

Lyndon Johnson, "The War on Poverty" (1964)

Lyndon Johnson was an ambitious man who wanted to be remembered as the greatest president of the 20th century after Franklin Roosevelt. During the New Deal years, Johnson himself had worked in a government youth camp. By the 1960s he believed that the eradication of poverty was finally within reach. This document shows that although the popular image of the 1950s and early 1960s is one of wealth or at least prosperity, many Americans of all backgrounds remained below the poverty level. Whether Johnson's war on poverty could have been won is unclear, but the competing demand for federal resources to finance the war in Vietnam diverted resources from the president's domestic programs. In the late 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Johnson would strongly disagree about which was more important, spending to support the war in Vietnam or to promote economic equality at home.

I have called for a national war on poverty. Our objective: total victory.

There are millions of Americans—one fifth of our people—who have not shared in the abundance which has been granted to most of us, and on whom the gates of opportunity have been closed.

What does this poverty mean to those who endure it?

It means a daily struggle to secure the necessities for even a meager existence. It means that the abundance, the comforts, the opportunities they see all around them are beyond their grasp.

Worst of all, it means hopelessness for the young.

The young man or woman who grows up without a decent education, in a broken home, in a hostile and squalid environment, in ill health or in the face of racial injustice—that young man or woman is often trapped in a life of poverty.

He does not have the skills demanded by a complex society. He does not know how to acquire those skills. He faces a mounting sense of despair which drains initiative and ambition and energy. . . .

The war on poverty is not a struggle simply to support people, to make them dependent on the generosity of others.

It is a struggle to give people a chance.

It is an effort to allow them to develop and use their capacities, as we have been allowed to develop and use ours, so that they can share, as others share, in the promise of this nation.

We do this, first of all, because it is right that we should.

For the establishment of public education and land grant colleges through agricultural extension and encouragement to industry, we have pursued the goal of a nation with full and increasing opportunities for all its citizens.

The war on poverty is a further step in that pursuit.

We do it also because helping some will increase the prosperity of all.

Our fight against poverty will be an investment in the most valuable of our resources—the skills and strength of our people.

And in the future, as in the past, this investment will return its cost many fold to our entire economy.

If we can raise the annual earnings of 10 million among the poor by only \$1,000 we will have added \$14 billion a year to our national output. In addition we can make important reductions in public assistance payments which now cost us \$4 billion a year, and in the large costs of fighting crime and delinquency, disease and hunger.

This is only part of the story.

Our history has proved that each time we broaden the base of abundance, giving more people the chance to produce and consume, we create new industry, higher production, increased earnings and better income for all.

Giving new opportunity to those who have little will enrich the lives of all the rest.

Because it is right, because it is wise, and because, for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty, I submit, for the consideration of the Congress and the country, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

The Act does not merely expand old programs or improve what is already being done.

It charts a new course.

It strikes at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty.

It can be a milestone in our one-hundred-eighty-year search for a better life for our people.

Document Analysis

1. What did Johnson identify as the most serious effect of poverty?
2. What reasons did Johnson use to justify the war on poverty? Who did he maintain would benefit from this "war"?
3. Does the United States need a "war on poverty" today? If so, why hasn't the nation taken this step? If not, why not?

Lyndon Johnson, Message to Congress and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964)

In August 1964, the USS Maddox became involved in a confrontation with North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. To obtain a better sense of North Vietnam's defenses, the Maddox had been shadowing South Vietnamese naval raids into North Vietnamese territory. In frustration, the North Vietnamese sent small boats against the Maddox. No torpedoes hit the Maddox, while the North Vietnamese lost one boat and suffered severe damage to the others. Neither the U.S. commanders on the scene nor the U.S. government considered the incident to constitute a major crisis.

A few nights later, in poor atmospheric conditions, the crew of the *Maddox* misread their radar and sonar and believed they were once again under attack. They fired rounds in all directions and reported the engagement to authorities in Washington. The commander of the *Maddox* and the senior naval aviator on the scene both reported that they had no evidence of an attack--no one had ever seen the North Vietnamese vessels or any torpedoes. Nevertheless, the U.S. government demanded proof of a second attack on the ship. Although no convincing proof was forthcoming, President Johnson ordered retaliatory counterstrikes against North Vietnamese installations. In the raids, Lieutenant Everett Alvarez became the first U.S. prisoner of war in North Vietnam, where he remained until 1972.

Meanwhile, insisting that the *Maddox* had been fired on without provocation, Johnson used the incident to convince Congress to give him a free hand in Vietnam. On August 5, the President sent the document excerpted below to Congress. Congress responded by passing a joint resolution--commonly known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution--authorizing the president "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Johnson later used this authority to dramatically increase U.S. troop strength in Vietnam.

Last night I announced to the American people that North Vietnamese regime had conducted further deliberate attacks against US. Naval vessels operating in international waters, and that I had therefore directed air action against gunboats and supporting facilities used in these hostile operations. This air action has now been carried out with substantial damage to the boats and facilities. Two U.S. aircraft were lost in the action.

After consultation with the leaders of both parties in the Congress, I further announced a decision to ask the Congress for a resolution expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in southeast Asia.

These latest actions of the North Vietnamese regime have given a new and grave turn to the already serious situation in southeast Asia. Our commitments in that area are well known to the Congress. They were first made in 1954 by President Eisenhower. They were further defined in the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty approved by the Senate in February 1955.

This treaty with its accompanying protocol obligates the United States and other members to act in accordance with their constitutional processes to meet Communist aggression against any of the parties or protocol states.

Our policy in southeast Asia has been consistent and unchanged since 1954. I summarized it on June 2 in our simple propositions:

1. America keeps her word. Here as elsewhere, we must and shall honor our commitments.

2. The issue is the future of southeast Asia as a whole. A threat to any nation in that region is a threat to all, and a threat to us.
3. Our purpose is peace. We have no military, political, or territorial ambitions in the area.
4. This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity. Our military and economic assistance to South Vietnam and Laos in particular has the purpose of helping these countries to repel aggression and strengthen their independence.

The threat to the free nations of southeast Asia has long been clear. The North Vietnamese regime has constantly sought to take over South Vietnam and Laos. This Communist regime has violated the Geneva accords for Vietnam. It has systematically conducted a campaign of subversion, which included the direction, training, and supply of personnel and arms for the conduct of guerrilla warfare in South Vietnamese territory. In Laos, the North Vietnamese regime has maintained military forces, used Laotian territory for infiltration into South Vietnam, and most recently carried out combat operations—all in direct violation of the Geneva agreements of 1962.

In recent months, the actions of the North Vietnamese regime have become steadily more threatening. . . .

As President of the United States I have concluded that I should now ask the Congress, on its part, to join in affirming the national determination that all such attacks will be met, and that the United States will continue in its basic policy of assisting the free nations of the area to defend their freedom.

As I have repeatedly made clear, the United States intends no rashness, and seeks no wider war. We must make it clear to all that the United States is united in its determination to bring about the end of Communist subversion and aggression in the area. We seek the full and effective restoration of the international agreements signed in Geneva in 1954, with respect to South Vietnam, and again in Geneva in 1962, with respect to Laos. . . .

Joint Resolution of Congress

To promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia.

Whereas naval units of the Communist regime in Vietnam, in violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters, and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace; and

Whereas these attacks are part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the Communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors and the nations joined with them in the collective defense of their freedom; and

Whereas the United States is assisting the peoples of southeast Asia to protect their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these peoples should be left in peace to work out their own destinies in their own way; Now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.

SEC. 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as

the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

SEC. 3. This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.

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President Lyndon Johnson's Defense of the U.S. Presence in Vietnam (1965)

In July 1965 U.S. involvement in Vietnam was escalating. That month, President Johnson had approved an immediate increase in American troop strength to 125,000, with a commitment to raise that number to 200,000 by year's end. But the speech that Johnson gave to defend his actions in Vietnam was not delivered to Congress, nor was it a prime-time television event. Rather, it was given at a press conference and, according to Johnson's advisers in later interviews, was meant to be as "low-key" as possible.

. . . Three times in my lifetime, in two world wars and in Korea, Americans have gone to far lands to fight for freedom. We have learned at a terrible and brutal cost that retreat does not bring safety and weakness does not bring peace.

It is this lesson that has brought us to Viet-Nam. This is a different kind of war. There are no marching armies or solemn declarations. Some citizens of South Viet-Nam, at times with understandable grievances, have joined in the attack on their own government.

But we must not let this mask the central fact that this is really war. It is guided by North Viet-Nam, and it is spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the South, to defeat American power, and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism.

There are great stakes in the balance.

Most of the non-Communist nations of Asia cannot, by themselves and alone, resist the growing might and the grasping ambition of Asian Communism.

Our power, therefore, is a very vital shield. If we are driven from the field in Viet-Nam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise or in American protection.

In each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened and an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States itself.

We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else.

Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another country, bringing with it perhaps even larger and crueler conflict, as we have learned from the lessons of history.

Moreover, we are in Viet-Nam to fulfill one of the most solemn pledges of the American nation. Three Presidents--President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and your present President--over 11 years have committed themselves and have promised to help defend this small and valiant nation.

Strengthened by that promise, the people of South Viet-Nam have fought for many long years. Thousands of them have died. Thousands more have been crippled and scarred by war. We just cannot now dishonor our word, or abandon our commitment, or leave those who believed us and who trusted us to the terror and repression and murder that would follow.

This, then, my fellow Americans, is why we are in Viet-Nam.

Document Analysis

1. Can you summarize Johnson's defense of U.S. policy in Vietnam in a single sentence? What are his main reasons for continuing U.S. involvement?
2. What does Johnson predict would happen if the United States pulled out of Vietnam?
3. ~~How does Johnson's explanation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam compare to George W. Bush's explanation of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq?~~

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Rachel Carson's book, *SILENT SPRING*, of which the first chapter is excerpted in *A Fable of Tomorrow*, touched off a major controversy in 1962 when it alleged that man's frequent and indiscriminate use of pesticides and other toxic chemicals were poisoning the Earth. Chemical companies and other opponents waged a campaign to discredit her, but she remained calm and firm in her convictions, confident of her facts.

Her writings helped people recognize that human actions affect the environment, an idea that forms the foundation of modern environmental movements. They also inspired later policy changes restricting the use of chemicals and pesticides. She is considered to be one of the most influential scientists of the 20th century.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AFTER READING:

1. What "evil spell" could have settled on and silenced the community?
2. How could the people have brought this destruction on themselves?
3. Why would this book have not been acknowledged as an influential piece of writing until the late 1970s and the 1980s?

Chapter I

A Fable for Tomorrow

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the autumn mornings.

Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveller's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and autumn people travelled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams, which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses, sank their wells, and built their barns.

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients. There had been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among adults but even among children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours.

22 *Silent Spring*

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example - where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

On the farms the hens brooded, but no chicks hatched. The farmers complained that they were unable to raise any pigs - the litters were small and the young survived only a few days. The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit.

The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless. Anglers no longer visited them, for all the fish had died.

In the gutters under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches; some weeks before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams.

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world. I know of no community that has experienced all the misfortunes I describe. Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. A grim spectre has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know.

What has already silenced the voices of spring in countless towns in America? This book is an attempt to explain.

