
Presidential Address: Structure, Contingency, and the War in Vietnam

My topic today is the Vietnam War, and as I stand here before you I'm conscious of the fact that this organization was born in the midst of that long and difficult struggle. The date was April 29, 1967, and the setting was the Palmer House Hotel in downtown Chicago, during the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians. There, in an afternoon session co-chaired by Alexander DeConde, Joseph O'Grady, and David Pletcher and attended by about seventy-five scholars, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations came into being by acclamation. Attendance at the session would have been higher but for the fact that a contentious panel featuring William Appleman Williams had been scheduled for the same timeslot! Williams himself, farsighted scholar that he was, understood he had missed something significant: he subsequently wrote to O'Grady, apologizing for his absence and expressing interest in joining the new organization. At the American Historical Association annual convention that December, SHAFR sponsored two panels—one organized by O'Grady, and one by Gaddis Smith—and at its first business meeting elected Thomas Bailey president and DeConde vice president. They were on their way.¹

Today, almost half a century later, we study the Vietnam War as history. The outpouring of scholarship on the conflict in the past two decades has been immense and shows no sign of abating, and the conference program this weekend gives ample evidence of the important work still being done on all aspects of the struggle. One man, however, has done more than perhaps any other person to deepen our understanding of the war, and he is moreover the main reason we are meeting here, in Lexington, even if he didn't have anything directly to do with the site selection. That man is George Herring. I don't have to tell this august group that George is one of our most distinguished historians, a former president of SHAFR, a former editor of our journal of record, *Diplomatic History*, and the author of the foreign-relations volume in the "Oxford History of the United States," among countless other works. But that's not all he is. George has been a mentor to me for a very long time, as dean among American historians of the Vietnam War, and as the epitome of the scholar-gentleman. He has taught me much about the war—about the questions to ask, the sources to consult. More than

1. Gary Hess, "SHAFR's Formative Years," *Passport* 45:2 (September 2014): 6-13.

that, he has taught me about how to carry myself as a historian, how to treat graduate students and colleagues, and about how to walk that fine line between being confident in one's research and findings while proceeding at all times with a healthy dose of intellectual humility. For that I shall always be grateful.

I want to focus in my brief remarks today on a particular historical problem: How do we account for the reality, as I see it, that three American presidents, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon, escalated and perpetuated a war in Southeast Asia that they privately suspected was neither winnable nor necessary, one that before it was over would claim that lives of more than 58,000 Americans and some three million Vietnamese, two million of them civilians? (In April 1967, the month SHAFR came into being, 436 U.S. soldiers were killed in action.) It seems unfathomable on some level, it cries out for explanation, yet I'm not sure I have an adequate one to offer, even twenty-five years after I began researching the struggle's origins. But I believe it's a question of profound historical importance, and I shall examine it here by zeroing in on the buildup under Kennedy and Johnson in the first half of the 1960s. (The Nixon decisions will be a subject for another day.) In the interests of time I shall be more or less relentlessly U.S.-centric, recognizing of course that the Vietnamese (North and South) played key roles, and that several outside powers mattered as well. And I want to get at the core issues by reflecting for a few minutes on a matter all of us deal with in our work and in our teaching—whatever our topic and time period—namely structure and contingency, and, more broadly, causation. Is historical change made by impersonal, subterranean forces, or by human actions, by unexpected quirks, by chance? Or some combination?

In preparation for this lecture I have been reading a range of authors, most recently Stephen Jay Gould, the late Harvard paleontologist and polymath who ruminated at length about historical contingency—about developments, Gould said, that may change the course of history, foreclosing some alternatives and making way for others. In his book, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, Gould argued that if one replayed “the tape of life” from the early days of the Burgess Shale with only a subtle change in initial conditions, one would get a tree of life that would in all likelihood bear little resemblance to what we have. In particular, according to Gould, the “chance becomes vanishingly small that anything like human intelligence would grace the replay.”²²

I have also been rereading our early forebears Thucydides and Herodotus. The former's *History of the Peloponnesian War* can be considered the foundation work of structural history, while Herodotus for his part gave us some of the earliest histories emphasizing individual agency. I have looked again at Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, still remarkably fresh after 240 years, and—more to the point here—showing its author's talent for building narrative out of human

2. Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York, 1989), 14.

agency and the unexpected, even as he also illustrates how the empire's structural problems become steadily more desperate and a kind of inexorable decline sets in.³

And, of course, in anticipation of today I've thought a lot about the work of our own time, the research produced over the past thirty to forty years, in particular in the field of U.S. and European international history. And I would make the following generalization about the scholarship done by *professional* historians during these four decades, much of it exceptionally valuable: that structural, impersonal determinants have become increasingly dominant over time, to the relative neglect of human agency.

Why that should be the case is a fascinating subject in itself, best left for another occasion.⁴ Suffice it to say here that it is so. And indeed, it cannot be denied that structural analysis is essential to an understanding of the human past. It's an approach that helps us to comprehend the limitations imposed on individual agency by institutions, economic and social conditions, popular attitudes, demographic patterns, and other circumstantial factors that exist beyond personality. Human agency, that is to say, is qualified by the conditions in which individuals find themselves when making decisions.

Too often, however, it seems to me that structural explanations, soaring high above the everyday give-and-take of human interaction, tend toward a deterministic view of history which gives the impression that what happened had to happen. "The illusions of retrospective determinism," the French philosopher Henri Bergson called it, in a marvelous turn of phrase.⁵ It's in line with the Marxian view in which history unfolds according to its own logic, taking little or no account of the actions and decisions of individuals who are in effect powerless to influence the relentless flow of historical events. The result is to conceal the fluidity of past situations, to blot out the effects of contingencies, and to absolve individual human beings of personal responsibility—they are, after all, mere captives of forces they cannot control. (In our present day, it can foster a disinclination to challenge the status quo—what is the point of working to bring about change in society if everything significant that occurs is bound to occur anyway?)

The social psychologist Philip Tetlock and the historian Geoffrey Parker have written perceptively about this retrospective determinism and the problem that results from it. "Few predicted World War I, the rise of the East Asian tigers, or the collapse of the Soviet Union," they point out, "but virtually everyone today who claims professional competence in such matters stands ready to trot out half a dozen 'fundamental' or 'structural' causes why these outcomes had to happen roughly at

3. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York, 1954); Herodotus, *The History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); Edward Gibbon and David P. Womersley, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* 3 vols. (London, 1994).

4. See the analysis in Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., "Human Agency and Impersonal Determinants in Historical Causation: A Response to David Lindenfeld," *History and Theory* 38 (October 1999): 300-306.

5. Quoted in Timothy Garton Ash, *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches, and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s* (New York, 1999), 214.

the time and in the manner they did. Indeed, given the overwhelming array of causal forces often invoked, it is difficult for some contemporary observers to resist the inference that the original historical players were a tad dense not to appreciate where events were heading. Creeping determinism emerges as a key obstacle to the time-honored objective of historians to see the world as it appeared to the decision-makers of the day, not as it appears now with the benefits and curses of hindsight.⁶

This hindsight bias is something we observe in all areas of human existence. As psychologists have long known, people have an amply documented tendency to exaggerate in retrospect the likelihood of an observed outcome. They see the future as more contingent than the past. “I knew it all along,” is the refrain, even when the outcome looked doubtful or was wholly unanticipated beforehand. The authors of *The 9/11 Commission Report* experienced this problem at first hand and summed up the problem clearly and powerfully:

In composing this narrative, we have tried to remember that we write with the benefit and the handicap of hindsight. Hindsight can sometimes see the past clearly—with 20/20 vision. But the path of what happened is so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply into shadow. . . . As time passes, more documents become available, and the bare facts of what happened become still clearer. Yet the picture of *how* those things happened becomes harder to reimagine, as that past world, with its preoccupations and uncertainty, recedes and the remaining memories of it become colored by what happened and what was written about it later.⁷

What’s the answer to such deterministic tendencies? One antidote is counterfactual analysis, which, by bringing to the fore plausible but unrealized alternatives to what occurred can convey the variable dimensions of past situations and the presence of contingency. Many in our profession frown on such analysis, dismissing it as superfluous to real scholarship and the equivalent of parlor games, or as being ideologically driven by authors who wish to rewrite the past according to their political preconceptions. We have enough difficulty as historians figuring out what actually happened, these skeptics say; why spend precious time on “imaginary universes”? For Richard Evans of the University of Cambridge, the entire exercise is a waste of time: “In the effort to understand,” he writes, “counterfactuals aren’t any real use at all.”⁸

6. Philip E. Tetlock and Geoffrey Parker, “Counterfactual Thought Experiments,” in Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker, eds., *Unmaking the West: “What-if?” Scenarios that Rewrite World History* (Ann Arbor, 2006), 25-26.

7. *The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York, 2004), 339.

8. Richard J. Evans, “‘What If’ is a Waste of Time,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2014. See also Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (London, 2014). For the canonical objection to counterfactual history, see E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961), chp. 4. Carr, it’s worth noting, did not practice what he preached: his own historical writing frequently resorted to

This seems to me altogether wrong. I submit that thinking about alternatives is an indispensable part of the historian's craft—we can judge the forces that won out only by comparing them with those that were defeated. The investigation of unrealized alternatives, that is to say, provides crucial insight into why things turned out as they did. What is more, *all* historians, whenever they make causal judgments, are engaging in speculation, are contemplating alternative developments, even when these alternatives are not stated explicitly. To vow to say nothing counterfactual can therefore mean vowing to say nothing at all. In response, some historians might say that they are in the business of “explaining” rather than investigating causality. But beware: often, this is just semantic obfuscation. As H. Stuart Hughes put it in the *American Historical Review* more than half a century ago, “The very employment of the word *because* immediately gives warning that causal explanation is at hand.”⁹

Let me turn, then, to the subject before us, U.S. decision-making in Vietnam in the first half of the 1960s. To what extent is this a story about human agency, about individual actors choosing among options viable in the context of the time, and to what extent is this really about deeper, impersonal forces? Surely it is both. Structural explanations by themselves don't satisfy—it won't do to chalk the U.S. military intervention up to overarching geopolitical pressures, economic imperatives, or ideological convictions, either singly or together. But neither will it do to argue that the origins of America's war in Vietnam can be explained *solely* by the actions of individual policymakers who had a menu of viable options, who were unfettered by external pressures and could easily have gone another way. That's to resort to an unsatisfactory “Great Man Theory of History” that the profession largely jettisoned a long time ago. (This is a danger in counterfactual analysis: too often its practitioners treat individual actors as though they are wholly free from these deeper forces.)

So the task is to balance out the elements of human agency, on the one hand, with impersonal forces on the other, and to write history that strives to stitch together persuasively all the causative factors and to take into account their interaction. When we do that, we see that contingency must loom large in any satisfactory assessment of the origins of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. From the early days of World War II, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt voiced strong objection to allowing France to reclaim colonial control and a firm belief that the age of colonialism had passed, right up to LBJ's decision in 1965 to Americanize the war,

counterfactual speculation. It could hardly be otherwise. See Tetlock and Parker, “Counterfactual Thought Experiments,” 28–33.

9. H. Stuart Hughes, “The Historian and the Social Scientist,” *American Historical Review* 66:1 (October 1960): 28. For useful studies on the utility and limitations of counterfactual analysis, see e.g., in addition to Tetlock, et al., Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1991); Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, 1997); John Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds* (Toronto, 1978), esp. chap. 6. A symposium on the chapter, with a response by Elster, is in *Inquiry* 23 (June 1980): 145–231.

U.S. leaders always had real choices about which way to go in the struggle against Ho Chi Minh and his revolution, choices perceived at the time, by observers inside as well as outside the government.

In other words, there was nothing inevitable about the U.S. military commitment that began in earnest in the early 1960s. Neither domestic nor international considerations compelled American leaders to escalate the war. At home, they confronted not an all-powerful “Cold War Consensus,” fully committed to thwarting Communist designs in Southeast Asia, but a pronounced fluidity in non-official thinking about the conflict, with opposition to an expanded war among influential sectors of the media and in Congress. Only *after* the air war began and the combat troops were committed did a consensus in support of the war take hold in elite and popular opinion.¹⁰

Internationally, the principal U.S. allies—Great Britain, France, Canada, Japan—were opposed to escalation and resisted strong American pressure to take part in it, both because of deep doubts about Vietnam’s importance to Western security and lack of confidence that any kind of meaningful “victory” in Southeast Asia was in any event possible. The Chinese and Soviet governments, meanwhile, were supporters of North Vietnam, but both were anxious to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States. Both took care in this period to avoid making direct pledges of support to Hanoi in the event of large-scale American military intervention.

In South Vietnam, meanwhile the political situation was dismal, especially after the start of 1963. Incompetence, corruption, and infighting characterized the political leadership in Saigon, while the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) suffered high rates of desertion among soldiers and a general reluctance among officers to engage the enemy. In the larger South Vietnamese population, war weariness, induced by twenty years of fighting, was endemic. And underneath it all percolated a latent, but potentially powerful, anti-Americanism.

As for the Hanoi government, it played a strong negotiating hand poorly in these months, in part because its leaders were fearful that they could lose out in the negotiations just as they had been cheated out of a just deal—or so they believed—at the Geneva Conference in 1954. But North Vietnamese officials in 1964–65 did not rule out negotiating an end to the conflict that would allow the United States a face-saving means of disengagement from the struggle. “Has Hanoi shown any [serious] interest in negotiations?” a State Department intelligence report asked in late July 1965, before supplying the answer: “Yes, repeatedly.”¹¹

It’s vital to bear in mind here that senior American officials knew all about this domestic and international mood. They understood full well the chronic

10. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).

11. INR (Hughes) to Rusk, July 28, 1965, box 31, National Security File Vietnam, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin Texas. For a more skeptical view, see Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to Vietnam War, 1964–1965* (Berkeley, CA, 2013).

weaknesses of the Saigon regime, and the disinclination of the ARVN to take the battle to the enemy. They were anything but optimistic, most of them, about the prospects in the war effort, even with major American fighting forces. They were all too aware that leading voices inside and outside the United States questioned the rationale behind seeking a military solution. And they understood why: they themselves, in many cases, harbored doubts about whether the thing was even worth doing at all, whether any of it really mattered all that much to American and Western security.

True, in public these officials insisted on the vital importance of preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, and voiced full-throated confidence that victory would come in the end. But behind closed doors a much darker mood prevailed. The overall picture that emerges in the massive internal record for the years 1961-65, and especially for the latter half of that period, is one of bleak realism at the middle and highest level, with broad consensus that the state of affairs was grim and getting grimmer. Although planners liked to say that a stepped-up war effort would make a major difference to the situation on the ground, deep down they suspected otherwise.

This is true, I believe, of both presidents in the period: John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy's doubts about Vietnam went back to 1951, when he visited Indochina as a young congressman and witnessed the Franco-Viet Minh War up close. Already then, JFK saw through the French expressions of bravado and optimism and grasped that time was on the enemy's side in this struggle. He asked penetrating questions about whether France, or by extension any Western power, could ever overcome Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary cause. Was it really possible, he wondered, to subdue revolutionary nationalists in this part of the world by force of arms?

"We are more and more becoming colonialists in the minds of the people," Kennedy wrote in his trip diary. "Because everyone believes that we control the U.N. [and] because our wealth is supposedly inexhaustible, we will be damned if we don't do what they [the emerging nations] want." The United States should avoid the path trod by the declining British and French empires and instead show that the enemy is not merely Communism but "poverty and want," "sickness and disease," and "in justice and inequality," all of which are the daily lot of millions of Asians and Arabs. Upon returning to Boston in late November, Kennedy continued the theme in a radio address and in a speech before the Boston Chamber of Commerce. "In Indochina we have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of the French regime to hang on to the remnants of an empire," he declared. "There is no broad general support of the native Vietnam Government among the people of that area," for it "is a puppet government." Every neutral observer believed "a free election . . . would go in favor of Ho and his Communists."¹²

12. Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston, 2003), 166-67; *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel edition (Boston, 1971), 1-72.

These early doubts of Kennedy's never really went away, even when he became president a decade later. To be sure, in the late 1950s he moved closer to Cold War orthodoxy in foreign policy in general and on Indochina in particular, in good part to position himself for a run for the White House in 1960. But the skepticism was always there, close to the surface. From time to time, he expressed doubts about the ability of the West to use military means to solve Asian and African problems that are at root political in nature; on several occasions, and notably in the fall of 1961, he resisted pressures from aides to commit U.S. combat forces to Vietnam. And always the French experience gnawed at him, as when he confided to an aide, early in his presidency, "if [Vietnam] were ever converted into a white man's war, we would lose it as the French lost it."¹³

Johnson, for his part, not long after ascending to the presidency in late 1963, began to question the long-term prospects in the struggle, even with major American escalation, and to wonder about the war's ultimate importance to U.S. national security. "I don't think it's worth fighting for, and I don't think we can get out," he despaired to McGeorge Bundy, his national security adviser, in May 1964. And: "What in the hell is Vietnam worth to me?... What is it worth to this country?"¹⁴ To be sure, at other times Johnson was quite capable of expressing can-do optimism and of arguing for the geopolitical importance of the struggle—ever the politician, he was skilled at tailoring his Vietnam analysis to his needs of the moment. But again, taken in totality the evidence shows a president who in the lead-up to major war was wary and skeptical and had little of the hubris so often ascribed to him, and who feared even now that Vietnam would ultimately be his undoing.

"[A] man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere," Johnson complained privately in early March 1965, in a remark that captured his basic thinking that winter. "But there ain't no daylight in Vietnam, there's not a bit."¹⁵

Yet here's the paradox: these same presidents deepened U.S. involvement in Vietnam dramatically during their time in office. In 1962 under JFK, vast quantities of the best American weapons, aircraft, helicopters, and armed personnel carriers arrived in South Vietnam, along with thousands of additional military advisers, some of whom were authorized to take part in combat. By the end of that year, American military advisers in Vietnam numbered over 11,000, and by the time of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas in November 1963, the figure had risen to 16,000. In 1964, under Johnson, the number grew to 23,000, and Congress voted to authorize the president to use military force as he saw fit in Southeast Asia.

In March 1965, in the very week in which he professed to see no daylight in Vietnam, LBJ initiated Operation Rolling Thunder, the graduated, sustained

13. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 547.

14. LBJ-Bundy telcon, May 27, 1964, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/lbj_bundy.htm (accessed October 16, 2014).

15. LBJ-Russell telcon, March 6, 1965, in Michael Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York, 2001), 210-13.

aerial bombardment against the North; mere days later, he dispatched the first ground troops to the struggle. This initial deployment of 3,500 Marines spiked to 33,500 and then to a force of 82,000. In June 1965, the commanding general in Vietnam, William Westmoreland, sought an increase of 41,000 combat troops to be followed by another 52,000. Johnson obliged. In total, General Westmoreland successfully lobbied for a combined command of 175,000 soldiers, equivalent to 44 battalions. By the end of the year, this force was in place in South Vietnam. After 1965, the numbers continued to rise, ultimately reaching more than half a million.

These developments should trouble us deeply. It would be one thing if the weight of the evidence showed that Kennedy and Johnson acted out of a deeply held if perhaps mistaken belief that U.S. national security interests depended on standing firm in Vietnam, if it indicated that the domino theory, however flawed in conception, still held sway in the upper reaches of policymaking. In that case we could speak of the war as a “tragedy,” as an eventuality that was by its nature and in the context of its time inevitable, one whose unfolding we watch with sympathy but with a sense that it had to be. But it wasn’t that way. As president neither John Kennedy nor Lyndon Johnson was ever a true believer on Vietnam. Neither felt real and sustained confidence that anything durable could be built on the weak reed that was the Saigon government and military. And neither could quite bring himself to believe the stakes were as large as the official line held.

Again, both men were careful to articulate their misgivings and fears only privately and even then only to a select few. To everyone else they hewed close to the received wisdom, insisting that the stakes in Southeast Asia were enormous and that they were committed to defending their South Vietnamese ally against aggression “imposed from the outside.” Whatever problems might be hindering the war effort would be overcome in the fullness of time. And whatever the price of victory, the cost of defeat would be infinitely greater. The sentiments, sometimes the very rhetoric, echoed that of their French counterparts a dozen years before: “We have a commitment to uphold”; “We’re stopping external Communist aggression”; “We seek no wider war, but our will is steadfast”; “To withdraw would be to dishonor those among our men who have given their lives”; and so on.¹⁶

And by using such unambiguous language in public, American presidents found—like the French before them—that backing away could be exceptionally difficult. They knew that if they evinced even a slight interest in reducing America’s involvement in the struggle, hawks in Congress and elsewhere stood ready to noisily remind them of their past determination and to wonder aloud if they had gone soft. The advisers, meanwhile, were themselves in a bind. Having asserted time and again that the struggle should and could be pursued to a

16. Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York, 2012).

successful conclusion, they grasped full well that their reputations were now on the line, and with that also their careers.

And so we begin to see that there are deeper causes that we have to consider. For although there can be no question that American planners in the Kennedy and Johnson years had options on Vietnam, options not involving military escalation, the record also shows that those alternatives were never close to being selected. To argue for contingency and the inherent plausibility of alternative outcomes, therefore, is not to say all were equally probable. This is the advantage that historical analysis, drawing on deep research in archival and other sources, affords.

There can be no doubt that Kennedy's and Johnson's freedom of maneuver had been constrained, at least to a degree, by the choices of their predecessors—by President Harry Truman's active support of the French war effort in 1950-54; and by the Eisenhower administration's move in 1954 to intervene directly in Vietnam, displacing France as the major external power. Johnson had the added burden of Kennedy's expansion of U.S. involvement during his thousand days in office, and by American complicity in the coup d'état that led to the overthrow and murder of Saigon leader Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1-2, 1963. For well over a decade, the United States had committed itself to preserving a non-Communist toehold in Vietnam, and Kennedy and Johnson feared that to alter course now, even under the cover of a fig-leaf negotiated settlement, could have baleful effects in terms of "credibility"—their country's, their party's, their own. It was not a risk they were willing to take. The two men found what a long line of French leaders before them had found: that in Vietnam, the path of least immediate resistance, especially in domestic political terms, was to remain steadfast and hope that somehow everything would turn out fine, at least long enough to be handed off to a successor.

Partisan politics mattered greatly. Kennedy and Johnson had to contend with the legacy of McCarthyism and the claim that they were "soft on Communism." Their predecessors likewise acted partly with this concern in mind, including Eisenhower—his Vietnam decisions of 1953-54, so vital in laying the foundation for the war yet to come, must be considered within the charged domestic political atmosphere in which they were made. But the salience of this perceived political imperative was even greater now, in the first half of the 1960s, as the two presidents, feeling the susceptibility that all Democrats felt in the period to this Republican line of attack, confronted the question of how to proceed in Vietnam.

I believe history—*this* history that I've been discussing here—is made by people rather than by dispassionate forces. But I also believe that one cannot comprehend why people act as they do unless one also understands the influences that condition their thinking. To flip it around, whereas impersonal forces may make events in human affairs possible, people make those events happen. If we are to understand the minds of the statesmen whose decisions brought the United States into large-scale war in Vietnam in the first half of the 1960s, it is necessary to understand the basic assumptions on which they based those decisions—assumptions absorbed bit by bit over the better part of two decades.

We need to remember, in other words, that patterns of thought were laid down already in 1946-47 that would drive American policy on Indochina for the next two decades. Although various roads were open to the U.S. planners throughout these years, the policy always moved in the direction of deeper U.S. involvement (if not always as deep as it might have: in the spring of 1954 and the fall of 1961, notably, presidents held back from far-reaching military escalation). Successive administrations could have shifted course, but they never did. Hence the danger of *too* much emphasis on contingency: It can cause us to lose sight of the continuities that pervade the entire three-decades-long American involvement in Southeast Asia, continuities built on the stated belief that Ho's revolution could not be allowed to succeed.¹⁷ And hence the vital importance, if we are to understand the U.S. war, of reckoning seriously with the French war that preceded it.

But it won't do to stop there. Let me conclude by suggesting to you that those of us who are historians of decision-making—of whatever time and place—have an obligation to construct causal hierarchies. For although monocausal history is seldom satisfactory history, neither will it do to merely list X number of causes and to subscribe to what philosopher Leszek Kolakowski called the “law of the infinite cornucopia,” which states that a limitless number of explanations can be identified for any given event, and leave it at that. Historian David Hackett Fischer has a different name for it: “indiscriminate pluralism,” that is, identifying the variety of causes that bear on a particular event without specifying how they bear on it or how they connect to one another.¹⁸

No, we must rank. And with respect to the American decision to seek a military solution in Vietnam, I believe it's presidential action that belongs at the top of the hierarchy, ahead of the advocacy of civilian and military advisers, ahead of bureaucratic momentum, ahead of the domestic Cold War Consensus, ahead of external international pressures. The presidents were the key players in the process, not merely in the obvious sense that they had to give final approval to any and all policy decisions, but in the sense of actively shaping the outcome of the deliberations. And because Johnson was fated to be president when the critical choices came, it is his imprint on the policy that is most important. Johnson's personality, his psychological foibles and his obsessive fear of the appearance of weakness, mattered greatly in the end. From day one in the Oval Office, he was a hawk on the war—a skeptical hawk, as I've noted, but hawk nonetheless. In his first days as president he told aides that he would not be the president who lost Vietnam. It remained the operating principle in the critical year and half that followed, and indeed to end in January 1969, when he left Washington, a man broken by the war. Johnson's tendency to personalize all issues pertaining to Vietnam, to view attacks on the policy as attacks on himself, to see American credibility and his credibility as

17. This is a theme in my book *Embers of War*.

18. Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford, 1982), 16; David H. Fisher, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970), 172-77. The classic articulation of the need for the historian to arrange causes in a hierarchy of importance is Carr, *What is History?*

essentially synonymous, diminished his ability to render objective judgment. He failed to see that the international and domestic context in late 1964 (and especially after his landslide election victory in November) gave him maneuverability on the war.

The Kennedy counterfactual—what would he have done in Vietnam had he returned from Dallas alive?—has real historical utility here, and not primarily because of it helps us to speculate about what a surviving JFK might have done. Rather, it helps us better understand what Johnson *did* do, by isolating (through removal) his role in the policy process. I have considered this counterfactual in some length elsewhere; here I will simply say that I believe the best argument is that a surviving Kennedy would have opted against large-scale escalation in the spring and summer of 1965.¹⁹ He saw the war and the world differently than did Johnson, and was less inclined to personalize foreign policy issues. Though he expanded America's involvement in highly important ways, he drew the line at committing combat troops, favoring U.S. military training and support for Saigon's army. No less important, Kennedy grasped a central fact of counterinsurgency warfare: that success requires an effective host government that in the end can carry the burden on its own. Finally, it bears noting that he would have faced the moment of truth on Vietnam in his second and final term, when the domestic political imperatives would have been less pressing.²⁰

But it wouldn't have been easy for Kennedy to back away. The easiest path in the short term—always the most important term to the ambitious politician—would have been to go in deeper and hope for the best. He had not been a profile in courage on Vietnam during his first three years as president; it's not certain he would have changed appreciably in 1964-65, when temporizing was no longer an option.

Let us remember this as we consider an extraordinary memorandum that Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey submitted to Lyndon Johnson in mid February 1965, during arguably the most important ten-day period in the entire history of American involvement in Vietnam. Note the credentials that Humphrey brought to the table. He was deeply steeped in the ideology and politics of the Cold War, having helped lead an assault on Communist-led unions after the Second World War and been immersed in the Democratic Party's electoral strategizing in the 1950s and early 1960s. No one needed to enlighten Hubert Humphrey on the myriad problems, partisan and careerist, that might follow from the charge of "losing" a country to Communism. Yet here we find Humphrey telling his president that 1965 is the best time to incur these risks and that the risks of escalation

19. Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in Mark Jonathan White, ed., *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (New York, 1998): 19-62.

20. An excellent recent examination of Kennedy and the debate over his intentions in Southeast Asia is in Marc Trachtenberg, "Kennedy, Vietnam, and Audience Costs," *ISSF Forum*, no. 3 (2014) <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-3.pdf> (accessed November 7, 2014).

are far more serious. A major war, Humphrey warns, would risk “gravely undermining” other U.S. foreign policies, including relations with Moscow and with European allies, and would help repair the Sino-Soviet rift. It would jeopardize funding for the Great Society domestic legislation. The voting public, meanwhile, would become impatient, because the administration had not made clear why the defense of South Vietnam was of fundamental strategic importance. The American people, Humphrey writes, “can’t understand why we would run grave risks to support a country which is totally unable to put its own house in order.” Disengagement, therefore, is the only answer and is both politically possible and advantageous:

It is always hard to cut losses. But the Johnson administration is in a stronger position to do so now than any administration in this century. 1965 is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson administration. Indeed, it is the first year when we can face the Vietnam problem without being preoccupied with the political repercussions from the Republican right. . . . The best possible outcome a year from now would be a Vietnam settlement which turns out to be better than was in the cards because the President’s political talents for the first time came to grips with a fateful world crisis and so successfully. It goes without saying that the subsequent domestic political benefits of such an outcome, and such a new dimension for the President, would be enormous.

What if no such settlement resulted? Even then, the memo concludes, withdrawal would still be far preferable to a risky escalation. “If, on the other hand, we find ourselves leading from frustration to escalation and end up short of a war with China but embroiled deeper in fighting in Vietnam over the next few months,” Humphrey cautions, “political opposition will steadily mount,” feeding “the negativism and disillusionment which we already have about foreign involvement generally.” The American public would be divided, harming the administration in myriad ways, and—by implication—hurting Johnson’s reelection chances in 1968.²¹

It was an extraordinary memorandum, not least for being so prescient. Humphrey’s analysis, moreover, accorded fully with that of the Senate Democratic leaders in foreign policy—Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Armed Services Committee chairman and Johnson mentor Richard Russell, and Foreign Relations Committee chairman J. William Fulbright—all of whom feared the domestic implications of a bloody and protracted struggle. And on that point no responsible observer in Washington in the winter and spring of 1965 had any doubt: in the best circumstances the war would last a long time. Senior military leaders, even as they advocated escalation, predicted a conflict on the scale of

21. The memorandum is reprinted in full in Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), 320–24.

Korea, which in three years would be large and not close to being won. To achieve victory would take “five years—plus 500,000 troops,” Marine Corps commandant General Wallace Greene told Johnson on July 22, 1965; five months earlier, Army chief of staff General Harold K. Johnson had given essentially the same estimate.²² The implication: that when serious campaigning began for the 1968 election, Johnson could expect to be mired in a costly and protracted war, with victory still years away. Nevertheless, he waved away Humphrey’s effort, reportedly with the words, “Hubert, we don’t need all these memos.”²³

Understanding this dismissive presidential response requires understanding Lyndon Johnson, his own foibles, his own outlook in the late winter of 1965, his own sense of what mattered and what did not. But it also requires looking beyond Johnson, as becomes immediately clear if we ask ourselves whether Hubert Humphrey as president would have accepted his own counsel that winter day half a century ago. Quite possibly he would have. But as with a surviving John F. Kennedy, it would not have been easy. It would not have been the path of least immediate resistance, especially in domestic political terms. Disengagement would have exacted a cost, even if carried out under the terms of a face-saving negotiated settlement, one ensuring a “decent interval” (to borrow the later phrase) before any Hanoi takeover of the South. Republican hawks may have been few in number that spring and may have reeling from the crushing election suffered by their standard-bearer Barry Goldwater the previous November, but that would not have stopped them from brandishing the “soft on Communism” cudgel; charges of “Humphrey the Appeaser” would have flown. If hawkish Democrats joined in the criticism, the domestic legislative agenda might be comprised, at least for a time. The temptation for Humphrey would have been considerable to avert these attacks and to stay in, which in view of the dire situation on the ground would have meant some form of escalation—the status quo was no longer an option—if not necessarily as large and open-ended as that chosen by LBJ. (William Bundy, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, offered a “middle way” proposal that argued for a modest troop commitment and for having those units concentrate on seizing and holding certain “enclaves.” Any decision about a larger buildup would await the end of the summer monsoon season, when a full-fledged assessment would be made.)

What I am suggesting, then, is that there is a mystery at the heart of this story. Lyndon Johnson had real choices about which way to go in Vietnam, options presented to him at the time by seasoned and sagacious analysts close to him. What is more, he shared their sense of gloomy realism about the struggle, about the chronic weaknesses of the South Vietnamese government and army, and he questioned the importance of the outcome to American strategic interests.

22. Notes of Meeting, 22 July 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968: Vietnam*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., 1995), 214.

23. Carl Solberg, *Hubert Humphrey: A Biography* (New York, 1984), 287–88; and Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, 327.

And yet, Johnson never came close to choosing one of these other options, indeed he refused to subject them to serious consideration. I have puzzled over this reality for the past two-plus decades—it is indeed more of a conundrum to me now than when I started my research; I remember asserting with breezy confidence as an early graduate student that the 1965 Americanization was surely “overdetermined”—and I’ll continue to puzzle over it.

I’ll do so despite the astonishing amount of archival and other material we scholars have access to on this war. It turns out that even on the subject of U.S. policymaking on Vietnam—unquestionably one of the most documented episodes in the history of American foreign relations—we cannot, I think, escape many of the constraints we face in our profession. Accounting for individual behavior can be frustratingly difficult for the historian; causal hierarchies can be unstable things.

But this much I feel I *can* say: from Lyndon Johnson’s calculation of his short- and medium-term interest, particularly in domestic political terms, Americanizing the war made a dreadful kind a sense. And one reason for that was because of what the United States had done previously in Indochina, first in support of the French in their anticolonial struggle, and then, after France was defeated, in building up and supporting South Vietnam. Johnson was operating within a larger world, and that world influenced what constraints and possibilities he confronted or thought he confronted, and what decisions he made, as a new present dawned and then became history.