

Opinion

How Vietnam Killed the Great Society

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President Lyndon Johnson surely felt a bitter sense of recognition when he opened The Washington Post on Aug. 1, 1967. There, on Page A12, appeared a political cartoon — the latest by the brilliant cartoonist Herbert Block, better known as Herblock. The sketch showed a beleaguered Johnson flanked by two female suitors. To his right stood a voluptuous seductress bedecked with jewels and a mink stole bearing the words “Vietnam War.” To his left was a scrawny, disheveled waif labeled “U.S. Urban Needs.” The Johnson figure reassured them, “There’s money enough to support both of you,” but readers could hardly fail to grasp the president’s hesitation. The cartoon left no doubt that the flow of resources toward Vietnam might starve Johnson’s domestic agenda.

Such a distraction from priorities at home was Johnson’s nightmare. Since assuming the presidency, he had committed himself to the most ambitious program of domestic reform since the New Deal, a broad array of measures aimed at creating what he called the Great Society. And he had achieved remarkable success. During his first three years in the White House, Johnson signed major legislation to expand civil rights, fight poverty, improve education, establish Medicare and Medicaid, and clean up the environment, among other things. He aimed to accomplish still more in 1967.

But that year brought the president face to face with the rapidly diminishing possibility of new achievements — and possibly even of protecting what he had already won — while fighting a costly and divisive war on the other side of the globe. He could not, as the old cliché put it, have both butter and guns.

This realization marked a breaking point in Johnson's presidency and, more broadly, a watershed in the history of the 1960s. The liberal early '60s, when Americans enthusiastically embraced government activism to address social ills, were giving way to a new era of political fragmentation and diminished expectations.

From the outset of his presidency, Johnson appreciated that enacting the Great Society depended on careful handling of the Vietnam problem. On the one hand, he believed that failure to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam would expose him to withering political attack and kill any chance that Congress or the public would back his domestic program. On the other hand, he believed that he had to play down the crisis in Vietnam to prevent alarm about a looming war in Southeast Asia from eclipsing all interest in his domestic priorities. The implications, he believed, were clear: He had to escalate in Vietnam, but do so with as little fanfare as possible.

Johnson successfully balanced these competing objectives as the war expanded in 1965 and 1966. The introduction of American combat forces ended any risk of Communist victory in the near term. Meanwhile, Johnson managed to avoid provoking a public outcry strong enough to imperil his domestic goals. He signed the landmark Voting Rights Act in August 1965 even as combat troops went into action, and more legislative victories followed. Behind the scenes, advisers urged a tax increase to pay for it all and hold down inflation, but the president, fearing a political firestorm, declined and hoped for the best.

Was Johnson wrong to proceed in this way? Sympathetic historians and journalists argue that the president made the best of an impossible situation and safeguarded major advances that transformed American society for the better. But his critics castigate him for deceiving the American public about the scale of the war in Vietnam and even conspiring with Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara to manipulate information about the war's likely cost. Some charge that domestic

considerations led Johnson to wage the war in a halfhearted way that prevented American forces from winning on the battlefield.

In any case, the curtain came down on Johnson's butter-and-guns balancing act after the November 1966 midterm elections. Amid mounting criticism of the war and urban unrest, Democrats lost 47 seats in the House and three in the Senate. Johnson's party still controlled both houses of Congress, but the setback weakened the liberal faction that had most eagerly backed the Great Society and restored power to a coalition of Republicans and conservative Southern Dixiecrats. As the cost of the war soared close to \$2 billion per month, Johnson could no longer avoid the reckoning he had deferred for so long.

In his State of the Union address on Jan. 10, 1967, Johnson proposed a 6 percent surcharge on individual and corporate taxes to pay for the war and expanding social programs. But the proposal stirred only acrimonious debate about the nation's priorities. Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and a staunch critic of Johnson's domestic programs, immediately demanded deep cuts in domestic spending before any tax proposal would be considered.

From the left, too, came unwelcome attention to the connections between war and domestic reform. Above all, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had been quiet about the war, used a high-profile speech on April 4 to berate American leaders for a conflict that, like a "demonic, destructive suction tube," pulled "men and skills and money" away from urgent tasks at home.

Things got only worse for Johnson. In August, revised estimates of American expenses in Vietnam and likely budget deficits led him to increase his surcharge proposal to 10 percent. He also accepted for the first time that he would have to give ground on spending: After months of dickering with an increasingly hostile Congress, on June 28, 1968, he signed legislation imposing the 10 percent surcharge but also requiring \$6 billion in cuts to domestic programs.

In the end, Johnson had the "last laugh," as his aide Joseph Califano Jr. put it. He had called Congress's bluff: Unwilling to make difficult choices about cuts to domestic programs, legislators could find only \$4 billion to slash from the 1969

budget, below the \$6 billion Johnson had called for. In fact, that fiscal year ended with a \$3.2 billion surplus and no significant unraveling of the Great Society. Johnson's Great Society survived for decades and remains largely intact in the 21st century, thanks to the unwillingness of most conservatives to risk political fallout from tearing down programs that proved beneficial to millions of Americans.

Still, 1967 marked a turning point for Johnson and the transformative agenda that he championed — indeed, for postwar liberalism itself. Attacked by both left and right, Johnson could never again muster anything close to the congressional support he had once enjoyed. His achievements during the final year of his presidency consisted mostly of environmental and consumer-protection measures that carried small price tags, and crime-fighting bills that enjoyed conservative support. The 1968 Fair Housing Act, the final civil rights accomplishment of the 1960s, was possible only because the assassination of King momentarily changed the mood in Congress.

More bad economic news in 1968 not only reinforced Johnson's frustrations domestically but also forced an abrupt change of policy in Vietnam. Confronted with mounting evidence that the war was contributing to a damaging drain on American gold reserves, Johnson saw no choice but to reject the military's appeal for more troops and to seek ways to wind down the war. In a speech on March 31, 1968, he called for negotiations and stunned the world by announcing that he would not run for re-election.

The latter decision may have resulted primarily from Johnson's concerns about his health, but it flowed as well from his failure, perhaps inevitable, to paper over the tensions between his foreign and domestic goals. He could not, as he put it after leaving the White House, have both “the woman I really loved — the Great Society” — and “that bitch of a war on the other side of the world.”

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