

How the U.S. Became Embroiled In the Vietnam War

“They only advised you, Mr. President. You decided. Against all your natural instincts, against the whole of your life experience, you decided.”

—Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford speaking to L.B.J. about U.S. policy on Vietnam, in a scene from *Path To War*

The Vietnam War was a turning point in American history: it not only marked the first defeat for the U.S. military, but it also signaled a transformation in the relationship between citizens and government. In the HBO film *Path To War*, students can witness firsthand the process by which President Lyndon Baines Johnson made a series of fateful decisions concerning U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Based on transcripts of secretly recorded conversations, diary entries, letters and interviews with key policymakers, the film sheds fascinating light on the inner workings of the Johnson White House.

L.B.J. was a colorful character who frequently made off-color remarks, and *Path To War* does not shy away from portraying this aspect of Johnson's personality. The film also includes violent images of war. Accordingly, teachers may find it useful to preview the film prior to assigning it to students.

Before Viewing

To provide background on the Vietnam War, you might distribute copies of the inTIME magazine created to accompany *Path To War*. Ask students: Based on the article on pages 2 and 3, what was the primary reason that L.B.J. and previous Presidents believed the U.S. had a role to play in Vietnam? What outlook did each of the advisers profiled on pages 4 and 5 bring to the White House? What are the key lessons to be drawn from the Vietnam War, as outlined on pages 6 and 7? Based on data on page 8, how did public support for L.B.J.'s handling of the war shift?

While Viewing

Directed by John Frankenheimer (whose previous films include *The Manchurian*

Candidate and *Reindeer Games*), *Path To War* stars Michael Gambon as L.B.J., Donald Sutherland as Clark Clifford and Alec Baldwin as Robert McNamara; its running time is 2 hours, 45 minutes. As students watch the film, encourage them to take notes in answer to the following questions: At what moments in the film does U.S. policy on Vietnam shift? Who seems to wield the most influence on Johnson at these moments? How do advisers' positions on the war change during the course of the film?

After Viewing

Path To War can spark an animated class discussion on a variety of topics. Subjects to explore with students include:

Setting the scene

Describe the mood of the opening scene. What distinguished Johnson's performance in the 1964 election? What goals did L.B.J. spell out in his inaugural speech?

Image of L.B.J.

How is L.B.J. portrayed in the movie? What do you see as his strengths and weaknesses? What words would you use to characterize his personality? In your view, which specific scenes offer the greatest insight into L.B.J.?

The decision-making process

What was the process by which the President made decisions on Vietnam? What role did his advisers play? How much consensus do you see within the White House? How were differences aired? What is your reaction to Clark Clifford's statement, quoted above? (For a worksheet on L.B.J.'s interactions with advisers, see page 2.)

In This Guide

- Advising the President
- TIME Capsules: 1965 and 1968
- Resources for Further Exploration



Domestic vs. foreign priorities

What were President Johnson's hopes and dreams for the U.S. domestic agenda? Which of these did he achieve? Which were overshadowed by the war effort? Why?

L.B.J.'s handling of the war

How did L.B.J. "sell" the Vietnam conflict to the American people? To members of Congress? To himself? What limits did L.B.J. impose on U.S. troops in Vietnam? Why?

The anti-war movement

How and for what reasons did Americans voice their opposition to U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia? Describe the actions that Norman Morrison took. What was your reaction to Morrison's act? Did you see it as an act of bravery or of cowardice? Why?

Outcomes and legacies

How and when did the Vietnam War end? What was the cost to the U.S., in human lives and dollars? In your view, how should L.B.J. be remembered by history? Was he a "tragic figure," as some historians have argued? How do you think director John Frankenheimer would answer this question?



Advising the President



Path To War takes viewers inside the White House to show the debates that occurred as President Lyndon Baines Johnson and his team of advisers struggled to formulate U.S. policy on Vietnam. Select one of these debates, listed below, for closer examination. As you watch the selected scene, take notes in the chart on this page to indicate what advice each counselor gave the President. (If you need more space, use the back of this sheet; note that not all advisers are present for each scene.) After completing the chart, use your notes to answer the questions at the bottom of the page.

Scene 1: L.B.J. and advisers in the Cabinet Room debate Operation Rolling Thunder • February 1965

Opening line: McNamara says, "It's over the border in North Vietnam. There are about 6,000 troops based there. It's an isolated facility..."

When scene occurs: 20:23 into film

Scene 2: L.B.J. and advisers in the Cabinet Room discuss Program of Expanded Military and Political Moves for Vietnam • July 1, 1965

Opening line: Johnson says, "But wouldn't we lose credibility throughout the world if we give up?"

When scene occurs: 52:30 into film

Scene 3: L.B.J. and advisers in the Cabinet Room consider whether to pause the bombing of Vietnam • December 1965

Opening line: CIA briefer says, "The North Vietnamese have never known anything but war."

When scene occurs: 78:17 into film

ADVISER	ADVICE TO L.B.J.
Donald McNamara, Secretary of Defense	
Dean Rusk, Secretary of State	
George Ball, Undersecretary of State	
General Earle Wheeler, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff	
Bill Moyers, Press Secretary	
Clark Clifford, Private Counsel	

For Discussion or Writing

1. In your view, which of the advisers in the scene you selected presented the wisest counsel to L.B.J.? With whom do you disagree most strongly? Why?
2. To what extent did the President's advisers agree among themselves on the proper role for the U.S. to play in Vietnam? How much dissent was evident within the scene you analyzed?
3. How did L.B.J. respond to the advice he received in this scene? Based on later scenes within *Path To War*, what were the consequences of this decision for the U.S.? For North and South Vietnam? For L.B.J.?

February 19, 1965

A Look Down That Long Road



TO THE MEMBERS OF THE National Security Council, seated around the coffin-shaped table in the Cabinet Room of the White House, President Lyndon Johnson said with quiet anger: “I’ve gone far enough. I’ve had enough of this.” And so, in response to a murderous series of Communist attacks against U.S. military forces and installations in South Vietnam, the

President last week gave the orders that sent American and Vietnamese warplanes on bombing raids in North Vietnam. Targets of these raids included communications systems, supply dumps and guerrilla staging areas.

For 15 months, Johnson had refused to change course, despite the steadily deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. To retreat, he said, would be “strategically unwise and morally unthinkable.” To expand the war might get the U.S. into a fight “with 700 million Chinese.” On the very eve of the current crisis he reiterated to an associate his determination to “go neither north nor south.”

Two days before the U.S. presidential election, guerrillas killed five Americans, wounded 76, and destroyed six B-57 bombers with a savage mortar barrage. Last Christmas Eve, a plastic charge demolished Saigon’s Brink Hotel, killing two Americans and wounding 96 others. Both times U.S. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor pleaded for a retaliatory strike at the North. Both times he was rejected.

Given this evidence, it was not surprising that the North Vietnamese thought they could continue to operate with impunity from their privileged sanctuary against the South. Finally, though, they provoked Lyndon Johnson beyond patience....

January 5, 1968

A Depression of the National Spirit

A DOUBT THAT IN THE past had rarely been articulated or even felt crept into the American consciousness in 1967: Is the U.S., after all, as fallible in its aims and unsure of its answers as any other power? Can—and should—the Vietnam War be won? Can the nation simultaneously allay poverty, widen opportunity, eradicate racism, make its cities habitable and its laws uniformly just? Or will it have to jettison urgent social objectives at home for stern and insistent commitments abroad?



It was increasingly clear that the attainment of all these elusive goals would require, above all, a quality that Americans have always found difficult to cultivate: patience. Yet, as the National Committee for an Effective Congress declared last week, with no exaggeration intended, “America has experienced two great internal crises in her history: the Civil War and the economic Depression of the 1930s. The country may now be on the brink of a third trauma, a depression of the national spirit.”

More than ever before in an era of material well-being, the nation’s discontent was focused upon its President. The man in the White House is at once the chief repository of the nation’s aspirations and the supreme scapegoat for its frustrations. As such, Lyndon Johnson was the topic of TV talk shows and cocktail-party conversations, the obsession of pundits and politicians at home and abroad, of businessmen and scholars, cartoonists and ordinary citizens throughout 1967.

Inescapably, he was the Man of the Year....

For Discussion or Writing

1. What shift in U.S. policy is reported in the first article? What is TIME’s perspective on this event?
2. According to the second article, why was L.B.J. the “supreme scapegoat” for the nation’s every frustration? In your view, was it fair for Americans to blame the President for so many problems? Explain.
3. Based on evidence contained in these two articles, how did the Vietnam War’s impact on life in the U.S. change between 1965 and 1968?

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For Further Exploration



Books

Beschloss, Michael. *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001). These transcripts take readers inside the Johnson White House and reveal how and why U.S. policy on Vietnam was formed.

Halberstam, David. *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1973). One of the most compelling books written on the Vietnam War, with insightful portraits of Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk and other key players in the war.

Herr, Michael. *Dispatches* (New York: Knopf, 1977). A reporter's notes from the battlefield, capturing the feel of life in the trenches.

Kearns, Doris. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Signet, 1976). A revealing and in-depth portrait by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

O'Nan, Stewart, editor. *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998). A superb anthology that represents a multiplicity of perspectives on the Vietnam War experience.

Documentaries

Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam, directed by Bill Couturie (1987, 84 min.) Soldiers' actual letters to their loved ones reveal the words and images of the war.

L.B.J., directed by David Grubin (1991, 4 hours). A comprehensive television biography of Johnson. Distributor: PBS Home Video, www.shop.pbs.org.

Regret to Inform, directed by Barbara Sonneborn (1998, 72 min.). A personal film about widows of Vietnam veterans, both American and Vietnamese. Distributor: New Yorker Films, www.newyorkerfilms.com.

Hearts and Minds, directed by Peter Davis (1974, 110 min.). This Academy Award-winning documentary, which traces U.S. involvement in Vietnam, is considered one of the most poignant anti-war films ever made.

Vietnam: A Television History (1983, 13 hours). A comprehensive history of the war and its aftermath, from the American perspective. Distributor: PBS Home Video; www.shop.pbs.org.

Feature films

Apocalypse Now, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (1979, 153 min.). Inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, this classic Vietnam epic starring Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen was re-released in 2001 as *Apocalypse Now Redux*.

Born on the Fourth of July, directed by Oliver Stone (1989, 144 min.). Based on a memoir by Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic, who came back from Vietnam in a wheelchair and eventually led veterans in opposition to the war.

Go Tell the Spartans, directed by Ted Post (1978, 114 min.). Set in 1964, this overlooked feature starring Burt Lancaster is considered one of the best films on the war.

Websites

www.vwip.org

The Vietnam War Internet Project provides an extensive collection of documents and images, along with oral histories of those who served in and opposed the conflict.

www.members.aol.com/veterans/warlib6v.htm

The Vietnam War Master Resource Guide, with links to hundreds of related sites.

www.thevirtualwall.org

Veteran profiles, remembrances and name rubbings at this online memorial.

Starting Points for Research and Writing

1. Behind L.B.J.'s mask.

"Every night when I fell asleep," L.B.J. told historian Doris Kearns, "I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: Coward! Traitor! Weaking!" Use the books by Kearns, Beschloss and/or Halberstam, cited at left, to construct a psychological portrait of L.B.J. How did the President's public persona contrast with the inner turmoil he was experiencing during the Vietnam years?

2. Analyzing the draft. The draft was unevenly applied: high school graduates were twice as likely to be drafted as college graduates, and the draft also seemed to single out black, poor and working-class young men over white, middle-class men. Through interviews with members of your community or family, learn more about responses to and experiences with the draft. Share your findings with classmates.

3. The Gulf of Tonkin incident: fact or fiction? Sydney Schanberg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, has criticized the press for its "unquestioning chorus of agreeability when Lyndon Johnson bamboozled us with his fabrication of the Gulf of Tonkin incident." Investigate Schanberg's claim. How was this incident reported in 1964? What do historians now believe actually happened?



To learn more about *Path To War*, visit www.hbo.com/films/pathtowar

For additional teaching resources, visit www.timeclassroom.com/vietnam