

# Make LBJ the Issue

## Letter to Underground

Dave McReynolds

1966

An open letter can be read by anyone. You are welcome to read it or not, but let me explain what this letter is about and to whom it is addressed. It is a letter about Vietnam and Johnson and Death.

If you support the war in Vietnam because you want the National Liberation Front to win, this letter is not addressed to you. (I admire and respect the courage of the N.L.F. but I think I respect the Buddhists there more, struggling without guns, and in their naivete hoping to touch the mechanical heart of McNamara through self-immolation. They have died without killing—the greatest courage—and if anyone were to have my loyalty it would be the Buddhists.)

If you support the war in Vietnam because you want America to win you are reading the wrong newspaper in the first place.

If you are Max Lerner or Herman Kahn or Sidney Hook I am sorry about that, for your knowledge has cut you off from wisdom. I would write to you if I could, but, it is not in my power—I write in one language and you read in another.

If you are one of the millions of liberals who oppose the war in Vietnam but argue that because America is a great power it “cannot simply withdraw,” then I am not writing to you. You are obsessed by power and its obligations. I am obsessed—haunted by people and why they die and how they might live.

If, finally, you are a Goldwater supporter, I congratulate you—your candidate won after all. Goldwater lives—in the White House. Beyond that we have little to say to one another just now, for your religion is a blend of nationalism and anti-Communism and the murder of little children who might, in their hunger, steal your yogurt and smash your color TV.

I am writing to you who are so agonized over Vietnam, so hurt and wounded and angry and sick, at one and the same time, that you have withdrawn behind a facade of buttons and bumper stickers. “Sterilize LBJ: No More Ugly Children.” “Kill For Peace.” “We Shall Overkill.” “LSD Not LBJ.” I am writing to those of you who do not know whether you are pacifists or not. Whether you support the N.L.F. or not.

I am writing to those of you who are not clear whether Vietnam is an inherent aspect of capitalism or a horrible accident. I am writing to those of you who might even support the war if the murders were at least done honestly, but who rebel against the systematic and deliberate policy of lying practiced so openly (and so consciously) by McNamara and Rusk and Rostow—and Johnson.

I write to those of you who are unclear where you stand on the whole question of Communism Versus the Free World but who feel there is something basically filthy about sending B-52s from the absolute security of Guam to make absolutely safe raids over South Vietnam, where, from miles above the wretched earth, they drop tens of thousands of tons of high explosive through the monsoon clouds upon targets they have never seen, upon children whose language they cannot speak, upon troops they will never confront in honest battle.

I write to those of you who, cowards like myself at least send no others to die, and make it a thing without honor to be ruled by a man who has never seen battle but who has committed 300,000 American boys to the swamps and

jungles and stench of this war and who can then say, from the guarded security of the White House or his Texas Ranch that “we” will not weary.

We say it is a dirty war. We mean it is an obscene war, a pornographic war. A war waged by the order of moral perversity. I write to those of you—and there are not so many—who do not require a twenty page political analysis with quotes from the New York Times and scholarly sources to know or to sense that in Johnson we have at last found the equivalent of Stalin and of Hitler—a man without a moral center.

You are a mixed “underground” but I address you all, housewives and queers, stray cops and acid heads and ex-Communists and neurotics and starving artists.

I address all of you who have seen through flames of napalm the trembling nightmare of Johnson’s inner mind and have found there is none: that his mind, (and the minds- of his associates) is tuned to death and to power: our death and his power. It is to you that I write.

I do not write you marching orders, for orders enough have been given. I do write to say that children are dying in Vietnam and all our buttons will not save them. Our bumper stickers are only a fun- game, to irritate the enemy and tickle the friend.

Johnson rules and in his name men die by the thousands and tens of thousands. Misguided but brave Americans kill for the sake of a lie—a whole set of lies in which they have been taught to believe. Thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese of all ages and conditions have died, die and will die. Death is in the air and it will not be dissipated by the wearing of a button.

I write to say that buttons and bumper stickers are a signal of our defeat. A sign that we have yielded. They mean we have placed ourselves outside the political process, that we will settle for the Cruel joke, the sharp satire, the hip laugh. In a dictatorship satire is deadly and laughter is effectively subversive. But this is not a dictatorship (or else I could not write this or you read it) and the nation is not totalitarian (otherwise we would be arrested with our buttons on). For all its faults this is a kind of democracy and in a democracy, weakened as it may be, laughter is a secondary weapon.

The issue is how to get rid of Johnson before he kills us all. Opting out, in whatever form, will not make Johnson go away. The real world and the dying children are still there and if we trip out to a world of private beauty it will be flawed by the un-silenced and un-silenceable consciousness of death in Vietnam—death that is not natural, death that is chemical, napalm, gas, and cordite.

Let me begin by discussing the unthinkable act of assassination. Assassination would seem to be the easy way, and in a country where such an act occurred less than three years ago with Kennedy and shortly after with Malcolm X and in a country where an Eagle Scout and ex-Marine could cut down fifteen lives in Austin, it is perhaps better to face this issue than to pretend it does not exist.

I begin by ruling out assassination because I am a pacifist and believe there is the light of God in the least among us. It was in Eichmann, it was in Hitler, it was in Stalin, and I must believe it is in Johnson—and even in McNamara—or abandon my pacifist faith.

I am also a Marxist, and if I recognize that the high crime rate in the Negro ghetto can only be understood in terms of the social conditions of the ghetto, then I must also recognize that the high crime rate of the White House also can only be understood in terms of the social condition of America.

So, both as a religious pacifist and as a Marxist I know that Johnson is not unique, not a monster without precedent: He is a product of America.

I know that we are all involved in Vietnam, that in a certain objective sense we gave our permission for it before it happened. This does not necessarily rule out assassination, it only explains why I would be unable to nerve myself to pull the trigger. I will not kill my fellow, whether he is in Vietnam or in Washington. I will not try to obliterate the sins of a nation by taking the life of a single man.

But there are other reasons. Johnson did not get us into Vietnam—that was the work of Eisenhower and Kennedy. We remain in Vietnam not only because Johnson is too much of a coward to risk his political career by getting us out (and thus facing Nixon’s accusation in 1968 that he “sold out” to the Communists and let America “be defeated by pint-sized guerillas”), but because of political forces grouped around him. Johnson is the symbol and he must bear the responsibility. But behind him are the State Department and the Pentagon.

To remove Johnson without a discussion of how or why we went into Vietnam will change nothing. If anything the killing of Johnson by someone who opposed the war would be exactly the act that would arouse the nation to full support for the war. Johnson might fall, but the next day the dikes around Hanoi would be bombed and a million would die.

We do not overcome the violence in Vietnam by adding our own violence to it. We do not resolve political issues by terror.

But I assume that those of you to whom I write have seen blood enough and would have done with killing altogether. So, then, how do we deal with Johnson? Are we stuck with him through 1972? Is there nothing we can do now? If we are convinced, as I am and many of you are, that the State Department and the Pentagon have no desire to negotiate peace but seek a military victory, and would not be unhappy about a chance to fight China, what can we do?

I praise, of course, all current efforts to educate the public—street-corner meetings, door to door visitation, leafleting of downtown areas, mass demonstrations, the encouragement of Young men to refuse military service. But I have in mind a further step. We run peace candidates (which is good) but operate on the assumption that Johnson himself is invulnerable, that we can do no more than pin on a button saying “LSD Not LBJ.” I suggest we move beyond buttons. I suggest that in every town and city across the country we draft soberly-worded “Impeach LBJ” petitions, circulate them, hold press conferences to announce them, and send them off to our Congressmen and Senators, demanding they begin impeachment proceedings.

Six months ago I muttered about impeaching Johnson but felt it was so far out and non-political that it would be a waste of time. It was too extreme a position to win any following and, in any case, if we could get the man impeached, we would only have Hubert to show for it, which is small progress, if any.

I think now, however, that it is important to raise the slogan because it personalizes the political debate. Johnson has sought to silence and to intimidate us with charges of being “nervous nellys.” He has sought to equate dissent with treason. Shrewd politician that he is, he has sought to make US the issue, rather than to debate or discuss the actual Vietnam policies.

It is time for us to make JOHNSON the issue. It would give the anti-war movement a focus. We would no longer be immobilized behind our buttons, tripping out in despair.

We cannot succeed, of course, in impeaching LBJ, but we can succeed in forcing the Vietnam debate off dead center.

Just now all the liberals are agreed on two propositions, the first being that the Vietnam War is an utter disaster and probably a crime, and the second being that Johnson is utterly sincere in his desire to negotiate.

Bullshit. Johnson has no intention of negotiating. he has blocked and side-tracked and sabotaged every move toward negotiation.

The immunity of Johnson from direct political attack is incredible. He is perhaps the most dishonest man ever elected President and there is no excuse for anyone any longer believing a word he says. Let us remove his immunity. Let us demand the impeachment of a President who has lied to us so massively that we do not trust him to make the peace he claims to seek and which we so urgently demand,

We cannot, I repeat, get Johnson impeached—the Congress today behaves with all the abject servility of the Roman Senate under the Caesars. But does their silence justify ours? Are we to agree that the course of our foreign policy is quite mad but that we ought not to do anything extreme? What more does Johnson have to do before we rise up and demand that he get the hell out of the White House? We dishonored ourselves by voting him in—are we not to dishonor ourselves by our silence?

We cannot really make any headway until we make it clear that not only do we think the government is wrong, but that we think it is lying. Shaking public confidence in the integrity of the government is a basic step toward a real examination of the Vietnam debacle.

Second, it is time for us to begin thinking, seriously, about running a write-in ticket for President in 1968. I am not talking about the nonsense of a “new party,” nor the delusion that a protest ticket could really win. But a protest ticket doesn’t have to win in order to win. That is, the chance for public debate, for TV time, for the education of the public to the issues — all of those things are possible with a serious, well-organized and well-financed write-in campaign. And to achieve that much constitutes a victory. Nor am I talking about a ticket that all 10,000 of us could

back—something like Timothy Leary and Ralph Ginzburg. I am talking about a ticket that hundreds of thousands of people might vote for. Because there are that many Americans, including some Republicans, who voted for Johnson in '64 and who would not vote for him now if the GOP were to run Adolph Hitler instead of Barry Goldwater. These are good, decent, honest, square Americans. They don't wear buttons, they rarely if ever join in demonstrations. They are simply disillusioned and they are there, all across the nation, from Seattle to Atlanta to Philadelphia to Minneapolis. Let us provide them with a ticket in 1968 which they can support with honor and without feeling they have been mousetrapped into psychedelic politics of some kind.

There are a host of good names to choose from: Norman Thomas, A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King, H. Stuart Hughes, Linus Pauling, Benjamin Spock, Seymour Melman, A.J. Muste, James Farmer, John Lewis, Julian Bond—and more than a few others.

Let us not be forced, again, to choose between a Goldwater and a Johnson only to find that in our victory we have been defeated.

If, for example, the Nobel Peace Prize winners, Pauling and King, were to get 200,000 write-in votes they would have been defeated but so massive a protest vote would amount to a great victory. Not only morally, but also politically.

Even the fact that we would not, under any circumstances, ever again vote for Johnson creates a political pressure upon liberal Democrats to dump Johnson at the '68 convention.

After all, liberal Democrats who think impeachment is too "extreme" and "write-in campaigns" too impractical, still have the option of running Fulbright or Kennedy or Morse in the '68 Democratic Presidential primaries. Or is even that too extreme? Why should we assume that we have a kind of constitutional monarchy and are stuck with a moral defective as President until 1972?

I close this letter by saying again that my audience is small. I write to those of you who want us out of Vietnam not because you support one side or the other, but because America has lost the right to stay in Vietnam on any terms, and because even small countries have the right to wage their own civil wars and make their own ghastly mistakes without the bloody intervention of major powers.

I write to those of you who do not side with China or Russia or Hanoi or the National Liberation Front, but come down on the side of the people of Vietnam. It is on their behalf that I remind you that buttons do not close down napalm plants or end bombing raids.

Our button's mean we are hiding in the trenches, giggling over our clever slogans in order to keep from weeping. It is time for us to get out of those trenches and begin advancing against the White House, It is there, and not in Hanoi, that America faces her greatest enemy.

David McReynolds, 36, is the Field Secretary of the War Resisters League. He was for some years on the National Committee of the Socialist Party and in 1964 he actively campaigned for the election of Lyndon Johnson. He burned his draft card on November 6, 1965.

# fifth Estate

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1966

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/15-october-1-15-1966/make-lbj-the-issue>  
Fifth Estate #15, October 1-15, 1966

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