

1996

## Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam

Cole C. Kingseed

Lloyd Gardner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kingseed, Cole C. and Gardner, Lloyd (1996) "Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 4 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss4/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

military value and suppressed consideration of potential U.S. reactions to their deployment. His behavior is evidence of wishful thinking that impairs judgment.

It was learning and reassurance that resolved the crisis. For example, the blockade against Soviet ships awoke Khrushchev to the reality that Kennedy would not acquiesce, while Kennedy agreed that the Soviet deployment was strategically defensive but politically unacceptable. Despite several uncooperative military commanders in both the Soviet and American military, each leader did his best to reassure the other that he was not escalating the situation.

Cold War tactics for deterrence also take their share of criticism from the authors. The Soviets and Americans avoided trade-offs, a significant point since deterrence depends upon one's adversary facing trade-offs squarely. U.S. officials, convinced that national security depended upon the universal applicability of deterrence, attributed any lapse or irrelevance of deterrence to their failure to communicate resolve, which therefore required increasing the American threat posture, which in turn aroused domestic and bureaucratic opinion and made it harder to back down. Officials in both crises shunned intelligence assessments that might show that deterrence was failing.

In 1973 both superpowers' intelligence analyses and political decisions lagged far behind battlefield events. Soviet officials threatened to intervene in Egypt, hoping or gambling that there were no trade-offs between maintaining their position in Washington and attempting to advance it in the Mideast. Suspecting that Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev was bluffing, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger instigated military alerts without having any strategy actually to block Soviet intervention if deterrence failed. He and other authorities micromanaged escalation but did not

grasp important military aspects, in particular the exposure of the Sixth Fleet to a hair-trigger confrontation. Deterrence was not really tested, since Israel had halted its advance before the Soviet threat and thus never forced Moscow's hand.

The authors stumble in presuming that the Soviet Union would not have intervened in 1973 anyway, regardless of the U.S. alert. But they adequately support their fundamental conclusion: that evidence from both sides of the Cold War's most intense confrontations contradicts major assumptions and beliefs behind deterrence strategy.

Strategists, diplomats, historians, and force planners definitely should read this fascinating book. Since deterrence is the rationale for many aspects of the U.S. military as they exist today, open-eyed recognition of its costs and of its very limited practicality should force us to reappraise the relative utility of many of our weapons, doctrines, command organizations, and deployment patterns.

MICHAEL C. POTTER  
San Diego, California

---

Gardner, Lloyd. *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995. 610pp. \$35

In the wake of the furor created by Robert McNamara's memoir, historian Lloyd Gardner has published a riveting book that attempts to explain Lyndon Baines Johnson and the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam. Relying heavily on the recently declassified manuscript collections and other holdings of the Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, Gardner examines the Vietnam tragedy from Johnson's perspective, focusing not on the president's personality but on his ideas and contexts. The result

is a major contribution to the historiography of the Vietnam War.

According to Gardner, President John F. Kennedy's assassination burdened Johnson with obligations, none of which was more onerous than those arising from the deceased president's knowledge of American complicity in the coup that deposed Ngo Dinh Diem. Johnson sought to overcome that burden by picturing himself as the trustee of the legacy of the three previous presidents of the United States. It was the shadow of Kennedy, however, that loomed largest.

Convinced that he needed access to Kennedy's Eastern establishment to pass his Great Society programs, Johnson retained all of Kennedy's key advisors, including war hawks Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. Fearful of being judged against Kennedy's standard of leadership during the Cuban missile crisis, Johnson sought to centralize the decision-making process in the White House. Consequently, he reacted with characteristic vigor in August 1964 in his response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

Bombing North Vietnamese bases not only quieted domestic political conservatives but also demonstrated the president's resolve to honor all of Kennedy's international commitments. Columnist Joseph Alsop most accurately summarized the comparison with Kennedy when he wrote, "For Lyndon Johnson, Vietnam is what the second Cuban crisis was for John F. Kennedy. If Johnson ducks the challenge we shall learn by experience about what it would have been like if Kennedy had ducked the challenge in October 1962." By the time Johnson realized that Vietnam was not Cuba, the forces he had unleashed had gained momentum.

Gardner demonstrates convincingly that Johnson moved inexorably toward war as early as 1963. In January 1964,

Johnson outlined the two wars that would dominate his administration: on one hand he had what he termed a "brazen Communist attempt to conquer Asia"; on the other, he declared an unconditional war on poverty in America. It was the fatal coupling of these two wars that doomed the Johnson presidency.

Rationalizing his decision to escalate in Vietnam, Johnson reasoned that the conflict in Southeast Asia and the war on poverty were joined symbolically. Defeating the enemy in Vietnam had become essential to the confidence Johnson had in passing his domestic legislation. However, the connection produced a fateful and fearful symmetry born of Johnson's New Deal conviction about the power of the federal government to promote economic development as an antidote to regional and class struggles, at home and abroad.

Though his closest advisers, save Rusk, later turned against the war, Johnson remained convinced of the righteousness of his cause. For the president, Vietnam was always a "test of freedom." Under Johnson, however, the United States repeatedly asserted its right to intervene in South Vietnamese internal affairs to prevent negotiations with the enemy, ostensibly under the claim that it was protecting South Vietnam's right to self-determination.

Tet, states Gardner, finally convinced Johnson that a return to the 1966 strategy of attrition would no longer work. Regardless of its military outcome, Tet demonstrated that the United States could not win the war, with 500,000 Americans in Vietnam. What the president needed was some sort of dramatic action, ultimately manifested in the announcement of a temporary bombing halt and Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race. From the time of his 31 March address until he left office, Johnson attempted to end the war that had destroyed his presidency.

In the final analysis, Gardner has written the most comprehensive account of Johnson's descent into the quagmire of Vietnam. Examining the war from the perspective of executive decision making, the author provides a fresh interpretation that the Vietnam War undermined the American credo that this country could not have liberty and prosperity at home without defeating the communist threat abroad.

COLE C. KINGSEED  
Colonel, U.S. Army

---

Cole, Charles F. *Korea Remembered: Enough of a War*. New Mexico: Yucca Tree Press, 1995. 306pp. \$17.95

The *Sumner-Gearing* class destroyers formed the backbone of the U.S. destroyer forces in the years immediately following World War II. Designed early in the war as successors to the workhorse *Fletcher* class, the *Sumner-Gearings* sported an array of six five-inch/38-caliber dual-purpose guns in three mounts, a powerful anti-aircraft battery, and a formidable antisubmarine warfare system. It was the five-inch guns, however, that were so useful bombarding the North Koreans and their Chinese allies during 1950–1953.

In *Korea Remembered*, Cole chronicles the adventures of one *Sumner-Gearing* class ship, USS *Ozborn* (DD 846), as seen through the eyes of a newly commissioned junior officer, himself. Cole begins with how he entered the Navy through the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps and how he managed to reach his ship before it left California for the western Pacific, seeing action with the carrier Task Force 77 and the Formosa Patrol (Task Force 72). Following the intervention of the People's Republic of China in North Korea, the *Ozborn*

supported the Seventh Fleet and participated in the occupation of Wonsan Harbor, where it suffered its first hit by enemy fire. Despite the excitement of action with the enemy, undoubtedly the *Ozborn's* most fulfilling incident of her 1950–1951 cruise was the rescue of an aviator, Ensign Ralph M. Tvede, off the coast of North Korea.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is Cole's description of the bonding of men at war, extending from the commanding officer to encompass the entire crew. The Korean conflict, small by World War II standards, was "enough of a war" to those who fought it.

Cole left *Ozborn* in early 1952 to train with the Underwater Demolition Teams (predecessors of the Navy Seals) in the Atlantic Fleet. It was a totally different experience for him. Most of his time was spent on land or swimming offshore on "field exercises." The teams were small, ten or twelve men, and the bonding was quite different from that among the 250 men of a fully manned destroyer. Although he does not explicitly say so, it was never completely satisfying to the author.

Cole left the regular Navy for the Reserve in 1953 (later retiring as a commander) and returned to Cornell University, where he received his doctorate in marine biology. He taught at several universities, retiring from Ohio State in 1994.

The only criticism I have is the author's abrupt transition from destroyer duty to UDT, which took him away from the "enough of a war." On the whole, Cole's memoirs provide an excellent window into two branches of the Navy as they existed in the 1950s.

ROBERT C. WHITTEN  
Cupertino, California

---