer. As fate would have it, the Japanese surrendered before Bundy had the opportunity to engage in any actual fighting. Despite his strong support of the war effort, Bundy never experienced life on the front-lines, but rather spent most of his time assisting men at the top of the military hierarchy. His relatively sheltered wartime experiences reinforced his belief in the benefits of military power without forcing him to confront the harsh realities of combat.

Once World War II had ended Bundy assumed an eclectic series of prestigious apprenticeships. He returned to Harvard Yard in 1946 to complete his studies as a junior fellow in Harvard University's Society of Fellows, a prestigious scholarly society established in 1933 according to the terms of a gift from Lawrence Lowell, Bundy's grandfather and former president of Harvard University. Though Bundy's distinguished career at Yale made him a deserving recipient of the fellowship, his family connections once again served him well. An exception to the rule, Bundy pursued a collaboration rather than original work while a junior fellow. He edited and co-authored Henry Stimson's memoir *On Active Service in Peace and War*, a book which became "a bible of the establishment's worldview, an argument for an activist foreign policy in pursuit of liberal empire."<sup>29</sup> Bundy also ghost-wrote several articles

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<sup>29</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.16.

on Stimson's behalf, including a piece in *Foreign Affairs* in which he urged the United States to embrace its role as a leader on the international stage. During these early postwar years, Bundy and Stimson developed an incredibly close intellectual and personal bond which left an indelible mark on Bundy. The two men met almost daily during the eighteen months they spent working on the memoir, often talking for hours on end.<sup>30</sup>

Bundy became increasingly recognized as a man of great intelligence and influence, renowned for his views on foreign policy and distinguished circle of friends. Though one professor observed that Bundy's brain was "more rapid than accurate," his growing esteem landed him the position of analyst and speechwriter for Republican candidate Thomas Dewey during the 1948 presidential election.<sup>31</sup> In the years that followed Bundy added several prominent positions to his already full resume. Having become a well-respected member of the foreign policy elite, Bundy served as a research fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, member of a prominent New York think tank, and editor of a collection of Secretary of State Dean Acheson's speeches entitled *The Pattern of Responsibility*. Acheson subsequently named Bundy executive secretary of a State Department advisory panel which was looking into nuclear disarmament and negotiations. Despite having never taken a course in government, Bundy quickly rose the ranks within Harvard's Government Department. He became a visiting lecturer in 1949, received tenure in 1951, and was named chairman of the department in 1953 just as Harvard President James Conant announced his decision to

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<sup>30</sup> Henry L. Stimson, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper, 1948), p.676.

<sup>31</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.25.

resign.<sup>32</sup> Bundy was proposed for the presidency of Harvard by several overseers, but was ultimately offered the position of Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.<sup>33</sup>

Never one to shy away from power, Bundy embraced it, enthusiastically accepting the role of dean. Despite Louis Auchinloss' recollection that Bundy "was ready to be dean of the faculty at Harvard when he was 12 years old," securing the position took Bundy until the age of 34, making him the youngest person in Harvard's history to hold that position.<sup>34</sup> Bundy became an imperious and extremely popular dean during his seven-year tenure, demonstrating ambition for Harvard, clarity of purpose, candor in judgment, openness to innovation, and attentiveness to the views of others. While Dean, Bundy raised faculty salaries, introduced the Program for Advanced Standing, and played a decisive role in the establishment of the Center for International Affairs and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. He also made a series of unorthodox faculty appointments, selecting individuals who he found impressive but who on occasion lacked the traditional qualifications and were unenthusiastically received by their departments.<sup>35</sup> Highly respected for his views on foreign policy, Bundy gave lectures to standing room only crowds of Harvardians on U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps in remembrance of playing the role of Henry IV at Groton, Bundy

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<sup>32</sup> Ken Gewertz, "McGeorge Bundy Dies at 77," *Harvard Public Affairs & Communications*, 19 Sept. 1996, <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/1996/09.19/McGeorgeBundyDi.html>>.

<sup>33</sup> "Harvard Gazette: Faculty of Arts and Sciences - Memorial Minute," *Harvard Public Affairs & Communications*, 1 Feb. 2001, <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/02.01/13-bundy.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.25.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Bator, Paul Doty, Edward Pattullo, Nathan Pusey, and Stanley Hoffmann, "Harvard Gazette: Faculty of Arts and Sciences - Memorial Minute," *Harvard Public Affairs & Communications*, 1 Feb. 2001, <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/02.01/13-bundy.html>>.

declared while teaching his popular undergraduate seminar that “You can’t possibly understand American foreign policy...without having read *Henry IV*.”<sup>36</sup>

Bundy’s views on foreign policy influenced not only his classroom lectures, but also some of his major decisions as dean. Like most of his generation, Bundy was a staunch anticommunist. He both passionately disagreed with communism on ideological grounds and considered it a legitimate and considerable threat to American interests and national security. In 1940, Bundy stated that because the communist party was controlled by unprincipled foreign governments, Americans who claimed to be communists should not be considered true Americans. He went on to say that “the Constitution contains no justification for such treachery.”<sup>37</sup> According to Bundy, communism was inherently hostile to American democracy, liberty, and freedom. In 1949 he wrote that “wherever Communists have power, freedom dies.”<sup>38</sup> Later that year he wrote that Americans had learned that the Soviet Union was “wholly hostile to the idea of peaceful reconstruction in any part of the world not under Communist government” and that “the basis of Soviet conduct since Yalta is a concept of human society not merely alien, but actively hostile to our own.”<sup>39</sup> The intense fear of communism in the United States in the 1950s forced Bundy to deal with some very delicate matters concerning relations between Harvard and Washington. One of the most contentious issues on the Harvard campus in 1953 and 1954 was how best to deal

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<sup>36</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.1.

<sup>37</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.32.

<sup>38</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.32.

<sup>39</sup> McGeorge Bundy, “The Test of Yalta,” *Foreign Affairs*, Council on Foreign Relations, vol. 27, No. 4 (Jul., 1949), pp.629. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20030211>>.

with academics who were accused of being Communist sympathizers and who refused to testify about themselves and others.<sup>40</sup>

Bundy believed that it was incumbent upon American universities to play their part in resisting the advance of communism but also understood that he had a responsibility to protect his professors. He reconciled the tensions between his responsibilities to his country, his university, and his faculty by ensuring the protection of his tenured professors while using his influence to help the government identify and remove domestic communists from the academic ranks at other institutions. Committed to preserve both academic integrity and the freedom of faculty and students to place their expertise and skills at the disposal of the U.S. government, Bundy maintained the ban on classified research, encouraged student involvement in the ROTC, allowed government-funded anticommunist research to be conducted in some of Harvard's academic departments, and promoted research by faculty members which would suit government needs. In 1951 he asked readers of the *American Political Science Review*, "Can we meet the challenge of Soviet imperialism without a major surrender of individual freedoms?"<sup>41</sup> For his own part, he did not believe that the United States could. Bundy's widely-held belief that communism was an extraordinary threat which required an extraordinary response was complemented by his support of what would come to be called modernization theory. According to modernization theory, if the Western model of free-market capitalism was encouraged in newly decolonizing societies in Asia and Africa, early nationalist movements would prove

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<sup>40</sup> Francis Bator, Paul Doty, Edward Pattullo, Nathan Pusey, and Stanley Hoffmann, "Harvard Gazette: Faculty of Arts and Sciences - Memorial Minute," *Harvard Public Affairs & Communications*, 1 Feb. 2001, <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/02.01/13-bundy.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> McGeorge Bundy, "Review of National Security and Individual Freedom by Harold D. Lasswell," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Jun., 1951), pp. 534-537.

more resistant to communist influence and the United States could develop new allies. Though Bundy warned Walter Lippmann that effectively exporting liberal democracy would be challenging, he strongly supported the ideas of Western and American exceptionalism that underlay modernization theory. In short, Bundy believed that “the United States was the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition to being an esteemed dean and compelling lecturer, Bundy was a shrewd bureaucratic politician, an impressive listener, and a persuasive conversationalist. His ability to read and understand people received both praise and concern. Though Bundy was respected by most while dean, one critic contended that Bundy played with the faculty like a cat with mice.<sup>43</sup> According to one of Bundy’s close friends, “He was so good...that when he left I grieved for Harvard and grieved for the nation. For Harvard because he was the perfect dean, for the nation because I thought that very same arrogance and hubris might be very dangerous.”<sup>44</sup> Stanley Hoffman, a colleague of Bundy's in the Government Department at Harvard, observed that Bundy “had a forceful, penetrating, and also a very playful mind. As dean, he had extraordinary authority over the faculty because of his verbal wit, elegance, and forcefulness.”<sup>45</sup>

While Dean of Harvard, Bundy developed what would become a crucial relationship with John F. Kennedy. Fellow Boston Brahmins and childhood

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<sup>42</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.30.

<sup>43</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p.58.

<sup>44</sup> Halberstam. *The Best and the Brightest*, p.59.

<sup>45</sup> Ken Gewertz, “McGeorge Bundy Dies at 77,” *Harvard Public Affairs & Communications*, 19 Sept. 1996, <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/1996/09.19/McGeorgeBundyDi.html>>.

schoolmates, Bundy and Kennedy were longtime acquaintances with many mutual friends. Following the 1960 election, shared Harvard connections Arthur M. Schlesinger and John Kenneth Galbraith endorsed Bundy for the position of Under Secretary of State while Walter Lippmann recommended him for the even more prestigious position of Secretary of State. Conveniently, Bundy's status as a registered Republican gained him even greater favor with the newly elected president Kennedy who, given his narrow Democratic victory, was seeking moderate Republicans to include in his administration. Confident that Bundy would be a good fit but hesitant to appoint so young a man to so prominent a position and concerned about Bundy's uneasy relations with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Kennedy offered Bundy the position of Deputy Undersecretary of State for Administration. Rarely one to simply do as he was asked, Bundy turned Kennedy down, asserting that he was exhausted of administration and did not feel that it was worthwhile to leave Cambridge, where he was a dean, to go to Washington to be a dean. Soon after, Kennedy offered Bundy the position of Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, a role which had little prestige at the time and which Bundy also turned down. In line with the old adage, the third try was a charm. Though Bundy was not his first choice, Kennedy ultimately offered Bundy the position of Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and Bundy enthusiastically accepted. The position was not considered particularly powerful at the time, but Bundy had big plans for it.

By the time Bundy joined the Kennedy administration he had a well-developed worldview which had crystallized during his formative years in academia and public service. Bundy's lifelong mentor Henry Stimson had shaped his worldview more than

any other. Bundy had inherited Stimson as an advisor from his father Harvey Bundy, an elite Boston lawyer who Stimson had recruited into government service while he was serving as President Hoover's Secretary of State. Though Harvey had been raised in the Midwest, a close friend observed that he was a "Bostonian not born in Boston," a reserved individual who responded harshly to anyone who tried to persuade him to compromise his principles or betray a confidence. While serving as Hoover's Assistant Secretary of State from 1931 to 1933 Harvey Bundy and Stimson developed a close bond, aided by the fact that both men were staunch Republicans who favored internationalism. A historian would later note that "Harvey's loyalty to Stimson (was) legendary" and Stimson would write in his memoirs that Harvey Bundy became his "closest personal assistant."<sup>46</sup>

Stimson, who considered himself a progressive conservative, believed that the United States should intervene abroad to ensure the proper conduct of nations, protect business, and maintain stability. Fairly typical of his time and elite upbringing, Stimson believed in the superiority of Western nations, was distrustful of mass politics, and supported greater concentration of power within the executive branch. Much like Theodore Roosevelt, he found virtue in war and struggle and felt that it was in the best interest of both the United States and the rest of the world that the U.S. play a dominant role on the international stage. Stimson concluded that U.S. intervention in foreign nations would produce a more peaceful, more stable international system that was receptive to American ideals and interests. The foundations of Stimson's

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<sup>46</sup> Preston, *The War Council*, p.13. Stimson, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, p.343.

worldview were thus military preparedness, service to the nation, and strong American leadership in the international arena.<sup>47</sup>

When it came to foreign affairs, Bundy was a loyal Stimsonian. Like his longtime mentor, Bundy advocated a moralistic-legalistic approach to foreign affairs that centered on internationalism and the maintenance of American credibility. George F. Kennan later observed that according to the legalistic-moralistic approach to international relations, American diplomacy should create positive, progressive change within the international system according to American interests and values. Kennan feared that this “approach to world affairs, rooted as it unquestionably is in a desire to do away with war and violence, makes violence more enduring, more terrible, and more destructive to political stability than did the older motives of national interest. A war fought in the name of high moral principle finds you no early end short of some total domination.”<sup>48</sup>

Bundy may best be understood as an advocate of “pragmatic idealism,” a Stimsonian belief that democracy and freedom were the best guarantors of peace and that progress toward peace could be achieved through practical steps, a dominant U.S. global role, and a strong but measured U.S. defense policy.<sup>49</sup> Bundy’s conviction in the legalistic-moralistic approach to foreign relations differentiated him from more traditional realists like Kennan. However, Bundy maintained the largely realist belief that “force...is the final arbiter among nations” and that the relationship between policy and military power lay at the heart of foreign affairs. According to Bundy,

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<sup>47</sup> David F. Schmitz, *Henry L. Stimson the First Wise Man* (Wilmington, DE: SR, 2001), p.3.

<sup>48</sup> A. J. Coates, *The Ethics of War* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester UP, 1997), p.26.

<sup>49</sup> “About Henry L. Stimson,” *The Stimson Center: Pragmatic Steps for Global Security*, <<http://www.stimson.org/about/about-henry-stimson/>>.

“Military power is not something separate from foreign policy, nor even something that waits upon and follows it; the two are one.”<sup>50</sup> Halberstam would later observe that one strain running through Bundy was the ultrarealist view, “a hard-line attitude which was very much a product of the fifties and Cold War,” according to which “force was justified by what the Communists did; the times justified the kinds of acts which decent men did not seek, but which the historic responsibilities made necessary.”<sup>51</sup>

Bundy’s well-developed worldview, strong personality, intelligence, and “great and almost relentless instinct for power” served him well as he rapidly transformed the previously modest position of Special Assistant for National Security Affairs into one of substantial power and authority.<sup>52</sup> The 1947 National Security Act established the National Security Council (NSC) and with it the secretarial position of Special Assistant. Under Truman and Eisenhower, the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs had served the almost entirely administrative role of facilitator. Unwilling to accept the maxim that there are no small parts, Bundy quickly set about transforming the role. Special Assistant for National Security Affairs in name only, Bundy not only played the influential role of National Security Advisor, he also in large part created it. Under Eisenhower the NSC staff had been considered a tool for effectively harnessing various agencies and departments so that the president would have productive input on multiple policy options. Kennedy and Bundy felt that the Eisenhower model was too bureaucratic and preferred small group meetings to the often large NSC meetings. Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s chief White House aid, noted that NSC meetings were

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<sup>50</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.27.

<sup>51</sup> Halberstam. *The Best and the Brightest*, p.61.

<sup>52</sup> Halberstam. *The Best and the Brightest*, p.43.

used for either minor decisions or major decisions already settled earlier given that Kennedy “strongly preferred to make all major decisions with far fewer people present.” Kennedy himself stated in a NBC television interview in April 1961 that NSC meetings are “not as effective” as smaller decision groups; “it is more difficult to decide matters involving national security if there is a wider group present.”<sup>53</sup>

Bundy transformed the NSC staff into a small, cohesive group of experts who would serve as influential advisors and placed himself at the helm. In a May 16, 1961 memo to Kennedy, Bundy wrote that though the White House was again the “center of energy... We do have a problem of management; centrally it is a problem of our use of time and your use of staff...but in the process we have overstrained your own calendar, limited your chances for thought, and used your staff incompletely. You are altogether too valuable to go on this way.”<sup>54</sup> A year later he wrote to Kennedy that “When we came in, it was the very strong feeling of most of those connected with the New Administration that the Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) had both become rather rigid and paper-ridden organizations...The State Department has not proved to be as effective an agency of executive management as we had hoped.”<sup>55</sup> The result of these beliefs was the establishment of a small, cohesive NSC which served as a “Little State Department,” capable of marginalizing the views of the actual State Department. Moreover, they led to the elimination of the Planning Board and the OCB and thus the elimination of staff positions which had been involved in interdepartmental coordination of policy-making and implementation processes. To a

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<sup>53</sup> John P. Burke, “The National Security Advisor and Staff: Transition Challenges,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2009): 283, <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/215683724?accountid=15054>>.

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, May 16, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1.

<sup>55</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, November 16, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 108.

great extent Bundy and his staff filled this void by becoming more directly involved in the formation of national security policy. They assumed the originally OCB responsibility of issuing National Security Action memoranda which informed recipients of policy directives. Bundy's memoranda proved to lack the rigor of the Eisenhower Administration's deliberative process, focusing on immediate issues and action more than planning.<sup>56</sup>

By encouraging organizational changes, Bundy substantially increased his own and the NSC staff's influence, particularly with regard to policy advocacy. Whereas General Andrew Goodpaster had regularly briefed Eisenhower on intelligence matters, under Kennedy that responsibility belonged to Bundy. Goodpaster later observed that "raw intelligence...should not come to the president. You can give the president too much...not even McGeorge Bundy, as brilliant as he is, can do a job of analysis for the staff over in CIA and DIA."<sup>57</sup> Bundy's expanded role as NSC advisor produced other tensions as well. An opinionated person by nature, Bundy "was often an advocate rather than an honest broker during meetings." For instance, the secret tape recordings of ExCom's meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis reveal Bundy "largely voicing his own policy views, not serving as the central agent testing for weaknesses in options, questioning assumptions, or other activities encouraging the airing of underrepresented views."<sup>58</sup>

The power of the largely hawkish "Little State Department" soon rivaled, and ultimately surpassed, the influence of the more dovish actual State Department.

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<sup>56</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.186.

<sup>57</sup> John P. Burke, "The National Security Advisor and Staff: Transition Challenges," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2009): 283, <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/215683724?accountid=15054>>.

<sup>58</sup> John P. Burke, "The National Security Advisor and Staff: Transition Challenges," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2009): 283, <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/215683724?accountid=15054>>.

According to Rostow, by 1961 Bundy was “clearly in charge of the shop.”<sup>59</sup> By reorganizing the NSC staff and transforming the role of Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Bundy assured himself power on multiple levels, as an advisor, as a go-between, and as a gatekeeper who was particularly willing to let himself and likeminded individuals through the gates. In essence, Bundy built the platform from which he would acquire, consolidate, and exercise significant influence over American foreign policy on Vietnam. As National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy was, as he had always been, a force to be reckoned with.

Myriad articles published after Bundy’s appointment observed that Bundy had quickly become one of Kennedy’s most influential advisors. As early as January 1961, some of Kennedy’s aides referred to Bundy as a “shadow secretary of state.”<sup>60</sup> In February the *New York Times* published an article entitled “McGeorge Bundy Emerging as Principal Policy Aide on Foreign Relations,” noting that Bundy’s predecessors had been “editors of council papers, framers of agendas and coordinators rather than right-hand men to the President on daily problems.”<sup>61</sup> In April 1962, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article entitled “Bundy in Top Advisory Place,” which identified Bundy as “the man of farthest reaching influence in the President’s inner circle. ‘Mac,’ as he is known within the White House, must lay before Mr. Kennedy each day all available information and opinions – including his own recommendations – on the vast array of matters that fall under the heading of national security. There has

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<sup>59</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.43.

<sup>60</sup> Chalmers M. Roberts, *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)* (Washington, D.C.)18 Jan 1961: pp. A2.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Lewis. *The New York Times*. 1961. Kennedy's Staff Forms Own Style: McGeorge Bundy Emerging as Principal Policy Aide on Foreign Relations. New York Times (1923-Current file) 1961. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/115355434?accountid=15054>.

not been a major foreign policy decision – from the Cuban invasion of last April to this week’s renewed negotiations on Berlin – that Bundy has not had a hand in.”<sup>62</sup>

According to Halberstam, Bundy “did not worry about the rumors of his growing power and influence; he delighted in them, knowing that you are the man to see feeds on itself, and makes you even more so. He loved power and did not shrink from it, rather the opposite was true, there was an enormous thrust for it; it sometimes seemed almost naked; the knowledge that he had this reputation bothered him some, yet his own instinct carried him forward. He was known at the White House as a tough infighter.”<sup>63</sup>

Bundy’s influential position allowed him a seat at the decision-making table during key moments of the Kennedy Administration, including the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, and the development of early U.S.-Vietnam policy. Bundy had felt while at Harvard that Cuba posed a serious threat to American security and interests as well as the political independence on Latin America as a whole. The Bay of Pigs invasion was launched on April 17, 1961. An ostensibly secret American trained and equipped force of Cuban exiles was sent to initiate the liberation of Cuba from Fidel Castro’s communist regime. After some initial hesitation, Bundy recommended to an uncertain President Kennedy that he approve the Zapata Plan to invade Cuba. In a memo to Kennedy on February 8, 1961 Bundy wrote that Dick Goodwin “and I join in believing there should certainly not be an invasion adventure

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<sup>62</sup> Robert L. Thomson, “Kennedy Insiders: Bundy in Top Advisory Place Insiders Report Insiders Report.” Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File), 1962, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/168117555?accountid=15054>.

<sup>63</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest.*, p.63.

without careful diplomatic soundings.”<sup>64</sup> By March Bundy had changed his mind, informing Kennedy that the CIA had “done a remarkable job of reframing the landing plan to as to make it spectacular and quiet, and plausibly Cuban...I had been a skeptic about Bissell’s operation, but now I think we are on the edge of a good answer.”<sup>65</sup> The invasion, which had been constructed under Eisenhower and executed under Kennedy, was a disaster, culminating in Kennedy’s decision to abandon the Cuban force.

Pushing against Kennedy’s decision, Bundy recommended that “the right course now is to eliminate the Castro air force, by neutrally-painted U.S. planes if necessary, and then let the battle go its way.”<sup>66</sup> Both Kennedy and Bundy privately placed the blame for the Bay of Pigs failure on the shoulders of the CIA and Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Bundy noted in a memo to General Maxwell Taylor that he did “not concur in any judgment that this operation was ‘run from the White House’...if the military had said at any time that calling off or modifying the air strikes would cause the operation to fail – or even damage it severely – the President would have reversed any such decision as that on Sunday.”<sup>67</sup>

Bundy and the NSC largely filled the void created by Kennedy’s newfound hesitancy to rely on the CIA and JCS for information and advice. In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs debacle, the White House Situation Room was created, which enabled Bundy and his staff to receive extensive cable traffic and other information. On the positive side, this meant that the White House would no longer have to rely on State,

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<sup>64</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, February 8, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 39.

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, March 15, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 64.

<sup>66</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, April 18, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 119.

<sup>67</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to General Maxwell Taylor, May 4, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 201.

Defense, or the CIA to forward information. On the negative side, it led to cross-hatching, a procedure which required White House clearance for important outgoing State Department cables. The NSC staff oftentimes both cleared and initiated such cables.<sup>68</sup> Bundy's increased power was compounded by Kennedy's decision to move Bundy and the NSC staff into the White House basement, allowing Bundy greater access to the president. Bundy wrote shortly after the Bay of Pigs invasion failed that one of the greatest lessons of the Bay of Pigs debacle was that presidential advisors should speak their minds more frequently and more forcefully going forward. In an April 24<sup>th</sup> memorandum to Kennedy, Bundy stated that "The morals of those failures are readily drawn...the President's advisors must speak up in council...The President and his advisers must second-guess even military plans."<sup>69</sup>

Bundy took his own advice, frequently expressing his own views during the Cuban missile crisis and the development of early Vietnam policy. In the summer and fall of 1962 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev secretly placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. When the Kennedy Administration discovered a Soviet missile deployment that October, Bundy and his fellow advisors recommended an air strike against the Soviet missile installations in Cuba. On October 16, Bundy recommended that the Executive Committee of the NSC support a military solution. He told Kennedy that the "political advantages are very strong, it seems to me, of the small strike" and advised that the

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<sup>68</sup> John P. Burke, "The National Security Advisor and Staff: Transition Challenges," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2009): 283, <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/215683724?accountid=15054>>.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, April 24, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1.

CIA continue various forms of sabotage against the Castro regime and that the U.S. Navy mine Cuban harbors.<sup>70</sup>

Bundy considered not only the Soviet Union, but also the situation in South Vietnam, a serious threat to U.S. national security, interests, and credibility. Kennedy confided to Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in 1961 that his advisors wanted “a force of American troops... They say it’s necessary in order to restore confidence and maintain morale. But it will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It’s like taking a drink. The effect wears off and you have to have another.”<sup>71</sup> Despite these concerns, Bundy recommended that the reluctant Kennedy put U.S. combat troops in Vietnam. In a November 15, 1961 memorandum Bundy wrote to Kennedy that “I believe we should commit limited U.S. combat units, if necessary, for military purposes (not for morale), to help save Vietnam. A victory here would produce great effects all over the world. A defeat would hurt, but not much more than a loss of South Vietnam with the levels of U.S. help now committed or planned... I am troubled by your most natural desire to act on other items now, without taking the troop decision. Whatever the reason, this has become a sort of touchstone of our will... Laos was never really ours after 1954. South Vietnam is and wants to be.”<sup>72</sup> Bundy would maintain his belief that the U.S. should have a substantial combat troop presence in Vietnam throughout his tenure as National Security Advisor to presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

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<sup>70</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, October 16, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1,

<sup>71</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p.547.

<sup>72</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, November 15, 1961. *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 253.

## *Chapter Two*

### *McGeorge Bundy and 1964: An Advocate, Not a “Messenger Boy”*

1964 played a crucial role in the Bundy revisionists’ central arguments. Relying heavily on Bundy’s retrospective views, the Bundy revisionists portrayed Bundy as a relatively insignificant advisor, a doubter of the domino theory, a critic of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and a skeptic of escalation. However, the evidence illustrates that in 1964 Bundy was an influential advisor who championed the United States’ commitment to South Vietnam, conceptualized a geographically wider war, welcomed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and recommended escalation of the war. Bundy was an advocate, not a skeptic, of expanding the United States’ war effort in South Vietnam.

According to Fred Logevall, it would not be difficult to imagine both Bundy and McNamara arguing that the U.S. should cut its losses and get out of the conflict if only they had served a president who had sought such a result. Echoing this sentiment, Kai Bird wrote that “On the foreign policy ledger, Johnson’s holdovers from the Kennedy years would prove incapable of controlling the president’s latent compulsions to resolve troublesome foreign problems with military intervention... With President Lyndon Johnson they would sometimes find themselves dragging their heels and holding onto his coattails.”<sup>73</sup> Logevall, Bird, Goldstein, and Bator’s argument that a dominant Lyndon Johnson was calling the shots in 1964 while his inherited advisors

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<sup>73</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.269.

watched the decision-making process from the sidelines largely mirrored Bundy's retrospective assertions. Reflecting on the war in 1993 Bundy said that Lyndon Johnson did not negotiate with his top advisors. "He was telling Bob, and he was telling Dean. They were important people...But they would salute and go and do it. He understands rank, in that sense."<sup>74</sup> Though Logevall rightly observed that "no president is a prisoner to his advisors," he, Bator, Bird, Goldstein, and Bundy took the argument much too far in the other direction.<sup>75</sup> Lyndon Johnson was certainly not a captive of his advisors in 1964, but neither were Bundy and McNamara captives of Lyndon Johnson.

Over the course of 1964, Bundy became one of Johnson's most trusted advisors. Contrary to Evan Thomas' claim that "the real tragedy was that LBJ did not listen to Bundy, or to his brother Bill, or to McNamara," when Bundy spoke Johnson listened.<sup>76</sup> In a telephone conversation with Bill Moyers in reaction to criticism that he was surrounded by "yes-men" and "messenger boys," Johnson said that "As far as this business of saying somebody's a 'messenger boy,' you just have never heard that. You have always given your honest opinion, and a good many times you have been vetoed. But...at thirty years old, you have made more big decisions that have been approved by the President than would have been approved if you had been working at AT&T."<sup>77</sup> This statement was equally true of McGeorge Bundy. He did not always get his way, but Johnson respected, and often heeded, his advice. Though Bundy would say in 1995 that "I was just a messenger boy...And he made sure I stayed that way," the evidence

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<sup>74</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>75</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.391.

<sup>76</sup> Evan Thomas comments, *Diplomatic History*, pp.341-342.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p.380.

suggests that that was simply not the case.<sup>78</sup> Throughout 1964, the “Texas boy” relied heavily on his hawkish National Security Advisor.

In 1969, shortly after leaving the Johnson Administration, Bundy espoused a much different version of Johnson’s relationship with his top advisors than he would in the 1990s. In the 1990s Bundy seemed to encourage and embrace the Bundy revisionists’ view that he had had little influence while in the Johnson Administration. Interestingly, in an oral history interview in January 1969, when Bundy’s interviewer stated that his job had been staffing the President for all foreign contingencies, Bundy corrected him, saying that it was “presidential business dealing with national security affairs that I thought had better also be my business or I wasn't doing my job.”<sup>79</sup> In the same interview, Bundy commented that Johnson wrote a marvelous letter to Dean Acheson which had praised Acheson for being one of the few men in Washington who did not mind giving the President advice that he knew he would not want to hear. After thanking Acheson for being such a candid adviser, Johnson noted that those are the kind of men that a president needs most. Reflecting on Johnson’s letter to Acheson, Bundy said that “That is rather like taking a very cold shower; it’s much easier to rejoice in afterwards than it is to march up to beforehand. On the other hand, the *door was always open*. So I always felt that any time you didn’t do that, it was your fault, not his...*It's the adviser's job to give the disagreeable advice.*” Bundy went on to note that though Johnson did not like to feel as though he was being teamed up on by his

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<sup>78</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.289.

<sup>79</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Interview I, 1/30/69, by Paige E. Mulhollan, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

top advisors, Johnson's advisors quickly learned that "there were other ways of catching the cat."<sup>80</sup>

By the 1990s Bundy's view of Johnson's relationship with his top advisers had changed dramatically. In an oral history interview in 1993 Bundy said that "It's baloney that we were running [and] deciding [for] either of these guys (Kennedy or Johnson). This is a *presidential* form of government; it doesn't work that way. It's like thinking John Hay ran Lincoln's decisions."<sup>81</sup> It is certainly true that Bundy was not running Johnson's decisions. It is equally true, however, that Bundy was substantially influencing Johnson's decisions. Bundy stated this himself point blank in January 1969. In an interview he said that he had always believed that if the President did not want your opinion, then you did not give it to him. "*But both presidents I worked for did.* In fact, they'd press you for your opinion, and they'd cuss you out if you didn't give it to them...The president has a right to the absolutely candid advice on any subject of anyone he asks."<sup>82</sup>

When Johnson asked Bundy for his advice on what to do in South Vietnam in 1964, Bundy advised that the U.S. should do more. On January 9<sup>th</sup> Bundy wrote a memorandum to Johnson saying that "The political damage to Truman and Acheson from the fall of China arose because most Americans came to believe that we could and should have done more than we did to prevent it. This is exactly what would

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<sup>80</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Interview I, 1/30/69, by Paige E. Mulhollan, Internet Copy, LBJ Library. Emphasis added.

<sup>81</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>82</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Interview I, 1/30/69, by Paige E. Mulhollan, Internet Copy, LBJ Library. Emphasis added.

happen now if we should seem to be the first to quit in Saigon.”<sup>83</sup> In a telephone conversation with Johnson the following month Bundy said that “If U.S. forces were withdrawn (in South Vietnam), that thing would collapse like a pack of cards. Maybe when we have a stronger position, maybe when we’ve pressed through with this and maybe if they can get a government that’ll move...there’ll come a time when there’ll be a balanced force in South Vietnam that can survive. But anyone who thinks that exists now is crazy and anybody who says it exists is undermining the essential first effort.”<sup>84</sup> Far from feeling that Johnson was doing too much in 1964, Bundy lamented that the President was not doing enough.

When reflecting on the war in 1995, Bundy criticized Johnson for making 1964 a “year of indecision and inactivity... (during which) you can’t do anything in Vietnam until after the election, can’t do anything because the president hasn’t made up his mind.”<sup>85</sup> He observed that 1964 had been a year in which the President “didn’t want to stir the pot.”<sup>86</sup> Bundy’s condemnation of Johnson for making 1964 an “off year” because of the upcoming presidential election, his domestic political agenda, and his general reluctance to make difficult decisions is particularly interesting given that this key argument does not square with his and the Bundy revisionists other central argument that Bundy would often find himself dragging his heels and holding onto Johnson’s coattails.<sup>87</sup> These conflicting scenarios lead to a crucial question: Was Bundy pushing Johnson to “do more” in South Vietnam in 1964 or was he holding

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<sup>83</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, January 9, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 8.

<sup>84</sup> Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p.227.

<sup>85</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, December 19, 1996, Bundy and Goldstein meeting transcript, p.23.

<sup>86</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>87</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.269. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.108

onto Johnson's coattails as the president raced toward war? The evidence suggests the former.

### *NSAM 273*

National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273, released on 26 November 1963, was the first clear sign that the Johnson Administration, like the Kennedy Administration before it, was dedicated to upholding the United States' commitment to South Vietnam. Fred Logevall used NSAM 273 to argue that "It was Johnson, more than his lieutenants... who set the tone for Vietnam policy in the early days after the assassination."<sup>88</sup> He emphasized the fact that NSAM 273 was released only four days after Kennedy's assassination and contended that it was used by Johnson to reiterate that the United States would help the South Vietnamese "win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy." Though NSAM was certainly approved by Johnson, it hardly serves as an example of Johnson assuming a dominant role on Vietnam decision-making from the outset of his presidency.

According to the evidence, NSAM 273 was written by Bundy, intended for Kennedy, and hardly altered by Johnson, if at all. The memorandum was the product of the 20 November Honolulu Conference and Bundy had thought that Kennedy and Lodge might like to discuss the memorandum during a meeting that had been planned for 24 November. William Bundy and Roger Hilsman, who Bundy had sent copies to in advance of Kennedy's scheduled meeting, responded that the document was fine

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<sup>88</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.77.

and made only minor changes.<sup>89</sup> The fact that NSAM 273 was written by Bundy for Kennedy leads one to doubt Logevall's claim that it was demonstrative of Johnson taking the lead from the beginning. Johnson approved the memorandum, but it was neither the brainchild of a determined new president nor written with Johnson in mind. Johnson did not come into presidency with guns blazing on the issue of South Vietnam.

That Johnson did not set the tone for Vietnam policy more than his "lieutenants" is not to say that he disagreed with his advisors. He did not. Both Johnson and his top advisors were committed fundamentally to the war effort in South Vietnam, though their views on the appropriate degree and means of support varied. Prior to the NSAM, Johnson met with Ambassador Lodge and his Vietnam advisors. Lodge gave Johnson good reason to be enthusiastic about the war effort, opening the meeting with a series of statements that had an "optimistic, hopeful" tone and that left the President with the impression that the U.S. was "on the road to victory."<sup>90</sup> McCone's appraisal of the future was markedly less optimistic. After noting that the strong voices both in Congress and across the country saying that the U.S. should leave South Vietnam gave him considerable concern, Johnson revealed that he had never been happy with the U.S. operations in South Vietnam and put Lodge in charge of cleaning it up. Johnson subsequently concurred with McNamara's recommendation that the U.S. should give generous economic aid to South Vietnam, but did not want as much emphasis placed on social reform.

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<sup>89</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 273, November 26, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.4, Document 331.

<sup>90</sup> Memorandum for the Record of Meeting, November 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.4, Document 330.

Logevall later claimed that the determined Johnson had felt that “too much effort had been placed on so-called ‘social reforms,’ not enough on battling the enemy.”<sup>91</sup> Johnson was indeed “anxious to get along, win the war,” but he did not say that too little emphasis had been placed on battling the enemy. Moreover, the point of his comment on limiting social reforms was that he felt that it was a mistake that the U.S. so often tried to transform foreign countries it engaged with in its own image, a belief that it is hard to imagine Logevall would find fault with. Immediately after the meeting, Bundy issued a statement to the press to the effect that the Johnson Administration would pursue the policies agreed to at the Honolulu Conference which had originally been adopted by President Kennedy.<sup>92</sup> During these first few days of his presidency, and with the full support of his top advisors, Johnson established his administration’s determination to maintain the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.

### *Can-Do Men*

Having officially committed to maintaining the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, the Johnson Administration was faced with the difficult question of what to do next. Though Francis Bator would later claim that the argument that Johnson was not good at foreign policy was “nonsense,” foreign policy was certainly neither Johnson’s foremost strength nor his primary interest.<sup>93</sup> Johnson said himself that he would have to rely more heavily on his foreign policy advisors than Kennedy had. This

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<sup>91</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.77.

<sup>92</sup> Memorandum for the Record of Meeting, November 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.4, Document 330.

<sup>93</sup> Bator. “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.28.

was particularly true given the growing realization within the administration that the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating and that the options were limited.

By mid-1964 it had become clear to Johnson and Bundy that McCone's pessimistic comments on the progress of the war effort painted a much truer picture of the situation than did Lodge's suggestion that the U.S. was on the road to victory in South Vietnam. Upon returning from a trip to South Vietnam in March, McNamara wrote to Johnson that the situation in South Vietnam "has unquestionably been growing worse."<sup>94</sup> Yet Johnson was, as Halberstam would later observe, "a can-do man surrounded by other can-do men... 'He would look around him,' said Tom Wicker later, 'and see in Bob MacNamara that it was technologically feasible, in McGeorge Bundy that it was intellectually responsible, and in Dean Rusk that it was historically necessary.'"<sup>95</sup> As far as Johnson and his top advisors were concerned, the war must be fought and would be won.

Undeterred by McNamara's dim report on the situation in South Vietnam, Bundy was committed to both expanding and selling the war effort. He wrote to Johnson that "I myself would quietly but firmly spell out the following themes" in an upcoming television program on the war effort; that the United States is supporting the right of people to choose their own course, that American support will remain firm and strong while the danger of threat persists, and that "we are strong, calm and determined, in a situation which has danger but also hope."<sup>96</sup> The following day, Bundy wrote another memo to Johnson providing answers to a series of broad

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<sup>94</sup> Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, March 16, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 84. Though this document was dated March 16, 1964, Bundy included McNamara's full draft report in Johnson's night reading on March 13, 1964 and Johnson received a brief of McNamara's report on the morning on March 13, 1964.

<sup>95</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

<sup>96</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, March 13, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 79.

questions on South Vietnam. Demonstrating his increasing tendency to conceptualize the war in South Vietnam as part of a geographically wider struggle, Bundy stressed that South Vietnam was a key element in Southeast Asia, an area whose importance is substantial and clear. He went on to emphasize that the United States has a commitment there in honor and national interest that it has long upheld in both good and bad times. He acknowledged that the danger and difficulty in South Vietnam had increased in the preceding months, but declared that “this is no time to quit, and is no time for discouragement...we are going to keep right on with our basic present program and purpose.”<sup>97</sup> David Halberstam would later write of Bundy that his determination and optimism in the face of bad news came from the fact that the idea of failure was almost alien to him and his fellow advisors. He argued that Bundy “had no concept about what failure might really mean, the full extent of it; it never really entered the calculations... Mac Bundy and the others had all been partner to so precious little failure in their lives that there was always a sense that no matter what, it would be avoided, deflected.”<sup>98</sup> Whether Bundy’s optimism was the product of hubris is uncertain, but Halberstam was right that by mid-1964 the “best and the brightest” believed the war would be won and that the possibility of failure was not being seriously confronted. Bundy was strongly and constantly encouraging Johnson to commit the U.S. to fighting harder in the face of struggle, which is precisely what Johnson did.

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<sup>97</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, March 14, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 81.

<sup>98</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp.527-528.

### *Bundy and the Domino Theory*

Francis Bator wrote that Johnson “did not think the U.S. stake in an independent South Vietnam...was all that great. He was much too empirical and contingent-minded to believe in some automatic theory of ‘dominoes.’” When reflecting on the war in 1996, Bundy told Bator that a theory of dominoes ““did not govern the White House...It’s never the real reason for action.””<sup>99</sup> Bator and Bundy’s comments are highly questionable on two levels. First, Bundy had offered the contradictory claim only three years earlier that Robert Kennedy was “saying in 1964 that he believes in the domino theory; JFK believed in it; we all believed in it. That isn’t quite true; we didn’t all believe in it. But most of us did.”<sup>100</sup> Second, the documents from the White House at the time substantiate the notion that Bundy did believe in the domino theory. Though there were few direct references to the domino theory during 1964, the President and the “best and the brightest” seemed to accept all that the theory implied. McNamara wrote in his March report that the United States sought an independent non-Communist South Vietnam and that unless the U.S. could achieve that objective “almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance.”<sup>101</sup> He emphasized that with regard to both foreign and domestic policy, the stakes were high. Bundy supported McNamara’s March 1964 belief, reiterating the importance of the entirety of Southeast Asia.

Bundy’s reaction to Senator Mike Mansfield’s memorandum to Johnson two months earlier advocating neutralization was particularly telling. Bundy not only

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<sup>99</sup> Bator. “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.5.

<sup>100</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>101</sup> Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, March 16, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 84.

confirmed his conceptualization of Southeast Asia as a tightly connected geographic unit, but also flatly rejected neutralization. He wrote to Johnson on January 9<sup>th</sup> that neutralization in South Vietnam would have troubling and widespread consequences including; a rapid collapse of anticommunist forces in South Vietnam and a unification of the entire country on Communist terms, neutrality in Thailand, increased influence for Hanoi and Peking, collapse of the anticommunist position in Laos, substantial pressure on Malaya and Malaysia, a shift toward neutrality in Japan and the Philippines, and a blow to U.S. prestige in South Vietnam and Taiwan which would require either a greater commitment there or further retreat. According to Bundy, the U.S. should only move in those painful directions if it became much clearer that the present course could not work and that the right course of action was to “strengthen our struggle against the Communist terror (which is exactly what it is).”<sup>102</sup> That summer he would stress to Johnson the importance that America keeps her word, that “the issue is the future of Southeast Asia as a whole,” and that the Vietnam War “is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity.”<sup>103</sup> In a memorandum to Johnson in May, Bundy wrote that in executing the decision of whether to use military force against North Vietnam, all separate geographic elements of it (Laos, South Vietnam, Cambodia, and North Vietnam) should be “treated as parts of a *single problem*: the protection of Southeast Asia from further Communist encroachment.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, January 9, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 8.

<sup>103</sup> Preston, *The War Council*, p.131.

<sup>104</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, May 25, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 173.

The spring of 1964 was a time of crystallization in Bundy's thinking on Vietnam. The grim assessments of the war effort were making it increasingly clear that in order to maintain the same basic commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam, the U.S. would have to take more dramatic action. Little progress had been made between March and May and on May 15<sup>th</sup> the CIA confirmed McNamara's bleak assessment of the situation, stating that the overall situation in South Vietnam remained extremely fragile and warning that "If the tide of deterioration has not been arrested by the end of the year, the anti-Communist position in South Vietnam is likely to become untenable."<sup>105</sup> Five days later, Bundy wrote a memorandum to Johnson outlining his, Rusk, and McNamara's basic recommendation and projected course of action on Southeast Asia. The memo began by recommending that the U.S. use carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam after appropriate diplomatic and political warning and preparation and unless such warning and preparation makes military action against North Vietnam unnecessary. Their recommendation was based primarily on the premises that the U.S. could not tolerate the loss of South Vietnam to communism and that without a decision to resort to military action, backed by resolute and extensive deployment, if necessary, the present prospect was not hopeful. Their attached outline of the proposed sequence of actions included; deployments of U.S. and ideally allied forces on a very large scale from the beginning in order to maximize their deterrent impact and their menace, a congressional resolution, further and expanded military force toward the theatre, and an initial strike against the North, at

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<sup>105</sup> Memorandum Prepared by the Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, May 15, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 159.

7,8,9, and 10 respectively.<sup>106</sup> In a meeting held the day before, Bundy stated that they needed an operational plan on targets in North Vietnam. McNamara stated that though the situation in South Vietnam was weaker then than it was in January, the U.S. could ride through for an additional few weeks without hitting North Vietnam but would have to be prepared to use military force later.<sup>107</sup>

Though Johnson shared his advisors willingness to expand the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam in order to improve the situation, he was hardly anxious to do so. In a conversation with Stevenson on May 27<sup>th</sup> Johnson revealed his concerns about escalation and his fear that all other alternatives were quickly going by the wayside. Johnson said “I shudder at getting too deeply involved there, and everybody thinks that’s the only alternative.” Stevenson replied that, “I’ve been shuttering on this thing for three years and I’m afraid we’re in a position now where you *don’t* have any alternatives. And it’s a *hell* of an alternative. And it really gives me the shakes.”<sup>108</sup> The spring of 1964 can hardly be considered a period in which Bundy was holding on to Johnson’s coattails. In light of the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, neither Bundy nor Johnson was eager, but both were willing, to maintain the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam by expanding the war effort. Andrew Preston may have gone a bit too far in arguing that “for Bundy, South Vietnam possessed an intrinsic importance worth protecting at almost any cost,” but by the summer of 1964 the determined

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<sup>106</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, May 25, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 173.

<sup>107</sup> Summary Record of the National Security Council Meeting, May 24, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 172.

<sup>108</sup> Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p.363. Emphasis in original.

National Security Advisor had made it clear that he was willing to pay a very high cost.<sup>109</sup>

### *Congressional Resolution*

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution played a crucial role in the Bundy revisionists' argument that Bundy was wary of escalation and had very little influence over Johnson's decision-making. According to Bundy's retrospective views, he opposed the congressional resolution and determined Johnson refused to listen to his concerns. There is, however, no evidence beyond Bundy's historical memory to defend the argument that Bundy had opposed a congressional resolution. In fact, in an August 6<sup>th</sup> White House meeting Bundy plainly stated that he "welcomed the recent events as justification for a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time."<sup>110</sup> Bundy supported a congressional resolution. Like Johnson, he had simply been waiting for a viable opportunity to seek one.

The possibility of seeking a congressional resolution and the desire for a politically-viable opportunity to secure one was discussed and debated at length throughout the summer of 1964. Johnson and his top advisors had anticipated the eventual need for a congressional resolution that would allow the administration to expand the war effort in South Vietnam as it saw fit. Johnson and his top advisors' discussions were often more focused on when to pursue the resolution than if the resolution should be sought at all. On May 25<sup>th</sup> Bundy wrote to Johnson that "we agree that no such resolution should be sought until Civil Rights is off the Senate calendar,

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<sup>109</sup> Preston, *The War Council*, p.148.

<sup>110</sup> Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting, August 5, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 290.

and we believe that the preceding stages can be conducted in such a way as to leave a free choice on the timing of the resolution. Some of us recommend that we aim at presenting and passing the resolution between the passage of Civil Rights and the convening of the Republican Convention.”<sup>111</sup>

The following month Bundy addressed the issue of a congressional resolution again. At a White House meeting on June 10<sup>th</sup> Bundy noted that “if there were a crash situation in Southeast Asia, a congressional resolution could be dealt with at any time.” When McNamara contended that U.S. actions up to that point were not such as to require a resolution, Bundy asked the group not to dismiss the proposal to seek a Congressional resolution without taking into account “the great benefit such a resolution would have in conveying our firmness of purpose in Southeast Asia” and called attention to the dilemma of how far the U.S. could go in influencing the situation in Southeast Asia without taking actions that could be initiated only with a Congressional resolution.<sup>112</sup>

Bundy reiterated his stance in a memorandum he sent to Johnson on the same day. He wrote that “it is agreed that the U.S. will wish to make its position on Southeast Asia as clear and strong as possible in the next five months” and that the immediate watershed decision was whether or not the Administration should seek a Congressional resolution. According to Bundy, if the resolution was to be sought, they would have to address the question of whether or not Southeast Asia mattered much. His response was “Yes--because of the rights of the people there, because our own commitment, because of the far-reaching effect of a failure, and because we can win if

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<sup>111</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, May 25, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 173.

<sup>112</sup> Summary Record of a Meeting, White House, Washington, June 10, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 210.

we stay with it.” He went on to stress that the great advantages of an early Congressional resolution were international and that the international disadvantages of not seeking a Congressional Resolution were obvious. His concerns with seeking a congressional resolution were not the product of any substantial personal hesitancy about expanding the war effort. Rather, he believed that the primary downside of seeking a resolution was that it risked a contest at home and might pin the administration to a level of concern and public notice that could end up being embarrassing if they ultimately decided not to take more drastic action in the months ahead.<sup>113</sup>

Bundy ended the memo with the statement that “it appears that we need a Congressional Resolution if and only if we decide that a substantial increase of national attention and international tension is a necessary part of the defense of Southeast Asia in the coming summer.”<sup>114</sup> Though Bundy did not conclude his memo with a clear recommendation that the Administration should seek a congressional resolution, his final statement was a loaded one. Given that at the end of the memo Bundy stated that a congressional resolution was necessary only if the Administration believed that a substantial increase in attention was necessary in the months ahead, and at the beginning of the memo he stated that it was agreed that the U.S. would wish to make its position as clear and strong as possible in the following five months, he was clearly suggesting that a congressional resolution would be beneficial and should be sought.

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<sup>113</sup> Draft Memorandum by Bundy, June 10, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 211.

<sup>114</sup> Draft Memorandum by Bundy, June 10, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 211.

The opportunity to seek a congressional resolution that the administration had been hoping for throughout the summer presented itself in early August. The Gulf of Tonkin episode began on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, when the American destroyer *Maddox* was attacked by several North Vietnamese torpedo boats while it was on patrol off the coast of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The attack occurred several hours after South Vietnamese raiders had struck at two targets on the North Vietnamese coast as part of a U.S. program of graduated covert pressure against the North called Operations Plan (OPLAN)-34A. Though the *Maddox* was in international waters when it was attacked, it had been within territorial waters when Hanoi's torpedo boats were sent out. The *Maddox* intercepted the North Vietnamese torpedo boats' communications and detected the crafts as they approached. A brief skirmish followed during which two of the three Vietnamese boats were sunk and the *Maddox* had no losses. Johnson approved a recommendation to reinforce the *Maddox* with the *C. Turner Joy* shortly thereafter. Both ships entered the Gulf of Tonkin in a state of high alert on the evening of August 3<sup>rd</sup>. In the hours that followed the U.S. warships recorded a series of sonar and radar readings which they interpreted to be attacking torpedo boats. In light of the incident two days earlier, the signals were interpreted as Hanoi mounting a second attack and sailors reported that they saw enemy boats.<sup>115</sup>

Though a general consensus has since developed that the August 4<sup>th</sup> attack did not actually occur, it seems that the administration believed at the time that the second attack had in fact occurred. In the 1990s Bundy retrospectively claimed to "know from direct exposure... that Lyndon Johnson really *invented* that series of actions,"

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<sup>115</sup> "LBJ Tapes on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident." *The George Washington University*. 12 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/tapes.htm>>.

connecting “the reports of August 2 and August 4 with using them for the purpose of getting the Resolution” and accepting “very uncertain evidence that it did happen, because he *wants* to pass the Resolution.”<sup>116</sup> Yet in 1971, Bundy clearly stated that in 1964 Johnson did no more than he had to do in Southeast Asia, a fact that “makes mincemeat of the notion that he would have ‘planned’ anything as unsettling and disquieting as the episode of August in the Tonkin Gulf.”<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Bundy said himself in a meeting on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1964 that “This much seemed certain: There was an attack.”<sup>118</sup>

There is reason to question Bundy’s retrospective assertion that “Lyndon Johnson accepts very uncertain evidence that it did happen, because he *wants* to pass the Resolution. He may need it later. But most of all he wants to look like a guy who doesn’t take this kind of stuff from these little bastards. He stands tall, is cool, and acts fast.”<sup>119</sup> Rather than jumping at the opportunity to aggressively react after the first attack, Johnson initially showed little to no interest in retaliation. In a meeting with Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy to discuss retaliatory measures shortly after the first attack, Johnson said that “It seems a bit murky and we won’t have any retaliation... But we will warn them against doing anything further.”<sup>120</sup> Far from pressing his advisors to seek a congressional resolution or develop a strategy for retaliatory measures which would make him appear tough, Johnson stunned his advisors by quickly transitioning

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<sup>116</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, December 19, 1996, Bundy and Goldstein meeting transcript, pp.14-15. Emphasis in original.

<sup>117</sup> JFK Library, Box 224, “Vietnam McGB 1971 CFR Lectures (3), American Policy and Politics,” First Draft 4/20/71, pp.10-11.

<sup>118</sup> Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting, August 5, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 290.

<sup>119</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, December 19, 1996, Bundy and Goldstein meeting transcript, p.16. Emphasis in original.

<sup>120</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.124.

the discussion away from the attacks and “on to something serious.” The “something serious” which Johnson had been referring to was the Postal Pay Bill.<sup>121</sup>

The decision to seek a congressional resolution in the wake of the second Gulf of Tonkin incident had by no means been Johnson’s alone. By noon on the day of the second attack Johnson was at a lunch meeting with Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara. James Thompson, the specialist of Asian affairs on the Bundy staff, had asked White House staff member Robert Komer earlier that afternoon what they do in such a crisis moment. “‘What we do,’ said Komer, ‘is go to lunch. In situations like this the big boys take over.’”<sup>122</sup> Komer was right and McGeorge Bundy was without question one of the big boys. At a National Security Council meeting held that evening, Johnson, Bundy, McNamara, Rusk, McCone, and Rowan met to discuss the appropriate response to the second attack. After quickly establishing that all were in agreement that “an immediate and direct reaction by us is necessary,” Johnson inquired as to whether the attacks signaled that the enemy wanted a war and to what extent the United States should react. Once McNamara assured Rowan that they would be able to “nail down exactly what happened” by the following morning, Rusk raised the issue of a resolution, stressing that “We should ask the Congressional leaders whether we should seek a Congressional resolution.”<sup>123</sup>

By August 4<sup>th</sup> Johnson and his top advisors were in lock step with regard the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Bundy retrospectively argued that Johnson’s decision to seize the Gulf of Tonkin incident as a time to take the resolution to Congress “was a

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<sup>121</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.124.

<sup>122</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p.413.

<sup>123</sup> Summary Notes of the 538th Meeting of the National Security Council, August 4, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 278.

mistake,” particularly given that Johnson had “made a quick decision on an incompletely verified event.”<sup>124</sup> Yet neither in 1964, while he was still in the White House, nor in 1971, shortly after he had left it, did Bundy believe that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had been a mistake, as he would later claim. In fact, Bundy’s perspective on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and explanation of his role in relation to it, changed dramatically in the period between 1964 and 1995. In the 1990s Bundy claimed that the Gulf of Tonkin was an “unassisted triple play,” an “instant decision,” and “a vaudeville show...all done with smoke and mirrors.”<sup>125</sup> Yet in 1971 Bundy stated that the episodes in the Gulf of Tonkin did happen, that the U.S. retaliatory response was measured, and that the Resolution said what most Americans and almost all Congressmen believed at the time about the importance of South Vietnam.

According to Bundy, the Resolution was “a stance of Consensus...if the debate had gone ten days or ten weeks instead of ten hours; if all the evidence of confusion and uncertainty at sea had been fully aired; if my colleague Fred Friendly had pulled all of his reporters together and pooled their wisdom and insight for ten nights of prime-time discussions, they would have emerged with a consensus favorable to the Resolution. For the Resolution was not then – and was not intended to be—what Nicholas Katzenbach later called it – the functional equivalent of a declaration of war (and it is certainly true that this much could and should have been made very plain in a more extended debate). The Resolution was a double-barreled statement of the exact stance the President, the Congress, and the country then wanted. As such it was bound to pass, whether in a long debate or a short one.”<sup>126</sup>

If Bundy had played the role of “a messenger boy” as he retrospectively claimed, the message he had been delivering was one he had played a large part in crafting, as Bundy had supported seeking a congressional resolution. When Special

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<sup>124</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.199.

<sup>125</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, pp.134-135.

<sup>126</sup> JFK Library, Box 224, “Vietnam McGB 1971 CFR Lectures (3), American Policy and Politics,” First Draft 4/20/71, p.16.

Assistant to the President Douglas Cater said that “The logic that troubled him was how an attack on US forces specifically justified a resolution in favor of maintenance of freedom in SE Asia,” Bundy told him that “perhaps the matter should not be thought through too far. For his own part, he welcomed the recent events as justification for a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time.”<sup>127</sup> Importantly, Bundy had acknowledged that the congressional resolution was something that “the administration” had wanted for sometime, not something that President Johnson alone had wanted. If it was true, as Bundy later said, that “he was not trying to cut off debate but rather to preempt Cater from engaging in resistance which would prove futile,” the reason Cater’s resistance would have proven futile was because Johnson and his top advisors were in agreement that a resolution should be sought.<sup>128</sup> Bundy’s clear, positive view of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1971 and the evidence from 1964 thus cast substantial doubt on Bundy and the Bundy revisionists’ later claims that Bundy had opposed a congressional resolution and that Johnson had refused to listen to his reluctant National Security Advisor.

Given Bundy’s retrospective assertion that “I knew the firmness and strength of the President’s decision because I was one of the first to question it,” one may be inclined to accept Kai Bird’s argument that Vietnam was Johnson’s War and that the decisions to retaliate and seek a congressional resolution in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents were Johnson’s decisions. However, this argument is highly flawed. Not only was Bird incorrect in asserting that “the crucial Tonkin decision was made without Johnson consulting any of his foreign policy advisors,” in reality the decision

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<sup>127</sup> Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting, August 5, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 290.

<sup>128</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.126.

was made after Johnson had consulted with many of his advisors. Bird's mistaken conclusion, based primarily on interviews with Bundy in the 1990s, is demonstrative of the fundamental problem of historians relying too heavily on a single document or on oral history interviews conducted nearly thirty years after the event in question occurred.<sup>129</sup>

Kai Bird and Gordon Goldstein used an anecdote shared by Bundy in the 1990s to substantiate their argument that Johnson had ignored Bundy's opposition to seeking a resolution. According to Bird's retrospective interview with Bundy, "On the morning of the second Tonkin 'attack,' Johnson had come storming over to Bundy's office in the west basement and announced that he had decided to retaliate, that he was going to give a nationally televised speech, and that he wanted a congressional resolution prepared. 'I interrupted,' Bundy recalled, 'and said I thought we ought to think it over.' Johnson snapped back, 'I didn't ask you that. I told you to help me get organized.'"<sup>130</sup> Interestingly, Bundy offered a somewhat different account of that morning's events in his interviews with Goldstein. According to Goldstein, "Johnson then descended to the national security advisor's office in the White House basement, which was "most unnatural," Bundy remembered. 'Get the resolution your brother drafted,' Johnson instructed Bundy. 'Mr. President, we ought to think about this,' Bundy replied. 'I didn't say that. I didn't ask you what you *thought*,' said Johnson. 'I told you what to *do*.'"<sup>131</sup> However alluring these stories may seem, there is no evidence to substantiate them beyond Bundy's retrospective account.

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<sup>129</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.289

<sup>130</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.289

<sup>131</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.126.

Johnson's decision to seek a congressional resolution was influenced not only by his top advisors, but also by the views and advice of several congressmen and senators. At a meeting held at the White House on August 4<sup>th</sup>, shortly after the NSC meeting, Johnson discussed the question of whether or not to secure a resolution with Congressional leaders. Without provocation by Johnson, Hickenlooper stated that "There should be no doubt as to whether the President should have the right to order the Armed Forces into action. He should not have to quarrel for weeks as to whether he had the authority or not. It is my own personal feeling that it is up to the President to prepare the kind and type of resolution he believes would be proper. It is up to Congress to say whether they will pass it or not. I have no doubt in my mind that concrete action would be taken."

Taking care to stress his desire to confer with his advisors before making the final decision, Johnson responded that "I had that feeling but felt I wanted the advice of each of you and wanted to consult with you. We felt we should move with the action recommended by the Joint Chiefs, but I wanted to get the Congressional concurrence." Johnson went on to say that "I don't think any resolution is necessary, but I think it is a lot better to have it in the light of what we did in Korea." When Halleck raised the question as to whether they were "getting fouled up here on something we could put off," Johnson responded that "I wanted to see if you felt it was the wise thing to do." Hickenlooper's quick reply that "the resolution is appropriate and proper," was followed by Halleck's prediction that "it will pass overwhelmingly"

and Aiken's comment that "By the time you send it up there won't be anything for us to do but support you."<sup>132</sup>

Logevall would later write that "Everyone, including Mansfield, said that they would support a resolution. 'I have told you what I want from you,' Johnson declared and then proceeded to go around the room asking each legislator to state his view. It was a tough spot for members of Congress to be in."<sup>133</sup> Though Logevall's quotations are accurate, his account is misleading. Johnson did indeed say "I have told you what I want from you," but it was not until the end of the meeting, at which point the congressional leaders had already made their support for the resolution clear. Johnson had been hoping for their support, but he had not bullied them into giving it. On August 7<sup>th</sup> the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed with a unanimous 416-0 vote in the House and an 88-2 vote in the Senate. Three days later, Johnson still showed no sign of a desperate desire to flex his military muscles in order to avoid the appearance of weakness as Bundy would retrospectively argue. Largely satisfied with what had been accomplished and with the positive congressional and public response, Johnson stressed in a meeting with his advisors that he "did not wish to escalate just because the public liked what happened last week."<sup>134</sup>

As the evidence illustrates, Johnson consulted with his top advisors and met with several legislators before making the decisions to retaliate and seek a congressional resolution, the very decision which his advisors had advised that he make. Far from opposing Johnson's decisions or questioning the validity of the attacks,

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<sup>132</sup> Notes of the Leadership Meeting, White House, August 4, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 280.

<sup>133</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.199.

<sup>134</sup> Memorandum for the Record of a Meeting, August 10, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 307.

at a White House staff meeting the morning after the second attack, Bundy remarked “that thus far everything the U.S. had done was well in hand” and that it was “difficult to conceive what kind of image they (the DRV) had of the U.S. to think we could stand for such attacks.”<sup>135</sup>

The evidence simply does not substantiate Bundy’s retrospective claim that when it came to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, he was “just a messenger boy” and that Johnson “made sure I stayed that way.”<sup>136</sup> As Bundy had said himself, the Gulf of Tonkin incident had provided a politically-viable opportunity for the Johnson Administration to secure a congressional resolution that it had wanted for some time.<sup>137</sup>

#### *Bundy’s August 31<sup>st</sup> Memorandum*

A memorandum that Bundy sent to Johnson at the end of August provides further reason to doubt the Bundy revisionists’ claim that Bundy had discouraged escalation in South Vietnam. On August 31<sup>st</sup> Bundy wrote to Johnson that that the administration’s only really serious international problem was South Vietnam and that that problem could hardly be more serious. After acknowledging that a number of contingency plans for limited escalation were already in preparation, Bundy wrote that “A still more drastic possibility which no one is discussing at the moment is the use of *substantial U.S. armed forces* in operations against the Viet Cong. I myself believe that before we let this country go we should have a hard look at this grim alternative, and I

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<sup>135</sup> Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting, August 5, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 290.

<sup>136</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.289.

<sup>137</sup> Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting, August 5, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 290.

*do not at all think that it is a repetition of Korea.* It seems to me at least possible that a couple of brigade-sized units put in to do specific jobs about six weeks from now might be good medicine everywhere.”<sup>138</sup>

In 1993 Bundy retrospectively argued that Johnson was the greater hawk. He told Kai Bird that “Johnson was more of a hawk than I...In the Johnson years, you know your guy is not going to say ‘to hell with it.’...He is going to stay with it, and there’s no point in telling him not to.”<sup>139</sup> Though Kai Bird appears to have accepted Bundy’s assertion at face value, it seems that Bundy was a greater hawk than Johnson, at least in the spring and summer of 1964. On May 27<sup>th</sup>, only three months prior to Bundy’s August recommendation that Johnson consider the use of substantial U.S. armed forces in operations against the Viet Cong, Johnson had expressed serious concerns about the war effort. In a telephone conversation with Bundy, Johnson said that “It looks to me like we’re getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don’t see what we can ever hope to get out of there with, once we’re committed...It’s just the biggest damn mess I ever saw.”<sup>140</sup> Bundy was well aware of Johnson’s reservations about escalating the war effort. He did not advocate an expanded war effort in the summer of 1964 *because* of Johnson’s unrelenting determination to escalate. He advocated an expanded war effort *despite* Johnson’s concerns. Though Bundy retrospectively referred to Vietnam as “a bridge too far,” in 1964 he believed that escalation was necessary and that victory was within reach.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, August 31, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 335. Emphasis added.

<sup>139</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.340.

<sup>140</sup> Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p.363.

<sup>141</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, Vietnam Chapters: Introduction, May 6, 1996, p.10.

### Chapter Three

#### *A Crucial Year: Escalation and Transparency in 1965*

The Bundy revisionists argued that the major decisions on Vietnam in 1965, like those in 1964, were made by a dominant Lyndon Johnson. According to Logevall, Johnson had to loom large in the story precisely because he was not pulled into war by his inherited advisors. Though Logevall acknowledged that Johnson inherited a challenging situation in Vietnam, he argued that the president made the situation much worse through his actions both before the November 1964 election and, more importantly, in the three months that followed the election. Logevall contended that during that ninety day period, which he considered the last good chance to withdraw the United States from Vietnam, “Johnson deceived the nation and the Congress about the state of the war and about his plans for it. He, *more than his top advisers*, feared a premature move to negotiations; he, *more than they*, ensured that all options to an escalated U.S. involvement were squeezed out of the picture.”<sup>142</sup>

Kai Bird similarly argued that it was Johnson, not Bundy, who favored escalation. Bird wrote that during the pivotal decisions of 1965 Bundy “urged President Johnson *not* to make an open-ended commitment of American ground troops.”<sup>143</sup> Francis Bator, too, agreed that the idea that Johnson acted as he did in 1965 because he was “under the thumb” of his inherited advisors was “simply wrong.”<sup>144</sup> Echoing Logevall’s argument that it was Johnson, not his top advisors, who deceived

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<sup>142</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.xxii. Emphasis added.

<sup>143</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth* p.18. Emphasis added.

<sup>144</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.2.

the nation in 1965, Bator went on to contend that Bundy had “perhaps pressed Johnson hardest during June-July 1965 to explain to the country that he was leading it into war.”<sup>145</sup>

The Bundy revisionists’ arguments on Bundy’s role in the decision-making process on Vietnam in 1965 closely reflected Bundy’s retrospective statements. Bundy told Gordon Goldstein in 1995 that the decision to Americanize the war in 1965 had been “made in Washington and not in Hanoi. It was an inherently *presidential* decision” and as such had to be studied through the prism of Kennedy and Johnson.<sup>146</sup> In an interview in 1993, Bundy said, “I’m a real believer that you can’t make war without explaining it. He’s (Johnson’s) a believer that you can.”<sup>147</sup>

Contrary to the Bundy revisionists’ arguments, the evidence suggests that Bundy advised Johnson to escalate the war effort throughout 1965. Moreover, the evidence does not substantiate Bundy’s retrospective assertion that he encouraged Johnson to be much more transparent with the American public regarding the war effort. In 1965, as in 1964, Bundy did not make Johnson’s decisions for him, but he did significantly influence Johnson’s decision-making.

#### *Fork-in-the-Road Memorandum*

Bundy and McNamara’s illustrious Fork-in-the-Road memorandum played a central role in the Bundy revisionists’ arguments on 1965. Far from lagging behind on the path toward escalation, Bundy and McNamara reached the fork in the

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<sup>145</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.14.

<sup>146</sup> JFK Library, December 19, 1995, Bundy and Goldstein Meeting Transcript.

<sup>147</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview I, 3/30/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

road before Lyndon Johnson. Bundy had been frustrated throughout 1964 that Johnson was unwilling to do more in South Vietnam. In January 1965 he advised the President that the present course was untenable and that a major decision about the trajectory of the war would have to be made soon. On January 27<sup>th</sup> Bundy and McNamara informed Johnson that they had reached a point at which “our obligations to you simply do not permit us to administer out present (wait and hope) directives in silence.” Bundy and McNamara felt that the administration’s policy could lead only to disastrous defeat. They noted that the United States’ best friends had been discouraged by their inactivity and that the South Vietnamese knew that the Viet Cong were gaining in the countryside, saw the tremendous power of the United States being withheld, and felt that the U.S. was unwilling to take serious risks. They went on say that such criticism was somewhat outrageous “in the light of all that we have done and *all that we are ready to do* if they will only pull up their socks.”<sup>148</sup>

According to Johnson’s top advisors, the United States was “pinned into a policy of first aid to squabbling politicians and passive reaction to events we do not try to control.” They felt that the worst course of action would be to continue in “this essentially passive role which can only lead to eventual defeat and an invitation to get out in humiliating circumstances.” As such, they offered two clear alternatives; to use the United States military power in the Far East and to force a change of Communist policy or to fully pursue negotiation, “aimed at *salvaging what little can be preserved*” with no major addition to the current military risks. Though Bundy acknowledged that both options should be carefully studied and that the ultimate responsibility was

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<sup>148</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, January 27, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 42. Emphasis added.

Johnson's, he flatly stated that "Bob and I tend to *favor the first course*... We both agree that *every effort* should still be made to improve our operations on the ground and to prop up the authorities in South Vietnam as best we can. But *we are both convinced that none of this is enough*, and that the time has come for harder choices."<sup>149</sup>

When writing about the Fork-in-the-Road memo, Goldstein portrayed Bundy as the "presumptive arbiter and coordinating intermediary" rather than as a policy advocate.<sup>150</sup> He contended that the Fork-in-the-Road memo had the desired effect of confronting Johnson with the necessity of making a decision soon about America's course in Vietnam. Goldstein's comment suggests that he agreed with Bundy's retrospective assertion that the purpose of the memorandum had been to compel Johnson to make a major decision, not to recommend a particular course of action.<sup>151</sup> Bundy adamantly argued this point when reflecting on the war in the 1990s. In a 1993 oral history interview, Bundy said that the memo "does say, 'We lean toward increased action.' But what it really says is, 'You've got to decide.' That's the major clause, and what that comes from is the enormous weight and sort of sense of dissatisfaction and of either opportunities lost or people deluded, or whatever, in the fact that the election year had turned out to be a year of nondecision."<sup>152</sup>

Despite Bundy's retrospective contention that his and McNamara's recommendation that Johnson's escalate the war effort was not a central element of the

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<sup>149</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, January 27, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 42. Emphasis added.

<sup>150</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.152.

<sup>151</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.154.

<sup>152</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

memorandum, their advice proved highly influential. In the week prior to reading the Fork-in-the-Road memo, Johnson had been hesitant to escalate. After reading the memo, Johnson became intensely distressed by the decision that his top advisors had placed before him. By the following morning, Johnson had taken his advisors' counsel to escalate and the Americanization of the Vietnam War had begun.

Johnson's stance on escalation changed substantially after reading the Fork-in-the-Road memo. Not eager to seek a wider war in the first weeks of the new year, Johnson sent McNamara a memorandum on January 7<sup>th</sup> which read, "I expect you and Max (Taylor) are right in opposing larger U.S. Forces."<sup>153</sup> Johnson held his ground at a meeting with congressional leaders two weeks later, stressing that "we have decided that more U.S. forces are not needed in South Vietnam short of a decision to go to full-scale war... The war must be fought by the South Vietnamese. We cannot control everything that they do and we have to count on their fighting their war."<sup>154</sup> Douglas Cater recalled that for a brief period after reading the Fork-in-the-Road memo, Johnson had been highly distressed by the choice that his advisors' had set before him. Having accepted the need to make a decision about America's course in Vietnam, Johnson said, "I don't know what to do. If I send more boys in, there's going to be killin'. If I take them out, there's going to be more killin'. Anything I do, there's going to be more killin'."<sup>155</sup>

Despite his frustration, within twenty four hours of reading the Fork-in-the-Road memo Johnson had made the "hard choice," accepting Bundy and McNamara's

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<sup>153</sup> Memorandum from Johnson to McNamara, January 7, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 20.

<sup>154</sup> Notes of President Johnson's Meeting with Congressional Leaders, January 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 30.

<sup>155</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, pp.153-154.

recommendation that the United States should use its military power in Southeast Asia and try to force a change of Communist policy.<sup>156</sup> Later the same day, Johnson sent a memo to the Ambassador in Vietnam which read, “I am determined to make it clear to all the world that the U.S. will spare no effort and no sacrifice in doing its full part to turn back the Communists in Vietnam.”<sup>157</sup> He went on to say that he had changed his mind and now supported the Ambassador’s suggestion that Bundy visit Saigon to communicate the administration’s position to selected Vietnamese leaders. Further demonstrating his strengthened commitment to escalation, Johnson sent a telegram to the Ambassador the following morning to inform him that if, as was expected, Khanh offered “a firm statement of determination to carry on with the war...we think you should certainly respond that US is equally determined to go on supporting Vietnamese government and people.”<sup>158</sup> Within one day of reading Bundy and McNamara’s Fork-in-the-Road memo, Johnson had not only accepted their counsel that a major decision had to be made, he had also selected the option that his top advisors had recommended.

Bundy retrospectively argued that the decision to escalate the war effort in early 1965 was an inherently presidential decision.<sup>159</sup> In the 1993 interview he stated that Moyers assertion that he had had to deal with Rusk, Bundy, and McNamara was “baloney.”<sup>160</sup> He went on to contend that Johnson’s first priority when it came to South

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<sup>156</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, January 27, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 42.

<sup>157</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, President to Ambassador, January 27, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 44.

<sup>158</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, President to Ambassador, January 28, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 47.

<sup>159</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>160</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

Vietnam was doing whatever he had to do in order to avoid history saying that he had neglected the war. Bundy retrospectively criticized Johnson for organizing a majority, as he had done in the Senate, to support escalation, saying that it was “done in a way that I don’t think would have been the one I would have recommended, and he knew that, too. That is to say, he gets a consensus; he organizes the votes. McNamara goes and negotiates so that Westmoreland will be on board. It's not the way my school books tell me a commander in chief makes a decision like that.”<sup>161</sup>

Interestingly, both the evidence from 1965 and Bundy’s assertions in 1971 provide substantial reason to doubt the Bundy revisionists’ arguments that a dominant Lyndon Johnson pushed for escalation in early 1965 against the advice of his top advisors. Moreover, the evidence does not substantiate the Bundy revisionists’ claim that Bundy was merely recommending that a decision be made, not advising escalation, through the Fork-in-the-Road memo. On January 4<sup>th</sup> Bundy wrote a memorandum to Johnson in which he observed that McNamara’s opposition to larger U.S. forces was based primarily on concerns regarding overhead and administration and that he thought that McNamara “would be responsive to an instruction to develop a new plan for volunteering fighting forces that would proceed with a minimum of overhead and a maximum of energy in direct contact with the Vietnamese at all levels. At the very least it is worth asking him.”<sup>162</sup> Bundy sent another memo to Johnson later that same day which said that “whatever we may decide to do on particular matter in the coming months, it is absolutely essential to maintain a posture of firmness

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<sup>161</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>162</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson. January 4, 1965. *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol.2, document 2.

today.”<sup>163</sup> Moreover, at the outset of a lecture Bundy delivered in 1971, Bundy explicitly stated that it was as “*necessary and right*, in some form and by some means, to act to avoid a Communist victory by force of arms in 1965 and thereafter. I suppose this is not the majority view today, but it is mine.”<sup>164</sup> Even as late as 1995, in a conversation with Goldstein, Bundy admitted that he “‘didn’t see any way of leaving Vietnam alone and simply getting out in 1965... I worry about that all the time, but I’m not prepared to sort it out yet.”<sup>165</sup>

### *Advocating Escalation*

Bundy’s advocacy of escalation in 1965 was not limited to the Fork-in-the-Road memo. As Halberstam later wrote, by early 1965 “Mac had come down with the hawks and had come down very hard.”<sup>166</sup> Influenced by the Viet Cong attack at Pleiku, Bundy became the administration’s leading advocate of sustained reprisals against North Vietnam in February 1965. Bundy strongly supported the decision to launch Operation Rolling Thunder, a gradual and sustained aerial bombardment campaign which was a crucial step in the Americanization of the war which Bundy had considered “a major watershed decision.”<sup>167</sup>

Bundy expressed his continued commitment to South Vietnam throughout the spring of 1965. In a February 8<sup>th</sup> National Security Council meeting he said that if the

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<sup>163</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson. January 4, 1965. *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol.2, document 5.

<sup>164</sup> JFK Library, Box 224, “Vietnam McGB 1971 CFR Lectures (3), American Policy and Politics,” First Draft 4/20/71, p.2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>165</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons In Disaster*, p.19.

<sup>166</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p.524.

<sup>167</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson. February 16, 1965. *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol.2, Document 124.

United States pulled out of South Vietnam, the nations of Southeast Asia would feel as if the United States had failed to carry out its policy of assisting the South Vietnamese to continue as an independent state. According to Bundy, “the consequences in Southeast Asia of our pull-out would be very large. In other parts of the world, the effect would also be very serious.”<sup>168</sup> The following day Bundy wrote a letter to Mike Mansfield in response to Mansfield’s concerns about expanding the war effort. Bundy wrote that he did not feel that the power of the United States around the world was “stretched too thin... While every single American casualty gives the President personal sorrow, we cannot say that the current level of American sacrifice in Southeast Asia is unduly heavy. We made a vastly heavier sacrifice in Korea – and one which was fully justified – and yet the stakes there were certainly no greater than those that are now on the table in Southeast Asia.”<sup>169</sup> Bundy maintained this belief in the months that followed. In a May 1965 memorial speech at Franklin Roosevelt’s gravesite, Bundy said that the United States could not limit itself to one objective at a time. “We, like Caesar, have all things to do at once... In Vietnam today we have to share in the fighting; we have to lead in the search for peace; and we have to respond, in all that we do, to the real needs and the real hopes of the people of Vietnam.”<sup>170</sup>

### *Rash-to-the-Point-of-Folly Memorandum*

Despite Bundy’s clear support for an expanded war effort, the Bundy revisionists have used what came become known as the Rash-to-the-Point-of-Folly

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<sup>168</sup> Summary Notes of the 547<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, February 8, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 87.

<sup>169</sup> Letter from Bundy to Mike Mansfield, February 9, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 94.

<sup>170</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons In Disaster*, p.16.

memorandum to argue that Bundy was hesitant about escalation in 1965. Kai Bird's account of the memorandum was particularly misleading. Bird suggested that Bundy's June 1965 memo substantiated his central argument that Bundy had urged President Johnson not to make an open-ended commitment of American ground troops in 1965, writing that "Mac Bundy warned Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that his proposal to introduce large numbers of troops was 'rash to the point of folly.'" In the memo, Bundy did indeed write that his initial reaction to the program proposed in the June 26<sup>th</sup> draft memorandum to Johnson was that it was "rash to the point of folly." However, the fact that Bundy had felt that that particular program was rash hardly substantiates Bird's claim that Bundy urged Johnson not to escalate the war effort.

The program that Bundy had been calling into question in his memo would likely have been considered extreme by almost anyone in the administration at the time, however hawkish. As Bundy stated, he felt that the program was rash because it proposed doubling the United States' presently planned strength in South Vietnam, tripling the air effort in North Vietnam, and instituting a new and important program of naval quarantine. The memo does demonstrate that Bundy was sufficiently concerned by the idea of suddenly doubling and tripling the United States ground troop and aerial commitment to the war effort to write a memo to McNamara expressing those concerns. However, it by no means demonstrates that Bundy opposed escalation in general.

Moreover, the memorandum does not substantiate Bird's claim that Bundy had urged Johnson not to expand the United States' ground troop commitment to South Vietnam in 1965. The memo was only sent to McNamara and there is no evidence to

suggest that Bundy voiced such concerns on multiple occasions or to Johnson personally on any occasion, It is worth noting that Bundy said in a 1993 interview that he had “been surprised to find, in recent years, that I actually wrote a memorandum about troops. ‘Two hundred thousand troops. We're going to send all these ground troops. We haven't used any, practically; we don't know what we're doing.’ Who do I send it to? It's very interesting to me: I send it to McNamara. Why do I send it to McNamara? Because my communications with Johnson are breaking down.”<sup>171</sup>

There is substantial reason to doubt Bundy’s retrospective claim that he had sent the memorandum to McNamara because his communications with Johnson were breaking down and because he had wanted to tell McNamara “don’t do what the president’s telling you to do.”<sup>172</sup> That very same day that Bundy sent the Rash-to-the-Point-of-Folly memorandum to McNamara, Bundy sent an important and forceful memorandum to Johnson which demonstrated his unfailing commitment to the war effort and his readiness to share his views with Johnson. Kai Bird wrote that Bundy “clearly understood the grave risks associated with any attempt to wage a ground war in Southeast Asia. Both (Bundy) brothers understood that the *French experience in Indochina was a critical bellweather*.”<sup>173</sup> However, Bundy’s June 30<sup>th</sup> memo to Johnson, entitled “France in Vietnam, 1954, and the U.S. in Vietnam 1965-A Useful Analogy,” suggests otherwise. In this memo Bundy explicitly argued that “*The situation faced by France in Vietnam in 1954 is not fundamentally analogous to that*

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<sup>171</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview II, 11/10/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

<sup>172</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.332.

<sup>173</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.18. Emphasis added.

*faced by the U.S. in Vietnam in 1965...Options, both military and political, remain to us that were no longer available to the French.*”<sup>174</sup>

Two days earlier, on June 28<sup>th</sup> Bundy had optimistically reported to Johnson that the RAND Corporation’s preliminary and unpublished findings indicated that Viet Cong morale had fallen significantly in the prior months as a result of the United States’ aerial attacks. He ended the memo by referencing the RAND Corporation’s conclusion that while aerial harassment should be a major component of U.S. operations...“in the end only the *ground forces* can transform the Viet Cong from hunters into hunted, defeat them decisively, and establish complete control and security over the population.”<sup>175</sup> Interestingly, George Ball had written to Bundy that same day that in his opinion the RAND Motivation and Morale Study demonstrated that the Viet Cong were “deeply committed to fighting.”<sup>176</sup>

Ball’s comment had been part of a paper he had written and sent to Bundy, Rusk, McNamara, William Bundy, McNaughton, and Unger entitled “Cutting Our Losses in South Viet-Nam.” Ball had argued in his paper that the United States was losing the war, that neither expanded bombing nor increased troop deployments offered assurance that the U.S. would win, and that the administration should either withdraw or substantially reduce its commitment. Ball concluded his summary by stating that “By pursuing a systematic and careful plan for cutting our losses we should be able to create the conditions under which we can get out of a dangerous situation

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<sup>174</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, June 30, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 33. Emphasis added.

<sup>175</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, June 28, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 27.

<sup>176</sup> Paper by George Ball, Undated, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 26.

without excessive loss of American prestige and influence.”<sup>177</sup> According to William Bundy, when Ball’s paper was discussed at the Department of State by McGeorge Bundy and the others the paper had been sent to on June 29<sup>th</sup>, the group criticized it as “outlining ‘the worst way to lose if it came to that... To Asian eyes, it would have been the most cynical exit method possible.’”<sup>178</sup>

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, Bundy sent Johnson a memorandum regarding the trajectory of the war effort which did not demonstrate even a hint of hesitancy toward escalation. He advised Johnson to first listen to Ball’s proposal on a compromise solution and noted that once he had rejected Ball’s proposal his choice would be between Bill Bundy’s “middle way” and McNamara’s recommendation for expanded military action.<sup>179</sup> Bundy went on to advise that the decision between the “middle way” and expanded military action should be made within ten days. When Ball’s proposal was debated on July 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, Bundy made it known that he agreed with “the main thrust of McNamara” and that adopting the new course proposed by George Ball would be “disastrous.” He went on to say that he “would rather maintain our present commitment and ‘waffle through’ than withdraw. The country is in the mood to accept grim news.”<sup>180</sup>

Bird argued that the Bundy brothers had been repeatedly exposed to and had understood the argument against deeper involvement in 1965, but that they knew that “*their president* could not abide by a defeat in Vietnam... ‘that’s not what Texas boys

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<sup>177</sup> Paper by George Ball, Undated, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 26.

<sup>178</sup> Paper by George Ball, Undated, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 26.

<sup>179</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, July 1, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol.3, Document 43.

<sup>180</sup> Memorandum for the Record, July 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol.3, Document 72.

do.”<sup>181</sup> However, contrary to Bird’s claims, the evidence suggests that Bundy had not considered the French experience in Indochina a critical bellwether and that throughout 1965 Bundy had been advocating, not begrudgingly accepting, further escalation of the war effort in South Vietnam. Bundy and Johnson were not in complete agreement on the pace and degree of escalation, but both clearly supported an expanded U.S. commitment to South Vietnam in 1965.

### *Transparency*

Another key element of the Bundy revisionists’ argument on 1965 revolved around transparency. They argued that Bundy had strongly encouraged Johnson to be much more transparent with the American public about the war effort and that a determined Johnson had disregarded his advice. Bundy said in 1993 that “Over the overall question...I’m a real believer that you can’t make war without explaining it. He’s a believer that you can.”<sup>182</sup> Though Bundy did encourage Johnson to be more transparent with certain groups on certain occasions regarding the war effort, the evidence suggests that Bundy and Johnson’s general views on transparency were much closer than Bundy and the Bundy revisionists have contended.

In a February 7<sup>th</sup> memo to Johnson, Bundy wrote that in the early stages they should make clear the United States’ intent to undertake further reprisals. He felt that they should announce that the U.S. had been patient and forbearing, “but we can no longer sit by in the face of repeated acts of terror and violence for which the DRV is

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<sup>181</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.340. Emphasis added.

<sup>182</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview I, 3/30/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

responsible.”<sup>183</sup> He went on to say that after the initial announcement was made, the reprisal policy should be executed with “as low a level of public noise as possible” and that maximum attention should be directed toward the continuing acts of violence which demonstrate the need for continuing reprisals.<sup>184</sup>

In a memorandum Bundy sent to Johnson nine days later, Bundy wrote that he had realized that he and others in the administration had been confusing two central questions; the firmness of Johnson’s decision to order continuing action and the wisdom of a public declaration of that policy by Johnson. Bundy felt that those who favored continuing military action against North Vietnam, himself included, considered it “a major watershed decision.” As such, Bundy felt that it was essential that there be an absolutely firm and clear *internal* decision of the U.S. Government known by enough people to allow for its orderly execution. He went on to say that that Johnson’s hesitancy to give a loud public signal of a substantial change in policy at that time made “a lot of sense of a lot of grounds...most of the need for public utterance which led Bill Moyers and me to urge a Presidential speech last week can be met just as well by the Secretary, and there is a real gain in keeping you out of the immediate military aspect of the matter at this stage. Thus I think it is possible to reconcile the need for a clear decision *within* the Government with *a need to avoid excessive public noise*...In summary, what I think we need is *internal clarity* about the importance and scope of the decisions you are taking, and *as much public calm and coolness as possible*.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Telegram from Bundy to Johnson, June 26, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 20.

<sup>184</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, February 7, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 84.

<sup>185</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, February 16, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 124.

The following month Bundy sent a memo to Johnson praising him for having made the decision, against his advisors' advice, to portray the administration's increased actions against the North as "within the framework of a continuing policy and a continuing purpose, and not as major new departures." Bundy noted that the most important impact of Johnson's decision was that it was enabling the administration to move toward a situation in which "*international* opinion may regard our actions against the North as a natural reply against the Viet Cong operations in the South."<sup>186</sup> As this memo suggests, Bundy was often more concerned with internal and international transparency than transparency with the American people. Moreover, the primary purpose of such transparency was not to encourage heated debate and opposition to escalation, but rather to confirm and defend the administration's position of firmness in supporting South Vietnam, which Bundy believed would strengthen the war effort. Later in the same memo, which was sent to Johnson on March 6<sup>th</sup>, Bundy wrote with regard to the administration's international political position that "we continue to believe that it is important to defend and to insist on our policy in every forum."<sup>187</sup>

Though Logevall argued that Johnson was more hesitant about negotiation than his top advisors in 1965, Bundy was by no means anxious to get to the negotiating table. He had been highly skeptical of negotiations throughout 1964 and 1965 and in March 1965 wrote to Johnson that "my own opinion on the general diplomatic front is that we can always get to the conference table when we need to, and that there is no

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<sup>186</sup> Memorandum by Bundy, March 6, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 183.

<sup>187</sup> Memorandum by Bundy, March 6, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 183.

great hurry right now.”<sup>188</sup> He concluded the memo by stating that he and McNamara had agreed that any contingency thinking for sharp deterioration of the war effort should be done “very, very privately,” that there should be no paperwork on the subject at all, and that discussion should be limited completely to he, McNamara, and Johnson, and one subordinate each. “There will be no papers, and this mission will not exist anywhere except in this memorandum.”<sup>189</sup>

In the spring of 1965 Bundy had been encouraging only moderately more transparency with the public, with the primary purpose of conveying the administration’s firmness and defending its policies on South Vietnam. To the extent that Bundy encouraged greater transparency, it was primarily for the sake of defending the administration’s policies on Vietnam to the national and international community, not to challenge them or even to encourage a more heated public debate over them. Though the Bundy revisionist censured Johnson for engaging in deception and secrecy against the advice of his National Security Advisor, that does not seem to be the case. When Senator Dirksen asked what use could be made of the information that had been shared at a February 8<sup>th</sup> National Security Council meeting, Johnson replied that he had instructed Bundy to talk to the press, “telling them as much as he possibly could without affecting the national interest.”<sup>190</sup>

Bundy wrote in the 1990s that the underlying difference between he and Johnson in 1965 was that Johnson had wanted to carry out “a massive change” in the level of U.S. military effort with the minimal amount of public debate and discussion

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<sup>188</sup> Memorandum by Bundy, March 6, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 183.

<sup>189</sup> Memorandum by Bundy, March 6, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 183.

<sup>190</sup> Summary Notes of the 547<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, February 8, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 87.

possible. “I did not believe at all that a change of this kind could or should be made without *full and open explanation*, advocacy, and indeed some visible form of agreement and support from the Congress.”<sup>191</sup> In a meeting with Goldstein in 1996, Bundy said that in 1965 Johnson had decided that he would “smuggle...nutty...smuggle two-hundred thousand men into Vietnam...President undoubtedly said to himself: Well! Fooled ‘em that time!”<sup>192</sup> Francis Bator seemingly agreed with Bundy’s contention that Johnson had not only substantially escalated the war effort against Bundy’s advice, but also that he had been ignoring his National Security Advisor’s recommendation that he should be much more honest and open with the public about escalation. Bator wrote that “Johnson (*shutting Bundy up*) signed off on Westmoreland’s minimum numbers, but sidled into war with minimum fuss.”<sup>193</sup>

Bundy offered a very different account of the situation in 1971 than he did in the 1990s. He flatly stated that the country had not been kept in the dark when it came to the Vietnam War. He went on to say that there were many real mistakes in the Vietnam record, but that it was important not to encumber the record with myths.

According to Bundy, “Neither the possibility of bombing the North nor the prospect of a major commitment of ground forces to Vietnam – the two major decisions of 1965 – was a secret to anyone before it happened. Both were extensively reported before, during, and after their occurrence. I have recently refreshed my own memory of these matters by some reading in the back files of the *New York Times* for 1965. They make it very plain that people knew what was happening. In the weeks immediately preceding the President’s critical decision on troop movements in July 1965, for example, the story from Washington on his deliberations was regularly on page 1, and as the decision

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<sup>191</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Notes on LBJ and Vietnam.

<sup>192</sup> JFK Library, December 19, 1996, Bundy and Goldstein meeting transcript, pp.20-21.

<sup>193</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.13. Emphasis added.

drew near, the volume (and to my memory the accuracy) of the reporting and analysis steadily increased. If the Congress did not intrude itself on these deliberations – and it did not – it was by clear and conscious choice.”<sup>194</sup>

In making the argument that Bundy had pushed for greater transparency with the American public in 1965, Francis Bator wrote that “Bundy, who perhaps pressed Johnson hardest during June-July 1965 to explain to the country that he was leading it into war, recalled the president saying to him, slowly: “I see what you mean... You mean if your mother-in-law – your very own mother-in-law – has only one eye, and it happens to be right in the middle of her forehead, then the best place for her is in the ‘livin’ room with all the company!”<sup>195</sup> Bundy had in fact shared the quote with Bator, but Bator’s account was misleading. Bator’s use of Johnson’s quote, which was employed similarly by Goldstein, implied that Johnson’s comment was in reference to the Vietnam War, which it was not. In Bundy’s notes for his book on Vietnam, he noted that he felt that Johnson’s mother-in-law comment reflected the President’s preference to avoid publically discussing the war, but wrote that the comment was “not about Vietnam but about a much smaller White House problem – so small I forget what it was.”<sup>196</sup>

Moreover, there is little evidence to support Bator’s argument that Bundy had pushed Johnson hardest during June and July 1965 to explain to the country that he was leading it into war. In a lengthy June 30<sup>th</sup> memorandum to Johnson on the American public’s reaction to the war effort, Bundy flatly stated that “At home we

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<sup>194</sup> JFK Library, Box 224, “Vietnam McGB 1971 CFR Lectures (3), American Policy and Politics,” First Draft 4/20/71, p.18.

<sup>195</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.14.

<sup>196</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Notes on LBJ and Vietnam.

remain politically strong and, in general, politically united.”<sup>197</sup> He neither portrayed the administration’s relations with the public in a negative light nor encouraged Johnson to be much more transparent with the American people. He wrote the people had several concerns regarding Vietnam, but that there was “general support for the administration.” He noted that the public appeared “unenthusiastic but reconciled” to the U.S. role in the conflict. Bundy then began referencing public poll results, nearly all of which were positive and encouraging.

Bundy told Johnson that the June 28<sup>th</sup> Harris Poll showed that 62% of the public expressed overall approval of Johnson’s handling of the Vietnam crisis, that more than 70% of the people felt that Southeast Asia would go communist if the U.S. did not stand firm in Vietnam, and that the people generally approved of the President’s call for unconditional negotiations. He went on to say that of those who had an opinion, nearly 80% approved of the bombing and over 60% felt that the U.S. should send more troops. With regard to the press, Bundy wrote that most editorialists and columnists supported Johnson in his determination to keep South Vietnam independent. He noted that their support was tempered by a noticeable strain of criticism over a “lack of frankness” on the part of the Administration in discussing the depth of the U.S. commitment, but certainly did not use the occasion to suggest that the general public shared the columnists concerns or to encourage greater transparency. Later in the memo Bundy wrote that “Despite obvious Congressional disquiet, Congressional support has been demonstrated in the 512-2 vote last August

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<sup>197</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, June 30, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 33.

on the Southeast Asia Resolution and in the votes approving the President's request for a supplemental Vietnam appropriation (408-7 and 88-3)”<sup>198</sup>

### *CBS Debate*

Bundy retrospectively placed a substantial amount of weight on an event that occurred near the end of his tenure as National Security Advisor, a televised debate on the war. In June 1965 Bundy agreed to participate in an hour-long primetime televised CBS News debate entitled “A Vietnam Dialogue: Mr. Bundy and the Professors” which was to be held the evening of June 21<sup>st</sup>. Hardly a month had passed since Johnson had sent Bundy on an international assignment to keep him from publically debating the war. Knowing that Johnson would disapprove of the CBS debate, Bundy decided to circumvent Johnson by simply agreeing to participate without asking him. In the notes Bundy was writing for his book in the 1990s, he wrote that he had not consulted Johnson because he had known what Johnson would say. Johnson was unsurprisingly outraged as he read in the press that his national security advisor had agreed to participate in the debate without consulting him. According to Bundy’s notes, thirty years later he was no longer “as pleased (with himself and his decision) as I fear I was then.”<sup>199</sup>

Bundy went on to write that his personal motivation for participating in the debate was not the point, but rather that “Johnson’s fury is the point.” Johnson’s anger was not expressed to Bundy directly, but rather to Bill Moyers. According to Bundy, Moyers reported decades later that he had had to use all of his influence with Johnson

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<sup>198</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, June 30, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.3, Document 33.

<sup>199</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Notes on LBJ and Vietnam.

to prevent him from ordering Bundy not to take part in the debate once he had heard that Bundy had agreed to participate. Using the situation surrounding the debate to defend his argument that he had favored much more transparency with the public than Johnson had, Bundy wrote that he knew then “that a deep and unchangeable disagreement on the best way of dealing with public opposition had been exposed in such a way that neither of us could disregard it. My way of saying it would have been something like this: ‘When you have a hard case to make you should miss no chance to make it, and above all you should never fear an open debate.’”<sup>200</sup> Bundy’s statement suggests that his primary motivation behind participating in the debate had not been a deep desire to encourage more heated public discourse or to offer the public much more transparency with regard to the administration’s actions in North and South Vietnam. He had not wanted to use the debate as an opportunity to encourage opposition, he wanted to use it as an opportunity to defeat the opposition and defend the administration’s policy and position.

Bundy wrote in the 1990s that “On explaining the war my differences with President Johnson were much deeper, and they eventually led me in the summer of 1965 to the conclusion that I should leave the government, which I did in early 1966.”<sup>201</sup> According to Bundy, “persistent and recurrent differences on the way to explain and defend his policy had so undermined the relations between the President and me that I became convinced that I did not have his confidence to the degree that was essential for successful performance as his national security assistant.”<sup>202</sup> It is

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<sup>200</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Notes on LBJ and Vietnam.

<sup>201</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Notes on LBJ and Vietnam.

<sup>202</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Notes on LBJ and Vietnam.

possible that the relationship between Johnson's and Bundy had weakened substantially because of major differences over how best to explain the war effort, though the lack of evidence to defend such a claim makes it relatively unlikely. If Bundy's relations with Johnson had diminished after the debate, as he later claimed, it is entirely possible that the reason was not because Johnson was angered by their major differences regarding transparency, but rather because Bundy had knowingly defied Johnson's wishes by participating in a very public debate on the war. On one occasion Bundy revealed to Goldstein that Johnson had felt that his participation in the debate had been "an act of disloyalty."<sup>203</sup> Reflecting on the situation in 1996, Bundy said that he had informed Johnson once the decision had been made that "I just couldn't live with myself if I didn't do it."<sup>204</sup> McGeorge Bundy was many things, but as his decision to participate in the CBS debate suggests, a "staff officer" resigned to doing exactly as he was told was not one of them.

It is worth noting that there is little evidence beyond Bundy's historical memory to suggest that Bundy and Johnson's relationship had in fact weakened substantially after the CBS debate. In the years after Bundy left the Johnson administration in 1966 to assume the presidency of the Ford Foundation, he and the president kept in fairly close contact and Bundy continued to occasionally advise Johnson on the war effort. Elsewhere in Bundy's notes on the war from the 1990s he offered an alternate explanation for his departure from the White House, which was far less dramatic but perhaps more honest. On a page in his notes titled "When & How I

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<sup>203</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.196.

<sup>204</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.193.

Left,” Bundy wrote that the most important point regarding his departure was that he was tired.<sup>205</sup>

McGeorge Bundy was one of Johnson’s most trusted advisors throughout 1965. The evidence suggests that Bundy had encouraged escalation of the war effort over the course of the year. Bundy and Johnson differed on occasion about how much and how best to explain the war effort, but Bundy had not strongly encouraged the President to be substantially more transparent with the American people. In short, Johnson’s decisions in 1965 were not made in a vacuum. Though he understood that the final decisions on Vietnam were his to make, those decisions were preceded by conversations and consultations in which Johnson not only heard, but listened and responded to, the advice of his hawkish National Security Advisor.

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<sup>205</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, Vietnam – Chapters, When & How I Left.

## *Conclusion*

### *An Influential and Hawkish Advisor*

#### *The Bundy Revisionists and the Kennedy Counterfactual*

Though it is generally dangerous to engage in games of historical “what if,” it is worth briefly addressing the Kennedy counterfactual given the frequency and conviction with which the Bundy revisionists have employed it to defend their case that Johnson’s advisors played a relatively small role in the Vietnam decision-making process. According to the counterfactual, John F. Kennedy would not have substantially escalated the war effort in 1965 had he lived. Gordon Goldstein argued that it can be assumed that Kennedy would have rejected a proposal to deploy combat troops in 1965.<sup>206</sup> Skeptical of the Bundy revisionists’ use of the counterfactual, historian Andrew Preston stressed that by accepting the contention that Kennedy would not have escalated in Vietnam whereas Johnson did, one must also accept that “it is Johnson – and not Kennedy, McNamara, Rusk, or Bundy – with whom the ultimate responsibility for the disastrous Vietnam War rests. With such enormously high stakes it is not difficult to understand why this battle for history and historical reputation has been waged on this singular issue.<sup>207</sup> Bundy retrospectively agreed with Goldstein, asserting that Vietnam did not have to be Lyndon Johnson’s War. According to Bundy, Vietnam became Lyndon Johnson’s War because “he could not himself appear to be a loser.”<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.245.

<sup>207</sup> Andrew Preston, *The War Council*, p.130.

<sup>208</sup> Andrew Preston, *The War Council*, p.130.

Initially, Bundy refused to engage in the counterfactual debate. In 1978 he said to an audience at the Massachusetts Historical Society, “I have never thought it wise to speculate in public as to what John Kennedy would have done in Vietnam had he lived. The public record shows him constantly asserting two propositions that could not have coexisted early in later years: that we must not quit there and that in the end the Vietnamese must do the job for themselves.”<sup>209</sup> Less than two decades later, however, Bundy made a 180 degree turn, emphasizing the importance of the counterfactual and adamantly arguing that Kennedy would not have escalated in Vietnam had he lived. Historians Blight and Lang recalled Bundy saying in 1996 that “We should pay attention to the leaders, and not get lost in the maze of memos authored by assistants...the war cannot be understood apart from an understanding of Lyndon Johnson – a deep understanding – and the ways he differed from Kennedy.”<sup>210</sup> In an interview with Goldstein in 1995, Bundy flatly stated that Kennedy would not have expanded the war. “He would have found a way to negotiate it. He would not have a U.S. ground war...And there would have been no Gulf of Tonkin Resolution”<sup>211</sup>

Goldstein placed so much weight on Bundy’s retrospective view on the counterfactual that he directly referenced it in the concluding paragraph of *Lessons in Disaster*. Goldstein wrote that “In our extensive discussions and in his draft fragments, Bundy argued that the Vietnam War could have been averted by President Kennedy’s determined choice.” Praising Bundy’s efforts to reflect on the path to war during the

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<sup>209</sup> Preston, *The War Council*, p.130.

<sup>210</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.247.

<sup>211</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, Meeting Transcript: McGeorge Bundy and Gordon Goldstein, 19 December 1995, p.6.

final years of his life, Goldstein went on to argue that Bundy's retrospective view would help current and future generations better understand the "indispensable centrality of the commander in chief's leadership. As Bundy's final reflections of Vietnam illuminate, intervention is a presidential choice, not an inevitability."<sup>212</sup> According to Goldstein, this was the most important lesson that could be learned from Bundy's role in the Vietnam decision-making process. Goldstein's choice to derive the "most important" lesson from Vietnam from the Kennedy counterfactual is particularly interesting given that Bundy observed in a 1995 meeting with Goldstein that "If we make the Kennedy hypothetical try to carry the general point we're over stressing it."<sup>213</sup>

The evidence suggests that the Bundy revisionists' contention that Kennedy would not have escalated in 1965 is questionable at best. More importantly, the extensive paper trail from 1964 and 1965 demonstrates that the Bundy revisionists' related argument that Bundy and his fellow advisors were relatively insignificant given the "indispensable centrality" of the commander in chief is simply incorrect. Johnson by no means made the crucial decisions of 1964 and 1965 alone. Though the Bundy revisionists rightly argue that Johnson's personality and politics substantially influenced his decisions, they were not the only, or even the most important, determinants of Johnson's Vietnam decision-making. Contrary to Bundy's retrospective assertions, escalation was not primarily the result of Johnson's domestic policy concerns, though these concerns certainly contributed to his hesitancy to make dramatic policy decisions in 1964 and his avoidance of a great debate on Vietnam. Nor

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<sup>212</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p.248.

<sup>213</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, Meeting Transcript: McGeorge Bundy and Gordon Goldstein, 19 December 1995. p.13.

was escalation primarily the result of Johnson's personal refusal to be the first U.S. president to lose a war, though machismo did play a part given that Johnson was, as any president would have been and perhaps more than some, concerned with his presidential legacy. Bundy's contention in 1995 that Johnson's decision-making was predominantly driven by the concern that "I'll lose votes in history" paints a much too simple picture.<sup>214</sup>

### *True Believers on Vietnam*

The evidence further suggests that the primary reason that Johnson, Bundy, and his fellow advisors supported escalation in 1965 is the same reason that Kennedy would likely have supported it. In the simplest of terms, they believed that maintaining the United States' commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam was the right thing to do and that expanding the war effort was necessary to uphold that commitment. Moreover, they strongly felt that U.S. credibility was at stake both at home and abroad, that the threat of international communism needed to be confronted, and that, despite the deteriorating situation in Vietnam, the war could and would be won. Throughout 1964 and 1965 they strongly believed that the United States was responsible for maintaining its commitment to Vietnam and had to make a substantial effort, even if the war could not be won.

Bundy made his belief in the fundamental rightness of the United States' commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam clear throughout 1964 and 1965. His February 1965 memorandum to Johnson was particularly telling. Bundy recommended

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<sup>214</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, Meeting Transcript: McGeorge Bundy and Gordon Goldstein, 19 December 1995, p.6.

a further expanded war effort despite increasingly clear signs that the war was not going well. “The prospect in Vietnam is grim... We cannot assert that a policy of sustained reprisal will succeed in changing the course of the contest in Vietnam. It may fail, and we cannot estimate the odds of success with any accuracy--they may be somewhere between 25% and 75%. What we can say is that even if it fails, the policy will be worth it. At a minimum it will damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own.”<sup>215</sup>

Bundy’s clear commitment to staying the course and doing “all that we could have done” in Vietnam was a defining characteristic of his tenure as National Security Advisor. In February 1966 Bundy argued that “danger to one man’s life, as such, is not a worthy guide... If the basic questions of interest, right, and power are answered, the casualties and costs are to be accepted.”<sup>216</sup> He stood by this basic belief that the United States should stand and fight in South Vietnam even as the military situation deteriorated and the political opposition mounted. In a January 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article, Bundy wrote that “It seems almost certain that without the military commitments made by President Kennedy and President Johnson in late 1961 and 1965 in each case after the most prayerful consideration of the consequences of both action and inaction South Viet Nam would have been delivered to the tender care of Hanoi and the chances for peaceful progress in many Pacific nations would have been heavily reduced. My own belief is that it is right to persevere in the interest of the Vietnamese, in our own interest and in the wider interest of peace and progress in the

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<sup>215</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, February 7, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.2, Document 84.

<sup>216</sup> Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.301.

Pacific.”<sup>217</sup> Even as late as 1991, Bundy acknowledged that in 1964 and 1965 he had mistakenly, but nevertheless resolutely, believed that that the war should be fought and could be won. When asked what the single greatest weakness or failure in Vietnam was, Bundy replied that “I guess as I see it now...the whole adventure, or misadventure...is a question of the point at which you decide that it won’t work. And from my point of view that happened in 67 and 68. I think the mistake was not to see it sooner... I’ve always thought that the biggest turning point was 65 and that that was the biggest mistake. I had a part in it, obviously.”<sup>218</sup>

The evidence thus provides little reason to accept Fred Logevall’s argument that Bundy and McNamara “cannot be considered true believers on Vietnam...in the sense of truly believing that the United States had a moral obligation to help the South Vietnamese or that American national interests were seriously threatened by the events in Indochina.” Logevall’s answer to the question of why Bundy and McNamara supported Americanization of the war if they did not truly believe in it, as he claims, was equally unconvincing. He contended that Bundy and McNamara favored Americanization “less out of concern for American credibility...than out of concern for their own personal credibility. For more than three years, McNamara and Bundy had counseled the need to stand firm in the war (a relatively easy thing to do in, say, 1962, when the commitment was small and the Cold War situation considerably more tense), and to go against that now would be to expose themselves to potential humiliation and to threaten their careers. It is not difficult to imagine both men, and especially McNamara, arguing with equal effectiveness for the need to cut losses and

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<sup>217</sup> McGeorge Bundy, “The End of Either/Or,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 45. no. 2. January 1967, pp.189-201.

<sup>218</sup> JFK Library, Box 225, Interview, Article, Correspondence etc, Interview with McGeorge Bundy, July 16, 1991.

get out of the conflict, had they served a president who had sought such a result...From 23 November 1963 it was ‘Lyndon Johnson’s War.’”<sup>219</sup>

### *An Influential and Hawkish Advisor*

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Bundy did believe in the basic rightness of the war and that the Vietnam War was not Johnson’s alone. Though Lyndon Johnson certainly made the final decisions as commander-in-chief, those decisions were heavily influenced by the beliefs and recommendations of his top advisors; Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk. These four men were largely on the same page about Vietnam throughout 1964 and 1965. Rightly or wrongly, they generally reinforced, rather than challenged, one another’s views. They were ready and willing, though not eager, to expand the United States’ efforts in Vietnam in order to fight communism, maintain American credibility, and win the war. More often than not, Johnson and his top advisors were marching to war in stride.

In a draft of the introduction for the book he had been working on in 1996, Bundy wrote that “I do not apologize for focusing on what was decided and not decided and explained or not explained at the time, by the two Presidents themselves...Neither of them ever forgot for a moment, as President, that the final authority and responsibility for decisions on Vietnam was his and his alone.”<sup>220</sup> Elsewhere in his personal notes Bundy offers a somewhat more moderate perspective, writing that “*Within the executive branch* he decides what he decides. But that sweeping reality does not end the discussion, it only begins it. (The) President cannot

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<sup>219</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.390.

<sup>220</sup> JFK Library. Box 223, Draft #1, Introduction #2, June 3, 1996, pp.2-4.

fight war himself, and he cannot estimate situation alone, and he cannot raise armies, or pay bills, or set a strategy alone. Can he really make war *alone? Not really...* From this set of observations we get: *attention to the President...* But *not* to let assistants off.”<sup>221</sup>

Unfortunately, the Bundy revisionists, and, for the most part Bundy himself, have endeavored to let Johnson’s top advisors off the hook with regard to their involvement in the Vietnam quagmire. They have adamantly and consistently portrayed Bundy as a relatively insignificant advisor who spent much of his time clinging to the coattails of a dominant Lyndon Johnson. Contrary to the Bundy revisionists’ portrayal, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Bundy was an instrumental advisor who provided frequently flawed, but largely influential, advice to the often uncertain president.

Lyndon Johnson was not under the thumb of his inherited advisors, but neither were the “best and the brightest” under the thumb of Lyndon Johnson. Both Johnson and Bundy played substantial roles in the decision-making process on Vietnam during the crucial years of 1964 and 1965. As such, both men must be held accountable for their large part in shaping the Vietnam quagmire. During discussions with the Bundy revisionists and others in the 1990s, Bundy was quick to lay the blame for the Vietnam quagmire squarely on the shoulders of Lyndon Johnson. Yet in his 1971 speech at the Council on Foreign Relations he had plainly stated that “to avoid misunderstanding, I should say at the outset that in my determined judgment no man ever tried harder, or

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<sup>221</sup> JFK Library, Box 226.

with deeper commitment, to do right about Vietnam than President Johnson.”<sup>222</sup> The exact reasons for Bundy’s change in perspective remain unknown, but it is clear that his contentions in 1971 were much closer to reality than his contentions in the 1990s.

Lyndon Johnson undoubtedly bares a substantial amount of responsibility for the decisions made on Vietnam in 1964 and 1965. Yet, just as he did not make those decisions alone, he should not bare the responsibility alone. In a telling note that Bundy wrote when reflecting on the war in 1995, Bundy stated that “At the beginning the hawks prevailed in our policy, and at the end the doves did. In 1995 it seems clear that the doves were right. One question to which I have addressed myself is why the rest of *us* learned so slowly.”<sup>223</sup> The “best and the brightest” were neither bad nor unintelligent men. They were well-educated, highly intelligent individuals whose advice was often flawed, but almost always influential. As David Halberstam wrote, “they were very confident of themselves and their capacity to wield power. The dry runs were behind them. They could handle events. They had confidence in themselves and in each other.”<sup>224</sup> Johnson and his top advisors were confident, impressive men who made a series of poor decisions which would unfortunately be paid for with the blood and treasure of others. To the extent that reaffirming Kennedy’s commitment to South Vietnam in 1963, expanding the U.S. commitment and securing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, and quietly escalating the war effort through a substantial increase in ground combat troops in 1965 were mistakes, they were mistakes that Johnson and his top advisors made together.

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<sup>222</sup> JFK Library, Box 224, “Vietnam McGB 1971 CFR Lectures (3), American Policy and Politics,” First Draft 4/20/71, p.1.

<sup>223</sup> JFK Library, December 19, 1995, Bundy and Goldstein Meeting Transcript. Emphasis added.

<sup>224</sup> Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p.399.

Just as Johnson and his top advisors must be held accountable for their part in the war, the Bundy revisionists must be held accountable for the scholarship they have published. On the whole, they have underrepresented Bundy's influence, substantially downplayed Bundy's advocacy of expanding the war effort, and have too readily accepted with Bundy's retrospective views. Like any individual, McGeorge Bundy had both great weaknesses and great strengths. My intent has never been to condemn Bundy as a person or as an advisor. It has simply been to set the record straight regarding Bundy's views on the war effort and his impact on America's path to war in Vietnam.

In the 1990s Bundy was determined to highlight the role of the president in the decision-making process, while leaving advisors in the shadows. In a fragment that he intended to include in the introduction to his book on Vietnam, Bundy wrote that "Except for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson I do not focus much on individual performance. The dominant American decision makers before, during, and after my time in Washington were the two Presidents. I consider their choices – and also their choices about the way to make choices."<sup>225</sup> By adopting this approach when reflecting on the war, Bundy offered a highly skewed and incomplete picture of Johnson's decision-making process. Quite conveniently, he was more than happy to leave himself and his fellow advisors largely out of the Vietnam story. By relying so heavily on Bundy's retrospective views regarding his recommendations to Johnson and his role in the decision-making process on Vietnam in 1964 and 1965, the Bundy revisionists

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<sup>225</sup> JFK Library, Box 223, Fragment #10, January 1996, for Introduction, April 1, 1996, p.15.

offer a highly skewed and incomplete picture of the decision-making process on Vietnam as well.

The Bundy revisionists' view that Bundy was neither a particularly prominent player in the Vietnam decision-making process nor a particularly strong advocate of expanding the United States' role in South Vietnam is not only flawed, but also has been used to make a particularly problematic larger argument. In a 1993 oral history interview, Bundy adamantly argued that "This is a *presidential* form of government" and that the "power not to make war...is clearly, inescapably and inherently Presidential."<sup>226</sup> After months of discussions with Bundy, Gordon Goldstein concluded that two of the most important lessons from Bundy's views and role in the decision-making process on the Vietnam War are that "Counselors advice, bur presidents decide" and that "intervention is a presidential choice, not an inevitability."<sup>227</sup> Like Goldstein and Bundy, Francis Bator, Fred Logevall and Kai Bird have placed tremendous emphasis on the idea of the "indispensible centrality of the commander in chief's leadership."<sup>228</sup> According to their argument, advisors are little more than minor actors in the president's play. Bator rightly argued that the idea that Johnson was "under the thumb of his inherited advisers" is "simply wrong."<sup>229</sup> Yet the contention that Johnson's inherited advisers were under the president's thumb is equally wrong. When it came to Vietnam decision-making in 1964 and 1965 Lyndon Johnson did not run his own show and McGeorge Bundy did not often find himself dragging his heels

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<sup>226</sup> Transcript, McGeorge Bundy Oral History Special Interview I, 3/30/93, by Robert Dallek, Internet Copy, LBJ Library. JFK Library, Box 224, Vietnam-Fragments: 1965.

<sup>227</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons In Disaster*, p.248.

<sup>228</sup> Goldstein, *Lessons In Disaster*, p.248.

<sup>229</sup> Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," p.2.

and holding onto the president's coattails.<sup>230</sup> During his tenure at the White House, McGeorge Bundy was neither a staff officer nor a messenger boy. He was a trusted and hawkish advisor.

### *The Bundy Counterfactual*

Would the Vietnam War have unfolded differently in 1964 and 1965 had McGeorge Bundy not been National Security Advisor? Andrew Preston contends that “without (Bundy’s) efforts, the war would not have unfolded as it did; indeed, it may not have unfolded at all.”<sup>231</sup> Preston takes the argument too far in suggesting that without Bundy the Vietnam War may not have unfolded at all, but he is certainly right that without Bundy the war would not have unfolded as it did. As a determined and influential advocate of the war effort, Bundy often persuaded Johnson to “do more” in South Vietnam than the president would likely have done otherwise. Bundy was not the most hawkish member of the Johnson Administration, but he was one of the earliest, most consistent, and most persuasive advocates of expanding the war effort.

Throughout his tenure as National Security Advisor Bundy persuasively advocated an expanded U.S. role in South Vietnam. On 15 November 1961 Bundy advised Kennedy to consider committing limited U.S. combat units to South Vietnam on the grounds that a victory in South Vietnam would produce great effects throughout the world. Even at that early date Bundy was convinced that South Vietnam had become a touchstone of the United States’ will.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” p.23. Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.269.

<sup>231</sup> Preston. *The War Council*, p.248.

<sup>232</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, November 15, 1961. *FRUS*, 1961-1963, vol.1, Document 253.

Bundy argued the case for expanding the war effort with much more forcefulness, and to much greater avail, under Lyndon Johnson. In November 1963 Bundy strongly supported the continuation of the United States' commitment to South Vietnam. In January 1964 Bundy encouraged Johnson not to quit in Saigon on the grounds that the political damage to Truman and Acheson from the fall of China resulted from most Americans' belief that the United States should have done more than it did to prevent it.<sup>233</sup> In early August 1964 Bundy supported seeking a congressional resolution. In late August he advised Johnson to seriously consider a drastic option that few if anyone else in the administration had been discussing; the use of substantial U.S. armed forces in operations against the Viet Cong. According to Bundy, putting in a couple of brigade-sized troop units would likely be good medicine everywhere.<sup>234</sup> Two months later Bundy paid very little attention to George Ball's seventy-five page memorandum questioning the fundamental premises of the war effort and proposing that the United States' withdraw. In January 1965 Bundy flatly stated that he favored escalation in South Vietnam. The following month he strongly supported gradual and sustained aerial bombardment of North Vietnam through Operation Rolling Thunder.

Throughout 1964 and 1965 it was McGeorge Bundy, not Lyndon Johnson, who wanted to do more in South Vietnam. Though Bundy did not always persuade Johnson to do as much more in South Vietnam as he would have liked, Bundy effectively advised Johnson to do more than the president would likely have done otherwise. When it came to decisions that Johnson was already inclined to make, such as securing

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<sup>233</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, January 9, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 8.

<sup>234</sup> Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, August 31, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol.1, Document 335. Emphasis added.

a congressional resolution in the wake of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incidents, Bundy provided the necessary support and credibility to ensure that such decisions would move forward. When it came to decisions which Johnson was hesitant to make, such as substantially escalating the Vietnam War in early 1965, Bundy determinedly, and often effectively, pushed Johnson beyond his comfort zone until he had persuaded the president to make decisions that he had been on the fence about.

Johnson did not always take Bundy's advice, but he always listened to and was often persuaded by Bundy's recommendations. Had the National Security Advisor sided with men like George Ball, who were determined to "do less" in South Vietnam, rather than with those who were determined to "do more," the decisions made on the Vietnam War by the Johnson Administration, and thus the unfolding of the war more generally, would likely have been much different.

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