Leadership and Decision Making

Activity 5: Operation Rolling Thunder and Widening the War
Timeline: Early 1965

Introduction: Students will examine the 1965 US bombing campaign of North Vietnam, code-named “Operation Rolling Thunder,” and President Johnson’s decision to send ground troops into South Vietnam.

Video Clips:
- Pleiku and Operation Rolling Thunder
- Widening the War

Summarizing Points:
- McGeorge Bundy’s memo to Johnson on the war’s status
- Johnson’s advisors propose options
- Guerrillas’ attack on the US helicopter base at Pleiku
- United States responds with air attacks
- Viet Cong blow up a hotel in Qui Nhon
- Conflict’s escalation worries US allies France and Britain
- Worry that escalating the war could hurt domestic policies
- Need for more ground troops

Activity Procedure

1. Watch the first video segment, “Pleiku and Operation Rolling Thunder.” Discuss the segment as a class using the summarizing points.

2. Have students read the “Fork in the Road” memo from William Bundy and Robert McNamara to President Johnson. Ask students: What seems to be the main message in each of these briefings?

3. Explain that at this stage of the conflict, the North Vietnamese were showing more resilience to US military actions than was expected. The Pentagon was asking for more troops and increased bombing of North Vietnam. But European allies were becoming nervous that the conflict could spin out of control.

Tell students: Faced with this situation, President Johnson has asked you to make a recommendation regarding the war’s strategy and the next steps to take. Should he:

a) Go along with current strategy and hope for a face-saving settlement.

b) Increase bombing of North Vietnam and commit US ground troops in South Vietnam.
Students can work in groups or individually to determine their recommendation. They should be prepared to present and defend their decision.

4. Show the final video segment, “Widening the War,” which reveals what Johnson decided to do and why. Have students compare and contrast their decisions with that of Johnson, and then write a brief analysis of Johnson’s and their own decisions.

Post-Activity Questions:

- What surprised you about the outcome of Johnson’s decision not to stand in the way of a coup? Does this change your decision in any way? Explain.
- What is your opinion of President Johnson’s decision? Explain.
- What might have been the outcome if Johnson had chosen the other option—that is, of going along as the U.S. had hoped for a face-saving settlement?
- Describe the misconception held by the Johnson administration about the enemy’s resolve. How might the Johnson administration have avoided this misconception with the evidence available?
- Why do you think Johnson wanted to keep knowledge of the bombing and increasing troop numbers a secret? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this?
- How did the increased bombing and troop numbers change the nature of the conflict in Vietnam? Considering the situation on the ground and the political circumstances Johnson faced, did he have any other choice? Explain.