

The Wartime Leader

May 14, 1965

With 69,200 Americans committed on land, at sea and in the air to the conflict in Viet Nam and another 31,600 enforcing a precarious peace in the Dominican Republic, the U.S. is a nation at war. And its leader is proving himself one of the most remarkable of all wartime Presidents.

Rarely has the presidency been so personalized. To Lyndon Baines Johnson, it is "my" Security Council and "my" intelligence bulletin. Referring to air strikes against North Viet Nam, he told aides: "I could have bombed again last night, but I didn't." Of the U.S. effort in Viet Nam, he said: "I thank the Lord that I've got men who want to go with me, from McNamara right down to the littlest private who's carrying a gun." Of Communist intransigence in Viet Nam, he cried: "They actually thought pressure on an American President would get so great that he'd pull out of Viet Nam. They don't know the President of the U.S. He's not pulling out."

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"I Don't Expect to Duck." For Lyndon Johnson, the days run into nights and the nights into days. "Some days," he said, "I suddenly realize at 5 o'clock that I haven't had lunch." Frequently, he is still on the telephone at 4 a.m. He manages his afternoon naps but no longer has time for swims in the White House pool. Instead of the relaxing Cutty Sark and soda, he now sips root beer or a no-calorie orange drink in his Oval Office. There are deep, dark circles beneath his eyes, and his voice is hoarse. Last week he paused briefly to gaze at a White House bust of another wartime President — Abraham Lincoln —and compassion was stamped on his own weary features.

But he never stops or even slows down. To reporters accompanying him on backyard walks, to dinner guests, to aides who sit at his bedside at night, to Latin American leaders, and to the nation and the world over television, he constantly explains and defends his decisions. "When you duck, dodge, hesitate and shimmy, every man and his dog give you a kick," he said. "I expect to get kicked, but I don't expect to duck." Replying to complaints about his decision to send troops into the Dominican Republic, Johnson snapped: "I realize I am running the risk of being called a gunboat diplomat, but that is nothing compared to what I'd be called if the Dominican Republic went down the drain."

On the Air. The President has taken to using television the way other men use the telephone. In the past two weeks he has appeared six times—usually on the spur of the moment, to such an extent that harried network executives pleaded for warnings further in advance. A typical performance came at 9:58 p.m. on Sunday, May 2. Johnson gave the networks less than three hours' notice. No one knew what his subject was going to be. Only CBS carried the appearance live. Yet it proved to be one of Johnson's meatiest statements about the Dominican Republic.

"Revolution in any country is a matter for that country to deal with," said the President. "It becomes a matter calling for hemispheric action only—repeat, only—when the subject is the establishment of a Communistic dictatorship. We support no single man or any single group of men in the Dominican Republic. Our goal in keeping the principles of the American system is to help prevent another Communist state in this hemisphere, and we would like to do this without bloodshed or without large-scale fighting."

He said that Communists, many of them trained in Cuba, "took increasing control. And what began as a popular democratic revolution committed to democracy and social justice very shortly moved and was taken over and really seized and placed into the hands of a band of Communist conspirators."

"Welcome to the Club." Within 24 hours, he was explaining it all again in a surprise speech to A.F.L.-C.I.O. construction-trade union leaders at Washington's Hilton Hotel. Pointing toward a U.S. flag, he declared: "Where American citizens go, that flag goes with them to protect them." There was a moment of self-indulgence: "I am the most denounced man in the world. All the Communist nations have got a regular program on me that runs 24 hours a day. Some of the non-Communist nations just kind of practice on me. And occasionally, I get touched up here at home in the Senate and the House of Representatives." But no matter. "What is important," he said, "is that we know and they know and everybody knows that we don't propose to sit here in our rocking chair with our hands folded and let the Communists set up any government in the Western Hemisphere."

Next day, he abruptly summoned to the White House 200 Congressmen, members of the Senate and House committees on Appropriations, Foreign Relations and Armed Services. Reporters and television cameras covered the meeting, and the President spoke about Viet Nam. "There are those who frequently talk of negotiations and political settlement, and they believe this is the course we should pursue—and so do I," he said. "When they talk that way, I say welcome to the club. I want to negotiate. I would much rather talk than fight." Rapping the lectern with his knuckles, he demanded that Congress give him \$700 million to meet further military requirements in Viet Nam.

This was the President's way of winning a congressional expression of confidence. He had instructed Speechwriter Richard Goodwin: "I want it to be very clear that this is a vote for my policy in Viet Nam." When the message went to Capitol Hill, it read: "This is not a routine appropriation. For each member of Congress who supports this request is also voting to persist in our effort to halt Communist aggression in South Viet Nam."

Within 48 hours, the appropriation was approved by both houses with enormous majorities. But some Congressmen were not very happy about it. Vermont's Republican Senator George Aiken insisted that his affirmative vote was by no means "an endorsement of the costly mistakes of the past." Oregon Democrat Wayne Morse, one of three Senators to vote nay (the others: Alaskan Democrat Ernest Gruening and Wisconsin Democrat Gaylord Nelson), seemed almost hysterical. "My government," he cried, "today stands before the world drunk with military power."

Letter from Ike Few men are more sensitive to criticism than President Johnson, and his mood was not notably improved by a demand from Charles de Gaulle that he pull the marines out of the Dominican Republic. Time and again during the week, Johnson pulled from his pocket a recent letter from Dwight Eisenhower, who wrote: "If there is any who opposes the President in his conduct of our foreign affairs, he should send his views on a confidential basis to the Administration; none of us should try to divide the support that citizens owe to their head of state in critical international situations." The absurdity of Ike's idea was pointed out by New York Daily News Columnist Ted Lewis: "Certainly Ike in 1952, when he tore into Truman's conduct of the 'police action' in Korea, was not following the 'write a confidential letter' advice he is now giving."*

It may have been because of blurred intelligence estimates, but the President undoubtedly got the U.S. more deeply involved in the Dominican fighting than he had originally intended. Now, under his leadership, the nation's diplomatic efforts were bent—successfully—on winning a reluctant but historic decision to take the U.S. off the hook by sending a hemispheric peace-keeping force into the Dominican Republic (see THE HEMISPHERE). And in Viet Nam, despite a continuing chorus of criticism, particularly on U.S. college campuses, the President kept increasing the pressure. In the largest amphibious landing operation since the Korean War, 3,000 marines and 3,000 seabees went ashore near Chu Lai to build an airbase for launching more bombing raids into North Viet Nam. Although the President solemnly declared that "our firmness may well have brought us closer to peace," he admitted to reporters last week: "It's a mess. There is no question about that. I wish it was better, too."

Thoughts about Home. Johnson would hardly be human if the responsibilities of what amounts to a one-man show did not weigh heavily on him. Said he: "These days are a little tense. I don't feel as free to go out over the country. I feel like U. S. Grant used to. He said he never

faced an audience where he didn't feel uneasy and quivering in his stomach. You don't stand up before 200 Congressmen like I did this morning without feeling that way."

During a twilight stroll around the White House grounds last week, the President told reporters that from now on he might spend as much as 25% of his time at his Texas ranch. Looking at the White House, he said: "It's not a home. It's some place you go when you finish work." He spoke of the airplanes flying overhead in the National Airport traffic pattern. "I wake up at 5 some mornings and hear the planes coming in, and I think they are bombing me.

Then at 8 a.m., when I'm trying to read a report from a general, all the tourists are going by right under your bed. And when you're trying to take a nap, Lady Bird is in the next room with Laurance Rockefeller and 80 ladies talking about the daffodils on Pennsylvania Avenue."

But, despite noisy planes and talk about daffodils, the President is functioning at top form. The U.S. is finding out once again that each President is different, that comparisons of Johnson to Kennedy or Eisenhower or Truman are, in the end, meaningless. For Johnson is Johnson, and stress and strain only make him more so. Never has the U.S. had a President more passionately, earnestly and all-encompassingly dedicated to and consumed by his work.

*-In Rock Island, Ill., on Sept. 17, 1952, Ike asked: "How do we stop or avoid any further Koreas; in short, how do we get away from the fumbling and bumbling that led us into Korea?" The next day in Newton, Iowa, he said: "We should be keeping our boys at home and not be preparing them to serve in uniforms across the seas."