Like their predecessor Dwight D. Eisenhower, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson adhered to the major tenets of post-World War II US foreign policy. They saw the Cold War as a long-term struggle played out in military, ideological, political, economic, scientific, and cultural arenas. All three leaders sought to contain the Soviet Union while advancing US influence around the globe. They agreed that radical revolution threatened US interests, and that such upheavals were instigated by the Soviets, "Red China," or Fidel Castro's Cuba. All three presidents believed that Western-style modernization — and particularly American values and institutions— offered the best model for developing nations. They also concurred on the strategy of tightening links with European allies in order to win the Cold War, head off potential problems with Germany, and compensate for the relative decline in US economic predominance. Kennedy (JFK) and Johnson (LBJ) differed from Eisenhower, however, in embracing an exuberant activism that "Ike" distrusted. In their respective presidencies, Kennedy and Johnson saw greater opportunities and threats than Eisenhower perceived in his time.  

While Kennedy and Johnson differed in background, style, and the relative emphasis each placed on domestic or foreign initiatives, they shared similar ideological assumptions and policy goals. Both had competitive personalities.

Kennedy and Johnson regarded the Cold War as the defining paradigm for international relations in their time. They interpreted almost all events and trends in terms of this struggle. On the one hand, this view was nearly inevitable. These men faced the unremitting reality of East-West propaganda barrages, nuclear and conventional arms rivalries, a space race, troops glaring across the tense borders dividing Germany and Korea, tension over Berlin, civil wars in Vietnam and Laos, revolution in Cuba, and competition for new African states and non-aligned nations in Asia and Latin America. Kennedy and Johnson worried that Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, egged on by a militantly anti-American "Red China," might indeed try to "bury" the United States, if not militarily, at least economically. Indeed, the Cold War intensified in 1961-62 as the Berlin and Cuban missile crises brought the superpowers to the brink of nuclear war.

On the other hand, the Cold War, like other paradigms, entailed some distortion of perceptions. Long-term changes that probably would have occurred in the absence of the East-West struggle were interpreted by Kennedy and Johnson as Cold War phenomena. With historical hindsight, decolonization appears as the nearly inevitable redress of power by Africans and Asians temporarily overwhelmed by Europeans in the nineteenth century. From the perspective of Kennedy and Johnson, however, the breakup of colonial empires upset the established order they had known since youth. They regarded the new nations as malleable objects of Cold War competition that might be won for the West or lost to the East. Another secular trend largely independent of the Cold War was China's recovery of great power status after its century of neocolonialism and civil war. JFK and LBJ, however, interpreted this development as a Cold War disaster. In a telling Cold War discourse, a senior adviser recalled that Kennedy "always regarded the Chicom nuclear explosion as likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s."  

Kennedy, Johnson, and most of their advisers overestimated both the threats and promises facing them. The excitement greeting the dawn of the 1960s was overblown. Caution ended up prevailing in the Berlin crisis and the Cuban missile crisis. New nations in Africa and turbulent ones in Latin America resisted both Communist-exported revolution and US-inspired modernization. Structural problems, such as the US balance-of-payments deficit and the disparity between the US and European wings of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), persisted despite efforts to fix them. Although the worst dangers of the Cold War did not materialize, neither did the promise of détente for Kennedy in 1963 or for Johnson in 1966-68. Historical memory, ideology, and personality encouraged Kennedy and Johnson to overrate the potential of the new decade.

Most of them born in the 1910s, the men in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations reflected their generation's memories of the 1930s-40s, when aggressive nations marched into one country after another. Imprinted with what they regarded as the lesson of Munich, this generation concluded that...

1 See Robert J. McMahon's chapter in volume I.

"totalitarian" states, including the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, were expansionist and ideological. As a consequence, the democracies had to remain armed, vigilant, and opposed to “appeasement.” Kennedy and Johnson feared “Red China” as particularly dangerous because it seemed to be in a highly ideological, “Stalinist” phase. Notions about historical development had another consequence. Kennedy and Johnson shared the prevailing belief that the decade of the 1960s portended extraordinary change. Pundits tried to decide on a unifying “national purpose.” A blue ribbon panel that featured a number of Kennedy’s and Johnson’s appointees, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, published Prospect for America (1958), which predicted a decade of challenge. Presidential adviser Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. recalled that at Kennedy’s inauguration, “we thought … the world was plastic and the future unlimited.”

Such assumptions stemmed in part from rarely questioned ideological beliefs. Kennedy and Johnson assumed that their nation had the power and the obligation to lead others toward adopting American-style institutions and values, particularly elections, gradual reform, and free markets. This doctrine, flattering to American sensibilities, incorporated elements of John Winthrop’s 1630 dream of a model “city upon a hill”; mid-nineteenth-century faith in manifest destiny; and twentieth-century confidence in US superiority in production, technology, and societal institutions. Woodrow Wilson synthesized these notions into an ideology of mission to the rest of the world. Wilson believed that the United States – close to God and superior in its economic, political, and cultural institutions – not only offered a model, but also had the obligation to help other nations become like itself. Wilson and his successors believed that adopting US-style institutions would enable other nations to become more prosperous, modern, stable, and friendly. In turn, the more other nations modeled themselves on the United States, the greater would become US security and the opportunity for Americans to do business and feel comfortable overseas. Radical change, such as in the Russian Revolution of Wilson’s time and the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions during the Kennedy–Johnson era, appeared as the arch enemy to these ideas and to American opportunity.

**Kennedy**

This ideology informed Kennedy’s inaugural address. The new president argued that American freedom packed such transforming power that the

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Robert F. Kennedy recalled, JFK spent half his days on earth in pain. He suffered back spasms, Addison’s disease, and gastrointestinal problems. Kennedy responded by trying to demonstrate manliness and courage. His philandering was extraordinary for the sheer number of women he slept with and the risks he took in choosing such partners as the Mafia moll Judith Campbell Exner. After Kennedy proved his calm toughness to Khrushchev and to the world in the Cuban missile crisis, he seems to have settled into a more relaxed, confident appraisal of risk and dangers.

Before October 1962, however, Kennedy exaggerated crisis. In his inaugural address, he dramatically declared: “In the long history of the world only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger.” By characterizing January 1961 as an historic “hour of maximum danger,” the new president was invoking memories of his generation’s formative experience. In 1941–42, the Germans and Japanese threatened to link up and isolate the rest of the world. But that was not the danger the United States faced in 1961, regardless of how enthusiastically the Soviets and Chinese might support “wars of liberation.” Ten days after he took office, Kennedy warned that in the next four years, “we shall have to test anew whether a nation organized and governed such as ours can endure. The outcome is by no means certain.” This was astounding hyperbole. As Kennedy noted, he was speaking on Franklin D. Roosevelt’s birthday. Kennedy might have considered that even after the devastation of Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt had voiced nothing but confidence in the nation’s institutions.

Kennedy probably expected that a sense of emergency would spur Congress, the bureaucracy, and the allies to accept his proposals. He secured a 15 percent increase in military spending. The Kennedyites’ confidence that they could achieve the extraordinary was reflected in how they labeled their programs: the “New Frontier” at home, the “Grand Design” for Europe, the “Alliance for Progress” for Latin America, and the “New Africa” policy. Equally ambitious was the “Peace Corps,” which would mobilize American youth to win hearts and minds in the Third World. If revolutionary guerrillas threatened, Kennedy would counter with the “Green Berets,” special forces trained in guerrilla tactics. To deter aggression while heading off a nuclear holocaust, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara developed the concept of careful escalation of power through “flexible response.” Despite their differences, these programs were alike in promising so much that they were bound to disappoint. Neither other nations nor structural problems proved as malleable as Kennedy and his advisers hoped.

As Kennedy took office, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) predicted that though the Soviets and the Chinese would promote revolution, they would not risk “recklessness.” Another NIE opined that “stresses and strains” would “weaken the Communist world posture and diminish the effectiveness of world Communism outside the bloc.” After the aborted May 1960 summit froze relations with Eisenhower, Khrushchev anticipated the new president. “What can we do to help the new administration?” the deputy Soviet foreign minister asked Kennedy’s advisers. Khrushchev sought help with his problem: the hemorrhaging of people and talent from East Germany through Berlin. The open city also offered Western espionage and propaganda entry into the Soviet bloc. Khrushchev “had nightmares about it,” his son recalled. “The German problem gave him no peace; instead it kept slipping out of his hands.” The Kremlin leader also acted on his Marxist–Leninist ideology, out of sincere belief and to stave off competition from Mao Zedong. On January 6, 1961, Khrushchev lauded “wars of liberation.” The US ambassador in Moscow pointed out that the speech also reaffirmed peaceful coexistence and declared that wars of liberation must not become wars between states. Kennedy, however, feared that Khrushchev’s tactics could slice away pieces of the Third World. He determined not to lose but rather to win the Cold War.

Although Kennedy and his advisers worried about the Third World, they also understood that wealth and political influence remained concentrated in the northern half of the globe. Indeed, advisers regarded links with Europe as key to winning the Third World and the Cold War. Rusk laid out this thinking:

Western Europe if it were really unified, and the North American Community, if we really developed the relationships that all of us have been discussing ... would be a nexus of special relationships reaching right around the world, with our relations with Latin America, and with the countries in the Pacific, the British with the Commonwealth, and the French with the French-speaking countries. Germany [too] is establishing some interesting relationships with selected countries.

As Rusk saw it, the United States would be the hub, with direct and indirect spokes of influence radiating to most of the world. Such organization would...
isolate the Communists and, he predicted, “would be reflected in growing caution on the part of the Soviet Union.” The Communists would be reduced, as State Department adviser Walt Whitman Rostow put it, to a “relatively minor power in the world.”

Western Europe figured at the center of Kennedy’s concerns. Like Eisenhower, Kennedy worried that the US balance-of-payments deficit, foreign distrust of the dollar, and the resulting gold outflow could weaken the nation’s vitality. “What matters,” Kennedy declared to an adviser, “is the strength of the currency. It is this, and not its nuclear weapons, which makes France a factor. Britain has nuclear weapons, but the pound is weak, so every one pushes it around.”

The European Common Market and Japan were presenting tough competition. US exports could no longer pay for the nation’s imports, capital investments, tourist expenditures, foreign aid, and military expenditure overseas. Kennedy told the National Security Council, “we have been very generous to Europe,” but now “it is time to look out for ourselves.” Cognizant of the crippling impact on Britain of its chronic payments crises, Kennedy warned that “if we cannot keep up our export surplus, we shall not have the dollar exchange with which to meet our military commitments. We must either do a good job of selling abroad or pull back.”

Part of JFK’s solution was the Trade Expansion Act, which facilitated tariff decreases to expand markets for US exporters. (This proved another exercise in overconfidence. The reduced tariffs boosted US imports more than exports.) Kennedy also advocated Britain’s admission into the Common Market (the European Economic Community) to keep it looking outward and receptive to US interests. Given French President Charles de Gaulle’s opposition to allowing the “Anglo-Saxons” into the Common Market, the Kennedy administration deputized West Germany to check de Gaulle. In January 1963, however, de Gaulle shocked Washington and London by vetoing British entry to the Common Market and by signing a friendship treaty with Germany’s octogenarian leader, Konrad Adenauer.

An astonished Kennedy wondered “what kind of a deal [could] de Gaulle make with the Russians which would be acceptable to the Germans?” The phrasing of this question highlighted key assumptions. Almost every international development was interpreted by the administration in terms of the Cold War. An underlying fear was that a diplomatic revolution could overturn the

14 Costigliola, Pursuit of Atlantic Community, 30.
15 Ibid., 50.
16 Ibid., 35.
German "break out" and shift in alliances demonstrated the tendency to overestimate dangers while underestimating the tenacity of the status quo.

The projected multilateral force (MLF) illustrated the mirror tendency of Americans to overestimate their ability to craft institutions. The MLF idea grew out of concern that as the FRG developed its economic and political clout, it would overthrow the restrictions that kept it a nonnuclear power. De Gaulle’s development of an independent nuclear force seemed to set a dangerous example. Joined by other nations, the Soviet Union adamantly opposed a West German nuclear force. After all, many Germans wanted to reunify their nation. Moreover, the FRG, pending a peace treaty, refused to accept as final Germany’s postwar losses of territory. Americans hoped that the MLF could square the circle. Conceived in the Eisenhower years, the MLF was planned as a fleet of surface ships, manned by a mix of NATO nationalities (including Germans) and armed with nuclear missiles. The missiles could not be launched without Washington’s approval. The MLF would give the Germans a finger near, though not on, the nuclear button. Kennedy appreciated the MLF as a device to “increase our influence in Europe and provide a way to guide NATO.”20 Although quickly dubbed the Multilateral Farce, the scheme was embraced by Kennedy, who swallowed his skepticism. The fact that the unwieldy proposal survived into the Johnson years testified to the persistence of US efforts, as a top aide put it, to “contain and provide a creative outlet for a West Germany which might be tempted to seek reunification with East Germany through bilateral arrangements with Moscow.”20

Kennedy believed that the United States could not hope to win in far-off Berlin and Vietnam unless it secured what he saw as the nation’s backyard. Latin America. JFK probably paid more attention to Latin America than did any other president of the Cold War era. He toured southern neighbors, met with leaders, and devoured economic and political reports. Despite his familiarity with the region, however, Kennedy overrated the threats and possibilities.

He called Latin America “the most dangerous area in the world.”21 In retrospect, this designation appears odd because the Soviets had only a minimal presence in Latin America, aside from Cuba. Again, apart from Cuba, there was little possibility of a US or Soviet provocation or miscalculation escalating into a major war, as could happen along the nuclear-armed border between the two Germanys. Kennedy feared that Castro’s charismatic appeal could spread revolution to the dispossessed of the region. Eliminating the Cuban revolutionary grew into an obsession. McNamara remembered that “we were hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter.”22 Castro survived this April 1961 US-sponsored invasion and the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) Operation Mongoose designed to assassinate him and sabotage the Cuban economy. Trying to eliminate Castro helped set in motion a chain of events leading to the worst confrontation of the Cold War. Concern about another US invasion induced the Cuban dictator to welcome the installation of Soviet nuclear-tipped missiles as a deterrent. That led to the US-Soviet missile crisis of October 1962.23 Although Castro’s revolution sparked a nuclear confrontation, the Cuban model ended up being difficult to export. A year after Kennedy’s death, Castro concluded that Latin America presented poor prospects for revolution. The Soviets remained unwilling to commit resources to the region. Latin American Communists resented the Cubans’ know-it-all attitude. In November 1964, Castro shifted his revolutionary efforts to Africa.24 Kennedy exaggerated the promise as well as the danger in Latin America. He probably agreed with Schlesinger, who described “the atmosphere” of the region as “set for miracles.”25 In a speech broadcast throughout the hemisphere on March 13, 1961, Kennedy announced a signature initiative, the Alliance for Progress. He called for sweeping changes to promote economic growth, redistribution of wealth, education, and democracy. His administration pledged $20 billion in public and private US capital, to which Latin Americans were to add $80 billion. The Kennedyites expected that this investment would double real growth rates and foster more equitable, democratic, and stable societies. The hope was that the Alliance could immunize Latin America against Castro-type revolutions. Although such revolutions failed to materialize, it was not because the Alliance reinvigorated economies. Despite the growth in US aid, private capital inflows and internal investment remained disappointing. US modernization theories proved ill adapted to Latin American realities. Elites and middle-class groups clung to their privileges. Economic growth stagnated, and wealth remained concentrated. Despite their

21 Ibid., 99.
soaring rhetoric about democracy, the Kennedyites chose anti-Communist stability rather than risk radical change. US Army Special Forces trained policemen and soldiers in techniques for suppressing popular discontent. Washington accepted military coups in Peru and elsewhere and destabilized democratic, leftist governments in Argentina, Brazil, British Guiana, and Guatemala. The Kennedy administration may have launched more covert operations in Latin America than any other Cold War president. Before his death, Kennedy realized that the Alliance for Progress was sputtering. He remained uncertain how to respond.

Kennedy also perceived serious challenges in Africa and South Asia. The rush to independence by scores of African nations—in 1960 alone—excited imaginations. Kennedy saw supposedly malleable societies that could drift toward capitalist or Communist models of development. Africa appeared a battleground. "We cannot simply sit by and watch on the sidelines," JFK declared. "There are no sidelines."26 Although Kennedy realized that these nations preferred non-alignment, he remained anxious that neutrality not slide toward hostility. Moreover, his competitive nature impelled him to jockey for advantage. Discussing with Rusk which countries were willing to accept Peace Corps volunteers, Kennedy said, "If we can successfully crack Ghana and Guinea, Mali may turn to the West. If so, these would be the first Communist-oriented countries to turn from Moscow to us."27 Also concerned with populous, non-aligned nations such as India, Kennedy told his advisers, "We cannot permit all those who call themselves neutrals to join the Communist bloc." If "we lose them, the balance of power could swing against us."28 The Kennedyites believed their support of India in its 1962 border skirmish with Pakistan. And India was not about to abandon its neutrality in the Cold War. African nations also proved resistant to blandishments. Neither Western nor Eastern models of development met the needs of extractive economies suffering a dearth of infrastructure and trained personnel. Moreover, most Africans remained loath to trade colonialism for some new tutelage. Kennedy also met frustration with the problems of Portuguese rule in Angola and Mozambique, chaos in the Congo, and apartheid in South Africa. Although the United States voted against Portugal in the United Nations, most African nations still


regarded Washington as Lisbon’s ally. While the CIA helped assassinate Congo premier Patrice Lumumba, whom Americans and Belgians feared as unstable and radical, peace did not return to that resource-rich nation. And South Africa resisted Kennedy’s efforts to moderate apartheid.29 Vietnam became the most grievous instance of Kennedy’s tendency to overvalue both dangers and opportunities. JFK developed a special relationship with South Vietnam. Although Senator Kennedy in the early 1950s criticized French colonialism in Vietnam, he welcomed Washington’s client government in Saigon as an independent, vital partner.30 In 1956, Kennedy declared South Vietnam "the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike."31 Subscribing to Eisenhower’s "domino theory," JFK argued that keeping this "finger in the dike" was crucial to preventing Communists from flooding into all of Southeast Asia, which would deprive Japan of markets and raw materials. Senator Kennedy traveled in the American Roman Catholic circles that lauded President Ngo Dinh Diem as the Christian savior of his country.

As president, Kennedy deepened commitments to South Vietnam. Meanwhile, Diem’s unpopular government persecuted non-Communist opponents and botched the suppression of the pro-Communist National Liberation Front (NLF) guerrillas. After Kennedy suffered embarrassment with the Bay of Pigs invasion, a rough-and-tumble summit with Khrushchev in June 1961, and the erection of the Berlin Wall that August, he believed he simply had to "win" on some Cold War battlefield. He took seriously the reports of Vice President Johnson, who journeyed to Vietnam in May 1961, and Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor, who visited in October. Johnson exaggerated the stakes in Vietnam. He praised Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Asia" and framed the issue as a "fundamental decision" between trying "to meet the challenge of Communist expansion now in Southeast Asia" or "throw[ing] in the towel."32 Rostow and Taylor advised sending more US military advisers. By the end of his presidency, JFK had raised their number from 600 to 16,000. Some became casualties.

* The Kennedyites chose escalation because they overrated the ability of foreign military forces to achieve political aims in a culturally different society such as Vietnam. They underplayed the determination of the Vietnamese,
who had a two-thousand-year history of expelling invaders. Wilsonian ideology proved naïve in its underestimation of the resolve of non-Americans to achieve their own goals in their own way. Having raised military spending from his first months in office, Kennedy had at his disposal overwhelming forces: the troops and ships of the US Pacific Command, the Green Berets, and innovative weaponry such as helicopters. After the Soviets backed down when confronted with US superiority during the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy drew the conclusion that escalation of force could impel the Communists in Vietnam likewise to back down. He regarded the conflict as an opportunity to demonstrate that “wars of liberation” could be defeated. The deepening war proved the most tragic element in Kennedy’s legacy to Johnson.

But that legacy also included steps toward détente. The accolades that Kennedy won after his perceived victory in October 1962 seem to have eased his burning need to best the Soviets at every opportunity. The brush with nuclear war tempered him. Khrushchev’s many letters awakened Kennedy to the Soviets’ legitimate concerns about nuclear war, possible German revenge, and improving the lives of the Russian people. In December 1962, JFK mused to Schlesinger that “Khrushchev makes much the same set of charges against the West that the West makes against him.” The president added that this “mirror effect reinforces his own detachment and his refusal to regard the world contest as a holy war.”33 Kennedy and Khrushchev opened a direct “hot line” to ensure communication should another crisis strike. They also renewed efforts to reach a nuclear test ban treaty. On June 10, 1963, at American University, Kennedy called for a relaxation of tensions and “genuine peace” with the Soviet Union. Implicitly recognizing that Khrushchev had reason to dread a remilitarized Germany, Kennedy recalled that “no nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union in the course of the Second World War.”34

This split on détente highlights Kennedy’s mixed legacy to Johnson. Kennedy’s crises gave Johnson breathing space. As leaders, Kennedy and Khrushchev were highly competitive while entertaining exaggerated hopes and fears. This volatile mix had brought the world close to nuclear war. Faced with apocalypse, Washington and Moscow had accepted common-sense mitigation of the underlying problems. The Berlin Wall ended the hemorrhage of East Germans while allowing West Berliners their freedom and ties with the outside world. The Cuban crisis subsided with the missiles withdrawn and the Americans promising not to invade the island unless provoked. This easing of the issues that had preoccupied Americans and the Soviets in 1958–62 enabled the Johnson administration to pursue détente, especially in 1966–68. Happily, there was no serious Soviet–American confrontation during LBJ’s term. Unhappily, the retreat from Armageddon enabled Johnson to focus his foreign policy on a disastrous project, the Vietnam War. Kennedy had deepened the US commitment to South Vietnam. Despite his rhetoric and activism, Kennedy did not solve but rather passed on to Johnson structural problems he had inherited from Eisenhower. The balance-of-payments deficit and gold drain continued. With Germany’s division dramatized by the Berlin Wall, the FRG remained frustrated. The problem of containing West German nuclear aspirations persisted. France defied US leadership, and Britain continued its quest for a post-imperial economic and political role. The Alliance for Progress did little to ease Latin American stagnation, inequality, and frustration. Non-aligned nations in Africa and Asia remained volatile and resistant to blandishments from East and West.

In terms of personality, Kennedy and Johnson presented a mix of similarities and contrasts. Although Johnson’s family did not approach Kennedy’s in wealth or eminence, both produced intensely competitive sons bent on redressing grievances over status. While Kennedy vaulted the barriers imposed on nouveau-riche Irish-Americans, Johnson outgrew the limitations of his central Texas upbringing. During the late 1930s, when JFK was being escorted around Europe by William C. Bullitt, George F. Kennan, and other diplomats, LBJ gained entry into Roosevelt’s circle of congressmen. Roosevelt admired this intelligent, hard-working acolyte and recruited him to run

33 Schlesinger and Schlesinger (eds.), Journals, 181.
34 Leffler, For the Soul of Mankind, 185.
for senator after only four years in Congress. Johnson’s roots among hard
scrabble farmers and his close association with Roosevelt imprinted him with
a fierce commitment to domestic reform that Kennedy never matched.
Differences in background also conditioned their approaches to personal
diplomacy. Comfortable with a wide range of people, Kennedy could turn
on the charismatic charm. In his short presidency he met with many foreign
chiefs, including twenty-eight African leaders invited to the White House. In
contrast, Johnson kept foreign trips and visitors to a minimum. The problem
with foreigners, LBJ explained, “is that they’re not like the folks you were
reared with.”

Johnson shared Kennedy’s tendency to personalize foreign-policy contests.
Tragically, however, Johnson never gained the confident perspective and
release that Kennedy won from his perceived victory in the Cuban missile
crisis. Instead, Johnson waded deeper into the morass of Vietnam. Haunting
him were fears that if one showed cowardice, enemies would breach the most
private refuge. “What in the hell is Vietnam worth to me?” Johnson asked in
1964. Then he answered himself: “Of course, if you start running from the
Communists, they may chase you right into your own kitchen.”

He had learned early in life that if you ran from a bully, “he is going to wind up
chasing you right out of your own house.” Explaining to Martin Luther
King, Jr., his February 1965 decision to bomb North Vietnam, Johnson alluded
to unspecified demons invading not just his home but also his inner self.
He said he preferred not to escalate the war. “But they kept coming. They
just kept coming and I couldn’t stand it any longer.” George Reedy, a close
associate, recalled of Johnson, “whatever may be said about him, he was a
tormented man. I don’t know what tormented him.”

The president was certainly cognizant of the supposed strategic rationale for fighting in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, he couched the consequences of pulling out in personal terms:
“They’d impeach a president that would run.” He feared that the American
people would “forgive you for anything except being weak.”

Johnson coupled his personal and political determination to stave off
foreign-policy threats with faith in the righteousness of America’s mission to
remake the world. As he put it: “Woodrow Wilson once said: ‘I hope we shall

never forget that we created this nation, not to serve ourselves, but to serve
mankind.’ In early 1965, Johnson invoked Wilsonian ideology to justify his
plans for two simultaneous initiatives, an expanded war overseas and a Great
Society reform program at home. He believed that domestic and foreign
affairs remained inseparable: “The state of the Union depends, in large
measure, upon the state of the world.” When protesters later criticized
the war, Johnson countered that the United States risked “decay and even
disaster” if it looked “only through a narrow glass.” Johnson believed that
America could fulfill the promise of economic opportunity and civil rights at
home only if it was expanding those promises abroad. He warned that a
United States “living in a hostile or despairing world would be neither safe nor
free to build a civilization to liberate the spirit of man.”

The outline for détente with Moscow that Johnson inherited was only
partly fleshed out during his presidency. Two weeks after taking office, Johnson
both began and ended a meeting by reiterating a first principle: “A nuclear war
will be the death of all of our hopes and it is our task to see that it does not
happen.” Johnson and his advisers did not, however, believe that nuclear war

43 I.Abeber, America, Russia, 247.
44 Israel (ed.), Messages of the Presidents, 3162. 45 Ibid., 1776.
threatened. This confidence enabled them to put other priorities ahead of improved relations with Moscow. Johnson wanted to ensure his victory in the November 1964 election as someone "tough" on Communism. He also sought to defeat the NLF and North Vietnam. Although cognizant of the Soviets' worries about a remilitarized West Germany, he preferred to co-opt rather than frustrate that vibrant nation. Johnson remained suspicious of the Soviets and even more so of the Chinese. Khrushchev and his successors, more eager for a breakthrough, reached out to the new president. The Kremlin chiefs sent detailed letters after Johnson became president and again after his election victory. Johnson responded less effusively. He did not meet with the Soviet ambassador until four months after he became president and he delayed two months before replying to the Kremlin's post-election proposals. Sidetracking the Soviets' suggestion for solidifying the division of Germany, which would infuriate the FRG, Johnson knitted what Rusk called "the little threads that bind." These were noncontroversial, bilateral agreements that fostered trust, such as an accord on rescuing astronauts.

Johnson and his advisers dealt with Cold War adversaries along three tracks. They sought to isolate "Red China," minimize disputes with Moscow, and quash Hanoi’s will to fight. The contradictions in this policy became apparent in February 1965, when Johnson chose to bomb North Vietnam even though Premier Aleksei Kosygin (who had helped overthrow Khrushchev in October 1964) was just then visiting Hanoi. LBJ explained that he "wanted to impress Kosygin and a number of others in the world." While Johnson may have "impressed" Kosygin with US military power, he failed to win Soviet aid in pressing North Vietnam and the NLF to give up their fight. Though unwilling to pay a high price for détente with the Soviets, Johnson hoped to move in that direction. In his January 1967 state of the union message, he declared: "Our objective is not to continue the cold war but to end it." Eschewing the verbal barrage that extended back to the Truman Doctrine speech, LBJ pledged to avoid "both the acts and the rhetoric of the cold war." He called for "bridge-building" to Poland, Romania, and other Soviet satellites eager to trade and establish cultural ties with the West.

The shifting nuclear balance propelled Johnson toward détente. Kennedy had deployed preponderant military power to persuade the Soviets to back down in the missile crisis. Yet this superiority proved fleeting. Afterward, a Moscow official warned an American, "you'll never be able to do that to us again." In the ensuing decade, the Soviets, despite a slowing economy, secured nuclear parity and built a blue-water navy. Johnson sought agreement with Moscow to head off a race in anti-ballistic missiles, which could destabilize the deterrence of "mutual assured destruction." After his June 1967 summit with Kosygin in Glassboro, New Jersey, Johnson boasted of their agreements. The accords regulated consular affairs and commercial air travel and banned weapons in outer space. Always competitive, Johnson contrasted this comity with Kennedy’s calamities: "We have made some progress since Vienna, the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis." In August 1968, however, Soviet tanks crushed prospects for an anti-ballistic missile accord when they rolled into Czechoslovakia to put down the reformist "Prague Spring." After a few months, Johnson resumed negotiations in hope of achieving a missile agreement before he had to relinquish the presidency. In this instance, too, Johnson overestimated his opportunity.

Johnson could move toward détente in part because the German issue was stabilizing. "I know my Germans," Johnson liked to say, having grown up with a German grandmother near German settlements in the Texas hill country. He determined to keep the Germans in Europe "by my side where I can count on them and where I can watch them." He acknowledged that his "overwhelming interest was to make sure that the Germans did not get us into World War III." Since the late 1940s, Americans and their European allies had kept the West Germans contained and busy by integrating them into supranational economic and military structures, such as the European Coal and Steel Community, the Common Market, and NATO. Americans valued the MLF scheme, despite its farcical aspects, because it promised to apply the supranational formula to the hypersensitive issue of a possible German nuclear bomb. In an elaborate dance from 1963–66, the Americans and the allies tiptoed around the fact that the MLF remained, despite the camouflage, a ruse. The scheme was not substantive enough to give West Germany a real voice in the decision to use nuclear weapons. Yet it contained enough substance to scare the Russians. The French, who had their own bomb,
vehemently opposed the plan since it threatened their superior status. Finally, Johnson's advisers and their FRG counterparts opted for a "non-hardware" solution. McNamara’s Defense Department agreed to admit German and other NATO defense officials into the technical process of nuclear war-planning.

Meanwhile, the mood in the FRG was changing. The Berlin Wall underscored that reunification was unlikely to be achieved through ritual pledges made by Americans and others to placate their German allies. Foreign Minister and later Chancellor Willy Brandt began reaching out to the East Germans, Soviets, Poles, and others with a policy that became known as Ostpolitik. As part of these policies, the FRG accepted the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty negotiated by the Americans and Soviets.

The Vietnam War and its impact on US global standing

Two days after becoming president, Johnson, who had disapproved of the overthrow of Diem, nonetheless affirmed determination “to win the war.” Although Johnson positioned himself in the 1964 election as a moderate against the Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, he also encouraged planning for escalation afterward. Johnson refused to become the first president to lose a war. He dreaded abandoning the South Vietnamese to what he saw as ruthless Communism. In the summer of 1964, the US Navy assisted South Vietnamese raids on North Vietnam. During the night of August 2, North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Tonkin Gulf fired at the U.S.S. Maddox. Two nights later, jittery crews reported another attack. The next morning there was no evidence of a second assault. No matter. Johnson was looking for an opportunity to hit both the North Vietnamese and Goldwater, who was accusing Johnson of timidity. Johnson ordered an airstrike on North Vietnam. He sent to Congress a resolution, prepared months before, authorizing broad military actions. Passed by the Senate with only two dissenting votes, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution became Johnson's legal basis for escalating the war. In February 1965, LBJ responded to an attack on a US airbase with "Rolling Thunder," a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam.

In July 1965, Johnson multiplied the number of US troops in South Vietnam. As he later told Senator Eugene McCarthy, "I know we oughtn't be there, but..." 54

US foreign policy from Kennedy to Johnson

Two days after becoming president, Johnson, who had disapproved of the overthrow of Diem, nonetheless affirmed determination “to win the war.” To avoid surrender, Johnson kept increasing US troops in Vietnam until they reached a half-million in early 1968. Despite White House predictions that victory was near, the North Vietnamese and NLF in February 1968 launched the devastating Tet offensive. Enemy troops surged through most South Vietnamese cities, nearly breaking into the US embassy in Saigon. As US public opinion turned against the war, LBJ convened a bipartisan group of Cold War veterans. The “Wise Men” warned that the war was tearing apart society at home and failing in Vietnam. Johnson called for a limited bombing halt to jumpstart negotiations. He also launched what would become Richard Nixon’s policy of replacing US troops with South Vietnamese forces. On March 31, 1968, Johnson announced he would not run for re-election.

Johnson’s hope for an historic legacy of beneficial reforms at home and abroad was only one of the dreams soured by the Vietnam War. The conflict undermined US prestige and reduced the funds available for foreign aid. In Latin America, the Alliance for Progress shifted priorities from development and equality to foreign investment. Kennedy’s lip service to democracy was replaced by a blatant support for supposedly stable, military-run governments. In Africa, tacit acceptance or support of Portuguese colonialism, the all-white government in Southern Rhodesia, and a Congolese dictatorship supported by white mercenaries alienated most leaders. Johnson lacked Kennedy’s personal interest in Africa and Latin America. Moreover, he grew so preoccupied with Vietnam that he neglected other issues. Protests aggravated Johnson’s defensiveness. During an interview with New York Times columnist Cyrus R. Sulzberger, Johnson kept thumbing through a folder of papers while asserting, “I’m spending most of my time on Europe these days.” The president insisted his administration had a global agenda, “despite Vietnam, despite what ‘intellectuals’ and those people in Georgetown say.” But when he tried to talk with reporters about these other matters, “all they did was to keep whining... Vietnam, Vietnam,” the president, himself imitating a whining baby. Sulzberger recorded that after this performance, Johnson “suddenly... opened the folder of papers he had been browsing over — and started to read a cable sent him by [Ambassador Henry Cabot] Lodge in Saigon.”

The Vietnam War had other consequences. In much of the world, repugnance for the war fostered broader skepticism and eroded US power — as

54 Leffler, For the Soul of Mankind, 210.

55 Johnson telephone conversation with Eugene McCarthy, February 1, 1966.
56 Baines Johnson Presidential Recordings Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia.
57 Costigliola, "Johnson, Germany," 176.
illustrated by the worsening gold drain. In Western Europe, increasing numbers of people grew horrified as television brought home images of heavily armed Americans and napalm-dropping jets terrorizing Vietnamese villagers. De Gaulle cited the war as further reason for European independence from both superpowers. In 1966, he pulled France out of the integrated NATO military command. This veteran of the pre-Cold War era looked toward a post-Cold War reunification of “Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals.” Spending on the war prompted a March 1968 panic in the international gold market. The dumping of dollars for gold forced the Johnson administration to close the gold window of the US Treasury to all holders of dollars except other governments, which could be pressured to hold onto their greenbacks. Meanwhile, Japan boomed with orders to supply both the United States and North Vietnam. One of the many ironies of the war entailed China. Although the containment of China was cited as justifying the war, China itself retreated into self-imposed isolation with its cultural revolution.

**Kennedy, Johnson, and US foreign policy**

Despite their contrasts in background, style, and personality, Kennedy and Johnson differed little in many aspects of foreign policy. Kennedy paid more attention to Latin America and to Africa, which, however, yielded only limited gains. Johnson never acquired Kennedy’s ease in dealing with foreign leaders and problems. Nor did LBJ acquire JFK’s comfort in his own skin. Although attracted to détente, both Kennedy and Johnson found difficulty in escaping the premises of Cold War policies codified in the Eisenhower and Truman eras. The confines of Wilsonian ideology narrowed what JFK and LBJ regarded as acceptable change around the world. They remained committed to the belief that the United States was an exceptional nation whose values and institutions offered the best model for others. The Vietnam War helped frustrate Johnson’s striving toward détente. If Kennedy had lived, he probably would have encountered Johnson’s difficulty of fighting in Vietnam to contain Communism while trying simultaneously to engage the Soviet Union.

Neither the prospects nor the problems Kennedy and Johnson perceived evolved as they had expected. The Alliance for Progress did not yield the economic growth or political stability that Americans had hoped would inoculate Latin America against more Castros. In spite of these setbacks, Castro failed to export his revolution. The NLF and North Vietnam refused to surrender despite the terrible pounding meted out in years of war. Nevertheless, the eventual US defeat in Vietnam did not pull down a long chain of dominoes, as Kennedy and Johnson had feared. Notwithstanding Germans’ frustration at continued division, de Gaulle’s arguments for an independent Europe, and Bonn’s overtures to the East in the late 1960s, the FRG remained allied to the United States. As the labels “New Frontier” and “Great Society” suggest, the domestic and foreign policies of Kennedy and Johnson—like the decade of the 1960s—stand out in history for grand promises unfulfilled.

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57 See Frédéric Bozo’s chapter in this volume.