

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON, "WITHDRAWAL SPEECH" (31 MARCH 1968)

David Zarefsky
Northwestern University

Abstract: On March 31, 1968, Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a speech that is most remembered for his surprise announcement that he would not be a candidate for reelection. Yet that announcement followed some 40 minutes of talk about U.S. policy in Vietnam. This essay reveals the multivocal quality of the address and also accounts for the dominant reading of the speech: the president was truly changing course in Vietnam, and that his withdrawal from the race testified to the sincerity of his desire to end the war.

Keywords: Lyndon Johnson, Vietnam war, Tet Offensive, 1968 presidential election, surtax, anti-war protests

On the evening of March 31, 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered an address to the American people by radio and television from his desk in the Oval Office. After about 40 minutes of discussing U.S. policy in Vietnam, he stunned the nation with the surprise announcement that he would not be a candidate for re-election. This completely unexpected conclusion is what is highlighted in news reports about the speech—it is even known as the "Withdrawal Speech"—and it remains the element for which the speech is most remembered. But the major thrust of the speech was a series of announcements about the American approach to the Vietnam war. The ways in which Johnson chose to explain those decisions, and their relationship to his withdrawal announcement, warrant careful attention.

Background and Context

In the fall of 1967, although antiwar protests were vocal, most Americans were optimistic about the course of the war. The South Vietnamese allies of the United States were gaining in strength, and some thought that the communist insurgents and their North Vietnamese supporters were on their last legs. Almost 60 percent of Gallup Poll respondents self-identified as "hawks," twice as many as those who said they were "doves."¹ American optimism was fueled by official statements that things were going well. Most notably, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, announced in November that the enemy was on its last legs.²

In fact, while it is true that the South Vietnamese armed forces were gaining in military readiness, the enemy was hardly on the verge of defeat. Official American intelligence anticipated a major enemy campaign in early 1968, most likely a siege of Khesanh—an isolated outpost in northern South Vietnam that seemed eerily reminiscent of Dienbienphu—the garrison

David Zarefsky: d-zarefsky@northwestern.edu

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the French had surrendered to when they abandoned the war in 1954. Attacks on South Vietnamese cities were also seen as a distinct possibility.³

While allied forces prepared to defend against the expected onslaught, the Johnson administration chose not to make its intelligence public, lest the enemies be made aware of the extent to which their communications had been intercepted.⁴ As a result, the American people and most of the world did not anticipate the attacks, which took place in other parts of the country outside of Khesanh.

On the night of January 30-31, 1968, while both sides supposedly were observing a truce for Tet, the Vietnamese new year, enemy forces attacked 26 cities in South Vietnam. Previously, the war had been confined to rural areas. Communist forces entered Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital, and even breached the security of the heavily guarded compound of the U.S. embassy. The communist attacks were repulsed, quickly in most cases, and the defenders suffered far fewer casualties than did the invaders. The performance of the South Vietnamese armed forces was their best of the war. The best the enemy could do was to hold the old imperial capital of Hue for three weeks before it was retaken by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces.

Two days after the Tet offensive, President Johnson proclaimed it to have been a disaster for the communist forces,⁵ and militarily he was right. His aides began to draft a speech in which he would explain the attacks as a desperate move that had failed, but they soon decided to postpone the speech until late March, after the anticipated siege of Khesanh.⁶ In the worst case, it would hurt the president's credibility if he reported optimistically about Tet and then there were a successful siege. In any event, a major assault on Khesanh never came, perhaps because of the failure of the Tet offensive.

But what President Johnson and his advisers apparently failed to recognize was the psychological effect of Tet on the American people. It certainly belied earlier expressions of optimism about an impending victory in the war. If the war was going so well and the enemy was on its last legs, then how could enemy forces mount such a large and well-coordinated series of attacks? If the cities were safe and rural areas were becoming increasingly pacified, then how could enemy forces infiltrate the cities and even reach the grounds of the U.S. embassy? And if the South Vietnamese army was performing so well, why was there widespread talk of the need for a U.S. "surge" in the aftermath of Tet?⁷

Traditionally, Americans have shown little patience with long and inconclusive wars, and Vietnam was no exception. In the wake of Tet, more began to wonder whether victory could be achieved at the present level of American involvement, or even whether there was a military plan that had a reasonable chance of success. Increasingly, the war was being described as a "stalemate," the term used by CBS anchor Walter Cronkite in a broadcast on February 27.⁸ Yet there was still no groundswell of support for American withdrawal from the war even if American attitudes were in flux. Public opinion polls revealed that the falloff in the president's support came more from "hawks" than from "doves."⁹ In other words, while the percentage favoring de-escalation remained relatively constant (about 20 percent), Johnson was losing support from people who believed that the United States and the South Vietnamese were not applying *enough* force. Tet reinforced this line of argument, leading to calls for significantly *increased* bombings of North Vietnam.¹⁰

These complex and conflicting realities weighed heavily on the Johnson administration as it began to plot its post-Tet strategy. General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was sent to Vietnam to assess the situation and to meet with General Westmoreland to determine his needs. Wheeler returned in late February with a request from Westmoreland for an additional 205,000 troops, almost a 50 percent increase above the 525,000 U.S. troops already in Vietnam. (Why Westmoreland thought he needed so many is another story.) Although President Johnson repeatedly proclaimed that he would give Westmoreland "whatever he needs," there is no evidence in fact that he ever was prepared to grant this request. He immediately directed his advisers to study the alternatives, since a request this large would have massive political, economic, as well as military consequences. Incoming Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, known as a "hawk" on Vietnam, believed that nothing less than an "A to Z" review of American foreign policy was required, including the re-examination of the administration's basic assumptions.¹¹

The Policy Review

Everywhere Johnson and his military advisers looked, they found dilemmas. If the war could not be won militarily at an acceptable cost, then diplomacy should be investigated. But the record of diplomatic initiatives, including some that were even then underway, was not promising. Hopes had been raised for the prospect of peace negotiations, only to be dashed repeatedly. Although public language suggested that the two sides were not very far apart in their terms for peace, in fact they were at an impasse. North Vietnam would not agree to negotiations until the United States unconditionally stopped bombing and all acts of war against the North. But President Johnson was convinced that he had gone as far as he could by putting forward what came to be known as the "San Antonio formula" in September of 1967: that the U.S. would stop the bombing when assured that such a step would lead promptly to negotiations and that North Vietnam would not take advantage of the bombing halt to increase infiltration of the South. These were the conditions stipulated by the United States. Insisting on an unconditional halt, North Vietnam would not grant such assurances. Neither side thus was willing to go first.

And as a practical matter, after three years of bombing, there were few targets of military significance left to bomb, and with the rainy season approaching, it would be hard for bombers even to identify them. Moreover, analysts were increasingly dubious that bombing the North achieved its stated objectives; it certainly had not limited North Vietnamese infiltration nor dampened the willingness of the communists to wage war.¹² What it *had* done, increasingly, was to arouse the anger of other governments and people around the world toward the United States, including some of America's most valued allies. To many, it was the United States rather than the North Vietnamese who seemed the greater obstacle to peace.¹³ And yet, the administration justified bombing as a punishment for North Vietnamese aggression. It was undertaken to reduce infiltration into the South and to bolster the morale of the South Vietnamese people and their government. So, not surprisingly, in the wake of Tet, while some decried the bombing, many "hawks" called for a *stepped-up* bombing campaign.

Similar dilemmas faced the administration with regard to the prospect of increasing the U.S. troop commitment. Without more troops, Westmoreland had little strategic reserve and little room to maneuver, so long as an attack on Khesanh seemed likely. He needed to commit substantial forces to its defense, leaving him without the manpower he would need to launch an offensive or to defend against attack elsewhere. But augmenting American troops beyond the 525,000 already authorized carried its own risks. One was that the American presence would become so large that it would be hard to regard Vietnam as a "limited" war. Another was that such American dominance would discourage the South Vietnamese from taking on more of the burdens and from continuing to improve their fighting capacity. Yet another was the fact that any significant "surge" of manpower would require calling up the reserves, a prospect that was sure to arouse further domestic opposition. And the increased costs entailed by higher troop levels would aggravate an already serious balance of payments problem, further weakening the dollar in international currency markets. In addition to all of these problems, the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that any increase in American troop levels would be matched by the communists within no more than six months' time.¹⁴ If this estimate were correct, then, rather than yielding an American military advantage, the ultimate result of an American troop increase would be to re-establish a stalemate at a higher level of danger and cost.

The president was also thinking about his political future. He had refused to enter any of the 15 presidential primaries except for those where the law required that his name be placed on the ballot,¹⁵ and he announced no plan to engage in campaigning before the nominating convention. Nevertheless, the 1968 election was never far from his mind.

The Exigence Intensifies

Matters came to a head by mid-March. On March 10, major newspapers broke the story of Westmoreland's request for 205,000 more troops.¹⁶ This report triggered widespread concern that the troop request had not been justified, that there was little assurance that it would produce success, and that the growing cost of the war was not worth it. On March 11, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by the antiwar J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, held hearings ostensibly on the administration's foreign aid bill. But several senators made clear that discussing foreign aid was just a pretext for their real concern: a lack of confidence in the president's handling of the war, opposition to a troop increase, and a demand that congress be consulted prior to any new escalation.

Then on March 12, the political world was stunned by the results of the New Hampshire primary. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota had agreed in November of 1967 to run in the primaries as an antiwar candidate, largely because no one with greater stature was willing to do so. No one, including himself, thought that he had any chance of actually securing the Democratic nomination. He was expected to be only a minor nuisance to the president receiving between 8 and 11 percent of the New Hampshire vote.¹⁷ In the end, McCarthy received 42 percent of the vote, running only about 250 votes behind the president, who was a write-in candidate. Certainly the moral victory was McCarthy's, as he had defied all expectations. Later analysis would show that McCarthy's supporters were "hawks" and "doves" in approximately equal numbers, united

only by their intense disapproval of the president's handling of the war. But Johnson was seriously vulnerable. If McCarthy had come this close in New Hampshire, he might actually defeat the president in the Wisconsin primary on April 2. That would not rule out Johnson's renomination, but it would be a huge embarrassment and could render him more vulnerable in the fall.

Among those paying close attention to the New Hampshire results was Senator Robert F. Kennedy. He earlier had declined to enter the race because he did not want to be responsible for splitting his party. Now the New Hampshire results made clear that the Democratic Party was already split, so Kennedy was seriously reassessing his position. On March 14 he proposed that President Johnson appoint a blue-ribbon panel composed largely of war critics to reappraise U.S. policy and propose alternatives; if this were done he would stay out of the race.¹⁸ Johnson rebuffed the idea and Kennedy announced his candidacy on March 16.

Meanwhile, on March 15 United Nations Ambassador Arthur Goldberg proposed that Johnson halt the bombing of North Vietnam to test the statements of its leaders and the prediction of United Nations Secretary General U Thant that negotiations would soon be forthcoming. Johnson's own military and civilian advisers found little substance to these overtures, so the president rejected this idea too. Probably reflecting the tension he no doubt was feeling, he angrily remarked that he had heard all there was to say on the subject of bombing and he was not going to stop it. That weekend, he delivered speeches in the Midwest in which he appealed to national pride and urged Americans not to give up but to support his policies, rally around the troops, and win the war.¹⁹

As if these were not enough sources of pressure, throughout the week beginning March 10, there appeared stories of increased gold purchases by other nations and the threat of a run on the dollar because of the unacceptably high U.S. balance of payments deficit that would result from a major escalation of the war.²⁰ The dollar was the world's basic currency at the time because of the American pledge that it was convertible into gold at \$35 per ounce, a price that speculators believed could not be sustained. So the likelihood of serious international economic ramifications severely limited the president's maneuvering room with respect to the war.

Drafting the Speech

All of these pressures and cross-pressures must have weighed heavily on Lyndon Johnson and his advisers as they conducted their "A to Z" review. They also weighed heavily on Johnson's speechwriters as they crafted the message the president would deliver on March 31. With the exception of the peroration, the principal writer was Harry McPherson, although he received suggestions and draft language from Cabinet secretaries, the National Security Adviser, and other aides.

The speech went through eleven drafts over a period of about a week. The first six can be regarded as more "hawkish" in tone. Although they expressed the desire for peace, and they did not announce an increase of anywhere near 205,000 troops, they did emphasize stepped-up military actions and winning the war. The subsequent five drafts, labeled "Alternate" and including the speech Johnson actually delivered, offered a more "dovish" perspective.²¹ The

elements are roughly the same as in the first six drafts. Yet, the order, the tone, and the emphasis were all different. Where the earlier drafts spoke of the challenges of war, the alternate ones referred to the desire for peace. If the earlier drafts opened with a discussion of military efforts, the later ones began with moves toward negotiations. If the goal implied by the earlier drafts was *winning* the war, the later drafts focused much more on *ending* the war.

Like many aspects of this speech, there are two different accounts of how the shift in the drafts came about in days leading up to the speech. One theory emphasizes the civilian undersecretaries at the Pentagon, who thought that the military hierarchy and the Department of State were calcified in their thinking. They convinced their boss, newly appointed Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, and he in turn colluded with speechwriter McPherson, a kindred spirit. They were in the minority among Johnson's advisers. So, rather than directly attacking their colleagues, they sought and received permission to compose an alternate draft, since it would be hard to oppose the notion of giving Johnson two different approaches to consider. Meanwhile, on Clifford's suggestion, Johnson had convened a group of distinguished former government officials known as the "Wise Men." When they had last met in November 1967, almost all had supported Johnson's policy on the war; now many expressed hesitations and doubts. Shaken by their lack of confidence, Johnson concluded that time had run out on the public's willingness to support existing policy, so he chose the alternate draft. This choice was not apparent until March 29 when he called McPherson to talk about a change "on page 3," and McPherson had to check both draft number 6 and alternate draft number 1 to see which one the president was using. This theory, then, regards the preparation of the speech as a battle for the president's mind that was won by a minority of his advisers who prevailed through savvy bureaucratic maneuvering. Not surprisingly, this theory regards the speech as announcing a major change in Vietnam policy and strategy.²²

The second theory is less dramatic. It begins with a judgment that the Tet offensive was a failure for the communists and that its failure actually made clear the military strength of the allied position. The South Vietnamese army fought better than expected, and the anticipated siege of Khesanh did not materialize. Although there were public misgivings that officials had to reckon with, the administration could conduct its reappraisal from a position of military strength. The decisions announced in the speech, on this view, were not major departures occasioned by failure; they were the natural outgrowths of success. Given these successes, a "hawkish" pronouncement was not necessary. Johnson's advisers realized this during the drafting process and adjusted the tone of the message, but the policy decisions followed naturally from success. They represented continuity rather than change. The measures announced in the speech did not originate with insurgent Department of Defense civilians but with the very leadership that had devised policy and strategy all along. The key proposal for a bombing halt came from Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Johnson's advisers did not need to be maneuvered into agreeing to an alternate draft; they realized that their thinking had outrun the speechwriting process and no one objected to having an alternative. Johnson did not need to be convinced, according to this view: while he did not reveal his cards publicly, he knew approximately where he wanted the review to end up. He did not need to be convinced by the "Wise Men"; he convened them knowing fairly well what they would recommend. If anything, their change of view would give

him "cover" with Americans who wanted a more "hawkish" approach than he believed reasonable or prudent. On this account, then, the speech marks a turning point in the war not because it abandons the past and charts a new direction but because it celebrates success and takes current policies to their next logical step.²³

Analysis of the Speech

The artistry of LBJ's "Withdrawal Speech" is evident in the realization that it can be cogently understood within *either* of these perspectives. In large measure, one can find in the speech what one seeks. Some understood it as a commitment to change; others, to continuity. They can both be right. A speech that has these characteristics is said to be *multivocal*; that is, it can speak to different audiences in different voices and each of their understandings can be said to be correct. Multivocality is especially important when one is addressing a heterogeneous audience, an audience that is deeply divided, or an audience that holds conflicting values—all of which characterized the American people in March of 1968.

To understand how Johnson's speech achieved multivocality, whether intentionally or not, it is useful to consider its major elements. Leaving aside the conclusion for the time being, there were four key structural components: the announcement of a partial bombing halt, the decision to rely more heavily on the South Vietnamese army, the dispatch of 13,500 additional U.S. support troops to Vietnam, and the plea for favorable congressional action on a proposed surtax.²⁴

The Partial Bombing Halt

Johnson began by saying, "Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia" (1).²⁵ The emphasis on *peace* rather than *war* set the tone for the speech and dictated that he discuss the prospect of negotiations first. He reiterated the San Antonio formula, then stated that "Hanoi denounced this offer, both privately and publicly" (6). He described the Tet offensive as the communists' response to genuine efforts for peace. The attacks failed. They might be renewed at any time; if so, they would fail again. But although he was confident that the North could not succeed militarily, the president noted that in the process, many lives would be lost and property destroyed. After painting this gloomy picture, Johnson changed his tone: "There is no need for this to be so. There is no need to delay the talks that could bring an end to this long and bloody war" (19). To demonstrate his sincerity, he renewed the offer he had made in San Antonio. But then he went beyond it.

In an effort to stimulate early talks, he said, the United States would take the first step to de-escalate the war. It would unilaterally stop bombing North Vietnam "except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens allied forward positions and where the movement of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat" (24). Several things are worth noting about this announcement. The bombing halt was *unilateral*; Johnson had dropped the demand for assurances that the enemy would not take advantage of the situation. But the bombing halt was not *complete*; it exempted the area that was most

relevant to stopping infiltration. Although the president defined this area imprecisely in this speech, as a practical matter he meant a halt to all bombing north of the 20th parallel. This move left the door open for a full bombing halt later, depending on whether Hanoi showed restraint. The partial halt was presented as a significant step, since it involved 90 percent of the North Vietnamese population and more than half of its territory. And yet, because it was limited, the bombing halt did not expose U.S. or South Vietnamese troops to heightened danger. Nor did Johnson completely abandon the principal of conditionality: North Vietnamese actions, rather than their advance pledges, would determine the next step.

The proposal for a unilateral but partial bombing halt came from Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who thought that the American military position made it possible, that it was an acceptable risk, and that it was a way to transcend what had become a stalemate.²⁶ It restructured the situation, calling on North Vietnam to follow suit with a new response. A flat denial by the communists would appear more intransigent and unreasonable in light of the fact that America had made the first move.

Was the partial bombing halt a major concession? In one sense it clearly was, since it relaxed the San Antonio formula by limiting bombing without any formal assurances of restraint by Hanoi and since it said that all bombing could be ended if Hanoi also would show restraint—but again, without necessarily needing to make formal guarantees. Hanoi could act unilaterally to limit its war-making, just as the United States had done. On the other hand, in the area where bombing was halted, there was no evidence that it had been effective in the first place, and the coming rainy season would make continued bombing unlikely in any case. One therefore could read these lines either as a significant change or as a case of Johnson framing an action as a spur to negotiations that he likely would have taken anyway.

Nor was Johnson at all confident that North Vietnam would respond to his gesture by agreeing to start talks. After all, communist forces had not reacted to previous bombing halts or calls for negotiation. Still, the speech was structured so that the choice was left to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. If they did not accept negotiations, there was another way that piece could be achieved: through victory on the battlefield. This line in the speech enabled Johnson to make a transition to military measures while making clear that they were not his preference.

Shifting Responsibility to South Vietnam

Johnson's second move was to assert as a principle that the main burden of the struggle must be borne by the South Vietnamese themselves. He chose to celebrate the strength and dedication of the South Vietnamese armed forces, the progress in building a stable and effective government, and the move to draft 18-year olds that deepened South Vietnam's commitment to the war. In light of this progress, America could safely turn over more of the fighting to the South Vietnamese while stepping up efforts to provide them military assistance. Again the framing of the message was significant. The American commitment was being de-escalated not because the Americans had failed but because the mission of training and equipping South Vietnamese forces had been successful. President Nixon later called this approach "Vietnamization" of the war. But

the logic behind it was set forth by Lyndon Johnson in March of 1968. This decision, like others, could be understood either as continuity or as change.

U.S. Troop Commitments

Johnson turned next to the subject of U.S. troop commitments, which were then at an authorized level of 525,000. Notably, he did not mention that Westmoreland had requested a massive increase or that he had decided against it. Rather, he said that an additional 11,000 combat forces had been sent to Vietnam a few weeks ago on an emergency basis, but without the accompanying support troops. He would then subsequently send an additional 13,500 to offer such support. This would bring the total American force level to 549,500. On its face it appears to be an escalation of the war, if a relatively modest one. The previously-understood ceiling of 525,000 American troops would be exceeded. But if understood in the context of the much larger number of troops Westmoreland had requested, or even the speculation that Johnson might add 30,000 or more, this increase could be seen as the very smallest increment that could satisfy military leaders, and it could be understood as consistent with *de*-escalation of the war.

Pleading for the Surtax

This discussion led Johnson to the next step. The additional military measures he was announcing would cost money, more than \$5 billion over two fiscal years. These additional pressures on the budget, the president insisted, made passage of the surtax even more imperative. He noted that while he repeatedly had sounded this theme, congress had failed to act. Now matters were even more urgent. As he said, "tonight we face the sharpest financial threat in the postwar era—a threat to the dollar's role as the keystone of international trade and finance in the world" (56). The major industrial nations were on the verge of creating a new monetary asset, but its success would depend on reasonable equilibrium in the U.S. balance of payments.

What the president did not say was that the reason the tax bill had stalled was that House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills refused to bring it up unless Johnson first agreed to substantial cuts in domestic spending, which the president feared would gut his "Great Society" programs.²⁷ (The Tea Party of the twenty-first century did not invent this game.) The economic uncertainty was so great, however, that Johnson urged "the passage of a bill now, together with expenditure control that the Congress may desire and dictate" (58). Certainly this passage conveyed the seriousness of the situation, but it too could be read in two ways. It could be understood as Johnson's acknowledgment that he must yield on domestic spending, sacrificing his domestic priorities for the sake of military goals.

But this part of the speech also can be understood differently. Johnson did not recommend any particular spending cuts or even any specific amount, leaving those decisions to the congress. Although Wilbur Mills was in a powerful position, he did not represent the views of congress as a whole. On this reading, the president was not yielding but was putting the ball in

the court of congress. He was making a shrewd bet that, in the end, Wilbur Mills was atypical and that congress would not have the will to make substantial cuts in programs that affected the districts and constituents of individual members.

The Peroration

Having developed the four key sections of the address—the bombing halt, the greater reliance on the South Vietnamese, the modest troop increase, and the plea for the surtax—Johnson expressed the hope that North Vietnam might also be finally interested in securing a genuine peace. Then he was ready to move to the speech's conclusion. But what should it say? At one point late in the drafting process, McPherson noted that the conclusion no longer matched the tone of the speech. It was bellicose and threatening, as befit the earlier drafts, which pointed toward military victory rather than peace. McPherson said he would work on a new version of the conclusion. Don't worry about it, Johnson replied; "I might have one of my own."²⁸

We now know that Johnson tentatively had decided not to run for re-election in November of 1967. His primary concern was his health; he believed that he would not survive another term.²⁹ He told almost no one of his thinking, and he was determined to keep his options open until the last possible moment. He had asked his long-time and trusted aide, Horace Busby, in strictest confidence, to draft a withdrawal statement that he might use at the appropriate time.³⁰ He asked for it now, late in the afternoon of March 31, and it became the conclusion of the speech. It was not included in the advance text distributed by the press secretary, so news reporters were as stunned as everyone else when President Johnson spoke the words. He referred to Lincoln's statement that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" and sadly noted that "there is division in the American house tonight" (108). Believing that unity was necessary in order to end the war, and wishing to devote himself fully to that task, he did not want to involve the presidency in the inevitable partisan divisions of an election year. And then he spoke the words that shocked the nation: "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president" (117).

Why did Johnson make his withdrawal statement in this particular speech? Cynics said that if he made it any later, after his expected defeat in the Wisconsin primary on April 2, it would be a confession of political failure, not a principled move. Some speculated that it was a calculated step to deflect attention from the Vietnam portion of the speech, since each of the announcements there could arouse strong opposition as well as support. Although it is a minor factor, Johnson claimed also to be influenced by the timing of Harry Truman's withdrawal announcement in 1952, which was at the end of March.³¹

But while all these understandings of the timing are possible, the overriding consideration seems to be that this was the best way to make the Vietnam portion of the speech seem more credible and genuine. Had Johnson remained a candidate, a natural reaction to the Vietnam announcements would have been to see them, at least in part, as devious moves in a political campaign. In contrast, the withdrawal announcement signaled that Johnson was sincere and so strongly dedicated to bringing an end to the war that he would sacrifice his political career for that goal. In this way, the parts of the speech reinforced each other; by means of the withdrawal

statement the president used his own *ethos* to strengthen the case for the measures he announced concerning Vietnam. Johnson may have been retiring for reasons of health, but the timing of his announcement brought another set of reasons to the fore and maximized the political value of his decision.

But wait. Did Johnson really withdraw from the race? From his plain statement it seems quite clear that he did, but even on this point there were different interpretations. Probably because they were surprised by the announcement, some were skeptical that Johnson really meant it. Perhaps he was imitating his hero, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who insisted that he did not wish to be a candidate in 1940 and then managed the nominating convention so as to obtain nomination for a third term.³² As for how Johnson might do this, one could parse his words and note that he said he would not *accept* a nomination. But if he were "drafted" by the convention, which might nominate him seemingly without his consent, then he would have no choice in the matter. He would be "forced" to run, or so he could maintain in order to avoid the charge of hypocrisy. On this view, Johnson's March 31 announcement was a cynical ploy to avoid the embarrassment of the Wisconsin primary, and other possible primary defeats, while still preserving his viability as a candidate. Farfetched as the notion of a "Johnson draft" might seem now, it was seriously entertained throughout the weeks after March 31, and it was not completely abandoned until midsummer, weeks after the assassination of Robert Kennedy, when public opinion polls showed Johnson doing no better than either Vice-President Hubert Humphrey or Senator Eugene McCarthy against the expected Republican nominee, Richard Nixon.³³

Outcomes and Implications

Although the speech is multivocal and different understandings are possible, a dominant reading of the speech soon emerged among the American public: that it *was* a turning point, that the president was changing course in Vietnam, and that his withdrawal from the race testified to the sincerity of his convictions about ending the war. All that may be right, but as this analysis has tried to show, it is not self-evident from the text itself. Contemporary students, lacking familiarity with the background context, sometimes read the text and have difficulty understanding how it could be perceived as de-escalating the war or why it is so important. What cemented the dominant understanding of the speech were three events that occurred in its immediate aftermath, showing the interdependence of text and context.

First, the overwhelming initial reaction to President Johnson's withdrawal announcement was praise for his courage and appreciation for his placing the national interest above his political future. Statements of gratitude came from leading politicians in both parties and from the editorial pages of major newspapers.³⁴ This was not the gloating of opponents who were happy to have Johnson out of the way. By all accounts, it was a sincere desire to honor his lifetime of public service, now drawing it to a close. This widespread adulation helped permanently to fix the meaning of the withdrawal announcement. In the face of these accolades, it would be very hard for Johnson to say later that he did not really mean to withdraw, or for him to re-enter the

race. Just as these public testimonials eclipsed any cynical interpretation of the withdrawal, so they constrained Johnson's moves as well.

Second, to the surprise of many who expected nothing to come of the partial bombing halt, on April 3 North Vietnam responded to Johnson's message by agreeing to open peace talks. To be sure, what they wanted to discuss was primarily how to bring about a complete U.S. bombing halt, not to end the war. It took several frustrating weeks to agree on a time and place for negotiations, or even on the shape of the table. But preliminary negotiations opened in May in Paris. Even though the fighting would continue for years, and even though the coming months would see the largest casualty figures of the war,³⁵ the continuation of talks (both publicly and behind the scenes) meant that the prospects of peace were being considered.

Third, these early perceptions of what the speech achieved were "frozen" by the tragedy that befell the country on April 4 with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the rioting in major cities across the country in the wake of that tragedy. The March 31 speech and the election politics of 1968 were driven from the front pages by these new and disturbing events. When the intense grief over Dr. King's death subsided and thoughts returned to the election and the war, the initial understandings of Johnson's March 31 speech were fixed in public memory. They have remained remarkably durable.

Moreover, lest time weaken the force of this account, it was actively promoted by those with a stake in its success. In 1969, Undersecretary of the Air Force Townsend Hoopes published *The Limits of Intervention*, emphasizing the role of the Pentagon civilians in making the key decisions of March 1968.³⁶ This claim was so disturbing to Johnson's staff, even out of office, that former White House aides compiled a notebook of unpublished documents (now in the Johnson Library in Austin) to refute Hoopes.³⁷ Then, in a series of interviews and in his subsequent memoir, Clark Clifford magnified the significance of his own role. His continued advocacy helped to make into the conventional wisdom the thesis that the March 31 speech was a major change.³⁸

The speech's context, not its text, made it seem a turning point, putting a ceiling on the level of American involvement and moving toward de-escalation. None of these meanings is self-evident from a reading of the text itself, which is artfully multivocal. Multivocality is an advantage, as noted, in situations when an audience has conflicting or ambivalent values and goals, as Johnson's clearly did. But public memory reduces the ambiguity of the text, giving it a dominant and often durable meaning in the eyes of history. What we recall today is only a part of what Lyndon Johnson said on March 31, 1968.

Author's Note: David Zarefsky is Owen L. Coon Professor Emeritus of Argumentation and Debate, and Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies, Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois. The author would like to thank Allison Niebauer, Ph.D. student, Pennsylvania State University for her support on the essay and for creating the teaching and learning materials and authenticating the speech. The author would also like to thank Michael Steudeman, Ph.D. candidate, the University of Maryland, for his early support on behalf of this project.

Notes

¹ Cited in Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 383.

² Cited in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 491; and in Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 65.

³ This knowledge came from prisoner-of-war reports and captured documents. National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 47, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 380.

⁵ Max Frankel, "Johnson Pledges Never to Yield," *New York Times*, February 2, 1968, p. 1; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 383. Johnson's judgment is echoed by Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 12. Most accounts agree that the Tet offensive, though a military loss for the communist forces, was a psychological victory. See, for example, Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 5-6.

⁶ National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 47, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library; Tom Johnson, Notes on the President's Meeting with Senior Foreign Policy Advisers, February 11, 1968, Lyndon Baines Presidential Johnson Library.

⁷ The term "surge" was used to refer to a significant increase in U.S. military personnel sent to Iraq in 2007. Although the term was not employed during the Vietnam war, the recommended policy was analogous.

⁸ Broadcast on *CBS Evening News*, February 27, 1968.

⁹ "Johnson's Rating Declines in Poll," *New York Times*, February 18, 1968.

¹⁰ See for example: Cable from Ellsworth Bunker to Dean Rusk, March 1, 1968, National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 48, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library; William P. Bundy, "European and Other Non-Asian Reactions to a Major U.S. Force Increase," March 1, 1968, National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 48, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

¹¹ John W. Furney, "Rusk Tells Panel of 'A to Z' Review of Vietnam War," *New York Times*, March 12, 1968, p. 1.

¹² Harry McPherson, Notes of Meeting, February 27 [1968], Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Box 271, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

¹³ Spector, *After Tet*, 17. Even President Johnson acknowledged that bombing Hanoi and Haiphong "enrages the world." Quoted in Harry McPherson, handwritten notes of March 20, 1968 meeting, Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Box 271, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam," p. 8, National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 48, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library; Central Intelligence Agency, "The Communists' Ability to Recoup Their Military Losses," National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 49, part 2, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

¹⁵ When it became apparent that Johnson would be challenged for the nomination, write-in campaigns in his behalf were organized in some states, and local politicians were placed on the ballot as surrogates for Johnson in others.

¹⁶ "Westmoreland Requests 200,000 More Men, Stirring Debate in Administration," *New York Times*, March 10, 1968, p. 1; "Westmoreland Asks for 206,000 More Troops; Stirs Debate," *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1968, p. 1.

¹⁷ White, *The Making of the President 1968*, 9; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 527.

¹⁸ Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 224.

¹⁹ William Chapman, "Troops Will Be Boosted," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1968, p. A1; Max Frankel, "Johnson Defiant on Vietnam War," *New York Times*, March 20, 1968, p. 32; Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York: David McKay, 1969), 206.

²⁰ Edwin L. Dale Jr., "New Attack on the Dollar," *New York Times*, March 10, 1968, p. E6; Richard F. Janssen, "Payments Gap Peril: Johnson's Bid to Cut International Deficit Faces New Difficulties," *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 1968, p. 1.

²¹ Files containing these drafts are in Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Boxes 271-273, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

²² This theory is developed, for example, in Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*.

²³ This theory is articulated by Walt W. Rostow, Memorandum to the President [Johnson], March 13, 1970, National Security File, Country File—Vietnam, Box 127, part 1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. See also Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 91.

²⁴ A surtax is a tax on a tax, for example, "figure your tax and then add 10 percent." It is intended to raise taxes while preserving the progressivity of the tax system.

²⁵ All of the passages from Johnson's March 31, 1968, speech are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

²⁶ Telegram from Dean Rusk to Ellsworth Bunker, March 16, 1968, National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, volume 4, Box 48, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. Rusk also believed that a bombing limitation was necessary in order to gain public support or even 13,500 additional troops and the surtax. See Telegram from Dean Rusk to Ellsworth Bunker, March 29, 1968, National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, volume 4, Box 48, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 454.

²⁸ Harry McPherson, *A Political Education* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971), 437. See also: McPherson's alternate draft, March 28, 1968, Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Box 273, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

²⁹ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 425-426; Vaugh Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1983), 289-290; George Christian, "The Night Lyndon Quit," *Texas Monthly*, April 1988, pp. 109, 168-169.

³⁰ These events are described in Horace Busby, *The Thirty-First of March: An Intimate Portrait of Lyndon Johnson's Final Days in Office* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

³¹ Christian, "The Night Lyndon Quit," pp. 168-169. Johnson made no mention in his speech of Truman's withdrawal, but in response to questions afterward, he said that Truman's timing influenced him as well. Before the speech, however, he did not reveal his intentions at all. At a press conference on March 30, he denied that he would say anything about his candidacy in the speech the following night. "The President's News Conference of March 30, 1968," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Week ending April 5, 1968, "filed in National Security File, National Security Council Histories, March 31st Speech, Box 49, part 2, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

³² Memorandum from Fred Panzer to Marvin Watson, April 5, 1968, SP 3-236, President's Remarks to the Nation, March 31, 1968, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, GEN SP, Box 197, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. This memorandum cites 19 sources, most of whom believe that Johnson really is seeking a draft. Among the sources are Tom Wicker in the April 1, 1968 *New York Times*, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, and columnist James J. Kilpatrick in the April 4, 1968 *Washington Star*. See also Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 543-544.

³³ Dallek reports that Johnson had "not yet definitively abandoned thoughts of another term" until summer and that the prospect of his being drafted was not abandoned until the outbreak of riots in Chicago, site of the Democratic National Convention, in August. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 549, 569-573.

³⁴ Memorandum from William J. Hopkins to James R. Jones, April 29, 1968, Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, White House Central Files, Box 274, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (reported 22,973 favorable responses to the speech and only 500-540 unfavorable); Memorandum from the Vice President to Marvin Watson, April 5, 1968, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, GEN SP, Box 197, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (transmitting an editorial in the *Minneapolis Tribune*); Untitled and unsigned memorandum, April 2, 1968 (reporting that 70 percent approved of Johnson's decision not to run, 23 percent disagreed, and 7 percent were undecided); Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 530-531. Almost 50,000 telegrams, mostly favorable, reached the White House over the subsequent three days, and most were favorable. See: Spector, *After Tet*, 23.

³⁵ Spector, *After Tet*, 25.

³⁶ Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*.

³⁷ Memoranda from Walt W. Rostow to the President [Johnson], March 13 and March 19, 1970, National Security File, Country File—Vietnam, Box 127, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

³⁸ Clark M. Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991). See also: Walt W. Rostow, Memo to the President [Johnson], March 19, 1970, National Security File, Country File—Vietnam, Box 127, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.