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Epilogue
The Burden of Regret

Some regrets entail more burdens than others. Yet we can gain insights and wisdom by consciously registering the meaning of our choices, acknowledging regret to ourselves, and reflecting on the consequences in a way that shines instructional light on the future. This is the power of "backward thinking."

Those principally responsible for Vietnam decision-making during the Kennedy and Johnson years wrestled with this burden, in varying degrees and in varying ways, throughout the remaining years of their lives. Of course there was no action to be taken that would bring back those who had perished or been scarred physically by wounds or emotionally by post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lyndon Johnson

Exhausted, **Lyndon Johnson** returned to his beloved ranch on the Pedernales River in the Texas Hill Country. There, surrounded by oaks and cattle and the vast sky, he recuperated by spending time with his family, visiting with friends, and running the ranch from behind the wheel of his white Lincoln convertible, which gave him, however modest, a sense of control and allowed him to again bend at least some things to his will. At the same time, because of the war's unpopularity and his own—the hawks blamed him for not crushing North Vietnam and the doves detested the war and held him responsible for every ugly aspect of it—his retirement became a kind of exile suffused with the pain of diminished stature and public rejection.

The decisions on Vietnam had, ultimately, been his. He had lost the presidency, his political standing, his dreams of further domestic reform, his historical reputation as a war leader—the yardsticks by which he had always judged success in life. Because of Vietnam, Johnson became such a pariah in his own party that top officials made it clear they did not want him to attend the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach that nominated an antiwar candidate, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, a vocal Johnson critic, for the presidency. No image of Johnson as president appeared at the convention, only a small portrait of him as Senate majority leader in the 1950s that hung in a back room. "Lyndon just doesn't carry any weight in the party anymore, and he knows it," said a friend. "It's a miserable fact for a man who only four years ago was President of the United States. But it is a fact." "My daddy committed political suicide for that war in Vietnam," his younger daughter, Luci, later said. "And since politics was his life, it was like committing actual suicide."

Johnson's personal habits reflected his burden. Moody and hypersensitive to criticism all his life, out of office he became restless and suffered periodic fits of depression. When he reminisced, it was about the early days—helping build FDR's New Deal in Depression-era Texas—much less often about Vietnam, and then only in shielded tones. He grew his now white

hair long—almost shoulder-length, swept back and curled on the ends like an Old Testament prophet—as if in silent sympathy with the young student radicals who had turned so vehemently against him and the war. For the first time since his heart attack in 1955, he resumed drinking more than moderately, started chain smoking again (two to three packs of cigarettes a day), and put on considerable weight—even after he suffered an episode of angina (a hardening of the arteries carrying blood from the heart)—dangerously and tellingly self-destructive behavior for a man in his sixties with a serious heart condition. He took to showing ranch visitors the carefully tended little family cemetery containing the graves of his mother and father, telling them here, too, he planned to be laid to rest.

Outside of his close circle, Johnson found it nearly impossible to speak from the heart about the war and to reflect on it with hindsight. Like many human beings, he avoided contemplating unpleasant things about himself in the interest of self-protectiveness, denying regret and hiding it from himself. Instead, he muffled the memory of Vietnam by defensive maneuvers. He published a bland and guarded memoir of his presidency, *The Vantage Point* (1971), in which the colorful, flesh-and-blood LBJ was largely absent. "What do you think this is," Johnson railed to an aide during the drafting, "the tale of an uneducated cowboy? It's a presidential memoir, damn it, and I've got to come out looking like a statesman, not some backwoods politician." His insecurity never went away. As a result, the book's Vietnam sections reflected more of ghostwriter William Jorden, who had served on the NSC staff under Walt Rostow, than they did LBJ himself: a detailed but dry defense of judgment calls rather than a personal account of how and why he made them.

But implicitly, Johnson wanted to share the burden and tragedy of Vietnam with his countrymen, and to have others draw lessons—not flattering to him, as he well knew—from the worst foreign policy disaster in the country's history that divided the nation more deeply than any event since the Civil War (and, in a sense, continues to divide the nation to this day). On the eastern edge of the University of Texas campus in Austin he created a presidential library in which "it's all here, the story of our time—with the bark off," as he said at the library's dedication ceremony in May 1971. "There is no record of a mistake, nothing critical, ugly, or unpleasant that is not included in the files here." He was right. He encouraged the federal government and its agencies to expedite declassification of the records of his administration's decision-making on Vietnam, and the Johnson library became one of the most open presidential libraries in the country.

Johnson suffered another major heart attack in the spring of 1972. He survived this one, too, but afterward chest pains began hitting him every day and he started swallowing nitroglycerin tablets and gulping air from a portable oxygen tank. On the afternoon of January 22, 1973, alone in the bedroom at his Texas ranch, of a he died massive coronary at the age of sixty-four. He did not live to witness the signing of the peace agreement in Paris, only three days later, that finally ended American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Dean Rusk

After eight years in office, **Dean Rusk** left Foggy Bottom in January 1969 "bone-tired" after serving the second longest term as secretary of state in American history. Before Rusk departed Washington for his native Georgia, Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin hosted a farewell dinner for him at the new Soviet embassy on Mount Alto in northwest D.C. Dobrynin found Rusk sad but stoic about Vietnam. Rusk conceded that mistakes had been committed, for which

he felt considerable responsibility, but he offered no explanations or excuses. "What's done cannot be undone," said Rusk. He would leave it to historians to pass their verdict.

Out of power, out of work, and lacking independent means like many of his government colleagues with a Wall Street background, Rusk struggled to adjust to his newly diminished circumstances and his unpopularity among liberals, many of whose views he had shared and championed as president of the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1950s. "I had trouble trying to wind down from the job," he confessed, looking back many years later. Having survived his last year as secretary of state largely on pertinacity, cigarettes, and scotch, he seemed to his family emotionally exhausted, depressed, and "com[ing] apart at the seams," in the words of his younger son, Richard, who wrote that his father "had all the appearances of a deeply troubled man." He rarely discussed the war and its legacy with family or friends—the sensitivity and, one imagines, the embarrassment, simply ran too deep.

A pariah on many American college campuses, where opposition to the war intensified during the early 1970s, Rusk eventually found work as an academic in his native South. Overcoming resistance from conservative regents who hated his progressive views on race and "internationalism," the University of Georgia appointed him in 1970 a professor at its law school in Athens, where Rusk educated a generation of students about his passion: international law. He settled quietly into academic life, which allowed him some measure of peace and which he found a welcome respite from the unceasing pressure and criticism of life in the fishbowl of high politics. "The students I was privileged to teach helped rejuvenate my life and make a new start after those hard years in Washington," he later wrote. Accessible and unassuming, he became popular with students surprised to find the former great man genuinely and disarmingly modest. He didn't rail those with antiwar fervor who harshly criticized him, still less questioned their motives. He didn't publish and he didn't teach from textbooks, preferring instead to pose Socratic questions and draw on examples from personal experience. He became known as an "easy mark" who graded student exams and papers A and B far more often than C, D, or F.

Rusk's door was always open, even after he retired from teaching in 1984. Visitors to the rustic campus dotted with neoclassical buildings forty-five miles southeast of his native Cherokee County would find the aging man seated behind a simple desk in the far corner of the little cottage that served as his office. Just to his right, on a window ledge, sat large black-and-white photographic portraits of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the men he had served with unbending loyalty and affection if not imagination and critical detachment. Rusk would field questions readily and directly, speaking in a courtly manner and a soft Georgia accent, but he remained laconic about the war and its consequences. Publicly, he would concede that he made two errors of judgment: "to underestimate the tenacity of the North Vietnamese and to overestimate the patience of the American people." Privately, on occasion the stoic facade would crack a bit and he would make telling, if implicit, comments that revealed his anguish and regret.

Having forsworn writing a memoir upon leaving office, after many years and with the help of Richard, with whom he reconciled after a long period of estrangement over Vietnam, Rusk finally did just that in 1991. In the memoir, *As I Saw It,* he acknowledged that his years as secretary of state "were filled with excitement, accomplishment and failure, and a healthy dose of tragedy." But this acknowledgment was of a lunchtime sort, not midnight.

When I trekked to Athens in 1988 to interview Rusk, I asked him, "If you had known what the costs of the war would ultimately become in terms of U.S. lives and resources expended and

domestic divisions sowed by the war, would you, first, have given President Kennedy and President Johnson the advice you did and, second, would President Johnson have committed the country as deeply as he did?" Rusk answered: "I've been offered several opportunities to present a mea culpa on Vietnam, and I've not done so because I thought that the principal decisions made by Kennedy and Johnson were right at the time." He paused, then added, "They're not here to speak for themselves, so I'll just live with it. I don't want to say or do anything that would cause any of the men and women in uniform who carried the fight for us to think that they were engaged in some unseemly or disgraceful action, and so I've not presented a recantation on Vietnam. I'll live with that responsibility. There's nothing I can say now that would mitigate, in any way, the degree of responsibility I had for the events of those days, and so I just will take the view that while I was there I did my duty as I saw it, and let the chips fall where they may." Dean Rusk died of heart failure at his home in Athens on December 20, 1994, at the age of eight-five.

McGeorge Bundy

Vietnam destroyed many things, not least the Establishment's dominance of American foreign policy. As national security advisor to Kennedy and Johnson from 1961 to 1966, **McGeorge Bundy**, the brilliant, self-confident scion of Groton, Yale, and Harvard, properly embodied the capacity—and what most considered the appropriateness—of a well-educated East Coast aristocrat to define U.S. foreign policy. The disaster of Vietnam fatally undermined this heretofore unassailable assumption about the elite and helped drive a frustrated Bundy from the White House, his stature diminished and tarnished, though he continued to informally advise President Johnson. Afterward, the direct descendant of Puritans pursued good works as president of the Ford Foundation, at the time the world's wealthiest philanthropy, during the late 1960s and 1970s and then taught and wrote about the history he had helped make as a professor at New York University (NYU) during the 1980s, though twenty-four faculty members had tried to block his appointment, calling him a "war criminal."

Politically unsympathetic and culturally uncomfortable with Johnson's successor, Bundy had little influence with the Nixon White House, even though Nixon's national security advisor Henry Kissinger had been a junior colleague of Bundy's in Harvard's government department for many years. Bundy faulted the Nixon administration's slow pace of disengagement, but how could he publicly complain as one who had a substantial role in the original escalation? In private settings like the grand second-floor meeting room of the Council on Foreign Relations on the East Side of Manhattan, where the febrile antiwar climate of the early 1970s held lesser sway, Bundy candidly acknowledged the negative consequences of a policy he had heavily influenced. In May 1971, he told a council audience that "there has been very much more cost and pain than most of us would have thought justified if we had perceived [the war] as inevitable in 1965." But that was as far as Bundy could and would go. He, in his own words, "deliberately put aside for decades" public discussion of how the tragedy happened and what could be learned from it. To a persistent questioner at a Harvard cocktail reception for Nieman Fellows in 1976 who said, "Mac, you fucked it up, didn't you?" he snapped, "Yes I did. But I'm not going to waste the rest of my life feeling guilty about it." Bundy's acerbic reply reflected the defensiveness of wounded pride, but also an awareness that the passions and controversy stirred by the war were simply too great, the personal anger and pain of those affected by Vietnam too raw and deep. "To take account of feelings is not necessarily to ease them," he admitted in a note to himself.

But Vietnam never went away for Bundy. “I had the war on my mind ever since I left the government in 1966,” he later confessed. Beneath his reserved New England mien that eschewed emotional displays in favor of cold, crisp logic lurked a heart with feelings like any other human being’s. Bundy never stopped mulling the impact of the decisions he helped make both on the nation he loved and those touched by the war. Nothing illustrated this more tellingly than Bundy’s regular, but unpublicized, visits to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the west end of the National Mall in Washington. Like everything else about the war, architect Maya Lin’s long, low, black gabbro wall engraved with the names of 58,318 fallen U.S. service members triggered intense controversy when constructed in 1982. It eventually became a shrine for millions of annual visitors, Bundy among them, who left flowers and letters for the dead and made rubbings of the names of loved ones as treasured mementos. He made these visits because he felt “a heavy obligation,” as he wrote in a note to himself, “to salute the lasting contributions of the sacrifice of those men whose names are on that long wall.” He could not bring them back, but he could try to “honor the meaning and value of their sacrifice.”

Bundy began the difficult and painful process of publicly addressing his role in Vietnam soon after Robert McNamara published *In Retrospect* in the spring of 1995. Since leaving the White House, Bundy had discussed Vietnam with journalists and academics through correspondence and in interviews at his office at the Ford Foundation, then NYU, and finally the Carnegie Corporation, where he perched in retirement, and he had lectured on the war at Harvard, Yale, NYU, and the Kennedy library. But he had never fundamentally reconsidered Vietnam and widely acknowledged his part in it until his former colleague and close friend inspired him to do the same. McNamara’s book reopened the floodgates of debate, provoking considerable emotion and anger among Americans. Bundy concluded that the remedy to such emotion and anger was more discussion, and he would contribute to it by wrestling with his own demons and offering his own reflections. Over the years, he had had too many arguments with too many different critics to believe that he could address Vietnam without the prospect of heated disagreement. But he also knew that wars—especially lost ones—offer many lessons and now fully recognized that the performance of those responsible for the war, like himself, had been so wanting that they had an obligation to explain what went wrong and why. “I have now been out of government for 30 years, the subject is still open—and I can try to help,” he mused. “I had a part in a great failure, and if I have learned anything, I should share.”

Bundy set out to write a memoir with the research help of Columbia University graduate student Gordon Goldstein. “The errors I know best by now are my own,” he wrote, and so he would “give them special attention.” This meant beginning with the “mea culpa” that he did not see that the American effort was doomed and had been “reluctant to give up” once he did. He acknowledged “mistakes of perception, recommendation and execution.” But he believed “the cardinal error was getting too far in, in terms of U.S. combat troops.” He concluded with thirty years of hindsight that “more would not have succeeded, so less would have been better” and that “the domino effect so deeply feared could have been contained just about as well as it was at much lower cost.” The once proudly self-confident Bundy—one of the war’s chief architects—brought himself to humbly admit, flatly and unequivocally, that “I was wrong” about a war that cost so many American and Vietnamese lives. He was no longer a prisoner of unacknowledged regret.

Sadly, Bundy did not live to complete his confessional memoir. He died on September 16, 1996, of a heart attack at his vacation home in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts, at the age

of seventy-seven. Among the small number of papers found lying on his desk at the Carnegie Corporation in New York after his death included a handwritten list of points he had penned more than three years before in which he listed "my own main exposures" concerning Vietnam: "(1) escalation to a war of attrition, (2) joining in the overthrow of Diem, (3) pretending there was a negotiable settlement, (4) not leveling with the country on the decision to fight." He pleaded "guilty in various ways on all 4." Bundy had continued to wrestle with these exposures, to ponder their human costs, and to reformulate the meaning of his past to the last day of his life.

Robert McNamara

The years after 1968 proved difficult for **Robert McNamara**. A fugitive from his past, he had no intention of becoming morbidly introspective. Preoccupation with the busyness of a peripatetic life as president of the World Bank from 1968 to 1981 filled with travel, speeches, and conferences helped keep thoughts and feelings of regret at bay. "He's running fast so the ghosts don't catch him," noted a long-time acquaintance. He also keyed on the successful aspects of his career before and after his tenure as secretary of defense, which were many. He recoiled when people pressed him about Vietnam, bypassing regret by avoiding the reminders.

But submerging the past proved as hard and exhausting for him as one who constantly tries to immerse an inflated ball deep underwater. The criticism of commentators and scholars during the 1970s and 1980s served as an unceasing reminder of all of his bad judgments, of all that had gone wrong and could not be undone. The criticism was hard to bear, the hardest of it all because he knew there was some truth to it. So, too, were occasional encounters with angry pedestrians—many of them former servicemen and antiwar protestors—who accosted him during his daily walk between his home in the Kalorama neighborhood of Washington and the World Bank and later his retirement office next to the Willard Hotel. "I had some confrontations you wouldn't believe," he later admitted. But there was no turning back the clock. He could not change the past. Life had to go on.

Slowly, however, the past worked its way to the surface. The tacit regret he had harbored for so long became increasingly conscious. As the years passed and the distance from Vietnam grew, he inched closer to the truth and acknowledging it. Gradually, tentatively—even reluctantly—he stopped fleeing his ghosts and started confronting them. When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial opened, McNamara had been unable to appear at it publicly. "It was absolutely impossible for me," he later said—the personal pain and shame at that stage was simply too great. By the end of the 1980s, though, he made regular nocturnal visits to the memorial, "but not in a way that anybody could observe me doing it." After hours, "I'd just walk down in the dark," and quietly study the thousands of names inscribed on a mournful facade that echoed the night sky above him. It was a "tremendous" experience for him. He felt "a sense of honor for those who served and a sense of continuing questioning of those who caused them to serve"—not least himself.

In the early 1990s, he resolved to finally reckon with Vietnam and his part in it. Before it was too late, he wanted to acknowledge that "I was wrong" rather "than go down in history as a guy who was wrong and refused to admit it." He was "willing to pay the price of being charged with failure and having caused all of these fatalities" because, then, "at least I could begin to correct my error before I left." Writing *In Retrospect* became a kind of therapy, an effort to understand and explain himself. The story of his involvement with Vietnam was not simple and he did not make it seem so. The resulting memoir was a meditation on his mistakes and the losses they entailed. It allowed him to form intellectual judgments and to share the emotional pain of regret.

It also helped him air grief long kept tightly contained. He enlisted my assistance to ensure accuracy by basing his account on the contemporaneous record rather than fallible (and sometimes wishful) memory. Such assistance enhanced the historical validity and analytic nature of *In Retrospect* at the cost of a more personal approach. Yet of all those who led the charge into Vietnam, perhaps McNamara best understood that life is about making imperfect choices, and this trade-off, in some ways par for his course, was one he was willing to make. He tried to be faithful to the record and to understand its meaning, primarily for the benefit of posterity. He understood that was how his memoir would live on after his death—by continuing to inform and instruct future generations.

It had taken McNamara a long time—thirty years—but as he wrote he finally stopped the emotional distancing and disengagement and started consciously regretting, rather than continually suppressing, his thoughts and feelings about Vietnam. He achieved resolution of regret through acceptance. Critics on the Left (many of them former antiwar protestors) and on the Right (many of them Vietnam veterans) perceived In Retrospect not as an act of self-revelation but as contrived contrition, too little, too late—thirty years too late. Some thought it revealed no genuine change of mind and heart, only the weakness of a man whose advancing age made him feel vulnerable. Such critics felt no apology could ever be sufficient and would never let him forget the anger and hurt he had caused others. In the end then, McNamara discovered only a balm, not a cure for his own pain and the pain of all those Americans and Southeast Asians touched by the war. After the publication of In Retrospect, McNamara visited Vietnam, first in the fall of 1995 and again in the summer of 1997. These visits—ostensibly to attend scholarly conferences in Hanoi but, in a deeper sense, personal pilgrimages as well—represented his effort to come to terms with the war's impact in Indochina as well as in the United States. The trips became, as one journalist who covered them wrote, "a lonely journey into a regretful past." The senior-most policymaker of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to visit Hanoi, McNamara met with old adversaries like General Võ Nguyên Giáp and acknowledged that what Americans called the Vietnam War and Vietnamese called the American War should not have been fought and could not have been won at reasonable risk and cost. McNamara's efforts surprised—even confounded—the Vietnamese, whose long history of foreign domination bred a habit of keeping secrets to defend themselves and for whom open debate on the war remained (and largely remains) taboo. As a result, McNamara had only limited success in his effort to persuade Hanoito open up official documentation of North Vietnamese decision-making anywhere near as fully as had been official U.S. documentation of the Kennedy and Johnson years. At the same time, McNamara's sojourns angered the fraternity of retired senior American military officers like William Westmoreland, who told an interviewer, "I can just imagine the attitude of my troops when they read in the paper that the old man goes to Hanoi." At the conferences, McNamara demonstrated admirable self-criticism and a relentless spirit of inquiry while stressing the theme of missed diplomatic opportunities, a generic (and in its specifics) debatable thesis designed to convince himself and others that all of the bloodshed could have been averted. "He's asking a lot of history," noted a former Johnson administration official at the 1997 conference.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, McNamara conducted lengthy interviews with filmmaker Errol Morris for a documentary of his life and decisions as secretary of defense, titled *The Fog of War*. In these up-close interviews, McNamara explored the moral dimensions of his participation in the bombing of German and Japanese cities as an army air corps officer during World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War in a frank and emotional way that

allowed viewers to catch a glimpse of the flesh-and-blood human being behind the famously rational facade. The film was a candid and intimate journey through his life and some of the most significant events of twentieth-century history, and it won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2003.

McNamara continued to wrestle with the war and its consequences for the rest of his life. He spent his final years quietly as his health slowly but inexorably deteriorated. Unknown to most, he embraced religion with renewed passion and study. Raised a Presbyterian, he became an active elder in his local Washington church, assisting in the preparation and serving of communion, visiting the sick at their homes, comforting the bereaved, and performing other pastoral duties. These duties gave him a measure of solace that he desperately sought in the twilight of his life, part of his search for redemption amid sad thoughts of mortality. But the war remained his personal nightmare. His worst enemy now existed inside of him: his regrets and the doubts created by them, the perils of his own past, his predicament illustrating the insight of Albert Camus, who wrote "that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them."26 The long-ago secretary of defense remained a man with an unquiet heart that gave him no rest and that he could not escape. He insisted that after his death there be no memorial service of any kind and no burial in Arlington National Cemetery.* Robert McNamara died of heart failure at his home in Washington on July 6, 2009, at the age of ninety-three. On his deathbed, he confessed to his son, Craig, that he felt God had abandoned him.27

More than fifty years have passed since McNamara and his colleagues led America into the Bay of Pigs, to the brink of nuclear war over missiles in Cuba, and into the quagmire of Vietnam during the 1960s. In the intervening half century, the iconic nature of their cautionary tale has lost none of its extraordinary power to attract, to move, and, most important, to sober those who contemplate it and the lessons it teaches. Their experience transcends the particularities of their story, as does the educative power of their cognitive foibles. And it continues to fascinate and frighten—as it always will—because their story is, at heart, a tale of very capable and well-intentioned men with very human limitations who confronted complex and difficult problems that led to disaster and in the end brought them low, as it did the country they served and loved. The story of the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War proved that even the best—and they were the best—have limitations that beset all human beings. It is a basic and disconcerting truth that each of us understands deep down, even if we are at the same time chastened by it.

In a fundamental sense, brilliant men not only lost the war in Southeast Asia, they lost the war against themselves because they were unable to surmount deeply ingrained cognitive patterns that channeled them into the abyss. They had no one like Daniel Kahneman to read, so they had no map to their biases and no compass to help them navigate toward a more objective assessment of reality. It would have taken enormous self-awareness and self-reflection to go against the heuristics and biases their minds were programmed to revert to when confronting the complex problem of Vietnam—but the benefits would have been massive. We need strategies for overcoming the quicksand within all of us and how it can be avoided, especially by those who prosecute future wars. We need to look for the patterns of our recurrent mistakes and devise solutions for them. Developing such strategies helps give redemptive meaning to the suffering and sacrifices caused by Vietnam.

The first step in avoiding future quagmires is to acknowledge the hazards of high-level decision-making. Fiercely ambitious and self-confident people, presidents and their advisors like

to think of themselves as in control—of events, of outcomes, of consequences. But what, really, is in their control and what is not? More than they know—or care to admit—they are like mountaineers on the upper reaches of Mount Everest whose fixation on the summit can dull them to the dangers of their surroundings. In both instances, the vistas are breathtaking. But the air is thin, the winds are strong, the hidden crevasses are deep, and if one slips and falls, the slopes are steep. Both environments are notoriously unforgiving of mistakes and misjudgments. The demands of high-level decision-making are intensified by information overload under pressure of circumstances. Social psychologists Jacob Jacoby of New York University and Carol Kohn and Donald Speller of Purdue University showed that increases in information load cause decision-makers to pay less attention to relevant data. This leads them to examine only a small proportion of available information, making it less likely that they will tend to some critical facts. On any given day, Johnson and his advisors dealt not just with Vietnam (as Kennedy and his advisors had dealt not just with Cuba), but troubles in Europe, China, India, and the Middle East—all of which had to be dealt with expeditiously. They confronted a myriad of problems, moreover, with incomplete information and a rapidly ticking clock, which gave them limited time for reflection. Crises, with all of their uncertainties, unknowns, and risks, had to be solved now. Such circumstances often led to reactive little decisions when creative big decisions were imperative.

There is no way to change the frenetic nature of high-level decision-making. Being bombarded with a multitude of pressing issues, day in and day out, is par for the course in the West Wing of the White House. All of this discourages the self-awareness and self-reflection necessary to offset heuristics and biases the human mind adopts when seeking solutions to problems. When faced with issues, we rarely deviate from past approaches, becoming entrenched in our own point of view and overconfident in our assumptions. A powerful antidote is to regularly ask oneself, "What if I'm wrong in clinging to my assumptions without reexamining them and in reaching conclusions without questioning them?" "Self-critical thinkers," notes political psychologist Philip Tetlock of the University of Pennsylvania, "are better at figuring out the contradictory dynamics of evolving situations, more circumspect about their forecasting prowess, more accurate in recalling mistakes, less prone to rationalize those mistakes, more likely to update their beliefs in a timely fashion and—as a cumulative result of these advantages—better positioned to affix realistic probabilities in the next round of events."

Harnessing cognitive diversity is another part of the answer. One important step is to enlist a range of thinkers in the collaborative task of crafting creative solutions by networking minds to tap varied perspectives. "It's the difference in how we think [and] what perspectives we bring to a problem . . . that, when combined, unlock breakthrough results," notes Amy Wilkinson of Stanford's Graduate School of Business. She cites the paradigmatic example of Bletchley Park, the British code-breaking center during World War II that assembled an improbable mix of crossword-puzzlers, cryptographers, engineers, linguists, and mathematicians to break the Enigma Code protecting Nazi military communications, thereby saving thousands of Allied lives. Brainstorming can help because it separates imagination from judgment, the creative act from the evaluative one. "A brainstorming session is designed to produce as many ideas as possible to solve the problem at hand," Roger Fisher and William Ury write. "The key ground rule is to postpone all criticism and evaluation of ideas. The group simply invents ideas without pausing to consider whether they are good or bad, realistic or unrealistic. With those inhibitions removed, one idea should stimulate another like firecrackers setting off one another." Having invented the widest possible range of options, decision-makers can then choose among alternatives for action. Prior to the famously successful July 1976 raid on Entebbe Airport in

Uganda that ended a hostage crisis, Israeli defense minister Shimon Peres convened what one member called a "fantasy council" that brought together creative thinkers to consider every known option, boldly imagine others, and game out all scenarios, no matter how fanciful. Daring thinking—envisioning the unimagined—led to innovation and success. Yet it only did so because Peres saw value in gathering unconventional perspectives, and because he was both humble enough to know he might be wrong and confident enough to know that if presented with radical ideas that contradicted his assumptions it was a sign of strength to change one's mind. Decision-making and problem-solving benefit from an open-minded search for information and an open-minded consideration of alternatives.

Even when not harried by circumstances, decision-makers generally lack the capacity to think outside of hardened molds, recognize the parameters of a situation early on, and ponder consequences in a systematic and probing way. No one person can synthesize all the information around us and even very bright people fall into mental ruts and cling to old strategies. One way to overcome these limits is to seek outside expertise from varying disciplines—for example, historians, linguists, and cultural anthropologists—whose analysis is unencumbered by the political and bureaucratic constraints of insider status, in which the norm is not to rock the boat and which inhibits advisors from pushing decision-makers out of fear of getting fired or exiled. The sources of regional expertise, moreover, are more abundant than they were fifty years ago. America's increasingly diverse population means that today's Vietnam specialists, for example, are more likely to be Vietnamese Americans, which can mean deeper, richer insights and thus better advice. There is no disputing the value of knowledge and understanding that comes from integrating expertise from across different fields. Having such outside expertise at hand requires supporting the education and recruitment of such experts early on, before problems become acute and far less tractable. Creating a bench of available outside experts is not cheap, but the cost of doing so is a tiny fraction of the costs of war. And timing is crucial. During the Vietnam War, Washington began utilizing a cadre of outside experts on Southeast Asia after it had plunged into the conflict—firefighters, rung only after the embers had become a conflagration. Much the same proved true in 2001 and 2003: Washington did not think to cultivate a cohort of outside experts on Afghan and Iraqi issues and utilize their expertise until after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were underway. The time to do so is before the tinder begins to smoke. Outside experts can help dampen the embers, even to the point of extinction.

Utilizing them requires opening oneself to new ideas. Embracing innovative thinking involves breaking established routines, which most decision-makers resist doing because they are very busy and so they are inclined to listen to their existing information suppliers, who ferociously defend established procedures. Their reliance becomes institutionalized in bureaucratic processes (daily intelligence briefings, national estimates) in which organizational missions channel attention, affect the selection of information, and make it difficult to seek out and embrace new ideas. Harvard Business School professor Clayton M. Christensen has shown that innovations often begin as small-scale experiments, placing a small bet to test a big idea in a trial-and-error process. One such experiment might be to create an independent office operating under the protection of the president to explore and exploit innovating thinking. Being open to new ideas can make decision-makers more accurate in their predictions and more thoughtful in their judgments.

Another step is to adopt "a cognitive net" that puts in place a system to catch flaws of assumptions, reasoning, and thoroughness inherent in decision-making. Good decisions require

looking at so many different factors in so many ways that even the smartest individual can make mistakes. Such a cognitive net would mandate communication across the board to deal with the unexpected and uncertain. This proved essential—and successful—in improving the safety of surgical procedures, as Atul Gawande of the Harvard Medical School detailed in his book, *The Checklist Manifesto*. A blizzard of things occur whenever a patient is wheeled into an operating room: allergies are identified, medicines are given, anesthesia is administered, surgical instruments are laid out, equipment is prepared, specialists are summoned, among many other things. All of this can lead to overlooked errors: in one hospital, a third of appendectomy patients failed to receive the right antibiotic at the right time. To remedy this problem, the hospital's administrator created a verbal checklist for operating room staffs. The checklist was greeted with skepticism and resistance at first out of fear that it would consume precious time and increase an already heavy workload, but surgical teams quickly learned the benefits of orally confirming a series of steps before the first incision was made. After three months, 89 percent of appendectomy patients received the right antibiotic at the right time; after ten months, all such patients did. When a similar checklist was adopted by the World Health Organization and applied in eight hospitals in both developed and underdeveloped countries, the results were equally dramatic: major complications for surgical patients fell by 36 percent, deaths by 47 percent, and infections by almost half.

The same can be done by high-level decision-makers prone to cognitive error if they go through a checklist of steps including rigorously and ruthlessly questioning assumptions, candidly acknowledging unforeseen developments, and open-mindedly exploring the widest possible range of options. "While no one [can] anticipate all problems," observes Gawande, adopting a cognitive net could allow decision-makers to "foresee where and when they might occur . . . If you got the right people together and had them take a moment to talk things over as a team rather than as individuals, serious problems could be identified and averted." A checklist will not be foolproof and it may slow down the decision-making process up front, but unlike a haphazard process, it may encourage people to talk through hard and unexpected problems, see subtleties, flag potential traps, and thus yield wiser decisions in far less time overall. As Gawande concludes, "Under conditions of complexity, not only are checklists a help, they are required for success. There must always be room for judgment, but judgment aided—and even enhanced—by procedure." Dealing with immensely complex problems like Vietnam demands a disciplined routine in which decision-makers acknowledge their fallibility, talk frankly with one another—most especially, share their apprehensions (which Johnson, McNamara, and the chiefs never really did)—and adopt methodical teamwork to catch problems and increase the probability that they have the critical information they need when they need it in order to craft solutions to the problems facing them. Doing so could improve decision outcomes with no increase in an individual decision-maker's skills. All of this may seem obvious, but it pushes against two abiding facts of Washington life: powerful egos who believe they have the right stuff, consider themselves to be their own experts, and don't need checklists, and the strong bureaucratic culture of turf-consciousness and turf-protection.

Perhaps the most difficult problem to overcome in decision-making is the problem of immediacy. Most policymakers unsurprisingly prioritize the short term. They find it difficult to look beyond the moment—not the minute, but the span of a few days or weeks. Short-term thinking helps them deal with crises and rapid change, and cope with an uncertain future. But it has costs. In a large survey of corporate chief financial officers, researchers found that 80 percent of them turned down lucrative projects because doing so would lower their companies' quarterly

earnings.38 A similar dynamic affects decision-makers when dealing with complex, fast-moving problems. President Johnson and his advisors fell into this trap. Preoccupied by Vietnam's daily vexations, they paid scant attention to signals that their assumptions were dangerously obsolete or to the war's long-term implications. When they did, it was only in fits and starts. The first of them to really do so in a systematic way, Robert McNamara, took two agonizingly long years from the fall of 1965 to the fall of 1967 to change his outlook on the war.

Long-term thinking can be difficult, but it can also be transformational. What might look like weakness and failure now might later be seen as enlightened leadership. The examples of BASF and Unilever Corporations are two cases in point. In the early 1990s, BASF decided to stop manufacturing highly profitable plastic products that contained a flame retardant suspected of causing cancer. This decision by BASF's president, Carles Navarro, was highly unpopular with employees and shareholders, and resulted in a sharp drop in revenue. After two years, however, BASF returned to the market with substitute products, using different chemicals, which eventually allowed BASF to recoup—and exceed—its prior sales. Navarro's decision resulted in short-term pain but long-term gain. In 2010, Unilever announced that it would henceforth release semiannual, rather than the customary quarterly, earnings statements. The company's share price plummeted in the wake of the announcement. But two years later, Unilever's stock had risen 35 percent above its preannouncement level. Through long-term action, the company had actually attracted more capital. Sometimes, looking far down the road is a necessity. As Amy Wilkinson observes, "Race-car drivers . . . go too fast to navigate by the lines on the pavement or the position of their fellow drivers. Instead, they focus on the horizon." Decision-making at the highest level is not that different: policymakers move very fast on a shifting course and face the ever-present chance of a crash. Presidents and their advisors, like race-car drivers, must keep their eyes fixed on the horizon.

The challenges of strategic thinking are real, however. The revolution in communications technology means that problems are now identified—and on decision-makers' plates—faster than ever, creating even greater pressure for immediate action or mere improvisation than in the past. It's hard to think strategically when trying to solve immediate problems. Taking the long view, moreover, is a tall order to ask of elected leaders in a democracy, where polls and electoral accountability necessarily focus the mind and dull attention to longer-term considerations. The future casts no vote. In the day-to-day process of Washington decision-making, problems usually manifest themselves in the form of immediate pressures, and busy and harried decision-makers tend to look for correspondingly immediate solutions, quick-working remedies that tide them over a crisis. They tend to act in terms of the seen, with less attention to the unseen. They are discouraged from making politically risky decisions because the short-term pain is often obvious while the long-term gain is something avoided. Johnson wrestled with this dilemma during the critical years 1964–1965, and it powerfully and fatally reinforced his short-term thinking. But short-term thinking, as the tragic unspooling of Vietnam showed, can lead to immensely damaging and destructive consequences. If decision-makers consciously strive to weigh the effect of what they do on the more distant future, they are more likely to see their choices in a clearer light. This is true of what not to do as well. "Making 'don't do' lists," notes Wilkinson, helps "overcome hubris . . . that can hold people back."42 It is well to remember that making history means understanding that history is sometimes made years after an action itself, and that leaders are ultimately judged not by their day-to-day choices but by the long-term consequences of their decisions.