

What were the Reasons for the Escalation of the US War effort in Vietnam in 1965?

Aryaman Gupta

Bangkok Patana School, Thailand

ABSTRACT

The Vietnam War is seen as one of the most brutal wars in which the US was involved in, and responsible for mass anti-war movements. This study investigates the factors responsible for the escalation of the US war effort in Vietnam. A prominent explanation for the increase of US involvement in Vietnam is the change in presidency to Lyndon Johnson. However, previous research generally fails to consider the impact of the North and South Vietnamese - a potentially significant factor in America's decision to increase involvement. This study uses historical documents provided by the Foreign Relations of the United States to determine the impact that the changing situation in Vietnam had on policymakers in the US. Additionally, these primary sources will be used to interpret how significant other factors were in causing the escalation of the US war effort in Vietnam. These include the change in presidency to Johnson, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and the importance of preserving credibility for the US. In addition to the primary sources, this study will incorporate the use of secondary sources such as scholarly articles and books to support the analysis. This investigation found that it was a combination of the changing situation in South Vietnam, and America's determination to protect its credibility in the wider context of the Cold War that was responsible for increased US involvement in Vietnam. Although the change in presidency to Johnson and the Gulf of Tonkin had an impact, this investigation found that it was largely limited.

Introduction

1965 is the year that the US started to increase their involvement in the Vietnam War. From 1964 to 1965, the total of American troops increased from 23,330 to 184,300, an increase of nearly eight times (Dept of Defense Manopower Data Center, 2008). This war went on to become one of the iconic wars in American history, causing mass demonstrations and anti-war sentiment in society. 1965 has been purposefully chosen because it can be seen as a turning point in US involvement in Vietnam. In 1965, the US chose to commit to their efforts in Vietnam and began to increase their involvement under Lyndon B Johnson at rates unforeseen under his predecessors.

This essay will explore the main factors that have been claimed for causing an escalation in the US war effort in 1965. These include: a weakening South Vietnam that necessitated US to support, a change in presidency from John F Kennedy to Lyndon B Johnson, the Gulf of Tonkin incident and American worries about their credibility in the larger Cold War. In the opinion of this essay, rather than being a single cause for the escalation of the US war effort, it was rather mainly a combination of the changing situation and deterioration of South Vietnam, and the US wanting to uphold their credibility in the wider scope of the cold war to prevent the dissemination of communism. Since South Vietnam were becoming weaker, it was increasingly likely that they would fall to the Vietcong, causing the spread of communism. This would be detrimental to the credibility of the US in their position in the Cold War, and could prompt further states falling to communism as per the 'domino theory'. As a result, this shows how the two factors are interlinked, and could have caused further escalation of the Vietnam War for the US.

Gulf of Tonkin Incident

The Gulf of Tonkin incident was largely responsible for legitimizing the escalation of troops from the US. This occurred on the 2nd of August 1964 as in the Tonkin Gulf, DE SOTO protocols were carried out gather intelligence on North Vietnamese troops. However, there was another DE SOTO protocol and OPLAN 34A raid on two islands off the coast at the same time, but no coordination. This led to the USS Maddox being attacked by North Vietnamese boats (NSA, 2005). There was a second attack on the Maddox just two days later, which led to 5 air strikes on bases. Although the first attack was undeniable, the second attack on the attack could not be confirmed due to the attack occurring at night and during bad weather (Bauer, 2022). However, upon Carl Rowan asking McNamara regarding confirmation, he confirmed that 'high classified information' proved that it happened (Ball, 1991). This would indicate that aggression from North Vietnam, as shown by the Gulf of Tonkin incident, was responsible for causing the US to escalate the war as they increased strikes. As a result, it can be seen as a genuine factor in causing an escalation in the American war effort in Vietnam.

However, since the second attack occurred at night and during bad weather, it could not be confirmed (Bauer, 2022). As Edward Moise claims, the documents of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution contained 'errors and omissions', which led to the conclusion that 'the weight of the evidence is overwhelming: no attack occurred' (Moise, 1996). There is additional criticism that the administration exploited the Tonkin Gulf resolution to push a far-reaching resolution on future policy towards Southeast Asia through congress. The Tonkin Gulf crisis removed any disagreement that existed regarding the policies under consideration and the feasibility, with Douglass Carter saying 'he welcomed the recent events as justification or a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time' (United States Department of State, 1964). This supports the idea that the incident wasn't a direct reason for escalation, but rather warranted the escalation of troops which would have occurred regardless of such an event. Additionally, there was a pause between the incident and escalation, as shown when the administration agreed against substantial escalation before October (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This shows that the Gulf of Tonkin incident wasn't necessarily the main cause as there was a delay between the incident and actual escalation from the US. Rather, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was an event that was needed to have an official reason for escalation rather than being a proper reason for escalation as the administration were seeking for something to justify escalation, and therefore, is not the main reason for the escalation of the US war effort in Vietnam.

Change in Presidency

In addition to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the change in presidency from Kennedy to Johnson. As Frederik Logevall said, Johnson had 'serious misgivings about his flair as a statesman' and this insecurity caused him to 'abhor interaction with foreign officials and debate over foreign policy with own staff'. 'Motivated by his fear of the personal humiliation that would come with a loss in Vietnam, he opted for a military solution' (Logevall, 2001). In addition, Johnson mourned the loss of China (Vandemark, 1995). This shows how a change in presidency and LBJ's personal insecurities prompted an operation in Vietnam, and hence an escalation of troops and the American war effort. Moreover, after Kennedy's death, McNamara, Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy often got Johnson to act in a way that fulfilled their intentions, which earned them the nickname 'the Awesome Foursome' (Logevall, 2001). These four were also firm believers of the domino theory and preferred war for their own aspirations (Logevall, 2001). This suggests that the change in presidency prompted them to act and pressured Johnson into acting in Vietnam, which caused an escalation of troops. To support the idea, Johnson did not remove troops after the 1964 election, rather there was escalation, showing that there was support from the president. Although Logevall is convincing, Asselin makes a compelling point that Choosing War 'fails to show how the Vietnamese may have impacted the outcome in 1964'. Nonetheless, when LBJ was scared of losing Vietnam because of the 'Who lost China?' attacks that were projected in the 1950s. This shows how again, Johnson's personal insecurities could be blamed for the escalation of the war

(BRYAN, 2021). Additionally, in McNamara's memoir, he asserts that he believes that Kennedy would've withdrawn from Vietnam had he lived (McNamara, 1995). However, McNamara was not convincing in his memoir. Nevertheless, it further supports the claims that the change in presidency was largely responsible for an escalation in the US war effort.

Johnson's immediate intention to escalate was shown as the Johnson administration was quick to overturn the previous American policy, which limited US funding, equipping and advising to South Vietnam. Additionally, the day after Johnson won, senior officials began preparations to avoid South Vietnamese defeat. By December 1964, the administration chose to begin two-phase escalation of fight and by February 1965, Johnson ordered operation Rolling Thunder after Vietcong attacks. March marked the first US combat battalions landed, and in April Johnson authorized offensive operations within 50 miles of their base area. By May, American forces totaled 47,000 and approached 82,000 and this was furthered in July, when Johnson approved immediate deployment of 50,000 troops and privately agreed for another 50,000 by the end of the year. Also, General Westmoreland was allowed to adopt an aggressive search-and-destroy strategy (Logevall, 2004). LBJ was the one who made the choices and authorized the decisions, almost immediately after winning the elections, and Responsible for furthering the war and the 'Americanization' of the war. This shows how a change of presidency to Johnson is a main factor.

However, the argument above assumes that Kennedy was intent on withdrawal. As Selverstone argues, Kennedy may have wanted to publicly appear dovish while privately remaining committed to military involvement. Furthermore, Johnson himself was reluctant on his policies. 'Into the Quagmire' portrays LBJ as a reluctant president who constantly sought advice from dovish and hawkish advisors, considered wide range of options and delayed decisions until events forced him to (Vandemark, 1995). This suggests that Johnson had to make the option to escalate the war because there was no other feasible option. This would have been the same for Kennedy, and therefore, suggests that the change in presidency wasn't necessarily responsible for the escalation because it would've occurred with Kennedy too. Also, it shows how it was the changing situation with Vietnam rather than LBJ himself who was responsible for the escalation of troops. Additionally, McNamara, Rusk and Bundy emphasized the loss of another domino in Asia (Vandemark, 1995). Kennedy would have been told the same thing by these prominent members. Also, Robert Kennedy, who was close to JFK and could influence his decisions, was confident about winning the war in Vietnam and would remain until they won. In addition, JFK himself was a firm believer in the domino theory and stated 'the United States is determined that communism shall not take over Asia' and "in my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia" (Cano, 2020). This has led to the interpretation that although the change in presidency from JFK to LBJ may have sped up the escalation of troops, it is likely that JFK would have done the same considering the worsening situation in South Vietnam and his belief of the Domino theory. The responsibility of losing another country to communism, worsening situation/instability in South Vietnam would've meant that it was likely that Kennedy would have escalated troops as well. Therefore, a change in presidency may not have been the largest factor, because Johnson's actions were likely a continuation of Kennedy's private intentions.

Weakening South Vietnam

Rather the changing situation in South Vietnam, and the deterioration of the governing system in South Vietnam can be attributed for the increasing American involvement in Vietnam. By 30th of January 1964, there was a second coup d'état in three months in South Vietnam (Warner, 2003). This shows the instability and fragility of South Vietnam at the time; the country wasn't safe to itself, let alone communists. Additionally, Johnson sent a message to Hanoi stating that the US didn't want to destroy the North Vietnamese regime but protect South Vietnam (Warner, 2003). However, this could be interpreted that a weakening South Vietnam would mean that increasing US involvement is needed to achieve this. This shows how a weakening South Vietnam with increasing instability would prompt the US to get involved and escalate their efforts to help. Ambassador Taylor sent a telegram saying the best thing that can be said about the Khanh government is that it lasted 6 months and has a 50-50 chance of lasting out the year. He continued

by saying ‘it was an ineffective government, beset by inexperienced ministers, who are jealous and suspicious of each other’. He mentioned that although a slight increase in government control was predicted by the end of the year, it wouldn’t be a significant enough in reducing communist power, stopping infiltration or justifying ultimate success (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). Khanh’s position was worsened when in attempts to strengthen his own power, he ended up causing riots from students and Buddhists. This supports the instability in South Vietnam, and the likelihood of South Vietnamese defeat was increasing. As a result, it shows how it could have prompted the US to get involved, especially as the administration knew that odds were against the emergence of a stable South Vietnamese government (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964).

Although the administration agreed against substantial escalation before October as aforementioned, they admitted that ‘in the longer perspective all of us agreed that substantially increased pressure against North Vietnam will be necessary if we are not to face the prospect of a gradual but increasingly inevitable break-up of our side of Vietnam’ (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This shows how the deterioration and worsening situation of South Vietnam over late 1964 prompted the US to escalate its involvement in order to further defend a weakening South Vietnam from falling to communism. At the same time, this can also be linked to the US wanting to maintain their credibility in the wider scope of the Cold War, and the domino theory as the US were afraid of losing South Vietnam for implications in the area and would escalate involvement to defend them. However, it did prevent action against the North in the short-term as LBJ thought that extensive action could not be taken until South Vietnam could defend itself.

To further support this argument, on December 1964, Johnson said that the most essential objective in South Vietnam was a stable government and so as a result, discussion turned to ways of boosting the South Vietnamese effort and enlisting third country help (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). However, with there being another coup on the 27th of January 1965, this hope for increasing stability was quickly diminished. William Bundy even predicted that the situation in Vietnam was to come apart more rapidly than anticipated’, and Bundy and McNamara were convinced that their policy would simply lead to defeat (Warner, 2003). This shows how the administration realized a change in policy was necessary to support South Vietnam, in hopes for victory in the war. The situation deteriorated so much that on March 1965, Bundy and McNamara believed that a turn-around in South Vietnam remained less than 50/50 and they have been losing ground at an increasing rate in the countryside. This caused to Bundy recommend the authorize landings of number of US divisions in Vietnam, demonstrating how the administration truly believed that the escalation of the American war effort was necessary due to a worsening South Vietnamese situation. Furthermore, Pentagon official, McNaughton, wrote ‘(a) politically, 50% chance of another coup, (b) militarily, SVN has been cut in two with GVN control in north reduced to enclaves’; the military situation in South Vietnam became critical and trends needed to be reversed to win the war and mentioned that a loss here can’t be afforded as it would be recognized world-wide (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1965). This links to the US wanting to maintain its credibility around the world, especially in the wider sense of the Cold War, otherwise it would portray American weakness, which would invite further expansion around the world. They concluded that US land forces should be introduced to achieve objectives and approved 2 marine battalions, a marine air squadron and 18,000 further advisors (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1965). To make matters worse for South Vietnam, there was yet another coup at the end of May 1965, and according to Westmoreland, South Vietnamese troops had ‘inordinately high’ desertion rates and ‘higher than expected’ casualties so were showing reluctance. As a result, they requested 46,000 immediately and 35,000 later which was later approved (Warner, 2003). As a result, the weakening of South Vietnam through the end of 1964 and into 1965 can be seen as playing an important role for the escalation of war, especially as it would hamper US credibility in the wider scope of the Cold War if South Vietnam were ultimately defeated to their worsening situation.

Protecting US Credibility

In addition to the previous factors, it can be said that the US hoping to maintain their credibility in the wider scope of the cold war to prevent the spread of communism can be attributed to the escalation of the US war effort. This can be seen as the US following up on their domino theory, but further developing it to a wider context, rather than simply neighboring states. This ideology is shown when McNamara mentioned that they pursued the war based on ‘principles and traditions of the country’ (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This directly links into the policy of containment, a principle that the country followed, as shown by US foreign policy in the buildup to the Vietnam War such as in Korea and China. The intention of this policy was to prevent ‘domino theory’, where nearby countries would fall to communism too. This can be applied to the example in Vietnam with nearby countries such as Cambodia and Laos becoming vulnerable to Vietnam, but also the policy of containment was necessary in a wider lens to demonstrate America’s involvement in fighting communism. The origin of the source has value because it was from the Secretary of State, McNamara, and therefore the stated aim in his memoir can be interpreted as an official aim by the administration. Moreover, in the same report, McNamara mentions the lasting impact that the fall of Vietnam could have on Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Burma. Therefore, the administration realized the high stakes and began plans to escalate bombings, showing there is truth to the argument.

Johnson himself was worried about the weakening of US credibility, and the possibility of further communism spreading in this time period, which reinforces the argument that the escalation of the US war effort was to maintain their credibility. This is exemplified as Johnson said to Bundy ‘if you start running from the communists, they may just chase you right into your kitchen’ to which Bundy agreed’ (Warner, 2003). This shows that the leadership are wary of communist expansion and the domino theory, so realize the importance of defending South Vietnam. In the wider cold war too, they were worried about possible communist uprisings if American credibility were to take a hit. Moreover, when Johnson asked the CIA if a loss would lead to a domino effect in the Far East, the CIA said that ‘they did not believe a loss would lead to a rapid spread, a spread would not be inexorable and would take time – time in which the total situation can change to be unfavorable to the communists’, and the report also indicated that the effect would be small outside mainland South East Asia and would result in a more cautious USSR (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This counters the argument favoring the domino theory. However, the CIA did add that ‘a loss would be profoundly damaging to US reputation in the Far East, especially as it has committed itself to preventing communist takeover. It would result in a greater tendency for countries in the area to seek greater accommodation with the communists and the extent would be affected by the substance and manner of US policy in the period after the loss of Vietnam and Laos’ (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This would have implications that would mean there would be greater risks of communist uprisings around the world as countries would take greater risks after seeing the damaged credibility of the US, who committed themselves to preventing communism. The CIA report also mentioned that ‘it would boost communist China’s confidence by raising its prestige as a leader of World Communist and support aggressive tactics of Peiping’ (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This has implications that would mean that China would be more inclined to further promote communism around the world. This again links to the point of America losing its credibility causing, because a loss of American reputation would prompt China to take bigger risks and become more aggressive. Therefore, overall, although in the short-term there may have been no immediate impact in the area, it can be interpreted that in the long-term that a loss of South Vietnam would foster communist ideologies around the world due to weakening US credibility in the wider cold war scope. Therefore, it is clear to see how the administration thought an escalation may be needed to prevent a loss of US reputation in the long-term.

Furthermore, many members of the administration firmly believed that a loss of South Vietnam would lead to increasing amounts of communism around the world. General Earl Wheeler said ‘if we should lose South Vietnam, we would lose Southeast Asia. Country after country on the periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power in the area’ (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). McNamara and Rusk argued that it was necessary to increase troops as they argued that not only would Thailand fall, but they would only have

Australia, New Zealand, Philippines and NATO as secure areas with even India falling to communism (Warner, 2003). Dean Rusk went on to say to a French ambassador that ‘it was part of the same struggle, to prevent an extension of Communist influence’ (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964). This reinforces the idea that the administration was largely worried of possible communist uprisings around the world if their credibility took a hit. This supports the argument that this was a reason for escalating the war effort in Vietnam, so that their credibility in the wider Cold War can be maintained.

In conclusion, in the opinion of this essay the Gulf of Tonkin incident and a change in presidency had limited impacts on the decision to escalate the war effort from the US. This is because the Gulf of Tonkin incident doesn’t provide sufficient evidence for the event actually taking place. Therefore, it is largely seen as providing justification for the escalation of the war, rather than being a cause for the escalation. The change in presidency can also be seen as being limited. Although there were decisions taken by Johnson to escalate the war, it can be seen as a continuation of Kennedy’s policy for the most part.

Rather, the changing situation in South Vietnam because of the instability of the government, and the desire from the US to maintain their credibility in the wider scope of the Cold War can be seen as being more significant factors. The desire to maintain credibility from the US meant that they would try to prevent the loss of South Vietnam. This is because if they lost Vietnam, they would be seen as weaker, which would cause other countries to take bigger risks, leading to greater communist uprisings. Therefore, if conditions were becoming increasingly unfavourable to South Vietnam, the US would intervene greater in attempts to avoid the loss. The unfavourable situation in South Vietnam was provided by the instability of their government, which made it difficult to fight the North, and would make it more likely for Vietcong victory. Therefore, this shows how the two factors are interlinked, and can be attributed to causing the escalation of the US war effort in Vietnam in 1965.

References

- Ball, M. A., 1991. Revisiting the Gulf of Tonkin crisis: an analysis of the private communication of President Johnson and his advisers. *Discourse & Society*, 2(3), pp. 281-296.
- Bauer, P., 2022. Gulf of Tonkin incident. [Online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Gulf-of-Tonkin-incident> [Accessed 13 October 2022].
- BRYAN, A., 2021. Who Lost China?. [Online] Available at: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/blog/who-lost-china/> [Accessed 14 October 2022].
- Cano, M. S., 2020. JFK and the Reasons behind the Vietnam War: the Domino Theory, Madrid: s.n.
- Dept of Defense Manopower Data Center, 2008. Vietnam War Allied Troop Levels 1960-73. [Online] Available at: <http://www.americanwarlibrary.com/vietnam/vwatl.htm> [Accessed 11 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 209. Memorandum From the Board of National Estimates to the Director of Central Intelligence (McCone). [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d209> [Accessed 16 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 227. Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d227> [Accessed 16 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 306. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d306> [Accessed 15 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 343. Memorandum of a Meeting, White House, Washington, September 9, 1964, 11 a.m.. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d343> [Accessed 16 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 432. Notes on a Meeting, White House. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d432> [Accessed 15 October 2022].



- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 441. Memorandum of a Conversation. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d441> [Accessed 2022 October 15].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 442. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d442> [Accessed 15 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964. 8. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d8> [Accessed 16 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1965. 193. Paper Prepared by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (McNaughton). [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v02/d193> [Accessed 15 October 2022].
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1965. 208. Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v02/d208> [Accessed 15 October 2022].
- Logevall, F., 2001. Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam. Berkeley: Univ. Of California Press.
- Logevall, F., 2004. Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34(1), pp. 100-112.
- McNamara, R., 1995. In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. New York: In retrospect: the tragedy and lessons of Vietnam.
- Moïse, E. E., 1996. Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- NSA, 2005. Chapter 6: The Gulf of Tonkin Incident. [Online] Available at: https://www.nsa.gov/portals/75/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/gulf-of-tonkin/articles/release-2/release-2_gulf_tonkin_incident_desoto.pdf [Accessed 11 October 2022].
- United States Department of State, 1964. 290. Memorandum for the Record of the White House Staff Meeting. [Online] Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d290> [Accessed 13 October 2022].
- Vandemark, B., 1995. Into the quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the escalation of the Vietnam War. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Warner, G., 2003. Review: Lyndon Johnson's War? Part I: Escalation. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 79(4), pp. 829-853.