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Francis M. Bator. "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection." *Diplomatic History* 32.3 (June 2008): 309-340. With comments by Evan Thomas (341-342), Randall B. Woods (343-345), Marilyn B. Young (347-350), Mark Moyar (351-354), Fredrik Logevall (355-359), Larry Berman (361-362). Author's Response by Francis M. Bator (363-370).

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Reviewed by **James McAllister**, Williams College

Students of the Vietnam War and the presidency of Lyndon Johnson owe a real debt to Francis Bator. While I am sure there are some possible exceptions to be found, I can't think of another example of a former high level policymaker agreeing to have his historical arguments subjected to the scrutiny of other historians in the leading journal of American foreign relations. The editors of *Diplomatic History* should be commended for their decision to feature Bator's article in their most recent issue. One can only hope that the respectful but critical dialogue between Bator and his critics will become a model for future interactions between policymakers and historians. In my view, the most important issue raised by Bator is not the primary argument that Lyndon Johnson's decisionmaking in June-July 1965 was heavily influenced by considerations of the Great Society legislation. Bator does a marvelous job of marshalling the evidence for his argument, but the fundamentals of his case--that Johnson sought to avoid a grand debate on Vietnam because he feared that it would embolden political elements that would derail his legislative program--is not new and is widely accepted by scholars of the war who agree about little else.¹ Whether a public debate over Vietnam, let alone a

¹ In his response to Bator, Larry Berman suggests that he put forward the same argument in his 1982 book *Planning a Tragedy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982). The basic thesis about the connection between Vietnam and the Great Society, as well as many of the specific arguments concerning the decisions of June-

settlement that headed off the Americanization of the war, would have actually derailed the great society legislation as LBJ feared remains a very open question. Fredrik Logevall has made a very compelling case that LBJ was wrong to fear the consequences of a Vietnam settlement for the Great Society, while Bator and other scholars think Johnson accurately gauged the likely consequences, but this is surely not an argument that can be settled by appealing to documents. A persuasive case could be made for either side of the argument.²

One of the real contributions of Bator's article is that it should force historians of the war to think more carefully about how to conceptualize the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and his top advisors. Bator clearly believes that Vietnam is truly "Lyndon Johnson's War." In his view, LBJ was not "under the thumb of his inherited advisors" and "he ran his own show" on Vietnam. However, while few scholars would deny that Johnson inevitably has to be at the center of any discussion of the Vietnam War, it is much too easy to hold him completely and solely responsible for the escalation of the war because his closest advisors, including McGeorge Bundy, played very important roles on the road to the "Americanization" of the war. To paraphrase Bundy's well known remark about Vietnam, gray is surely the color of truth when it comes to understanding the relationship between Johnson and his advisors. Bator is correct to emphasize that Johnson was not a passive leader simply implementing the wishes of the national security bureaucracy or "the Harvards," but in making this argument he is largely pushing against a very open door. Maureen Dowd, George Stephanopoulos, and John Yoo may believe that Johnson was under the thumb of his inherited advisors, but it is clear that hardly any of the leading scholars of the Vietnam War and the Johnson presidency would advance such a stark view of the relationship between Johnson and his advisors.³ Fredrik Logevall agrees

July 1965, can also be found in David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp.590-610, 656. None of Bator's commentators in *Diplomatic History* dispute the basic claim that Johnson's actions were influenced by considerations of his Great Society legislation.

² The thesis that LBJ was mistaken in fearing a right wing backlash if he moved towards a negotiated settlement in Vietnam is one of the most important contributions of Logevall's *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). While I find his argument very persuasive, I can understand why Bator and other scholars believe that Johnson was correct to think otherwise.

³ Bator cites Dowd, Stephanopoulos, Daniel Schorr, James Reston, John Yoo, Eric Foner, and Robert Dallek to assert that this view of LBJ as under the thumb of his advisors "has become dogma." The evidence he cites, however, is very thin. The Foner reference that he cites actually refers to Richard Russell rather than Johnson's advisors. The Dallek quote he provides is a reference to the period right after JFK's assassination and hardly representative of Dallek's larger thesis which squarely puts the blame for Vietnam on LBJ's own shoulders. See Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Bator does not cite Gareth Porter's *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (2005), which is perhaps the only recent scholarly book that could legitimately be read as arguing Johnson was under the thumb of his inherited advisors, as well as far less hawkish than Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy. However, as Robert Brigham correctly points out, Porter's argument about the dominant influence of the national security bureaucracy is "unsustainable" and

with Bator that Johnson was “under no advisor’s thumb.” Mark Moyar suggests that Johnson was “not a pawn of his advisors” and Randall Woods agrees that LBJ was “clearly the master of his own ship.”⁴ All of these arguments about thumbs, pawns, and shipmasters should raise the obvious question of what scholars, if any, actually argue that LBJ was a pawn, deckhand, or under the thumb of his advisors? To the best of my knowledge, these are not widely held arguments in the voluminous historical literature on the Vietnam War. In his fulsome appreciation of Bator’s article, Evan Thomas suggests that scholars have adopted the view that elite advisors exerted an enormous influence over Johnson from the late David Halberstam’s classic book *The Best and the Brightest*. However, a close reading of Halberstam’s still valuable account shows that the author has a far more subtle and complex view of the relationship between Johnson and his advisors. While Halberstam does suggest that LBJ was somewhat more dubious about escalation than his top advisors, I do not think a fair reading of his book supports the idea that he helped create a grand “narrative myth” that “The Harvards [led] LBJ into the Vietnam quagmire, rather against his better judgment,” as Thomas suggests.⁵

In demolishing the not very sturdy edifice that Johnson was a captive of his top advisors, however, Bator goes much too far in the other direction. In “No Good Choices,” LBJ’s main advisors appear to be either very wise men whose good advice was rejected by the president or men who are largely irrelevant to our understanding of America’s involvement in Vietnam. However, replacing the old myth that LBJ was under the thumb of his advisors with a new myth that LBJ’s advisors simply followed a determined president on a course that they disagreed with does not advance our understanding of the Vietnam War. Thomas argues that Bator’s article has opened the door to nothing less than a new revisionist understanding of the war. He argues that Bator shows that the “truth is quite the opposite,” which in this context can only mean that Lyndon Johnson plunged the United States into the Vietnam quagmire *against* the better judgment of McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, and Bill Bundy. In his view, “The real tragedy was that LBJ did not listen to (McGeorge) Bundy, or to his brother Bill, or to McNamara. And, possibly, that the Harvards did not try harder to make him.”⁶ The thesis that America’s growing involvement in the Vietnam War, either in June-July 1965 or previously, resulted

backed up by “little if any documentary evidence.” See Robert Brigham, “The National Security Bureaucracy Made Me Do It,” *SHAFR Newsletter*, August 2006. For an earlier work that places more blame on Johnson’s advisors for pushing escalatory actions on an allegedly reluctant president, see George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987).

⁴ See comments by Logevall, Moyar, and Woods in *Diplomatic History*, pp.344, 351, 355.

⁵ Evan Thomas comments, *Diplomatic History*, pp.341-342.

⁶ The addition of the word “possibly” suggests that Thomas believes that the Bundy brothers and Robert McNamara did in fact try hard to make Johnson listen. It is possible that Thomas takes Bator’s article further than the author himself would. In his extensive response to his commentators, however, Bator does not take any issue with Thomas’s views.

from LBJ failing to listen to or heed the advice of the Bundy brothers and Robert McNamara may have the benefit of novelty but it surely does not come close to capturing American decisionmaking during the early Johnson presidency.

Bator's explicit focus on the decisions and events of June-July 1965 is valuable, but it also helps obscure the prior context in which those decisions need to be understood. Westmoreland's cable of June 7, 1965 may have been a "bombshell," but it certainly did not come out of nowhere. Putting substantial American ground forces in Vietnam was always the end of line in discussions of what needed to be done if all else failed. And by the spring of 1965 it was increasingly clear that all else had failed. The best place to start understanding the June-July 1965 decisions is with the inherent struggle within LBJ's own mind between two ideas not easily reconciled. The first is Johnson's well known remark immediately after he became president that he would not lose in Vietnam. The second is his belief, expressed on numerous occasions between 1963-1965, that the prospects for victory in Vietnam were not very good and American involvement should be limited as much as possible. Johnson's basic views on Vietnam were very consistent with those of the most important advisors he inherited from the Kennedy administration, particularly McNamara and Bundy. Of course, we will never know whether any advisory process could have resulted in the victory of LBJ's doubts over his determination not to lose in Vietnam. In an oral history interview he gave in 1969, McGeorge Bundy was probably correct in arguing that LBJ simply did not believe that the advice of those opposed to escalation, such as George Ball, would result in anything else than "the Americans getting licked and taking the licking."⁷ However, it is also true that the most important voices within his administration, including McNamara and Bundy, reinforced his determination not to lose in Vietnam at every step along the way between November 1963 and June-July 1965. If someone other than Lyndon Johnson had taken over for Kennedy in November 1963, and McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara retained their positions, it is far from clear that either Bundy or McNamara would have advised that president against the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam.⁸

This assessment of McGeorge Bundy's role in the Vietnam conflict should not in any sense be controversial.⁹ For those who do not have time to review all of the relevant *FRUS*

⁷ McGeorge Bundy Oral History II, 1969, LBJ library, p.6.

⁸ Fredrik Logevall may be correct in arguing that McNamara and Bundy were not "true believers" and "It is not difficult to imagine both men, and especially McNamara, arguing with equal effectiveness for the need to cut losses and get out of the conflict." Perhaps, but I am not sure why it is not an equally plausible counterfactual that Johnson might have been more willing to explore getting out of the conflict if, for example, George Ball was his National Security Advisor and Clark Clifford was his Secretary of Defense. LBJ's right to being classified as not a "true believer" is as strong as the claim for either Bundy or McNamara. See Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.389.

⁹ The rest of this commentary will focus on Bundy rather than McNamara since he is central to Bator's article. For an incisive critique of McNamara's belated and unconvincing explanation of his role

volumes or other archival evidence, I strongly recommend Andrew Preston's recent book, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam*. As Preston shows, Bundy's views on Vietnam between 1961 and 1965 were not completely fixed but they shifted within a very narrow range: he moved from being a hawk, to a "soft" hawk, to a determined advocate for escalation in 1964 and early 1965, and finally back towards being a somewhat ambivalent and "reluctant warrior" in the late spring and summer of 1965. Bundy may not have been in favor of "Americanizing" the war in the fall of 1961—hardly anyone was at the time—but he was in favor of putting in "limited US combat units" to Vietnam as proposed by the Taylor-Rostow report; a recommendation that was rejected by JFK.¹⁰ In May 1964, summarizing the views of Rusk and McNamara, but from which he clearly did not dissent, Bundy recommended to LBJ that he approve a sequence of actions that included large scale deployments of American forces "so as to maximize their deterrent impact and their menace."¹¹ Within weeks after the Gulf of Tonkin events, Bundy was already suggesting that Johnson give more serious thought to employing American ground forces in Vietnam. As his language in the memo to LBJ suggests, Bundy was not simply serving as a neutral manager of ideas floating around in the bureaucracy but also as an advocate of a certain course of action: "A still more drastic possibility which no one is discussing is the use of substantial U.S. armed forces in operations against the Viet Cong. I myself believe that before we let this country go we should have a hard look at this grim alternative, and I do not at all think that it is a repetition of Korea. It seems to me at least possible that a couple of brigade-size units put in to do specific jobs about six weeks from now might be good medicine everywhere."¹²

As Bundy well knew from earlier exchanges throughout the year with LBJ, such an escalation of the American role before the presidential elections was precisely what Johnson wanted to avoid. However, by January 1965 the relatively cautious path that Johnson had adopted over the course of 1964 was seen as increasingly unsustainable by Bundy. Along with McNamara, Bundy advised LBJ in January 1965 that it was time for him to do more and move out of the "essentially passive role which can only lead to eventual defeat and an invitation to get out in humiliating circumstances."¹³ Aided by the Viet Cong attack at Pleiku, Bundy would soon become the leading administration figure behind the policy of sustained reprisals against North Vietnam in February 1965. The

during these years, see Thomas Hughes "Experiencing McNamara," *Foreign Policy* (Autumn 1995), pp.155-171.

¹⁰ Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, The NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p.99.

¹¹ Bundy to LBJ, "Basic Recommendation and Projected Course of Action on Southeast Asia," May 25, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964, vol.1, pp.374-77 (quotation on p.377).

¹² Bundy to LBJ, August 31, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964, vol.1, pp.723-24.

¹³ Bundy to LBJ, "Basic Policy in Vietnam," January 27, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. II, p.96.

decision to launch the Rolling Thunder campaign was obviously a major step towards the “Americanization” of the war and was seen by Bundy at the time “as a major watershed decision.”¹⁴ Preston’s final conclusion about Bundy’s overall role in the Vietnam War is harsh but mostly convincing: “His overall record, however, has been ultimately and irrevocably tarnished by his role in causing and continuing the Vietnam War...It is unfortunate, but apt, that this should be so, for Bundy’s role in marginalizing internal dissent and shaping escalation was crucial to the escalation of the war. Without his efforts, the war would not have unfolded as it did; indeed, it may not have unfolded at all.”¹⁵

It can surely be argued that Preston perhaps attributes a little too much importance to Bundy’s overall importance in the origins and unfolding of the Vietnam War. Bundy certainly listened to the many NSC staffers who were less hawkish on the war and it is clear that he did not punish or shun those who did not see Vietnam in quite the same way as he did. But Preston’s book is also a very helpful corrective to the idea that Bundy and other top officials were really of little or no importance since in the final analysis Johnson himself was determined not to lose in Vietnam. His assessment of Bundy’s role in Vietnam policy is far closer to the reality than the one found in “No Good Choices” or in Kai Bird’s *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms*.¹⁶ Bird’s widely praised study of the Bundy brothers is important in this context because it advances a view of McGeorge Bundy very similar to the one put forward by Bator. While Bird is far from uncritical of Bundy, the entire thrust of his book is to render Bundy a much more sympathetic and tragic figure and to make Vietnam squarely “Lyndon Johnson’s War.” In his view, both of the Bundy brothers “understood what a dubious venture the Johnson administration had embraced” from a very early point. “During the pivotal decisions of 1964-65, both brothers urged President Johnson not to make an open-ended commitment of American ground troops...Both brothers understood that the French experience in Indochina was a critical bellwether.”¹⁷ Bird’s argument is that the

¹⁴ Bundy to LBJ, February 16, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. II, p.283. The phrase is important because Bator cites later writings in which Bundy argued that the decision to send in troops in June-July 1965 “as the watershed decision” rather than the February decision to bomb North Vietnam. See Bator, “No Good Choices,” p.315. Both decisions, of course, were “watershed decisions.”

¹⁵ Preston, *The War Council*, p.248.

¹⁶ Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

¹⁷ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.18. This argument is not true when it comes to McGeorge Bundy. On the very same day he sent his “rash to the point of folly” memo to McNamara, he sent LBJ a memo “France in Vietnam, 1954, and the U.S. in Vietnam, 1965-A Useful Analogy,” which explicitly and without qualification argued that “the situation faced by France in Vietnam in 1954 is not fundamentally analogous to that faced by the U.S. in Vietnam in 1965 ... Options, both military and political, remain to us that were no longer available to the French.” See Bundy to LBJ, June 30, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol. III, pp.79-85 (quotation on p.85).

liberal Bundy brothers served a far more hawkish Lyndon Johnson, despite their doubts on Vietnam, largely because they worried about the power of the right wing in American politics and the “wild men waiting in the wings.” Their job was not so much to prosecute the war effectively, but merely “to contain the war” from going too far. The problem was not just the right wing, but Lyndon Johnson and his own hawkish tendencies. While the Bundy brothers often pushed Kennedy to go further than he wanted to go, they had the opposite problem when it came to Johnson: “But with President Lyndon Johnson they would sometimes find themselves dragging their heels and holding onto his coattails.”¹⁸ By June-July 1965, trying to stop the deployment of ground troops was an exercise in futility because no amount of persuasion by the Bundy brothers or anyone else could stop LBJ from escalating the war. Adopting the cultural explanation preferred by Evan Thomas, Bird cites McGeorge Bundy to the effect that Johnson wanted to “fight the war and win it, because that’s what Texas boys do.”¹⁹

How should we account for the vast difference in the view of McGeorge Bundy found in Preston’s book with those put forward in “No Good Choices” and *The Color of Truth*? While there are many reasons for the differing views, one of the most important is in the nature of the sources employed by Preston, Bator, and Bird. Preston’s study is almost entirely based on official sources readily available to scholars in the *Foreign Relations* series and other archival sources. In stark contrast, Bator and Bird rely heavily on oral history interviews, private conversations, and notes that McGeorge Bundy was developing in the years before his unfortunate death in 1996. Bator’s article relies heavily on materials that were deposited at the Kennedy presidential archives in 2004, but are still not available for the scrutiny of other scholars. In reading *The Color of Truth*, it is remarkable how many times important arguments about McGeorge Bundy and his brother concerning the war are grounded on little or nothing more than interviews with the subjects or other materials dating from the 1990’s. A great example of this unfortunate tendency is Bird’s discussion of the Gulf of Tonkin events of August 1964. Bird argues that the escalation that resulted from the Gulf of Tonkin is squarely LBJ’s responsibility and “was made without Johnson consulting any of his foreign policy advisors.” Bird includes an anecdote from Bundy suggesting that he wanted Johnson to “think it over” before asking for a congressional resolution. In Bundy’s view, “I was just a messenger boy...And he made sure I stayed that way.” Needless to say, important arguments such as this should not be accepted as fact on the basis of a single oral history interview, particularly when there is abundant evidence to suggest that it is simply not an accurate depiction of

¹⁸ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.269 and 332. The first reference is Bird’s own judgment of the relationship between the Bundy’s and LBJ. The second reference is a quote from an oral history interview Bird conducted with McGeorge Bundy in 1994. This is a problem that occurs repeatedly in *The Color of Truth*; namely Bird’s willingness to accept and endorse Bundy’s view of his role in the Johnson presidency.

¹⁹ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, pp.332 and 340.

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the decisionmaking process.²⁰ While we will never know everything Johnson and Bundy may have discussed during the crisis, the important point is we do know that Bundy was surely not opposed to seeking a Congressional resolution at the time. As Bundy said in a staff meeting the very next day, “For his own part, he welcomed the recent events as justification for a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time.”²¹

Bator does not address Bundy’s role in Vietnam policymaking before 1965, but in “No Good Choices” he clearly wants to establish that Bundy and Johnson were at cross-purposes on important issues in the period before and during the decisions of June-July 1965. First, he argues that no one pushed more than Bundy in the spring and summer of 1965 to “explain the choices in Vietnam.” Second, Bator suggests that anyone interested in Bundy’s role at this time should look more closely at his well known “rash to the point of folly” memo of June 30, 1965. On the first point, there is little doubt that LBJ and Bundy were not in complete agreement about the importance of public explanation of the war. Bundy wanted to do much more in this regard and LBJ, for a variety of reasons, clearly wanted to do less. It is also clear that LBJ did not approve of Bundy’s decision to engage in debates and dialogue with opponents of the war in public forums. However, it is far from clear that these disagreements amounted to all that much. Bundy wanted LBJ to make a major speech on Vietnam in February 1965, but by early March 1965 he was actually applauding LBJ for his decision to reject this advice.²² While LBJ certainly did not want a full blown debate over Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965, it is misleading to suggest that he tried to keep growing American involvement in Vietnam totally hidden from either the public or Congress. LBJ’s speech at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965, which Bundy helped draft, did indeed attempt to explain to the American people the nature of the conflict as he saw it and he did warn in the speech that “we must be prepared for a long continued conflict.”²³ In May 1965, LBJ also asked Congress to approve a \$700 million dollar appropriation bill for Vietnam and he did not try to get approval by

²⁰ See Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.289. Bundy and other key advisors were consulted frequently by LBJ during the crucial days of the crisis. There is no evidence, beyond the anecdote related by Bundy, that he in any way opposed a course of retaliation or the seeking of a Congressional resolution during the crisis.

²¹ *FRUS*, 1964, vol.1, August 5, 1964, p.632. In his oral history deposited at the LBJ library in 1969, Bundy does not appear to have any reservations at all about LBJ seeking the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. My point here is simply that there does not appear to be any independent evidence beyond Bundy’s recollections at various points in the 1980’s and 1990’s that he urged Johnson to go slow in seeking a congressional resolution. Needless to say, I think historians should take this fact into account particularly when it seems to cut against the evidence from the time, such as the above memo and the oral history interview from 1969, and particularly when the recollection portrays the former policymaker in a positive light. Variations of this story, which I emphasize might well be true, have appeared in such important books as Dallek’s *Flawed Giant*, pp.150-151; and Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p.209.

²² Bundy to LBJ, March 6, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol.2, p.402.

²³ Address at Johns Hopkins University, “Peace Without Conquest,” April 7, 1965.

downplaying the bill as a routine measure that carried no political importance. In fact, he did exactly the opposite by stating in an accompanying message to Congress, “Each member of Congress who supports this request is also voting to persist in an effort to halt Communist aggression in Vietnam.”²⁴ The point here is not that Lyndon Johnson was remarkably forthright with the American people in the spring and summer of 1965; he clearly was not. But it is also not apparent that Johnson’s disagreements with Bundy over public explanation and Congressional involvement were anything more than a minor tactical disagreement between the two men.²⁵

Bundy’s June 30 “rash to the point of folly” memo is a very interesting document in many respects. It is indeed, as Bator suggests, a “remarkable forewarning of all that went wrong.” There is no reason to doubt Bundy’s skepticism about putting substantial numbers of ground troops into Vietnam, but it is also clear that Bundy certainly did not push the case against an expanded commitment with any real determination. First, he sent his doubts only to McNamara and he did not force LBJ to grapple with the pointed questions he raised. Perhaps it is true, as he would later tell Kai Bird, that he only sent the memo to McNamara because “he thought Johnson’s mind was already made up” and that he wanted to tell McNamara “don’t do what the president’s telling you to do.”²⁶ Second, not more than a day after the “rash to the point of folly memo” Bundy was already advising LBJ that he should listen to George Ball’s proposal but that his choice would probably come down to one between his brother’s “middle way” course and McNamara’s more expansive course. Over the next three weeks, Bundy did not do very much at all to put his doubts before President Johnson and it is quite possible that LBJ had no idea that his national security advisor was increasingly dubious about the “Americanization” of the war. When Ball’s proposal was debated at length on July 21st and 22nd, Bundy made it clear that he agreed with “the main thrust of McNamara” and that it would be “disastrous” to adopt the new course proposed by George Ball; “He would rather maintain our present commitment and “waffle through” than withdraw. The country is in the mood to accept grim news.”²⁷ While they may have disagreed on the degree and pace of the increased

²⁴ Quotation in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p.269.

²⁵ Bator cites a July 1 phone conversation between LBJ and Bill Moyers to bolster his point that there was a serious disagreement between Bundy and the president over his speeches and desire for more Congressional involvement. The conversation is certainly harsh and LBJ actually tells Moyers that he would be pleased to have Bundy’s resignation. How should we interpret this striking conversation? In “No Good Choices,” Bator made a useful distinction between Johnson when he was in “Act 1” and “Act 2” mode. Bator suggests that LBJ often just let off steam and that “literal truth was not the point and he expected you to understand that. If you didn’t he thought you a bit of a fool.” In his view, Act 1 mode was usually followed by a more thoughtful Act 2 mode. In reference to the conversation with Moyers, Bator believes that LBJ was “unmistakably in his Act 2 mode.” Perhaps, but the conversation with Moyers seems to be a textbook case of LBJ in Act 1 mode since it is filled with precisely the paranoia and “imaginary Bobby Kennedy plots” that he earlier said was representative of LBJ when he was in this mode of thinking.

²⁶ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.332.

²⁷ “Memorandum for the Record,” July 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-68, vol. III, p.203.

commitment to Vietnam, and particularly over how the expanded commitment should be explained and justified to the American people, Bundy and LBJ were still much closer on Vietnam matters to each other than they were to their many critics within and outside the administration.

Needless to say, the Vietnam War was no more “McGeorge Bundy’s War” than it was “Robert McNamara’s War.” The point of this commentary is that historians should also resist the temptation to explain the war as simply an unavoidable consequence of Lyndon Johnson’s own goals, personality, and leadership style. The belief that there was a real and important dichotomy between LBJ, on the one hand, and his top advisors, on the other hand, in the period leading up to the decisions of June-July 1965 is not borne out by the documentary evidence. In *The Color of Truth*, Kai Bird recounts that McGeorge Bundy told him, “I think Kennedy was more a dove than Johnson, and my surest judgment for that is that I was more of a hawk than Kennedy and Johnson was more of a hawk than I....He is going to stay with it, and there’s no point in telling him not to.”²⁸ The evidence of Vietnam policymaking certainly does not support the idea that Johnson was more of a hawk than McGeorge Bundy or Robert McNamara before July 1965. Whether there was “no point” in telling Johnson that he should not stay on a long-established path to the Americanization of the war is also far less certain. As Fredrik Logevall suggests, “Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk all advised sticking it out in Vietnam, through escalation if necessary. Had the three of them marched into the Oval Office one spring day and declared that disengagement via a conference was the only sensible option, no doubt Johnson would have listened. Perhaps he would have followed their advice. But perhaps not.”²⁹ One of the many tragedies of Vietnam is that none of LBJ’s top advisors ever marched into the Oval Office and made the case for such an option. When it comes to understanding the origins of the Vietnam War, we will go much further by acknowledging the shared goals and outlook of “the Harvards” and the “Texas boy” than by suggesting that only the latter must assume all responsibility for the escalation of the Vietnam War.³⁰

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²⁸ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p.332.

²⁹ Logevall, *Choosing War*, p.145.

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