

# Devil's Advocate Defeated: George Ball as a True Dissenter

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It is the late summer of 1964. The South Vietnamese government is on the verge of collapse, and President Lyndon B. Johnson is considering secret plans to bomb North Vietnam.

In steps Undersecretary of State George Ball. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, Ball receives a phone call from his friend, reporter James Reston of the *New York Times*, who has read a leaked report on conditions in Saigon. He confirms with Ball that the situation is tense, and then proceeds to ask, "What about finding a way to get out of Vietnam?" to which Ball responds, "Nobody is thinking seriously about pulling out or initiating negotiations." Then, Reston inquires, "What about a wider, Geneva-type conference?" "Unworkable," Ball answers.<sup>1</sup> On October 5<sup>th</sup>, however, just five weeks later, Ball turns in a sixty-seven page memorandum annihilating the foundations of the administration's Vietnam strategy and proposing a negotiated exit. The memo turned out to be highly prescient, anticipating nearly everything that subsequently went wrong in Vietnam. But Johnson rejected its advice and chose military escalation over a negotiated withdrawal.

Why was Ball ignored? It depends on which Ball was the real George Ball: the hawk who talked to Reston or the dove who wrote the memo five weeks later. Such a dramatic change is unusual in so short a time. Some academic historians argue, therefore, that Ball must have been a hawk whose role in the administration was to play the role of dove and "devil's advocate." Because he was only playing a role, his memo was not taken seriously. Other historians argue that Ball was a dove who kept his dissent against the war secret, even to the extent of appearing hawkish when necessary.

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Some historians argue that Ball's advice was ignored because his dissent was merely staged for effect. Yet the text of Ball's October 5<sup>th</sup> memo and the word of his colleagues strongly suggest that his dissent was in fact genuine. There are alternative explanations for why Ball was referred to as a devil's advocate, why the memo was delayed, and why Ball never tried to mobilize support for it.

### The Devil's Advocate Thesis

After Ball retired in 1966 from his post as Undersecretary of State, he became widely known for having served as the Johnson administration's devil's advocate. A devil's advocate is someone who presents one opinion in order to test the strength of the opposite opinion. According to the devil's advocate thesis, Ball presented "dove" opinions for the "hawks" in the Johnson administration to practice defeating, and his warnings against Operation Rolling Thunder and other escalatory measures were ignored because these warnings were just an exercise and not Ball's true beliefs. In Johnson's memoir, *The Vantage Point*, he claims that Ball "often in our meetings...spoke in opposition to one proposal or another...[and] played the role of devil's advocate frequently."<sup>2</sup> In *Choosing War*, Fredrik Logevall asserts that Ball "had been appointed a 'house dove,' a resident devil's advocate...who could be safely counted on to remain on the team, come what may."<sup>3</sup> And in *Dereliction of Duty*, H. R. McMaster argues that "[Johnson] and his closest advisers viewed Ball's opinion skeptically, as if he were a devil's advocate who was only fulfilling his task as the lone dissenter."<sup>4</sup> This understanding of Ball as the Johnson administration's devil's advocate became so widespread that when Ball died in 1994, the headline of his obituary in the *New York Times*—one of the most respected newspapers in the world—read: "George W. Ball dies at 84; Vietnam's Devil's Advocate."<sup>5</sup> The devil's advocate thesis is clearly an enduringly popular one that deserves further examination.

According to the devil's advocate thesis, Ball's dissent was nothing more than the arguments raised by someone whose job it was to voice a position (which he himself might or might not believe in) for the

sake of argument. Ball wrote memoranda cautioning against escalation because the president had requested them, not because Ball himself believed in them. It was as a devil's advocate that Ball completed his memo to Johnson on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1964, questioning the assumptions in the plans for an air offensive against North Vietnam. The plans were put forward by Robert McNamara, Johnson's Secretary of Defense, and were meant to damage North Vietnam's future negotiating position and to help the South Vietnamese people and government recover their morale. According to Logevall, "The 5 October memorandum had been requested by Johnson at an NSC meeting some two weeks earlier...[and Johnson had] instructed the undersecretary to shoot holes in the contingency plans for stepped-up action. ..."<sup>6</sup>

All the sources agree that Johnson did not read this memo until late February of 1965. By then it was too late, however, because Johnson had approved Operation Rolling Thunder on February 13<sup>th</sup> and bombing began on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, the first contingent of U.S. Marines landed at Da Nang. Those who believe in the devil's advocate theory argue that if Ball had been honestly trying to persuade Johnson to question the assumptions of the administration's Vietnam policy (rather than just performing an assigned rhetorical task), then he would not have waited for almost five months to elapse before making sure that the president read it. Logevall, for example, asks:

*Why did Ball never make any attempt to get his October memorandum to the president, especially given that it had been written at Johnson's behest...? Why did Ball make no effort to get it into Johnson's hand during the critical policy discussions in November? Or in December? Nor did Ball make any attempt to build support for his position within the foreign-policy establishment....<sup>7</sup>*

Those who believe in the devil's advocate theory conclude that Ball didn't attempt to get his memo to the president because he had no personal conviction in what he wrote. He had already performed his task by writing the memo. Therefore, because he was just a devil's advocate "acting as a good lawyer for the president by developing dispas-

sionately an argument diametrically opposed to McNamara's," Ball's memos were never meant to persuade Johnson or his pro-war advisers to withdraw American forces from Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Ball was just providing a counterpoint ultimately meant to strengthen McNamara's recommendations for escalation in Vietnam.

### A True Dissenter

There are two reasons why calling Ball a devil's advocate is misleading, however. First of all, the term implies that Ball was not a true believer in his own dissent. However, both the tone of Ball's dissenting memoranda and the testimony of his colleagues indicate the opposite. Secondly, the term implies that Ball was assigned the job, but there is strong evidence to the contrary. It may well be that he was only referred to as a devil's advocate in order to preserve the appearance of unanimity among Johnson's advisers.

According to the traditional definition, a devil's advocate is assigned the worse side of a debate for the sake of argument. He does not truly believe in his own position but argues for it anyway in order to strengthen the other side. If Ball were truly a devil's advocate in this sense, his memo's goal would be only to point out weaknesses in McNamara's plans beforehand, so that there would be enough time to fix them and ultimately make the air offensive stronger. Ball's October 5<sup>th</sup> memo, however, aims at completely dismantling McNamara's case. It cites several critical reasons why the U.S. should not begin an air offensive against North Vietnam: there is no proof that bombing North Vietnam will improve the morale or government of South Vietnam; bombing will not necessarily stop North Vietnam from sending forces and supplies into South Vietnam; bombing might make the U.S. look like a bully for bombing a small, poor nation and thereby weaken, not strengthen, the U.S. position in negotiations; bombing might provoke a North Vietnamese counter-assault that could only be answered by U.S. ground troops or nuclear weapons; bombing would unite feuding Communist countries against us; and finally, bombing North Vietnam might provoke China into entering the war.<sup>9</sup> Instead of testing and refining the arguments for an air offensive, Ball's objections damage

them so thoroughly that none can be restored to full strength, at least in retrospect. His memo should therefore not perhaps be dismissed as the work of a devil's advocate.

Furthermore, in the same October 5<sup>th</sup> memo, Ball urges a course of action that a devil's advocate would not. He does not just question the policy of escalation but forcefully promotes that of a political settlement. An examination of the tone of part two of Ball's memo ("The Problems and Possibilities of a Political Solution") reveals his convictions. Ball proposes diplomatic measures, frequently opening his thoughts with "We should..." or "I suggest..." or "I think..." or "I am convinced..." On the last page of the memo, he says: "What I am urging is that our Southeast Asian policy be looked at in all aspects and in the light of our total world situation."<sup>10</sup> By directing the administration towards a policy of negotiation, Ball is moving beyond the devil's advocate role of shooting "holes in the contingency plans for stepped-up action..."<sup>11</sup> He sounds less and less like a devil's advocate who, according to McMaster, acts "as a good lawyer for the president by developing dispassionately an argument..." and more and more like someone who speaks for himself by using the first person to express his genuine beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the evidence given by members of the Johnson administration who worked most closely with Ball suggests how strongly he believed in his own dissent. McNamara and McGeorge Bundy were two members of the three-man group that frequently met with Ball and Johnson to discuss top-secret matters. (The third was Secretary of State Dean Rusk.) McNamara and Bundy knew Ball best and were constantly exposed to his dissent. If anybody were to accuse Ball of being a devil's advocate, it would be these two. Yet McNamara said that Ball's memos were the efforts "of an honest man pushing through a series of propositions that deserved thorough debate at the highest levels," and that Ball "...had our respect—but he deserved more than that."<sup>13</sup> Bundy also defended Ball's motives, saying, "Why do people hassle around with [Ball's] motives? ...I think George should be taken on [his] merits. ..." <sup>14</sup> Also, until the end of 1965 McNamara and Bundy were both pro-escalation "hawks" in the Johnson administration. They were part

of the reason for the Vietnam War. If anybody were to expose Ball as just a devil's advocate who was assigned the job of giving what turned out to be the correct advice, it would be the men who knew Ball well and who gave Johnson what turned out to be disastrous advice. Downplaying Ball's dissent and calling his warnings the exercise of a devil's advocate might make their own actions in those years look more excusable, because then people would say that nobody knew what would happen. Yet, as shown in these quotes, McNamara and Bundy didn't take that tack. Instead, they credited the strength of Ball's convictions. Their testimony suggests Ball was not a true devil's advocate.

### Codename: Devil's Advocate

If Ball was never assigned the job of devil's advocate or saw himself in that role, then how did he acquire the label? The most likely explanation involves Johnson's way of running his staff. According to Larry Berman, in *Planning a Tragedy*, "Johnson's operating style incorporated a preoccupation with secrecy, a need for controlling information both to and from the White House...an emphasis on consensus and team play, and a tight rein on the White House staff."<sup>15</sup> George Reedy, Johnson's longtime press secretary, said that Johnson "abhorred dissent."<sup>16</sup> Johnson needed his White House to present a unified front regardless of any internal disagreements. Therefore, Ball's dissent could not become public knowledge.

Secret information, however, was often leaked from the White House to the press. Furthermore, it was inevitable that there would be meetings attended by other less-trusted advisers who weren't a part of the "Awesome Foursome."<sup>17</sup> The Johnson administration therefore came up with a plan to refer to Ball as "the devil's advocate" and his notorious memo as "the devil's advocate paper" in front of others as a way to hide the fact that Ball was working on a dissenting position he truly believed in. According to notes from a White House meeting on November 19, 1964, "Mr. McGeorge Bundy commented that work had not advanced on the 'devil's advocate' exercise. ...Mr. Rusk and Mr. William Bundy responded that the 'devil's advocate' exercise had made some progress under Mr. Ball."<sup>18</sup> Aside from Johnson, Rusk, McNamara, Ball, and the Bundys, the attendance list at the meeting in-

cluded Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, CIA director John McCone, Under Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, and NCS staffer Bromley Smith.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the term “devil’s advocate” was used in this meeting because Johnson did not want some of these other men to know about the depth of Ball’s convictions.

In his memoir, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, Ball himself claims that the label was given to him and his memos for the sake of secrecy and the appearance of consensus:

*To negate any impression of dissent among the top hierarchy, President Johnson announced that he would refer to me as the ‘devil’s advocate,’ thus providing an explanation for anyone outside the government who might hear that I was opposing our Vietnam policy. Though that ruse protected me, I was irked when some academic writers later implied that my long-sustained effort to extricate us from Vietnam was merely a stylized exercise by an in-house ‘devil’s advocate.’ Thus are myths made. Not one of my colleagues ever had the slightest doubt about the intensity of my personal convictions.*<sup>20</sup>

Ball clearly states that Johnson assigned him the name but not the role of devil’s advocate. A person who believes in the devil’s-advocate theory might suggest that Ball is being self-serving here, that he really was just a devil’s advocate now trying to rewrite the past in order to look wiser. If Ball were a devil’s advocate, then it wouldn’t have mattered if someone outside found out about his “stylized exercise.” There is, however, evidence that Ball actually did take measures at the time to keep his opposition secret. On the cover page of his October 5<sup>th</sup> memo, Ball addresses Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy: “The paper has the obvious limitations of a personal effort drafted mostly late at night and without the benefit of staffing.” Furthermore, Ball states, “Only five copies of this document have been prepared...[and it] should not be discussed outside the four of us. ...”<sup>21</sup> Ball took these precautionary measures to keep his dissent secret, not because he enjoyed working secretly, alone and at night. Indeed, taking those measures was disadvantageous to his work: he couldn’t have staffers help with the research, and he had to work at night, when he was tired, instead of during the day, when others might see what he was writing. Therefore, the memo

also supplies evidence supporting Ball's claim that "devil's advocate" was not his actual role, but a deliberately misleading title given to him in order to mask his personal convictions against the air offensive—in a word, a ruse.

### Rejected, Alone, and Ignored

Ball's explanation for the origins of the devil's advocate label is plausible and supported by evidence. However, if we accept that Ball really was a secret dissenter who was committed to his opposition, then we have to answer Logevall's question: Why didn't Ball get his October 5<sup>th</sup> memo to Johnson until February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1965?<sup>22</sup> First of all, Ball's memo was rejected out of hand by McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk. Ball writes, "My colleagues were dead set against the views I presented and uninterested in the point-by-point discussion I had hoped to provoke." Ball also remarks, "McNamara, in particular, was absolutely horrified. He treated it like a poisonous snake...He really just regarded it as next to treason. ..."<sup>23</sup> These advisers were not going to pass his memo on to the president, and Ball himself, respectful of the chain of command, didn't want to go around the proper channels by delivering it himself. Secondly, Ball's memo coincided directly with the final weeks of the 1964 presidential election, and Ball did not want to pull Johnson's focus away: "I didn't press to show it to the President, because he was occupied with the campaign at that time."<sup>24</sup>

Logevall also asks why Ball did not try to get other members of the foreign policy staff to support his position. Ball definitely needed outside supporters, because otherwise he would have to debate alone against the hawks—McNamara, Rusk, Bundy, and Johnson himself. The problem is that if Ball had attempted to build support outside, then his memo and his position would have been exposed, and Johnson wanted any dissent within his administration kept secret. Any such disclosure would surely have angered Johnson: in February of 1965 he became furious with Humphrey for submitting a memo against escalation and for openly voicing his concerns at an NSC meeting. He punished Humphrey by banning him from all Vietnam discussions.<sup>25</sup> Johnson deeply valued the appearance of unanimity:

*I served [Kennedy] loyally, as I would have wanted my Vice-President to serve me. We did not always see things in the same light. I did not always agree with everything that happened in his administration. But when I did disagree with the President, I did so in private, and man to man.*<sup>26</sup>

If Ball had tried to get support for his dissent from outside the Awesome Foursome, Johnson would have excluded him as well. Any support Ball had managed to get would have been useless:

*The effectiveness of my opposition to the war—or even my ability to retain the ear of the President—had depended on Johnson’s confidence that I would never betray or embarrass him. That was the condition on which I could continue to participate in discussions and have access to the intelligence information that enabled me to argue my case with some authority.*<sup>27</sup>

So Ball’s memo went ignored until after the decision to authorize the air offensive, which happened on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1965. Rolling Thunder would make it much harder to negotiate the settlement that Ball recommended in his memo.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

In the end Johnson finally did see Ball’s memo. Why did he reject it? There are many possible answers to this question, but it seems to me that the devil’s advocate answer is unlikely. As presented here, there is plenty of evidence to support the idea that Ball was not a devil’s advocate, but only called that to mask his dissent, and that he was the only dissenter in Johnson’s hawkish circle of advisers. However, this brings us back to the original question: why did the hawks ignore Ball? Ball has been noted by almost everyone to be an extremely loyal man. Logevall notes that “Johnson identified that key part of the George Ball persona: his unswerving loyalty. The president knew that, whatever Ball might feel inside, outwardly he would faithfully present the administration’s position.”<sup>29</sup> Everyone knew that even though the preponderance of the evidence was on Ball’s side, his loyalty meant he would never go to the press with his dissent no matter how well-reasoned it was or how much

he believed in it. Having this luxury meant, perhaps, that Johnson and his advisers were never forced by the prospect of public embarrassment to fully and honestly address the dissent in Ball's October 5<sup>th</sup> memo. If this is true, the irony would be a sobering one: the loyalty of a wise and respected man is ultimately to blame for the Vietnam War. ●

### Notes

1. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 229.
2. Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart And Winston, Inc., 1971), 389.
3. Logevall, 248-249.
4. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 167.
5. Robert D. McFadden, "George W. Ball Dies at 84; Vietnam's Devil's Advocate," *New York Times*, May 28, 1994, Obituaries section, New York edition.
6. Logevall, 248-249.
7. Ibid.
8. McMaster, 167.
9. George Ball, *How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Our Viet-Nam Policies?* (Washington, 1964), in "Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected," *Atlantic*, July 1972, 38-44.
10. Ibid.
11. Logevall, 249.

12. McMaster, 167.
13. Robert McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 158; in James A. Bill, *George Ball: Behind the Scenes in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 174.
14. Logevall, 249-250.
15. Larry Berman, *Planning A Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982) 4.
16. George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1985), 6; in Logevall, 79.
17. "Rusk Still Pulling," *Toledo Blaze*, July 22, 1965, Op-Ed section, Home edition.
18. Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers, Southeast Asia—Vietnam, 1964, General. Top Secret. Drafted by Thomson on November 24.
19. Ibid.
20. George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 384.
21. George Ball to Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, October 5, 1964.
22. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 249.
23. Ball, 383.
24. Paige E. Mulhollan, George Ball, New York City, July 8, 1971.
25. Ibid.

26. Logevall, 356; 394.

27. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 2.

28. Ball, Past, 432.

29. Logevall, 249.

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