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**How did the Vietnam War impact Lyndon B.
Johnson's Reputation?**

Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War

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How did the Vietnam War impact Lyndon B. Johnson's Reputation?

Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th President of the United States, has frequently been described as 'Master of the Senate'¹. This description of Lyndon B. Johnson is evidently well deserved; as well as becoming the youngest ever majority leader of the Senate in 1955, he is also recognised as a man who paved the way for current social reform throughout his political career, through his work to help the minorities in American society. Prior to the Vietnam War, Johnson's reputation had reached an all-time high. This was due to his enthusiasm and confidence in America's greatness, coupled with his ground-breaking domestic policy. A clear demonstration of Johnson's popularity was his nickname at the time - 'Landslide Lyndon'². Shockingly, however, by March 1968, Johnson's popularity had decreased to the point that he had to withdraw from the forthcoming Presidential elections. This negativity surrounding Johnson was due to his involvement in the Vietnam War, which is commonly regarded as the USA's greatest foreign policy disaster. The real question, one that will be explored throughout this essay, is to what extent Lyndon B. Johnson's reputation was destroyed, and how it was destroyed so drastically and so immediately by his handling of the Vietnam War.

Historians such as David Woolner and Lisa Jardine have explored Johnson's early life and the reputation he gained during the initial stages of his political career. Both historians explore Johnson's work for the minorities in society, which first began in 1928 when he taught at a segregated school attended by Mexican-American children. It has been said by many that Johnson vastly heightened these children's senses of self-belief; he not only educated them, but also encouraged them to strive for greatness. Throughout his early political career in particular, Johnson stressed the importance of solving America's race issues. He therefore began work for the National Youth Administration, one of Roosevelt's New Deal Agencies, which aimed to bring economic stability to the nation. It was during this New Deal era that racism was fully recognized and targeted as a problem in the United States; as David Woolner writes, Lyndon Johnson helped to 'expose the invisible hand of racism as a national issue'³. Johnson proved to be helpful to both the Mexican-American and the African-American community – as part of his involvement with the New Deal, Johnson put significant effort into decreasing the rate of black unemployment, which had risen to 50% by 1932, and was working intensely to increase equality for black farmers and black school children in Texas, his home state. Therefore, particularly in the south of America, Johnson's involvement with the New Deal program led to him developing a reputation for propelling America's racial issues onto the national stage. In Lisa Jardine's 2009 article for *The Independent*, she describes Johnson's work as part of the Washington House of Representatives, which he joined in 1937. As Jardine writes, Johnson's work involved bringing cheap power to rural areas and developing housing for the poor; this helped to regenerate America after the Great Depression (1929-1939). Jardine writes that Johnson played a central role in 'transforming the lives of the rural poor'⁴ throughout the 1930s in the USA. Thus, we can see that in the

¹ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson – Master of the Senate*, (Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, April 2002), p.57

² Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, *The Independent*, January 2009

³ David Woolner, *African Americans and the New Deal: A Look Back in History*, By Roosevelt Institute (web article – accessed 10th August 2016)

⁴ Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, *The Independent*, January 2009

early stages of Johnson's political career, the American public would have viewed him as a strong politician who fought for justice and equality, and promoted national recovery through his association with the New Deal administration. Jardine sums up Johnson's reputation throughout the 1930s, prior to his Presidency and the Vietnam War – 'Lyndon Johnson was being called "the best New Dealer from Texas"'⁵.

Lyndon B. Johnson entered the US Senate in 1948, and rapidly rose up the ranks, becoming the youngest ever majority leader of the Senate in 1953. Robert Dallek, Lyndon Johnson's biographer, describes how Johnson quickly became one of America's most powerful majority leaders - 'He understood the way the Senate worked. He understood what senators needed and what they wanted'⁶. Dallek explains how Johnson's precise understanding of the senators around him enabled him to dominate the US Senate. Johnson formed close, personal relationships with other Senators, which, in turn, enabled him to establish control over the Senate. Therefore, Lyndon B. Johnson was quickly becoming known as a powerful political figure – as Dallek writes, he had 'a talent for leadership that created fear, admiration, and a desire in others to follow'⁷. Robert A. Caro also describes Johnson's dominance over the US Senate – 'By mastery of men and of procedure, he turned the Senate into his kingdom'⁸. This Senate power that Johnson gained even enabled him to steer the first ever civil rights legislation through Congress in 1957. The legislation, which aimed to increase the amount of African-American voters in the US, was extremely important as it showed the American public that Johnson was not just a regional leader, but a national leader too. It also increased Johnson's popularity within the black community. Furthermore, in the eyes of the American public, Johnson was seen to be a peaceful, non-violent man, due to his public abhorrence of the use of the military to maintain America's law and order. Instead, Johnson counseled 'self-restraint and prudence'⁹. This approach greatly differed to President Eisenhower's. For example, during the 1957 crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, in which the de-segregation of the Little Rock school began, Eisenhower sent in Federal troops to enforce the law when some black children faced opposition to their attendance. This caused many Southern leaders to become outraged at the interference. Therefore, particularly in comparison to other political leaders, throughout his time in the Senate, Lyndon B. Johnson had developed a reputation for maintaining the country's peace, while fighting for equality in the USA.

On the 22nd of November 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. At the time, Lyndon B. Johnson had been serving as Kennedy's Vice-President, after having lost the primary elections to Kennedy in 1960. Due to Kennedy's unexpected death, Lyndon B. Johnson was consequently sworn into Office on the very same day in 1963, becoming the 36th President of the United States. This date marks the beginning of Johnson's war on poverty, which slotted perfectly into Kennedy's legislative legacy. Johnson announced his vision of a 'Great Society' for America; he wanted to end poverty and racial injustice. As Lisa Jardine writes, in pressing forward with Kennedy's domestic reforms, 'Johnson was comfortably on ground he had occupied when representing the poor and dispossessed as the senator

⁵ Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, The Independent, January 2009

⁶ Robert Dallek, *A Young Leader*, American Experience, 2011 (Film)

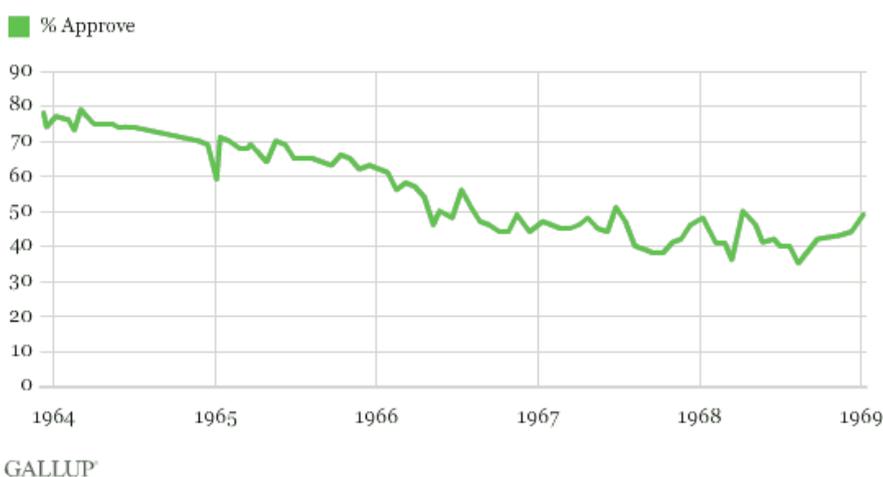
⁷ Robert Dallek, *Portrait of a President*, (Penguin Books, 2004), p.82

⁸ Robert A. Caro, p.979

⁹ Robert Dallek, p.108

for Texas'.¹⁰ In July 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, and in 1965 he passed another Civil Rights bill, which allowed millions of black Americans to vote for the first time in history. This has been labelled as an extremely significant moment in the history of the Civil Rights Movement because it was the first time that African-Americans in the USA became involved in US politics. Robert Dallek describes Johnson's work for Civil Rights as 'a groundbreaking development' and suggests that Johnson's work to fight poverty and injustice in America led to his increasing popularity because his confidence and positive outlook 'made Americans feel better about themselves'.¹¹ This appears to be true – in the 1964 Presidential election, Lyndon Johnson swept to victory, taking a larger percentage of the popular vote than any previous president. Johnson's great victory earned him the nickname 'Landslide Lyndon'. Thus, it is clear that Johnson's reputation throughout the early stages of his time as US President, prior to the relative disaster of the Vietnam War, was positive and encouraging. Johnson's positive reputation during 1964 is also reflected in the Gallup Polls from this year; his public approval rate was steadily at 80% throughout the first years of his Presidency.

Lyndon B. Johnson's Job Approval Ratings Trend



While Johnson had been focusing on America at home, he had failed to recognise the worsening situation in Vietnam. Since the early 1950s, the USA had been sending military advisors to Vietnam in an attempt to prevent Vietnam from turning to Communism. This was part of the USA's 'policy of containment'. There was a strong anti-communist feeling in America throughout much of the 20th century, initially sparked by Russia turning to Communism in 1918. This had sparked the fear that Communism would spread throughout the world, the 'domino theory'. Therefore, when it appeared that Vietnam might be turning towards communism, the US had begun their policy of containment and introduced military advisors in Vietnam. At the time of Kennedy's assassination, there were approximately 16,000 advisors placed in Vietnam. However, on the 2nd of August 1964 an incident took place that sparked Johnson's decision to escalate US involvement in Vietnam. News arrived in the United States that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked an American ship,

¹⁰ Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, The Independent, January 2009

¹¹ Robert Dallek, p.168

¹² LBJ and Public Opinion Polls - <https://ows.edb.utexas.edu/site/natalies-site/lbj-public-opinion> (accessed 18th August 2016)

the *USS Maddox*, in the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson responded instantly, telling his Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara that he would give the North Vietnamese ‘a real dose’¹³. With the support of Congress, Johnson drafted the Tonkin Resolution in 1964. This resolution read ‘The United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps... in defense of its freedom’. Philip Knightley describes the immense support that Johnson received from Congress in regards to his plans for escalation – ‘The House committee was unanimous as was the House itself... President Johnson had what Ball called his “blank check”’¹⁴. Moreover, Johnson received great support from the US public, who rallied around the flag. Dallek even suggests that Johnson felt pressured by the US public to increase involvement in the Vietnam War. He writes ‘Mrs Johnson told me... “The moment you said something about defending liberty around the world – bear any burden – everybody would go to cheering”’¹⁵. Therefore, Johnson began to escalate US involvement in Vietnam throughout the coming years. At this point in time, it is clear that Johnson’s reputation was still intact. The majority of the US public greatly supported Johnson’s decision to begin escalating the Vietnam War due to the strong anti-communist feeling in the United States during these years.

If we examine Johnson’s successful reputation as President so far, it seems astonishing, even implausible, that his reputation plummeted so dramatically throughout the unfolding Vietnam War. However, opposition to both the Vietnam War and Lyndon B. Johnson spread throughout the US from as early on as 1965, when President Johnson ordered Operation Rolling Thunder: this was an aerial bombing programme against the North Vietnamese that continued relentlessly until 1968. American planes bombed Viet Cong (the military branch of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam) supply lines, such as the Ho Chi Minh trail. However, this operation proved to be unsuccessful for the US because the Vietnamese built a vast underground tunnel system, enabling them to escape the USA’s bombs. Furthermore, the US couldn’t bomb Vietnamese weapon suppliers because the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong received their weapons from the Soviet Union, who hoped that Communism might spread throughout the world. Thus, Operation Rolling Thunder was fairly unsuccessful for the USA, leading to much criticism from some members of the US public. George C. Herring describes the reaction that many Americans had to Johnson’s bombing operations: they viewed it as waging war in ‘cold blood’¹⁶. Many Americans abhorred the amount of violence being used by US soldiers in Vietnam, especially when this involved the murder of innocent Vietnamese civilians. For example, Johnson’s “search and destroy” missions, introduced in 1966, produced a very negative reaction in the American public because many Vietnamese villages were destroyed, killing innocent men, women and children. Over 10,000 Vietnamese civilians were killed by these brutal attacks¹⁷. Unfortunately for President Johnson, the brutal tactics used by American forces were being increasingly displayed to the US public through the media. Nigel Hamilton writes ‘Though the battlefields were far away from ordinary American life, television brought the pity of war finally home’¹⁸. Johnson’s use of chemical warfare in Vietnam also proved to be extremely unpopular with many members of the American public, particularly when the US

¹³ Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, The Independent, January 2009

¹⁴ Philip Knightley, *Truth: The First Casualty*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 13th Sept 2004), p.32

¹⁵ Robert Dallek, p.212

¹⁶ George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p.131

¹⁷ George C. Herring, p 148

¹⁸ Nigel Hamilton, *American Caesars*, p.201

press released images of Vietnamese children being burnt alive. Nigel Hamilton describes the fierce opposition that Johnson faced when the US public was presented with images of murdered children – Johnson would ‘face crowds chanting, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”’¹⁹. Once the US public could see the Vietnamese victims who had been ‘beaten, tortured, raped and their bodies mutilated’²⁰, it is hardly surprising that many Americans began to turn against Johnson for his use of brutality in the Vietnam War, as he was becoming known as a violent warmonger. Dallek shows the ever-decreasing support for Lyndon Johnson due to his tactics in Vietnam – ‘polls show a decline in the President’s popularity to 56 percent, a drop of 5 points in just one month’. Thus, it is clear that the US public was becoming increasingly disappointed by Johnson’s Vietnam strategy; his violent tactics, revealed by the press, were particularly unpopular.

The media played an extremely large role in destroying the reputation of Lyndon B. Johnson, particularly in regards to the Tet Offensive of January 1968. The Tet Offensive was an attack by around 70,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces on many cities and towns in South Vietnam. This was an attempt to instigate rebellion within the South Vietnamese population and pressure the United States to reduce its support of the Saigon regime. While eventually the Tet Offensive ended with a victory for the United States, it was a desperate, drawn-out battle, with many casualties for both sides. This seems to have been the turning point in US public opinion in regards to the war in Vietnam. For example, as George W. Hopkins writes – ‘The Tet offensive revealed the structural constraints on policy and decision making...and compelled the Johnson administration and Congress to acknowledge... the limits that economic, military and political realities inexorably imposed on them’²¹. Therefore, it seems that the US public, as well as the rest of the world, began to fully understand the complexities of the Vietnam war, as the difficulty the USA faced while fighting in the Tet Offensive revealed America’s military, political and economic weaknesses. These evident US weaknesses also opened up a credibility gap because, while Johnson had claimed that the Vietnam crisis was being handled smoothly by US troops, the media revealed the real struggle taking place in Vietnam – ‘Televised reports of the bloody fighting in Saigon and Hue made a mockery of Johnson and Westmoreland’s year-end reports of progress, widening the credibility gap’²². Herring describes the increasingly sceptical attitude that many American journalists held towards the Johnson administration – ‘journalists increasingly challenging official reports of progress... Relations between the press and the US mission steadily deteriorated’²³. Hence, it is clear that the Tet Offensive played a large part in the deterioration of Johnson’s reputation as the media coverage revealed Johnson’s false narrative of the USA’s involvement in Vietnam. Johnson, in the eyes of many Americans, was becoming seen as an increasingly untrustworthy leader. People who had once supported Johnson and the USA’s involvement in Vietnam now found it difficult to trust the President’s claims of great success and military prowess in Vietnam. Even in the present, Johnson is known by many as a President who was, as Lisa Jardine wrote in 2009, ‘economical with the truth’²⁴ in regards to the Vietnam

¹⁹ Nigel Hamilton, p.205

²⁰ Nigel Hamilton, p.201

²¹ George W. Hopkins, *Studies in Popular Culture* vol. 23, (October 2000), p.100

²² George C. Herring, p.153

²³ George C. Herring, p.127

²⁴ Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, *The Independent*, January 2009

War. This therefore demonstrates how Johnson developed a negative reputation, which has been remembered over the years since the relative disaster of Vietnam.

Throughout the years 1967 and 1968, an anti-war movement developed in the USA. Peace activists and leftist intellectuals on college campuses initially led this movement, but it gained national prominence as the Vietnam War unfolded. The anti-war movement gained such fierce momentum for several reasons. Primarily, many Americans, particularly students, were shocked by the brutality used by US forces and the sheer amount of Vietnamese casualties, which is estimated to be almost 3 million. Furthermore, American casualty numbers were also visibly increasing; by 1967, US casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded²⁵. As a result of the enormous casualty numbers, many of the older, wealthier generation in America also began to oppose the Vietnam War, for fear of their sons being forced to fight in such an extremely violent war. The Vietnam War was also costing the USA around \$25 billion per year, money that came from the taxation of wealthy American families. However, when this expensive war seemed only to result in the deaths of more innocent people, opposition to the Vietnam War spread even further. George C. Herring describes the anger towards Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War that was spreading throughout the American public – 'Expansion of the war brought increased casualties and new taxes, and as the cost grew with no apparent end in view, public frustration mounted'²⁶. Public ire became particularly evident when Johnson introduced the draft in July 1965, which was an attempt to increase the size of the US military forces in Vietnam. Despite Johnson's attempts, thousands of draftees refused to fight. Some deserted, some simply refused to appear before their draft boards. "Hell, No, We Won't Go!"²⁷ became a commonly used catchphrase. Many prominent US figures, such as Yoko Ono and Muhammad Ali also joined the anti-war movement, having declared that they wished for an end to the violence in Vietnam – "love not war" became another popular catchphrase throughout these years. Muhammad Ali was one of the many men who refused conscription in 1966, despite having been arrested and having his boxing license taken away due to this refusal. Initially, many American supporters of the Vietnam War hugely condemned Muhammad Ali's actions. David Susskind, the American television host, for example, stated in 1966 'I find nothing amusing or interesting or tolerable about this man. He's a disgrace to his country, his race, and what he laughingly describes as his profession'²⁸. However, as opposition to the USA's involvement in Vietnam spread, Ali's firm standing up for his beliefs has been labeled as one of the boxer's greatest achievements.

By mid-1967, for the first time, a near majority of Americans stated that the USA's involvement in Vietnam had been a mistake. Riots and protests filled America's streets. An event that sparked intense anger towards the Johnson administration was the Kent State University incident, in which four peaceful student demonstrators were killed when national guardsmen intervened. People all over the world, and of course the US public, were outraged by this event – as Hamilton writes, reactions to Johnson's dealing with anti-war protestors made it 'unsafe for the embattled president

²⁵ Robert Caro, p 554

²⁶ George C. Herring, p.140

²⁷ Robert Dallek, p.247

²⁸ Krishnadev Calamur, *Muhammad Ali and Vietnam*, (The Atlantic, 2016) - accessed 20th August 2016

even to go near the city'²⁹. The American public's opinion had slowly shifted; many Americans no longer worried about winning the war in Vietnam War, but whether the USA could 'extricate itself from the tangle'³⁰. At this point in American history, mid-1968, Johnson's public approval ratings had fallen to just 40%. It is clear that by the end of 1968, Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War had led to him becoming an extremely unpopular figure across the USA.

Throughout the disastrous Vietnam War, Lyndon B. Johnson's reputation was destroyed by his unpopular handling of American troops. This negative view of Johnson is still held by many people around the world today. Despite, however, Lyndon Johnson's shortcomings, several historians have also tended to argue that Johnson was in fact a successful President in many ways, and that he should not take full responsibility for the relative disaster of Vietnam. Lisa Jardine, for example, recognises the success of Johnson's domestic policies – 'he laid the groundwork for socially responsible legislation whose impact can still be felt in the United States today... deserve general recognition today as effective and forward-looking measures'³¹. Dallek also argues that Johnson's domestic reforms, such as his work for Civil Rights and aid to education, undoubtedly bettered the USA³². These policies were successful and therefore popular as they improved the lives of the many Americans living in poverty. In some cases, historians have even argued that Johnson is not completely to blame for the failure of US involvement in Vietnam – Fredrik Logevall writes 'The circle of responsibility was wide'³³, suggesting that Congress, Johnson's advisors and even the US public must take some of the blame for the USA's failure in Vietnam particularly due to the fact that Congress greatly supported Johnson's escalation of the war. Logevall even mentions the "inevitability thesis", which suggests that the Vietnam crisis was inevitable, regardless of the President in Office at the time³⁴. Arguably, this absolves Johnson of total responsibility for the disastrous Vietnam War. Nevertheless, despite the few historians who focus on the positive aspects of Johnson's presidency, it is evident that the vast majority of historians and people around the world regard Johnson as the man who pushed America into an unwinnable war. Therefore, we can see that while there are contrasting opinions surrounding Lyndon Johnson, in the present day his successes in domestic policy have not outweighed his many failures in Vietnam.

Lyndon B. Johnson's political career was undoubtedly filled with several successes. Notably, Johnson's work for the minorities in society, such as his Civil Rights legislation and aid to education programs, are remembered as groundbreaking movements towards a fairer and more equal American society. Despite these successes, it appears that Lyndon Johnson is still blamed, and thus remembered, for his one great failure: the disastrous Vietnam War and the humiliation it caused the USA. Due to his brutal tactics and false narrative, which were revealed to the US public by the press, Johnson became known as increasingly untrustworthy and unpopular. His poor handling of the anti-war movement also created chaos and disunity within his own country. Thus, while many remember Johnson for his

²⁹ Nigel Hamilton, p.205

³⁰ George C. Herring, p.135

³¹ Lisa Jardine, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Uncivil Rights Reformer*, The Independent, January 2009

³² Robert Dallek, p.374

³³ Fredrik Logevall, *Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*, (Blackwell Publishing, March 2004), p.111

³⁴ Fredrik Logevall, p.102

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domestic achievements, his reputation is still suffering from the relative disaster of Vietnam, even sixty years later. Despite the negativity surrounding his reputation, Lyndon Johnson was a President whose actions will forever provoke great debate and controversy, and therefore it is clear that, in the words of Johnson's biographer, Robert Dallek, 'He will not be forgotten'³⁵.

³⁵ Robert Dallek, p. 377

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