

JOHNSON'S LEGACY TODAY: DO WE LIVE IN A GREAT SOCIETY?

Seattle Repertory Theatre's productions of Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" and "The Great Society" shed light on Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous presidency. In this 10-week series, we'll explore the legacy of Johnson's noteworthy legislative acts and how decisions made 50 years ago continue to resonate in modern America. Today's topic: The Vietnam War.

JOHNSON AND THE VIETNAM WAR

The Inherited War

America's involvement in the Vietnam War did not begin or end with Johnson. When Johnson became president, Vietnam was divided into the North and South. The North was controlled by communist forces led by Ho Chi Minh. The South was under attack by the Viet Cong, the North's guerilla forces. To prevent a communist takeover, President Kennedy expanded the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam from fewer than 700 in 1961 to more than 16,000 by the fall of 1963. When Johnson stepped into office, he relied on Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and other advisers from the Kennedy administration for foreign policy expertise and military leadership. Johnson chose to focus on the 1964 presidential election, knowing that increased involvement in Vietnam would not be smart, politically. After Johnson won the election, however, incidents overseas made the Vietnam conflict impossible to set aside.

Increased Presence

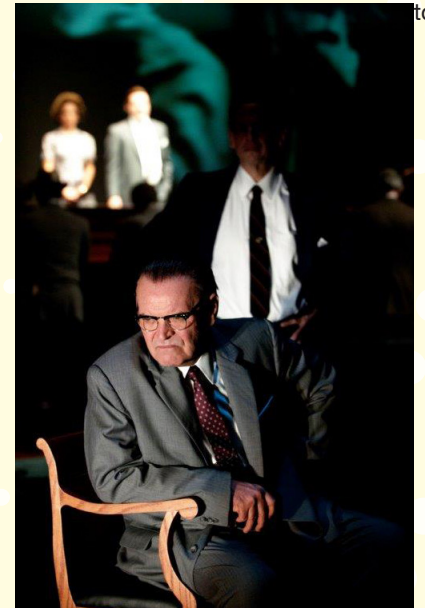
What is known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident triggered a chain of events which eventually led to greatly increased U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and the American public's conflicted opinions of Johnson. The U.S. navy ship Maddox was sent into the Gulf of Tonkin to patrol the area. When the Maddox was allegedly attacked by North Vietnam, Johnson sent an order, called the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, to attack North Vietnam. The resolution granted Johnson the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country at risk of communist aggression. The debate continues about the nature of the attack and whether it was provoked. Believing in the "domino theory," that if one nation fell to communism others would follow, by the end of 1964 Johnson had increased the U.S. presence in Vietnam to 23,000 military personnel. By the end of 1965, 200,000 Americans were serving in Vietnam.

As he had done when seeking election in 1964, Johnson downplayed the war to the American public. He made few speeches about it and chose to focus on his Great Society Programs. While Johnson was adept at building relationships, bargaining and bartering with local politicians, he was not able to apply these skills as easily to conflicts overseas. Many Americans came to see the Vietnam conflict as a civil war that had gone on for decades and could not be resolved by U.S. intervention. Because no American president had lost a war, and Johnson was determined to not be the first, he believed that if he persisted in demonstrating America's strength, Ho Chi Minh would come to the bargaining table as was common in his dealings with American politicians. Johnson believed that abandoning his commitment to preventing the

spread of communism this far in would lead World War III; he told the American people that North Vietnam forces were weakening. Johnson's claim was incorrect and on Jan. 30, 1968, the Vietnamese holiday of Tet, North Vietnam launched a massive attack on the South Vietnamese government called the Tet Offensive. As a result of the mass casualties, any hopes Johnson had of convincing Americans that North Vietnam's power was weakening were proven untrue.

America's Response

While Johnson continued to pursue an increased American presence in Vietnam, many Americans began to question his credibility after Tet. Privately, some of Johnson's advisers warned of a long war and advised him to walk away from the situation. Johnson would not back down. By 1968, over 550,000 soldiers were in Vietnam, more than 25,000 had already been killed and troops were dying at a rate of nearly 2,000 a month. American dissent grew. Protests began on college campuses, and expanded to protests and sit-ins at the White House. Hoping that it would help to secure a negotiated peace, Johnson told the American people that he would not run in the 1968 presidential election. However, opponents of the war protested at the 1968 Democratic convention, which led to violent confrontation with the Chicago police. On a platform of anti-communism and a promise to end the war, Republican Richard Nixon won the election and the Vietnam War continued on for another five years.



Jack Willis, Peter Frechette, Erica Sullivan and Jonathan Haugen. Photo: Jenny Graham.

CURRENT CONNECTION

- Some say the Vietnam War was a civil war that the United States should not have been involved in. What do you think?
- What lessons have we learned from the Vietnam War?
- What current U.S. involvement in other countries is similar to the Vietnam War?
- How can the Vietnam experience be applied to our involvement in Korea and the Middle East?