

The Choice: President Johnson's Decision to go to War in Vietnam

By Randall B. Woods, *The Conversation*, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.04.17

Word Count **742**

Level **800L**



President Lyndon B. Johnson in Vietnam on October 1966. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to involve the United States in the Vietnam War. In 1954 Vietnam had been split into two countries, North and South Vietnam. The two Vietnams were enemies. Since the late 1950s, the North had been seeking to seize control of the South. Its goal was to reunify Vietnam.

North Vietnam was a communist country. At the time, the United States and its allies were locked in a struggle with communist countries, particularly Russia and China.

Communism was a set of ideas about the way societies should be organized. Many Americans believed it was the enemy of freedom. Communist governments thought they were doing what was best for their people.

The United States was not at war with Russia or China, but it was trying to limit their influence around the world. Above all, it was trying to prevent the spread of communism.

Johnson felt the United States needed to act. He believed joining the war was the only way to prevent South Vietnam from falling to communist forces.

Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, and Undersecretary of State George Ball advised him against entering the war. Both men said the war was probably not winnable.

Johnson himself had serious doubts.

"I don't think it's worth fighting for," he once said of Vietnam. "And I don't think that we can get out. It's just the biggest damned mess." Entering the war, he said, would be "a terrible thing."

Yet in February 1965 Johnson approved a bombing campaign against North Vietnam. And in July he agreed to send two troop divisions to Vietnam.



Why?

U.S. help needed to stop spread of communism

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been studying the situation in Vietnam. In April 1964, it reported that large numbers of North Vietnamese troops were slipping into South Vietnam.

The CIA predicted that without help, South Vietnam would fall within the year.

Johnson feared that if South Vietnam fell, other countries would soon fall to the communists as well. He decided he must try to stop this from happening.

Johnson also had other reasons for entering the war.

Johnson pushes for civil rights legislation

In 1965, Johnson was trying hard to get Congress to approve his Great Society programs. They were several laws to help end the troubles of poor people. Johnson wanted to give more money to schools and get health care for older people. Some of the laws were aimed at ending the unfair treatment of African Americans.

In those years, many schools and hospitals were still segregated, or separated by race. One of Johnson's laws was designed to bring about the end of whites-only schools and hospitals. President John F. Kennedy had tried to get these civil rights laws made, but then he was killed. Johnson wanted to continue what Kennedy had started.

Many white Southerners were against Johnson's plans. Yet Johnson needed the support of southern politicians if he wanted his programs to pass.

The South was the most segregated part of the country, and it was also the most anticommunist. Johnson believed he could not ask the South to accept both the end of segregation and the loss of South Vietnam to the communists. He decided he would have to go to war.

The gamble

In the end, Johnson did get Congress to pass his Great Society programs. America was forever changed for the better.

However, this victory came at a great cost. The Vietnam War was impossible to win, as Ball and Humphrey had predicted. The United States pulled out of the war in 1975. Soon afterward, the South fell and Vietnam was reunited under communist rule.

In the end, Johnson understood that he had made a mistake.

What if he had decided not to go to war?

South Vietnam would have fallen to the communists much sooner. Therefore, the war would have ended much sooner. Thousands of American lives and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese lives would have been saved.

However, there is another way to look at it. If Johnson had chosen to stay out of the war, his Great Society programs might never have passed. He would have lost the chance to make the United States a better place.

There was no easy choice for Johnson.

Randall B. Woods is a professor of history at the University of Arkansas.

Quiz

1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-10] and the final section "The gamble."

What is the connection between these two sections?

- (A) The introduction describes opinions about Vietnam before entering the war, and the final section provides opinions about the outcome.
- (B) The introduction explains a problem with winning the war in Vietnam, and the final section describes Johnson's solution.
- (C) Both sections show what finally caused Johnson to enter the war.
- (D) Both sections describe effects of communism on Vietnam.

2 This article is organized using a cause-and-effect structure.

Why do you think the author chose to organize the information this way?

- (A) to explore the ideas and events that contributed to Johnson's decision to enter the war
- (B) to contrast Johnson's advisers' plan for entering the war with Johnson's plan
- (C) to show how the problem in South Vietnam was finally solved successfully
- (D) to trace the spread of communism to other countries near Vietnam over time

3 Read the section "Johnson pushes for civil rights legislation."

Select the paragraph that BEST supports the conclusion that going to war was the only way for Johnson's Great Society programs to pass.

- 4 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-10].

Communism was a set of ideas about the way societies should be organized. Many Americans believed it was the enemy of freedom. Communist governments thought they were doing what was best for their people.

The United States was not at war with Russia or China, but it was trying to limit their influence around the world. Above all, it was trying to prevent the spread of communism.

Which sentence from the selection shows WHY people were afraid of communism?

- (A) Communism was a set of ideas about the way societies should be organized.
- (B) Many Americans believed communism was the enemy of freedom.
- (C) Communist governments thought they were doing what was best for their people.
- (D) Above all, it was trying to prevent the spread of communism.