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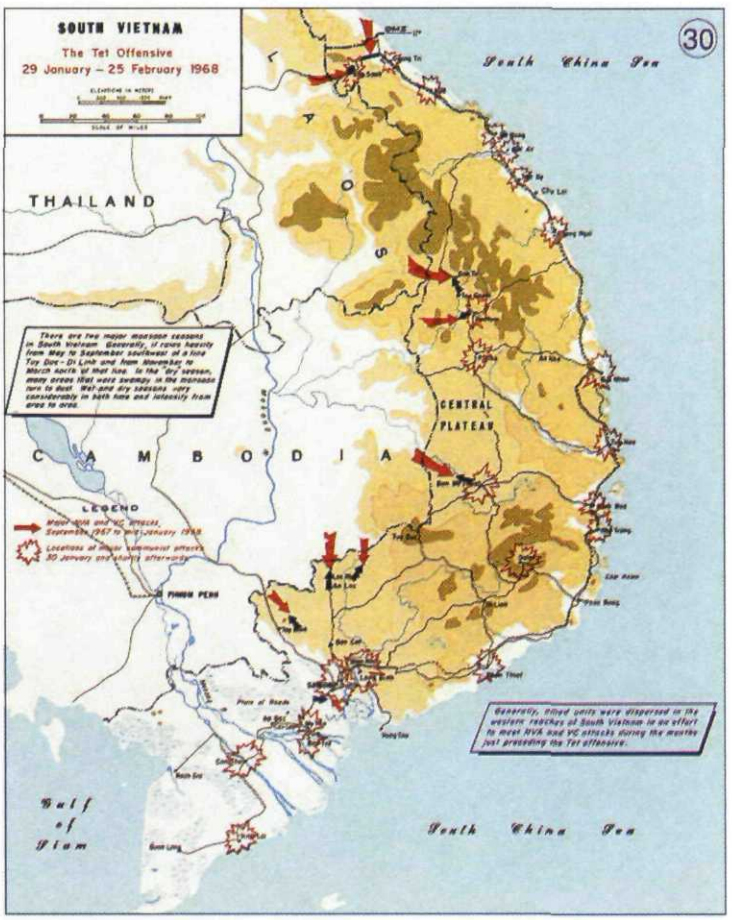
The Tet Offensive: The Turning Point of the Vietnam War

By January 1968, American ground troops had been fighting in Vietnam for almost three years with little success. The U.S. had provided political, economic, and military support to the government of South Vietnam for a decade and a half while the North Vietnamese forces and their southern allies, the National Liberation Front (NLF), gained strength. Under President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), the U.S. steadily increased its troop commitments in Vietnam throughout the mid-1960s, and although Johnson claimed American and South Vietnamese military success, the Tet Offensive of January and February 1968 demonstrated otherwise. During a cease-fire in honor of Tet, the Vietnamese lunar New Year, Communist forces coordinated an attack on key cities and American military bases throughout South Vietnam. Although American and South Vietnamese forces eventually repelled the attack, North Vietnam and the NLF had some initial successes, including a siege of the American embassy building in Saigon. Many historians consider the Tet Offensive a psychological victory for the Communist forces and a political defeat for the U.S.



Tactical map of the Tet Offensive. (Image courtesy of the Department of History, United States Military Academy.)

National Standards

This lesson plan will help students master the following standard from the *National Standards for United States History*:

Era 9: Postwar U.S.

3C: The student understands the foreign and domestic consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, therefore the student is able to assess the Vietnam policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations and the shifts of public opinion about the war. [Analyze multiple causation.]

Time

One class meeting of forty-five minutes.

Student Objectives

1. To analyze primary source material.
2. To analyze the role of the media in shaping public opinion and public policy.
3. To assess the impact of public opinion on foreign policy.

Background and Preparation

North Vietnam and the NLF launched the Tet Offensive in hopes of forcing the U.S. to the negotiating table and halting the American bombing campaign. Hanoi also hoped to weaken the Saigon government and drive a wedge between South Vietnam and the U.S. Beginning in late 1967, the Hanoi government began a strategy of attacking remote areas to lure American troops away from the large cities and towns in South Vietnam. They focused their attacks especially on the Marine garrison at Khe Sanh, just south of the demilitarized zone and near the Laotian border. Over 50,000 American troops had been diverted to Khe Sanh at the height of the siege, leaving Saigon, Hue, Da Nang, Pleiku, and other urban areas vulnerable in late 1967-early 1968. Both sides had traditionally observed a cease-fire during Tet, the lunar New Year and an important Vietnamese holiday at the end of January, and South Vietnamese soldiers and officials were celebrating and away from their posts and offices.

In late 1967, despite the growing antiwar movement, the White House and the Pentagon publicly pledged victory in Vietnam and asserted that the war was nearing its successful conclusion. General

The Viet Cong mounted coordinated attacks on hamlets, villages, and cities throughout the Republic of Vietnam during the festive Tet or New Year season. Here, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers search for Viet Cong snipers hiding in nearby buildings beneath a banner celebrating the New Year, the Year of the Monkey. (Image courtesy of the Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.)

William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. military operations in Vietnam, told Congress that the end was close at hand and that the enemy was in retreat. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had just requested 200,000 additional troops to make the final push to victory.

At 2:45 a.m. on January 30, 1968, a cadre of NLF guerillas successfully penetrated the outer wall of the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon. The Embassy lay under siege for six and a half hours. This was the most visible attack and provided powerful imagery for Americans watching news reports at home, but the NLF also hit five of the six largest cities in South Vietnam, including the imperial city of Hue, thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals, and sixty-four district capitals. The NLF occupied Hue for almost a month until the Marines retook the city. Street-by-street and house-by-house fighting, combined with an intensive air bombing campaign, turned back the NLF and North Vietnamese forces. The fighting took a terrible toll, and as one U.S. soldier in charge of recapturing Ben Tre told reporters, "we had to destroy the town to save it." NLF and North Vietnamese casualties may have been as high as 40,000, while U.S. and South Vietnamese combined losses numbered about 3,500. Almost 12,500 civilians were killed with hundreds of thousands more forced to flee their homes.

Ultimately, the Communist forces had miscalculated. Their offensive failed to spark a nationwide uprising and they were unable to hold back the American and South Vietnamese military. Yet the Tet Offensive had an important influence on public opinion and official policy in the U.S. The images of the American embassy under siege and the stark contrast between the fierce fighting during Tet and the optimistic estimates and reports emanating from Washington in the period just prior to the attacks contributed to the interpretation of the Tet Offensive as a political and moral defeat for the U.S. Many members of the American media used Tet to underscore their arguments that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable and venerable broadcast journalist Walter Cronkite questioned U.S. policies in a February 1968 broadcast, asserting that "we are mired in stalemate." Lyndon Johnson allegedly responded, "If we've lost Cronkite, we've lost the country." Public reaction to Tet convinced Johnson to shift the burden of fighting in Vietnam to the South Vietnamese, a strategy known as Vietnamization.

The fallout from Tet had broad political implications because it occurred during an election year. The New Hampshire primary was scheduled for March 12, 1968, less than six weeks after the Tet Offensive. Johnson was not on the ballot but his campaign staff and party regulars organized a write-in campaign for him. The President's main challenger, Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, ran on an antiwar platform. Al-

Vietnamese infrastructure destroyed during in the Tet Offensive, May 5, 1968. (Image courtesy of The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.)

though polls conducted in January indicated that McCarthy would garner only 10 percent of the Democratic vote, his numbers surged in the aftermath of Tet and he came close to beating the incumbent president, falling short only by several hundred votes.

Students' understanding of the war in Vietnam should be set in the context of the cold war and the protest movements and cultural conflict of the 1960s. They should have a grasp of Vietnam policy up to 1968, including the French withdrawal after Dien Bien Phu, U.S. backing of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and the latter's demise in 1963, the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and the introduction of American ground troops to South Vietnam in April 1965. In addition, students should have some familiarity with the "village war" and the emerging antiwar movement.

Marines riding atop a M-48 tank cover their ears as the 90mm gun fires during a road sweep southwest of Phu Bai. April 3, 1968. (Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NAIL NWDNS-127-N-A371493.)

Procedures

Have students research press accounts of the Tet Offensive and analyze how it was portrayed in the media to develop their critical thinking skills. Focusing on the Tet Offensive will help students to tie together policy shifts from the Johnson to the Nixon administration, assess the role of public opinion and the antiwar movement on the Vietnam War, and presage the election of Richard Nixon in 1968.

Ask students to read Walter Cronkite's February 27, 1968 broadcast from the CBS program *Who, What, When, Why* and Lyndon Johnson's March 31, 1968 speech announcing that he would take steps to limit the war in Vietnam and that he would not run for re-election. You might also wish to have the students read local newspaper accounts of the Tet Offensive. Your local public library or school library should have them on microform. Pull the issues from January 31 through the first few weeks of February 1968 and April 1, 1968. Divide the students into small groups of three to five and have them discuss the following questions. If class size permits, have each group report to the class on their answers to one of the questions, using an outline format with a thesis statement and the pieces of evidence they would use to defend their argument.

Discussion Questions

A. Document analysis

1. How are Cronkite's and Johnson's analyses of the Tet Offensive different? How are they similar?

2. Who had more influence over public opinion, Cronkite, a journalist, or Johnson, the president? Why?

B. The role of the media

1. Compare the reporting on Vietnam to reporting of other twentieth-century wars, such as World War I and World War II. How does evolving technology shape media accounts of war? How did the constant images of the fighting in Vietnam beamed into American living rooms influence public opinion?

2. How does the media shape history?

C. The role of public opinion

1. Should war and other issues of national defense and military strategy be fought or decided with regard to public opinion? Why or why not?

2. How does the Vietnam experience influence public perceptions of war?

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Handout 1

"Report from Vietnam," Walter Cronkite Broadcast, February 27, 1968.

Tonight, back in more familiar surroundings in New York, we'd like to sum up our findings in Vietnam, an analysis that must be speculative, personal, subjective. Who won and who lost in the great Tet offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. The Vietcong did not win by a knockout, but neither did we. The referees of history may make it a draw. Another standoff may be coming in the big battles expected south of the Demilitarized Zone. Khesanh could well fall, with a terrible loss in American lives, prestige and morale, and this is a tragedy of our stubbornness there; but the bastion no longer is a key to the rest of the northern regions, and it is doubtful that the American forces can be defeated across the breadth of the DMZ with any substantial loss of ground. Another standoff. On the political front, past performance gives no confidence that the Vietnamese government can cope with its problems, now compounded by the attack on the cities. It may not fall, it may hold on, but it probably won't show the dynamic qualities demanded of this young nation. Another standoff.

We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. They may be right, that Hanoi's winter-spring offensive has been forced by the Communist realization that they could not win the longer war of attrition, and that the Communists hope that any success in the offensive will improve their position for eventual negotiations. It would improve their position, and it would also require our realization, that we should have had all along, that any negotiations must be that—negotiations, not the dictation of peace terms. For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. This summer's almost certain standoff will either end in real give-and-take negotiations or terrible escalation; and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us, and that applies to invasion of the North, the use of nuclear weapons, or the mere commitment of one hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred thousand more American troops to the battle. And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster.

To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy's intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.

This is Walter Cronkite. Good night.

Source: *Reporting Vietnam: Part One: American Journalism 1959-1969* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 581-582. This document can also be found at: <http://www.richmond.edu/~ebolt/history398/Cronkite_1968.html>

Walter Cronkite and a CBS television camera crew use a jeep as a dolly during an interview with the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, during the Battle of Hue, February 20, 1968. Shortly after this interview, Cronkite delivered the above commentary. (Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration NAIL NWDNS-127-N-A190589.)

Handout 2

President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation Announcing Steps To Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection, March 31, 1968 [excerpted].

Good evening, my fellow Americans:

Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. No other question so preoccupies our people. No other dream so absorbs the 250 million human beings who live in that part of the world. No other goal motivates American policy in Southeast Asia.

For years, representatives of our Government and others have traveled the world—seeking to find a basis for peace talks.

Since last September, they have carried the offer that I made public at San Antonio. That offer was this:

That the United States would stop its bombardment of North Vietnam when that would lead promptly to productive discussions—and that we would assume that North Vietnam would not take military advantage of our restraint.

Hanoi denounced this offer, both privately and publicly. Even while the search for peace was going on, North Vietnam rushed their preparations for a savage assault on the people, the government, and the allies of South Vietnam.

Their attack—during the Tet holidays—failed to achieve its principal objectives.

It did not collapse the elected government of South Vietnam or shatter its army—as the Communists had hoped.

It did not produce a "general uprising" among the people of the cities as they had predicted.

The Communists were unable to maintain control of any of the more than thirty cities that they attacked. And they took very heavy casualties.

But they did compel the South Vietnamese and their allies to move certain forces from the countryside into the cities.

They caused widespread disruption and suffering. Their attacks, and the battles that followed, made refugees of half a million human beings.

The Communists may renew their attack any day.

They are, it appears, trying to make 1968 the year of decision in South Vietnam—the year that brings, if not final victory or defeat, at least a turning point in the struggle.

This much is clear:

If they do mount another round of heavy attacks, they will not succeed in destroying the fighting power of South Vietnam and its allies.

But tragically, this is also clear: Many men—on both sides of the struggle—will be lost. A nation that has already suffered 20 years of warfare will suffer once again. Armies on both sides will take new casualties. And the war will go on.

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 this bloody war.

Tonight, I renew the offer I made last August—to stop the bombardment of North Vietnam. We ask that talks begin promptly, that they be serious talks on the substance of peace. We assume that during those talks Hanoi will not take advantage of our restraint.

We are prepared to move immediately toward peace through negotiations.

So, tonight, in the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to deescalate the conflict. We are reducing—*substantially reducing—the present level of hostilities.*

And we are doing so unilaterally, and at once.

Tonight, I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens allied forward positions and where the movements of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat.

The area in which we are stopping our attacks includes almost 90 percent of North Vietnam's population, and most of its territory. Thus there will be no attacks around the principal populated areas, or in the food-producing areas of North Vietnam.

Even this very limited bombing of the North could come to an early end—if our restraint is matched by restraint in Hanoi. But I cannot in good conscience stop all bombing so long as to do so would immediately and directly endanger the lives of our men and our allies. Whether a complete bombing halt becomes possible in the future will be determined by events.

Our purpose in this action is to bring about a reduction in the level of violence that now exists.

It is to save the lives of brave men—and to save the lives of innocent women and children. It is to permit the contending forces to move closer to a political settlement. . . .

. . . I call upon President Ho Chi Minh to respond positively, and favorably, to this new step toward peace.

But if peace does not come now through negotiations, it will come when Hanoi understands that our common resolve is unshakable, and our common strength is invincible.

Tonight, we and the other allied nations are contributing 600,000 fighting men to assist 700,000 South Vietnamese troops in defending their little country.

Our presence there has always rested on this basic belief: The main burden of preserving their freedom must be carried out by them—by the South Vietnamese themselves. . . .

. . . *I pay tribute once again tonight to the great courage and* endurance of [South Vietnam's] people. South Vietnam supports armed forces tonight of almost 700,000 men—and I call your attention to the fact that this is the equivalent of more than ten million in our own population. Its people maintain their firm determination to be free of domination by the North.

There has been substantial progress, I think, in building a durable government during these last 3 years. The South Vietnam of 1965 could not have survived the enemy's Tet offensive of 1968. The elected government of South Vietnam survived that attack—and is rapidly repairing the devastation that it wrought. . . .

. . . I cannot promise that the initiative that I have announced tonight will be completely successful in achieving peace any more than the 30 others that we have undertaken and agreed to in recent years.

But it is our fervent hope that North Vietnam, after years of fighting that have left the issue unresolved, will now cease its efforts to achieve a military victory and will join with us in moving toward the peace table.

And there may come a time when South Vietnamese—on both sides—are able to work out a way to settle their own differences by free political choice rather than by war.

As Hanoi considers its course, it should be in no doubt of our intentions. It must not miscalculate the pressures within our democracy in this election year.

We have no intention of widening this war.

But the United States will never accept a fake solution to this long and arduous struggle and call it peace.

No one can foretell the precise terms of an eventual settlement.

Our objective in South Vietnam has never been the annihilation of the enemy. It has been to bring about a recognition in Hanoi that its objective—taking over the South by force—could not be achieved.

We think that peace can be based on the Geneva Accords of 1954—under political conditions that permit the South Vietnamese—all the South Vietnamese—to chart their course free of any outside domination or interference, from us or from anyone else.

So tonight I reaffirm the pledge that we made at Manila—that we are prepared to withdraw our forces from South Vietnam as the other side withdraws its forces to the north, stops the infiltration, and the level of violence thus subsides . . . .

. . . One day, my fellow citizens, there will be peace in Southeast Asia.

It will come because the people of Southeast Asia want it—those whose armies are at war tonight, and those who, though threatened, have thus far been spared.

Peace will come because Asians were willing to work for it—and to sacrifice for it—and to die by the thousands for it.

But let it never be forgotten: Peace will come also because America sent her sons to help secure it.

It has not been easy—far from it. During the past 4 ½, it has been my fate and my responsibility to be Commander in Chief. I have lived—daily and nightly—with the cost of this war. I know the pain that it has inflicted. I know, perhaps better than anyone, the misgivings that it has aroused.

Throughout this entire, long period, I have been sustained by a single principle: that what we are doing now, in Vietnam, is vital not only to the security of Southeast Asia, but it is vital to the security of every American.

Surely we have treaties which we must respect. Surely we have commitments that we are going to keep. Resolutions of the Congress testify to the need to resist aggression in the world and in Southeast Asia.

But the heart of our involvement in South Vietnam—under three different presidents, three separate administrations—has always been America's own security.

And the larger purpose of our involvement has always been to help the nations of Southeast Asia become independent and stand alone, self-sustaining, as members of a great world community—at peace with themselves, and at peace with all others.

With such an Asia, our country—and the world—will be far more secure than it is tonight.

I believe that a peaceful Asia is far nearer to reality because of what America has done in Vietnam. I believe that the men who endure the dangers of battle—fighting there for us tonight—are helping the entire world avoid far greater conflicts, far wider wars, far more destruction, than this one . . . .

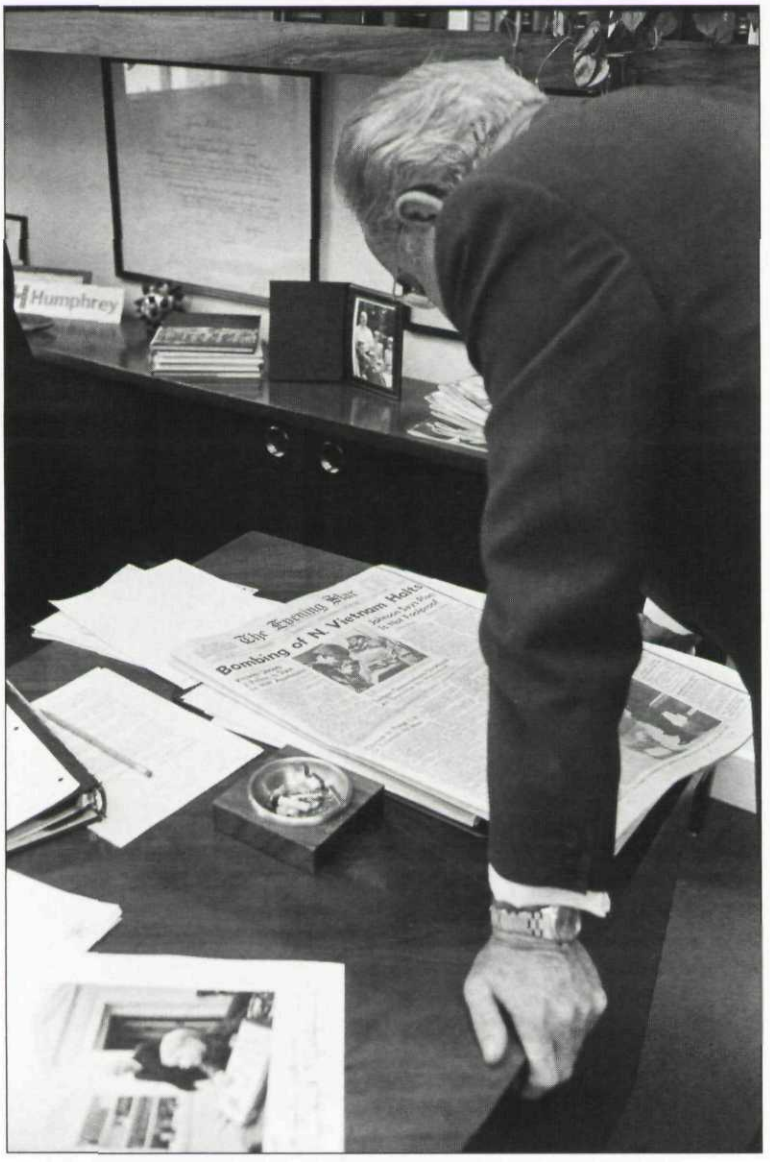
. . . Finally, my fellow Americans, let me say this:

Of those to whom much is given, much is asked. I cannot say and no man could say that no more will be asked of us.

Yet, I believe that now, no less than when the decade began, this generation of Americans is willing to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

Since those words were spoken by John F. Kennedy, the people of America have kept that compact with mankind's noblest cause.

President Lyndon B. Johnson addresses the nation, announcing a halt to the bombing in Vietnam and his decision not to run for reelection. (Image Courtesy of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, C9284-35.)



President Lyndon B. Johnson reads headlines announcing the halt to bombing, November 1, 1968. (Image courtesy of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, B2316-31.)

And we shall continue to keep it.

Yet, I believe that we must always be mindful of this one thing, whatever the trials and the tests ahead. The ultimate strength of our country and our cause will lie not in powerful weapons or infinite resources or boundless wealth, but will lie in the unity of our people.

This I believe very deeply.

Throughout my entire public career I have followed the personal philosophy that I am a free man, an American, a public servant, and a member of my party, in that order always and only.

For thirty-seven years in the service of our Nation, first as a Congressman, as a Senator, and as Vice President, and now as your President, I have put the unity of the people first. I have put it ahead of any divisive partisanship.

And in these times as in times before, it is true that a house divided against itself by the spirit of faction, of party, of region, of religion, of race, is a house that cannot stand.

There is division in the American house now. There is divisiveness among us all tonight. And holding the trust that is mine, as President of all the people, I cannot disregard the peril to the progress of the American people and the hope and the prospect of peace for all peoples.

So, I would ask all Americans, whatever their personal interests or concern, to guard against divisiveness and all its ugly consequences.

Fifty-two months and ten days ago, in a moment of tragedy and trauma, the duties of this office fell upon me. I asked then for your help and God's, that we might continue America on its course, binding up our wounds, healing our history, moving forward in new unity, to clear the American agenda and to keep the American commitment for all of our people.

United we have kept that commitment. United we have enlarged that commitment.

Through all time to come, I think America will be a stronger nation, a more just society, and a land of greater opportunity and fulfillment because of what we have all done together in these years of unparalleled achievement.

Our reward will come in the life of freedom, peace, and hope that our children will enjoy through ages ahead.

What we won when all of our people united just must not now be lost in suspicion, distrust, selfishness, and politics among any of our people.

Believing this as I do, I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year.

With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country.

Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.

But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace—and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause—whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice that duty may require.

Thank you for listening.

Good night and God bless all of you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9 p.m. in his office at the White House. The address was broadcast nationally.

Source: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1970) Vol I, entry 170, 469-476. This document is also available at: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/680331.asp>