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AMERICAN RECKONING

The Vietnam War and Our National Identity

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PENGUIN BOOKS

The story JFK really wanted told was put more crudely in private. Talking about Khrushchev with friends, the president said, "I cut his balls off." Diplomacy had saved the day, but instead of celebrating that, Kennedy and his aides preferred Americans to believe that peace had been preserved by their manliness.

The need to demonstrate presidential "balls" has been an unacknowledged but enduring staple of American foreign policy. Aggressive masculinity shaped American Cold War policy, and still does. Deep-seated ideas about gender and sexuality cannot be dismissed as mere talk. They have explanatory value. U.S. policy in Vietnam was driven by men who were intensely concerned about demonstrating their own, and the nation's, toughness. As every other justification of the war grew threadbare, it became increasingly important to appear "firm."

The appearance of manly resolve was especially crucial for policymakers as it became ever clearer that the United States was not achieving its objectives in Vietnam. They expanded the war not because they strongly believed more troops and more time would turn the tide, but because they were afraid to appear weak.

To preserve an image of strength, LBJ systematically escalated the war. Perhaps the most shocking moment in Robert Dallek's biography of Johnson comes when a group of reporters pressed LBJ to explain why he continued to wage war in spite of so many difficulties and so much opposition. The president "unzipped his fly, drew out his substantial organ, and declared, 'This is why!'"

Other key policymakers may not have displayed their genitals, but all the men who sent America to Vietnam felt a deep connection between their own masculinity and national power. They imagined foreign policy as a constant test of individual as well as national toughness. LBJ's masculinity had different roots and expressions but was not fundamentally different from John Kennedy's or Mac Bundy's. The primary distinction was one of economic class. Unlike Johnson, who had a hardscrabble childhood in the Texas Hill Country, the foreign policy establishment was composed overwhelmingly of privileged men. It was an astonishingly homogeneous group. Their ideas about manhood were forged in a common set of elite, male-only environments—private boarding schools, Ivy League secret societies and fraternities, military service in World War II, and metropolitan men's clubs. As historian Robert Dean has demonstrated, this "imperial brotherhood" viewed themselves as stoic and tough-minded servants of the state. Intensely driven and competitive, they also regarded themselves as part of a fraternity of like-minded men whose core commitment was to advance American power. Indeed, any serious challenge to American power was felt by these men as a blow to their own. They may have disdained LBJ's crudeness, but they were every bit as concerned about demonstrating their manly resolve.

Johnson talked about the connection between masculinity and Vietnam with writer Doris Kearns Goodwin. After leaving the presidency in 1969, Johnson convinced her to help him with his memoirs. She spent many weeks at his Texas ranch and eventually wrote her own biography of LBJ. At the ranch, Goodwin writes, "a curious ritual developed. I would awaken at five and get dressed. Half an hour later Johnson would knock on my door, dressed in his robe and pajamas. As I sat in a chair by the window, he climbed into the bed, pulling the sheets up to his neck, looking like a cold and frightened child."

In that intimate, quasi-therapeutic setting, Goodwin took notes while LBJ talked:

> Everything I knew about history told me that if I got out of Vietnam . . . I'd be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II [at Munich]. I'd be giving a big fat reward to aggression. And I knew that . . . Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. . . .
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> If we lost Vietnam . . . there would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine.
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> Oh, I could see it coming all right. Every night when I fell asleep I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: "Coward! Traitor! Weakling!" They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones. At exactly that moment I would generally wake up.

Johnson habitually embellished stories or made them up. LBJ's recurring nightmare—"every night"—may have been pure invention, but it does offer a vivid sense of how he viewed his Vietnam decisions (or at least how he wanted others to view them). Most obvious is his profound anxiety about manliness and courage and how inextricably linked they are to his worries about the political cost of appearing weak.

But he does not cast himself as a stalwart, heroic commander. Instead of dismissing his critics as cowards or appeasers, he makes himself the pitiable, helpless victim. It's as if he were literally driven into war by a mad mob—stalked, staked, and stoned into escalating the war in Vietnam. You might expect that the lynch mob would be led by right-wing Republican hawks like Curtis LeMay or Barry Goldwater. But it's Democrat Robert Kennedy leading the charge.

LBJ stacks the deck to suggest that all the forces of history and politics were aligned against him. He *had* to make the decisions he did in Vietnam. However much he may have wanted to avoid an ill-fated war, he had no choice. To back down would ruin his presidency and put the nation through an "endless" and "destructive" debate. Even near death, LBJ could not acknowledge that the war had done precisely that.

Lying there in bed, with the covers pulled up, the former president might just as easily have told Doris Kearns Goodwin about another, more plausible nightmare. In this one a raging and howling mob ties him to the ground and screams: "Murderer! Baby-Killer! War Criminal!" Then the chanting dies out and he sees Robert Kennedy speaking to a large, enraptured crowd: *And if we care so little about South Vietnam that we are willing to see the land destroyed and its people dead, then why are we there in the first place?* The crowd begins to chant again: "Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?" And then he wakes up and realizes that his nightmare comes directly from the daily news, the terrifying reality that engulfed the final years of his presidency.

LBJ and most of the other key Vietnam policymakers never imagined that withdrawal from Vietnam would be an act of courage. In one sense this moral blindness is baffling because these same men prided themselves on their pragmatic, hardheaded realism, their ability to cut through sentiment and softhearted idealism to face the most difficult realities of foreign affairs. They could see that the war was failing. But they could not pull out. A deeper set of values trumped their most coherent understandings of the war. They simply could not accept being viewed as losers. A "manly man" must always keep fighting.

By the late 1960s, however, all the foundational lessons of LBJ's foreign policy were crumbling, even the idea of what it meant to be a man. Ideas about gender were beginning to undergo just as much scrutiny as national identity. Suddenly large numbers of young men were saying no to the idea that male identity required them to take up arms against foreign "enemies." And many young women were forcefully arguing that American masculinity was an ever more intolerable form of patriarchy that was oppressing women at home and abroad.