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Sixth Edition

AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975



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GEORGE C. HERRING

America's Longest War

*The United States
and Vietnam, 1950–1975*

SIXTH EDITION

George C. Herring



AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

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*For
My Students*

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To the Instructor

CHANGES TO THE SIXTH EDITION

The sixth edition of *America's Longest War* continues the tradition of explaining the origins of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and the consequences for both the Vietnamese and the Americans. The scholarship on the Vietnam War has been prolific since I did the fifth edition in 2012, and I have integrated new information throughout the manuscript. Areas of special emphasis include the following:

- North Vietnam's decision making and its crucial ties with the Soviet Union and China, Chapters 1–7.
- Nation building, rural development, and pacification in South Vietnam, Chapters 2–7.
- The American and international peace movements, Chapters 5–7.
- The Tet Offensive, as experienced by all sides, Chapter 6.
- Chapter 7 especially discusses the U.S. decision making in 1969 that led to the abandonment of Duck Hook and the fallback on Vietnamization, the Kissinger–Le Duc Tho secret talks leading to the 1973 Paris agreements, and military operations and pacification under Gen. Creighton Abrams.

Major parts of the last chapter were rewritten to update important recent developments in U.S.–Vietnam relations and the impact of the war in both countries.



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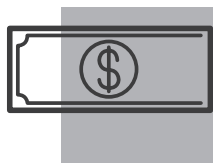
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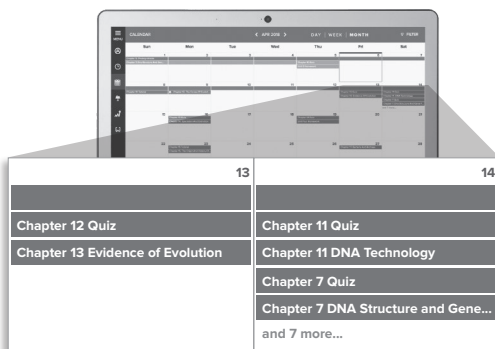
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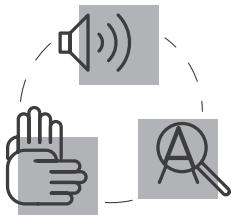
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About the Author



Courtesy of University of Kentucky
College of Arts & Sciences

GEORGE C. HERRING has devoted much of his career to teaching and writing about the Vietnam War. He is widely recognized as the “dean” of American scholars of that conflict.

Dr. Herring taught his first class on the war in the spring of 1973 as the last U.S. troops were returning

home from Vietnam. He began research on *America’s Longest War* in 1975, shortly after the fall of Saigon. First published in 1979, the book quickly established itself as a standard work in the field, and it has enjoyed extensive classroom use. Dr. Herring has published numerous articles and essays on the war and has lectured across the United States and abroad. His books include *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (1983) and *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1994). At the University of Kentucky, he directed the work of scores of doctoral and M.A. students who themselves have contributed significantly to the history of the Vietnam War.

A native of Virginia, Dr. Herring graduated from Roanoke College. After service in the U.S. Navy, he earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Virginia. He taught at the University of Kentucky from

1969 until his retirement in 2005. In 1993–1994, he was a visiting professor at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, and in 2001, Douglas Southall Freeman Professor of History at the University of Richmond. His most recent book is *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (2008), a volume in the Oxford History of the United States Series. He lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

Introduction

“Vietnam, Vietnam . . . there are no sure answers.” So wrote the distinguished Southeast Asian correspondent Robert Shaplen in the midst of a long and traumatic war.¹

As this edition of *America’s Longest War* is being put together, we are commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of that war. During this half century, millions of pages of documents have been made available in the United States and elsewhere; thousands of books and articles have been written. We have learned a great deal about the war, and new and exciting avenues of inquiry have been opened. There are now some “sure answers” to some questions that long perplexed us. Others are still hotly contested. Some remain unanswered.

This book seeks to place U.S. intervention in Vietnam in historical perspective. I have given the most detailed treatment to the years 1963–1973, the decade of heaviest American involvement. But I have also devoted attention to the period 1950–1963. The assumptions that led to the crucial commitments took form during those years. In addition, as CIA operative Edward Lansdale, himself a key player in these events, once observed, without an understanding of this formative period, “one is a spectator arriving in the middle of a complex drama, without true knowledge of the plot or of the identity and motivation of those in the drama.”²

¹Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam: 1965–1970* (New York, 1970), p. 283.

²Quoted in W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1977), p. 43.

This is not primarily a military history. Rather, in keeping with the original purpose of the “America in Crisis” series, it attempts to integrate military, diplomatic, and political factors to explain America’s involvement and ultimate failure in Vietnam. It focuses on the United States, but it seeks to provide sufficient discussion of other nations to permit a rounded account of these major events.

The questions raised in the first edition of this book remain central today. Why did the United States make such a vast commitment of blood and treasure in an area seemingly of so little importance to it, a place where before 1945 it had scarcely been involved? What did it attempt to do during the quarter century of its involvement there? Why, despite the expenditure of more than \$150 billion, the loss of more than 58,000 lives, application of the most up-to-date technology and a vast arsenal of destructive force did the world’s most powerful nation fail to achieve its objectives and suffer its first defeat in war, a humiliating and deeply frustrating experience for a people accustomed to success. What have been the consequences for Americans, Vietnamese, and others of the nation’s most divisive war?

The U.S. war in Vietnam was a logical, if by no means inevitable, outgrowth of its Cold War world view and the policy of containment that Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades. The concept of containment of Communist expansion provided the broad parameters in which the Vietnam commitment took shape. Some writers have argued that the dictates of the Cold War consensus were so compelling that policymakers had little choice but to follow where they led. Recent scholarship has challenged this view. At each step on the long road to war, alternatives were presented and discussed; choices were available. That presidents chose escalation was not primarily a result of blind obeisance to the dictates of ideology.

Why *were* such commitments made? It was not a case of overzealous advisers leading busy presidents blindly into a quagmire, as some early writers contended. The dangers and pitfalls were apparent. Nor was it a matter of hubris, of leaders plunging ahead certain of the efficacy of American power, confident that the United States would prevail, as it always had. Each president did take office believing that he could succeed where his predecessor had failed, a conviction that influenced early decisions in each administration. Even after they became more aware of the problems, some presidents may have clung to the belief that things would somehow work out in the end. In time, the commitment took on a life of its own, as important in and of itself as the aims it was

originally designed to achieve. Presidents repeatedly held on in Vietnam in the belief that success or at least not failing was vital to maintaining America's credibility and world position.

Domestic politics played a crucial role in this calculation. Especially after Harry S. Truman's "loss" of China in 1949 and the huge political consequences that seemed to follow, no president wanted to "lose" Vietnam. Policymakers repeatedly warned in the 1950s and 1960s that the fall of South Vietnam would set off the collapse of "dominoes" throughout Southeast Asia. Pointing to domestic political exigencies, Leslie Gelb argued many years ago that the White House was the "essential domino."³

Personality also played a part. A strange sequence of events conspired to place Lyndon Baines Johnson and Richard Milhous Nixon in office at crucial points in the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The personalities and leadership styles of these powerful and driven but deeply insecure individuals exerted enormous influence on the decisions to go to war, the manner in which the war was fought and ultimately ended, and especially the ways in which dissent at home was handled.

It can be argued that the containment policy worked in Europe, contributing significantly, maybe even decisively, to the outcome of the Cold War. That said, I believe that containment was misapplied in Vietnam. Obsessed with their determination to stop the advance of communism, and abysmally ignorant of the Vietnamese people and their history, Americans profoundly misread the nature of the struggle in Vietnam, its significance for their vital interests, and its susceptibility to their influence.

Defeat came hard, and in its aftermath it has been fashionable for many Americans to argue that victory could have been attained if the United States had only fought the war more decisively or in a different way. Such views are perhaps comforting for a people spoiled by success. They accord with what the English scholar D. W. Brogan once called "the illusion of American omnipotence," the belief, almost an article of faith among Americans, that this nation can do anything it sets its mind to. The enduring "lesson" of the Vietnam War is that power, no matter how great, has limits. American power in Vietnam was constrained by the Cold War, in whose name, ironically, it was fought. It was limited by the weakness of America's client, South Vietnam, and by the determination and willingness of its foes—North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam—to pay any price. Given these circumstances,

³Leslie Gelb, "The Essential Domino: American Politics and Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 50 (April 1972): 459–475.

I do not believe that the war could have been won in any meaningful sense or at a moral or a material price Americans would—or should—have been willing to pay.

The costs of these mistakes—crimes, some would say—still stagger the imagination: 58,000 Americans dead, a deep wound to the national psyche, deep-seated and still lingering domestic divisions. For the Vietnamese, the cost was much, much higher, as many as 3 to 4 million dead, an estimated 300,000 North Vietnamese and NLF missing in action, the devastation of a country, and enormous ecological costs. These costs, many of which are still being paid today on both sides, make it urgent, especially in the wake of failed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, that Americans better understand one of the most traumatic events in their history and what it can tell them about themselves and how they deal with other peoples.

The new conventional wisdom is that Afghanistan is now America's longest war. If U.S. involvement in Vietnam is dated from the first G.I. death of the Second Indochina War in 1959 to the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1973, that certainly is the case.

These pages will show that the United States was directly or indirectly involved in Vietnam for twenty-five of the thirty years that conflict raged in Indochina, that the United States waged economic warfare against Vietnam long after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and that this war still haunted Americans years after its end.

Acknowledgments

Many people and institutions have assisted me in the preparation of this sixth edition of *America's Longest War*. Erika Lo of McGraw-Hill Education and Erica Longenbach helped launch this project. Tara Slagle has been wonderful to work with, efficient, prompt to respond to my queries, and helpful in every possible way. Thanks, Tara.

The Inter-Library Loan Division of the University of Kentucky Library has procured for me numerous books and articles not otherwise available.

My former University of Kentucky colleague and good friend Dr. John Carland, author of major works for the U.S. Army's Vietnam War history series and editor of essential volumes in the State Department's distinguished *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, has read numerous sections of this manuscript, responded to my many questions, and helped me work through a number of difficult issues. I am grateful for his assistance and especially for his friendship.

Dr. Edward Drea, author of invaluable volumes on Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, helped me unravel the sometimes bewildering path followed by the Johnson administration in deciding how many troops to send to Vietnam during and after the Tet 1968 Offensive.

I have greatly missed Steve Wrinn since he left Lexington to head the University of Notre Dame Press, but he continues to serve as a sounding board on matters of substance and style. He is an editor without equal. His continuing assistance and friendship mean so much.

A special thanks to those many scholars who have rewritten the history of the Vietnam War over the past twenty years. Their work has made this revision the most exciting—and challenging—of the five.

My appreciation to the reviewers of this sixth edition who offered numerous helpful suggestions:

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Dottie Leathers typed the manuscript for the first edition of this book. The wonders of word processing have spared her repeat performances on subsequent editions, but as my wife of the last twenty-three years she has been a source of constant encouragement and support. I am daily grateful for her love and companionship.

My students have contributed far more to my work on the Vietnam War than they can ever realize or I can properly acknowledge. At Ohio University, 1965–1969, my first academic position, their insistent questioning motivated me to learn more about the war. A graduate student paper enlightened me on how it all began, for me, truly, a perspective-changing experience. My students at the University of Kentucky, my academic home between 1969 and 2005, were quite simply an essential part of my life. Their research broadened and deepened my knowledge of the war. Their curiosity kept me learning; their questions prevented me from becoming complacent with my own answers. It was a joy to learn with them and from them. Somehow, amidst it all, we managed to have a lot of fun. Their influence is present in these pages far more than the footnotes can indicate. This edition is dedicated to them with my gratitude and deepest affection.

George C. Herring

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America's Longest War

The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975



Ho Chi Minh, March 1946

The charismatic and indefatigable Ho Chi Minh (the name means “he who enlightens”) led the Vietnamese revolution from its inception until his death in 1969, and his organizational genius and indomitable will were instrumental to Vietnamese victories over France and the United States.

Source: Photographic collection of Wayne DeWitt Larabee

A Dead-End Alley

*The United States, France, and the First Indochina War,
1950–1954*

When Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam from French rule on September 2, 1945, he borrowed liberally from Thomas Jefferson, opening with the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal.” During celebrations in Hanoi later in the day, sleek U.S. fighter planes swooped down over the city, U.S. Army officers stood near the reviewing stand, and a Vietnamese band played the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Toward the end of the festivities, Vo Nguyen Giap spoke warmly of Vietnam’s “particularly intimate relations” with the United States—something, he noted, “which it is a pleasant duty to dwell upon.” The prominent role played by Americans at the birth of Vietnam appears in retrospect one of history’s most bitter ironies. Despite the glowing professions of friendship, the United States in 1945 acquiesced in the return of France to Vietnam and from 1950 to 1954 actively supported its efforts to suppress Ho’s revolution, the first phase of a quarter-century American struggle to control the destiny of Vietnam.¹

HO CHI MINH AND THE AUGUST REVOLUTION

Ho Chi Minh’s declaration of independence struck one of the first blows for a major phenomenon of the post–World War II era—what would be called *decolonization*, the breakup of colonial empires that had been a standard feature of world politics for centuries. The war and Allied rhetoric vaguely supporting self-determination gave a huge boost to nationalism among peoples in the colonial areas. It also drastically weakened the European colonial powers and Japan, enormously

¹David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995), pp. 532–545.

hampering their ability to hang on to their imperial holdings. A global transformation of this magnitude did not occur smoothly. It sparked turmoil, conflict, and, in the case of Vietnam, war.

One of the most celebrated events in modern Vietnamese history, the August Revolution of 1945, also marked another milestone in that nation's centuries' old struggle against foreign domination. From 111 BC to 939 AD the land of Nam Viet, centered in the Red River Delta, had been a protectorate or outright colony of China. The Vietnamese absorbed from their larger northern neighbor their language and much of their culture. The Chinese introduced a system of building dikes, methods to reclaim the land from the sea, and advanced agricultural practices. The Vietnamese adopted Chinese legal codes, forms of taxation, and local government. As in China, the tenets of Confucianism provided for the Vietnamese a system of governance, a means of selecting public officials, and indeed an ethos for life.

While borrowing extensively from China, the Vietnamese also resisted its rule. Perhaps the most famous of their heroes, the Trung sisters, led a major first-century AD rebellion against superior Chinese forces. When defeated, they drowned themselves in a lake in Hanoi. Another woman, Trieu Au, usually depicted wearing armor and riding an elephant, led yet another unsuccessful revolt in 248 AD. In the tenth century, the Vietnamese finally won their independence by luring an attacking Chinese fleet into a river bed planted with iron-tipped spikes. They stubbornly resisted Chinese efforts at reconquest. Three times in the thirteenth century, they repulsed the legendary Mongol warrior Kublai Khan, in the process pioneering methods of guerrilla warfare later used against the French and Americans. In 1426, another legendary hero, Le Loi, drove out the Chinese after a two-decade occupation. These sporadic, localized rebellions fed a powerful later mythology of nationalist Vietnamese resistance to outside oppression.

Expansion forms as important a part of Vietnamese history as resistance to outside invaders. Following their defeat of the Mongols, the Viets moved south against the Muslim kingdom of Champa. After nearly two centuries of fighting, they destroyed its capital of Indrapura.

National unity remained elusive. Geography, religion, and ethnicity produced sharp regional differences. Buddhism was more pronounced in the South than Confucianism. The climate was more salubrious, land more plentiful, and the people more prosperous; the result was a much more easygoing lifestyle than that of the more intense and restive northerners. Civil war between two ruling families continued into the nineteenth century.

In the last third of that century, France took China's place as imperial overlord. In colonizing Vietnam, the French hoped to find wealth in the form of vital minerals. They also sought an outpost from which to exploit China and compete with British and Dutch colonies in South and Southeast Asia. They established protectorates with nominal Vietnamese rule in Tonkin (the North) and Annam (the center) and imposed outright colonial rule on Cochin China (the South). Protectorates in Laos and Cambodia filled out what became known as French Indochina. The French brought Western-style modernity to their new colonies in the form of major cities: Saigon (the Pearl of the Orient) and Hanoi, with their broad tree-lined avenues and gleaming buildings. They imposed a capitalist economy and in time Romanized the Vietnamese language. They modernized agriculture. They perpetrated massive change with no intention of promoting self-government and eventual independence. Rather, their colonial ideal was what they called the *mission civilisatrice*, which aimed to make the colonial areas and their people integral parts of France. The result for many Vietnamese was disruption of traditional village society, political oppression, economic exploitation, high taxes, and atrocious working conditions in the mines and on the railroads and rubber plantations.

The Vietnamese resisted French imperialism as fiercely as that of China. A late nineteenth-century scholars' movement sought unsuccessfully to remove the French and restore the old imperial order. Emulating Japanese and Chinese models, early twentieth-century nationalists attempted to mold traditional opposition to outside domination into modern, pro-Western republicanism. French colonialism created an urban middle class and proletariat, and the exploitation of the country sparked increasingly radical revolutionary activity. In 1930, a nationalist party headed by urban intellectuals launched the abortive Yen Bay revolt in northern Vietnam, while peasant and worker rebellions backed by the Communists erupted throughout the central part of the country. The French brutally suppressed the latter, jailing as many as 10,000 dissidents and even using aircraft to drop bombs on demonstrators. "The French have mercilessly slain our patriots," Ho affirmed in his September 2 declaration. "They have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood."²

The revolution of 1945 was in many ways the personal creation of the charismatic patriot and revolutionary agitator who took the name Ho Chi Minh ("He Who Enlightens"). Born in the central province of

²Quoted in Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, Vol. 2, *Since 1914*, 5th ed. (Boston, 2000), pp. 444–445.

Nghe An, the cradle of Vietnamese revolutionaries, Ho inherited from his father a sturdy patriotism and adventurous spirit. Departing Vietnam in 1911 as a cook aboard a French merchant steamer, he spent time in the United States and England before settling in France with a cohort of Vietnamese nationalists. When the Paris Peace Conference ending World War I ignored his petition for democratic reforms for Vietnam, he found “our path to liberty” in Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin’s treatise on imperialism. He became a founding member of the French Communist Party. Then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc (“Nguyen the Patriot”), he worked for more than two decades as a party functionary and revolutionary organizer in the Soviet Union, China, Thailand, and Vietnam, hiding behind aliases, eluding French, Chinese, and British police, doing time in prison, and once even being reported dead. In 1930, he organized the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). Frail in appearance, a gentle person who radiated warmth and serenity and could charm even his enemies, Ho was also willing to sanction the most cold-blooded methods to achieve his aims. He was a worldly man who mastered numerous languages, a tireless worker, master organizer, and determined revolutionary—a “fiery stallion” in the words of an associate. His dark, piercing eyes revealed the intensity of his dedication to the cause to which he devoted his life. He could be flexible and pragmatic in method, but he never wavered from the goal of an independent, unified Vietnam under Communist control.³

The onset of World War II in Europe and Asia would have profound implications for Vietnam. Hitler’s conquest of France in June 1940 vastly complicated French efforts to manage their overseas holdings. Exploiting French vulnerability to improve their strategic position in their stalemated war against China and to secure vitally needed oil and rubber from Southeast Asia, the Japanese established a protectorate over Vietnam in 1940–1941, leaving French officials nominally in charge but themselves exercising control. France’s defeat in Europe and its humiliation by an Asian power further discredited it in Vietnamese eyes and set off a surge of nationalism. Initially welcomed by the Vietnamese, the Japanese proved cruel masters, strengthening the urge for freedom.

Seeking to capitalize on these momentous events, Ho returned to his homeland in 1940. Establishing headquarters in caves near the

³Two excellent up-to-date biographies are William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York, 2000), and Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (New York, 2007).

Chinese border by a mountain he named Karl Marx and a river he called Lenin, he founded the Independence League of Vietnam (Viet Minh) and conceived the strategy that would eventually drive the French from Vietnam. He and the other Communists who constituted the Viet Minh leadership skillfully tapped the deep reservoir of Vietnamese nationalism, muting their commitment to social revolution and adopting a broad platform stressing independence and “democratic” reforms. Displaying an organization and discipline far superior to competing nationalist groups, many of which spent as much time fighting each other as fighting the French, the Viet Minh gradually established itself as a preeminent voice of Vietnamese nationalism.

The Viet Minh also skillfully exploited the chaos that marked the end of the Pacific War. Fearing an Allied invasion of Indochina and distrustful of the French, the Japanese in March 1945 overthrew Vietnam’s puppet government, disbanding its army and jailing officials. The coup further damaged French authority and encouraged Vietnamese resistance. Japan’s inability or unwillingness to address a devastating famine that killed an estimated two million people in the winter–spring of 1945 added to Vietnamese anger. By the spring of 1945, Ho had mobilized a base of mass support in northern Vietnam and, with the assistance of Giap, a former professor of history and admirer of Napoleon, raised an army of 5,000 soldiers. With limited help from the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) intelligence unit (hence the American presence on September 2), the Viet Minh began the systematic harassment of their former and new masters. When the atomic bomb brought an unexpectedly quick end to the Pacific War on August 14, the Viet Minh opportunistically filled the vacuum. At the Potsdam Conference in July, the Allies had assigned Nationalist China to accept Japan’s surrender in northern Vietnam and Great Britain to occupy the South. Before Chinese and British troops could get to Vietnam, Viet Minh leaders took over government headquarters in Hanoi. Wearing the faded khaki suit and rubber sandals that became his trademark, Ho stood before cheering throngs on September 2 and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

Vietnamese independence would not go uncontested. Looking backward rather than ahead, French leaders set out to regain the empire they had ruled for more than a half century. Businesses such as the Michelin rubber company insisted that economic recovery demanded retention of the Indochinese colony. Some top officials continued to preach its strategic importance. Mainly, French leaders sought to restore their nation’s status as a world power. Humiliated by Germany’s defeat

and subsequent occupation of their country and their liberation by allies, the French acquired what philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre called a “formidable inferiority complex.”⁴ They viewed colonies as a certain path to restoring national greatness. Recognizing that their present weakness prevented them from achieving their goals immediately, they spoke vaguely of reforms rather than recolonization and of making the colonial areas “associated states.” They exploited the British presence in southern Vietnam to take control of the government in Saigon.

Through 1945–1946, Ho scrambled desperately to parry the impossibly complicated and eminently dangerous threats to Vietnam’s tenuous independence. Ever the pragmatist, he sought recognition and aid from both the United States and the Soviet Union. He negotiated the withdrawal of Chinese Nationalist forces. To the disgruntlement of some of his compatriots, he agreed to forgo immediate independence and national unity for French promises of future concessions. In March 1946, Paris recognized his government as a “free state” in return for the temporary stationing of 15,000 French troops in northern Vietnam. As the Chinese moved out, the French began to re-insinuate themselves into Tonkin. In the fall of 1946, they took control of the customs houses in major ports. As they returned, some Viet Minh groups began to withdraw from the cities into the hinterlands.⁵

The Viet Minh also faced internal challenges from rival nationalist groups ranging the political spectrum from Trotskyites on the left to allies of China’s ruling Kuomintang party on the right. To broaden the DRV’s nationalist appeal, the ICP officially dissolved itself in late 1945, although Communists retained key leadership posts in the government and an innocuous-sounding—but quite potent—Marxist Study Group devised economic programs and military plans. The Viet Minh coopted rival leaders where possible, and when that failed used imprisonment, deportation, even targeted assassination to eliminate them. It starved into submission one group by cutting a railroad line that was its only source of food.⁶

Conflict between the DRV and France over the future status of Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) ignited the First Indochina War.

⁴Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York, 2012), p. 74.

⁵Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016), pp. 207–208; David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley, Calif., 2013), pp. 348, 405, 427; Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, 2017), pp. 383–384.

⁶Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (New York, 2018), p. 49.



French officials clung to the South because of its symbolic importance and its economic value. For the Viet Minh, unification was essential symbolically and also economically since the South produced the food surplus needed to sustain the overpopulated, more industrialized North. The two sides agreed in early 1946 to hold plebiscites to determine the status of each of the three political divisions of Vietnam. Before these votes could take place, a new hard-line commissioner, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, a former Carmelite monk, throwback to nineteenth century imperialist, and singularly unfortunate choice, launched a move for a separate Cochin China, infuriating the Vietnamese. With tensions building on both sides, French authorities in Saigon decided to squeeze the DRV economically and militarily in the North to force concessions on Cochin China. On November 19, they unleashed artillery, naval gunfire, and aircraft against the port city of Haiphong, "the gateway to Tonkin," killing as many as 6,000 Vietnamese, most of them civilians. Ho continued to hope that a new left-wing government in Paris might make concessions, precisely what D'Argenlieu feared. The Viet Minh played into Saigon's hands a month later by shutting down the Hanoi power plant and mounting attacks on French positions throughout the city, setting off a conflict that would last for eight years.⁷

The French went to war in 1946 confident of victory, but Ho predicted the nature and outcome of the conflict more accurately. "If ever the tiger [Viet Minh] pauses," he said, "the elephant [France] will impale him on his mighty tusks. But the tiger will not pause, and the elephant will die of exhaustion and loss of blood."⁸ Certain of their superior firepower, the French sought a quick victory. Employing the classical dictates of guerrilla warfare, Giap hoped to deny it to them. The Viet Minh guerrillas retreated to safe areas, avoided conflict where the French had an edge, and exploited their familiarity with the terrain. They ambushed French convoys where possible and employed terror selectively and with deadly effectiveness. They used nationalist appeals to build support among the Vietnamese people and by mid-1947 controlled extensive territory. France held the major towns and cities, but a series of unsuccessful and costly offensives and relentless hit-and-run raids by Viet Minh guerrillas placed growing strain on French personnel and resources and in time produced war-weariness at home. The war quickly settled into a stalemate.

⁷Marr, *Vietnam*, pp. 248–257; Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley, Calif., 2010), pp. 107–128, 229–233.

⁸Quoted in Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (New York, 1968), p. 171.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

For a time during World War II, the United States actively opposed the return of Indochina to France. Before 1940, Vietnam had been of little concern to Americans, but the Japanese takeover made clear its importance as a gateway to China, Southeast Asia, and the U.S. colony in the Philippines. Japan's conquest of Southeast Asia shortly after its December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor further underscored the importance of that region's sea lanes and essential raw materials, such as oil, tin, and rubber. Some U.S. officials feared that a French attempt to reimpose colonial rule might provoke war and instability in an area of strategic importance. President Franklin D. Roosevelt seems instinctively to have perceived that colonialism was doomed and that the United States should identify with peoples seeking freedom. Something of a Francophobe, FDR especially disliked the French leader Gen. Charles de Gaulle and he often expressed outrage with France's handling of its imperial responsibilities. The French were "poor colonizers," he declaimed, who had "badly mismanaged" Indochina and brutally exploited its people. At the same time, Roosevelt viewed the "Annamites" [Vietnamese] as an inferior people, backward, politically immature, and unready to govern themselves without tutelage from an "advanced" Western nation. Throughout the war, he repeatedly advocated placing French Indochina under international trusteeship in preparation for independence.⁹

The United States contributed in a small way to the early success of the Vietnamese revolution. The OSS agents who journeyed to Ho Chi Minh's remote base in 1945 furnished the Viet Minh small arms and provided rudimentary military training in return for information on Japanese troop movements and aid in locating downed U.S. pilots. The Americans formed close ties with Ho (code-named "Lucius" and "Agent 19"). They even provided him with possibly life-saving quinine and sulfa drugs when he was gravely ill with malaria. Eager for U.S. support, Ho carefully cultivated his American guests. The conspicuous and by no means coincidental U.S. presence at the independence ceremonies gave the Viet Minh legitimacy with other Vietnamese and conveyed the appearance of international support.¹⁰

⁹Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000), pp. 76-80.

¹⁰Dixie R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War against Japan* (Lawrence, Kans., 2006), pp. 208-209, 213, 243.

In fact, as early as the spring of 1945, official U.S. policy was shifting in other directions. Concerned for their own vast imperial holdings and hoping to restore France as a power in Europe, the British, and especially Prime Minister Winston Churchill, vigorously objected to FDR's trusteeship scheme. Some of the president's top advisers also warned him not to antagonize a crucial ally by opposing its colonial aspirations. Roosevelt's hatred for French colonialism never wavered and he continued to prefer a trusteeship for Indochina. Amidst the vast array of problems he faced in 1945, Vietnam did not loom large. In the face of opposition from allies and his own advisers, he did not push ahead on a trusteeship or spell out a clear policy for Vietnam.¹¹

After FDR's death in April 1945, U.S. policy moved sharply toward France. Harry S. Truman did not share his predecessor's keen personal interest in Indochina or his opposition to colonialism. More important, American thinking about the postwar world underwent a major reorientation in the spring of 1945. Military and civilian strategists perceived that the war had left the Soviet Union the most powerful nation in Europe. The sometimes brutal Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe raised growing fears that dictator Joseph Stalin had broader, perhaps even global, expansionist designs. Assigning top priority to the promotion of stable, friendly governments in Western Europe that could stand as bulwarks against Soviet expansionism, the Truman administration concluded that the United States had "no interest" in "championing schemes of international trusteeship" that would weaken or alienate those "European states whose help we need to balance Soviet power in Europe." France assumed a special place in this new scheme of things. The State Department insisted that the United States must repair the rift that had opened under Roosevelt by cooperating "wholeheartedly" with France and allaying "her apprehensions that we are going to propose that territory be taken away from her."¹² The administration scrapped FDR's trusteeship plan. In May, Truman privately assured de Gaulle that the United States would not oppose the restoration of French sovereignty in Indochina.

¹¹ Stein Tønnesson, "Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and Indochina: A Reassessment," in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (eds.), *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), pp. 56, 63–64.

¹² Office of Strategic Services, "Problems and Objectives of United States Policy," April 2, 1945, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mo., Rose Conway File, Box 15.

U.S. officials viewed the outbreak of war in Vietnam with alarm. Along with anticolonial revolutions in Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia, the Indochinese war highlighted the explosiveness of nationalism in Southeast Asia. France's stubborn pursuit of outmoded colonial goals seemed to preclude anything except a military solution. But the U.S. State Department's Asian experts doubted that France could subdue the revolution and feared that its defeat would eliminate Western influence from an important area. They further warned of the dangers of identifying with French colonialism and pressed the administration to compel France to come to terms with Vietnamese nationalism.

Skepticism about French policy in Asia continued to be outweighed by European concerns.¹³ In the spring of 1947, through what came to be called the Truman Doctrine, the United States formally committed itself to blunt a perceived Soviet threat to Greece and Turkey. The following year, to further this new policy of containing communism, the Marshall Plan committed massive funds to the reconstruction of Western Europe. U.S. attention was riveted on France, where economic stagnation and political volatility aroused fears of a Communist takeover. Warned by moderate French politicians that outside interference in colonial matters would play into the hands of the French Communist Party, the United States left France to handle Indochina its own way. An "immediate and vital interest" in retaining a "friendly government to assist in the furtherance of our aims in Europe," the State Department concluded, must "take precedence over active steps looking toward the realization of our objectives in Indochina."¹⁴

By early 1947, U.S. officials had also drawn conclusions about the Vietnamese revolution that would shape American policy for the next two decades. From the outset, the Viet Minh and the United States viewed each other through badly distorted lenses. Isolated in the northern mountains of Vietnam and cut off from the outside world, Ho Chi Minh clung to hopes that the friendly demeanor of OSS agents reflected official American views. On numerous occasions between 1945 and 1949, he appealed for U.S. support, even suggesting that Vietnam would

¹³James Dunn memorandum, April 23, 1945, 851G.00/4-2345, Department of State Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; George C. Herring, "The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina," *Diplomatic History* 1 (Spring, 1977): 97-117.

¹⁴Department of State, "Policy Statement on Indochina," September 27, 1948, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 6: 48. Hereafter cited as *FR* with date and volume number.

be a “fertile field for American capital and enterprise” and raising the possibility of a U.S. naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. Ho emphatically denied that he was a “Moscow puppet,” noting, correctly, that he had received more aid from the United States than from the Soviet Union. To those who questioned the Viet Minh’s capacity to defeat France, he referred back to the revolution of 1776. “You Americans ought to remember,” he observed, “that a ragged band of barefoot farmers defeated the pride of Europe’s best armed professionals.”¹⁵ In April 1947, the Viet Minh dispatched an emissary to Bangkok to persuade the United States of its moderation and seek political and economic aid. He stressed to Americans that his people sought mainly independence from France. Speaking a language he thought might appeal to capitalists, he offered tax-free monopolies for U.S. imports and the rice trade.

Such incentives had no impact in Washington. American political reporting about Vietnam was devoid of expertise and based on racial prejudices and stereotypes that reflected deep-seated convictions about the superiority of Western culture. In U.S. eyes, the Vietnamese were a passive and uninformed people, totally unready for self-government. The “Annamites” were not “particularly industrious,” one diplomat sneered, nor were they noted for “honesty, loyalty, or veracity.”¹⁶ U.S. officials thus concluded that even if the Vietnamese were to secure independence from France, they would be susceptible to the establishment of a Communist police state and vulnerable to external control. Ho’s letters languished in State Department files and never reached the White House.

Ho’s long-standing Communist ties reinforced such fears. In fact, between 1945 and 1949 Stalin was no more supportive of the Viet Minh than the United States had been. He doubted that southern Asian nations were ripe for revolution. Like the United States, he assigned top priority to Europe and feared that helping the Viet Minh might jeopardize the French Communist Party’s chances of taking power. Stalin distrusted Ho from earlier ideological spats. He was angered that the Viet Minh revolution had been launched without his approval, and by its seeming ties with the United States. He refused to recognize the

¹⁵Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, pp. 342–343, 379.

¹⁶Quoted in Mark Bradley, “An Improbable Opportunity: America and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s 1947 Initiative,” in Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (eds.), *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (New York, 1993), pp. 13–14.

Viet Minh government or take the Vietnam issue to the United Nations. The Kremlin also declined even to answer Ho's letters.¹⁷

U.S. officials, of course, could not have been aware of these differences among Communists. In any event, the Cold War mentality that was already gripping Washington left little room for nuance. U.S. diplomats in Vietnam correctly reported they could find no evidence of direct ties between the USSR and the Viet Minh and stressed that, regardless of ideology, Ho had established himself as the "symbol of nationalism and the struggle for freedom to the overwhelming majority of the population."¹⁸ Intelligence assessments countered that Ho had remained loyal to Moscow throughout his career. The lack of close ties with the USSR simply meant that he was trusted to carry out Stalin's plans without supervision. In the absence of irrefutable evidence to the contrary, the State Department concluded, the United States could not "afford to assume that Ho is anything but Moscow-directed." Unwilling to see "colonial empires and administrations supplanted by philosophies and political organizations emanating from the Kremlin," the administration refused to do anything to facilitate a "Communist" triumph in Indochina.¹⁹

During the first three years of the war in Indochina, the United States maintained a distinctly pro-French "neutrality." Fearful of antagonizing a key European ally and of assisting the Viet Minh even indirectly, it refused to use its leverage to end the fighting. The contact in Thailand was quietly terminated. Unwilling to support colonialism openly, the administration provided indirect assistance. Ships turned over to France during World War II were used to transport French troops to Indochina. The United States extended credits for the purchase of additional transports. It provided weapons for use in Europe that were, in fact, employed in Vietnam. Marshall Plan funds enabled France to divert its own resources to the Indochina war.

¹⁷Ilya V. Gaiduk, "Soviet Cold War Strategy and Prospects for Revolution in South and Southeast Asia," in Christopher E. Goscha and Christian Ostermann (eds.), *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Asia, 1945–1962* (Stanford, Calif., 2010), pp. 123–126; Christopher E. Goscha, "Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the International Communist Movement (1945–1950)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1 (Nos. 1–2): 62–65.

¹⁸"Policy and Information Statement on Indochina," July 1947, Philippine and Southeast Asia Branch File, Department of State Records, Box 10.

¹⁹George C. Marshall to U.S. Embassy Paris, February 3, 1947, *FR*, 1947, 6: 67–68.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE WAR, 1949–1950

The landscape of international politics changed dramatically in 1949–1950, making the world a much more dangerous place for large nations and small. Soviet–American conflict heated up in Western Europe, sparking a war scare and rearmament on both sides. The Communist triumph in China’s epic internal struggle brought the Cold War to East Asia, with implications extending far beyond. The globe was increasingly divided into two hostile camps; world leaders had to make difficult choices. With Chinese Communist commitment to the DRV in 1950 and America’s decision to aid France, a regional anticolonial war in Indochina was transformed into an integral part of the Cold War, ensuring its prolongation and making it far more destructive, with horrendous long-term consequences for the Vietnamese.

Internationalization of the war actually began in 1947, when France launched a systematic campaign to wean the United States from its neutrality. Failing to win a quick military victory, French leaders formulated a parallel political strategy to rally non-Communist Vietnamese behind an ostensibly independent national government. By changing an anticolonial conflict into a war against communism, French leaders sought to win greater support at home. More important, they hoped to use anti-communism to neutralize U.S. anticolonialism and secure aid for the war in Vietnam.²⁰ They selected the former emperor of Annam, Bao Dai, to head the “free” Vietnamese government. Properly skeptical of French intentions, the so-called playboy emperor at first refused to go along. But the growing likelihood of a Communist victory in China heightened pressure on both sides to reach an agreement. In March 1949, a new government headed by Bao Dai was formed. The French redoubled their efforts to gain U.S. support.

For its own reasons, Britain energetically backed the French. British officials increasingly saw France as the key to a stable Southeast Asia and the protection of their colonies in Singapore and Malaya. Overcommitted globally and perilously short of resources, they viewed U.S. aid as essential for French military success in Indochina. Greater American involvement would also allow Britain to avoid the taint of supporting French colonialism, Labour government officials reasoned, thus pacifying their party’s anticolonial left wing and the newly

²⁰ Logevall, *Embers of War*, p. 198; Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), pp. 187–232.

independent and fiercely anticolonial government of India. British officials repeatedly appealed to the United States to help France and enlisted the support of sympathetic Americans to plead their case. Speaking in Washington in April 1949, Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin called for a “Great Combination” of Britain, Europe, and the United States, to prevent the Communist conquest of Southeast Asia.²¹

Escalation of the Cold War in Europe made the United States more susceptible to Franco-British appeals. Fearing for its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, in 1948 the Soviet Union overthrew a neutralist government in Czechoslovakia, installed Stalinist regimes throughout the region, and shored up its control through exclusive economic agreements and eventually a military alliance. Stalin’s bold—and risky—blockade of West Berlin in the summer of 1948 brought the two Cold War antagonists dangerously close to a hot war. The United States and the Western European nations expedited plans for a defensive alliance, culminating in the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949. U.S. officials viewed France as the linchpin of the new pact. They recognized that the so-called Bao Dai Solution was a smoke screen for continued French domination of Vietnam and doubted it would work. But it seemed the only alternative to “Commie domination of Indochina,”²² and they felt compelled to back France in Indochina to keep it closely allied in Europe. In June 1949, the United States issued a statement of support for the Bao Dai government, a hugely significant first step toward active involvement in the war.

The Chinese Communist victory in the summer of 1949 provided a major catalyst for internationalization of the Indochina conflict. After a brief period of hesitancy, during which there seemed at least a slim chance of Chinese accommodation with the United States, Communist leader Mao Zedong publicly declared that his government would “lean to one side” in a divided world: It would align with the Soviet Union. The Chinese saw assistance for the Viet Minh as part of their “glorious international duty”—and also a means to secure their southern border where numerous Kuomintang troops had fled. For the dangerously isolated

²¹Mark Atwood Lawrence, “Forging the ‘Great Combination’: Britain and the Indochina Problem, 1945–1950,” in Lawrence and Logevall, eds., *First Vietnam War*, pp. 48–50.

²²Acheson to U.S. Embassy Manila, January 7, 1950, *FR*, 1950, 6: 692; Gary R. Hess, “The First American Commitment in Indochina: Acceptance of the Bao Dai Solution,” *Diplomatic History* 2 (Fall 1978): 331–350.

Viet Minh, Chinese success raised the possibility of desperately needed military aid. China had begun to sell arms to the Viet Minh as early as 1947. In late 1949, the two sides proclaimed their mutual allegiance.

Soviet backing was difficult to obtain and limited in scope. During a year-end trip to Moscow, Mao urged Stalin to assist the Viet Minh. Obsessed with Yugoslavia's split from the Soviet bloc and wary of Ho's historical independence and dissolution of the ICP, the Kremlin leader pointedly asked "Which side did the Vietnamese want to sit on?" Mao eventually persuaded him to recognize the DRV, but he would go no further. In what he called a "division of labor," he cleverly assigned Beijing responsibility for promoting revolution in Asia and assisting the Vietnamese. In January 1950, China and the USSR formally recognized the DRV. China began to send vital military supplies including mortars and rocket launchers to help neutralize France's firepower advantage and to provide sanctuary on its territory for training as many as 30,000 Vietnamese troops. Long impatient with Ho's pragmatism, many Viet Minh Communists enthusiastically embraced their new role as a "fortress on the anti-imperialist defense perimeter in Southeast Asia." The DRV made clear its newfound zeal by publicly praising Stalin and denouncing the United States, purging its leadership of moderates, pushing land reform, and instigating revolution in Laos and Cambodia.²³

Soviet and Chinese recognition of Ho's government seemed to confirm what most U.S. officials had long believed: that the revolution in Vietnam was part of a broader Communist drive for world domination spearheaded by Moscow. According to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the establishment of close ties among these three Communist parties revealed Ho Chi Minh in his "true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina." Acheson thus sought to impugn Ho's nationalist credentials while boosting the legitimacy of the Bao Dai government.²⁴

A series of stunning events in 1949 sent shock waves across the United States. Soviet explosion of an atomic bomb in the summer came much sooner than Americans had expected. It eliminated the U.S. nuclear

²³Tuong Vu, "From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Coming of the Cold War, 1950–1951," in *ibid.*, pp. 189–192; Goscha, "Diplomatic Disaster," pp. 87–90; Laura M. Calkins, *China and the Vietnam War, 1940–54* (New York, 2013), pp. 35–40.

²⁴*Department of State Bulletin* (February 13, 1950): 244; Charles Yost memorandum, January 31, 1950, *FR*, 1950, 6: 710–711.

monopoly and aroused fears that an already aggressive Stalin might take even greater risks. The fall of China to the Communists had an especially profound impact. For years, many Americans had regarded China as a special protégé that, with their guidance, would become a close friend and reliable ally. The collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's government and the "loss" of China to communism at this seemingly pivotal moment in the Cold War had profoundly unsettling consequences. With one stroke, it appeared to tilt the global balance of power against the United States and its allies. It left frustrated and fearful Americans asking the portentous—and pretentious—question: Who lost China? Sensationalist revelations of Communist espionage in the United States seemed to provide the answer. Soviet spies had allegedly speeded Stalin's nuclear timetable by stealing U.S. secrets. Communist sympathizers within the U.S. government had sabotaged the Kuomintang government, thus ensuring a Communist takeover.

Shaken from their complacency, a people who, through much of their history, had enjoyed maximum security at minimal cost reacted to these seemingly sinister and ominous threats with near panic. They sought scapegoats for their newfound predicament and political retribution against those deemed responsible. A Cold War culture of near-hysterical fear, paranoiac suspiciousness, and stifling conformity began to take shape. Militant anticommunism came to dominate both foreign policy and domestic politics. In February 1950, a heretofore obscure Wisconsin senator by the name of Joseph R. McCarthy claimed to have the names of more than 200 Communists working in the State Department, setting off the Red Scare/witch hunt that would bear his name. "McCarthyism" would poison the nation's politics and cripple its diplomacy for years to come.²⁵

The fall of China set loose powerful domestic political pressures to prevent the loss of additional Asian real estate to communism. Already under fire from Republicans and some Democrats for "losing" China, the Truman administration felt compelled to hold the line elsewhere. It attempted to demonstrate its resolve by focusing on Southeast Asia. Significantly, the first aid committed to France for Vietnam came from a fund originally appropriated for Nationalist China.²⁶ The year 1950 initiated an almost ritualistic process in which each major political party

²⁵Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Md., 1991).

²⁶Robert M. Blum, *Drawing the Line: The Origins of the American Containment Policy in East Asia* (New York, 1982).

tried to outdo the other in demonstrating toughness against the Communist onslaught and labeling the adversary as weak.

The crisis of 1949–1950 also produced a sweeping reassessment of U.S. national security policy that assigned major significance to previously peripheral areas. This universalist worldview was best expressed in National Security Council (NSC) document 68 (NSC 68), one of the most significant statements of American Cold War policy. Drafted in early 1950, NSC 68 set as its fundamental premise that the USSR, “animated by a new fanatical faith,” was seeking to “impose its absolute authority on the rest of the world.” In this emotionally supercharged atmosphere, U.S. policymakers also concluded that Soviet expansion had reached a point beyond which it must not be permitted to go. “Any substantial further extension of the area under the control of the Kremlin,” NSC 68 warned, “would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled.” In this context of a world divided into two hostile power blocs, a fragile balance of power, a zero-sum situation in which any gain for communism was automatically a loss for the United States, and the frightening possibility of global war, the Truman administration initiated plans to increase American military capabilities, shore up the defense of Western Europe, and extend the containment policy to East Asia.²⁷

In the dramatically altered strategic context of 1950, Southeast Asia assumed special importance. The raging conflict in Indochina and insurgencies in Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia all sprang from indigenous roots, but in a seemingly polarized world, their mere existence and leftist orientation persuaded anxious American officials—mistakenly—that Southeast Asia was “the target of a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin.” Should the region be swept by communism, the NSC warned, “we shall have suffered a major political rout the consequences of which will be felt throughout the world.”²⁸

The loss of an area so large and populous would tip the balance of power against the United States and might tempt European nations to come to terms with communism. America’s European allies desperately needed dollars to rebuild their devastated economies. The United States thus purchased raw materials from former colonial areas in

²⁷The document is printed in its entirety in *FR*, 1950, 1: 237–290.

²⁸U.S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, *The Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel Edition*, 4 vols. (1971), 1: 37–38. Hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel).

Southeast Asia, which then bought finished products from Western Europe, thus making up the “dollar gap” and permitting Europeans to buy U.S. goods.²⁹ If Southeast Asia joined the Communist bloc, the United States and its allies would be denied access to important markets. Southeast Asia was the world’s largest producer of natural rubber and a vital source of oil, tin, tungsten, and other strategic commodities. Its loss would threaten control of the air and sea routes between Australia and the Middle East, thus imperiling nations such as Japan, India, and Australia, in which the West retained predominant influence.

The impact on Japan, America’s recent enemy and now its most important Asian ally, as well as the richest economic prize in the area, was viewed as potentially disastrous. Even before the fall of China, the United States was pushing for the reintegration of Japan with Southeast Asia, a region that had served as Japan’s rice bowl and bread basket and an essential source of raw materials and markets. With China already lost, U.S. officials feared that the loss of Southeast Asia would compel Japan to shift toward communism. The United States therefore set out to defend a “vital segment” of the “great crescent” of containment extending from Japan to India.³⁰

By early 1950, American policymakers had come to view Vietnam as the key to keeping Southeast Asia out of Communist hands, an importance it would retain for nearly a quarter of a century. The Viet Minh’s increasingly well-organized and well-equipped military forces had already scored major gains against France and, with increased Chinese aid, might force a French withdrawal, removing the last obstacle between China and Southeast Asia. Indochina was in “the most immediate danger,” the State Department warned and was therefore “the most strategically important area of Southeast Asia.”³¹

Indochina was considered intrinsically important for its raw materials, rice, and naval bases, but it was deemed far more significant for the presumed effect its loss would have on other areas. By early 1950, U.S. officials had firmly embraced what would become known as the *domino theory*, the deeply rooted conviction that the fall of Indochina would cause the collapse of the rest of Southeast Asia, like a row of

²⁹ Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), pp. 141–164.

³⁰ Michael Schaller, “Securing the Great Crescent: Occupied Japan and the Origins of Containment in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of American History* 69 (September 1982): 392–413.

³¹ Dean Rusk to James H. Burns, March 7, 1950, *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 1: 363.

dominoes falling. Acceptance of this concept reflected the perceived fragility of the region in 1950 as well as memories from 1940 to 1942 when Germany and Japan overran vast regions in very short spaces of time. First employed to justify aid to Greece in 1947, the idea, when applied to Southeast Asia, became an article of faith.³²

This strategic reassessment of 1950 ended American “neutrality” in the war in Indochina. In February, the United States formally recognized the Bao Dai government. In early March, it committed itself to furnish France military and economic aid for the war against the Viet Minh. The principles upon which these decisions were based would provide the foundation for U.S. policy in Vietnam for years and, in time, would lead to large-scale U.S. involvement.

The assumptions on which U.S. policymakers acted were flawed in numerous ways. The Southeast Asian revolutions were not inspired by Moscow. Although the Soviet Union and especially China would at times seek to control them, their capacity to do so was limited by their lack of military and especially naval power and mainly by the force of local nationalism. The U.S. assessment of the situation in Vietnam was off the mark. Although a dedicated Communist, Ho Chi Minh was no tool of the Kremlin. He was willing to accept help from the major Communist powers, but he was not prepared to subordinate Vietnamese independence to them. Vietnam’s historic fears of its larger northern neighbor made submission to China especially unlikely. “It is better to sniff French shit for a while than eat China’s all our life,” Ho once said, graphically expressing a traditional principle of Vietnamese foreign policy.³³ Perhaps most important, regardless of his ideology Ho had captured the standard of Vietnamese nationalism by 1950. By supporting France, even under the guise of the Bao Dai solution, the United States attached itself to a dubious cause.

Americans were not unaware of the pitfalls. Should the United States commit itself to Bao Dai and he turn out to be a French puppet, a State Department Asian specialist warned, “we must then follow blindly down a dead-end alley, expending our limited resources . . . in a fight that would be hopeless.”³⁴ Some officials even dimly perceived that the United States might get sucked into direct involvement in Vietnam.

³²Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power: A History of the Domino Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1994), traces it back to Woodrow Wilson.

³³Quoted in Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 119.

³⁴Charles Reed to C. Walton Butterworth, April 14, 1949, 851G.00/4-1449, Department of State Records.



From By Sea, Air and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia by Edward J. Marolda, 1994, p. 2. Naval Historical Center.

But the initial commitments seemed limited and the risks smaller than those of inaction. Caught up in a perilous global struggle and with memories of the first years of World War II fresh in their minds, U.S. officials were certain that if they did not back Bao Dai and France, Southeast Asia might be lost, leaving the more frightful choice of a “staggering investment” to recover the losses or a “much contracted” line of defense in the western Pacific.³⁵

THE FRANCO-AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP IN VIETNAM

By the time the United States began to assist France, the Viet Minh had gained the military initiative in Indochina. Its regulars and guerrillas numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and it controlled an estimated two-thirds of the countryside. By early 1950, and with Chinese encouragement, Giap felt sufficiently confident to take the offensive. The French maintained tenuous control of the major cities and production centers, but at very high cost, suffering a thousand casualties per month and in 1949 alone spending 167 million francs on the war. Even in areas under nominal French control, the Viet Minh spread terror after dark, sabotaging power plants and factories, tossing grenades into cafés and theaters, and brutally assassinating French officials. “Anyone with white skin caught outside protected areas after dark is courting horrible death,” an American journalist reported.³⁶

The Bao Dai Solution, Bao Dai himself ruefully conceded, was “just a French solution.”³⁷ The much-maligned emperor was in fact a tragic figure. An intelligent man, genuinely concerned for the future of his nation, he had spent much of his life as a puppet of France and then Japan, whiling away the years by indulging an apparently insatiable taste for sports cars, women, and gambling. Under the February 1950 agreement, the French retained control of Vietnam’s treasury, commerce, and foreign and military policies. They refused even to turn over Saigon’s Norodom Palace. The government was composed mainly of wealthy southern landowners, in no way representative of the people.

³⁵ Acheson to Truman, May 14, 1950, Truman Papers, Confidential File.

³⁶ Tilman Durdin, “War ‘Not for Land but for People,’” *New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 1950, 48.

³⁷ Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York, 1966), p. 64.

Nationalists of stature refused to support Bao Dai; the masses backed the resistance or remained aloof. The emperor lacked the temperament for leadership. Introverted and given to depression and indolence, he isolated himself in one of his palaces or aboard his 600-ton air-conditioned yacht or fled to the French Riviera, all the while salting away large sums of money in Swiss bank accounts. Not “the stuff of which Churchills are made,” U.S. ambassador Donald Heath lamented with marvelous understatement.³⁸

The outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950 brought new perils. Communist North Korea’s invasion of South Korea confirmed deeply embedded U.S. suspicions that the Soviet Union sought to conquer all of Asia, even at the risk of war, and Indochina assumed even greater importance. The United States responded by sending its own military forces to help defend South Korea, placing the Seventh Fleet between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland to protect Chiang Kai-shek’s exile government, and stepping up aid to the French in Indochina. These crucial decisions would shape U.S. policies in Asia for years to come.

By the end of the year, the United States and France had suffered devastating defeats. Massive Chinese intervention in Korea forced Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s troops into headlong retreat from the Yalu River. In the meantime, Giap had inflicted upon France its “greatest colonial defeat since Montcalm had died at Quebec,” trapping an entire army in Cao Bang in northeastern Vietnam and costing the French more than 6,000 troops and enough equipment to stock an entire enemy division.³⁹ Chinese intervention in Korea raised fears of a similar thrust into Vietnam. U.S. policymakers increasingly feared that growing defeatism and war-weariness in France would raise demands for withdrawal from Indochina.

Against this background of stunning defeat, the Truman administration struggled to devise workable policies. With large numbers of U.S. troops committed to Korea and Europe seemingly vulnerable to a Soviet invasion, military officials insisted that even if China invaded Vietnam, the United States could not send military forces. France must hold the line; the United States could do no more than provide military assistance. In late 1950, the administration committed more than \$133 million and ordered large quantities of arms, ammunition, ships,

³⁸Heath to John Foster Dulles, April 28, 1953, *FR, 1952–1954*, 13: 523; Ellen Hammer, “The Bao Dai Experiment,” *Pacific Affairs* 23 (March 1950): 58.

³⁹Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy* (New York, 1972), p. 33.

aircraft, and military vehicles. Americans appreciated, of course, that such aid might not be enough. As early as May, Acheson complained that the French seemed “paralyzed, in a state of moving neither forward or backward.”⁴⁰ A fact-finding mission dispatched to Vietnam *before* the Cao Bang disaster reported that the French state of mind was “fatuous, even dangerous,” and warned that unless France prosecuted the war more determinedly, used Vietnamese personnel more effectively, and offered generous political concessions, the United States and its ally might be “moving into a debacle which neither of us can afford.”⁴¹ Some U.S. officials proposed that aid be conditioned on French pledges to take drastic measures, including the promise of eventual independence.

The administration demurred. Acheson conceded that if the United States supported France’s “old-fashioned colonial attitudes,” it might “lose out.” But the French presence was essential to defend Indochina, and the United States could not push France to the point where it would say, “All right, take over the damned country. We don’t want it.” Admitting the inconsistency, he saw no choice but to encourage the French to remain until the crisis had eased but at the same time to persuade them to “play with the nationalist movement and give Bao Dai a chance really to get the nationalists on his side.”⁴² The administration would go no further than gently urge France to make symbolic concessions and build a Vietnamese army, while holding Bao Dai’s “feet to the fire” to get him to assert effective leadership under French tutelage.⁴³

To strengthen the “free states” and increase their popular appeal, the United States spent more than \$50 million between 1950 and 1952 for economic and technical assistance. American experts provided fertilizer and seeds for agricultural production, constructed dispensaries, developed malaria control programs, and distributed food and clothing to refugees. To ensure achievement of its objectives, the United States insisted that the aid go directly to the local governments. To secure maximum propaganda advantage, zealous U.S. officials tacked posters on pagoda walls and air-dropped pamphlets into villages, indicating

⁴⁰Minutes of meeting, NSC, May 4, 1950, Truman Papers, President’s Secretary’s File.

⁴¹Melby Mission Report, August 6, 1950, *FR*, 1950, 6: 843–844; Policy Planning Staff memorandum, August 16, 1950, *ibid.*, 857–858.

⁴²U.S. Congress, Senate, *Reviews of the World Situation, 1949–1950 Hearings Held in Executive Session before the Committee on Foreign Relations* (Washington, D.C., 1974), pp. 266–268, 292–293.

⁴³Livingston Merchant to Dean Rusk, October 19, 1950, *FR*, 1950, 6: 901–902.

that the programs were gifts of the United States and contrasting the “real gains” with “Communism’s empty promises.” The U.S. Information Service even prepared a Vietnamese-language *History of the United States* with an introduction by President Truman, expressing hope that an “account of the progress of the American people toward a just and happy society can be an inspiration to those Vietnamese who today know something of the same difficulties as they build a new nation.”⁴⁴

These initiatives brought limited results. Their hopes of victory revived by increased U.S. assistance, in late 1950 the French appointed the flamboyant Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to command the armed forces in Indochina and instructed him to prosecute the war vigorously. A born crusader and practitioner of what he called *dynamisme*, de Lattre vowed upon arriving in Vietnam that he would win the war in fifteen months. Under his inspired leadership French forces repulsed a major Viet Minh offensive in the Red River Delta in early 1951, inflicting enormous losses. But when de Lattre followed up by attacking enemy strongholds just south of Hanoi, France suffered its worst defeat of the war. De Lattre died of cancer in 1952. The French military position was more precarious than when he had arrived.

In other areas, also, there was little progress. Desperately short of personnel, de Lattre made determined efforts to create a Vietnamese National Army (VNA), a process the French called *jaunissement* (“yellowing”). But the Vietnamese were understandably reluctant to fight for a French cause, and by the end of 1951 the VNA numbered only 38,000 soldiers, far short of its projected strength of 115,000. Responding to U.S. entreaties, the French vaguely promised to “perfect” the independence of the Associated States, but the massive infusion of American supplies and de Lattre’s early victories seemed to eliminate any need for concessions. The French refused to fight for Vietnamese independence and never seriously considered the only sort of concession that would have satisfied the aspirations of Vietnamese nationalism. The “free states” remained shadow governments lacking authority and popular support.

⁴⁴Mutual Security Agency, *Dateline Saigon: Our Quiet War in Indochina* (Washington, D.C., 1952). Roger Tubby to Joseph Short, March 8, 1951, Truman Papers, Official File 203-F. The French dismissed as the “height of national egotism” the fact that this first book translated by Americans into Vietnamese was a history of the United States. Heath to Secretary of State, June 14, 1951, *FR*, 1951, 6: 425–427.

By 1952, the United States was bearing roughly one-third of the cost of the war, but it found itself powerless to influence French policy. A small Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) went to Vietnam in 1950 to screen French requests for aid, assist in training Vietnamese soldiers, and advise on strategy. By going directly to Washington to get what he wanted, de Lattre reduced the MAAG to virtual impotence. Proud, sensitive, and highly nationalistic, he ignored the Americans in formulating strategy, denied them any role in training the Vietnamese, and refused even to tell them what he was doing.⁴⁵

Deeply suspicious of American intrusion into their domain, the French expressed open resentment against and obstructed the civilian aid program. De Lattre bitterly complained that there were too many Americans in Vietnam, spending too much money, and making France “look like a poor cousin in Vietnamese eyes.” The Americans were “fanning the flames of extreme [Vietnamese] nationalism.” At a dinner for the U.S. consul in Hanoi in the spring of 1951, the general launched an anti-American tirade that lasted until 1:00 a.m., raving like a “madman,” according to a British diplomat, and accusing the United States of trying to replace France in Vietnam. French officials attempted to block projects they felt did not contribute directly to the war and encouraged Vietnamese suspicions by warning that U.S. aid contained “hidden traps” to subvert their independence. Largely as a result of French obstruction, the aid program touched only a few people. U.S. officials conceded that its “beneficial psychological results” effects were largely negated because the United States at the same time was pursuing a “program of [military] support to the French.” America was looked upon “more as a supporter of colonialism than as a friend of the new nation.”⁴⁶

France continued to demand additional military assistance; the United States could do little but comply. The Truman administration in June 1952 approved \$150 million in new aid. Although thoroughly dissatisfied with France’s military performance and deeply annoyed by its secretiveness and obstructionism, Truman and Acheson continued to

⁴⁵Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, D.C., 1983), pp. 115–121.

⁴⁶Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, pp. 86–89; Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, May 15, 1951, *FR*, 1951, 6: 419; Frank Gibbs to R. H. Scott, April 28, 1951, FO 371/92420, Foreign Office Records, Public Records Office, London.

reject proposals to use military aid to compel France to adopt a more aggressive strategy and make political concessions. The State Department feared that if it “pressed the French too hard they would withdraw and leave us holding the baby.”⁴⁷

America’s Indochina policy continued to be a hostage to its preeminent interests in Europe. Since 1951, the United States had pushed for a European Defense Community (EDC) that would integrate French and German forces into a multinational army, a plan originally put forward by France to delay German rearmament. The French repeatedly warned that they could not furnish troops for European defense without generous U.S. support in Southeast Asia, a ploy Acheson accurately described as “blackmail.” The EDC had become a volatile political issue in France, where there was strong resistance to surrendering the identity of the French army and collaborating with a recent and still despised enemy. With the question awaiting approval by the French parliament, Acheson later recalled, no one “seriously advised” that it would be “wise to end, or threaten to end, aid to [France in] Indochina unless an American plan of military and political reform was carried out.”⁴⁸

Despite a substantial investment in Indochina, Truman and Acheson left to their successors a problem infinitely more complex and dangerous than the one they had taken on in 1950. A localized rebellion against French colonialism had expanded into an international conflict of major proportions. The United States was now bearing more than 40 percent of the cost of the war and had a huge stake in its outcome. Chinese aid to the Viet Minh had increased more than sevenfold. The war had spilled over into neighboring Laos and Thailand, where China and the Viet Minh backed insurgencies against governments supported by the United States and France. In Vietnam itself, France controlled enclaves around Hanoi, Haiphong, and Saigon, and a narrow strip along the Cambodian border. It now faced a new and much more ominous military threat. “The enemy, once painted as a bomb-throwing terrorist or hill sniper lurking in night ambush,” journalist Theodore White observed, “has become a modern army, increasingly skillful, armed with artillery, organized into divisional groups.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷Quoted in John M. Allison, *Ambassador from the Prairie, or Allison Wonderland* (New York, 1976), pp. 191, 194.

⁴⁸Dean G. Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York, 1969), p. 676.

⁴⁹Theodore H. White, “France Holds on to the Indo-China Tiger,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 8, 1952, 9.

Both sides suffered horrendous losses, and yet, to each, victory seemed no closer. Driven relentlessly by Viet Minh leaders, Vietnamese peasants showed distinct signs of war-weariness and disaffection. The French had naively hoped that U.S. aid might be a substitute for increased French sacrifices but had come to realize that it only required more of them. Fearful of their growing dependence on the United States and painfully aware of the possible costs of victory, in late 1952 some French political leaders outside the Communist Party for the first time began to call for withdrawal from Indochina. The “real” problem, Acheson warned the incoming administration, was the “French will to carry on the . . . war.”⁵⁰

EISENHOWER, DULLES, AND VIETNAM

The Republican administration of former U.S. Army general and World War II hero Dwight D. Eisenhower accepted without major modification the principles of Indochina policy bequeathed by the Democrats. The new president and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, a corporate lawyer and long-time Republican foreign policy expert, agreed that the Vietnamese revolution was part of a larger Communist drive for world domination. They further concurred that defeat in Indochina could have consequences more disastrous than in Korea, where the United States was then seeking to negotiate a settlement. Korea was a peninsula and the impact could be isolated, they reasoned, but the fall of Indochina might cause the loss of all Southeast Asia, with potentially devastating political, strategic, and economic repercussions for the United States and its allies. France must not be permitted to negotiate. In the campaign, the Republicans had attacked the Democrats for failing to halt the advance of communism, and they were even more determined to win in Indochina. While vowing to wage the Cold War vigorously, Eisenhower and Dulles also promised cuts in military spending. Their “New Look” defense policy called for sharp reductions in troops. They were even more reluctant than their predecessors to commit ground forces to Southeast Asia. France must hold the line.

The Republicans introduced changes more of mood and tactics than of substance. As would happen so often in the long history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a new administration came into office

⁵⁰Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., *As It Was* (New York, 1976), p. 36.

confident that new methods or the more persistent application of old ones could reverse a deteriorating situation. Eisenhower branded the French generals in Indochina a “poor lot” and insisted that new leadership was essential. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) opined that France could win the war within a year if it made better use of Vietnamese forces, as the United States had done with the South Koreans. Most U.S. observers also agreed that France had not done enough to win nationalist support by making timely and substantive political concessions. The Republicans were certain that it was time to get tough with France. Diplomat Rob McClintock averred that the United States should refuse to pay the bill until the French stopped “sitting in their Beau Geste forts on champagne cases” and aggressively took the war to the enemy. Eisenhower and Dulles agreed with Gen. J. Lawton “Lightning Joe” Collins that it was time to “put the squeeze on the French to get them off their fannies.”⁵¹

The new administration set out zealously to correct the perceived mistakes of its predecessor. Alarmed by evidence of French war-weariness, Eisenhower and Dulles gave firm assurances of continued assistance and promised that French “tiredness” would “evaporate in the face of a positive and constructive program.”⁵² They also made clear that continued aid would depend on detailed and specific information about French plans and military operations and on firm pledges to expand the VNA and develop an aggressive strategy with an explicit timetable for victory. Eisenhower himself impressed on the French the urgency of appointing a “forceful and inspirational leader, empowered with the means and authority to win victory” and of making “clear and unequivocal public announcements, repeated as often as may be desirable,” that complete independence would be granted when the war was won.⁵³

Although they refused to admit it to their American allies, the French had all but abandoned hope of victory. They had also come to regret their dependence on the United States, a “catastrophe,” President Vincent Auriol called it. However, they saw little choice but to comply

⁵¹British Embassy, Saigon, to Foreign Office, April 24, 1953, PREM 11/645, Public Record Office; JCS meeting, April 24, 1953, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 500.

⁵²Dulles to U.S. Embassy Paris, March 27, 1953, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington, D.C., 1971), Book 9: 20. Hereafter cited as *USVN* with book number.

⁵³Eisenhower to C. Douglas Dillon, May 6, 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans., International File: France, 1953(3), Box 10.

with U.S. demands. In early May 1953, the government appointed Gen. Henri Navarre to command its forces in Indochina. Two months later, a new cabinet, headed by Joseph Laniel, promised (again!) to “perfect” the independence of the Associated States by giving them additional responsibilities. Shortly thereafter, the French presented for U.S. approval a new strategic concept, the so-called Navarre Plan. Tailored to specifications set forth by the United States, the plan proposed a vast augmentation of the VNA, along with the commitment to Indochina of an additional nine battalions of French regulars. Navarre proposed to withdraw his scattered forces from their isolated garrisons, combine them with the new troops available to him, and initiate a major offensive in the Red River Delta. In a secret report to Paris, he admitted that the war could not be won in a strictly military sense. The best that could be hoped for was a draw. The Laniel government apparently adopted the plan as a last-ditch measure to salvage some return on an already huge investment and to ensure continued U.S. support. It also attached a high price tag, sending Washington the by-now-ritualistic warning that without an additional \$400 million in aid it would have to consider withdrawal from Indochina.

Although deeply skeptical of French intentions and capabilities, Washington felt compelled to go along. Eisenhower privately complained that Laniel’s promise of independence had been made “in an obscure and roundabout fashion—instead of boldly, forthrightly, and repeatedly.”⁵⁴ The JCS doubted France’s willingness and ability to pursue the Navarre Plan vigorously. By this time, however, the two nations were caught in a tangle of conflicting aims, mutual distrust and dependence, and spiraling commitments. The Navarre Plan seemed to offer a chance of success. Laniel’s fall might bring in a government committed to negotiations resulting in the “eventual loss to Communism not only of Indochina but of the whole of Southeast Asia.”⁵⁵ After extracting a French promise to pursue the plan determinedly, in September 1953, the U.S. administration agreed to provide an additional \$385 million in military aid. With characteristic bravado, Dulles proclaimed that the new French strategy would “break the organized body of Communist aggression by the end of the 1955 fighting season.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴Eisenhower to Ralph Flanders, July 7, 1953, Eisenhower Papers, Diary Series, Box 2.

⁵⁵State Department report to NSC, August 5, 1953, *USVN*, Book 9: 128.

⁵⁶Quoted in Bernard Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York, 1967), p. 122.

THE DIEN BIEN PHU CRISIS

In fact, within six months, France's position in Vietnam was in peril. An outburst of Vietnamese nationalism later in 1953 further undermined its already tenuous political authority. When the French opened negotiations to "perfect" Vietnamese independence, non-Communist nationalists, including some of Bao Dai's associates, demanded not only complete independence but also severance of all ties with France. The United States faced a dilemma. Although it had taken a firm stand for eventual independence, it feared that Vietnamese demands might provoke a French withdrawal, and it was certain that Bao Dai's government could not stand alone. Ambassador Heath charged the Vietnamese with "childlike" and "irresponsible" behavior. Dulles denounced their "ill-considered" actions and dangled before them promises of large-scale aid if they behaved.⁵⁷ The U.S. embassy in Saigon pressed the Vietnamese to tone down their demands; "We are the last French colonialists in Indochina," an American diplomat remarked with wry humor.⁵⁸ Despite U.S. attempts to mediate, the two sides could not agree on the status of an independent Vietnam.

The costly military stalemate along with the political turmoil in French-controlled Vietnam and major changes of thinking in Moscow and Beijing combined in 1953 to create powerful pressures for negotiations. More than six years of war left the Viet Minh's armies battered, its people war-weary, and its leadership wary of U.S. intervention. Ho recognized that compromise might divide his cohorts for the short term, but he leaned toward negotiations. Despairing of military victory, many French politicians had already concluded that Vietnamese association with the French Union, if only symbolic, was all that could be salvaged. The leaders who took power in the Kremlin after Stalin's death in February 1953 wanted a respite from Cold War tensions to solidify their grasp on power and address critical domestic problems. They had taken a conciliatory stance on numerous Cold War issues, Indochina included, and the French government hoped that Soviet influence might make possible an acceptable settlement. Following the Korean peace agreement, China also sought a breather to boost its

⁵⁷ Heath to State Department, October 18, 1953, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13:836; Dulles to U.S. Embassy Saigon, October 21, 1953, *USVN*, Book 9: 169–170.

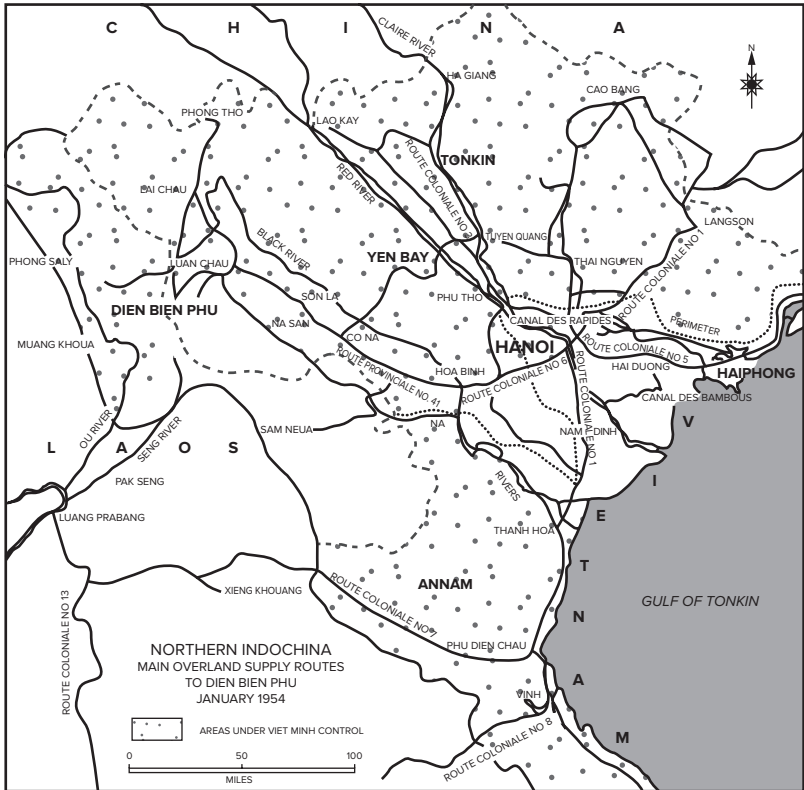
⁵⁸ Quoted in Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, p. 319.

international status, complete the revolution at home, and focus on essential issues such as liberating Taiwan.⁵⁹ Over Dulles's vigorous objections, in early 1954 France agreed to place Indochina on the agenda of an East–West conference scheduled to meet in Geneva to consider Asian problems.

Eisenhower and Dulles could only acquiesce. Distrustful of Soviet overtures and skeptical of French wisdom, they could not openly oppose the peaceful settlement of a major international issue. The French still refused to ratify the EDC, and the new Kremlin line complicated the prospect by easing European fears of the USSR. Like Acheson before him, Dulles hesitated to press France too hard on Indochina lest it reject the EDC altogether, splitting the Western alliance and playing into the hands of the Soviets.

With negotiations now pending, France and the Viet Minh prepared for battle near the remote village of Dien Bien Phu in the north-western corner of Vietnam. Called the “Arena of the Gods” by local peoples, the eleven-mile-long valley was one of the few open spaces in a region of rugged mountains. It was strategically placed at the cross-roads of Vietnam, Laos, and China. It produced ample rice and enough opium to help fund both the French and the Viet Minh war efforts. By establishing a major base there, Navarre hoped to draw Viet Minh forces away from the Red River Delta and Annam. He sought to protect Laos, whose loss could have disastrous political consequences, and to defend the Tai and Hmong hill people who had fiercely resisted Viet Minh domination. In planning the Dien Bien Phu campaign, Navarre drew upon French success in a 1952 battle in the same region. At Na San, they had built an impregnable fortress with an airfield for resupply to draw the Viet Minh into a set-piece battle. French artillery and aircraft mauled Giap's inexperienced forces, inflicting huge losses. Navarre similarly planned to use Dien Bien Phu as a base from which to mount air-land operations against Viet Minh forces in the area and even to draw the enemy into a pitched battle where French artillery and air power might prevail. As at Na San, he counted upon logistical difficulties to limit the enemy's ability to get large numbers of troops into the area and sustain them. Victory at Dien Bien Phu would give France an edge in

⁵⁹ Chen Jian, “Bridging Revolution and Decolonization: The ‘Bandung Discourse’ in China's Early Cold War Experience,” in Goscha and Ostermann, *Connecting Histories*, pp. 148–149.



The Battle of Dien Bien Phu

UAGS

the upcoming negotiations. In late 1953, Navarre confidently dispatched twelve battalions of regulars supported by aircraft and heavy artillery. His base commander, the flamboyant aristocrat Col. Christian Marie Ferdinand de la Croix de Castries, constructed an airfield and a garrison ringed with barbed wire and bunkers and protected by a series of artillery bases in the outlying hills, each, according to legend, named for one of his mistresses.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Logevall, *Embers of War*, pp. 383–384; Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp. 56–62, 211, 218–223.

Giap took the “bait.” Although keenly aware of the difficulties of fighting in such a distant area and on such difficult terrain, he, too, saw an opportunity to strike a decisive blow at a critical point in the war. He too learned from Na San, especially the need for careful preparation, the essentiality of logistics, the value of artillery, and the urgency of choking off the enemy’s air resupply. He set out to get to Dien Bien Phu sufficient forces and equipment to overwhelm the French garrison. Giap drove his soldiers and civilian workers mercilessly, day and night, for weeks. In one of the most spectacular logistical feats in the history of warfare, the Viet Minh moved an army of 50,000 men into the hills around the French garrison. More than 250,000 coolies (*dan cong*) devoted hours of grueling labor to repairing existing roads and building new ones. Thousands of porters, including a “long-haired army” of women, used trucks, 20,000 bicycles, horses, ox carts, even wheelbarrows, to move thousands of tons of supplies over an extraordinary rough terrain from southern China and the delta. U.S. and French “experts” had predicted that it would be impossible to get heavy artillery up to the high ground surrounding the garrison. The Viet Minh formed “human anthills,” carrying disassembled weapons up piece by piece, putting them back together, placing them in underground casements, and camouflaging them so effectively that they were impervious to French artillery and air attacks. By January 1954, the two sides were girded for the decisive battle of the First Indochina War.⁶¹

At this point, for the first time, the United States faced the prospect of military intervention in Vietnam. Eisenhower expressed strong opposition to putting U.S. troops into the jungles of Indochina. But he went on to insist that the United States could not forget its vital interests there. Comparing the region to a “leaky dike,” he warned that it was “sometimes better to put a finger in than to let the whole structure wash away.”⁶² A special committee reviewing Indochina policy recommended in mid-March that the United States should discourage defeatist tendencies in France. If, despite its efforts, the French negotiated an unsatisfactory agreement, the United States might have to join the Associated States and other nations to fight without France.⁶³

⁶¹Logevall, *Embers of War*, pp. 412–417; Windrow, *Last Valley*, pp. 258–259.

⁶²Record of NSC meeting, January 8, 1954, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 949, 952.

⁶³*Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 1: 90–92.



Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap (shown above far right with Ho Chi Minh and others planning the Dien Bien Phu campaign)

Giap was the architect of Viet Minh victory in the First Indochina War and one of the most important military figures of the twentieth century. Self-educated in the art of war, he built the Peoples Army of Viet Nam (PAVN) from scratch. With Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh, he devised the peoples' war strategy employed against the French. A logistical genius, he pushed his people beyond their limits to mobilize superior forces for the epic battle of Dien Bien Phu, his greatest triumph. Giap fell out of favor during much of the tenure of Le Duan, but he returned to help rebuild and transform the PAVN after the Easter Offensive and played an important role in planning the final campaigns of 1974–1975.

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While the United States pondered intervention, Giap tightened the noose around Dien Bien Phu. After two months of painstaking preparation, on March 13 the Viet Minh unleashed a withering artillery assault on the furthest hill outposts of Gabrielle and Beatrice. The severity of the fire stunned the French defenders. The Viet Minh's 75 mm and 105 mm guns shredded French defenses, destroyed weapons, collapsed trenches, and killed and maimed the outgunned defenders. The attackers seized the outposts within twenty-four hours and knocked

out the airfield, making resupply impossible except by parachute drop and leaving the garrison isolated and vulnerable. The French had gone into battle confident of the outcome. By upsetting the calculations upon which their confidence had been based, the Viet Minh artillery assault by itself sent their morale plummeting. Top leaders recognized that they must stay, but they were no longer hopeful of the outcome.⁶⁴

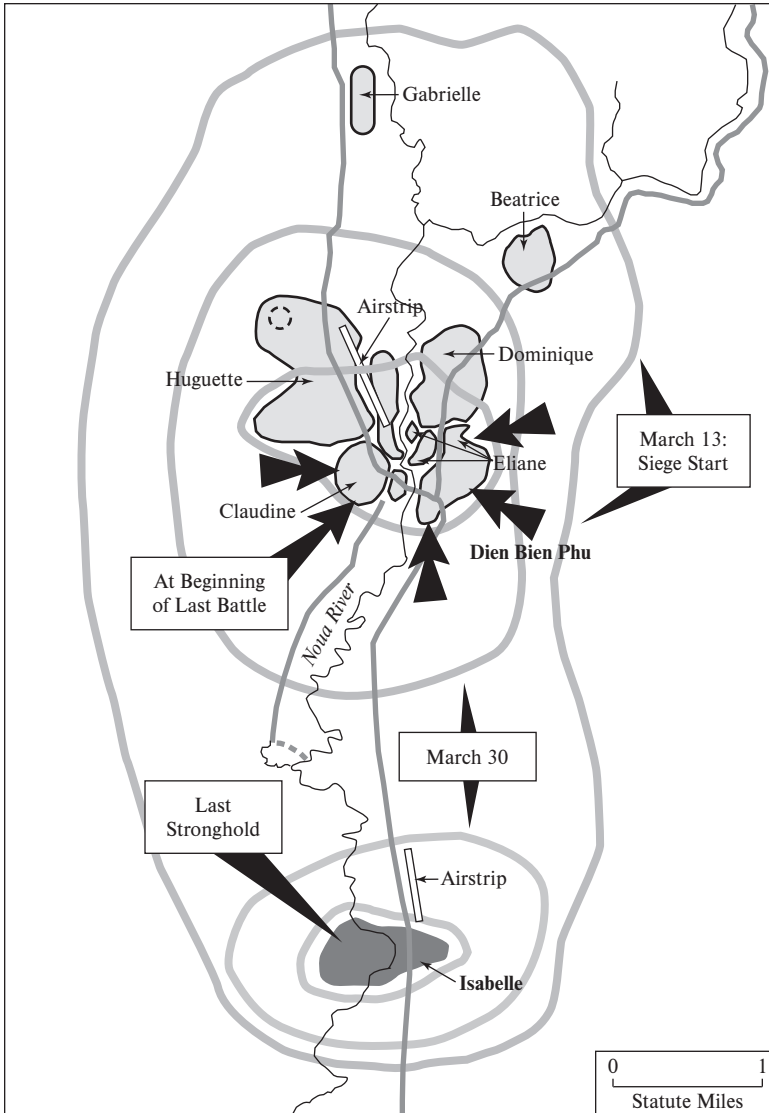
The spectacular initial Viet Minh success at Dien Bien Phu raised the prospect of immediate U.S. intervention. During a visit to Washington in late March, French chief of staff Gen. Paul Ely still estimated a "50-50 chance of success" and merely requested the transfer of additional U.S. aircraft to be used for attacks on Viet Minh lines around the fortress. Ely was deeply concerned about the possibility of Chinese intervention, however, openly inquiring how the United States might respond in such a contingency. Much less optimistic, the JCS chairman, Adm. Arthur Radford, seized upon a scheme originally devised by French and American officers in Saigon. Code-named *VULTURE*, it called for the bombing of Viet Minh supply lines to and entrenchments around Dien Bien Phu by a fleet of as many as sixty U.S. B-29 Superfortress bombers from the Philippines, possibly unmarked or camouflaged with French markings and flown by either French crews, American military pilots, or U.S. military pilots temporarily assigned to the French Foreign Legion. Radford's apparent enthusiasm for the plan led Ely to believe that U.S. approval would be forthcoming should the French formally request it.⁶⁵

VULTURE won little support in Washington. Eisenhower briefly toyed with the idea of a "single strike [flown by U.S. pilots in unmarked planes], if it were almost certain this would produce decisive results." "Of course . . . we'd have to deny it forever," he added.⁶⁶ Dulles accepted air and naval intervention in Indochina, but only as a last resort. He preferred what he called "United Action," the formation of a coalition composed of the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and the Associated States, to

⁶⁴Windrow, *Last Valley*, pp. 370–371, 374–379.

⁶⁵Laurent Cesari and Jacques de Folin, "Military Necessity, Political Impossibility: The French Point of View on Operation *Vautour*," in Lawrence S. Kaplan et al. (eds.), *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954–1955* (Wilmington, Del., 1990), pp. 105–120.

⁶⁶Memorandum of conversation, Eisenhower and Dulles, March 24, 1954, Lot 64D199, Box 22, Department of State Records; James Hagerty Diary, April 1, 1954, James Hagerty Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.



Progress of the Battle

guarantee the security of Southeast Asia. By its very existence, such a grouping might deter Chinese intervention in Indochina and aggression elsewhere in Asia. United Action, as some scholars have argued, may have been primarily a bluff. Or, if military intervention became necessary, it would remove the stigma of a war for French colonialism and ensure that the burden did not fall upon the United States. In keeping with the New Look defense policy, local and regional forces could bear the brunt of ground fighting while the United States provided air and naval support and money and supplies and trained indigenous forces.

Most top military advisers opposed air intervention at Dien Bien Phu. Some questioned whether an air strike could relieve the siege without destroying the French garrison itself. Others wondered whether intervention could be kept limited; "One cannot go over Niagara Falls in a barrel only slightly," one military analyst warned.⁶⁷ Among the JCS, only U.S. Air Force Gen. Nathan F. Twining approved the proposal, and he insisted on conditions the French would never have accepted. The other chiefs advised that air intervention would not decisively affect the outcome of the war. Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway was particularly outspoken, warning Eisenhower that airpower alone could not ensure victory and ground forces would have to fight under the most difficult logistic circumstances and on singularly inhospitable terrain.⁶⁸

Although profoundly skeptical about an air strike, the administration was sufficiently alarmed by the emerging crisis to seek congressional support for possible military intervention. The fall of Dien Bien Phu seemed likely by early April. Eisenhower and Dulles preferred to act in concert with other nations, but they feared that a defeat might produce a French collapse before plans for United Action could be implemented, leaving U.S. naval and airpower the only means to save Indochina. Sensitive to Truman's fate in Korea, they were unwilling to act without congressional backing. Thus, on April 3, Dulles met with legislative leaders to seek discretionary authority to employ U.S. naval and air forces—with allies if possible, without them if necessary—should the fall of Dien Bien Phu threaten the loss of Indochina.

⁶⁷ *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 1: 89.

⁶⁸ Ridgway memorandum to Joint Chiefs, April 2, 1954, Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

The secretary met stubborn resistance. No one questioned his assessment of the gravity of the situation, but the members of Congress insisted that there must be “no more Koreas with the United States furnishing 90 percent of the manpower.” They also made clear that the United States could not go to war in defense of French colonialism. They would agree to support a resolution authorizing U.S. intervention only if “satisfactory commitments” could be secured from Great Britain and other allies to support military intervention and from France to “internationalize” the war and speed the move toward Vietnamese independence. Congressional insistence on prior allied commitments eliminated the option of unilateral intervention and placed major obstacles in the way of United Action.⁶⁹

The April 3 session also doomed an air strike at Dien Bien Phu. Although wary of U.S. intervention in any form, the French government eventually concluded that an air strike offered the only hope of saving the beleaguered fortress and two days later requested its implementation. Eisenhower promptly rejected the French request. On April 6, the NSC agreed to initiate planning for possible later intervention while attempting to meet the essential preconditions for United Action.⁷⁰

With the fate of Dien Bien Phu hanging in the balance, the United States frantically promoted United Action. Dulles hustled off to London and Paris to consult with allied leaders. Eisenhower penned a long personal letter to Prime Minister Winston Churchill urging British support for a coalition that would be “willing to fight” to check Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. At a much publicized news conference on April 7, he laid the foundation for possible U.S. intervention. Outlining in simple language the principles that had shaped U.S. policy for years, he emphasized that Indochina was a vital source of tin, tungsten, and rubber and that having lost China to “Communist dictatorship,” the United States “simply can’t afford greater losses.” More important, he added, should Indochina fall, the rest of Southeast Asia would “go over very quickly,” like a “row of dominoes” when the first one is knocked down, causing much greater losses of raw materials and people,

⁶⁹Dulles memorandum, April 5, 1954, John Foster Dulles Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.

⁷⁰Record of telephone conversation, Eisenhower and Dulles, April 5, 1954, Eisenhower Papers, Diary Series, Box 3; record of NSC meeting, April 6, 1954, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 1253.

jeopardizing America's strategic position in the region, and driving Japan into the Communist camp. "So the possible consequences of the loss," he concluded, "are just incalculable to the free world."⁷¹

The U.S. initiative exposed fundamental cleavages with major allies. Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden did not agree that the loss of Indochina would bring the fall of Southeast Asia. They believed that France could salvage a reasonable settlement at Geneva. They feared that outside intervention would undermine a negotiated settlement and perhaps provoke war with China. Most important, they had no desire to entangle Britain in a war they were certain could not be won. The French insisted that Vietnam must retain ties with the French Union. They wanted nothing more than an air strike to help relieve the siege of Dien Bien Phu. They opposed internationalization of the war, which would undermine their prestige in Indochina and take control from their hands.

The administration was deeply annoyed with the European response. U.S. officials privately complained that the British were "weak-kneed" and showed a "woeful unawareness" of the risks of inaction. Eisenhower accused the French of using "weasel words" in their promises to the Vietnamese.⁷² They "want us to come in as junior partners and provide materials, etc., while they themselves retain authority in that region." He would "not go along with them on any such notion."⁷³

Congressional opposition reinforced the administration's determination to avoid unilateral intervention. In a speech that won praise from members of both parties, Senator John F. Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat, warned that no amount of military aid could conquer "an enemy of the people which has the support and covert appeal of the people." There could be no victory as long as France remained. When a "high administration source," subsequently identified as Vice President Richard M. Nixon, remarked "off the record" that if United Action failed, the United States might have to send troops to Indochina, the reaction was immediate and strong.

⁷¹Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers, 1954* (Washington, D.C., 1955), pp. 382–384.

⁷²Hagerty Diary, April 25, 1954, Hagerty Papers; Eisenhower Diary, April 27, 1954, Eisenhower Papers, Diary Series, Box 3.

⁷³Eisenhower to E. E. Hazlett, April 27, 1954, Eisenhower Papers, Diary Series, Box 4; record of telephone conversation, Eisenhower and Walter Bedell Smith, April 24, 1954, *ibid.*, Box 3.

Continued British opposition sealed the fate of United Action. In late April, French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault made a last desperate appeal for U.S. support, warning that only a “massive” air attack would save Dien Bien Phu and that France was prepared to internationalize the war. Dulles frantically sought to sway Eden, urgently warning that without allied support France would give up the fight. The British would have none of it. Eisenhower informed congressional leaders on April 26 that it would be a “tragic error to go in alone as a partner of France” and reaffirmed that the United States would intervene only as a “grouping of interested nations.” Three days later, the NSC formally decided to “hold up for the time any military action in Indo China until we see how Geneva is coming along.”⁷⁴ Eisenhower and Dulles may have conceived of United Action mainly as a bluff designed to neutralize “hawks” in Congress and the country. More likely, they were prepared to intervene but were thwarted by legislative leaders and allies.

The decision ensured the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Giap’s army had suffered horrendous losses in the capture of Beatrice and Gabrielle, threatening morale in the ranks. While resting and rebuilding his forces, he shifted to what he called “nibbling away,” building a veritable spider web of assault trenches, picking off the remaining French outposts a few at a time, and eventually closing in on the main camp. Old-timers among the French troops compared the battlefield to Verdun. After six weeks of siege warfare, the Viet Minh launched their final assault in early May. Isolated, badly bloodied, hopelessly outmanned, without adequate food, water, and medicine, the French surrendered on May 7 after fifty-five days of courageous but futile resistance.⁷⁵

The Viet Minh’s stunning victory at Dien Bien Phu has often been attributed to superior firepower, and Giap’s artillery did knock out the French airfield and facilitate the advance of his troops. Newly available Vietnamese sources also suggest, however, that the number of guns on each side was roughly equal and that Viet Minh ammunition stocks were such that firing had to be rationed. More important in explaining

⁷⁴Dulles to State Department, April 22, 23, 1954, Eisenhower Papers, Ann Whitman File; summary of meeting, April 26, 1954, Eisenhower Papers, “Cleanup” File, Box 16; Hagerty Diary, April 29, 1954, Hagerty Papers.

⁷⁵Windrow, *Last Valley*, pp. 499–566.

Viet Minh success was Giap's meticulous preparation, superior logistics, and timely tactical shift from human wave attacks to the use of trenches. The enemy's early hubris may have been most important of all. French officers were so certain of themselves after Na San that they went to Dien Bien Phu complacent. When their confidence was shattered in mid-March, they never recovered.⁷⁶

Dien Bien Phu ranks as one of the most important battles of the twentieth century. For much of the nine-week siege, the world's attention was focused on that remote and beleaguered French outpost. The battle was enormously costly for both sides. The French lost an estimated 1,500 killed, 4,000 wounded, and as many as 10,000 missing or captured, the latter subjected to horrific treatment by their captors. The Viet Minh suffered an estimated 25,000 casualties, 10,000 of them killed, requiring weeks to recover. The French lost a much smaller proportion of their active forces, still controlled the major cities of Vietnam, and were in a position to fight on. But the defeat at Dien Bien Phu was a devastating blow to already shaky morale at home. The mood of "shocked despair" in France was compared to that of 1940. A day of mourning was declared in Paris; theaters and eating places were closed.⁷⁷

Dien Bien Phu ended the First Indochina War, the first time in the postwar era that anticolonial forces had defeated a Western power. The battle scarred all of those involved. The French felt betrayed by a United States that had pushed them to fight and then left them to die. Americans attributed the debacle to the French Army's "bunker psychosis," ignoring what the war might teach them about Viet Minh tactics and reinforcing their confidence in their own aggressive way of war. For the Viet Minh, the battle vindicated "peoples' war" and became a celebrated part of their larger historical record of exploiting human resources to expel powerful outside invaders. They would seek a similar battle with similar results to defeat the United States in the war that would soon follow.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Kevin M. Boylan, "No 'Technical Knockout': Giap's Artillery at Dien Bien Phu," *The Journal of Military History* 78 (October 2014): 1349–1383.

⁷⁷Windrow, *Last Valley*, pp. 628–633; see also John Prados, "Assessing Dien Bien Phu," in Lawrence and Logevall, *First Vietnam War*, pp. 215–239.

⁷⁸Dennis Showalter, "Dien Bien Phu in Three Cultures," *War and Society* 16 (October 1998): 93–98.

THE GENEVA CONFERENCE

With the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the attention of belligerents and outside parties immediately shifted to Geneva, where consideration of Indochina was to begin the following day. The British, Soviets, and Chinese took the lead in the conference and sought mainly to end the war and thereby avert U.S. intervention. For China, Geneva was a sort of coming out party, its first appearance on the world stage, and it hoped by participating and promoting a settlement to advance its stature as a great power. Reeling from Dien Bien Phu, France came to Geneva, Bidault lamented, holding a “two of clubs and a three of diamonds.”⁷⁹ Resigned to getting out of Vietnam, it sought the best settlement it could obtain. Buoyed by its victory, the DRV savored the prize for which it had been fighting for seven years. Its leaders perceived, however, that Dien Bien Phu had not significantly altered the balance of forces in its favor and that, exhausted from their recent sacrifices, its own armies and people desperately needed a respite. Like their allies, Viet Minh leaders also saw that U.S. intervention must be avoided and that they might have to compromise to forestall that eventuality.⁸⁰ At Geneva, they sought to win by peaceful means what they had not been able to achieve militarily.

The United States was a reluctant participant at Geneva. In these tension-ridden days of the early Cold War, negotiation with any Communist nation was anathema, but the presence of Communist China, which the United States had refused to recognize and was seeking to isolate diplomatically, was especially unpalatable. Dulles remained in Geneva only briefly and, in the words of a biographer, conducted himself with the “pinched distaste of a puritan in a house of ill repute.”⁸¹ He once remarked that the only way he and Chinese delegate Zhou En-lai would meet was if their cars collided. When they actually met face-to-face and Zhou extended his hand, the secretary, according to some accounts, turned his back.

The administration faced a dilemma. For reasons of international and domestic politics, it did not want to “lose” all or even part of

⁷⁹Quoted in Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, 1970), p. 79.

⁸⁰Jian, “China,” pp. 242–245; Pierre Asselin, “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique,” *Cold War History* 11 (May 2011): 158–159.

⁸¹Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston, 1973), p. 222.

Indochina to the Communists. But it was also keenly aware that there was little public support for military intervention. Eisenhower and Dulles had long feared that Geneva might provide a fig leaf of respectability for a French surrender, and the fall of Dien Bien Phu increased its concern. After departing Geneva, Dulles instructed his delegation to participate in the conference only as an “interested nation,” not as a “belligerent or a principal in the negotiations” and not to endorse an agreement that in any way impaired the territorial integrity of the Associated States.⁸² Given the military position of the Viet Minh when the conference opened, he was saying that the United States would endorse no settlement at all.

During the first five weeks of the conference, the United States also kept alive the possibility of military intervention. When Laniel requested U.S. help if the Chinese stalled the talks while the Viet Minh pressed on for military victory, the administration resumed planning for possible intervention. The JCS drew up detailed contingency plans for deploying U.S. forces, even agreeing that nuclear weapons might be used if militarily advantageous. Officials also drafted a congressional resolution authorizing the president to employ U.S. military forces in Indochina. They hoped to develop a new scheme for United Action that did not require British backing.

As before, the talks foundered. The administration demanded of France an unequivocal advance commitment to internationalize the war and a guarantee that the Associated States could withdraw from the French Union. The French indicated a willingness only to discuss the U.S. conditions and insisted on at least a token commitment of American ground forces and a prior commitment to employ airpower if the Chinese intervened. France eventually concluded that it must exhaust every possibility of a negotiated settlement before prolonging the war. Eisenhower and Dulles surmised that Paris was keeping alive the possibility of U.S. intervention primarily as a “card to play at Geneva.” In any event, the refusal of Australia and New Zealand to go along effectively ditched United Action. The discussions all but ended by mid-June.⁸³ They may have reinforced Communist concerns about U.S. intervention, thereby encouraging compromise and a settlement.

After more than a month of deadlock, the conferees at Geneva began to inch toward an agreement based on the temporary partition

⁸²Dulles to Smith, May 12, 1954, *USVN*, Book 9: 457–459.

⁸³Dulles to American Consulate Geneva, June 8, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 541.

of Vietnam, to be followed by national elections. Laniel had promised Bao Dai he would reject partition, but his cabinet fell on June 12 and he was replaced by Pierre Mendès-France. The new prime minister was flexible on partition and upon taking power also promised to resign if a settlement was not reached by July 21. From the outset, the Soviets and the Chinese had pressed the DRV to accept partition. The DRV had itself concluded that such a settlement might be all it could obtain. Its willingness to compromise was spurred in June when France recognized the independence of the State of Vietnam and Bao Dai named Ngo Dinh Diem prime minister. The DRV viewed the fiercely anti-Communist Diem as an “American lackey” and increasingly feared that the United States would seek to replace France in Vietnam. Following conversations with Zhou En-lai in early July, Ho Chi Minh agreed to partition while hoping for a dividing line at the sixteenth parallel.⁸⁴

The United States grudgingly acquiesced in partition, a step made easier by inclusion in the Geneva agreements of an article providing for the free movement of civilians between the two zones. U.S. officials deemed the loss of Tonkin a moral disaster for the people there, especially the large Catholic population that Americans considered the “energetic Yankees” of Vietnam. Having blasted the Democrats for losing China, the Eisenhower administration understandably feared charges of a “Red Munich” from them and Republican right-wingers. Freedom to migrate might give Catholics and others a way to escape communism and blunt domestic criticism. Diem opposed partition to the point of threatening resignation, and such a provision might keep him on board. As part of its broader effort to deal with the “unpalatable facts” of a Geneva settlement, the administration proposed inclusion of such an article in the final agreement. France and Britain went along to ensure continued U.S. support. DRV leaders apparently did not grasp the implications of the migration article. This seemingly innocuous provision enabled the United States to accept the Geneva agreements and along with U.S. promises of post-Geneva support helped keep Diem in power. To the surprise of most conferees, it would spur a mass migration north to south that would bring major short-term gains for U.S. policy but would also mark another fateful step toward full-fledged involvement in Vietnam.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Asselin, “Geneva Conference,” pp. 168–169; Jian, “China,” pp. 253–262.

⁸⁵ Philip E. Catton, “‘It Would Be a Terrible Thing if We Handed These People over to the Communists’: The Eisenhower Administration, Article 14(b), and the Origins of the Refugee Exodus from North Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 39 (April 2015): 331–358.

Recognizing that the war could not be prolonged without grave risks and that part of Vietnam would likely be lost at Geneva, the administration also began to plan for the defense of what was left in Indochina and the rest of Southeast Asia. Dulles told congressional leaders on June 24 that whatever emerged from Geneva would be “something we would have to gag about,” but he expressed optimism that the United States could still “salvage something” in Southeast Asia “free of the taint of French colonialism.” It must assume responsibility for defending Laos, Cambodia, and non-Communist Vietnam. The first step would be to draw a line that the Communists would not cross and then “hold this area and fight subversion within it with all the strength we have” by providing economic aid and building a strong military force. The United States must also take the lead in forming a regional defense grouping “to keep alive freedom” in Southeast Asia.⁸⁶

Over the next three weeks, Dulles worked relentlessly to ensure this outcome. He secured British commitment to an agreement that would include freedom for Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam to maintain “stable, non-communist regimes” and accept foreign arms and advisers. To the point of threatening to disassociate the United States from Geneva, he pushed Mendès-France to go along. Even then, Dulles approached the last stages of Geneva determined to retain complete freedom of action. The United States must play no role in the negotiations, he instructed chief delegate Walter Bedell Smith. If the agreement lived up to its standards, the United States would issue a unilateral statement of endorsement. Otherwise, it would reserve the freedom to “publicly disassociate itself.” Under no circumstances would it be a “cosignatory with the Communists” and “it would not guarantee the results.”⁸⁷

By mid-July pressures for a settlement had mounted. Mendès-France’s July 21 deadline was approaching and Anglo-American backing improved his bargaining position. The Russians and Chinese continued to press for a compromise agreement. Taking seriously Dulles’s bluster and increasingly fearing that a breakdown of negotiations might provoke U.S. intervention, the DRV agreed to remove its forces from and to accept neutrality for Laos and Cambodia and the partition of Vietnam at

⁸⁶Hagerty Diary, June 23, 24, 28, Hagerty Papers.

⁸⁷*Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 1: 152.

the seventeenth parallel. "After French withdrawal, the whole of Vietnam will be yours," Zhou soothingly assured DRV leaders.⁸⁸

The Geneva Agreements (Geneva Accords) provided that Vietnam would be partitioned along the seventeenth parallel to permit regrouping of military forces from both sides. The division was to be temporary and should not be "interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary." The country was to be reunified by elections scheduled for the summer of 1956 and supervised by an international commission composed of Canada, Poland, and India. To insulate Vietnam against a renewal of conflict during the transitional period, troops were to be withdrawn from the partition zones within 300 days. The introduction of new forces and equipment and the establishment of foreign military bases were prohibited. Neither part of Vietnam was to join a military alliance. Cease-fire arrangements for Laos and Cambodia explicitly recognized the two nations' right to self-defense, but to ease Chinese fears of U.S. intervention, they were not to enter military alliances or permit foreign bases on their soil except in cases where their security was endangered.

The agreements, in the words of a Canadian diplomat, constituted a "nasty bargain accepted by all parties as the only way to avoid a dangerous confrontation."⁸⁹ The major issues over which the war had been fought were not settled. The terms were vague in crucial places; different people viewed their meaning quite differently. The manner in which the accords were handled was unusual if not unique and reflected the fragility of the understandings themselves. The United States and the State of Vietnam refused to associate themselves with the formal agreements. Other nations signed only the cease-fire agreement, merely listing their names on the political "instruments."

For the DRV leadership, Geneva represented at best a bittersweet victory. They found partition difficult to accept, even temporarily, and they had hoped that the line would be drawn further south and the elections held sooner. They appreciated, however, that they could not get better terms. They had committed huge resources to Dien Bien Phu, suffered enormous losses, and were in no position to follow up with major campaigns elsewhere. Even without U.S. involvement, Giap estimated that it would take at least two more years to defeat the French.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000), p. 58; see also Asselin, "Geneva Conference," pp. 169–170.

⁸⁹ Quoted in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Indochina and the Roots of Complicity* (Toronto, 1983), p. 225.

Prolonging the war risked American intervention. Ho cautioned those “intoxicated with victories” that the “struggle for peace is a hard and complex one.” The Viet Minh must work within the framework of Geneva to attain its goals of independence and unity.⁹⁰

The United States also took a mixed view toward Geneva. The settlement produced some domestic political backlash. California Republican senator and hard-core anti-Communist William Knowland hyperbolically called it “the greatest victory the communists have won in twenty years.” The Eisenhower administration itself viewed with concern the loss of northern Vietnam—“the keystone to the arch of Southeast Asia”—but Eisenhower and Dulles realized, as Smith put it, that “diplomacy has rarely been able to gain at the conference table what cannot be held on the battlefield.” The administration protected itself against domestic attacks and retained its freedom of action by refusing to associate itself with the agreements. In a unilateral statement, Smith simply “took note” of the Geneva Accords and vowed that the United States would not “disturb them” by the “threat or the use of force.”⁹¹

In truth, the administration was not displeased. The agreements were better than had been anticipated when the conference opened, and they allowed sufficient latitude to proceed along the path Dulles had outlined. Partition at least gave the United States the chance to build up non-Communist forces in southern Vietnam, a challenge the administration took up eagerly. The accords placed some limits on outside intervention, to be sure, but they were not viewed as prohibitive. And some of the terms seemed advantageous. Eisenhower and Dulles agreed, for example, that if the elections were held immediately, Ho Chi Minh would be an easy victor. But the two-year delay gave the United States “fairly good time” to get ready. Canada’s presence on the commission would enable it to “block things.”⁹²

Eisenhower and Dulles viewed the apparent demise of French colonialism with equanimity if not outright enthusiasm. The Franco-American partnership in Indochina had been marked by profound mutual suspicion and deep-seated tensions. The United States had provided France more than \$2.6 billion in military aid, but its efforts to influence French policies

⁹⁰Quoted in Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, pp. 460–461; Logevall, *Embers of War*, pp. 747–749.

⁹¹*Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 1: 571–572.

⁹²Record of telephone conversation, Eisenhower and Dulles, July 20, 1954, Eisenhower Papers, Diary Series, Box 4.

by friendly persuasion and attaching strings had failed. The commitment had indeed proven to be a "dead-end alley." Americans attributed France's failure mainly to its misguided attempts to perpetuate colonialism in Indochina. They were confident that without France they could find a viable non-Communist alternative to the Viet Minh. "We must work with these people, and then they themselves will soon find out that we are their friends and they can't live without us," Eisenhower observed.⁹³ Conceding that the Geneva Accords included "many features he did not like," Dulles still insisted that they contained many "good aspects," most important, the "truly independent status" of Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. The "important thing," he concluded, was "not to mourn the past but to seize the future opportunity to prevent the loss in Northern Vietnam from leading to the extension of communism throughout Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific."⁹⁴

⁹³Hagerty Diary, July 23, 1954, Hagerty Papers.

⁹⁴Dulles news conference, July 23, 1954, John Foster Dulles Papers, Seely G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, N.J.



The Ngo Family

With American assistance, Ngo Dinh Diem played a major role in the founding of South Vietnam, but his increasing isolation and reliance on his family ultimately contributed to his undoing.

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Our Offspring

Nation Building in South Vietnam, 1954–1961

"The fundamental tenets of this nation's foreign policy . . . depend in considerable measure upon a strong and free Vietnamese nation," Senator John F. Kennedy proclaimed in 1956. "Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike." Should the "red tide of Communism" pour into it, Kennedy warned, much of Asia would be threatened. Vietnam's economy was essential to the prosperity of Southeast Asia, its "political liberty" an "inspiration to those seeking to obtain or maintain their liberty in all parts of Asia—and indeed of the world." The United States had special obligations to Vietnam that extended beyond mere considerations of the national interest, the senator stressed in conclusion: "It is our offspring, we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs."¹

Kennedy was addressing the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), and he may have been indulging in after-dinner hyperbole, but his words spoke volumes about the way Americans viewed Vietnam in the 1950s. His reference to South Vietnam as "our offspring" betrayed the sort of paternalism that typified U.S. dealings with Asians. His speech summed up the rationale for American policy in South Vietnam, touched on the pivotal role played by the United States at its birth, and highlighted the importance it came to assume. Certain that its fall to Communism would cause the "loss" of all Southeast Asia, after Geneva the Eisenhower administration set out to create a nation that could serve as a bulwark against Communist expansion and as a proving ground for democracy in Asia. Originating from the exigencies of the

¹John F. Kennedy, "America's Stake in Vietnam," *Vital Speeches* 22 (August 1, 1956): 617–619.

Cold War, the experiment in nation building also tapped the wellsprings of American idealism and took on the trappings of a crusade. Begun as a high-risk gamble, it appeared for a time one of the great success stories of postwar U.S. foreign policy. But Americans' certainty that they knew what was best for their "offspring" inevitably clashed with the views of a proud people who had their own vision for an independent South Vietnam. Their neocolonial approach produced a dependent society whose weaknesses in time became evident. Only at the end of the decade, when South Vietnam was swept by revolution and its government increasingly threatened did Americans begin to perceive the magnitude and complexity of the problem they had taken on.

A GOOD STOUT EFFORT

Warning that Geneva had been a "disaster" that had made possible a "major forward stride of Communism," the National Security Council (NSC) in the summer of 1954 called for a "new initiative" to shore up the U.S. position in Southeast Asia. The NSC recommended the use of "all available means" to undermine the infant Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) regime in northern Vietnam.² Throughout the rest of the year, a CIA team stationed in Saigon and headed by Col. Edward Lansdale devised numerous clandestine methods to harass the Hanoi government. Paramilitary groups infiltrated across the demilitarized zone on sabotage missions, attempting to destroy the government's printing presses and pouring contaminants into the engines of buses to demobilize the transportation system. The teams also carried out "psywar" operations to embarrass the DRV and encourage emigration to the south. They distributed fake handbills telling citizens to inventory their property to facilitate government confiscation programs. To sway Catholics, they passed out fliers proclaiming that "Christ Has Gone to the South" and "The Virgin Mary Has Departed from the North."³

²NSC, "Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East," August 1954, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington, D.C., 1971), Book 10, 731-741. Hereafter cited as *USVN* with book number.

³Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York, 1971), pp. 16-18. Hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers* (NYT); Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, 2018), p. 225.

In the meantime, Dulles hastened off to Manila and negotiated the Southeast Asian security pact he had promoted so vigorously during the Dien Bien Phu crisis. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) had obvious weaknesses. The major neutralist nations of the region—Burma, India, and Indonesia—declined to join. Because of restrictions imposed by the Geneva Accords, Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam could not formally participate. Eisenhower and Dulles admitted that the “western colorization” of the alliance was “unfortunate,” but they conceded that it was necessary because of the weakness of the countries in the area. The member nations bound themselves only to “meet common danger” in accordance with their own “constitutional processes” and to “consult” with each other.

From Dulles’s standpoint, SEATO was more than satisfactory. The mere existence of the alliance might deter Communist aggression in the region. More important, a separate protocol specifically designated Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam as areas that, if threatened, would “endanger” the “peace and security” of the signatories. During the Dien Bien Phu crisis, Dulles had felt hampered by the lack of a legal basis for intervention in Indochina. The SEATO protocol not only remedied this defect but also established the foundation, should United Action become necessary in the future, and gave South Vietnam a semblance of international status as a “free” nation.⁴

The key to the new American “initiative” was South Vietnam. The NSC recommended that the United States “make every possible effort, not openly inconsistent with the U.S. position as to the armistice agreements . . . to maintain a friendly non-Communist South Vietnam and to prevent a Communist victory through all-Vietnam elections.”⁵ Violating the spirit and sometimes the letter of the Geneva Accords, the Eisenhower administration in 1954 and after firmly committed itself to the fragile government of Ngo Dinh Diem, eased the French out of Vietnam, and used its resources unsparingly to construct in southern Vietnam a viable, non-Communist nation that would stand as the “cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia.”

Post-Geneva Vietnam presented formidable challenges to those who sought to mold its future. The DRV faced a daunting task rebuilding the North after France’s departure. Seven years of war left problems

⁴SEATO included the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan.

⁵NSC, “Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East,” August 1954, *USVN*, Book 10, 731–741.

of reconstruction that would have taxed the most skilled and experienced government. The former colonial masters complicated the problem by stripping the cities of everything of value as they left, including even typewriters and radium for hospital X-ray machines. Some disgruntled French soldiers joined Lansdale's psywar operatives in acts of sabotage. Departure to the South of large numbers of northerners embarrassed the DRV and deprived it of the services of skilled workers, government functionaries, and farmers. Ho and his compatriots had exacerbated already formidable problems by implementing in 1953 a massive land reform campaign that redistributed some 2 million acres. This top-down "reform" was brutally implemented; as many as 15,000 people were executed. It crippled agricultural production and worsened existing food shortages. In time Ho and Giap were compelled to issue public apologies. The DRV did have a large, battle-tested army. Ho was still the best-known and most venerated nationalist leader. The Viet Minh continued to hope that elections would be held. In the meantime, they settled on a North-first strategy that focused on rebuilding Tonkin to serve as a base for war in the South should that become necessary.⁶

In southern Vietnam, chaos reigned. The colonial economy depended entirely on exports of rice and rubber to finance essential imports. It had been devastated by nearly fourteen years of war and was held together by enormous French military expenditures that would soon cease. The French had finally granted unqualified independence to the State of Vietnam in June 1954, but the government, still nominally presided over by Bao Dai, was a fiction. Assuming the premiership in the summer of 1954, the staunchly anti-French Ngo Dinh Diem inherited antiquated institutions patterned on French practices and ill-suited to the needs of an independent nation—an "oriental despotism with a French accent," one American scornfully labeled it. Diem's government lacked experienced civil servants. Tainted by its long association with France, it had no base of support in the countryside or among the non-Communist nationalists in Saigon. Its army had been created by the French out of desperation in the last stages of the war and was accurately dismissed by General Navarre as a "rabble."⁷

⁶Boot, *Lansdale*, pp. 219–226; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York, 2018), pp. 81–83.

⁷Robert McClintock to State Department, May 20, 1953, and May 8, 1954, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 13: 575, 1519. Hereafter cited as *FR* with date and volume number.

Political fragmentation was the fundamental fact of life. Historically, southern Vietnam had been ethnically and culturally diverse, and its mountains and rivers had further segmented its people into subgroups. French divide and rule tactics also contributed to what has been variously called a “collage of mini states,” “the least coherent territory in the world,” or the “Wild South.” The French army remained, and French officials persisted in trying to influence their former colony. The Viet Minh retained sizeable pockets of control in the Mekong Delta and even on Saigon’s doorstep. The so-called sects, politico-religious organizations with their own governments and armies that had been bankrolled by the French during the recent war, ruled parts of the Delta and Cho Lon, a largely Chinese suburb of Saigon. The native Montagnards had a large measure of autonomy in the Central Highlands. Viewing a mass emigration from the North as a possible means to tip the political balance and perhaps even win the 1956 elections, the French and Americans actively encouraged southerners to cross the seventeenth parallel. Within weeks after Geneva, northerners, including many Catholics, began pouring into predominantly Buddhist southern Vietnam at the rate of 7,000 a day, adding new religious and ethnic tensions to an already volatile mix. Had the United States looked all over the world it might not have found a less promising place for an experiment in nation building.⁸

Some U.S. officials issued stern warnings about the pitfalls of nation building in South Vietnam. A National Intelligence Estimate of August 1954 admonished that even with solid support from the United States, the chances of establishing a strong, stable government were “poor.”⁹ When asked to formulate a program for training a South Vietnamese army, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) responded that it would be “hopeless” to build an army without a “reasonably strong, stable civil government in control.”¹⁰ Agreeing that the situation in South Vietnam was “utterly hopeless,” Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson urged the United States to get out as “completely and as soon as possible.”

⁸Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, 2017), p. 397; Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), pp. 13–23.

⁹National Intelligence Estimate 63-5-54, “Post-Geneva Outlook in Indochina,” August 3, 1954, *USVN*, Book 10, 692.

¹⁰Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense, August 4, 12, 1954, *ibid.*, 701–702, 759–760.

In words that would take on the ring of prophecy, he warned that he could “see nothing but grief in store for us if we remained in that area.”¹¹

Eisenhower and Dulles were not deterred by these gloomy forecasts. Dulles admitted that the chances of success might not exceed 1 in 10. On the other hand, he and the president agreed that to do nothing risked the probable loss to Communism of a vital area. The administration could not afford to act only when success was assured, the secretary explained to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Vietnam was one of those places where it was necessary to “put up a good stout effort even though it is by no means certain that we will succeed.” They seem also to have felt that because of the purity of its motives and the superiority of its methods, the United States might succeed where the French had failed. In its first two years in office, moreover, the administration had, with limited effort, toppled unfriendly governments in Iran and Guatemala, and Eisenhower and Dulles may have concluded that they could beat the odds in Vietnam as well. Admitting that he was indulging in the “familiar hen-and-egg argument as to which comes first,” Dulles flatly informed the JCS that a strong army would do more than anything else to stabilize the government of South Vietnam.¹²

His arguments eventually prevailed. At an NSC meeting on October 22, 1954, Eisenhower affirmed with “great conviction” that “in the lands of the blind, one-eyed men are kings,” by which he presumably meant that despite the obstacles, the United States had the resources and ingenuity to succeed.¹³ Shortly after, the administration committed itself to a major aid program for South Vietnam. The commitment was carefully limited and conditioned on Diem’s instituting major reforms, but its significance was unmistakable: the experiment in nation building was under way.

NGO DINH DIEM

The man to whom Eisenhower made the fateful commitment had impeccable credentials as a nationalist and, from the U.S. standpoint, more important, as an anti-Communist. One of nine children of Ngo Dinh Kha, an official at the imperial court of Hue, Ngo Dinh Diem

¹¹Record of National Security Council meeting, October 26, 1954, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 2184–2186.

¹²Dulles to Charles E. Wilson, August 18, 1954, *USVN*, Book 10, 728–729.

¹³Record of National Security Council Meeting, October 22, 1954, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 2157.

attended French Catholic schools in Hue and the school of public administration in Hanoi, where, after finishing at the top of his class, he was given an appointment in the bureaucracy of the protectorate of Annam. A devout Catholic, he became a staunch opponent of communism before he became a nationalist. As a village supervisor in central Vietnam, he unearthed a Communist-inspired uprising in 1929 and severely punished its leaders. The French rewarded him with an appointment as minister of the interior, the highest position in the government, but when they refused to enact the reforms he had proposed, he resigned and would not return to his post even when threatened with deportation.

During the next two decades, Diem remained active in politics. He was deeply involved in the frantic maneuvering that took place at the end of World War II, rejecting offers of a post from the Japanese, the Viet Minh, and Bao Dai, but only after they refused to meet his terms. When the formation of Bao Dai's government in 1949 and the Viet Minh shift toward the Communist bloc seemed to foreclose all his options, he journeyed to Rome and then settled at a Maryknoll seminary in Lakewood, New Jersey. In the United States, he lectured widely, and his impassioned appeals for an independent, non-Communist Vietnam attracted him to such luminaries as Catholic prelate Francis Cardinal Spellman, Democratic senators John F. Kennedy and Mike Mansfield, and Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas. He also kept in close touch with people in Vietnam who were plotting his return to power.¹⁴

Diem's fervent nationalism and administrative experience made him an obvious choice for the premiership of an independent Vietnam. He brought to the office personal traits that would prove both assets and liabilities in governing and would in time provoke conflict with his patron, the United States. Among his most noteworthy qualities was a determination to persist in the face of severe challenge and even threats to his person. He had a remarkable penchant for survival. He was a man of principle, but he also inclined toward an all-or-nothing integrity that limited his ability to deal with the intractable problems and deep-seated conflicts he faced. In many ways a skilled politician, he was also an introverted and self-absorbed elitist who did not relate

¹⁴Edward Miller, "Vision, Power, and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem," in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn Young, (eds.), *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (New York, 2008), pp. 137–143. See also Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, N.C., 2004), pp. 27–29

easily to the people he served. A compulsive talker—"a single question was likely to provoke a dissertation for an hour or more," journalist Robert Shaplen observed—he was a poor listener who seemed almost indifferent to the reaction he evoked in others.¹⁵ He lacked the charisma of Ho Chi Minh. Dismissed by Americans at that time and later as a man who sought to restore South Vietnam to its old ways, he was in fact a dedicated modernizer with his own vision for his country. Although accepting U.S. aid, he often staunchly resisted American ways of doing things.

One of the more enduring myths of U.S. involvement in Vietnam is that Washington—and specifically the CIA—contrived to put Diem in power in 1954. In truth, he was far more the master of his own fate than often patronizing Americans have been willing to concede. In exile, he lobbied relentlessly for U.S. backing while in Saigon his brother and alter ego, Ngo Dinh Nhu, worked feverishly to build a base of political support. In both countries, Diem stood apart from the meager competition. His Catholicism, anti-Communism, and anti-French nationalism, along with his ability to speak English, appealed to Americans. Rising non-Communist demands for full independence, a position he had long supported, made him attractive to South Vietnamese. The challenge was to establish the conditions of his service, and this was done mostly in a series of shadowy contacts between Nhu and CIA operatives in Saigon. Diem made clear to Bao Dai he would serve only if he had full power and U.S. support. American officials agreed to back him provided that the United States alone would be responsible for training the army and his government would resist the Viet Minh in the South and reject any proposal for a coalition government. Nhu's assent ensured U.S. aid. Recognizing the essentiality of such assistance, Bao Dai offered Diem the premiership. What is not clear is whether the United States made its support of South Vietnam conditional on the appointment of Diem.¹⁶

Many top U.S. officials found little encouragement in Diem's assumption of power. Indeed, what is striking in retrospect is the extent to which early on-the-scene estimates of the prime minister's leadership potential anticipated the problems that would develop later. From Geneva, Walter Bedell Smith did express hope that Diem might be

¹⁵ Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York, 1966), p. 104.

¹⁶ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 52–53; Kiernan, *Viet Nam*, pp. 400–401.

a “modern political Joan of Arc” who could “rally the country behind him.” In Paris, however, Ambassador Douglas Dillon was reassured by the emergence of this “Yogi-like mystic” only because the standard set by his predecessors had been so low. Within weeks after Diem took office, Chargé Robert McClintock in Saigon characterized him as a “messiah without a message,” complained of his “narrowness of view,” and commented scornfully that his only “formulated policy is to ask immediate American assistance in every form.”¹⁷

Throughout the fall and winter of 1954–1955, Diem was the focal point of a bitter and protracted conflict between the United States and France. Controversy was probably inevitable given the accumulated tensions of four years of uneasy partnership. It was sharpened by profound mutual suspicions that extended from top policy levels in Paris and Washington down to the operational level in Saigon. The French doubted Diem’s capacity to lead, viewed him as a threat to implementation of the Geneva Accords, and actively sought to get rid of him. The Americans feared, with justification, that Paris was playing a double game, seeking to maintain its position in the south while attempting to build bridges to Hanoi. U.S. officials also feared that the French inclination to let the best man win the upcoming election would bring about a Ho Chi Minh victory. The French had always resented American intrusion in Vietnam. They suspected that the United States was using Diem to supplant them. Diem has that “one rare quality, so precious in Asia,” a French journalist snarled, “he is pro-American.”¹⁸ Differences over Vietnam were exacerbated by French rejection of the European Defense Community, which strained Franco-American relations to the breaking point and, at least momentarily, left the Western alliance in disarray.

In Vietnam, the United States now held most of the cards, and it eventually imposed its will on a recalcitrant France. The French still depended on American aid to support their army in Vietnam, and Washington used this leverage in the fall of 1954 to extract a commitment to support Diem. The Eisenhower administration also insisted on giving its economic and military aid directly to the Diem government rather than funneling it through the French mission in Saigon, as Paris had proposed. Throughout the winter of 1954–1955, French officials

¹⁷T. B. Miller (ed.), *Australian Foreign Minister: The Diaries of R. G. Casey, 1951–1960* (London, 1972), p. 159; Dillon to State Department, May 24, 1954, *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 1608–1609; McClintock to State Department, July 4, 1954, *ibid.*, 1783–1784.

¹⁸Quoted in *FR*, 1952–1954, 13: 2333; Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY, 2007), pp. 118–119.

insisted that Diem was incapable of running the government and proposed that he be replaced by Bao Dai or some other reputable nationalist figure. Dulles would have none of it. If Bao Dai was the only person who could save Vietnam, the secretary concluded, "then indeed we must be desperate." He conceded Diem's shortcomings but accepted Ambassador Donald Heath's argument "that there is no one to take his place who would serve US interests better."¹⁹ The unstinting support provided by Dulles and the United States enabled Diem to remain in power against strong French opposition.

Timely American backing also helped Diem thwart a series of military plots against his government. The U.S. embassy foiled a coup attempt in the fall of 1954 by making it known that a change of government would result in termination of American aid. Lansdale helped abort another coup in November. A former advertising executive, he had served in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II and afterward had assisted Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay in suppressing the Huk rebellion. An imaginative operator, he had quickly ingratiated himself with Diem and became one of the prime minister's most trusted advisers and vocal supporters. Learning that a group of army officers was plotting to overthrow the government, he lured several of the ringleaders out of the country with an expense-paid trip to Manila. The scheme quickly collapsed.²⁰

Working closely with France, the United States also helped Diem cope with one of the most urgent problems he confronted during his first year in office. Taking advantage of the free movement clause in the Geneva Accords, thousands of regroupes came South in 1954–1955. Officially called "refugees," an appellation designed to underscore the existence of two separate states, the group included large numbers of Catholics who understandably feared persecution at the hands of the Communists. They responded more to the calls of their priests and bishops that "God is not here anymore" than to CIA propaganda. Some were drawn southward by the fact that Diem was a Catholic. Northerners who had worked with the French government or served in the Vietnamese National Army also feared reprisals if they remained. Some emigrants left to join family in the South or seek new opportunities.

¹⁹ Embassy Paris to State Department, December 19, 1954, *USVN*, Book 10, 826–834; Heath to Walter Robertson, December 17, 1954, *ibid.*, 824–825.

²⁰ Boot, *Lansdale*, pp. 235–236.

The DRV acquiesced in their departure until its magnitude became clear.²¹ In all, more than 800,000 regroupées braved North Vietnamese harassment and obstructionism, crammed ships, and an arduous sea passage to Saigon or other southern ports. French and American personnel collaborated to ensure the success of what was dubbed Passage to Freedom. Along with private charitable organizations, they established reception centers and offered emergency food, clothing, and medical care to the newcomers. Himself a northerner and Catholic, Diem was sympathetic to the refugees, and his government gave them funds to build new dwellings and purchase clothing and food. Passage to Freedom was one of the most successful refugee operations in history, for which both French and American publicists claimed credit. The dramatic story of the diaspora linked Americans to South Vietnam in a very personal way. Diem's effective handling of the short-term problems created by the refugees was cited as early evidence of his ability to govern South Vietnam under U.S. tutelage.²²

Resettlement and integration of the migrants proved far more difficult. The GVN attached high priority to the task, and the United States committed \$93 million, half of its non military aid program. But the fledgling government was not prepared to handle so many people. The program severely taxed its limited resources and diverted attention from urgent matters like economic development. Diem designed two major resettlement programs, one in the Central Highlands and the other in the Mekong Delta, with the aim of protecting vulnerable regions, strengthening his power base, and promoting economic growth. In all, some 600,000 migrants settled in 319 villages. Many arrived without any resources and had difficulty getting what they needed to begin new lives. Often the newcomers huddled together and did not integrate into southern society. Some drifted off on their own. A U.S. study later concluded that a relatively small number of them achieved an independent existence. The migrants were not always welcomed by southerners, and their presence sometimes incited violence. The addition of large numbers of northerners and Catholics further divided an already fragmented society. Diem's favoritism for them in dispensing aid and government

²¹Peter Hansen, "Bac Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954–1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4 (Fall 2009): 173–211.

²²Ronald B. Frankum, Jr., *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954–1965* (Lubbock, Tex., 2007), pp. 14, 28, 36, 100–112, 138; Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, pp. 140–171.

appointments provoked anger among southerners and later became one of the major indictments against him. Americans and South Vietnamese both had a lot vested in the program and claimed dramatic success. Their narrative of self-praise was not based on reality.²³

THE SECTS CRISIS

Diem barely survived the sects crisis of 1955. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao represented the most potent political forces in the fragmented society of post-Geneva Vietnam. Organized along the lines of the Catholic Church with a pope as head, the Cao Dai claimed two million adherents, maintained an army of 20,000, and exercised political control over much of the Mekong Delta. Also centered in the delta, the Hoa Hao had as many as one million followers and an army of 15,000. The Binh Xuyen, a mafia-like organization headed by a colorful brigand named Bay Vien, had an army of 25,000 men, earned huge revenues from gambling, an opium factory, and prostitution in Saigon, and actually ran the city's police force. Unable to subdue the sects while fighting the Viet Minh, the French had given them virtual autonomy. Accustomed to running their own affairs, they refused to surrender their power or fortunes to the new national government.²⁴

Diem's divide-and-conquer tactics at first united the sects against him. To win their support, he offered the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao cabinet posts. Lansdale journeyed deep into the jungles near the Cambodian border and bribed (he preferred the word "payoff") the most important Cao Dai leaders to work with the government. The U.S. embassy backed Diem by warning that if the sects overthrew the president, American aid would be withdrawn, leaving South Vietnam at the mercy of the Viet Minh. Diem stubbornly refused to negotiate with the Binh Xuyen, however, and his rapprochement with the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao broke down when he rejected their demands for autonomy within their own territories. In the spring of 1955, the sects joined the Binh Xuyen in an all-out assault against the government. By March, government forces and sect armies were waging open warfare in the streets of Saigon.

²³Jessica Elkind, "'The Virgin Mary Is Going South': Refugee Settlement in South Vietnam, 1954–1956," *Diplomatic History* 38 (November 2014): 987–1016.

²⁴Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York, 2009), p. 80.

Diem's mishandling of the sects persuaded top French and U.S. officials in Saigon that he must be removed. Gen. Paul Ely, the French high commissioner for Vietnam, advised the American Embassy that Diem verged on megalomania and probably could not be saved, and if he were, "we shall have spared for Vietnam the worst Prime Minister it ever had." Eisenhower had appointed Gen. J. Lawton Collins (called "Lightning Joe" for his bold and decisive military leadership) as his Special Representative to Vietnam with the rank of ambassador. The general had expressed misgivings about Diem from the time he arrived in Saigon. The sects crisis persuaded him that Ely was right.

Collins's repeated calls for Diem's ouster in the spring of 1955 spurred week-to-week reassessments in Washington and rampant political maneuvering. Either to confirm his own views or to cover the administration's political flank, Dulles consulted Senator Mansfield, widely known as that body's Asian expert (and also a close acquaintance of Diem). The senator threatened to cut off aid to South Vietnam if Diem was deposed. Eisenhower and Dulles acquiesced. Soon after, in response to another Collins plea for Diem's removal, Eisenhower and Dulles appeared ready to go along. But Mansfield forced a compromise by which Diem would be retained as president, a largely titular position, while the power to govern was given to someone else. When Collins strenuously objected, the administration brought him home for consultation. He could not budge Mansfield, but this time he appears to have won over the president and even a more reluctant Dulles.²⁵

While Collins was en route to Vietnam to implement the change, a sudden turn of events gave Diem another chance. Lansdale's urgent warning to CIA headquarters that Diem was the best that could be hoped for and that the only winner from dumping him would be the Viet Minh prompted a stay order on the overthrow decision. When the Binh Xuyen subsequently launched a mortar attack on the presidential palace, Diem ordered his army into battle. To the surprise of everyone, it drove the opposition back into the Cho Lon district of Saigon. Although instructed to remain neutral, many Americans openly sided with Diem. General John W. O'Daniel, chief of the U.S. military mission, "rode past the Vietnamese troops in his sedan, flying the American flag . . . and gave them the thumbs-up sign, shouting 'Give em' hell, boys.'"²⁶ Lansdale convinced a skeptical embassy that the successful counterattack

²⁵Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, pp. 175–216.

²⁶Boot, *Lansdale*, p. 265; Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York, 1972), p. 288.

demonstrated the loyalty of the army and Diem's strength as a leader. At a critical moment in the struggle the ubiquitous CIA agent persuaded Diem to ignore a cable from Bao Dai demanding his resignation.

Diem's success against the Binh Xuyen produced a U.S. policy reversal of momentous significance. Senate leaders, including Mansfield and California Republican William Knowland, lobbied furiously for Diem's retention. Having lost the first round to Collins, Dulles, with the support of his brother, CIA director Allen Dulles, exploited the developments in Saigon. Arguing that Diem was the only means to "save South Vietnam and counteract revolution" and that he must be supported "wholeheartedly," the secretary persuaded the president to stick by a man whose political career had appeared doomed just days before.²⁷

The American commitment to Diem provoked a final—and, not unwelcome—crisis with France. In a dramatic confrontation in Paris in mid-May, Prime Minister Edgar Faure argued heatedly that Diem was "not only incapable but mad" and that France could "no longer take risks with him": If the United States persisted in its support, France would have to withdraw from Vietnam.²⁸ Dulles perceived that the French presence had permitted the United States to avoid major commitments in the region and to blame failures on its ally. He also recognized, as the Joint Chiefs warned, that a French withdrawal, although desirable from a long-term standpoint, would leave the new nation highly vulnerable for the short term.

By the spring of 1955, however, Dulles concluded that the French had outlived their usefulness in the region, and resolution of the German problem permitted the United States for the first time to deal with Indochina issues on their own merits. He thus persuaded the French to remain and support Diem until the Vietnamese could settle the future of their country through elections. He also let it be known that the United States would frame its policies independently and would not feel bound to consult France before acting. In all, it was a bravura performance. This "gentleman's agreement" ensured French support for the short run but separated the United States from France and opened the way for bilateral relations with South Vietnam. Frustrated by Dulles and Diem and faced with rebellion in their North African colonies, the French abandoned what remained of their dreams of

²⁷Dulles to State Department, May 8, 1955, *USVN*, Book 10, 962–963.

²⁸*Ibid.*

influence and began a phased withdrawal from what had been the most glittering jewel in the French Union. The United States had already begun to replace France by assuming primary responsibility for the survival of the Saigon regime.²⁹

Buoyed by his successes and by assurances of U.S. support, Diem set out to consolidate his power. His army drove the Binh Xuyen deep into the swamps east of Saigon—where it eventually surrendered—and routed Hoa Hao forces in the Mekong Delta. Now isolated, the Cao Dai saw no choice but to come over to Diem's side.

Spurning U.S. advice and North Vietnamese protests, the premier also blocked the national elections called for by the Geneva Accords. This issue was especially awkward for the United States, given its traditional support for self-determination and its Cold War advocacy of elections for divided nations such as Germany and Korea. U.S. officials saw quite clearly, however, that Ho Chi Minh's reputation as a nationalist leader made elections risky and that the more populous North, operating under iron Communist discipline, was "mathematically certain" to win. Not eager for elections but not wanting to appear to obstruct them, Americans encouraged Diem to agree in principle while delaying and insisting on conditions that North Vietnam would not accept. They also urged him to discuss with the DRV the modalities for elections. Ignoring his American advisers, the premier refused even to talk with the North and ignored the July 1955 deadline for consultations. He adamantly insisted that because South Vietnam had not signed the Geneva Accords it would not be "tied down" by them. In any event, there could be no free elections where Communists were involved.³⁰

Diem shrewdly used a hastily called "referendum" as a substitute for the national elections called for by Geneva, a "legal" means to get rid of Bao Dai, and a way to establish claims of legitimacy for his newly created Republic of Vietnam (RVN). He ordered the vote in July 1955 about the time he announced his nonparticipation in talks with the DRV. He and his supporters skillfully managed the referendum, portraying Bao Dai as the "Master Keeper of the Gambling Dens," corrupt, debauched, incompetent, and above all a traitor who had

²⁹Kathryn Statler, "The Diem Experiment: Franco-American Conflict over South Vietnam, July 1954–May 1955," *Journal of American–East Asian Relations* 6 (Summer–Fall 1997): 168–173.

³⁰Statler, *Replacing France*, pp. 156–170.

collaborated with the French and the Viet Minh, and putting forth Diem as the “Savior of the People” who was leading South Vietnam toward modernization and democracy. Diem hailed his overwhelming victory as a sign that South Vietnam had joined the Free World. The obvious contradiction between his claims of democracy and his 98.2 percent electoral majority raised concerns about corruption, frustrated the hopes of those who had put faith in him, and sparked an opposition that would grow steadily in coming years.³¹

The Geneva conferees had assumed that national elections would take place and were caught off guard by Diem’s maneuvers. Preoccupied with other matters, they acquiesced. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev refused to permit a dispute over elections in faraway Vietnam to interfere with his newly proclaimed policy of “peaceful coexistence.” He was happy not to set a dangerous precedent for elections in Germany or Korea. In 1957, the USSR even backed the admission of both Vietnams to the United Nations. Absorbed with domestic problems and not inclined at this point to challenge Moscow, China contented itself with perfunctory protests. France preferred that the elections be held but was powerless to achieve that result.³² As a cosponsor of the Geneva Conference, the British at first sought to implement the accords. They shared France’s low estimate of Diem and feared that with American backing he might destroy the precarious peace in Vietnam. Privately, they scoffed at U.S. willingness to support free elections only when they seemed likely to produce the “desired result.” At the same time, they conceded their inability to influence their more powerful ally. “We are treated like Australia,” Prime Minister Anthony Eden moaned in April 1955. Unwilling to jeopardize their “special relationship” with America for no more than marginal interests in Vietnam, the British abdicated. “If the U.S. takes the responsibility,” Eden affirmed, “they will have to shoulder it before the world.”³³

Preoccupied with its own grave internal problems, shocked by Diem’s unexpected moves, and disappointed by the lack of help

³¹Jessica M. Chapman, “Saving Democracy: South Vietnam’s 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai,” *Diplomatic History* 30 (September 2006): 671–703.

³²Statler, *Replacing France*, pp. 170–172.

³³Quoted in Arthur Combs, “The Path Not Taken: The British Alternative to U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1954–1956,” *Diplomatic History* 19 (Winter 1995): 51.

provided by the major powers, North Vietnam could do little more than condemn the United States for “sabotaging” the elections.

With a boldness few would have predicted, through singular good fortune, political savvy, and sheer force of will, by the end of 1955 Diem had established unchallenged control over a separate South Vietnam. Within two years, amazingly, he had averted a French–American move to replace him, subdued his major internal rivals, attained unchallenged power, and blocked the elections called for by the Geneva conference. His sublime self-confidence and his willingness to act swiftly and decisively were the keys to his early success. Those Americans who had supported him—and some who had not—now hailed him as a “miracle man,” a courageous and effective anti-Communist leader who had triumphed against all odds. The Eisenhower administration proudly affirmed its support. Diem could not but have concluded in the aftermath of 1955 that he rather than the Americans had properly appraised the situation and devised the correct response.³⁴

Diem’s refusal to participate in the elections ended, at least temporarily, any chance for the reunification of Vietnam, and the division of the country increasingly took on permanent form. Diem would not permit any traffic with the North, including even a postal arrangement. The seventeenth parallel became one of the most restricted boundaries in the world. The breakdown of the Geneva Accords all but assured the resumption of war in Vietnam.

NATION BUILDING IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Having assisted the survival of the Diem regime through its tumultuous first years, the United States supported it lavishly for the rest of the decade. The preservation of an independent South Vietnam as a bulwark against further Communist penetration of Southeast Asia remained the goal of U.S. policy. During the mid-1950s, the major battleground of the Cold War shifted from Europe to the newly emerging nations of Asia and Africa, where the United States and the Soviet Union vied for influence and sought to demonstrate the superiority of their respective systems. In this context, South Vietnam assumed even greater importance as a testing ground for the viability of American ideology and institutions in underdeveloped nations.

The experiment in nation building, launched on a crash basis, quickly assumed the form of a crusade. Private charitable agencies distributed

³⁴Miller, *Misalliance*, p. 123.

food, soap, toothbrushes, and emergency medical supplies and worked zealously to improve amenities in refugee camps. Nongovernmental organizations such as CARE and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) set out to teach villagers modern methods of farming, fishing, and forestry, created health and sanitation programs to curb disease, and initiated self-help projects to promote economic development, in the process seeking to educate the South Vietnamese in the values of democratic capitalism. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) went further. Originally established to assist refugees from Nazi Germany, the IRC subsequently shifted its efforts to the Cold War. In Vietnam, it professed to stand as a “lighthouse of inspiration” for those eager to preserve and broaden “concepts of democratic culture.” It staged anti-Communist plays in the villages and, in the cities, sponsored recitals and art exhibitions built around democratic themes. It also established Freedom Centers in Saigon, Hue, and Dalat to win over disaffected Vietnamese intellectuals and students through such diverse and apparently contradictory efforts as research into “pure Vietnamese culture” and English-language courses.³⁵

Meanwhile, in the United States, liberals and conservatives joined hands to form the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), a group created to enlighten Americans about the “realities” in Vietnam and to lobby the U.S. government to support Diem. “A free Vietnam means a greater guarantee of freedom in the world,” the AFV affirmed in its statement of purpose. “There is a little bit of all of us in that faraway country,” Gen. O’Daniel, a charter member, would write in 1960.³⁶

Already deeply committed to South Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration needed little urging from private lobby groups. From 1955 to 1960, it poured more than \$1.5 billion in economic and military assistance into South Vietnam. By 1961, Diem’s government ranked fifth among all recipients of U.S. foreign aid.

The aid program accorded top priority to building a South Vietnamese army. Dulles had insisted from the outset that the development of a modern army was an essential first step in promoting stable government.

³⁵Robert McAlister reports to IRC, May–October 1955, document #4084, William J. Donovan Papers, U.S. Army Military Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. For CARE and CRS, see Delia Pergande, “Private Voluntary Aid in Vietnam: The Humanitarian Politics of Catholic Relief Services and CARE, 1954–1965” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1999), especially pp. 43–157.

³⁶American Friends of Vietnam, “Statement of Purpose,” n.d., copy in Hans Morgenthau Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; John W. O’Daniel, *The Nation That Refused to Starve* (New York, 1960), p. 11.

The withdrawal of French military forces; the presence of large, experienced armies in the north; and continued instability in the south all underscored the necessity of providing South Vietnam with a strong military force. Between 1955 and 1961, military assistance constituted more than 78 percent of the total American foreign aid program.

In early 1956, the United States assumed from France full responsibility for training the South Vietnamese Army. The Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon undertook a crash program to build it into an effective force. Limited by the Geneva Accords to a strength of 342 men, the MAAG was augmented by various subterfuges to 692. From 1955 to 1960, it was headed by Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, a veteran of the two world wars and Korea who earned the sobriquet "Hanging Sam" by exclaiming during a court martial for the rape and murder of a little girl "I've heard enough! Let's hang the sonovabitch!"³⁷

The MAAG faced truly formidable obstacles. The United States inherited from France an army of more than 250,000 soldiers, poorly organized, trained, and equipped; lacking in national spirit; suffering from low morale; and deficient in officers and trained specialists such as engineers and artillerymen. The army's supply problems were compounded by the French, who took most of the best equipment with them and left behind tons of useless and antiquated matériel. The U.S. advisers had to bridge profound language and cultural gaps. Despite good intentions, they often patronized the Vietnamese, sometimes even referring to them as "natives." "Probably the greatest single problem encountered by the MAAG," one of its officers wrote at the time, "is the continual task of assuring the Vietnamese that the United States is not a colonial power—an assurance that must be renewed on an individual basis by each new adviser."³⁸ From this weak foundation and in the face of serious practical difficulties, the MAAG was assigned the challenging mission of building an army capable of maintaining internal security and holding the line against an invasion from the north until outside forces could be brought in.

Under the MAAG's direction, the United States reorganized, equipped, and trained the South Vietnamese Army. It provided roughly \$85 million per year in military equipment, including uniforms, small arms, vehicles, tanks, and helicopters. It paid the salaries of officers and

³⁷Harold J. Meyer, *Hanging Sam: A Military Biography of General Samuel T. Williams* (Denton, Tex., 1990), p. 108.

³⁸Judson J. Conner, "Teeth for the Free World Dragon," *Army Information Digest*, (November 1960): 41; Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, D.C., 1983), pp. 278–282.

enlisted personnel, financed the construction of military installations, and underwrote the cost of training programs. The MAAG scaled down the army to a strength of 150,000 and organized it into mobile divisions capable of a dual mission. It launched an ambitious training program, based on American models, including a Command and General Staff College for senior officers, officer candidate schools, and specialized schools for noncoms. In 1960 alone, more than 1,600 Vietnamese soldiers participated in the Off-Shore Program, studying in the United States and other Free-World countries. Official publicists proclaimed by 1960 that the United States had achieved a “minor miracle,” transforming what had been “little more than a marginal collection of armed men” into an efficient, modern army.³⁹

As so often in Vietnam, official rhetoric bore little resemblance to reality. The army still lacked sufficient officers in 1960, and Gen. Williams later conceded that many of the officers holding key positions were of “marginal quality.” As one of Williams’s top assistants put it, “No one can make good . . . commanders by sending uneducated, poorly trained, and poorly equipped and motivated boys to Benning or Knox or Leavenworth or Quantico.”⁴⁰ Diem’s determination to maintain tight control over the army frustrated the MAAG’s efforts to establish a smoothly functioning command system. The president personally ordered units into action, bypassing the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. He chose safe rather than competent officers for critical posts. He promoted them on the basis of loyalty rather than merit and constantly shuffled the high command—“generals and colonels, it was said jokingly in Saigon, were the only first-class travelers in Vietnam.”⁴¹

The military was trained for the wrong mission. The MAAG would be sharply criticized for failing to prepare the South Vietnamese Army for dealing with guerrillas, but from the perspective of the mid-1950s its emphasis appears quite logical. Confronting the near-impossible task of building from scratch an army capable of performing two quite diverse missions, the MAAG naturally leaned toward the conventional warfare with which it was most familiar. At least until 1958, moreover, the countryside was quiet and Diem appeared firmly entrenched. Williams and most of his staff had served in Korea, and the seeming resemblance

³⁹Conner, “Teeth for the Free World Dragon,” p. 33.

⁴⁰Robert H. Whitlow, “The United States Military in South Vietnam, 1954–1960” (Master’s thesis, University of Kentucky, 1972), p. 87.

⁴¹Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam between Two Truces* (New York, 1966), p. 117.

between the two situations inclined them to focus on the threat of invasion from the north. Also learning from experiences in Greece and the Philippines, they doubted that North Vietnam could mount an insurgency capable of threatening the South. The army was therefore trained, organized, and equipped to fight a conventional war. Its inadequacies were obvious only after South Vietnam was enveloped by a rural insurgency.

A paramilitary force, the Civil Guard, was to assist the army in maintaining internal security, but it was hampered from the outset by conflicts over organization and training. Advisers from Michigan State University sought a small group modeled after state police forces in the United States and trained and equipped for law enforcement at the province and local level. Backed by the MAAG and the CIA, Diem preferred a paramilitary force equipped with helicopters, armored cars, and bazookas and capable of small-scale military operations against insurgents. Squabbling between the two factions led to a cutoff of American aid in 1957. Diem eventually prevailed, and U.S. assistance was restored, but the Civil Guard never became an effective force.⁴²

The United States also provided South Vietnam more than \$127 million in direct economic aid and \$16 million in technical assistance. Academic theorists of modernization and political operatives viewed economic development as the solution to the problems of poverty, political instability, and internal conflict that wracked so many new nations. More than 1,500 Americans, volunteers and government workers, made the U.S. mission in Saigon the largest in the world. Certain of the universality of their own methods, institutions, and values, brimming with hubris from successes in Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea, and keenly aware of South Vietnam's urgent need for help, the visitors set out to create a modern state that would be invulnerable to communism and would demonstrate to the world the magic of the American way.⁴³

The aid workers took on a variety of tasks. They helped repair the vast destruction from more than a decade of war by rebuilding highways, railroads, and canals. Educators supervised the founding of schools and furnished textbooks. Public health experts provided drugs

⁴²Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Ky., 2016), pp. 3, 9–11, 16–17.

⁴³Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2002); James M. Carter, *United States and State Building: 1954–1968* (New York, 2008), p. 111; Elkind, *Aid Under Fire*, pp. 150–159.

and medical supplies and assisted in training nurses and paramedics. Public administration specialists from Michigan State University (MSU) instructed Vietnamese civil servants in skills ranging from typing to personnel management. Experts from MSU's school of law enforcement established a police academy to train what one brochure called "Vietnam's Finest," updated the methods of the Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation (VBI), and even helped the Saigon police install stop lights and paint street lines to better manage growing traffic problems in the burgeoning metropolis.⁴⁴

The nation builders inevitably encountered problems. Most of them lacked knowledge of Vietnamese history, culture, and folkways. Few spoke the language. However well intentioned, their cultural arrogance and determination to impose their own ways could not but come across to the South Vietnamese as yet another form of colonialism. As the U.S. presence mushroomed and spread into many areas of society, Americans increasingly butted up against Vietnamese nationalism, provoking tensions that would grow through the decade.

Such conflicts were especially evident in the rural areas where 80 percent of South Vietnam's population lived, the insurgency was deeply rooted, and to which the United States devoted particular attention. U.S. "agents of agricultural change," many of them volunteers, brought a missionary zeal to the selling of ideas and methods that had made American farming uniquely productive. They sought to revolutionize Vietnamese agriculture, curb rural poverty, and thereby head off the insurgency. They implemented a variety of ideas, including even a 4T program for young people patterned after their own 4H. Sometimes, they emphasized achieving their own goals rather than meeting the needs of Vietnam's farmers. The ideas they sought to export ran up against deeply engrained customs and traditions. The South Vietnamese sometimes resisted or were outright hostile to U.S. proposals. On occasion, they accepted the aid and used it in their own way. The Americans in turn grew frustrated and questioned the Vietnamese work ethic. U.S. aid helped spur a modest increase in production, but it did not significantly change Vietnamese agriculture or combat rural poverty. As in other areas, the ties of U.S. aid workers to an increasingly repressive South Vietnamese government undermined their good intentions.⁴⁵

⁴⁴U.S. Operations Mission, *Building Economic Strength* (Washington, D.C., 1958), p. 75; John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance* (East Lansing, Mich., 1998), pp. 41–84.

⁴⁵Elkind, *Aid Under Fire*, pp. 3–22, 62–133.

Much of U.S. assistance came through what was called the Commodity Import Program (CIP). Described by one zealous U.S. official as the “greatest invention since the wheel,” it was designed to make up South Vietnam’s huge foreign exchange deficit while preventing the runaway inflation that might be set loose by a massive infusion of dollars into a vulnerable economy. The idea was that in time economic growth would enable South Vietnam to wean itself from American assistance.

Through the CIP, Vietnamese importers ordered from foreign export firms goods ranging from foodstuffs to automobiles, with Washington footing the bill. The importers paid for the goods in piasters, which then went into a “counterpart fund” held by the National Bank of Vietnam and were used by the government to cover operating expenses and finance development projects. From 1955 to 1959, the import program generated almost \$1 billion in counterpart funds.

The CIP covered South Vietnam’s foreign exchange deficit and, by making available large quantities of consumer goods, held inflation in check. American aid helped South Vietnam survive the first few critical years after independence. Indeed, by the late 1950s the new nation appeared to be flourishing. In Saigon, one visitor reported, “the stores and market places are filled with consumer goods; the streets are filled with new motor scooters and expensive automobiles; and in the upper-income residential areas new and pretentious housing is being built.”⁴⁶ After conducting an investigation of the uses of American economic assistance, Democratic senator Gale McGee of Wyoming proposed that South Vietnam be made a “showcase” for the foreign aid program, a place to which people from other countries could be brought to observe firsthand the “wholesome effects of our efforts to help other peoples help themselves.”⁴⁷

Appearances were again deceptive. Although U.S. aid prevented an economic collapse and supported a high standard of living for some people in Saigon, it did little to promote economic development or improve conditions in the villages where more than 90 percent of South Vietnam’s population lived. From 1955 to 1959, military aid was four times greater than economic and technical assistance. Of the nearly \$1 billion in counterpart funds, more than 78 percent went for

⁴⁶Milton C. Taylor, “South Vietnam: Lavish Aid, Limited Progress,” *Pacific Affairs* 34 (1961): 242.

⁴⁷Senate, *Hearings*, 1959, p. 369.

military purposes. Such was the preoccupation with “security” among Vietnamese and Americans alike that those interested in other projects found it expedient to justify them in terms of defense. Saigon and Washington insisted that the continuing presence of serious external and internal threats allowed them no choice, but the heavy emphasis on military aid left little money for long-range economic development. The military program was the “tail that wags the dog,” a Senate committee pointed out in 1960.⁴⁸

The CIP also contained built-in weaknesses. It was enormously wasteful, importers frequently ordered far more than could be consumed, and it created abundant opportunities for fast profits. The most serious weakness was that it financed an artificially high standard of living while contributing little to development. As late as 1957, about two-thirds of the imports consisted of consumer goods. Much of the wealth was drained off in conspicuous consumption rather than going into industry or agriculture. Diem stubbornly resisted American attempts to reduce the proportion of consumer goods, arguing that a lowering of living standards would create domestic unrest. The United States made some changes on its own, dropping from the list such obvious luxury items as record players and water skis and reducing consumer goods to about one-third of the total, but with little effect. Robert Scigliano concluded in 1963 that the CIP had been a “large-scale relief project” that had not promoted “significant economic development in Vietnam.”⁴⁹

The massive infusion of U.S. aid thus kept South Vietnam alive, but it fostered dependency rather than laying the foundation for a genuine independence. Rice production doubled between 1955 and 1960, but much of the increase was taken up in increased domestic consumption. Gains in industrial productivity were insignificant. South Vietnam relied on a high level of imports to maintain its standard of living and on U.S. money to pay for them. Vietnamese and Americans agreed that a cutback or termination of American assistance would bring economic and political collapse. Vietnam was the “prototype of the dependent economy,” Milton Taylor wrote in 1961, “its level of national income as dependent on outside forces as was the case when the country was a French colony. . . . American aid has built a castle on sand.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *United States Aid Program in Vietnam, Report, February 26, 1960* (Washington, D.C., 1960), p. 8.

⁴⁹Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston, 1964), p. 125.

⁵⁰Taylor, “South Vietnam,” p. 256.

The basic problem of nation building was political. There was much talk about assisting the Vietnamese to construct an American-style democracy. U.S. advisers helped draft a constitution that contained many of the trappings of Western democracies, including a president and legislature elected by popular vote and guarantees of basic political rights. In fact, the United States devoted little attention to political matters and, despite its massive foreign aid program, exerted very little influence. Some Americans naively assumed that Diem shared their political values; others were preoccupied with the security problems that seemed most urgent. Most probably shared Dulles's view that it was enough for Diem to be "competent, anti-Communist and vigorous" and that although representative government was a desirable long-range objective, it could not be accomplished overnight.⁵¹ For whatever reason, the United States did little to promote democracy or even political reform until South Vietnam was swept by revolution.

In both the economic and political realms, Americans met increasingly stubborn resistance from their protégé Ngo Dinh Diem. Often dismissed as backward looking, Diem in truth held very strong views about the direction Vietnamese society should take. His beliefs were influenced by his own country's history and also by the philosophy of French Catholic humanists who had pondered at length the problems of industrial society. He was critical of Marxism, which he believed to be too materialistic and devoid of spirituality, and also of liberal capitalism, whose stress on individualism could produce chaos. Through a philosophy called *personalism*, he sought a middle way by which individuals could balance the fulfillment of their own aspirations with the broader concerns of the community, especially the need for order. He and his chief theorist, Nhu, in the president's words, sought to "adapt the best of our heritage to the modern heritage."⁵² Their personalism was notably vague and indeed impenetrable to most Westerners. But it set their view of a modernized Vietnam and they clung to it doggedly in the face of American intrusion.⁵³

⁵¹Dulles news conference, May 7, 1955, Dulles Papers, Princeton, N.J., Box 99; Frederick Reinhardt oral history interview, *ibid.*

⁵²Catton, *Final Failure*, p. 35.

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 41–50; Edward Miller, "The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem," in Christopher E. Goscha and Christian Ostermann (eds.), *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Asia, 1945–1962* (Stanford, Calif., 2010), pp. 380–382.

Given the strong views and personalities of Diem and Nhu, it is not surprising that they would run afoul of the United States as its presence grew larger. Diem protested the small amount of aid provided and the purposes for which it was given. The United States required that industrial development be based on private enterprise. Diem and his entourage shared the mandarin's contempt for business and the nationalist's distrust of foreign capital. They denounced U.S. attitudes as "medieval and retrograde." They insisted that South Vietnam must have government ownership of major industries, at least at the start. Diem sought the kind of aid that would help his country be strong and independent. He feared and was angered by its growing reliance on the United States. He resented the way U.S. advisers told Vietnamese what to do. He complained that Americans were politically naive and did not understand his country and people. Nhu spoke bluntly of a "clash of civilizations."⁵⁴

Diem's authoritarian governance provoked growing conflict with his own people and concern among Americans. His philosophy of government was succinctly summarized in a line he personally added to the constitution: "The President is vested with the leadership of the nation." He identified *his* principles with the nation's welfare and firmly believed that the people must be guided by the paternalistic hand of those who knew what was best for them. A deeply suspicious person, he rejected compromise. He viewed any opposition as subversion that must be suppressed. Cabinet officers or upper-level civil servants who disagreed with him were promptly dismissed. To appease his American patrons, he occasionally paid lip service to democracy, but in practice he assumed absolute powers. He personally dominated the executive branch of government, reserving to himself total authority for decision making. Unwilling or unable to delegate, he oversaw the operations of the government down to the most minute detail. The executive branch dominated the legislature, which, in any case, was virtually handpicked by careful manipulation of the electoral process. The National Assembly initiated nothing important, and pliantly approved whatever the president submitted.

The government might have survived its authoritarianism had it pursued enlightened policies, but its inability to meet the needs of the people and its ruthless suppression of dissent stirred a rising discontent that eventually brought its downfall. Diem's policies toward the

⁵⁴Catton, *Final Failure*, p. 25.

villages—traditionally the backbone of Vietnamese society—failed badly. Land reform was an urgent task, especially in areas such as the Mekong Delta where landlords owned most of the land, and the Viet Minh had implemented sweeping programs. Diem was deeply committed to land reform, but his program was implemented belatedly and in a cautious manner that alienated both peasants and landlords. Only about one-third of the land worked by tenants was redistributed. The ceiling for landlords was set very high. Of the land made available for redistribution only about 40 percent actually changed hands. The program was implemented slowly and its dictates were not always enforced. In seeking to “harmonize” the perhaps irreconcilable interests of peasants and landlords, Diem’s government managed to antagonize both. Diem was even more passionately devoted to a land resettlement program, initiated in 1957, that he hoped would create a “human wall” against North Vietnamese infiltration in thinly populated areas of the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands as well as relieve population pressures in the cities and expand agricultural production. The program achieved limited success. But tribespeople and ethnic Vietnamese were reluctant to participate. In pushing the program, the regime moved too rapidly and often employed coercion, provoking conflict with its own people and U.S. advisers.⁵⁵

Another “reform” enacted by the government during the 1950s touched off massive resentment in the villages. Diem romanticized villagers as staunchly independent and the forebears of Vietnamese democracy, but he treated them as backward, ignorant, and in need of government direction. In a misguided effort to centralize authority over the villages and check Viet Minh influence, he abolished traditional local elections and began to appoint village and provincial officials. The villagers had enjoyed virtual autonomy for centuries. The fears aroused by the mere presence of outsiders were often heightened by what they did. Many of Diem’s appointees were chosen on the basis of personal loyalty; most were poorly trained for their jobs. Some used their positions for personal enrichment. Province chiefs were known to have arrested villagers on trumped-up charges and then forced them to pay bribes for their release.

Diem’s vigorous assault against political opponents spawned rising discontent in the cities and the countryside. Newspapers that criticized the government were promptly shut down. Nhu’s Vietnamese Bureau of

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 50–71

Investigation rooted out suspected subversives in a manner that would have made F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover blanch. Using authority handed down in various presidential ordinances, the government herded into “reeducation centers” thousands of Vietnamese—Communists and non-Communists alike—who were alleged to be threats to public order. The program was originally aimed at Viet Minh “stay-behinds,” but it was extended to anyone who dared speak out against the government. The regime admitted to the incarceration of 20,000 people by 1956. The campaign was subsequently intensified. The government “has tended to treat the population with suspicion or coerce it,” an American intelligence report concluded in 1960, “and has been rewarded with an attitude of apathy or resentment.”⁵⁶

IMAGES AND REALITY

In a remarkable display of public-private collaboration, U.S. government officials and private citizens mounted in the 1950s an artful propaganda campaign extolling American good deeds in Indochina and lionizing Diem and South Vietnam. One of the folk heroes of the era, Navy doctor Tom Dooley, played a key role in introducing Americans to Vietnam. In his books and lectures, he portrayed the Vietnamese as childlike people in need of Western help but also as sympathetic figures worthy of U.S. support. He embellished his accounts with horrific—and unsubstantiated—tales of Communist atrocities. His blockbuster best seller about Passage to Freedom, *Deliver Us from Evil*, has been called the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the Cold War.⁵⁷ The AFV hired a major New York public relations firm to build support for South Vietnam and Diem. Hollywood producers, with the backing of the ubiquitous Lansdale and the AFV, imaginatively transformed English writer Graham Greene’s virulently anti-American novel, *The Quiet American*, into a passionately pro-U.S. film starring World War II Medal of Honor winner Audie Murphy, a movie, Lansdale told Diem, that “would help win more friends for you and Vietnam in many places in the world. . . .”⁵⁸ Diem himself contributed to the cause by sponsoring exhibits and other

⁵⁶“Special Report on Internal Security Situation in Saigon,” March 7, 1960, *USVN*, Book 10, 1267–1280.

⁵⁷Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, pp. 154–157.

⁵⁸Lansdale to Joseph Mankiewicz, March 17, 1956, and Lansdale to Diem, October 28, 1957, Edward Lansdale Papers, Hoover Institution Library, Stanford, Calif.

events in the United States portraying himself as a worthy successor to Vietnam's national heroes and South Vietnam as a legitimate nation-state and a loyal American ally.⁵⁹

In part no doubt as a result of such propaganda, Diem retained a highly favorable image in the United States until South Vietnam was engulfed by revolution in the early 1960s. It is possible that even those Americans close to the government were unaware until the end of the decade of the extent to which he had alienated his people. In the eyes of most Americans, moreover, his vigorous anti-communism more than compensated for his shortcomings. Apologists such as Professor Wesley Fishel of Michigan State University conceded that Diem had employed authoritarian methods but argued that Vietnam's lack of experience with democracy and the threat of communism left him no choice. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow agreed that Diem's "somewhat authoritarian" government was compatible with U.S. interests and insisted that the United States "look with tolerance" on the government's efforts to develop a political system that conformed to Vietnamese traditions. The American media focused on the stability brought to South Vietnam by the "tough little miracle man." When Diem visited the United States in 1957, he was widely feted. The image persisted even after insurgency had spread across the country. "On his record," *Newsweek's* Ernest Lindley exclaimed in 1959, "he must be rated as one of the ablest free Asian leaders. We can take pride in our support."⁶⁰

THE ORIGINS OF INSURGENCY

At the very time Americans were extolling the "miracles" wrought by Diem, the revolution that would sweep him from power and in time provoke massive U.S. intervention was taking root. Washington later went to great lengths to prove that the Second Indochina War was the result of "aggression from the north," the determination of North Vietnam to impose communism on its southern neighbor. Antiwar critics insisted, on the other hand, that the southern revolution sprang from indigenous sources and, although assisted by the North, retained substantial independence throughout the war.

⁵⁹Matthew Masur, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954-1960," *Diplomatic History* 33 (April 2009): 300-304.

⁶⁰Durbrow to State Department, December 7, 1959, *FR*, 1958-1960, 1: 269; Ernest K. Lindley, "An Ally Worth Having," *Newsweek*, June 29, 1959, 31.

A more complex picture of the origins of the insurgency emerges from newly available documentation. In the summer of 1954, southern and northern Viet Minh differed sharply in their assessment of the Geneva Conference. Southern “stay-behinds” complained that DRV diplomats had squandered at the conference table what had been won in the war. They protested partition, which left them exposed, and feared that they would be abandoned by their northern brethren. By contrast, the DRV leadership initially viewed Geneva as a “big victory” and expressed optimism about the future. France had been defeated and U.S. military intervention averted. The elections provided a mechanism for peaceful unification. Ho Chi Minh was a revered national leader; Bao Dai lacked popular support. The leadership determined to observe the letter and spirit of the Geneva Accords. Such an approach squared with the policies of its major allies, the Soviet Union and China. It would earn the respect of the other Geneva signatories. In any event, Hanoi desperately needed the time before the elections to repair damage from the war, consolidate its power, and build socialism in the North. It hedged by leaving 10–15,000 operatives in the South and having them hide caches of weapons in strategic locations. But it instructed these cadres to pursue the revolution by peaceful means, adhere to the Geneva process, and treat other southerners respectfully to help win the elections. Even in 1955, after Diem had emerged from the chaos in Saigon and blocked the elections, the DRV would go no further than authorize increasingly discontented southerners to step up the political struggle but avoid armed conflict. The “most essential priority” was to focus on the North, which, in the absence of elections, must be built up as a base to liberate the South.⁶¹

During the next two years, Viet Minh in both halves of Vietnam encountered grave difficulties. The revolution in the South experienced what party histories called its “darkest period.” Diem’s anti-Communist campaigns executed more than 2,000 suspected Communists, some by the guillotine. Party membership plummeted to precarious levels. “By the time I return, my hair and beard will turn grey,” one despairing regroupée concluded a poem.⁶² Facing extinction, local leaders

⁶¹Pierre Asselin, “Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954–1955,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9 (Spring 2007): 103–118.

⁶²Balasz Szaiontai, “Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955–1956,” *Journal of Cold War History* 5 (November–December 2005): 415.

appealed for help and increasingly violated the party line by forming militias to forcibly defend themselves, and even to attack exposed Diemist troops.

In the North, Ho and his cohorts also faced massive problems of reconstruction and nation building. The withdrawal of France and the disruption of trade with southern Vietnam added to the economic woes from years of war, leaving shortages of food and consumer goods, rising inflation, and widespread unemployment, a situation dramatically worsened by the disastrous land reform program. A campaign to eradicate capitalist influence in the cities sparked dissent among artists and intellectuals.⁶³ During these difficult times, the party itself was increasingly torn between “North-firsters,” who wanted to focus on the North, and “South-firsters,” who favored mobilizing the North to support the resistance in the South. In December 1956, the factions compromised, agreeing that the North should continue to have priority but authorizing southern insurgents to defend themselves.⁶⁴

Between 1957 and 1960, Hanoi gradually committed itself to the southern insurgency. In March 1957, the DRV approved plans to modernize its own armed forces. More important decisions came in 1959. China’s defiance of the Soviet Union in backing wars of national liberation gave heart to South-firsters. The emergence to a leadership position in Hanoi of Le Duan, who had led the fight in the South during the First Indochina War, helped bring about a more aggressive northern posture. Party leaders recognized that revolutionaries in the South were in desperate straits but also that Diem’s oppressiveness had created a climate favorable for revolution. They worried that the revolution might be extinguished or might survive and elude their control. Some party leaders may also have concluded that a commitment to war in the South might unify a fractured North.⁶⁵

Through the notably ambiguous Resolution 15, the party in early 1959 authorized the insurgents to defend themselves by force, which they were already doing, and to create the conditions for the overthrow of Diem but not set in motion the process, a still cautious move but an important step toward war. With the watchword “absolute secrecy,

⁶³Ibid., pp. 404–418.

⁶⁴Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), pp. 42–43.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 44–62.

absolute security," it established a special force, Group 559 (the number celebrated the date of Ho Chi Minh's birthday), to construct an infiltration route to move personnel and supplies into South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia—the beginning of the fabled Ho Chi Minh Trail. Along with small arms and other equipment, Hanoi also sent South to assume leadership roles Viet Minh who had regrouped after Geneva and in many cases had served in the Peoples' Army of Vietnam (PAVN). These infiltrators traveled individually and out of uniform and claimed to be volunteers. To maintain the illusion of northern noninvolvement, most of them were native southerners. Their job was to train insurgent units and keep the rebellion alive but also to check any drastic actions that might provoke U.S. military intervention.

The Third Party Congress of September 1960 took still more aggressive measures. Le Duan was named party secretary and head of the Politburo, elevating a hawkish figure to a position second only to that of Ho. It formally approved the shift to armed struggle, assigning liberation of the South equal priority with building up the North. To assure itself of control while revving up the rebellion, the Politburo directed southern insurgents to form the National Liberation Front (NLF), a broad-based organization led by Communists but designed to rally all those disaffected with Diem by promising sweeping reforms and the establishment of genuine independence. Hanoi thus carefully concealed its own hand with an ingenious move that created the appearance of an internal struggle in the South that outside powers like the United States had no business getting involved in.⁶⁶

In 1960–1961, revolutionary activity surged in the South. The level of violence increased sharply: In 1958, an estimated 700 government officials were assassinated; in 1960, 2,500. In 1959, the insurgents shifted from hit-and-run attacks to full-scale military operations against government-controlled villages and exposed units of the South Vietnamese Army. Intelligence and propaganda networks that had fallen into disuse after Geneva were reactivated. The insurgents launched vigorous campaigns of political agitation in the villages. Largely as a result of Diem's misguided policies, they found

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 45–47; Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, pp. 88–103.

a ready audience: The peasants were like a “mound of straw ready to be ignited,” a captured guerrilla later told an interrogator.⁶⁷ By the time the NLF was formally organized, the Viet Cong (a derogatory term meaning “Vietnam Communist,” applied to the guerrillas by the Diem regime) had attracted thousands of adherents among the rural population and established a presence in countless villages. Its military forces grew from 2,000 in 1959 to 10,000 in early 1961. By mid-1961, they had pushed Diem’s army out of much of the vital Mekong Delta.

On July 8, 1959, in the town of Bien Hoa, the base of the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division just north of Saigon, a small band of Viet Cong assassins attacked with machine guns and bombs the mess hall where U.S. advisers were watching a feature film on a homemade projector. Sergeant Chester Ovnand, a Texan, and Major Dale Buis, originally from Nebraska, were killed and, several others wounded. The event received little notice at the time, but it assumed great importance in retrospect. That date marked the first Americans killed in the Second Indochina War.

THE IMPENDING CRISIS

Diem’s response to the insurgency heightened popular antagonism toward his government. He intensified the anti-Communist campaign in the villages and tightened controls in the cities, arresting scores of alleged dissidents. Once again demonstrating that he was out of touch with rural Vietnam, he launched in the summer of 1959 an ill-fated “agroville” program to combat the rising violence in the countryside. The major goal was to relocate the peasantry in areas where the army could shield them from the insurgents. The program reflected Diem’s faith in population redistribution and land development and his naïve, personalist belief that peasants would happily leave their homes and band together to build modern communities with schools, medical facilities, and electricity. Implemented mainly in the Mekong Delta, the agrovilles revealed Diem’s ignorance of

⁶⁷U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), 4 vols. (Boston, 1971), 1: 329.

rural people. Peasants deeply resented being relocated from their ancestral lands to often dreary spots in isolated regions far from the fields they had worked to make a living. If they resisted, they might be forcibly relocated. They were given a paltry sum of money inadequate even to cover the cost of the land they had to buy and compelled to work on communal projects without compensation. The program enraged many peasants and sparked added hostility toward Diem and his government. The insurgents at first feared the initiative, but they skillfully exploited its failure, branding the agrovilles "big prisons and hells on earth."⁶⁸

Throughout 1960, evidence of the government's fragility mounted. The insurgency grew unchecked in the countryside, and the level of violence increased sharply. In January 1960, at Trang Sup, a village northeast of Saigon, four insurgent companies destroyed a South Vietnamese Army headquarters and seized large stocks of weapons, leaving the army and its U.S. advisers in a state of shock. The regime's unpopularity in Saigon was highlighted in April when a group of non-Communist politicians, many of whom had served in Diem's cabinet, met at the Caravelle Hotel and issued a manifesto bitterly protesting the government's oppressiveness and calling for sweeping reforms. In November, Diem narrowly thwarted an attempted coup by three paratroop battalions presumed to be among the most loyal units of the army. American intelligence reports ominously warned that if present trends continued, the collapse of the regime was certain.

Belatedly perceiving the strength of the insurgency and the inability of the South Vietnamese government and armed forces to cope with it, in 1960 the United States shifted the emphasis of its military programs from conventional warfare to counterinsurgency. U.S. military officials began work on a comprehensive plan to expand the army and Civil Guard and equip and train them for antiguerrilla operations. While this plan was being formulated, the mission in Saigon took piecemeal steps to assist the South Vietnamese. Training programs already in operation were reoriented. Special American teams were sent to train South Vietnamese Ranger Battalions. U.S. advisers were placed at the regimental level to give on-the-spot advice and assess the capabilities and needs of individual

⁶⁸Catton, *Final Failure*, pp. 63–70; Geoffrey C. Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem's Failure to Build an Independent Nation* (New York, 2017), pp. 180–181, 184–186.

units. Although the shift to counterinsurgency represented a tacit admission that the original advisory program had failed, it did not produce the sort of drastic changes required to defeat the guerrillas. It merely resulted in additional military aid and proposals for bureaucratic reorganization.⁶⁹

In the meantime, civilian officials made gentle and largely unsuccessful attempts to persuade Diem to change his ways. Many Americans, including Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, feared that unless the president reformed his government and mobilized popular support, the insurgency would overwhelm South Vietnam. He tactfully urged Diem to broaden his government by appointing a new cabinet, relax controls on the press and civil liberties, and pacify the rural population by restoring village elections and making credit easily available. Diem responded noncommittally that the proposals conformed with his own ideas but that it would be “most difficult” to implement them while the government faced internal rebellion.⁷⁰ Over the next few weeks, he tightened the controls, clamping down on the army and arresting the politicians who had issued the Caravelle Manifesto.

By the end of the year, Americans in Saigon were thoroughly alarmed by the impending crisis and deeply divided over how to combat it. Durbrow warned Washington that the Saigon government was in “serious danger” and that “prompt and even drastic action” was required to save it. In return for additional military aid, he advised, the United States should insist that Diem institute sweeping reforms.⁷¹ The U.S. military mission in Saigon firmly resisted Durbrow’s proposals, which, it claimed, would distract attention from the war and undercut Diem during a critical period. The debate became increasingly bitter. Meetings at the embassy, in the words of a participant, were “barely civil.”⁷²

Although the experiment in nation building was in obvious jeopardy, the Eisenhower administration did not resolve the debate in Saigon or take any major steps to salvage its huge investment. Throughout much of 1960, attention was focused elsewhere. A flare-up over divided Berlin sharpened Cold War tensions in Europe. The Soviet

⁶⁹Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 372.

⁷⁰Durbrow memorandum, October 15, 1960, *USVN*, Book 10, 1318.

⁷¹Durbrow to State Department, December 5, 1960, *ibid.*, 1334–1336.

⁷²William Colby, *Honorable Men* (New York, 1978), p. 160.

shooting down of an American U-2 spy plane and torpedoing of a summit meeting in Paris provoked a major crisis. The emergence in neighboring Cuba of a revolutionary government headed by Fidel Castro and the establishment of close ties between Cuba and the Soviet Union aroused fears of Communist intrusion in America's backyard. The deterioration in South Vietnam was gradual. A sense of crisis did not develop until late in the year, by which time Eisenhower was already planning to transfer power to the newly elected Democratic administration of John F. Kennedy.

Even then, Laos, rather than South Vietnam, seemed the most urgent problem in Indochina. A mildly pro-Western government had assumed power after Geneva and was given lavish American support. But when it attempted to reach an accommodation with the Pathet Lao insurgents who had fought with the Viet Minh, the United States instigated a right-wing coup. The American-sponsored government launched an ambitious military campaign against the Pathet Lao. But it achieved little success and in 1960 was overthrown by a group of so-called neutralists. Rejecting a compromise, the Eisenhower administration firmly supported its client government and forced the neutralists into an uneasy alliance with the Pathet Lao. By the end of the year, North Vietnam and the Soviet Union had begun to furnish substantial support for the anti-American forces. Intensification of the civil war seemed certain.

In the twilight of his presidency, a deeply concerned Eisenhower pondered U.S. military intervention. Referring to Laos as the "cork in the bottle" whose removal could threaten all of Southeast Asia, the president, as early as September 1959, had grimly warned that it might "develop into another Korea."⁷³ At a meeting in late 1960, he advised that "we cannot let Laos fall to the Communists, even if we have to fight—with our allies or without them." He seems *not* to have recommended unilateral U.S. intervention to Kennedy in a transition briefing on January 19, 1961, but the possibility was discussed. Compared with Laos, South Vietnam seemed to be a "back-burner" problem.⁷⁴

⁷³Gordon Gray memorandum, September 14, 1959, Eisenhower Papers, "Cleanup" File, Box 5.

⁷⁴The basis for the allegation was the Clark Clifford memorandum of conversation, January 19, 1961, *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 2: 635–637. For a corrective, see Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 568–587.

The quirks of the electoral calendar spared Eisenhower from facing the ultimate failure of his policies in Vietnam. Within a short time after taking office, however, John F. Kennedy would have to choose between abandoning what he had called *our offspring* or significantly increasing the American commitment.



The Self-Immolation of Thich Quang Duc

This classic 1963 photo of the immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc in the streets of Saigon brought home to Americans the depth of Vietnamese discontent with the Diem regime, and it aroused grave concern among Kennedy advisers and the public about the nation's growing entanglement in Vietnam.

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Limited Partnership

Kennedy and Diem, 1961–1963

On the morning of June 11, 1963, Thich Quang Duc, an elderly Buddhist monk, stepped out of a small automobile on a busy Saigon street. As a crowd gathered and other bonzes chanted, Quang Duc assumed the lotus position. Another monk doused him with a highly volatile mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel. Silently and without expression, Quang Duc touched a lit match to his saturated robes. Instantaneously, he burst into flames; within minutes his body was charred and lifeless. Making clear whose attention they sought, Buddhist demonstrators held aloft banners in English proclaiming “Buddhist Priest Burns for Buddhist Demands.” Alerted to the event, U.S. reporters were on the scene. Their grim pictures would soon appear in newspapers and on television screens across the world.

The self-immolation of Quang Duc highlighted in the most graphic way the summer 1963 breakdown of U.S. policy in Vietnam. To reverse a rapidly deteriorating situation, the administration of John F. Kennedy in late 1961 had established a “limited partnership” with the Diem government, taking a giant step toward direct U.S. participation in the Second Indochina War. U.S. escalation slowed but did not suppress the National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgency. As the American presence increased dramatically, tensions with the Saigon government mounted. The sudden outbreak of Buddhist protests against alleged Diemist persecution in May 1963 vastly complicated an already tenuous situation. The so-called Buddhist crisis strained to the breaking point relations between Diem and his U.S. patron. It thrust Vietnam to the forefront of policymaking in Washington. It set in motion a tragic chain of events that would lead to the overthrow and killing of Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Combined with the stunning

assassination of Kennedy himself just weeks later, these climactic developments dramatically transformed the war and America's role in it.¹

THE NEW FRONTIER AND THE COLD WAR

When JFK took office in January 1961, the Cold War seemed to have reached a critical stage. The struggle of hundreds of new nations to break from their colonial past and establish modern institutions unleashed chaos across much of the globe. The rhetoric and actions of the erratic Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev suggested a new Communist boldness, even recklessness, and a determination to exploit the prevailing instability. Soviet-American confrontation broadened and intensified in the late 1950s. The development of weapons with enormous destructive power and delivery systems with global range added an especially frightful dimension. China appeared weakened by the Great Leap Forward, a misguided attempt to collectivize agriculture and speed industrialization that had devastating consequences for its people and economy. But JFK and his advisers continued to view it as a threat to Southeast Asia and especially to Vietnam. In 1961, the fate of the world appeared to hang in the balance. The new president took office certain that America's very survival depended on its capacity to defend "free" institutions. Should it falter, he warned, "the whole world, in my opinion, would inevitably move toward the Communist bloc."²

Promising vigorous leadership and calling upon Americans to become "watchmen on the walls of freedom," Kennedy vowed to meet the perils of the new era. The youngest person ever to be elected president, the former senator from Massachusetts had been born to wealth and privilege. Bright, handsome, and witty, he had been decorated for heroism in the Pacific theater in World War II. He had served without particular distinction in Congress, where he gained a reputation as a playboy. The author of several books on history and politics, he took a keen interest in foreign policy as a house member and a senator and also acquired a special curiosity about Indochina. He had been an avid backer of Diem, but a visit to Saigon in late 1951 had also aroused a certain skepticism that would influence his handling of Vietnam policy.

¹A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954–1975* (New York, 2000), pp. 214–215.

²Quoted in Seyom Brown, *The Faces of Power* (New York, 1969), p. 217.

The new president gathered about him a youthful, energetic corps of advisers from the top positions in academia and industry, activists who shared his commitment to “get the country moving again.” The New Frontiersmen accepted without question the basic assumptions of the containment policy, but they also believed they must take the initiative in meeting the Communist threat rather than simply reacting to it.³ Coming to political maturity during World War II, they were alarmed by the danger of another global holocaust but also exhilarated by the challenge of leading the nation through perilous times. They shared a deep sense of duty to their country and a Wilsonian view that destiny had singled out the United States to defend the democratic ideal. Pragmatic centrists, they believed that no problem was without solution. They were self-confident to the point of arrogance.⁴

Kennedy and his advisers also recognized that domestic politics demanded a forceful and successful foreign policy. During the campaign of 1960, in strident tones the senator had accused Eisenhower of indecisiveness and promised to regain the initiative in the Cold War. Having won the most narrow of electoral victories, he was keenly aware of his vulnerability. Especially in his first two years, he kept a wary eye on his domestic flank. He was ever sensitive to Republican charges of weakness or appeasement.

He had joined in the attacks on Truman for “losing” China. He was aware of the lingering influence of McCarthyism and the China Lobby, that small but potent group of advocates for Nationalist China, and he was extremely alert to the political damage that could come from the loss of additional Asian real estate. Thus, he was even less willing than Eisenhower to permit the fall of South Vietnam to communism.

The administration set out at once to meet the challenges of the Cold War. The president ordered a massive buildup of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles to establish a credible deterrent to Soviet nuclear power. Persuaded that Eisenhower’s heavy reliance on nuclear weapons had left the United States muscle-bound in many diplomatic situations, Kennedy also expanded and modernized the nation’s conventional military forces to permit a “flexible response” to various types and levels of aggression. Certain that the emerging nations would be the major battleground in the struggle between

³Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise* (New York, 1973), p. 72.

⁴Thomas G. Paterson, “Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK’s Foreign Policy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 54 (Spring 1978): 197.

freedom and communism, the administration also devoted much attention to developing an effective response to guerrilla warfare—"an international disease" the United States must learn to "destroy." Kennedy took a keen personal interest in the theory, tactics, and weapons of counterinsurgency warfare and covert operations. He encouraged his advisers to read the writings of revolutionaries such as Mao Zedong and Castro adviser Che Guevara and pushed the armed services to develop means to combat their tactics. He also felt that America had to strike at the heart of the disease. Some of his top advisers, such as economist Walt Whitman Rostow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), had pioneered so-called modernization theory and insisted that, through generous foreign aid programs and assistance in economic development, the United States could steer the new nations away from communism and toward the Free World.⁵

Vietnam stands as the most tragic legacy of the global activism of the Kennedy era. The president had labeled it the "cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia." In his eyes and those of many of his advisers, South Vietnam was a test case of America's determination to uphold its commitments in a menacing world and its capacity to meet the new challenges posed by guerrilla warfare in the emerging nations.

Inheriting from Eisenhower an increasingly dangerous if still limited commitment, he plunged deeper into the morass. Kennedy did not eagerly take up the burden in Vietnam; his actions there contrast sharply with his rhetoric. In settling the major policy issues, he was cautious rather than bold, hesitant rather than decisive, and improvisational rather than carefully calculating. He delayed making a firm commitment for nearly a year and then acted only because the shaky Diem government appeared on the verge of collapse. Wary of the domestic and international consequences of a negotiated settlement but unwilling to risk full-scale involvement, he chose a cautious middle course, expanding the American role while trying to keep it limited. In the short run, such a policy offered numerous advantages, but it was also delusive and dangerous. It encouraged Diem to continue on his self-destructive path while leading Americans to believe they could secure a favorable outcome without

⁵John McCloy and Walt W. Rostow quoted in Fairlie, *Kennedy Promise*, pp. 132, 264; James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York, 2008), pp. 115–117.

paying a heavy price. It significantly narrowed the choices, making extrication more difficult and creating a self-supporting argument for a larger and more dangerous commitment.

YEAR OF CRISES

Throughout the presidential campaign, Kennedy had stressed the perils the nation confronted, but he appears to have been unprepared for the severity of the problems he inherited. Khrushchev's threat to resolve the status of divided Berlin on his own terms held out the possibility of a superpower confrontation. In January 1961, the Soviet premier delivered a seemingly militant speech avowing his support for wars of national liberation. In fact, the statement defied Kremlin hard-liners and the more aggressive Chinese by renouncing conventional war. It may even have been intended to reassure the West. To the untutored ears of the inexperienced Kennedy administration, however, it appeared a virtual declaration of war. Stepped-up Soviet aid to Castro's Cuba and insurgents in the Congo and Laos seemed to confirm the magnitude of the threat. Such was the siege mentality that gripped the White House in early 1961 that JFK on one occasion greeted his advisers by grimly asking, "What's gone against us today?"⁶

Vietnam was not regarded as a major trouble spot in the administration's first hundred days. It was only in January, after reading an Edward Lansdale report Rostow called "ominous" that Kennedy learned of the steady growth of the insurgency and the increasing problems with Diem. Lansdale predicted a large-scale insurgent offensive before the end of the year, but he concluded optimistically that a "major American effort" could frustrate the Communist drive for power. Persuaded, like Truman and Eisenhower before him, that Vietnam was vital to America's global interests, Kennedy routinely approved an additional \$42 million to support an expansion of the South Vietnamese Army and created a special task force to study the issue.⁷

By the end of April, Kennedy's staff was again closely watching Vietnam. Acting on Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow's advice, the

⁶Quoted in Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1972), p. 170.

⁷McGeorge Bundy to Rostow, January 30, 1961, John F. Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 192, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass; Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, 2018), pp. 352–353, 360.

president had conditioned the assistance granted in January on the institution of military and political reforms. But Diem had balked, and after three months the aid program remained stalled and the war languished.

At the same time, major foreign policy setbacks in Cuba and Laos appeared to increase the importance of Vietnam. A clandestine effort to overthrow Castro ended in disaster at the Bay of Pigs, leaving Kennedy in a state of acute shock and his administration profoundly shaken. After the Bay of Pigs, the president was suspicious of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the intelligence community; he therefore rejected various proposals to put troops into Laos to stave off the impending defeat of the American-sponsored government. The military warned that protecting U.S. troops sent to Laos against possible Chinese or North Vietnamese countermoves might require extreme measures, even the use of nuclear weapons. The country was landlocked, a poor choice for intervention from a logistic standpoint. More important, most Americans viewed Laotians as lazy, lacking in national unity, and singularly devoid of a martial spirit, and they were reluctant to go to war for a people who seemed unwilling to defend themselves. Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith contemptuously warned that as a "military ally the entire Laos nation is clearly inferior to a battalion of conscientious objectors from World War I." Moreover, as JFK himself repeatedly pointed out, it would be difficult to explain to the American public why he sent troops to remote Laos when he had refused to send them to nearby Cuba. Without explicitly ruling out a military solution, in late April Kennedy broke sharply with Eisenhower's policy and concluded that a negotiated settlement was the best he could get in Laos. The United States agreed to participate in a peace conference at Geneva.⁸

More than anything else, the decision to negotiate in Laos led the administration to reassess its policy in Vietnam. Along with its refusal to send U.S. aircraft or troops to salvage the Bay of Pigs operation, its unwillingness to intervene militarily in Laos appeared to

⁸Galbraith to Kennedy, May 10, 1961, Kennedy Papers, Office File, Box 29. For the Laos decisions, see Seth Jacobs, "No Place to Fight a War": Laos and the Evolution of U.S. Policy toward Vietnam, 1954–1963," in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young (eds.), *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (New York, 2008), pp. 53–62, and William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (Lexington, Ky., 2012), pp. 260–261.

increase the symbolic importance of taking stands elsewhere. The administration had captured the attention of the nation with its self-conscious activism but had little to show for it. "At this point we are like the Harlem Globetrotters," National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy conceded, "passing forward, behind, sidewise, and underneath. But nobody has made a basket yet."⁹ Kennedy confided to *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock that he had to make certain that "Khrushchev doesn't misunderstand Cuba, Laos, etc. to indicate that the United States is in a yielding mood on such matters as Berlin."¹⁰ Moreover, with the outcome of the Laos negotiations uncertain, it seemed urgent to prepare a fallback position in Southeast Asia. Vietnam appeared a better place than Laos to make a stand.

Despite its growing concern with Vietnam, the administration did not institute major policy changes or drastically expand American commitments in the spring of 1961. The president authorized a modest increase of 100 advisers in the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) and dispatched to Vietnam 400 Special Forces troops to train the Vietnamese in counterinsurgency techniques. Convinced in light of the Laos negotiations that Diem had to be handled with special care, Kennedy recalled Durbrow, the foremost advocate of hard bargaining tactics, and sent Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to Saigon to give personal assurances of American support. To back up its diplomacy without provoking domestic or international concern, the administration launched covert warfare in Indochina. The United States sent clandestine teams of South Vietnamese across the seventeenth parallel to attack enemy supply lines, sabotage military and civilian targets, and agitate against the Hanoi regime. At the same time, the CIA initiated a "secret war" in Laos, arming some 9,000 Hmong, an ethnic group in that country's mountain region, for actions against the Ho Chi Minh trail in what would become one of the largest paramilitary operations ever undertaken.¹¹

⁹Fairlie, *Kennedy Promise*, p. 180.

¹⁰Krock memorandum of conversation with Kennedy, May 5, 1961, Arthur Krock Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, N.J., Box 59.

¹¹For the beginnings of the Laos secret war, see Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam* (New York, 1993), especially pp. 39–44; and Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), pp. 70–112. See also Richard H. Shultz Jr., *The Secret War against Hanoi* (New York, 1999).

The reappraisal of the spring of 1961 was more important for the questions raised than for the solutions provided. The administration's decisions reflected, in the words of Rostow, a calculated policy of "buying time with limited commitments of additional American resources."¹² Many officials feared this might not be enough. The Vietnam Task Force began to consider the more drastic measures that might be required if the Laos negotiations broke down or the insurgents launched a major offensive in Vietnam. Among other actions, it openly raised the possibility of sending, for the first time since 1954, U.S. combat forces to Vietnam. It also discussed air and naval operations against North Vietnam.

While the administration studied various choices, pressures mounted for expanded American involvement in Vietnam. After a whirlwind trip through East Asia with a major stopover in Saigon, Johnson reported that the decision to negotiate in Laos had shaken Diem's confidence in the United States. If a further decline in morale was to be arrested, he warned, "deeds must follow words—soon."¹³ After Johnson's visit, Diem himself requested additional aid. He displayed no interest in U.S. combat troops when the vice president discreetly raised the issue. Fiercely independent and keenly aware of the rising opposition to his regime, Diem feared that the introduction of large numbers of American troops would not only provide the NLF a powerful rallying cry but also give the non-Communist opposition critical leverage. Shortly after Johnson departed Saigon, however, Diem warned Kennedy that the situation in Vietnam had become "very much more perilous" and requested sufficient additional American aid and advisers to expand his army by 100,000 troops.¹⁴

The Cold War intensified in the summer of 1961. During a stormy summit meeting in Vienna in June, Khrushchev again affirmed the Soviet commitment to wars of liberation, reinforcing the administration's fears and its inclination to respond somewhere. He "just beat hell out of me," Kennedy remarked. "If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts . . . we won't get anywhere with him. So we have to act."¹⁵ In August, under cover of darkness, the Soviets constructed a

¹²Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, p. 270.

¹³Johnson to Kennedy, May 23, 1961, Kennedy Papers, Office File, Box 30.

¹⁴U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, *The Pentagon Papers (Senator Gravel Edition)*, 4 vols. (Boston, 1971), 2: 60. Hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*.

¹⁵Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years* (New York, 1991), p. 225.

steel and concrete wall shutting off West Berlin from the eastern zone and confronting an already beleaguered Kennedy administration with yet another crisis.

THE TAYLOR–ROSTOW MISSION

In the supercharged atmosphere of mid-1961, some of Kennedy's advisers pressed for escalation in Vietnam. The hawkish Rostow had long advocated the employment of such "unexploited counter guerrilla assets" as helicopters and the newly created Green Berets. "It is somehow wrong to be developing these capabilities but not applying them in a crucial theater," he advised the president. "In Knute Rockne's old phrase, we are not saving them for the junior prom." He compared the summer of 1961 to the year 1942, when the Allies had suffered defeats across the globe, warning that "to turn the tide" the United States must "win" in Vietnam. If Vietnam could be held, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia could be saved and "we shall have demonstrated that the Communist technique of guerrilla warfare can be dealt with."¹⁶

Preoccupied with Berlin, JFK fended off his more belligerent advisers, approving only small additional increments of aid until a dramatic worsening of conditions in the fall of 1961 compelled him to act. North Vietnam's Politburo in early 1961 approved expanded military action in the south. Infiltration into South Vietnam doubled to nearly 4,000 in 1961. The NLF drastically stepped up operations in September and for a brief period even seized a provincial capital just fifty-five miles from Saigon. Intelligence analysts reported a substantial increase in the size of regular guerrilla forces. The journalist Theodore H. White noted a "political breakdown of formidable proportions" in South Vietnam.¹⁷ In September, Diem urgently requested additional economic assistance. By early October, both the JCS and the National Security Council (NSC) were proposing the introduction of sizable U.S. combat forces into Vietnam.

¹⁶ Rostow to Kennedy, March 29, 1961, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 192, and June 17, 1961, Kennedy Papers, Office File, Box 65.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), 2: 70.

Kennedy remained cautious. He revealed to Krock a profound reluctance to send American troops to the Asian mainland. He expressed grave doubts that the United States should interfere in “civil disturbances caused by guerrillas,” adding that “it was hard to prove that this wasn’t largely the situation in Vietnam.”¹⁸ Increasingly concerned by the military and political deterioration in South Vietnam but fearful of expanding the U.S. commitment, he dispatched Rostow and his personal military adviser, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, to Vietnam to assess conditions firsthand and weigh the need for U.S. forces.

Taylor and Rostow confirmed the pessimistic reports that had been coming out of Saigon for the past month. The South Vietnamese Army was afflicted with a “defensive outlook.” The Diem government was disorganized, inefficient, and increasingly unpopular. The basic problem was a “deep and pervasive crisis of confidence and a serious loss in national morale” stemming from developments in Laos, the intensification of guerrilla activity, and a devastating flood in the Mekong Delta. “No one felt the situation was hopeless,” Taylor later recalled, but all agreed that it was “serious” and demanded “urgent measures.”¹⁹

Taylor and Rostow recommended a significant expansion of American aid to arrest the deterioration in South Vietnam. They emphasized that the Vietnamese themselves must win the war; but they also concluded that the provision of U.S. equipment and skilled advisers working closely with the government at all levels could result in a “much better, aggressive, more confident performance from the Vietnamese military and civilian establishment.”²⁰ Highly trained advisory groups, strategically placed throughout the South Vietnamese bureaucracy, could help identify and correct major political, economic, and military problems. Improved training for the Civil Guard and Village Self-Defense Corps would free the army for offensive operations. Equipment such as helicopters would give it the mobility to fight more effectively. Taylor and Rostow also advocated what they called a “limited partnership” with the South Vietnamese government, a middle ground between “formalized advice on the one hand” and “trying to run the war on the other.”²¹

¹⁸Krock memorandum of conversation with Kennedy, October 11, 1961, Krock Papers, Box 59.

¹⁹Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York, 1972), p. 241.

²⁰Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, p. 275.

²¹Taylor to Kennedy, November 3, 1961, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 1: 493. Hereafter cited as *FR* with date and volume number.

The most novel—and ultimately most controversial—of the proposals was to send an 8,000-person “logistic task force” of American soldiers, comprising engineers, medical groups, and the infantry to support them. The ostensible purpose was to assist in repairing the massive flood damage in the Mekong Delta, but Taylor had other, more important motives in mind. Diem continued to resist the introduction of U.S. combat forces, but many government officials and many Americans in Saigon believed that troops were desperately needed. Taylor himself felt a “pressing need to do something to restore Vietnamese morale and to shore up confidence in the United States.” The task force would serve as a “visible symbol of the seriousness of American intentions,” he advised Kennedy, and would constitute an invaluable military reserve should the situation in South Vietnam suddenly worsen.²² The humanitarian purpose of the force would provide a convenient pretext for its introduction into Vietnam. It could be removed without embarrassment when its job was completed. Taylor and Rostow emphasized that their proposals constituted minimum steps. If they were not enough, the United States might have to dispatch combat troops or launch offensive operations against North Vietnam.

The proposal for a flood relief force aroused especially heated discussion among Kennedy’s advisers. Some candidly admitted that it was a subterfuge. Some feared that the introduction of combat troops in any form might jeopardize the Laos negotiations or provoke escalation in Vietnam. Others questioned whether such a force would be large enough or, given its announced purpose of flood relief, capable of restoring morale. Should it come under attack, the United States would face the more difficult choice of supporting it with additional forces or withdrawing it altogether. “If we commit 6–8,000 troops and then pull them out when the going gets rough we will be finished in Vietnam and probably all of Southeast Asia,” one NSC staffer warned.²³ There was general unhappiness with the “half-in, half-out” nature of the proposal. Top State Department officials expressed major reservations about committing troops in any form. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the JCS, and McGeorge Bundy used the Taylor proposal to develop more far-reaching recommendations, urging Kennedy to make an unequivocal commitment to prevent the fall of South Vietnam and be prepared to

²²Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, p. 239.

²³Robert Johnson to Bundy, October 31, 1961, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 194.

introduce large-scale U.S. combat forces “if that should become necessary for success.”²⁴

While the Taylor–Rostow report was circulating in Washington, Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles and the veteran diplomat W. Averell Harriman, the chief negotiator on Laos, promoted a very different course. Harriman expressed grave doubt that Diem’s “repressive, dictatorial and unpopular regime” could survive under any circumstances and warned that the United States should not “stake its prestige in Vietnam.” Bowles admonished that the United States was “headed full blast up a dead end street.” The two men pressed Kennedy to defer any major commitment to Diem. If the Laos negotiations proceeded smoothly, the United States could then expand the conference to include Vietnam and seek an overall settlement based on the 1954 Geneva Agreements.²⁵ The Taylor–Rostow report for the first time since 1954 posed a clear-cut choice between a major escalation of the conflict and possible extrication from Vietnam.

In a way that would become institutionalized, JFK opted for a cautious, middle-of-the-road approach. He flatly rejected a negotiated settlement. Throughout the year, Republicans and right-wing Democrats had charged him with weakness, and he feared that a decision to negotiate on Vietnam would unleash domestic political attacks as rancorous and destructive as those after the fall of China in 1949.

Administration strategists also felt that in a divided and dangerous world the United States must establish the credibility of its commitments. Should it appear weak, allies would lose faith and enemies would be emboldened to further aggression, a process that could leave the awful choice of a complete erosion of America’s world position or nuclear war. By late 1961, Kennedy and many of his advisers were convinced that they must prove their toughness to Khrushchev. “That son of a bitch won’t pay any attention to words,” the president remarked during the Berlin crisis. “He has to see you move.”²⁶

Although determined to appear tough, Kennedy firmly resisted the proposal to send combat troops. He questioned the psychological value of

²⁴Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara to Kennedy, November 11, 1961, *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 2: 110–116.

²⁵Harriman to Kennedy, November 11, 1961, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 195; Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep* (New York, 1971), p. 409; Stephen Pelz, “John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Vietnam War Decisions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4 (December 1981): 378.

²⁶Quoted in Paterson, “Bearing the Burden,” 206.

Taylor's flood relief force. He speculated—prophetically, as it turned out—that the commitment of some men would only lead to requests for more. "The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer," he told Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you have to take another."²⁷ He also rejected McNamara's proposal for a major verbal commitment to prevent the fall of South Vietnam, noting that a commitment without troops could bring the worst of both worlds. He expressed deep concern about taking on simultaneously major obligations in Europe and Southeast Asia. He was especially bothered by the prospect of direct involvement in a war whose origins were so "obscure" in an "area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success." On several occasions, he expressed uncertainty that he could secure congressional and allied support to wage such a war.²⁸

Kennedy would go no further than approve Taylor's recommendations to increase significantly the volume of American assistance and the number of advisers in hopes this would arrest the military and political deterioration in South Vietnam. To oversee implementation of the new program, the administration created a Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and elevated the top military official to equal status with the ambassador. It took these steps in full recognition that it was violating the Geneva Accords of 1954. On December 15, it released a "white paper" detailing North Vietnamese breaches of the Geneva Agreements that justified its own response.²⁹

In undertaking Taylor's "limited partnership" with South Vietnam, the administration at first took a hard line with Diem. American officials had long agreed that his repressive and inefficient government constituted a major obstacle to defeating the insurgency. Reluctant to commit American personnel, money, and prestige to a "losing horse," as Secretary of State Dean Rusk put it, the administration instructed the embassy in Saigon to inform Diem that approval of the new aid program would be contingent on specific promises to reorganize and reform the government and permit the United States a share in decision making.³⁰

²⁷ Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston, 1965), p. 547.

²⁸ Notes on NSC meeting, November 15, 1961, *FR*, 1961–1963, 1: 607–608.

²⁹ Department of State, *A Threat to the Peace: North Viet Nam's Effort to Conquer South Viet Nam* (Washington, D.C., 1961).

³⁰ Rusk to State Department, November 1, 1961, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 194; *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), 2: 120.

The U.S. demands provoked a crisis in Saigon. Accustomed to getting what he wanted with no strings attached, Diem was stunned by Washington's new approach. He perceived that the sort of political reforms the United States sought could lead to his own demise. He angrily protested the pittance of money and equipment offered and lashed out at the proposals for a new relationship, bluntly informing Ambassador Frederick Nolting that South Vietnam "did not want to be a protectorate."³¹ The Kennedy administration responded by holding up shipments of military equipment and instituting a quiet search for a possible replacement for Diem. The two sides came close to a break before the United States retreated. Nolting advised that a "cool and unhurried approach is our best chance of success."³² The State Department could identify no one who appeared capable of filling Diem's shoes. Persuaded, as JFK conceded, that "Diem is Diem and the best we've got," the United States backed down.³³ The new relationship was redefined to mean simply that one party would not take action without consulting the other; the emphasis was shifted from reform to efficiency. The two governments agreed on an innocuous statement affirming these points. The crisis passed.

Kennedy's decisions of 1961 mark yet another critical turning point for U.S. policy in Vietnam. Properly wary of deeper military involvement in a conflict he suspected might not be winnable, the president, primarily for domestic political reasons, still refused to abandon the struggle. Rejecting the extremes of combat troops and negotiations, he settled for a limited commitment of aid and advisers. His caution was well placed, but his 1961 decisions increased direct American involvement and the commitment of U.S. prestige. He recognized from the start, moreover, that these limited steps might not be enough to save South Vietnam. Events would demonstrate that the commitments, once made, could not easily be kept limited. The new commitments marked a giant step toward America's assumption of responsibility for the war, a step symbolized by the creation of a formal military command.³⁴

In instituting their new partnership, the United States and Diem entangled themselves more tightly in their fateful web. American

³¹Nolting to State Department, November 18, 1961, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 165.

³²Nolting to State Department, November 29, 1961, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 195.

³³Quoted in Benjamin Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York, 1976), p. 59.

³⁴Michael Cannon, "Raising the Stakes: The Taylor-Rostow Mission," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 12 (June 1989): 153–158.

frustration with Diem was understandable, but in searching for a more manageable replacement, U.S. officials arrogantly presumed to know what was best for South Vietnam. By assuming greater responsibility for the war, they undercut the nationalist claims on which Diem's success ultimately rested. Diem perceived that he could not defeat the insurgency and stay in power without U.S. support, but he recognized the dangers and tried desperately to avoid his ally's suffocating embrace. Even more wary of the United States after its decision to negotiate in Laos, Diem's brother Nhu helped persuade him to oppose the American proposals. From this point, the president increasingly relied on him. The agreements of late 1961 aroused increased suspicions on both sides and opened the way for conflicts that would make a mockery of the word *partnership*, could not be resolved, and would have tragic consequences for all concerned.³⁵

PROJECT BEEFUP

Their differences settled, at least for the moment, the United States and South Vietnam initiated a two-pronged campaign to defeat the insurgency. To assert their independence from the United States and gain the support of the rural population, Diem and Nhu launched in the late summer of 1962 a Strategic Hamlet Program. It resembled successful undertakings in the Philippines and Malaya and grew out of the agrovilles built in the 1950s. To demonstrate South Vietnamese self-reliance, the Americans were excluded from the planning. Diem and Nhu envisioned a truly nationalist revolution that would restore the villages to their traditional place in Vietnamese life. Nhu spoke of a "triple revolution" promoting democracy, social progress, and economic development. Diem hailed the strategic hamlets as the "quintessence of our truest traditions." Peasants from scattered villages would be brought together into hamlets surrounded by moats and bamboo stake fences and guarded by local military forces. The hamlets would protect the people against NLF terror, separate them from the insurgents who depended upon them, and provide the means for a social and economic revolution based on local self-rule and self-sufficiency. The institution of village elections, land reform, and the building of schools and medical facilities would persuade villagers that the government offered them more than the insurgents. Restoring

³⁵ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), p. 230.

village autonomy, displacing the old elite, and encouraging economic development through self-help projects would bind the villagers as a community, fulfilling personalist ideals and leaving the guerrillas facing a hostile population. The program was the most ambitious undertaken by the South Vietnamese government. In the Ngos most grandiose vision, it would lead to the unification of all Vietnam under their control. The Americans enthusiastically backed it as a way to promote modernization and defeat the insurgents. U.S. agencies and volunteers assisted in its implementation.³⁶

To support the counterinsurgency program, the United States, in what was called “Project Beefup,” drastically expanded its role in Vietnam. The Military Assistance and Advisory Group was replaced by an enlarged and reorganized military command headed by Gen. Paul D. Harkins. American military assistance more than doubled between 1961 and 1962 and included such major items as armored personnel carriers and more than 300 military aircraft.

The number of U.S. “advisers” jumped from 3,205 in December 1961 to more than 9,000 by the end of 1962. Highly trained professionals, in many cases veterans of World War II and Korea, they epitomized the global commitment and can-do spirit of the Kennedy era. Their casual dress—brightly colored caps, shoulder holsters, and bandoliers—reflected their unusual mission. They stoically endured the harsh climate and the dysentery (promptly dubbed “Ho Chi Minh’s revenge”), confident that they were not only defending Vietnam against a Communist takeover but also preparing themselves for the wars of the future. “It’s as important for us to train as the Vietnamese,” a helicopter pilot informed an American journalist.³⁷

The advisers performed varied, ever-widening tasks. Special Forces units conducted Civic Action programs among the Montagnards of the Central Highlands. Helicopter pilots dropped detachments of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops into battle zones deep in the swamplands and picked up the dead and wounded after engagements. Americans went with Vietnamese trainees on bombing and strafing missions and, when the Vietnamese ran short of pilots, flew the planes

³⁶Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, Kans., 2002), pp. 86–98, 118–128; Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Ky., 2016), pp. 190–193; and Geoffrey C. Stewart, *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem’s Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963* (New York, 2017), pp. 208–224.

³⁷Quoted in Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary* (New York, 1963), p. 149.



U.S. Advisers in Vietnam:

U.S. advisers like those shown above helped train South Vietnamese soldiers and officers and often fought with them. Differences of language, culture, and even concepts of warfare complicated the advisory effort. Success or failure often hinged on how well they worked together. The advisory era gave way to Americanization of the war in 1965.

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themselves. Army officers and enlisted personnel conducted expanded training programs for the ARVN and the Civil Guard. Advisers down to the battalion level fought with ARVN units on combat missions.

Initiating a pattern that would come to stigmatize the U.S. war in Vietnam as a whole, the Kennedy administration went to considerable lengths to deceive the American public about its growing involvement. It refused to divulge the actual number of “advisers” sent to Vietnam and continued to insist that they were advisers long after they were actively engaged in combat. Elaborate schemes were devised to maintain that fiction. Low-ranking Vietnamese enlisted men were placed in aircraft to provide cover for U.S. pilots. Vietnamese pilots sat next to Americans so that combat casualties could be publicized as training accidents. Advisers going on ground operations were authorized to shoot back if fired upon. Americans even selected the names for combat operations. While actually waging war in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration emphatically denied it. The president himself insisted that the United States had not sent to

Vietnam combat forces in the “generally understood sense of the word” and that U.S. advisers were not involved in combat. When the truth inevitably came out, the administration ordered officials in Saigon to clamp down on the press to minimize the possibility of harmful stories.³⁸

As part of Project Beefup, Kennedy also approved the limited use of chemical defoliants and herbicides to deprive the VC of cover and destroy their food supply. The British had employed such weapons in Malaya. Diem had already used American-supplied chemicals, and in August 1961 he requested an expanded program. The possible impact on humans of chemicals such as the widely used Agent Orange had not been determined at this time—by referring to them as “weed killers,” top U.S. officials seemed to minimize the dangers. The State Department questioned whether their use might alienate the peasants whose support the Diem regime so desperately needed. Others worried that chemical warfare might provoke outrage in world opinion and give the Communists a handy propaganda weapon. The Defense Department insisted that the military gains would be worth any possible political consequences, and boasted of how the chemicals seemed to spook the guerrillas. JFK may have seen technology as a way to reduce pressures for sending troops. He agreed in late 1961 to the use of defoliants and herbicides on a limited basis in relatively isolated areas and only in support of military operations. A year later, he would reauthorize the program. These operations would expand to mammoth proportions as the U.S. role in Vietnam grew, with devastating and long-lasting ecological consequences for Vietnam and human consequences for Vietnamese and Americans.³⁹

Even as the United States and South Vietnam escalated the war, the NLF expanded its grip on the countryside. The Communist Party spearheaded the revolution in the South. Gradually replacing—or purging—the cadres who had fought the French, it recruited a new generation of revolutionaries, many of them poor peasants, young, idealistic, and deeply committed to the cause. The new members were rigorously indoctrinated and required to engage in intense self-criticism. They were schooled to put cause before self: The individual was “no more than a grain of sand in the desert,” according to party dogma. The

³⁸Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003), pp. 152–159.

³⁹David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think About the Environment* (Athens, Ga., 2010), pp. 59–66; Edwin A. Martini, “Hearts, Minds, and Herbicides: The Politics of Chemical War in Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 37 (January 2013): 60–63.

intricate NLF network was tightly organized from top to bottom. Skilled propagandists, the insurgents effectively exploited local grievances to stir up class hatred and mobilize the peasantry against the Saigon government. In some liberated areas, the party enacted land reform that benefited many peasants. Taxes were low and sometimes came in the form of voluntary contributions. Local cadres were schooled to behave properly toward the peasants, to win over their “hearts and minds” (a phrase used by the Americans as well). The NLF also employed violent means to eliminate the best and worst of government officials, in each case strengthening its own position. Party membership almost doubled during this period, exceeding the highest numbers during the French war. Popular support for the insurgency peaked. In late 1961, the NLF raised military struggle to the same level as political agitation. Building a complex military organization extending from local militia platoons to regional main force units, it cleverly used subterfuge and intimidation to expand the area under its control.⁴⁰

For a time in the summer of 1962, South Vietnam wrested the momentum from the insurgents. Buoyed by the new weapons and U.S. advisers, the ARVN launched major military operations. The Strategic Hamlet Program threatened insurgent control in some areas and retook villages that had been “liberated.” New weapons, such as armored personnel carriers and helicopters, at first intimidated the guerrillas, causing them some defeats and forcing them into hiding. In the fall of 1962, in the critical Mekong Delta region south of Saigon, party leaders expressed grave concern.

Such gains proved fleeting. Even with aircraft and sophisticated electronic equipment, it proved frustratingly difficult to locate enemy bases in the dense forests and swampy paddies of Vietnam. The very nature of airphibious operations—an air strike followed by the landing of troops—gave advance warning of an attack, often permitting the enemy to slip away. The insurgents quickly adapted to the helicopters. Sometimes, they stood and fought, and they learned to bring down the slow, clumsy aircraft with small arms. Other times, they would lie in hiding until the chopper departed and then ambush the landing force. In late 1962, party leaders concluded that “if we want to survive, we have to attack them, and only by attacking them can we survive.” They

⁴⁰David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930–1975* (Armonk, N.Y., 2007), pp. 137–178; Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, Colo., 1991), pp. 54–68, 82–84.

ordered military forces to stay on the move and employ deception and their superior mobility to keep ARVN units off-balance. More important, they were instructed to stand and fight when challenged.⁴¹ Gradually, they regained the initiative. NLF operations became increasingly bold and began to inflict heavy losses. As the fighting became more costly, ARVN commanders, apparently under orders from Diem, reverted to their old caution, increasingly relying on airpower and refusing to risk their troops in battle.

The NLF resurgence was dramatically manifested in January 1963 in one of the most important battles of the Second Indochina War. A U.S. adviser, the aggressive and charismatic Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, persuaded his ARVN division commander to attack three NLF units near the village of Ap Bac. But the South Vietnamese dallied for a day, enabling the insurgents to learn of the attack and prepare deadly defenses. The ARVN outnumbered the NLF by 10 to 1—the textbook ratio for fighting guerrillas, but at the first sign of resistance, the attackers balked. One group refused to advance. Others failed to block enemy escape routes. Smaller NLF units encircled the attackers and inflicted huge losses on them and the relief forces sent by helicopter. The battle ended, ingloriously, with the South Vietnamese firing on one another while the NLF slipped away. The vastly superior ARVN forces suffered sixty-one dead and one hundred wounded; two helicopters were shot down. The NLF left only three bodies behind. Thinking in entirely conventional terms, MACV claimed victory because the enemy had vacated the field of battle, a view scathingly dismissed by some skeptical American journalists and top White House advisers. The battle proved to the NLF that they could stand up to and defeat even those ARVN forces with U.S. equipment and advisers. Morale soared. It emboldened hardliners in Hanoi to press for even more aggressive steps, including the use of North Vietnamese troops. Ap Bac reversed the trend of United States–South Vietnamese gains and started the GVN on a downhill slide.⁴²

The political implications of techniques employed in military operations also increasingly disturbed some Americans. It was difficult to distinguish between insurgents and innocent civilians, and ARVN soldiers, their lives constantly under threat, were not inclined to make fine

⁴¹Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, p. 178.

⁴²The classic account is Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York, 1988), pp. 212–256. The NLF perspective is set forth in Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, pp. 179–184.

distinctions. Civilians, even women and children, were gunned down, giving the NLF a powerful propaganda weapon. The bombing and strafing of villages suspected of harboring guerrillas and the use of napalm and defoliants turned villagers against the government. American and South Vietnamese military officials insisted that air cover was essential to ground operations, however, and Diem and General Harkins vigorously promoted the use of napalm. It "really puts the fear of God into the Vietcong," the general exclaimed. "And that is what counts."⁴³

The much ballyhooed Strategic Hamlet Program also produced meager results. A similar plan had worked well in Malaya, where Malay villages were fortified against Chinese insurgents, but in Vietnam the hamlets were to be erected against Vietnamese, many of whom had lived among the villagers for years. The issuance of more than seven million laminated identification cards proved a less-than-adequate safeguard against infiltration. In theory, the program was meant to prevent the massive relocation of peasants from sacred ancestral lands, the flaw of the ill-fated agrovillage plan. But in the delta region, where villagers lived in scattered settlements, the hamlets could not be established without displacement. The large-scale uprooting of the peasantry added to the discontent that had pervaded the rural population since Diem's ascent to power.

The plan was poorly implemented. The Saigon government did not set clear goals and outline the means to achieve them. The result was poorly designed hamlets. In contrast to the NLF, which worked patiently and with painstaking attention to detail, Diem and Nhu naively underestimated the difficulty of the task and tried to do too much too quickly. They established hamlets in areas where no real security existed, and the vulnerable settlements were quickly overrun or infiltrated by the NLF. Many of the hamlets lacked adequate defenses. Adviser Roger Hilsman encountered several spread over such large areas that a full division would have been required to protect them. "But the defenders," he recalled, "were only a few old men, armed with swords, flintlocks, and half a dozen American carbines."⁴⁴ In some areas, enemy agents who had infiltrated the South Vietnamese government deliberately sabotaged the hamlets for which they had responsibility.

In the hands of Diem and Nhu, moreover, the program did nothing to bind the people to the government. Land reform was implemented

⁴³ Quoted in Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York, 1967), p. 442.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 456; Catton: *Diem's Final Failure*. pp. 128 ff.

poorly, if at all, and many peasants were left landless. The United States allocated substantial funds for the institution of services in the hamlets, but inefficiency and corruption kept much of the money from its destination. The government lacked qualified people to staff the program, and many incompetent and corrupt officials represented it at the village level. Instead of building a community, they drove and coerced the villagers to achieve unrealistic goals, provoking resistance and flight to the NLF.⁴⁵

The Strategic Hamlet Program failed to achieve its goal of winning the war at the “rice roots.” As a means of protecting the villagers from direct attack, it enjoyed some limited, short-term success. Among the Montagnards in the Central Highlands, where the United States assumed responsibility, it played a constructive role. By early 1963, however, even its most ardent supporters agreed that it was fundamentally flawed. In addition, the NLF, fearing that even limited government success would threaten its base among the rural population and leave its members as “fish on the chopping block,” launched a systematic and effective campaign against key hamlets, creating specially trained units to destroy them by direct attack or infiltration. U.S. aid officials reported that in the Mekong Delta the strategic hamlets were being “chewed to pieces by the Viet Cong” and that sixty percent of the hamlets in Long An province had been overrun. The full extent of the damage would not be evident until the following year.⁴⁶

Some Kennedy advisers continued to insist that an effective counterinsurgency program required sweeping political reforms, but Diem stubbornly resisted. To appease his American “partners,” he instituted token reforms such as the creation of a council of economic advisers. Instead of broadening his government, as the Americans urged, he retreated more and more into isolation, relying almost exclusively on Nhu, a frail and sinister man who tended toward paranoia and delusions of grandeur. The two men personally controlled military operations and directed the Strategic Hamlet Program. They brooked no interference from their American advisers. Nhu’s wife, the beautiful, ambitious, and acid-tongued Tran Le Xuan (often referred to by

⁴⁵Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, pp. 128 ff.

⁴⁶William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo., 1981), p. 214; “Second Informal Appreciation of the Status of the Strategic Hamlet Program,” September 1, 1963, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 202; Stewart, *Lost Revolution*, p. 230.

Americans as the Dragon Lady, a racially charged stereotype applied to strong Asian women, and the name of a leading character in a popular comic strip of the time) increasingly assumed the role of spokesperson for what by 1962 had become a narrow family oligarchy. Madame Nhu sponsored a "Social Purification Law" that prohibited, among other things, dancing, suggestive dress, public displays of affection, and birth control.

The suspicious and beleaguered Ngos tightened rather than relaxed the controls. The National Assembly pliantly passed laws prohibiting all types of public gatherings, weddings and funerals included, unless approved by the government in advance. The regime imposed on Americans as well as Vietnamese the most rigorous censorship. Diem angrily terminated the contract of the Michigan State University advisory group when several of its members, on returning to the United States, wrote articles that he branded "untrue, unfair, and tendentious."⁴⁷ The veteran *Newsweek* correspondent Francois Sully was expelled from Saigon for critical remarks about Madame Nhu.

OPTIMISM AND UNCERTAINTY

Throughout 1962, Vietnam remained for the Kennedy administration an operational rather than a policy problem. Preoccupied with more urgent matters, such as the Soviet military buildup in Cuba, top U.S. officials devoted little attention to Vietnam. Having decided the hard questions of policy in 1961, they did not consider fundamental changes. Kennedy flatly rejected Rostow's proposal to put pressure on the Russians to stop the infiltration of soldiers and supplies from North Vietnam. He ignored Galbraith's warnings that the United States was becoming entrapped in a "long drawn out indecisive involvement" and might "bleed as the French did."⁴⁸

As late as the end of 1962, a reappraisal appeared unnecessary, because both the embassy and the military command in Saigon exuded optimism. To some extent, as Ambassador Nolting once conceded, their bullishness derived from a "whistle while we work" mentality that was

⁴⁷ Wesley Fishel to John Hannah, February 17, 1962, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 196.

⁴⁸ Galbraith to Kennedy, April 4, 1962, Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Box 196.

necessary to sustain morale amid setbacks and frustration.⁴⁹ In time, however, they came to believe their own rhetoric. Their confidence was misplaced. They appeared, at best, fools, at worst, dissemblers. But the flaws in the program were more apparent later than at the time. Strangers in an unfamiliar country, they depended for information on the South Vietnamese government, which produced impressive statistics to back claims of progress. Nolting and Harkins erred badly in accepting these figures at face value, but the conflict did not lend itself to easy analysis; they, like other observers, were impressed by the change of climate since 1961, when the Diem government had appeared on the verge of collapse. American policy was working, they argued. With time and patience, victory was attainable.

In late 1962, the American press corps in Saigon began to challenge the official optimism. Brash young correspondents such as David Halberstam of the *New York Times* and Neil Sheehan of United Press International did not question the importance of containing communism in Vietnam. Despite government efforts at obfuscation, they sniffed out the facts of growing U.S. involvement. They argued, with increasing force, that the war was being lost. They denounced the Diem government as corrupt, repressive, and unpopular and the Strategic Hamlet Program as a sham. They questioned official reports of military progress, arguing that government statistics were grossly inflated and that the ARVN was conducting “office-hours warfare,” launching perfunctory operations during the day and returning to its bases in the evening. They insisted that the war could not be won as long as the United States persisted in its foolish policy of “sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem.” The angry, defensive response of the embassy and the military command—“Get on the team!” a top military official demanded of one dissident journalist—only enraged the reporters and provoked charges that the government was deliberately deceiving the American people about the war.⁵⁰

Other observers raised even more troublesome questions. Kennedy’s former Senate colleague Mike Mansfield visited Vietnam at the president’s request and returned in December 1962 with a highly pessimistic appraisal. In a formal, published statement, Mansfield noted

⁴⁹ Nolting to Harriman, November 19, 1962, *FR*, 1961–1963, 2: 738.

⁵⁰ The attitudes of the dissident journalists and their experiences are chronicled in David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York, 1964). See also Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers* (New York, 1993), pp. 77–127.

that he could find little progress since his last visit in 1955. In a private report to the president he was even more blunt, observing that Diem seemed exhausted, out of touch with reality, and under the sway of his brother, Nhu. The United States was not making progress in Vietnam, Mansfield warned. On the contrary, after years of steadily expanding effort, it was still “at the beginning of the beginning.” Even more ominously, he admonished that the president might soon have to choose between a “truly massive commitment” of America’s resources and manpower or finding a way to limit its commitments in Southeast Asia without sparking “catastrophic upheavals.” Shortly after Christmas, the two men discussed the report at length aboard Kennedy’s yacht off Palm Beach. The president was angry and red-faced, Mansfield recalled, in part because the report questioned his policies, in part because he agreed with his former Senate colleague. Ambassador Nolting later called the Mansfield report “the first nail in Diem’s coffin.”⁵¹

Mounting criticism of U.S. Vietnam policy aroused grave concern in Washington. The administration had attempted to keep its involvement under wraps, but the rising toll of American deaths and the critical newspaper accounts raised troublesome questions. U.S. officials spent hours investigating the journalists’ reports and answering their allegations. Kennedy himself tried, unsuccessfully, to get the *Times* to recall Halberstam. The president was stung by Mansfield’s report, but he could not ignore the warnings of a trusted friend. He immediately dispatched Hilsman and Michael Forrestal, a member of the White House staff, on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam.

The Hilsman–Forrestal report of early 1963 struck a middle ground between the harsh criticism of the journalists and the rosy optimism of the embassy. The two men expressed serious reservations about the effectiveness of ARVN military operations, found flaws in the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program, and conceded that Diem had become increasingly isolated from the people. They concluded that the United States and South Vietnam were “probably winning” but quickly added that the war would “probably last longer than we would like” and “cost more in terms of both lives and money than we had anticipated.”⁵² Despite a generally pessimistic appraisal and cautiously optimistic conclusions, Hilsman and Forrestal found U.S. policy sound

⁵¹Mike Mansfield oral history interview, Kennedy Papers; Jones, *Death of a Generation*, p. 216.

⁵²Hilsman–Forrestal report, January 25, 1963, *FR, 1961–1963*, 3: 50–52.

in its conception and recommended only tactical changes to ensure more effective implementation. Their report reinforced doubts about the reliability of official estimates of progress but kept alive hopes that the United States might yet achieve its goals.

Throughout the spring of 1963, optimism and uncertainty coexisted uneasily in Saigon and Washington. The embassy and the military command continued to exude confidence. Harkins even informed a gathering of top officials in Honolulu in April that the war might be over by Christmas. Intelligence analyses were much more cautious, warning that the military situation remained fragile and unpredictable. In the White House, in the lower echelons of the Washington bureaucracy, and among some Americans in Vietnam, there was a gnawing uncertainty about how the war was really going and severe doubt, if it was not going well, about which way to turn.

Growing evidence of Vietnamese–American tension compounded the uncertainty. Strained relations existed at all levels and were probably inevitable given the rapid U.S. buildup in Vietnam and the vastly different approaches of the two peoples. Restless and impatient, the Americans were eager to get on with the job and were frustrated by the inertia that pervaded the government and army of South Vietnam. They sought to bypass the central government and deal directly with the villagers, thus, in effect, taking control of the war. Their arrogance was frequently manifested, one U.S. adviser conceded, by an attitude of “Get out of my way, I’d rather do it myself!” Proud and sensitive, having only recently emerged from Western rule, the Vietnamese bristled at the presumptuousness of the newcomers who sought to tell them how to run their country. “Daily friction leads to no more love left,” a Saigon newspaper philosophized in the spring of 1963.⁵³

Relations at the top levels grew particularly tense. The Americans urged “democratic” reforms to secure popular support, they said, but Diem perceived that such reforms would undermine rather than strengthen his regime. Trapped in the dilemma he had feared from the start, he recognized that the American presence, although necessary to hold the line against the NLF, had introduced another—perhaps pivotal—element into the already volatile mix. He became more and more sensitive to U.S. criticism. Diem and Nhu were increasingly troubled by the growing number of Americans and their apparent efforts to run the

⁵³Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, 1970), p. 207; Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November* (New York, 1987), p. 33.

war. They protested infringements of Vietnamese sovereignty and fretted about a new colonialism. "All these soldiers," Diem complained to the French ambassador. "I never asked them to come here. They don't even have passports."⁵⁴ Diem and Nhu concluded that the United States posed as great a threat to them as the NLF and began to think in terms of reducing their dependence on their ally. In May 1963, Nhu publicly questioned whether the United States knew what it was doing in Vietnam and proposed that U.S. forces might be reduced by as many as 5,000 soldiers. He also began to explore, through a Polish intermediary, the possibility of a settlement with Hanoi based on American withdrawal from Vietnam.⁵⁵ Kennedy was increasingly sensitive to South Vietnamese anger. "Those people hate us," he told a journalist. "They are going to throw our asses out of there at almost any point."⁵⁶ Some of his advisers began to see Diem and Nhu as major obstacles to winning the war in South Vietnam and therefore as expendable.

In this atmosphere of confusion and mounting conflict, the Kennedy administration began to consider the possibility of withdrawing some troops from Vietnam. As early as the spring of 1962, presumably with the president's approval, Secretary of Defense McNamara had initiated planning for a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces as part of a larger effort to institute long-range defense planning and reduce waste in the defense budget. The secretary especially feared a long-range, open-ended, and increasingly expensive commitment, as in South Korea. McNamara and others also saw troop withdrawals as a means to gain leverage with the Saigon government and assure Congress and the public that the United States was not hopelessly entangled in Vietnam.

Some former Kennedy advisers claim that the president's interest in troop withdrawals confirms his concern about an open-ended commitment and even his determination to get out of Vietnam after he had been reelected. "If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam," he reportedly explained to Mansfield, "we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands."⁵⁷ The extent to which Kennedy was

⁵⁴Quoted in Hammer, *Death in November*, p. 121.

⁵⁵Memorandum of conversation at the White House, April 4, 1963, *FR*, 1961–1963, 3: 198–200.

⁵⁶Quoted in Reeves, *President Kennedy*, pp. 484–485.

⁵⁷Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye": *Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (New York, 1973), p. 16; Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 236–237, 321–325; Marc J. Selverstone, "It's a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal," *Diplomatic History* 34 (June 2010): 485–495.

committed to troop withdrawals remains unclear. In a conversation with McNamara in May 1963, he did affirm that his commitment to the withdrawal of a planned 1,000 troops later in the year depended on success in the war.

THE BUDDHIST CRISIS

At the very time Kennedy and Diem were having sober second thoughts about their fateful partnership, an upheaval among Buddhists in the major cities of South Vietnam suddenly introduced a dramatic new threat to the Diem regime and new complications for an already faltering American policy. The affair began on May 8, seemingly inadvertently, when government troops fired into crowds gathered in Hue to protest orders forbidding the display of flags on the anniversary of Buddha's birth. The May 8 incident stirred new and vigorous protest. Buddhist leaders, such as the charismatic Thich Tri Quang, accused the government of religious persecution and demanded religious freedom. Diem at first sought to conciliate the Buddhists, but hotheads on both sides, including his older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc, the Catholic Archbishop of Hue, and Tri Quang, made any resolution difficult. A provocative anti-Buddhist statement by Madame Nhu's Women's Solidarity Movement in early June stirred things up again, leading to the self-immolation of Quang Duc on June 11 and a full-fledged crisis.

From that fiery moment, the Buddhist protest emerged into a powerful, deeply rooted political movement that threatened the very survival of the Diem government. The protests of 1963 grew out of a Buddhist revival that had begun in the 1920s and sought to restore Buddhism to a central place in Vietnamese life. The revival aspired to unify Vietnam's disparate Buddhist groups into a strong national movement deeply engaged in the shaping of Vietnamese society. By the 1960s, Buddhist leaders were increasingly alarmed by the direction the Diem government was moving and saw his personalist agenda as inimical to their aspirations.⁵⁸ The immolation of the elderly monk spurred wider protests in South Vietnam. Students in the universities and high schools, including some Catholics, joined in mass demonstrations, and discontent spread to the army. As the Buddhists became more

⁵⁸Miller, *Misalliance*, pp. 262–266.

confrontational, the government abandoned any thought of conciliation. Diem dismissed the protests as Communist-inspired; Madame Nhu called the immolations "barbecues" and offered to furnish the gasoline and matches for more. By midsummer, South Vietnamese society appeared on the verge of disintegration.

The crisis brought consternation to a Washington already uneasy over its Vietnam policy. The administration was caught off guard by the protest, surprised by the response it touched off, and shocked by the self-immolation of Quang Duc. Fearing that these ominous new developments might undercut domestic support for the war and further endanger a counterinsurgency program many suspected was already failing, the administration frantically attempted to reconcile the two sides, sending numerous emissaries to talk with Buddhist leaders and pressing Diem to take conciliatory measures.

Such efforts produced meager results. The Americans could never really determine what the Buddhists wanted; Diem and Nhu were obdurate. Diem defiantly proclaimed that he would not permit himself and his country to be humiliated, even if the Americans "trained their artillery on this palace." Nhu instructed the Americans that it was impossible to fight a war with a guilty conscience and appealed for an aid program without strings such as the one provided during World War II, when the United States assisted Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin without approving his regime.⁵⁹ Diem and Nhu compared the crisis of 1963 to that with the sects in 1955, which, they claimed, also, the United States had not understood and which they had successfully suppressed by force. The demonstrations and immolations continued; in all, seven monks met fiery deaths. While Madame Nhu and the government-controlled Saigon press issued shrill tirades against the Buddhists and the United States, Nhu's police carted off hundreds of protesters to South Vietnam's already bulging jails.

By the late summer, the Kennedy administration was increasingly troubled and deeply divided. The Buddhist mind remained "terra incognita," one Kennedy adviser later conceded, but most Americans agreed that Diem's response had been provocative.⁶⁰ Some feared that there was no real alternative to Diem and that a change in government might bring even greater chaos to South Vietnam. Others retained confidence

⁵⁹ Embassy Saigon to State Department, June 24, 1963, *FR*, 1961-1963, 3: 413; Memorandum of conversation, Nhu and Robert Manning, July 17, 1963, *ibid.*, 500-501.

⁶⁰ Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 210.

in Diem himself, blaming the problems on Nhu and his wife and arguing that the damage might yet be repaired if they could be removed. Still others began to view the Buddhist crisis as symbolic of basic, uncorrectable defects in the regime and concluded that the United States must face the possibility of a change.

An incident in late August clinched the issue as far as Diem's American opponents were concerned. Nolting's appointment as ambassador expired in the summer of 1963. During his farewell visit, Diem had assured him, as a personal favor, that no further repressive measures would be taken against the Buddhists. But on August 21, Nhu's U.S.-trained Special Forces carried out massive raids in Hue, Saigon, and other cities, ransacking the pagodas and arresting more than 1,400 Buddhists. Whether Diem approved the raids in advance remains unclear, but in the eyes of most Americans, his subsequent refusal to disavow Nhu's actions placed the onus squarely on him. These latest actions, just days after the solemn pledges to Nolting, appeared to the anti-Diemists a "deliberate affront" that demanded a firm response. Since the Kennedy administration had taken office, consideration had been given to Diem's replacement. Americans assumed as a matter of course a right and, indeed, a duty to intervene in South Vietnamese affairs as they saw fit. "We could not sit still and be the puppets of Diem's anti-Buddhist policies," Hilsman later recalled.⁶¹

Shortly after the raid on the pagodas, moreover, a group of South Vietnamese Army generals reopened secret contacts already established with CIA agents in Saigon. The most recent incident made clear, they warned, that Nhu would stop at nothing. Reporting evidence that he was not only planning their execution but also discussing with Hanoi a deal that would sell out the independence of South Vietnam, the generals inquired how the United States might respond should they move against the government. The anti-Diem group in Washington was undoubtedly alarmed that Nhu was making overtures to Hanoi; such reports reinforced their conviction that something must be done. More important, perhaps, the inquiries suggested that there was, after all, an alternative.

The generals' overtures arrived in Washington on a Saturday, when many top officials were out of town, and Hilsman, Forrestal, and Harriman seized the opportunity to execute what Taylor later described as an "egregious end run."⁶² They prepared a tough, if

⁶¹Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, p. 482; Hilsman oral history interview, Kennedy Papers.

⁶²Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, p. 292.

somewhat ambiguous, cable instructing the newly appointed ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., to give Diem an opportunity to rid himself of Nhu, but adding that if he refused, the United States must “face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.” They also instructed Lodge to make clear to the generals that the United States would not continue to support Diem if he refused to cooperate and that it would provide them with “direct support in any interim period of breakdown of central government mechanism.”⁶³ These last words left deliberately vague what the United States might do and under what circumstances, but the thrust of the message was unmistakable: If Diem remained defiant, the United States was prepared to dump him. The cable was cleared with Kennedy, then vacationing on Cape Cod. The president’s endorsement was apparently used to secure the acquiescence of responsible officials in the Defense Department.

Lodge wasted no time implementing his instructions. From the day he set foot in Saigon, he had concluded that a change of government was necessary. He shared Hilsman’s outrage at the August 21 incident. He had no doubt, he later recalled, that the raid on the pagodas “marked the beginning of the end of the Diem regime.”⁶⁴ His convictions were reinforced by his first meeting with Diem. When he warned that the regime’s handling of the Buddhists was endangering American support for South Vietnam, Diem gave him a long lecture on the difficulties of governing a nation with a “dearth of educated people.” The embassy subsequently contacted the generals through a CIA agent—“so the official American hand would not show”—offering assurances of support should they succeed in overthrowing the government but warning that the United States would not assist them in undertaking a coup or “bail them out” if they got into trouble.⁶⁵

⁶³Telegram, August 24, 1963, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington, D.C., 1971), Book 12, 536–537.

⁶⁴Lodge oral history interview, Kennedy Papers.

⁶⁵Forrestal to Kennedy, August 26, 1963, Kennedy Papers, Office File, Box 128; Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York, 1971), pp. 195–196. Hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers* (NYT). See also memorandum, “Contacts with Vietnamese Generals,” October 23, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Tex., DSDUF, Box 2; and Thomas L., Aherm, Jr. “CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–1963(u)” (DVD, 2009).

Kennedy and his top advisers returned on Monday to a capital rife with tension. Charges and countercharges flew back and forth. Some senior officials accused those who had been in charge of effecting major policy changes behind their back. "This shit has got to stop," the president himself upbraided Forrester at one point. Over the next four days, a chastened and somewhat more collaborative team of advisers struggled through endless meetings to hammer out a policy. All agreed that Nhu must go, but Ambassador Nolting continued to vigorously defend Diem. Those who backed a coup urged a positive response to the generals' queries. Others conceded an urgent need for more reliable information about the coup plotters and expressed doubts whether a coup could succeed. Should an uprising take place, McNamara stressed, the United States must figure out "how we make this thing work." With misgivings, the administration decided to make one last approach to Diem to get rid of Nhu. But it did not alter the policy agreed upon over the previous, frantic weekend. "We're up to our hips in mud out there," JFK affirmed. Congress might "get mad" if the United States colluded with coup plotters, but "they'll be madder if Vietnam goes down the drain." Uncertain about the generals but not willing to let the possibility of a successful coup slip away, the administration offered encouragement without any tangible support or even a firm commitment. Lodge was instructed to inform the generals that the United States would "support a coup which has [a] good chance of succeeding but plans no direct involvement of U.S. Armed Forces." He was authorized to announce publicly and at his own discretion a reduction in aid to Diem, the signal the generals had requested as an indication of Washington's support.⁶⁶

While U.S. officials in Washington and Saigon nervously awaited the generals' response, the plans for a coup gradually unraveled. The leaders of the plot could not secure the support of key army units in the Saigon area. Despite the assurances given by the CIA go-between, they remained uncertain of American backing, a wariness stoked by Nhu. On August 31, they informed Harkins that the coup had been called off. "There is neither the will nor the organization among the generals to accomplish anything," Lodge cabled Washington with obvious disappointment.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Memoranda of these meetings and actual tape recordings may be found at <http://www.gwu.edu/~NSAEBBI/NSABB302/index.htm>

⁶⁷Quoted in *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 2: 240; Miller, *Misalliance*, p. 294.

NO TURNING BACK

Although the August plot came to nothing, it marked another major turning point in U.S. policy in Vietnam. Many officials had grave reservations about the desirability, feasibility, and possible consequences of a coup, but the anti-Diemists had been able to bind them to their point of view. By making such a commitment, the administration encouraged opponents of the regime and made difficult, if not impossible, any real reconciliation with Diem. As Lodge put it, the United States was "launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back."⁶⁸

The Diem regime refused to bend. Nhu sent his wife out of the country, perhaps as much for her personal safety as to appease the United States. But he would not resign. Lodge described him as a "lost soul, a haunted man who is caught in a vicious circle. The Furies are after him." The monkish Diem sought to discredit the Buddhist protest by claiming that the pagodas had been turned into bordellos where obscene photographs had been discovered and virgins were being despoiled.⁶⁹ The regime made no effort to conciliate the Buddhists or the United States.

Over the next four weeks, the Kennedy administration heatedly debated its options. Hilsman and others argued that there was no chance of stabilizing South Vietnam as long as Nhu remained. They warned that Nhu might already be committed to a deal with Hanoi that would force the United States out of Vietnam. The administration must therefore apply firm pressure, including aid cuts, to compel Diem to remove Nhu and adopt the changes in policy necessary to defeat the NLF. Others, such as Nolting, advocated a final attempt at reconciliation. The failure of the August coup made clear, they argued, that there was no real alternative to Diem. The president was unlikely to remove Nhu, even under the most severe American pressure. Cuts in aid would only hurt the war against the Vietcong, antagonize the South Vietnamese people, and further destabilize the country. There was still a chance, they concluded, that if the United States repaired its relations with the government, the war might be won.

⁶⁸Lodge to Rusk, August 29, 1963, *ibid.*, 738.

⁶⁹Lodge to Rusk, September 9, 1963, *FR, 1961-1963*, 4: 142; Lodge to Rusk, September 19, 1963, *ibid.*, 259.

A “fact-finding” mission to South Vietnam added to the confusion. Gen. Victor Krulak of the Defense Department played down the possibilities of a coup and advised that the war could be won if the United States firmly supported Diem. In contrast, Joseph Mendenhall of the State Department reported a “virtual breakdown of the civil government in Saigon,” warned of a possible religious war between Catholics and Buddhists, and concluded that there was no chance of defeating the guerrillas unless, “as a minimum, Nhu withdrew or was removed from the government.” “You two did visit the same country, didn’t you?” Kennedy remarked with obvious exasperation.⁷⁰

The administration by this time was more divided on Vietnam than it had been on any other issue. “My God, my government’s coming apart,” Kennedy exclaimed on one occasion. Such was the confusion and perplexity that at one point, in a moment of frustration, Attorney General Robert Kennedy blurted out the ultimate question, wondering aloud whether any South Vietnamese government was capable of winning the war and whether the United States should not begin to extricate itself from an impossible tangle. The question was both appropriate and timely. The disarray in South Vietnam was reaching a point where both factions in the administration may have been right—the country could not be stabilized with or without Diem.

Adding to the confusion, major international developments raised the enticing—to some, frightening—possibility of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. Following the Cuban missile crisis, the most dangerous face-off of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States took the first awkward steps toward detente with the negotiation of a nuclear test ban treaty. The missile crisis also catalyzed the shift from a bipolar to a multipolar world. The long-simmering ideological and power struggle between the USSR and China came out into the open, with momentous implications for the Cold War. In the West, French leader Charles de Gaulle staked out a course independent of the United States. Seeking to promote France’s prestige generally, its influence in its former colony, Vietnam, and a Vietnamese peace that might be extended to other areas, de Gaulle in late August—just as the Buddhist crisis worsened and Washington began to contemplate the overthrow of Diem—proposed an ambitious neutralization scheme.⁷¹

⁷⁰Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, p. 502.

⁷¹Yuko Torikata, “Reexamining de Gaulle’s Peace Initiative on the Vietnam War,” *Diplomatic History*, 5 (November 2007): 916–922.

His aim was a unified Vietnam, free of U.S. and Chinese influence, and occupying a neutral, Yugoslavia-like position in Asia. Paralleling de Gaulle's ploy, the Polish diplomat Mieczyslaw Maneli explored with DRV leaders Pham Van Dong and Ho Chi Minh, on the one hand, and Nhu, on the other, the possibility of a negotiated settlement.⁷²

This flurry of diplomatic activity produced little beyond rumor. Nhu seems to have viewed the prospect of negotiations as possible leverage against the United States. Incredibly, during these fateful days, he and Diem remained sublimely confident. They believed they had put down the Buddhist revolt, staved off a coup attempt, and were winning the war against the NLF. They were "two fingers from victory," in the brazen words of Madame Nhu. They seem to have given no serious thought to a compromise peace with the DRV or to de Gaulle's neutralization scheme except as ways to explore Hanoi's position or impose their own terms on a defeated Viet Cong. Nhu in fact met with an NLF representative, perhaps to arouse suspicions in Hanoi—and Washington. As for North Vietnam, Ho and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong appeared receptive to economic and cultural exchanges with South Vietnam: "We are realists," Pham told Maneli. Hanoi was especially interested in trade, mainly the exchange of coal for much needed rice from South Vietnam. But North Vietnam appears to have been interested in negotiations and neutralization only on terms of Saigon's submission. To stave off premature discussions, the more belligerent Le Duan arranged that a trusted associate should meet with Nhu. In any event, both North and South Vietnam distrusted Maneli who did not have the backing of his own government or the support of the Soviet Union.⁷³

The United States at this juncture adamantly opposed negotiations and neutralization. Rumors of Nhu's conversations with Maneli and perhaps with NLF agents heightened Kennedy administration support for a coup. Some U.S. officials suspected that "Nosey Charlie" deGaulle's proposals were motivated mainly by anti-Americanism. Kennedy himself expressed an openness to neutralization under more favorable

⁷²Margaret K. Gnoinska, "Poland and Vietnam, 1963: New Evidence on the Maneli Affair," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper* 45 (March 2005).

⁷³Miller, *Misalliance*, pp. 310–311; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), pp. 62–63; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley, Calif., 2013), pp. 155–157.

circumstances. At this time, however, he expressed certainty it would lead to a unified Vietnam under Communist domination, an unacceptable outcome from the standpoint of both foreign policy and domestic politics. The dire situation in Laos in the late summer of 1963 reinforced already strong U.S. doubts about negotiations in Vietnam. The Laotian neutralization agreement signed in July 1962 had broken down in less than a year, and North Vietnam had quickly resumed using Laos as a supply route. Things were so bad in Laos at this time that the Kennedy administration to persuade Moscow and Hanoi of the seriousness of its commitment contemplated deploying U.S. troops there or even bombing select North Vietnamese targets and mining Haiphong harbor. The abject failure of neutralization in Laos confirmed in U.S. eyes the peril of negotiations.⁷⁴

In any event, despite Robert Kennedy's despairing question, most Americans were still persuaded that the war could somehow be won. To JFK, the middle ground still seemed open, and the "safe course, in his view, was to stay the course," as Fredrik Logevall has written, at least until he was reelected, even if it required overthrowing Diem.⁷⁵ The chief result of the rumors of peace was to sharpen the U.S. desire to get rid of Nhu. The attorney general's question was not raised again. The administration drifted along, divided against itself, uncertain of its direction, in truth rushing headlong toward a coup.

THE OVERTHROW OF NGO DINH DIEM

After more than a month of debate, in early October Kennedy settled on a short-run policy that, characteristically, split the difference between the two extremes promoted by his advisers. Still quite uncertain what was going on in South Vietnam, he dispatched Taylor and McNamara to Saigon to get a firsthand appraisal. The mission took place in an atmosphere that can only be described as surreal. A report was actually drafted before the group left Washington. In Saigon, the chain-smoking Diem subjected the visitors to a two-hour monologue, including predictions of South Vietnam's becoming a "model democracy" and a spirited

⁷⁴William J. Rust, *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and Laos* (Lexington, Ky., 2014), pp. 148, 214–220, 231–232.

⁷⁵Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), p. 42.

defense of Mme. Nhu: "One cannot deny a lady the right to defend herself when she has been unjustly attacked." Taylor arranged a tennis match with Gen. Duong Van Minh at the Saigon Officers Club to assess the prospects for a coup. It produced nothing but tennis, and the Americans concluded that the dissidents had "little stomach" for overthrowing the government. The visitors were deluged with hopelessly conflicting reports on the war, leaving McGeorge Bundy "with a lasting skepticism of the ability of any man, however honest, to interpret accurately what was going on."⁷⁶ Probably after discussions with Lodge, Taylor and McNamara rejected any notion of conciliating Diem on grounds that it would reinforce his belief that he could bend the United States to his will. The only feasible course was to apply "selective pressures," including cuts in U.S. aid. Such an approach probably would not sway Diem to remove Nhu, but it might persuade him to stop oppressing political dissenters. Overly optimistic about the progress of the counterinsurgency effort, Taylor and McNamara concluded that if Diem could be brought around, the insurgency might be reduced to "something little more than organized banditry." Based on such optimism, they also recommended the phased withdrawal of U.S. troops back to the January 1961 level by the end of 1965 with the first installment of 1,000 men to leave later in the year. "We need a way to get out of Vietnam," McNamara averred. "This is a way of doing it." With the election a year away and eager to reassure the public and Congress, Kennedy approved the withdrawal plan without conditioning it on military success.⁷⁷

Although it badly misjudged the actual conditions in South Vietnam, the McNamara-Taylor report formed the basis of subsequent U.S. policy. The two men underestimated the prospects of a coup and overestimated the efficacy of applying pressure to Diem. Kennedy approved their recommendations on October 5. Over the next few weeks, the administration gradually implemented the policy of "selective pressures." Lodge remained away from the presidential palace, insisting that Diem must come to him. In the meantime, the administration recalled the CIA station chief in Saigon, John Richardson, known among Vietnamese and Americans as a close friend of Nhu; cut off funds to Nhu's Special Forces; and suspended shipments of tobacco, rice, and milk under the commodity import program.

⁷⁶Jones, *Death of Generation*, pp. 369-375.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 380-384.

A number of Kennedy advisers later emphatically denied that these measures were designed to stimulate a coup, and in the most literal sense, they were correct. The McNamara–Taylor report had explicitly rejected encouragement of a coup. The aid cuts were designed to pressure Diem. The administration was not as innocent as its defenders have maintained, however. Hilsman later conceded that “some of the things that we did encouraged the coup, some we intended as pressure on Diem, although we knew it [*sic*] would encourage a coup.”⁷⁸ Kennedy and his advisers would have been naive indeed if they did not recognize that the recall of Richardson, whom the generals had feared would tip off the August plot, and the cuts in aid, the very signal of support the generals had requested earlier, would influence Diem’s opponents. And the timing is significant. The aid cuts were instituted after the generals had once again inquired how the United States would respond to a coup. The measures taken during October encouraged the generals to step up their planning and seek further assurances from the United States.

Once aware that the generals were again planning a coup, the administration did nothing to discourage them. The response to their inquiry was sufficiently vague to salve the consciences of those who preferred a coup but hesitated to accept direct responsibility for it, and to satisfy the reservations of those who remained wary of dumping Diem. But the instructions offered the assurances the generals sought. Lodge was authorized to inform the plotters that although the United States did not “wish to stimulate a coup,” it would not “thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing [the] effectiveness of the military effort, ensuring popular support to win [the] war and improving working relations with the U.S.”⁷⁹

His administration sharply divided to the very end, Kennedy stuck by his compromise policy. Harriman, Hilsman, and others felt that Diem must go. Vice President Johnson, top CIA and Pentagon officials, and Harkins continued to insist that there was no real alternative and that Diem’s removal would bring chaos to South Vietnam. They also felt, as Harkins put it, that it was “incongruous” after nine years of supporting Diem “to get him down, kick him around and get rid of him.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Hilsman oral history interview, Kennedy Papers.

⁷⁹ CIA to Lodge, October 6, 1963, *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 2: 769.

⁸⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 785.

Kennedy himself vacillated, adhering to the policy of not overtly supporting a coup but not discouraging one either. In this case, not to decide was to decide, and by leaving matters in the hands of Lodge, whose views were well known, the president virtually ensured the outcome. The major fear among Kennedy and some of his advisers in the anxious days of late October seems to have been that the coup might fail, provoking Diem, in Robert Kennedy's words, to "tell us to get the hell out of the country" and sending U.S. policy in Vietnam and indeed Southeast Asia "down the road to disaster." A successful coup, others warned, might impede prosecution of the war. Although he sought evidence that a coup could succeed, Kennedy seemed content to leave in Lodge's hands a decision whether to call it off or delay it.⁸¹

Throughout the last week of October, Saigon was gripped with tension and deluged with rumors as the various actors played out their complicated—and ultimately tragic—drama. Determined to avoid the mistakes of 1960 and August 1963, the generals lined up their forces with the closest attention to every detail. Keenly aware that the "elephants were crashing in the jungle," Nhu is said to have concocted an elaborate scheme for a fake coup that could be used as an excuse for eliminating suspected plotters. He and Diem did count on a key officer, Gen. Ton That Dinh, to side with them and head off the uprising. They remained confident to the very end that, as before, they would prevail. To complicate matters still further, in the last hours before the real coup, Diem suddenly turned conciliatory, inquiring of Lodge at their last meeting what the United States wanted of him. Whether he was merely trying to buy time or had concluded that he must place himself in the hands of his ally is unclear. In any event, his apparent concession came too late.

While Diem was talking with Lodge early in the afternoon of November 1, the generals seized key military installations and communications systems in Saigon, compelled the surrender of Nhu's Special Forces, and demanded the resignation of Diem and Nhu. The coup plotters—and the United States—had hoped for a peaceful transition with the former leaders going into exile far from Vietnam, thereby helping to secure international support for the new government. Reluctant to be tied to the coup, the Kennedy administration left matters largely in the hands of the generals. The coup leaders made slapdash arrangements for such

⁸¹Ken Hughes, "The Tale of the Tapes: JFK and the Fall of Diem," *The Boston Globe Magazine*, October 24, 1999, p. 14 ff.

an outcome and completely underestimated their adversaries. Diem and Nhu adamantly refused to resign. With a briefcase full of U.S. money, they fled the palace and were transported by car to a Catholic church in ChoLon, the Chinese district. Early the next morning, All Souls Day (the Day of the Dead), they received communion. Furious with Diem and Nhu's escape and tipped off as to their whereabouts, the generals sent an armored vehicle to capture them. Their hands were bound and they were thrown in the back of the truck. Presumably on the generals' orders, they were shot in the head and repeatedly stabbed by a hit man who had once been Nhu's bodyguard. Diem was buried in an unmarked grave in a cemetery next to the house of the U.S. ambassador.⁸²

Throughout the coup, the United States followed to the letter its promises "not to thwart a change of government." American officials later insisted that they knew nothing of the timing or exact plans for a coup. In fact, CIA agent Lucien Conein maintained close contact with the generals in the planning stages through clandestine meetings at a dentist's office. He had telephone contact with them while the coup was taking place. The United States refused even to intervene to ensure the personal safety of Diem and Nhu. Lodge was considerably less than candid in the telephone conversation with Diem when he pretended ignorance of Washington's attitudes. During the last pathetic phone call, Lodge offered to help, but he then went off to bed, leaving matters in the hands of the coup forces. Perhaps he accepted at face value the generals' pledges to spare Diem and Nhu. He may have feared that any action taken on behalf of the brothers would be interpreted as a violation of the earlier U.S. assurances not to interfere.

The news of the coup and the bloody deaths of the Ngos evoked mixed reactions. In Saigon, jubilant crowds smashed statues of Diem, danced in the streets, and covered ARVN soldiers with garlands of flowers. "Every Vietnamese has a grin on his face today," Lodge excitedly informed Washington. In the ancient Vietnamese tradition, the mandate of heaven had passed. Among Americans there was a sense of relief and satisfaction. Lodge, the primary architect, hailed the coup as a "remarkably able performance in all respects." Some Washington officials agreed and went to great lengths to distinguish this "acceptable" coup from the "unacceptable" military takeovers then sweeping Latin America. Lodge went further, extolling the coup as a "useful lesson" in the way people "on the side of freedom," with U.S. help, could "clean

⁸²Jones, *Death of a Generation*, pp. 416–419, 428–429, 435.

their own house," eliminating the "autocrats" and "Colonel Blimps" as a way to prevent being taken over by Communists.⁸³

The deaths of Diem and Nhu were deeply unsettling. The generals first attributed them to "accidental suicide," but photographs of the two mutilated bodies, hands tied behind their backs, made clear, as McGeorge Bundy sarcastically put it, that this was "not the preferred way to commit suicide." Some of Kennedy's advisers accepted the deaths as a matter of course. "Revolutions are rough. People get hurt," Hilsman told a reporter.⁸⁴ But Kennedy himself was profoundly troubled. When he learned of the slaying of Diem and Nhu, Taylor later recalled, "he leaped to his feet and rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before."⁸⁵ When someone justified the deaths on the grounds that the two men were tyrants, the president retorted that "they did the best they could for their country." People close to him found Kennedy more depressed than at any time since the Bay of Pigs and speculated that he realized that Vietnam had been his greatest foreign policy failure.⁸⁶

Just three weeks later, Kennedy himself would be assassinated in Dallas, leaving questions about the might-have-beens that still perplex us. Some of his aides who would become outspoken critics of "Lyndon Johnson's war" and some historians have claimed that he was committed to extricating the United States from what he knew was a quagmire, even that he had a secret plan for doing so. JFK undoubtedly harbored deep-seated doubts about Vietnam. He feared Americanizing the war. But there is no persuasive evidence that he had decided to get out; no secret plan has been uncovered.⁸⁷ He had resisted "premature" negotiations as firmly as he opposed combat troops. In a speech to be given on the day of his death, he conceded that commitments in Third World nations could be "painful, risky, and costly," but, he added, "we dare not weary of the test." The plan for a phased withdrawal approved by him in

⁸³Lodge to State Department, November 2, 1963, *FR*, 1961–1963, 4: 526; Memorandum for record of White House meeting, November 1, 1963, *FR*, 1961–1963, 4: 518; Lodge to State Department, November 3, 1963, *ibid.*, 546–548; Lodge to State Department, November 6, 1963, *ibid.*, 577–578.

⁸⁴Memorandum of White House meeting, November 4, 1963, *FR*, 1961–1963, 4: 555–556; Hilsman quoted in Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York, 1965), p. 225.

⁸⁵Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, p. 301.

⁸⁶Reeves, *President Kennedy*, p. 651; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 997–998.

⁸⁷These arguments are analyzed in Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in Mark J. White, ed., *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (New York, 1998), pp. 22–30.



The Killing of Diem and Nhu

South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, disguised as priests to facilitate their planned escape, are pictured here in the back of an armored personnel carrier after their assassination by the perpetrators of the coup that removed them from power. Aware that the United States had not done enough to save the lives of the Ngo brothers, President John F. Kennedy was visibly shaken by their violent death. Less than a month later, JFK himself was slain by an assassin in Dallas.

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October was reaffirmed at a policy conference in Honolulu on November 20. The first increment was quietly taken out the next month. But this scheme was predicated on South Vietnamese military success, and it was viewed as one element of the selective pressures to be applied against the Diem regime rather than part of a larger plan for getting out. National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273, also drafted in Honolulu, strongly reaffirmed the importance of South Vietnam to U.S. security and the necessity of waging the war vigorously.

A strong case can be made that when confronted with the crisis of 1964–1965 in South Vietnam, Kennedy might have acted differently than his successor. He had privately expressed reservations about the chances of success in Vietnam, and he had adamantly opposed the commitment of U.S. combat troops. He knew enough about counterinsurgency warfare to realize that a key ingredient for victory was a competent

and responsible allied government, something conspicuously lacking in Saigon. He viewed the world in a more sophisticated manner than Johnson. He was a much more secure individual, and he was not disposed to personalize issues. He was battle tested. Having weathered the disasters of 1961 and the missile crisis, he had gained self-confidence in foreign policy. He would have dealt with the crisis in his second term, when, presumably, he would have had much greater freedom of action. The questions that linger are *how* he might have extricated the United States from a South Vietnam on the verge of collapse and *how* he would have managed that embarrassment at home.⁸⁸

At the time of his death, Kennedy appears to have made no decisions on Vietnam. He was deeply troubled by the coup and its aftermath and by the chaotic situation in Saigon. He staunchly opposed a major commitment. But he appears not yet convinced he could not achieve a satisfactory outcome. Like most policymakers in comparable situations, he was inclined to put off difficult decisions as long as possible and keep his options open. On the day before he died, he instructed his advisers to conduct a “complete and profound review” of U.S. involvement to determine how to implement a “gradual shift in our presence” in Vietnam, an order that can be interpreted as his way of developing multiple options without making a firm decision.⁸⁹

Kennedy must be judged on what he did while in office, not what he might have done. Whatever his private doubts, he and his advisers repeatedly and publicly insisted that a non-Communist South Vietnam was vital to America’s global interests, strengthening the popular hold of that questionable assumption. His cautious middle course significantly enlarged the U.S. role in South Vietnam. When he took office, there were less than 1,000 U.S. advisers in Vietnam. At the time of his assassination, there were more than 16,000, and they were deeply involved in planning and carrying out military operations. With the overthrow of Diem, the United States assumed direct responsibility for the South Vietnamese government. Whatever his fears and ultimate intentions, he passed on to Lyndon Johnson a problem eminently more complicated and dangerous than the one he had inherited.

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 40–48; Fredrik Logevall, “Structure, Contingency, and the War in Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 39 (January 2015): 8–15; Marc Trachtenberg, “Kennedy, Vietnam, and Audience Costs,” *ISSR Forum*, no. 3 (2014) <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-3.pdf> (accessed February 16, 2018).

⁸⁹Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), pp. 130, 132–140.



LBJ and HHH

President Lyndon Baines Johnson and an out-of-his-comfort-zone vice-president-elect Hubert H. Humphrey celebrate their 1964 electoral success on horseback at the LBJ Ranch in Texas. The presidential helicopter is in the background. Johnson's decisive victory encouraged him to pursue his expansive vision of Great Society domestic reform and freed him to escalate the war in Vietnam. Humphrey opposed escalation in 1965, opening a rift with LBJ that would widen when the vice president ran for president in 1968.

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Enough, but Not Too Much

Johnson's Decisions for War, 1963–1965

Between November 1963 and July 1965, Lyndon Baines Johnson transformed a limited commitment to assist the South Vietnamese government into an open-ended commitment to preserve an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. Johnson inherited from Kennedy a rapidly deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. Fearing that large-scale involvement might jeopardize his chances of election in 1964 and threaten his beloved Great Society domestic programs, he temporized for more than a year, expanding American assistance and increasing the number of advisers in hopes that a beefed-up version of his predecessor's policy might somehow stave off disaster. South Vietnam's survival appeared more in doubt than ever after Johnson's reelection, however, and over the next nine months he made his fateful decisions, authorizing a sustained air offensive against North Vietnam and dispatching ground forces to stem the tide in the South. By July 1965, the United States was committed to a major war on the Asian mainland.

A "BIG JUICY WORM"

The overthrow of Diem culminated a very bad year in South Vietnam. Following Ap Bac, National Liberation Front (NLF) military forces regained the momentum held only briefly by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The insurgents continued to chip away at the already shaky Strategic Hamlet Program. In parts of the vital Mekong Delta, the government's position had declined significantly before the Buddhist crisis erupted in Saigon. Through a kind of circular effect, the onset of chaos in the capital in the summer of 1963 undercut the

government's hold in the rural areas, and the erosion of its strength in the countryside further threatened an increasingly embattled Diem regime. The November coup exacerbated the position of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) across the board. The army suffered from confusion and waning morale and the officials in the villages from weakened authority. The strategic hamlets completely collapsed. By the end of the year the Saigon government verged on disintegration.¹

These obvious signs of decay in South Vietnam posed for the Hanoi leadership grave dangers—and enticing opportunities. A complete government collapse might provoke large-scale American intervention, even combat troops. But South Vietnam's growing weakness also opened the possibility that a major escalation of the political and military struggle might produce victory in the South.

Throughout much of 1963, Hanoi's hawks and doves struggled over policy choices. Moderates such as Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap continued to preach caution. Emboldened by the battle of Ap Bac, Algeria's victory in its revolution against France, and an increasingly radicalized China's offer of unqualified support in war materials and men, if needed, Le Duan and the hawks pressed for escalation. Growing disarray in Saigon gave them an edge, and the overthrow of Diem presented an opportunity too good to pass up. In what historian Pierre Asselin has called "a coup of a different kind," Le Duan and his allies pushed aside the objections of the pragmatists and gambled on a go-for-broke strategy aimed at a total victory that would force a U.S. withdrawal. Resolution 9 called for stepped up political struggle in the South and a major expansion of the war. It was ratified at the party's Ninth Plenum in December. North Vietnam proceeded to enlarge its army to 300,000 men, prepare some regular units for infiltration into the South, and vastly expand the flow of equipment and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With these bold moves, the hawks gained control of the war. Henceforth, Ho would be a figurehead—with little influence on policy. The first of three colossal and extremely costly miscalculations on the part of Le Duan and his cohort, these decisions all but assured a major war with the United States.²

¹David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY, 2006), pp. 188–193.

²Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York, 2018), pp. 105–107; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), pp. 65–67.

For Johnson and the United States, the road to war was longer and more tortuous. After listening to Ambassador Lodge's gloomy assessment of the postcoup prospects of the Saigon regime on November 24, 1963, the new president claimed to feel like a catfish that had just "grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook in the middle of it." Johnson vowed to meet the Communist challenge, however, and insisted that he would not let Vietnam go the way China had gone in 1949. He instructed Lodge to "go back and tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word." Two days later, NSAM 273 incorporated this pledge into policy by declaring that the "central objective of the United States" was to assist the "people and Government" of South Vietnam "to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy." This reaffirmation of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam tied LBJ's policies to those of his predecessor. But the vow to "win" went a step further. The revised document also initiated planning for expanded operations against North Vietnam, opening the possibility for a major U.S. escalation of the war.³

During the first months of Johnson's presidency, the situation in South Vietnam further deteriorated. Some Americans had naively assumed that the removal of Diem and Nhu would restore domestic harmony and promote political unity, but the effect was quite the opposite. Diem had systematically destroyed the opposition, and his death left a gaping vacuum. Buddhists and Catholics constituted the most coherent groups in the cities, but their hatred of each other was implacable, and neither represented a viable political force. The Buddhists were splintered into a bewildering array of factions. Although tightly disciplined, the Catholics had no political program or mass appeal. The coup released long-pent-up forces. In the months that followed, new groups proliferated, but they were leaderless and hopelessly fragmented.

In the countryside, decay remained the norm. The removal of Diemist controls over information made clear that the statistics compiled by the government to demonstrate progress had been grossly in error. The insurgents controlled more people and territory than had been assumed. The Strategic Hamlet Program was in shambles, many of

³Bill Moyers, "Flashbacks," *Newsweek*, February 10, 1975; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003), p. 446.

the key hamlets in the critical Mekong Delta having been torn down either by guerrillas or by their own occupants. The situation was “very disturbing,” McNamara warned Johnson in late December. Unless the trend could be reversed within the next few months, South Vietnam might be lost.⁴

The junta that assumed power after the coup did little to arrest the decline. It inherited a bureaucratic structure atrophied by “dry rot and lassitude.” The twelve army officers who formed the Military Revolutionary Council (MRC) had been educated in France and had spent much of their careers in French service. They lacked political experience and indeed confidence in their own political skills. During the planning for the coup, they several times told their American contact that the United States should “take care of the political part.” As they floundered about, however, Lodge ordered U.S. officials to keep their distance, a move designed to demonstrate the new government’s independence that deprived it of much-needed American help. Suspicious of each other and of competing factions within the army, and uncertain which way to move, the MRC isolated itself in its headquarters near Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut airport. Those few actions it took merely added to the confusion. The removal of Diem’s province chiefs, for example, brought paralysis to local administration.⁵

The new government lasted less than three months. Presumably to get him out of Saigon, MRC leaders had sent to Da Nang Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, described by one of his coconspirators as “highly deceitful” and a “complete opportunist.” In late January, Khanh informed a CIA contact that some of the generals who backed neutralization of South Vietnam along lines proposed by France were planning a coup. No evidence has been found to support Khanh’s claims. He was likely acting to advance his own ambitions. By affirming that the United States opposed neutralization, the U.S. agent may have given him a green light for a coup of his own. The U.S. military command was disappointed in the junta’s lack of aggressiveness and may

⁴Robert McNamara to Johnson, December 21, 1963, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963* (Washington, D.C., 1991), 4: 1. Hereafter cited as *FR* with date and volume number.

⁵Henry Cabot Lodge to Johnson, January 1, 1964, *FR 1964–1968*, 1: 1; Thomas L. Ahern Jr., “The CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–1963” (DVD, 2009), pp. 175, 179.

have welcomed Khanh's scheme. At the very least, the United States did nothing to stop him. On January 29, 1964, a group of officers headed by Khanh overthrew the ineffectual junta.⁶

The coup reinforced Washington's growing doubts about its client state. Devious, opportunistic, and ambitious, Khanh in a notably checkered career had supported the Viet Minh and the French and had worked for and against Diem. His reliability must have been suspect. Putting the best face on a bad situation, some Americans comforted themselves that he was an able military commander and that, at least in contrast to Diem and the junta, he was "our boy." Lodge speculated that one-man rule might be preferable to a divided junta, and he was encouraged by Khanh's pledges to act decisively. Nothing would please the United States more, Lodge informed the general, than "the sight of an oriental chief of state who wanted to go fast and did not hesitate to kick people in the rear end." Khanh's response—he hoped he would "pick the right rear ends to kick"—could not have offered much reassurance. And Lodge conceded that it would be premature to predict a long life for the new government.⁷ The United States quickly recognized Khanh, but with little enthusiasm and even less confidence.

The Khanh government faced truly staggering problems. Military operations and the Strategic Hamlet Program had come to a complete standstill. The government's authority was nonexistent throughout much of the countryside, and near anarchy prevailed in the cities. In Saigon the "atmosphere fairly smelled of discontent," Gen. William Westmoreland later recalled, with "workers on strike, students demonstrating, the local press pursuing a persistent campaign of criticism of the new government."⁸ As NLF incidents increased in number and boldness, the capital took on all the appearances of an armed camp. Government buildings, stores, and even cafés were surrounded by barbed wire, while soldiers stood guard in concrete sentry boxes reinforced with sandbags. Khanh himself took up residence in a house on the Saigon River, where he could flee by boat if necessary. American intelligence warned that unless the new government took charge

⁶Ahern, "CIA and the House of Ngo," p. 189; Thomas L. Ahern Jr., "CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam" (DVD, 2009), pp. 9–18; A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954–1975* (New York, 2000), pp. 275–278.

⁷Lodge to Secretary of State, February 5, 1964, Declassified Documents Reference System (75)215A.

⁸William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), p. 63.

immediately and dealt with its problems effectively, South Vietnam had, "at best, an even chance of withstanding the insurgency menace during the next few weeks or months."⁹

VIETNAM, THE GREAT SOCIETY, AND WORLD ORDER

To Lyndon Baines Johnson and the advisers around him, the crisis of early 1964 could not have been less welcome. Johnson had assumed office in a moment of great national tragedy. He set as his first task conducting an orderly transition and restoring national calm. He attached great importance to passage of Kennedy's legislative agenda, long stalemated in Congress, both as a memorial to the fallen leader and as a springboard to launch his own reform program and campaign for election in his own right. From this standpoint, a crisis in Vietnam could only be regarded as an intrusion.

But it was an intrusion that had to be handled effectively. From the outset, Johnson personalized the struggle in Vietnam. The new president was an extraordinarily complex individual. Physically imposing, he had an ego and ambitions the size of his native Texas. A remarkably adroit politician, brilliant legislator, and highly successful Senate majority leader, he was a driven man, prodigiously energetic, single-minded, manipulative, often overbearing. At the same time, he could be generous, warm, and compassionate toward other people. He was fiercely loyal to those who stood by him. "He had as many sides to him as a kaleidoscope," Dean Acheson once observed, an "unbelievable combination of sensitivity and coarseness, of understanding and obtuseness."¹⁰ Despite his considerable accomplishments, Johnson remained profoundly insecure, especially in the area of foreign policy. He viewed the emerging crisis in Vietnam as a crucial test of strength for his personal prestige, his authority as president of the United States and leader of the Free World, and indeed for his manhood.

Recognizing his foreign policy inexperience, he retained and relied heavily on Kennedy's advisers. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy had all played prominent roles in shaping

⁹Quoted in *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), 3: 42.

¹⁰Quoted in Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York, 1991), p. 386.

Kennedy's Vietnam policy. They had a deep personal stake in upholding it. Indeed, they felt very strongly that expansion of the American commitment since 1961 had itself significantly increased the importance of holding the line there.

Johnson linked Vietnam inextricably to his domestic political fortunes. He saw the commitment there as a vital part of the Kennedy program that he was sworn to uphold. He had been at the center of the political bloodletting that had followed the fall of China in 1949. He was certain that the "loss" of Vietnam would produce an even more explosive upheaval, a "mean and destructive debate," he later commented, "that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy."¹¹ Early in his presidency, he set out to create what he called the Great Society, the most ambitious legislative program of domestic reforms since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. He also tied Vietnam to the realization of these goals, fearing that if he showed weakness, southern conservatives who opposed his domestic programs, especially his commitment to racial equality, would attack him with a vengeance. "If I don't go in now and they show later that I should have," he predicted, "then they'll . . . push Vietnam up my ass every time."¹²

In the eyes of Johnson and his key advisers, Vietnam remained vital to America's larger foreign policy goals. Policymakers had begun to perceive by 1964 the extent to which major changes in world politics were challenging long-standing Cold War assumptions. In particular, open squabbling between the Soviet Union and China undermined the assumption that in Vietnam as elsewhere, the United States confronted a monolithic communism united in its drive for world domination.

Most foreign policy experts still believed, however, that it was essential to hold the line in Vietnam. The ethos of the Cold War, by this time deeply ingrained, put a premium on toughness and viewed compromise as a sign of weakness, retreat as a sign of cowardice. The United States must continue to display to the major Communist powers its certainty of purpose and strength of will. A firm stand in Vietnam would discourage any Soviet tendencies toward adventurism and encourage the nascent trend toward détente with the United States. It was especially important to contain the presumably more aggressive and reckless Chinese. Policymakers also believed that the way the United States responded to "Communist provocations" in Vietnam would have "profound consequences everywhere." If the

¹¹Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, 1976), p. 252.

¹²Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire* (New York, 1991), pp. xv, 60.

United States did not protect Vietnam, Secretary of State Rusk insisted, its “guarantees with regard to Berlin would lose their credibility.”¹³ Turbulence in the Third World, especially in Southeast Asia and the Western Hemisphere, appeared to pose serious dangers to American credibility and world order. Firmness in Vietnam would ensure stability in a strife-torn world by demonstrating that violent challenges to the status quo would be resisted.

In the spring and early summer of 1964, LBJ was deeply conflicted about Vietnam. As South Vietnam continued to come apart, his military advisers pressed him to attack North Vietnam—even China. Dovish senators such as Mike Mansfield and the influential journalist Walter Lippmann urged him to accept de Gaulle’s neutralization scheme as a way to get out of an impossible tangle. The president’s candid telephone conversations with friends and advisers reveal his frustration—indeed his torment. In talking with McNamara, he yearned for some “military mind” who could devise a plan to “trap those guys [Viet Cong] and whip the hell out of them.” Yet he conceded to others that “I shudder at getting too deeply involved there. . . .” A major escalation could produce another Korea or even World War III. “It’s damned easy to get into a war,” he prophetically observed on one occasion, “but it’s going to be awfully hard to extricate yourself if you get in.” At times, he questioned the intrinsic value of Vietnam. “What the hell is Vietnam worth to me?” he would ask. “What is Laos worth to me?” “But if you start running from the Communists,” he would answer, “they may just chase you into your own kitchen. . . .” “We’re there, and being there we’ve got to conduct ourselves as men.” He expressed certainty that the “loss” of Vietnam would provoke his impeachment by Congress. “I don’t think it’s worth fighting for,” he confided to Bundy, “and I don’t think we can get out.” “It’s just the biggest damn mess that I ever saw,” he told his old friend and Senate mentor Richard Russell of Georgia.¹⁴

MORE OF THE SAME

Despite his anguish over Vietnam, the president was not prepared to employ American military power on a large scale in early 1964. Like Kennedy and Eisenhower before him, he had no enthusiasm for a massive engagement of American forces on the Asian mainland. He and his

¹³Memorandum of conversation, Rusk and French ambassador, July 1, 1964, *FR*, 1964–1968, 1: 536.

¹⁴Randall B. Woods, *LBJ—Architect of American Ambition* (New York, 2006), p. 510; Edward C. Keefer, “LBJ Calling,” *Diplomatic History* 24 (January 2010): 205.

advisers also feared that Americanization of the war would further undercut the self-reliance of the Vietnamese. The introduction of large-scale U.S. forces in Vietnam would provoke much hostile propaganda throughout the world. Most important, it might cause major disruptions at home, threatening Johnson's legislative program and his campaign for the presidency. He therefore turned down proposals developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for air and ground operations against North Vietnam.

After a major policy review in mid-March, the president concluded that the "only realistic alternative" was "to do more of the same and do it more efficiently."¹⁵ NSAM 288, approved March 17, did state U.S. objectives in more sweeping terms, emphasizing as the essential goal the preservation of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. The administration still hoped that its program of military and economic assistance would be workable, however, and at this point merely attempted to make it more effective. Aware that the most urgent problem was the weakness of the South Vietnamese government, Washington publicly affirmed its support for Khanh and privately advised the U.S. mission to do everything possible to avert further coups. NSAM 288 also called for a national mobilization plan to put South Vietnam on a war footing and for significantly increasing the size of its armed forces. The president appointed Gen. William Westmoreland, a paratrooper and veteran of World War II and Korea, to replace the ineffectual and perennially optimistic Harkins. Over the next nine months, the United States increased its "advisers" from 16,300 to 23,300 and expanded its economic assistance by \$50 million. "As far as I am concerned," Johnson advised Lodge in April, "you must have whatever you need to help the Vietnamese do the job, and I assure you that I will act at once to eliminate obstacles or restraints wherever they may appear."¹⁶

Although the administration did little more than reaffirm existing policy in the spring of 1964, its attention was shifting increasingly toward North Vietnam. The change reflected a growing concern over the infiltration of people and supplies from the North and mounting frustration with ground rules that permitted Hanoi to support the insurgency with impunity. Some U.S. officials seem also to have concluded that action against the North might somehow compensate for the lack of

¹⁵Kearns, *Johnson*, p. 196.

¹⁶Johnson to Lodge, April 4, 1964, Johnson Papers, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 3.

progress in the South. Others wished to signal Hanoi that it would pay a high price for its continued intervention. Although covert operations in North Vietnam had been notably unsuccessful, they were expanded in early 1964 to include intelligence overflights, the dropping of propaganda leaflets, and OPLAN 34A commando raids conducted by South Vietnamese guerrillas along the North Vietnamese coast. The administration also intensified its planning to prepare U.S. forces for possible "border control" operations into Cambodia and Laos, "tit-for-tat" retaliatory bombing raids into North Vietnam, and a series of "graduated overt pressures" against North Vietnam, including air attacks against military and industrial targets. Firm warnings were delivered to Hanoi through Canadian intermediaries that continued support for the insurgency could bring great devastation to North Vietnam itself. At a National Security Council (NSC) meeting on March 17, top administration officials expressed confidence that increased military and economic aid would be enough to stem the tide in South Vietnam. They also agreed that failure of the program outlined in NSAM 288 might compel them to take the war to North Vietnam.¹⁷

The spring 1964 program, like those before it, produced meager results. Under U.S. supervision, Khanh developed ambitious plans for bringing the government down to the village level, but there was a vast gap between planning and implementation. In many areas the NLF was so firmly entrenched that it could not be dislodged except by massive force. Where it could function freely, the government was hampered by a shortage of skilled officials and by what one American described as "outmoded concepts, directives and practices, bureaucratic constipation, [and] insufficient on-the-spot resources."¹⁸ As a result of spiraling desertion rates, the strength of the ARVN remained well below the figure authorized before the projected increase. The army won a few minor engagements in the early summer, but it was never able to gain the initiative. American officials publicly praised Khanh's "able and energetic leadership." Khanh dutifully followed U.S. suggestions for gaining popular support, visiting numerous villages and cities and even making a series of "fireside chats."

Although a word from well-placed Americans could topple governments in Vietnam, it could not create stability; mere speeches were

¹⁷ Summary record of NSC meeting, March 17, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings File, Box 1.

¹⁸ William Colby memorandum, May 11, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 3.

inadequate to bring together South Vietnam's disparate political forces. Catholics and Buddhists mobilized against each other and agitated against a government neither trusted. After a period of quiescence, the students began to stir again. The government itself was rent by internal dissension, and a coup plot in July failed only because the United States made known its opposition. Maxwell Taylor, who replaced Lodge as ambassador in midsummer, reported in August that "the best thing that can be said about Khanh's government is that it has lasted six months and has about a 50-50 chance of lasting out the year."¹⁹

Hanoi responded defiantly to American warnings. There is no reason to suppose that the North Vietnamese leaders wanted war with the United States. Rather, they hoped that intensification of aid to the NLF would topple the South Vietnamese government, leaving the United States no choice but to abandon its ally. They may have dismissed the various U.S. "signals" as bluff. In any event, they were not prepared to abandon their long-sought goal in the face of American threats. In the spring and summer of 1964, North Vietnam mobilized its own forces for war, intensified transformation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail into a modern logistical network capable of handling large trucks, and stepped up preparation of units of its own regular army for infiltration into South Vietnam. Premier Pham Van Dong bluntly informed Canadian Blair Seaborn in June that the stakes were as high for North Vietnam as for the United States and that the NLF and its supporters were prepared to endure regardless of the cost. If the United States insisted on war, he concluded with a ringing declaration, "We shall win!"²⁰

Under these circumstances, Americans increasingly looked north for a solution they could not find in the south. Alarmed by the persistent lack of progress in South Vietnam, annoyed by Hanoi's defiant response, and fearful that the North Vietnamese might seek to exploit the administration's presumed immobility in an election year, by mid-summer 1964 some of Johnson's advisers had developed a full "scenario" of graduated overt pressures against the North, according to which the president, after securing a congressional resolution, would authorize air strikes against selected North Vietnamese targets. Rusk and McNamara finally rejected the program for fear that it would "raise

¹⁹Quoted in *Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), 3: 82.

²⁰George C. Herring (ed.), *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin, Tex., 1983), p. 8.

a whole series of disagreeable questions" that might jeopardize passage of civil rights legislation, but the proposals indicate the drift of official attitudes during this period.²¹

TONKIN GULF

The administration implemented much of the proposed "scenario" in early August in response to a series of dramatic events at sea. The president and his advisers portrayed the so-called Tonkin Gulf incidents as unprovoked attacks on U.S. ships innocently steaming in international waters. In fact, as part of the DeSoto Patrols, the destroyer *USS Maddox* was engaged in electronic espionage in the Gulf of Tonkin, sometimes venturing into North Vietnamese waters. One of its objectives was to gauge the reaction of enemy radars to OPLAN 34A operations carried out by South Vietnamese gunboats under U.S. supervision. These boats had bombarded the nearby islands of Hon Me and Hon Ngu the evening of August 1. Correctly assuming that the *Maddox* was connected with these attacks, local North Vietnamese commanders ordered torpedo boats to close with the destroyer the following afternoon. In a brief and decisive engagement, the gunboats launched torpedoes, the *Maddox* opened fire, and aircraft from the nearby *USS Ticonderoga* joined the fray. The North Vietnamese boats were badly damaged but managed to limp back to shore.

Johnson was reportedly enraged when he learned of the encounter, but no retaliation was ordered. "The other side got a sting out of this," Rusk remarked. "If they do it again, they'll get another sting."²² To avoid any appearance of weakness and to assert traditional claims to freedom of the seas, the administration ordered the *Maddox* to resume operations in the Gulf of Tonkin and sent the destroyer *C. Turner Joy* to

²¹McNamara-Rusk memorandum, June 11, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 4. For a full discussion of these events see Andrew L. Johns, "Opening Pandora's Box: The Genesis and Evolution of the 1964 Congressional Resolution on Vietnam," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 6 (Summer-Fall 1997): 186-201.

²²Quoted in John Galloway, *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (Rutherford, N.J., 1970), p. 52. The authoritative study is Edwin E. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996). See also John Prados, "Essay: 40th Anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident."

support it. The United States may not have been seeking to provoke another attack, but it did not go out of its way to avoid one either. The administration kept the destroyers close to North Vietnamese shores, where they were vulnerable. Eager for “open season” on a nation already looked upon as the enemy, responsible military officials in the area were choosing targets for retaliatory raids before reports of a second attack began to come in.

On the night of August 4, while operating in heavy seas some sixty miles off the North Vietnamese coast, the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy* suddenly reported being under fire. The initial reports were based on sonar and radar contacts, both unreliable under the adverse weather conditions, and on sightings of torpedoes and enemy searchlights on a night one seaman described as “darker than the hubs of Hell.” The captain of the *Maddox* later conceded that evidence of an attack was less than conclusive. North Vietnamese gunboats may have been operating in the area, but no evidence has ever been produced to demonstrate that they committed hostile acts. It is now certain that no second attack took place.

Had it not been an election year or had the president and his advisers been in a less pugnacious mood, the administration might have viewed the conflicting evidence as reason for caution. But the election campaign was gearing up and hawkish Republican candidate Barry Goldwater was already indulging with special fervor in the quadrennial Cold War exercise of talking tough and branding his opponent as weak. Committed to showing their determination to a recalcitrant Hanoi, U.S. officials had been poised to strike back since the first encounter in the gulf. The JCS insisted that the United States must “clobber” the attackers. After the initial reports of another attack, they worked out a series of retaliatory options ranging from limited air strikes against North Vietnamese naval installations to the mining of parts of their coastline. When the president met with his advisers early that afternoon, there seemed little doubt an attack had occurred. The CIA cautiously speculated that the North Vietnamese might be responding defensively and out of “pride” to attacks on their territory. Top officials insisted rather that Hanoi was trying to make the United States appear a “paper tiger.” Rusk labeled the attack an “act of war.” Determined to prove their toughness—to American voters and North Vietnamese leaders—Johnson and his advisers agreed, as McNamara put it, that “we cannot sit still as a nation and let them attack us on the high seas and get away with it.” They decided upon a

"firm, swift retaliatory [air] strike" against North Vietnamese torpedo boat bases.²³

Although serious questions were raised later in the day about the alleged attacks, the administration stuck by its decision. "FLASH" messages from the *Maddox* cautioned that "freak weather effects" on the radar and sonar, as well as "overeager" sonarmen, may have accounted for many of the reported torpedo attacks and enemy contacts. Contradicting earlier messages, the commander of the *Maddox* also admitted that there had been no "visual sightings." A "complete evaluation" of all the evidence should be made before retaliation was ordered. McNamara postponed the air strike temporarily to make "damned sure that the attacks had taken place." By late afternoon, however, he was convinced, on the basis of evidence that now appears quite dubious. Ignoring the belated uncertainty of the men on the scene, the secretary of defense accepted at face value the judgment of the commander in chief of the Pacific fleet, Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, in Honolulu, whose certainty was based on the first reports from the *Maddox* and intercepts of North Vietnamese messages indicating that two patrol boats had been "sacrificed." The intercepts, which provided the clinching evidence, actually referred to the August 2 attacks. It is also now clear that after transmitting to Washington highly misleading information based on bad translations of the intercepts, National Security Agency (NSA) operatives sought to cover their error by sending only information confirming that a second attack had occurred.²⁴

McNamara and his military advisers did not knowingly lie about the alleged attacks, but they were obviously in a mood to retaliate. They seem to have selected from the conflicting evidence those parts that confirmed what they wanted to believe. Accepting McNamara's conclusions without question, in the late afternoon Johnson authorized retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese torpedo boat bases and nearby oil storage dumps. Described by the Joint Chiefs as a "pretty good effort," the strikes destroyed or damaged twenty-five patrol boats and 90 percent of the oil storage facilities at Vinh.²⁵

²³"Chronology of Events, Tuesday, August 4 and Wednesday, August 5, 1964, Tonkin Gulf Strike," Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 18; Summary notes of 538th NSC meeting, August 4, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings File, Box 1; Rusk to Taylor, August 8, 1964, DDRS(75)845-H.

²⁴*New York Times*, October 2, December 2, 2005.

²⁵"Chronology of Events," Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 18; "Transcripts of Telephone Conversations, 4-5 August," Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 228.

The president also seized a golden opportunity to secure passage of a congressional resolution authorizing him to take "all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." His purpose was to indicate to Hanoi that the nation was united in its determination to stand firm in South Vietnam. The resolution also served immediate domestic political needs. The show of force and the appeal for national support permitted him to disarm Goldwater, who had vigorously urged escalation of the war, and to demonstrate that he could be firm in defending American interests without recklessly expanding the war. In presenting its case, however, the administration deliberately deceived Congress and the American people. Nothing was said about the covert raids. Official reports indicated that the *Maddox* was engaged in routine patrols in international waters. The incidents were portrayed as "deliberate attacks" and "open aggression on the high seas."

Congress responded quickly and pliantly. Senator Wayne Morse (Oregon Democrat) raised some embarrassing questions about the OPLAN 34A raids and the mission of the American destroyers. Senator Ernest Gruening (Alaska Democrat) attacked the resolution as a "pre-dated declaration of war," and Senator Gaylord Nelson (Wisconsin Democrat) attempted to limit the grant of authority to the executive branch. During a period when America's national interests seemed constantly in peril, however, Congress had grown accustomed to approving presidential initiatives without serious question. The crisis atmosphere seemed to leave no time for debate. "The American flag has been fired upon," Representative Ross Adair (Indiana Republican) exclaimed. "We will not and cannot tolerate such things."²⁶ The Senate debated the resolution less than ten hours, during much of which time the chamber was less than one-third full. By his own admission more concerned with the challenge posed by Goldwater than with giving a blank check to Johnson, Senator J. William Fulbright (Arkansas Democrat) carefully shepherded the resolution through, choking off debate and amendments. The vote in the Senate was an overwhelming 88 to 2; only Morse and Gruening dissented. Consideration in the House was even more perfunctory, passage taking a mere forty minutes and the vote being unanimous.

From a domestic political standpoint, Johnson's handling of the Tonkin Gulf incident was masterly. His firm but restrained response to

²⁶Quoted in Anthony Austin, *The President's War* (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 98.

the alleged North Vietnamese attacks won broad popular support, his rating in the Louis Harris poll skyrocketing from 42 to 72 percent overnight. He neutralized Goldwater on Vietnam, a fact that contributed to his overwhelming electoral victory in November. Moreover, this first formal congressional debate on Vietnam brought a near-unanimous endorsement of the president's policies and provided an apparently solid foundation on which to construct future policy.

In time, Johnson would pay a heavy price for his easy victory. U.S. prestige was now publicly and more firmly committed not merely to defending South Vietnam but also to responding to North Vietnamese provocations. By attacking North Vietnamese targets, the president temporarily silenced his hawkish critics inside and outside government, but in doing so he had broken a long-standing barrier against taking the war to the North. The first steps taken, the next ones would be easier. Johnson's victory in Congress may have encouraged him to take the legislators lightly in making future policy decisions on Vietnam. But the overwhelming vote for the resolution obscured searching questions raised in the debate from the left about the centrality of America's interests in Vietnam and the limits of its power and from the right about the incremental nature of the administration's policies. Such questions would set the contours of a debate on Vietnam that would rage in the months to come. And when the administration's case for reprisals later turned out to be less than overwhelming, many members of Congress correctly concluded that they had been deceived. The president's resounding triumph brought enormous, if still hidden, costs.²⁷

Unknown to the United States, the Tonkin Gulf incident also raised the stakes on the other side. Rather than deterring North Vietnam, Johnson's forceful response led it to step up its efforts in the South. Encouraged by signs of continued deterioration in South Vietnam and persuaded that the United States was on the verge of expanding the war, Hanoi decided in September 1964 to send to the South the first units of its own regular army to support a push for victory before the spring of 1965. In yet another major miscalculation, the North Vietnamese hoped to accomplish their goal before the United States could intervene directly in the war, thus avoiding a major conflict with a great power. Shortly after, North Vietnamese leaders went to Moscow and Beijing to seek additional support. The Soviet Union was still cautious but found itself

²⁷ Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington, Ky., 2010), pp. 67–69.

under increasing pressure to do something or lose its leadership position to the Chinese. While urging the North Vietnamese to prepare for a long war, China was more forthcoming, mobilizing forces along its border with North Vietnam and significantly expanding its military and economic assistance.²⁸

The Johnson administration did not follow up the Tonkin Gulf reprisals with additional attacks against North Vietnam. The president was not about to jeopardize his political fortunes by escalating the war. Having established his determination to defend American interests with force if necessary, he emphasized in the final months of the campaign his wish to limit American involvement if possible. "We seek no wider war," he stated in numerous speeches.

At the same time, political turmoil in South Vietnam made caution essential. Attempting to exploit the Tonkin Gulf affair to save his political skin, Khanh on August 6 assumed near-dictatorial powers and imposed severe restrictions on civil liberties. Thousands of Saigonese took to the streets, and when an angry mob forced Khanh to stand atop a tank and shout "Down with dictatorships," the humiliated general resigned. For days, near anarchy reigned: Mobs rampaged through the streets, Buddhists and Catholics waged open warfare, and gangs of thugs fought and pillaged with hatchets and machetes. Behind the scenes, politicians and generals, Khanh included, jockeyed for power.

Under these circumstances, the administration refused to escalate the war. By early September, the U.S. Air Force and the Marine Corps were vigorously pressing for extended air attacks against North Vietnam. Ambassador Taylor and others conceded that such steps would have to be taken in time, but they argued that it would be too risky to "overstrain the currently weakened GVN by drastic action in the immediate future." Johnson concurred, stating that he did not wish to "enter the patient in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round." While keeping other options open, the administration decided merely to continue its covert operations against North Vietnam and to be ready to respond to North Vietnamese provocations on a "tit for tat basis."²⁹ LBJ remained sufficiently concerned about the approaching election and the internal situation in South Vietnam that

²⁸Ang Cheng Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962–1964: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (October 2000): 617; William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York, 2000), pp. 540–542.

²⁹McGeorge Bundy memorandum for the record, September 14, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 6.

he refused to retaliate when NLF guerrillas on November 1 attacked the U.S. air base at Bien Hoa, killing four Americans and destroying five aircraft.

DECISIONS FOR WAR

Johnson's reluctance would soon change. Scholars now agree that late 1964–early 1965 was the pivotal period in his escalation of the Vietnam War.³⁰ During this time, the president fundamentally altered the U.S. commitment by initiating the regular bombing of North Vietnam and by sending the first U.S. ground combat troops to South Vietnam. Some of his advisers doubted that even these steps would be enough, but they believed that to maintain its international credibility, the United States should do everything it could as the “good doctor” to save the ailing patient, South Vietnam. Johnson, Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, and McNamara seem to have hoped that by gradually increasing the bombing and injecting U.S. forces into the ground war they could coerce North Vietnam into abandoning the southern insurgency. This strategy of gradual escalation, which drew on the recent experience of the Cuban missile crisis, was based on the dubious assumption that North Vietnam would give up its goals rather than risk complete destruction. The result for the United States was an irreversible commitment to a major war and Americanization of the conflict in South Vietnam.

Johnson was not forced into war by the exigencies of domestic or international politics. Public opinion in late 1964 was apathetic and permissive. Growing numbers of Americans opposed a major war. Although there was also opposition to withdrawal, the public might have gone along with a skillfully executed disengagement. Some leading political figures and major newspapers endorsed drastic escalation, but by early 1965 many others had become increasingly concerned about the prospect of war and favored deescalation and a negotiated settlement. Johnson's political position was as strong as it would ever be. He had just won an overwhelming electoral victory and had firm control of Congress. The administration often maintained that it was in Vietnam to prove its reliability to its allies. In fact, America's major allies doubted

³⁰See, for example, Logevall, *Choosing War*; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2000); and H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York, 1997).

the importance of Vietnam and were even more skeptical that the United States could succeed there with military force. When the administration launched a “many flags” campaign in the spring of 1964 to get support from its allies, only Australia enthusiastically agreed to provide troops.³¹

The administration chose war for other reasons. A resolute Cold Warrior, Secretary of State Rusk believed that the United States must stand firm in Vietnam to contain an aggressively expansionist China. Johnson shared Rusk’s concern and feared even more the political backlash from right-wing Republicans and southern Democrats should he falter in Vietnam. For the president, the Great Society remained the highest priority. He continued to worry that a retreat on Vietnam would jeopardize his cherished domestic goals. For personal reasons, he also found the possibility of failure intolerable.

Another leader might also have gone to war in these circumstances, but the *way* the United States went to war in early 1965—“by stealth”—bore the distinctive LBJ brand.³² This approach was partly a result of personality and *modus operandi*. A cloakroom operator rather than a master of debate, the former Senate majority leader did not like open and freewheeling discussion. His ego and insecurity led him to personalize dissent and opposition. He was determined to keep control in his own hands. He also feared that a potentially divisive debate on Vietnam would distract attention from the domestic issues he wished to focus on. Thus, while taking major steps toward war, Johnson carefully and skillfully silenced public debate. He obscured the significance of what he was doing. By stressing the continuity of his policies and emphasizing that he was giving equal attention to military measures *and* negotiations, he encouraged both “hawks” and “doves” to believe that he was moving in their direction. By deceit and obfuscation, he brilliantly mobilized a consensus behind his policies while blurring what these policies actually were.

The process began even before the election. On November 2, the day before Americans went to the polls, Johnson authorized intensive planning for future action in Vietnam, a “crucial step in the country’s entry into a new war.”³³ By the end of that month, a firm consensus had emerged among his advisers that the United States must soon undertake a carefully orchestrated bombing attack against North Vietnam.

³¹Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 275–279, 304–305.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 273, 314–315.

³³Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 355.

U.S. officials disagreed among themselves on the reasons for the bombing, some viewing it as a way of boosting morale in South Vietnam, others as a means of reducing infiltration from the North, and still others as a weapon to force Hanoi to stop supporting the insurgency. They also disagreed on the type of bombing campaign. The military pressed for a “fast and full squeeze”—massive attacks against major industries and military targets. Civilians advocated a “slow squeeze”—a graduated series of attacks beginning with infiltration routes in Laos and slowly extending to North Vietnam. Despite warnings from intelligence sources that bombing would not decisively affect the war in the south, most of Johnson’s advisers endorsed the use of airpower in some form.

Only Undersecretary of State George Ball vigorously dissented. An experienced diplomat who as counsel to the French embassy had observed firsthand that nation’s defeat in Indochina, Ball insisted that airpower would not solve the American dilemma in Vietnam. He doubted it would either improve morale in the South or compel Hanoi to give in. He also warned that in response to U.S. escalation North Vietnam might pour its virtually unlimited human resources into the struggle and China might intervene. Most important, after the process of escalation had been initiated, the United States could not be sure of controlling events. “Once on the tiger’s back,” Ball concluded, “we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.”³⁴

Ball’s argument had little impact in Washington, and by the end of November Johnson’s senior advisers had formulated concrete proposals for the use of American military power. Rejecting the more extreme program of the JCS, they advocated a two-phase plan of gradually intensifying air attacks. The first phase, to last roughly a month, consisted of limited bombing raids against infiltration routes in Laos, along with reprisal strikes against North Vietnamese targets in response to any provocation. In the meantime, Taylor would use the promise of air attacks against North Vietnam to persuade the South Vietnamese to put their house in order. Once an acceptable level of stability had been attained, the United States would move into phase two, a large-scale air offensive against North Vietnam lasting from two to six months, to be followed if necessary by a naval blockade.

Johnson approved the program in December, a “momentous decision,” historian Fredrick Logevall has emphasized, perhaps the most

³⁴George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York, 1982), pp. 380–385.

important of the war.³⁵ On December 1, the president approved immediate initiation of phase one bombing operations in Laos. Still reluctant to move too far too fast, he subsequently approved in principle the launching of retaliatory strikes and phase two bombing operations when the situation warranted. Those operations required a substantial deployment of ground combat forces, and the president also endorsed this highly significant measure.

In approving what amounted to decisions for war, Johnson demanded absolute secrecy, covering his tracks so skillfully that he deceived his contemporaries and misled a generation of historians. Recognizing that even with his huge electoral mandate he would have only a brief honeymoon period to achieve his ambitious legislative goals, he was unwilling to permit the war to thwart his Great Society. If he had to go to war, he would do everything possible to conceal it. He made it a matter of “highest importance” that the December decisions be kept from the public. Speaking figuratively but firmly, he threatened to “shoot at sunrise” anyone who leaked sensitive information about the war.³⁶

He continued to move cautiously for more than a month. He was loathe to escalate too rapidly in view of his campaign assurances of no wider war. South Vietnam was still in turmoil, and he refused to send U.S. troops when the South Vietnamese were “acting as they are.” He and his advisers also feared that U.S. reprisals might provoke further NLF attacks at a time when South Vietnam was “too shaky” to withstand a “major assault.” He thus instructed Taylor to do everything possible to get the South Vietnamese to pull together. He refused even to retaliate when, on Christmas Eve, the NLF bombed a U.S. officers’ quarters at the Brinks Hotel in Saigon, killing two Americans and injuring thirty-eight.³⁷

ROLLING THUNDER

By the end of January, the president could delay no longer. One of the major arguments against escalation—the weakness of South Vietnam—had become the most compelling argument for it. After Khanh’s

³⁵ Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 270–273.

³⁶ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 379; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 195.

³⁷ Meeting on Vietnam, December 1, 1964, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 1; Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York, 1971), p. 121.

resignation, a civilian government had been formed, but it could not consolidate its position. Upon returning to Saigon, Taylor informed South Vietnam's leaders that the United States would escalate the war if they could stabilize the government. The answer came immediately when Vice Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and General Nguyen Chanh Thi executed yet another coup. Outraged, Taylor lectured the young officers as a drill instructor might talk to recruits. Perhaps something was wrong with his French, he snarled sarcastically, because his listeners had obviously not understood him. "Now you have made a real mess," he added angrily. "We cannot carry you forever if you do things like this."³⁸

The harsh reprimand produced some "shame-faced grins," Taylor recalled, but no results.³⁹ The military finally agreed to cooperate with civilian politicians to form a new government, but Buddhist leaders refused to participate and launched a new round of demonstrations, hunger strikes, and immolations that took on increasingly anti-American tones. Protesters publicly demanded Taylor's resignation. Five thousand students sacked the U.S. Information Service library in Hue. Rumors of coup plots abounded. U.S. officials began to fear that a new government could emerge from the chaos and negotiate with the enemy on the basis of a U.S. withdrawal. In the meantime, NLF regular forces decimated two elite South Vietnamese units in major battles. Combined with reports that North Vietnamese regular units were now entering the South, the defeats aroused growing fear that the enemy had decided to launch an all-out attack that South Vietnam could not withstand.

By the end of January, most of Johnson's advisers agreed that the threat to the South and the ominous military danger required the United States to bomb the North. Throughout the month, Taylor bombarded Washington with warnings that failure to take drastic action could only lead to "disastrous defeat." McGeorge Bundy played a decisive role in moving Johnson toward a major escalation of the war. Since 1961, Bundy had radically transformed the role of the NSC, creating a smaller, more streamlined State Department within the office of the president. As National Security Adviser, he increasingly served as a policy coordinator who framed options for his boss. By late 1964, Bundy had established himself as one of Johnson's most influential foreign policy advisers. He had also grown more hawkish on Vietnam.

³⁸Quoted in Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York, 1971), pp. 371–381. Hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers* (NYT).

³⁹Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York, 1972), p. 330.

A staunch supporter of improved relations with the USSR, he feared that by shattering U.S. credibility the collapse of South Vietnam would irreparably compromise any prospect of détente. It would also heighten China's aggressiveness. In early 1965, he set out to end the indecision and delay. His January 27 "fork in the road" memorandum—"an explosive document," McNamara later recalled—remains a landmark on America's road to war in Vietnam. Speaking in "apocalyptic" language, he warned, much like Taylor, that continuation of existing policy would lead to "disastrous defeat." The choice was between using U.S. military power to change Communist policy or seeking negotiations "aimed at salvaging what little could be preserved." He favored the more aggressive option, pushing for retaliatory air strikes at the first opportunity followed by phase two bombing operations.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly with great reluctance but also with firm resignation, Johnson concurred. "Stable government or no stable government we'll do what we have to do," he vowed. It was the decisive moment—Johnson moving to implement the program he had approved in principle in December. He dispatched Bundy to Saigon to see what further military action should be taken. Recognizing that a pretext for escalation would be useful, he resumed DeSoto Patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin.⁴¹

The awaited incident came on land instead of at sea. On February 7, NLF units attacked a U.S. Army barracks in Pleiku and a nearby helicopter base, killing nine Americans, wounding 126, and destroying five aircraft. That evening, after a meeting of less than two hours, the administration decided to strike back. Only Senator Mansfield dissented, arguing that the United States might provoke Chinese intervention. Johnson brusquely dismissed Mansfield's argument. "We have kept our guns over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now," he exclaimed with obvious impatience. "I can't ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand behind their backs."⁴² The president ordered the immediate implementation of FLAMING DART, a plan of reprisal strikes already drawn up by the JCS. Later that day and again the following day, American aircraft struck North Vietnamese military installations just across the seventeenth parallel. When, on February 10, the NLF attacked an American

⁴⁰ Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), pp. 39–53, 165–167; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 387–393; Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 317.

⁴¹ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 392.

⁴² Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 125.

enlisted men's quarters at Qui Nhon, the president ordered another, even heavier series of retaliatory air strikes.

Within less than forty-eight hours, the administration moved from reprisals to a sustained, graduated program of air attacks against North Vietnam, the fundamental aim of which was to persuade Hanoi to refrain from intervention in South Vietnam. Mansfield, some top State Department officials, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, and even members of Bundy's staff strongly opposed such a move. But most U.S. officials mistakenly viewed the Pleiku attack as a direct challenge issued by North Vietnam that must be met (more than thirty years later, a former NLF officer revealed to a number of Americans, this author included, that he had ordered the attack on his own authority). McNamara and his top advisers, the JCS, Gen. Westmoreland, and Ambassador Taylor strongly supported a sustained bombing program. The normally cool and detached Bundy visited Pleiku the day of the attack and was deeply shaken by the carnage he witnessed. Henceforth, he pushed for escalation with a new passion, warning that "without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable—probably not in a matter of weeks or even months, but within the next year or so." Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, who had accompanied Bundy to Vietnam, agreed, arguing that "measured against the costs of defeat the program would be 'cheap,'" and even if it failed to turn the tide, "the value of the effort" would "exceed the costs."⁴³ The next day, apparently without extended debate, the administration approved ROLLING THUNDER, the program of gradually intensified air attacks Bundy and McNaughton had advocated.

The administration deceived the American public in explaining the reasons for and significance of its decision. Officials from the president down justified the air strikes as a response to the Pleiku attack and emphatically denied any change of policy. In fact, Pleiku was the pretext for rather than the cause of the February decision. The possibility of a South Vietnamese collapse appeared to demand the adoption of a policy some Americans had been advocating for more than two months. It was, therefore, simply a matter of finding the right opportunity to justify measures to which the administration was already committed. Pleiku provided such an opportunity, although it could as easily have been something else. "Pleikus are like streetcars," McGeorge Bundy later remarked, by which he meant that if you missed one, another

⁴³Preston, *War Council*, pp. 176–179.

would be along shortly.⁴⁴ Despite the administration's disclaimers, the February decisions marked a major watershed in the war. The initiation of regular bombing attacks advanced well beyond the limited tit-for-tat reprisal strikes of Tonkin Gulf and provided a built-in argument for further escalation should that become necessary.

Indeed, almost as soon as the bombing got under way, there were pressures to expand it. The initial attacks achieved meager results, provoking Taylor to complain that ROLLING THUNDER had constituted but a "few isolated thunder claps" and to call for a "mounting crescendo" of air strikes against North Vietnam.⁴⁵ Intelligence reports ominously warned that the military situation in South Vietnam was steadily deteriorating. At the present rate the government might soon be reduced to a series of islands surrounding the provincial capitals. From the outset, Johnson had insisted on maintaining tight personal control over the air war—"They can't even bomb an outhouse without my approval," he is said to have boasted.⁴⁶ But in response to these urgent warnings, he permitted gradual expansion of the bombing and relaxation of the restrictions under which it was carried out. The use of napalm was authorized to ensure greater destructiveness, and pilots were permitted to strike alternative targets without prior authorization if the original targets were inaccessible. In April, American and South Vietnamese pilots flew a total of 3,600 sorties against North Vietnamese targets. The air war quickly grew from a sporadic, halting effort into a regular, determined program.

GROUND TROOPS, ENCLAVES, AND PEACE MOVES

The expanded air war also provided the pretext for the introduction of U.S. ground combat forces into Vietnam. Anticipating retaliatory attacks for ROLLING THUNDER, Gen. Westmoreland in late February urgently requested two Marine landing teams to protect the air base at Da Nang. Although he conceded the importance of protecting the base, Taylor expressed grave concern about the long-range implications of Westmoreland's request. He questioned whether American combat forces were adequately trained for guerrilla warfare in the Asian jungles

⁴⁴Quoted in Anthony Lake (ed.), *The Vietnam Legacy* (New York, 1976), p. 183.

⁴⁵*Pentagon Papers* (Gravel), 3: 335.

⁴⁶Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 119.



Marines Land at Da Nang

Shortly after 9:00 a.m. on March 8, 1965, Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marine Expeditionary Force, splashed ashore in rough seas at Da Nang. They were the first U.S. ground combat troops sent to Vietnam. With their arrival, the United States crossed a major threshold in its escalation of the war. The Marines were originally “tasked” to guard the air base at Da Nang. But in less than a month, President Lyndon Johnson secretly authorized them to move out and engage enemy soldiers in combat.

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and warned that the introduction of such forces would encourage the ARVN to pass military responsibility to the United States. Most important, the introduction of even small numbers of combat troops with a specific and limited mission would violate a ground rule the United States had rigorously adhered to since the beginning of the Indochina wars. Once the first step had been taken, it would be “very difficult to hold [the] line.”⁴⁷

Taylor’s objections were prophetic, but they were ignored. Months before, the president had approved in principle the introduction of ground combat forces. The need appears to have been so pressing and immediate, the commitment so small, that the decision was made routinely, with little discussion of its long-range consequences.

⁴⁷ *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 3: 418.

After less than a week of apparently perfunctory debate, LBJ approved Westmoreland's request. On March 8, two battalions of Marines, fitted out in full battle regalia, with tanks and 8-inch howitzers, splashed ashore near Da Nang, where they were welcomed by South Vietnamese officials and by Vietnamese girls passing out leis of flowers. It was an ironically happy beginning for what would be a wrenching experience for both nations.

As Taylor had predicted, once the first step had been taken, it was very difficult to hold the line. Alarmed by the slow pace of the ARVN buildup and fearful of a major enemy offensive in the Central Highlands, Westmoreland concluded by mid-March that if the United States was to avert disaster in Vietnam, there was "no solution . . . other than to put our own finger in the dike."⁴⁸ He therefore advocated the immediate commitment of two U.S. Army divisions, one to the highlands and the other to the Saigon area. The Joint Chiefs forcefully endorsed Westmoreland's request. Long impatient with the administration's caution and eager to assume full responsibility for the war, they even went beyond Westmoreland, pressing for the deployment of as many as three divisions to be used in offensive operations against the enemy.

The administration now found itself on what McNaughton called *the horns of a trilemma*. The options of withdrawal and a massive air war against North Vietnam had been firmly rejected. It was apparent by mid-March, however, that the bombing campaign approved in February would not produce immediate results. Westmoreland's urgent warnings raised fears that further inaction might lead to a South Vietnamese collapse. Many administration officials therefore reluctantly concluded that they must introduce U.S. ground forces into Vietnam. They fully appreciated, on the other hand, the possible domestic political consequences of the sort of commitment Westmoreland proposed. And Taylor ominously warned that to place major increments of forces in the highlands would invite heavy losses, even an American Dien Bien Phu.

The administration resolved its "trilemma" with a compromise, rejecting the military proposals but still approving a significant commitment of ground forces and an enlargement of their mission. At a conference in Honolulu in late April, McNamara, Taylor, and the Joint Chiefs agreed on a hastily improvised strategy to "break the will of the DRV/VC [Democratic Republic of Vietnam/Viet Cong] by depriving them of victory." The bombing would be maintained at its "present

⁴⁸Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 126.

tempo" for six months to a year. But the conferees agreed, as McNamara put it, that bombing "would not do the job alone."⁴⁹ They therefore decided that some 40,000 additional U.S. ground combat forces should be sent to Vietnam.

These forces were not to be used in the highlands or given an unrestricted mission, as Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs had advocated, but would be used in the more cautious "enclave strategy" devised by Taylor. Deployed around the major U.S. bases, their backs to the sea, they would be authorized to undertake operations within fifty miles of their base areas. The administration hoped this limited commitment would deny the enemy a knockout blow, thus allowing time for the South Vietnamese buildup and for the bombing to take its toll. Although the April decisions stopped short of the commitment urged by the military, they advanced well beyond the original objective of base security and marked a major step toward large-scale involvement in the ground war. The new strategy shifted emphasis from the air war against North Vietnam to the war in the south. By adopting it, the administration at least tacitly committed itself to expand its forces as the military situation required.

By this time Johnson recognized that achievement of U.S. objectives in Vietnam would require a sustained and costly commitment, but he still refused to submit his policies to public or congressional debate. Many administration officials shared a view widely accepted at the height of the Cold War that foreign policy issues were too complex and too important to be left to an indifferent and ignorant public and a divided and unwieldy Congress. LBJ seems to have feared that a declaration of war might trigger a Chinese or Soviet response or increase domestic pressures for an unlimited conflict in Vietnam. He particularly feared, as he later put it, that a congressional debate on "that bitch of a war" would destroy "the woman I really loved—the Great Society."⁵⁰ The president's unparalleled knowledge of Congress and his confidence in his renowned powers of persuasion encouraged him to believe that he could expand the war without provoking a backlash. The repeated deference of the Congress to executive initiatives gave him no reason to anticipate a major challenge.

Johnson thus took the nation into war in Vietnam by indirection and dissimulation. The bombing was publicly justified as a response to the Pleiku attack and the broader pattern of North Vietnamese

⁴⁹ McNamara to Johnson, April 21, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 13.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Kearns, *Johnson*, p. 251.

"aggression" rather than as a desperate attempt to halt the military and political deterioration in South Vietnam. The administration never publicly acknowledged the shift from reprisals to "sustained pressures." The dispatch of ground troops was explained solely in terms of the need to protect U.S. military installations. Not until June, when it crept out by accident in a press release, did officials publicly concede that American troops could undertake offensive operations.

Although the administration effectively concealed the direction of its policy, the obvious expansion of the war, particularly the bombing, attracted growing criticism. White House mail ran heavily against the bombing. A few newspapers joined the *New York Times* in warning of the cost of "lives lost, blood spilt and treasure wasted, of fighting a war on a jungle front 7,000 miles from the coast of California." Prominent Democratic senators such as Frank Church, Mike Mansfield, and George McGovern urged the president to search for a negotiated settlement. Professors at the University of Michigan, Harvard, and Syracuse conducted all-night teach-ins; students on various campuses held small protest meetings and distributed petitions against the bombing; and on April 17, in a portent of things to come, 20,000 students gathered in Washington to march in protest against the war.

Escalation also aroused widespread criticism abroad and brought forth, even from some of America's staunchest allies, appeals for restraint. United Nations Secretary General U Thant of Burma had been trying for months to arrange private talks between the United States and North Vietnam. When the administration ignored his overtures and initiated the bombing, he publicly charged that Washington was withholding the truth from the American people. In early April, seventeen nonaligned nations issued an "urgent appeal" for negotiations without precondition. Great Britain, as cochair of the Geneva Conference, called upon the parties to the conflict to state their terms for a settlement. In a move that infuriated Johnson, Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, speaking on American soil, appealed to Washington to stop the bombing and work for a peaceful settlement.

The administration quickly responded to its critics. White House aides organized "Target: College Campuses," sending their "best young troops" to speak at universities and bringing professors and student leaders to Washington for "seminars."⁵¹ The president invited dissident

⁵¹Jack Valenti to McGeorge Bundy, April 23, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 13.

members of Congress and newspaper editors and representatives of foreign governments in for sessions that sometimes lasted for three hours, vigorously defending his policies and reminding his visitors of past favors. Administration spokespersons publicly replied to critics, revealing from the start an abrasiveness and arrogance that would steadily widen the gap between Washington and opponents of the war. Addressing the American Society for International Law, Rusk expressed incredulity at the “stubborn disregard of plain facts by men who are supposed to be helping our young to learn . . . how to think.”⁵²

The administration also sought to disarm its critics by several well-publicized peace initiatives. In a speech at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, LBJ affirmed that the United States was prepared to enter into “unconditional discussions.” He also dangled before Hanoi the offer of a billion-dollar economic development program for the Mekong River valley region, a program “on a scale even to dwarf our TVA,” he claimed. “Ho [Chi Minh] will never be able to say ‘No,’” a president accustomed to winning over recalcitrant senators with offers of dams and roads confidently exclaimed to an aide.⁵³ In early May, he approved a five-day bombing pause, accompanied by private messages to Hanoi indicating that the diminution of North Vietnamese and NLF military activity could lead to a scaling back of U.S. bombing.

Johnson was undoubtedly sincere in his desire for peace, but the spring 1965 initiatives were designed as much to silence domestic and international critics as to set in motion determined efforts to gain a peace settlement. Despite his offer to participate in “unconditional discussions,” the United States did not wish to begin serious negotiations at a time when its bargaining power was so weak. Indeed, it had not even begun internal discussions to formulate a negotiating position. The president also made clear in his April 7 speech that the United States would not compromise its fundamental objective of an independent South Vietnam, which meant, by implication, a non-Communist South Vietnam. And U.S. officials were aware that the North Vietnamese would not negotiate on that basis.

Hanoi was even less inclined than Washington to negotiate at this stage of the war. Ideology provided hard-liners such as Le Duan

⁵²Quoted in *Time*, April 30, 1965, 29.

⁵³*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965* (Washington, D.C., 1966), 1: 394–399; Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, p. 355.

confidence in the ultimate triumph of their revolution. Hard experience made them leery of diplomacy. They vividly recalled the period after the 1954 Geneva Conference when, in their view, the great powers had cheated them of the victory they had won on the battlefield. Like the United States, North Vietnam feared that a willingness to negotiate might be interpreted by the other side as a sign of weakness. As with their American counterparts, party leaders harkened back to World War II for historical lessons. "We do not want a Munich which will spare us from war now but bring dishonor upon us," Premier Pham Van Dong told a French diplomat in April 1965.

Hanoi was especially disinclined toward negotiations at this time because it was certain it was winning. The go-for-broke strategy adopted in late 1963 appeared to be paying rich dividends. The NLF had intensified its political struggle in South Vietnam and had initiated a shift to big-unit military operations. In a relatively short time it had enlarged the liberated zone from the Central Highlands to the Mekong Delta, controlling about one-half the people and territory of South Vietnam. Big-unit operations increasingly exposed the vulnerability of the ARVN. In May 1965, at Ba Gia north of Saigon, NLF main forces mauled two South Vietnamese battalions, as at Ap Bac validating their ability to defeat large enemy units. Not surprisingly, Le Duan sensed an "opportunity moment" when South Vietnam might be defeated before the United States could intervene in force, leaving it no choice but to withdraw. In response to Johnson's John Hopkins speech, North Vietnam did release a Four Point program for negotiations, but like the U.S. peace moves, this ploy was aimed mainly at world opinion. It denounced the U.S. bombing pause as a "worn-out trick of deceit and threat" and stepped up rather than reduced its military and political activities in South Vietnam.⁵⁴

U.S. peace moves did help still domestic and foreign criticism, at least temporarily, and the administration used the respite to solidify congressional support. On May 4, Johnson requested \$700 million for military operations in Vietnam and made clear that he would regard a vote for the appropriation as an endorsement of his policies. The basic decisions had already been made, of course, and the president did nothing to clarify the policy he was actually pursuing. It was very difficult for

⁵⁴Elliott, *Vietnamse War*, pp. 217, 223, 225; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 73–79; Pierre Asselin, "We Don't Want a Munich: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy, 1965–1968" *Diplomatic History* 36 (June 2012): 548–561.

the legislators to vote against funds for troops in the field. Congress approved the request quickly and without dissent. Johnson would later cite this vote, along with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, to counter those critics who said he had not given Congress an opportunity to pass on his Vietnam policy.

CULMINATION

In the three months after the May bombing pause, the Johnson administration took the final steps toward an open-ended commitment to war. Despite the bombing, continued increases in aid, and the infusion of ground forces, the military situation deteriorated drastically. At this most critical phase of the war, the ARVN verged on disintegration. Desertion rates among draftees in training centers ran as high as 50 percent. Discouraged by the failure of the bombing and increasingly inclined to "let the Americans do it," the officer corps became even more cautious. The high command was "close to anarchy" from internal squabbling and intrigue.⁵⁵ Bolstered by as many as four regiments of North Vietnamese regulars, the NLF took the offensive in May. Its resounding victory at Ba Gia increased Westmoreland's already pronounced doubts about the ARVN's capabilities, and the heavy losses completely upset his plans for building it up. By the end of May, he concluded that major increments of U.S. forces were essential to avert defeat.

The political situation showed no signs of improvement. Khanh had continued to play a dominant role after his resignation in August 1964, resuming the premiership for a brief period and then taking command of the armed forces. After more than a year at or near the center of power, during which he had sharply exacerbated the divisions in South Vietnam, the embattled general finally withdrew in February 1965 and, to the relief of the Americans, accepted an appointment as "roving ambassador." Following an impossibly confusing series of coups and countercoups, a civilian government was formed by Phan Huy Quat, and relative quiet prevailed for a time. When Quat shook up his cabinet in May, however, the so-called Young Turks, Vice Air Marshal Ky and

⁵⁵William Depuy memorandum for the record, March 9, 1965, and memorandum to Westmoreland, April 13, 1965, William Depuy Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., Folder D(65).

Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, finally emerged from the shadows, dissolving the government and assuming power.

The new government, the fifth since the death of Diem, would survive far longer than any of its predecessors, but at the outset its future seemed uncertain. Thieu, who assumed command of the armed forces, was respected by the Americans as a capable military leader, and Taylor regarded him as a man of "considerable poise and judgment."⁵⁶ The prime minister, Ky, was another matter entirely. Customarily attired in a flashy flying suit with a bright purple scarf and an ivory-handled pistol hanging ostentatiously on his hip, the flamboyant, mustachioed air marshal had a well-earned reputation for "drinking, gambling and chasing women," as well as for speaking out of turn and using the air force for personal political intrigue.⁵⁷ The Americans found it hard to take Ky seriously and saw little cause for optimism in his rise to power. The Ky-Thieu directorate "seemed to all of us the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel," Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy later recalled.⁵⁸

Under these circumstances, Johnson's advisers again began pressing for vigorous action to stave off certain defeat. Long frustrated by the restrictions on the bombing, Westmoreland, the Joint Chiefs, and Walt Rostow of the State Department urged intensification of the air war. The present level of bombing, they contended, was merely inconveniencing Hanoi, and U.S. restraint had allowed it to strengthen its offensive and defensive capabilities. Rostow, in particular, argued that victory could be attained by striking North Vietnam's industrial base.

Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs also advocated a drastic expansion of American ground forces and the adoption of an offensive strategy. They were more certain than ever that South Vietnam lacked sufficient military strength to hold the line on its own. Traditionalists in their attitude toward the use of military power, they had opposed the enclave approach from the start and now insisted on an aggressive, offensive strategy. "You must take the fight to the enemy," Gen. Earle Wheeler, the JCS chairman, affirmed. "No one ever won a battle sitting on his ass."⁵⁹ Indeed, by the summer of 1965, even Taylor conceded,

⁵⁶Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, p. 345.

⁵⁷CIA memorandum, October 8, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 7.

⁵⁸William Bundy oral history interview, Johnson Papers.

⁵⁹Henry Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 138.

as he later put it, that “the strength of the enemy offensive had completely overcome my former reluctance to use American ground troops in general combat.”⁶⁰

A June 7 Westmoreland cable that McNamara later called a “bomb-shell” triggered seven weeks of intensive deliberations that brought about the Americanization of the war. The MACV commander urgently requested 150,000 additional troops and authorization to use them in offensive operations against the enemy. “We are in a hell of a mess,” McNamara conceded, and he saw little choice but to go along. As LBJ’s principal adviser during this turbulent time, he went further and urged the president to declare a national emergency, mobilize the reserves, seek a congressional resolution of support, and even raise taxes to fund the additional expenses. An escalation of this magnitude would make a later decision to withdraw “even more difficult and costly than would be the case today,” the secretary of defense conceded, but it might “stave off defeat in the short run and offer a good chance of producing a favorable settlement in the longer run.”⁶¹

Among the president’s advisers, only Undersecretary of State Ball and Washington attorney Clark Clifford opposed a major commitment of ground forces. Ball warned that approval of Westmoreland’s proposals would lead to a “protracted war involving an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces, mounting U.S. casualties, no assurances of a satisfactory solution, and a serious danger of escalation at the end of the road.” Clifford urged limiting U.S. forces to the absolute minimum and exploring “every serious avenue leading to a possible settlement.” “It won’t be what we want,” he admitted, “but we can learn to live with it.”⁶²

During much of this period, Johnson himself was a man in torment, at times depressed, racked by indecision, and given to sharp mood swings. On one occasion, an aide found him in bed with the covers nearly over his head moaning that he felt like he was in a Louisiana swamp “that’s pulling me down.” He realized that he had reached a point where he “must get in or get out,” a Vietnam Rubicon. “Isn’t this going off the diving board?,” he asked the JCS. He feared that an expanded war would doom his Great Society. He fretted about his

⁶⁰Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, p. 347.

⁶¹Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 145–146.

⁶²Ball to Johnson, July 1, 1965, in Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers* (NYT), pp. 449–454; Clifford to Johnson, May 17, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 16.

military advisers' recklessness and irresponsibility. "They just scare you," he told a friend. He understood that approval of this request for additional troops might lead to another request and then perhaps another. The Bay of Pigs debacle offered a historical reminder of the folly of doing things in a "half-assed way." Yet privately, LBJ expressed doubts that even if Westmoreland were given the troops the enemy could be beaten. "I don't believe they're ever going to quit." He railed against those "kooks" and "peaceniks" who opposed the war (and who, he insisted, were controlled by "the communists") and the "sob sisters" and "whiners" in Congress who would "tuck tail and run." He searched desperately for an elusive middle ground that would somehow avert defeat in Vietnam and leave him some options, but he expressed little confidence that such an approach could bring about an acceptable solution.⁶³

In handling this decision, LBJ put his political savvy on full display. He delayed for weeks, in part no doubt because of the magnitude of what he was doing, but also to allow passage of Medicare and the Voting Rights Act, essential pieces of his Great Society program. He would have none of McNamara's proposal for mobilization and a war resolution. "I think it commits me where I can't get out, and it puts me out there further than I want to get right at this moment," he explained to friends. He gave the JCS and Ball their day in court, listening attentively to their arguments and raising numerous probing questions before rejecting their proposals for large-scale escalation and withdrawal. In a masterful act of political gamesmanship, he neutralized Congress by threatening to dump the problem in its lap, something the leadership wanted no part of. "The senators didn't want to vote," he sneered to McNamara. "They just want to talk and whine about it."⁶⁴ In meetings with congressional leaders, he pledged to conservatives to hold the line in Vietnam while assuring liberals that he would not permit the war to get out of hand. "I'm going up old Ho Chi Minh's leg an inch at a time," he told Senator George McGovern. He spoke frequently with former president Dwight Eisenhower, "the best chief of staff I've got," he flattered the general, as a way of currying favor among Republicans.⁶⁵

After a whirlwind McNamara trip to Vietnam, during which Westmoreland doubled his earlier troop request, and a week of frenzied

⁶³ George C. Herring, *The War Bells Have Rung: The LBJ Tapes and the Americanization of the Vietnam War* (Charlottesville, Va., 2015), pp. 5, 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.

⁶⁵ George McGovern, *Grassroots* (New York, 1977), pp. 104–105.

meetings in Washington, the president in late July made his fateful decisions, opening the way for eight years of bloody warfare in Vietnam. He rejected proposals to escalate the air war against North Vietnam, approving only small, gradual increases in the number of sorties and retaining control tightly in his own hands. He agreed to furnish Westmoreland 30–40,000 troops in three separate installments, thus avoiding the reserve call-up and a public debate. He authorized him to “commit U.S. troops to combat independent of or in conjunction with GVN forces in any situation when. . . their use is necessary to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces.”⁶⁶ By giving the general a free hand, he cleared the way for the United States to take over the fighting in South Vietnam.

The president deliberately obscured the nature and significance of what he was doing. While fundamentally altering America’s role in the war, he continued to deny any changes of policy. He insisted that he was sending the additional troops to protect those already there while secretly authorizing their use in offensive operations. He assured skeptics such as Senators Mansfield and Russell that once the situation in Vietnam was stabilized he would “seek a way out without saying so.” To make his decisions more palatable to potential waverers, he and his aides issued dire warnings that failure to act decisively would play into the hands of those who wanted to take more drastic measures, the “Goldwater crowd,” who were “more numerous, more powerful and more dangerous than the fleabite professors.”⁶⁷

Rather than rallying the nation to fight, he soft-pedalled going to war. Some of his advisers had fretted their way through the Cuban missile crisis, and they were understandably sensitive to the perils of escalation. LBJ justified his approach on the grounds that he did not want to be “too dramatic” and “blow things up,” thus alarming the Soviet Union and China and risking a wider war. Acting in this way might also help salvage his domestic goals. He instructed his staff to implement his decisions in a “low-keyed manner in order (a) to avoid an abrupt challenge to the Communists, and (b) to avoid undue concern and excitement in the Congress and in domestic public opinion.”⁶⁸ He announced his decision at a noon press conference on July 28 instead of at prime time

⁶⁶Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers* (NYT), p. 42.

⁶⁷Herring, *War Bells*, p. 18; McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, July 14, 1965, Johnson Papers, Diary Backup File, Box 19.

⁶⁸Benjamin Read memorandum, July 23, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 16.

and lumped it in with other items in a way that shrouded its significance. His tactics reflected his continuing determination to achieve his goals in Vietnam without sacrificing the Great Society and his hope that he could somehow do both.

Significantly, in making these decisions, the Johnson administration all but ignored the object of its concern, its South Vietnamese ally. The Saigon government was not consulted on the decisions to bomb North Vietnam and introduce major increments of U.S. combat forces. The most that was done was to brief its leaders on the steps being taken and request their concurrence. Former ambassador Bui Diem later noted the absence of communication between allies, the “unself-conscious arrogance” of the Americans, and the impotence of the South Vietnamese, who acquiesced in the Americanization of the war against their better judgment and despite the fact that they had just emerged from years of foreign domination. “The Americans came in like bulldozers,” Bui Diem observed, “and the South Vietnamese followed their lead without a word of dissent, for the most part without a thought of dissent.”⁶⁹

The July decisions represented the culmination of a year and a half of agonizing over America’s Vietnam policy and stemmed logically from the administration’s refusal to accept the consequences of withdrawal. At times, privately, LBJ questioned the importance of Vietnam and expressed doubts about the prospects for success. Yet he plunged ahead. He and many of his advisers feared that even the appearance of defeat in Vietnam might undermine U.S. credibility abroad. For this insecure president, his nation’s credibility and his own were interchangeable. He could not bear the thought of failure or defeat, what he called pulling down the flag, tucking tail and running. At times, it seemed, even his manhood was at stake. By choosing war without bluster and on a modest scale he opted for what seemed the best of a bad batch of alternatives, one that offered at least a glimmer of hope for success. He deluded himself that his approach would leave control in his hands.

In making the July commitments, the administration saw itself moving cautiously between the extremes of withdrawal and total war; it sought, in Johnson’s words, to do “what will be enough, but not too much.” The president and his advisers did not seek the defeat of North Vietnam. They did not “speak of conquest on the battlefield . . . as men

⁶⁹Bui Diem with David Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston, 1987), pp. 127, 153.

from time immemorial had talked of victory," the historian Henry Graff recorded. They sought rather to inflict sufficient pain to compel the enemy to negotiate on terms acceptable to the United States—in Johnson's Texas metaphor, to apply sufficient force until the enemy "sobers up and unloads his pistol."⁷⁰

As the president himself had predicted, getting into war would be much easier than getting out. The administration's decisions of 1964 and 1965 were based on two fatal miscalculations. In seeking to do what would be "enough but not too much," LBJ and his advisers never analyzed with any real precision how much would be enough. When Ball warned that it might take as many as a half million troops, McNamara dismissed the figure as "outrageous."⁷¹ JCS estimates of the forces needed and time required turned out to be not far off the mark. But the president devoted his energy to neutralizing the military politically rather than seeking their views; the Joint Chiefs hesitated to press on him the truth as they saw it for fear it might deter him from war. They hoped, once they got a foot in the door, to chip away at the presidential restrictions until they got the type of war they wanted. The decisions of December 1964 through July 1965 also took place in a strategic vacuum, scant consideration being given to a precise formulation of goals and how U.S. power might best be used to achieve them.⁷² Leaders of the most powerful nation in the history of the world, many U.S. officials could not conceive that a small, backward country could stand up against them. It would be like a congressional filibuster, Johnson once speculated, "enormous resistance at first, then a steady whittling away, then Ho [Chi Minh] hurrying to get it over with."⁷³

Miscalculating the costs that the United States would incur, the administration could not help but overestimate the willingness of the nation to pay. On July 27, 1965, Mansfield penned a long, eloquent, and prophetic warning to his old friend and political mentor. He advised Johnson that Congress and the nation supported him because he was president, not because they understood or were deeply committed to his policy in Vietnam, and that there lingered beneath the surface a confusion and uncertainty that could in time explode into

⁷⁰Graff, *Tuesday Cabinet*, pp. 54, 59.

⁷¹Benjamin Read oral history interview, Johnson Papers.

⁷²McMaster, *Derelection of Duty*, pp. 257, 261, 275, 301.

⁷³Kearns, *Johnson*, p. 266.

outright opposition.⁷⁴ Mansfield correctly perceived the flimsiness of Johnson's backing. As long as U.S. objectives could be obtained at minimal cost, Americans were willing to stay in Vietnam. When the war turned out to last much longer and cost much more than had been anticipated, however, the president's support would wither away. The advocates of escalation and withdrawal he had parried so skillfully in July 1965 would turn on him.

Johnson disregarded Mansfield's admonitions. After months of uncertainty, he had set his course. In July 1965, quietly and without fanfare, he launched the United States on what would become its longest, most frustrating, and most divisive war. The nation responded with a sense of relief that the steps taken were not more costly and drastic. Reflecting the mood of the moment, *Newsweek* noted the absence of "hot tides of national anger" and remarked on the "strange, almost passionless war" the United States was waging in Vietnam. "There are no songs written about it," the magazine concluded, "and the chances that any will seem remote," a prophecy that turned out to be tragically off the mark.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Mansfield to Johnson, July 27, 1965, Johnson Papers, National Security File, National Security Council Histories: Deployment of Major U.S. Forces to Vietnam, July 1965, Box 40.

⁷⁵*Newsweek*, August 9, 1965, pp. 17–18.



President Johnson

The commander-in-chief has just listened to a tape sent from Vietnam by his son-in-law, Charles Robb, describing an ambush in which GIs were killed. His growing distress at the inconclusive and intractable war mirrored that of the country in 1967.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration (NLJ-WHPO-A-VN137)

On the Tiger's Back

The United States at War, 1965–1967

While visiting the aircraft carrier *Ranger* off the coast of Vietnam in 1965, Robert Shaplen overheard a fellow journalist remark: “They just ought to show this ship to the Vietcong—that would make them give up.”¹ The first combat troops to enter Vietnam shared similar views. When “we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon,” Marine Lt. Philip Caputo later wrote, “we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit conviction that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten.”² President Lyndon Johnson and his top advisers did not go to war with this sort of blind optimism, but they did allow themselves the hope that an infusion of U.S. military power by improving the balance of forces in the South and threatening North Vietnam with destruction would bring about a negotiated settlement.

By 1967, optimism had given way to deep and painful frustration. The failure of one level of force led to the next and then the next until the war attained a degree of destructiveness no one could have imagined in 1965. The United States had nearly a half million combat troops in Vietnam. It had dropped more bombs than in all theaters in World War II and was spending more than \$2 billion per month on the war. Some American officials persuaded themselves that progress had been made, but the undeniable fact was that the war continued. Lyndon Johnson thus faced an agonizing dilemma. Unable to end the war by military means and unwilling to make the concessions necessary to secure a negotiated settlement, he discovered belatedly what George Ball had warned in 1964:

¹Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York, 1966), p. 186.

²Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York, 1977), p. xii.

"Once on the tiger's back we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount."

American strategy in Vietnam was improvised rather than carefully designed and contained numerous contradictions. The United States went to war in 1965 to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam but could never relate its tremendous economic and military power to the fundamental task of establishing a viable government in Saigon. The administration insisted that the war must be kept limited—the Soviet Union and China must not be provoked to intervene—but the president counted on a quick and relatively painless victory to avert unrest at home. That these goals might not be compatible apparently never occurred to Johnson and his civilian advisers. The United States injected its military power directly into the struggle to cripple the insurgency and persuade North Vietnam to stop its "aggression." The administration vastly underestimated the enemy's willingness and capacity to resist, however, and did not confront the crucial question of what would be required to achieve its goals until it was bogged down in a bloody stalemate.

Although the president and his civilian advisers set limits on the conduct of the war, they did not provide firm strategic guidelines for the use of American power. Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs chafed under the restraints imposed by the civilians. Sensitive to Gen. Douglas MacArthur's fate in Korea, however, they would not challenge the president directly or air their case in public. On the other hand, they refused to develop a strategy that accommodated the restrictions imposed by the White House; instead, they attempted to break down the restrictions one by one until they got what they wanted. The result was considerable ambiguity in purpose and method, growing civil-military tension, and a steady escalation that brought increasing costs and uncertain gain.³

ROLLING THUNDER

The United States relied heavily on bombing.⁴ Airpower doctrine emphasized that the destruction of an enemy's war-making capacity would force it to come to terms. The limited success of strategic

³George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin, Tex., 1994), pp. 26–62.

⁴The best analyses of the air war are Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York, 1989), and Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., 1991).

bombing as applied on a large scale in World War II and on a more restricted scale in Korea raised serious questions about the validity of this assumption. The conditions prevailing in Vietnam, a primitive country with few crucial targets, might have suggested even more questions. The military insisted that for the bombing to be effective, it should be administered at once and in massive doses, a knockout blow, and there was even talk of bombing China. Civilian leaders properly feared a drastic escalation and stuck closely to the untested doctrines of limited war. They demanded a carefully calibrated bombing program expanded gradually and based on the academic theories of coercion pioneered by economist Thomas Schelling. Initiated in early 1965 as much from the lack of alternatives as from anything else, the bombing of North Vietnam was expanded over the next two years in the vain hope that it would check infiltration into the South and force North Vietnam to the conference table.

The air war gradually assumed massive proportions. The president firmly resisted the Joint Chiefs' proposal for a knockout blow, but as each phase of the bombing failed to produce results, he expanded the list of targets and the number of strikes. Sorties against North Vietnam increased from 25,000 in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 and 108,000 in 1967; bomb tonnage increased from 63,000 to 136,000 to 226,000. Throughout 1965, ROLLING THUNDER concentrated on military bases, supply depots, and infiltration routes in the southern part of the country. From early 1966 on, air strikes were increasingly directed against the North Vietnamese industrial and transportation systems and moved steadily northward. In the summer of 1966, Johnson authorized massive strikes against petroleum storage facilities and transportation networks. A year later, he permitted attacks on steel factories, power plants, and other targets around Hanoi and Haiphong as well as on previously restricted areas along the Chinese border.

The bombing inflicted an estimated \$600-million damage on a nation still struggling to develop a modern economy. The air attacks crippled North Vietnam's industrial productivity and disrupted its agriculture. Some cities were virtually leveled, others severely damaged. Giant B-52s, carrying payloads of 58,000 pounds, relentlessly attacked the areas leading to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, leaving the countryside scarred with huge craters and littered with debris. The bombing was not directed against the civilian population, and the administration publicly maintained that civilian casualties were minimal. But the CIA estimated that in 1967 total casualties ran as high as 2,800 per month and admitted

that these figures were heavily weighted with civilians; McNamara privately conceded that civilian casualties were as high as 1,000 per month during periods of intensive bombing. Especially at the beginning, it struck terror in the hearts of civilians. A British diplomat later recalled that by the fall of 1967 there were signs among the civilian population of the major cities of widespread malnutrition and declining morale.⁵

The manner in which airpower was used in Vietnam virtually ensured that it would not achieve its objectives. Whether, as the Joint Chiefs argued, a massive, unrestricted air war would have worked remains much in doubt. In fact, the United States had destroyed most major targets by 1967 with no demonstrable effect on the war. Caught off guard at the start, the North Vietnamese in time grasped how the United States was waging the air campaign. It took advantage of U.S. gradualism and the regularity and predictability of the bombing attacks to construct an effective air defense system, protect its vital resources, and develop alternative modes of transportation. Gradualism encouraged the North Vietnamese to persist despite the damage inflicted upon them.

An emboldened North Vietnam demonstrated ingenuity and dogged perseverance in coping with the bombing. Among the people, terror gave way to anger, which the government used to mobilize them for resistance. Civilians were evacuated from the cities and dispersed across the countryside; industries and storage facilities were scattered and in many cases concealed in caves and under the ground. The government claimed to have dug more than 30,000 miles of tunnels, and in heavily bombed areas the people spent much of their lives underground. An estimated 500,000 North Vietnamese, many of them women and children, worked full time repairing bridges and railroads. Piles of gravel were kept along the major roadways, enabling "Youth Shock Brigades" to fill craters within hours after the bombs fell. Concrete and steel bridges were replaced by ferries and pontoon bridges made of bamboo stalks, which were sunk during the day to avoid detection. Truck drivers covered vehicles with palm fronds and banana leaves and traveled at night, without headlights, guided only by white markers along the roads. B-52s blasted the narrow roads through the Mu Gia Pass leading to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but to American amazement trucks moved back through within several days. "[W]e attacked choke

⁵Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff (eds.), *The Air War in Indochina* (Boston, 1972), pp. 39–43. For a firsthand account of the impact of the bombing, see John Colvin, "Hanoi in My Time," *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 1981): 138–154.



The Mu Gia Pass

The Mu Gia Pass through the Annamite cordillera was a major entry point from North Vietnam into Laos on the fabled Ho Chi Minh Trail. An estimated 66 percent of North Vietnamese truck traffic went through it. Identifying the pass as a point of possible enemy vulnerability, the United States bombed it relentlessly, leaving the moonscape portrayed here in 1968. After each bombing, the North Vietnamese quickly repaired the damage, and the Mu Gia Pass was never closed for any significant length of time.

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points But the next day, bypasses appeared. We rolled avalanches into the roadbed, and the trail somehow slithered around them. We made mud and soon found corduroy. We cratered fords that somehow filled up and widened," a U.S. pilot recalled. "Caucasians cannot really imagine what ant labor can do," another American remarked with a mixture of frustration and admiration.⁶

⁶Merrill A. McPeak, "Bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail," *New York Times*, December 26, 2017; Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York, 1970), p. 79. For North Vietnam's response to the air war, see Merle L. Pribbenow, "Rolling Thunder and Linebacker Campaigns: The North Vietnamese View," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 10 (Fall–Winter 2001): 197–206.

Losses in military equipment, raw materials, and vehicles were more than offset by drastically increased aid from the Soviet Union and China. U.S. escalation did not force the two Communist rivals back into a close alliance, as George Ball had warned. Nevertheless, along with their increasingly heated rivalry, it permitted Hanoi to play one against the other to get increased aid and prevent either from securing predominant influence.

Until 1965, the Soviet Union had remained detached from the conflict, but the new leaders who overthrew premier Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964 took a much greater interest in Vietnam, and U.S. escalation presented challenges and opportunities they could not ignore. The bombing created a need for sophisticated military equipment that only the Soviets could provide, giving them a chance to wean North Vietnam from dependence on China. At a time when the Chinese were loudly proclaiming Soviet indifference to the fate of world revolution, the direct threat to a Communist state posed by U.S. escalation required the Russians to prove *their* credibility. The expanding war provided opportunities for the USSR to undermine U.S. prestige, tie down both of its major rivals, test its own weapons under combat conditions, and analyze the latest U.S. military hardware. The Soviets were nervous about escalation of the war and especially feared a nuclear confrontation like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. They resented North Vietnam's stubborn independence, bemoaned the fact that their massive aid did not purchase commensurate influence with Hanoi, and complained of the way the North Vietnamese used their freighters in Haiphong harbor as shields against U.S. bombing. But the Russians steadily expanded their support. Up to January 1, 1968, they furnished more than 1.8 billion rubles in assistance to North Vietnam, 60 percent of which was for military aid that included such modern weapons as fighter planes, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), and tanks. Three thousand Soviet technicians took direct part in the war effort, some of them manning anti-aircraft batteries and SAM sites and actually shooting down U.S. aircraft.⁷

For China also, the war with the United States—especially the air war—presented challenges and opportunities. The Chinese had supported North Vietnam since the Geneva Conference. At a time when they were asserting leadership of the world revolutionary

⁷Ilya V. Gaiduk, "The Vietnam War and Soviet-American Relations, 1964–1973: New Russian Evidence," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Winter 1995/1996): 232, 250–258.

movement, they could not help but view U.S. escalation as a "test case for 'true communism.'" They deemed the defense of North Vietnam essential to their own security. By rallying his people to meet an external threat, party chairman Mao Zedong also sought to mobilize support for his radicalization of China's domestic policies. Like the Soviets, the Chinese feared a confrontation with the United States, and they had vivid memories of losses suffered in the Korean War. They, therefore, let it be known through public statements and intermediaries that should the United States invade North Vietnam, they would send their own forces. They also made clear through words and deeds their full support for their ally. Under agreements worked out in 1964 and 1965, approximately 320,000 Chinese engineering and artillery troops helped the Vietnamese build new highways, railroads, and bridges to facilitate the transport of supplies from China and manned antiaircraft positions to defend the existing network from American attack. The Chinese also provided huge quantities of vehicles, small arms and ammunition, uniforms and shoes, rice and other foodstuffs, even volleyball and table tennis equipment for the recreation of North Vietnamese troops. In contrast to the First Indochina War, the wary Vietnamese did not permit their powerful allies to control their decision making. They developed into an art form the exploitation of divisions between the Soviet Union and China. Although eager supplicants, they were also tough negotiators who held out for what they most needed rather than accept outright what others offered. Assistance from the Soviet Union, China, and ten other Communist-bloc nations made up roughly 60 percent of North Vietnam's budget between 1965 and 1967, thus sustaining its war economy. It helped North Vietnam counter U.S. air attacks, replaced equipment lost through the bombing, and freed Hanoi to send more of its own troops to the South. The consistent underestimation of its volume and importance by U.S. intelligence led top officials to believe that North Vietnam was more vulnerable to U.S. military pressure than it was.⁸

Other factors reduced the effectiveness of the bombing. Heavy rains and impenetrable fog forced curtailment of missions during the long monsoon season, from September to May. Pilots claimed to be able

⁸James G. Hershberg and Chen Jian, "Informing the Enemy: Sino-American 'Signaling' and the Vietnam War," in Priscilla Roberts, ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain* (Stanford, Calif., 2006), pp. 193–257; Harish C. Mehta, "Soviet Biscuit Factories and Chinese Financial Grants: North Vietnam's Economic Diplomacy in 1967 and 1968," *Diplomatic History* 36 (April 2012): 316, 318–320, 324.

to bomb with “surgical” precision, but the weather and techniques that had not advanced much since World War II made for considerable inaccuracy. Many targets had to be bombed repeatedly before they were finally destroyed. Unreliable at the start of the war, North Vietnam’s air defense system with significant Russian and Chinese assistance developed formidable capabilities. Especially as they came close to Hanoi and Haiphong, U.S. aircraft ran up against a deadly foe. Soviet SAMs and MiG fighters did not score a high kill rate, but they threw off bombing patterns and forced pilots down to altitudes where they confronted heavy flak and small-arms fire. One U.S. pilot described North Vietnam as the “center of hell with Hanoi as its hub.”⁹

Despite the extensive damage inflicted on North Vietnam, the bombing did not achieve its goals. It absorbed a great deal of personnel and resources that might have been diverted to other military uses. It hampered the movement of troops and supplies to the South, and its proponents argued that infiltration would have been much greater without it. Official American estimates nevertheless conceded that infiltration increased from about 35,000 soldiers in 1965 to as many as 90,000 in 1967, even as the bombing grew heavier and more destructive. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and National Liberation Front (NLF) troops required only 34 tons of supplies a day from outside South Vietnam, “a trickle too small for airpower to stop.”¹⁰ It is impossible to gauge with any accuracy the psychological impact of the bombing on North Vietnam, but it did not destroy Hanoi’s determination to prevail. It gave the leadership a powerful rallying cry to mobilize the civilian population in support of the war.

By 1967, the United States was paying a heavy price for no more than marginal gains. The cost in bombs of a B-52 mission ran to \$30,000 per sortie. The direct cost of the air war, including operation of the aircraft, munitions, and replacement of planes, was estimated at more than \$1.7 billion during 1965 and 1966, a period when aircraft losses exceeded 500. Overall, between 1965 and 1968 the United States lost 950 aircraft costing roughly \$6 billion. According to one estimate, for each \$1 of damage inflicted on North Vietnam, the United States spent \$9.60. The costs cannot be measured in dollars alone. Captured U.S. fliers gave Hanoi hostages who would assume increasing importance in the stalemated war. The continued pounding of a small, backward

⁹Quoted in Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 131–132.

¹⁰Tilford, *Setup*, p. 113.

country by the world's wealthiest and most advanced nation gave the North Vietnamese a propaganda advantage they exploited quite effectively. Opposition to the war at home increasingly focused on the bombing, which, in the eyes of many critics, was at best inefficient, at worst immoral.

SEARCH AND DESTROY

American ground operations in the South also escalated dramatically between 1965 and 1967. Even before he had significant numbers of combat forces at his disposal, Westmoreland had formulated the strategy he would employ until early 1968. Its major objective was to locate and eliminate NLF and North Vietnamese regular units. Westmoreland has vigorously denied that he was motivated by any "Napoleonic impulse to maneuver units and hark to the sound of cannon," but "search and destroy," as his strategy came to be called, did reflect traditional U.S. Army doctrine. In Westmoreland's view, North Vietnam's decision to commit large units to the war left him no choice but to proceed along these lines. He did not have sufficient forces to police the entire country, nor was it enough simply to contain the enemy's main units. "They had to be pounded with artillery and bombs and eventually brought to battle on the ground if they were not forever to remain a threat." The helicopter provided a means to quickly deliver large numbers of U.S. troops over difficult terrain to get at enemy forces, and "airmobility" became a major instrument of search and destroy. Westmoreland's aim was to attain a "crossover point" where the United States was killing enemy forces faster than they could be replaced. That achieved, he reasoned, the South Vietnamese government could stabilize its position and pacify the countryside. The adversary would have to negotiate on terms acceptable to the United States.¹¹

Westmoreland's aggressive strategy required steadily increasing commitments of personnel. To secure some of the needed troops and give international respectability to its commitment in Vietnam, the Johnson administration mounted a "many flags" campaign among its allies, pressing them to commit forces and dangling subsidies,

¹¹William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), pp. 149–150; Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York, 2011), pp. 17, 91–92.

arms packages, and trade deals as inducements. The president himself got into the act, warning allied diplomats in 1967 of a "brush fire" in their backyard. If "you're wise . . .," he advised them, "you'll help me stamp it out before it reaches you. It will reach you," he concluded ominously, "before it reaches me."¹²

The results, from the U.S. perspective, were disappointing. America's European allies saw in a way the Johnson administration never did the dubiousness of its cause in Vietnam. They questioned whether the stakes were as high as the United States claimed or whether its credibility was really on the line. On the contrary, they feared that America might suffer more from a failed intervention than from a face-saving withdrawal. In any event, they doubted, given the weakness of South Vietnam, that even a massive injection of U.S. power could do more than delay an inevitable defeat. Except for France, America's major European allies did not openly oppose U.S. policy in Vietnam, but they adamantly refused, despite relentless pressure and Johnson's personal arm-twisting, to provide even the token military forces the administration requested. "Are we the sole defenders of freedom in the world?" the presidency plaintively asked in 1965.¹³

Even in the Pacific region the results were disappointing. The most hawkish of the allies at the outset of the war, Australia sent 8,000 soldiers and paid for them itself. Although dependent on the United States for its very survival, South Korea drove a hard economic bargain for the 60,000 troops it provided. Others were reluctant to refuse but also uneager to make large commitments. New Zealand doubted that the United States could achieve its goals in Vietnam but recognized that U.S. departure from the region would leave a "strategic task of frightening dimensions." To appease Washington, Wellington sent an artillery battery as a token. Thailand also committed a small "volunteer" contingent; the Philippines an engineering battalion; and Nationalist China small, highly trained units for covert operations. As the war dragged on inconclusively and became more unpopular throughout the world, even the Pacific allies grew more reluctant to succumb to U.S. blandishments, pleading budgetary constraints and domestic politics as excuses. When Maxwell Taylor and Clark Clifford visited the region in 1967 seeking

¹²New Zealand embassy, Washington, to Ministry of External Affairs, November 3, 1967, EA 478/4/8, Records of the New Zealand Ministry of External Relations and Trade, Wellington, N.Z.

¹³George C. Herring, "Fighting Without Allies," in Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York, 2002), p. 80.

additional forces, they found allied leaders “friendly but usually cautious and defensive,” talking more about what they had done in the past than about what they would do in the future. Allied forces in Vietnam peaked at around 71,000 in early 1969.¹⁴

The United States thus provided the bulk of the forces, and even before the 1965 buildup had been completed, Westmoreland requested sufficient additional troops to bring the total to 450,000 by the end of 1966. Although the administration retained tight control over the air war, it gave its field commander broad discretion in developing and executing the ground strategy. It saw no choice but to give him most of the troops he asked for. In June 1966, the president approved a force level of 431,000 to be reached by mid-1967. While these deployments were being approved, Westmoreland was developing requests for an increase to 542,000 troops by the end of 1967.

Furnished with thousands of fresh American troops and a massive arsenal of modern weaponry, Westmoreland took the war to the enemy. He accomplished what has properly been called a “logistical miracle,” constructing virtually overnight the facilities to handle huge numbers of U.S. troops and enormous volumes of equipment. The Americans who fought in Vietnam were the best-fed, best-clothed, and best-equipped army the nation had ever sent to war.

In what Westmoreland described as the “most sophisticated war in history,” the United States attempted to exploit its technological superiority to cope with the peculiar problems of a guerrilla war. To locate an ever-elusive enemy, the military used small, portable radar units and “people sniffers” that picked up the odor of human urine. IBM 1430 computers were programmed to predict likely times and places of enemy attacks. C-47 transports were converted into terrifying gunships (called “Puff the Magic Dragon” after a popular folk song of the era) that could fire 18,000 rounds a minute.

The herbicide warfare initiated in the Kennedy administration expanded along with the war. C-123 RANCHHAND crews with the motto “Only You Can Prevent a Forest” (a sardonic twist on the National Forest Service’s Smokey the Bear campaign *against* forest fires) sprayed more than 100 million pounds of chemicals such as Agent Orange over millions of acres, destroying an estimated one half of South Vietnam’s timberlands. They also targeted crops to deprive the NLF of food.

¹⁴ Clifford-Taylor report, August 5, 1967, Johnson Papers, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Tex., National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 91.

Total U.S. Military Personnel in South Vietnam

| Date | Army | Navy | Marine Corps | Air Force | Coast Guard | Total |
|--------------|---------|--------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| 31 Dec. 1960 | 800 | 15 | 2 | 68 | — | About 900 |
| 31 Dec. 1961 | 2,100 | 100 | 5 | 1,000 | — | 3,205 |
| 30 June 1962 | 5,900 | 300 | 700 | 2,100 | — | 9,000 |
| 31 Dec. 1962 | 7,900 | 500 | 500 | 2,400 | — | 11,300 |
| 30 June 1963 | 10,200 | 600 | 600 | 4,000 | — | 15,400 |
| 31 Dec. 1963 | 10,100 | 800 | 800 | 4,600 | — | 16,300 |
| 30 June 1964 | 9,900 | 1,000 | 600 | 5,000 | — | 16,500 |
| 31 Dec. 1964 | 14,700 | 1,100 | 900 | 6,600 | — | 23,300 |
| 30 June 1965 | 27,300 | 3,800 | 18,100 | 10,700 | — | 59,900 |
| 31 Dec. 1965 | 116,800 | 8,400 | 38,200 | 20,600 | 300 | 184,300 |
| 30 June 1966 | 160,000 | 17,000 | 53,700 | 36,400 | 400 | 267,500 |
| 31 Dec. 1966 | 239,400 | 23,300 | 69,200 | 52,900 | 500 | 385,300 |
| 30 June 1967 | 285,700 | 28,500 | 78,400 | 55,700 | 500 | 448,800 |
| 31 Dec. 1967 | 319,500 | 31,700 | 78,000 | 55,900 | 500 | 485,600 |
| 30 June 1968 | 354,300 | 35,600 | 83,600 | 60,700 | 500 | 534,700 |
| 31 Dec. 1968 | 359,800 | 36,100 | 81,400 | 58,400 | 400 | 536,100 |
| 30 Apr. 1969 | 363,300 | 36,500 | 81,800 | 61,400 | 400 | *543,400 |
| 30 June 1969 | 360,500 | 35,800 | 81,500 | 60,500 | 400 | 538,700 |
| 31 Dec. 1969 | 331,100 | 30,200 | 55,100 | 58,400 | 400 | 475,200 |
| 30 June 1970 | 298,600 | 25,700 | 39,900 | 50,500 | 200 | 414,900 |
| 31 Dec. 1970 | 249,600 | 16,700 | 25,100 | 43,100 | 100 | 334,600 |
| 30 June 1971 | 190,500 | 10,700 | 500 | 37,400 | 100 | 239,200 |
| 31 Dec. 1971 | 119,700 | 7,600 | 600 | 28,800 | 100 | 156,800 |
| 30 June 1972 | 31,800 | 2,200 | 1,400 | 11,500 | 100 | 47,000 |
| 31 Dec. 1972 | 13,800 | 1,500 | 1,200 | 7,600 | 100 | 24,200 |
| 30 June 1973 | ** | ** | ** | ** | ** | ** |

*Peak strength.

**Totals for all five services combined less than 250.

Source: U.S., Department of Defense, OASD (Comptroller), Directorate for Information Operations, March 19, 1974.

Americans and South Vietnamese used comic books and other techniques to persuade wary villagers that the chemicals did not harm humans. The U.S. military insisted that the use of herbicides hurt the enemy without harming the peasantry. RAND Corporation studies raised serious doubts about such claims. In many cases, the NLF simply



Smokey

This emblem of Operation Ranchhand was mockingly adapted from the U.S. Forest Service's iconic Smokey the Bear image with the motto "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires." Between 1962 and 1971, American and South Vietnamese forces sprayed millions of gallons of herbicides and defoliants over South Vietnam to deprive the Viet Cong of food and natural cover. The extensive use of chemicals collectively (and mistakenly) called Agent Orange because of the color of bands around their barrels may have inconvenienced the guerrillas, but it brought far more harm to the peasants the United States sought to win over. The light-hearted reference to Smokey took on macabre connotations when the harm done by the chemicals containing the deadly dioxin became clear. Ranchhand had horrendous ecological and human consequences in Vietnam that linger to the present. It caused severe illnesses for many Americans who served there.

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moved to other areas to find the necessary food and cover. They accused the United States and South Vietnam of waging chemical warfare. Villagers endured huge losses. Their daily lives were disrupted; sometimes they were driven from their homes. Corruption in the Saigon government often deprived them of the compensation they were promised. They saw themselves, as one farmer lamented, "like a fly caught between two fighting buffaloes," with harsh consequences any way they turned. They did not understand why their crops were being destroyed. Not surprisingly, many of them blamed the United States and the Saigon government for their woes. As in so many other areas of the war, the means employed were counterproductive in terms of the aims pursued. And the long-term ecological and human consequences for Vietnam, the Vietnamese, and some Americans were horrendous.¹⁵

The United States relied heavily on artillery and airpower to dislodge the enemy at minimal cost, and it waged a furious war against NLF and North Vietnamese base areas. "The solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm . . . till the other side cracks and gives up," observed Gen. William Depuy, one of the principal architects of "search and destroy."¹⁶ From 1965 to 1967, South Vietnamese and U.S. airmen dropped more than a million tons of bombs on South Vietnam, twice the tonnage dropped on the North. Retaliatory bombing was employed against some villages suspected of harboring guerrillas. Airpower was used to support forces in battle according to the "pile-on concept," in which U.S. troops encircled enemy units and called in the aircraft. "Blow the hell out of him and police up," one officer described it.¹⁷ A much greater proportion of the air strikes comprised what was loosely called interdiction—massive, indiscriminate raids, primarily by B-52s, against enemy base areas and logistics networks. Entire areas of South Vietnam were designated Free Fire Zones, which could be pulverized without regard for the inhabitants.

North Vietnam more than matched U.S. escalation. If the United States fought a limited war for limited objectives, Hanoi, by contrast, fought an all-out war for national survival and victory. Although their bold gamble had backfired, its leaders stuck doggedly to their strategy. They mobilized the entire resources of their nation for what they called

¹⁵ Edwin A. Martini, "Hearts, Minds, and Herbicides: The Politics of the Chemical War in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 39 (2013): 58–84.

¹⁶ Quoted in Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York, 1972), p. 234.

¹⁷ Quoted in Littauer and Uphoff, *Air War*, p. 52.

the "Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation" and pledged to fight until the enemy was defeated and South Vietnam liberated. "The greater the escalation of USA troops," premier Pham Van Dong boldly proclaimed, "the greater would be [our] victory." At least at the outset, the war was popular in the North. The initial mobilization program doubled the number of NVA troops from around 200,000 to more than 400,000. North Vietnam significantly stepped up the infiltration of men and supplies into the South. Recognizing that their very survival was at stake, North Vietnamese leaders developed a sophisticated strategy of *dau tranh* ("struggle") that sought to integrate the military, political, and diplomatic dimensions of war. North Vietnamese and NLF strategists often disagreed on how aggressively to pursue the war in the South and to what extent the North Vietnamese rear area should be put at risk. But they concurred that the South Vietnamese government and army and American public opinion were their enemies' most vulnerable points. They attempted through intensive guerrilla and main unit operations to put maximum military pressure on the South Vietnamese and keep U.S. casualties high in hopes that Americans would weary of the war.¹⁸

Infiltration into South Vietnam was crucial to victory, and the fabled Ho Chi Minh Trail was the key to infiltration. From the beginning of the American war, the North Vietnamese committed vast human and material resources to expanding and improving this vital lifeline. What had been a primitive footpath with elephants sometimes used as a mode of conveyance was transformed by the late 1960s into a complex and sophisticated network of arteries into South Vietnam, with some paved roads capable of handling heavy trucks and with rest stations at numerous points. Thousands of workers, including women and children, devoted much of their lives to keeping the roads open. For the porters and soldiers who went to South Vietnam, the trip remained arduous. Depending on the means of travel, the 600-mile trek could take from two weeks to six months. It was fraught with peril from deadly tigers and bears, from the terror of American B-52 bombing, and especially from the scourge of malaria. Many way stations soon had cemeteries that marked the danger. During peak periods in the late 1960s, North Vietnam could move an estimated 400 tons of supplies per

¹⁸ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), pp. 74–76; Pierre Asselin, "'We don't want a Munich': Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy, 1965–1968," *Diplomatic History* 36 (June 2012): 548, 551.

week and as many as 5,000 soldiers a month into South Vietnamese battle zones.

Throughout 1965 and 1966, the North Vietnamese and NLF attempted to keep the Americans off balance, thereby disrupting search-and-destroy operations. In 1967, they engaged U.S. forces in major actions around the demilitarized zone, giving themselves short supply lines and convenient sanctuary and hoping to draw the Americans away from the populated areas and leave the countryside vulnerable to the NLF. Tactically, the North Vietnamese relied on ambushes and hit-and-run operations and sought to "cling to the belts" of the Americans in close-quarter fighting to minimize the impact of the vastly superior U.S. firepower. Like their NLF counterparts, the North Vietnamese were capable fighters. "Damn, give me two hundred men that well disciplined and I'll capture this whole country," one U.S. adviser commented after a major battle in the Central Highlands in late 1965.¹⁹

During 1966 and 1967, intensive fighting took place across much of South Vietnam. Along the demilitarized zone, Marines and North Vietnamese regulars were dug in like the armies of World War I, pounding each other relentlessly with artillery. In the jungle areas, small American units probed for the hidden enemy in a manner comparable to the Pacific island campaigns of World War II. Increasingly, however, Westmoreland concentrated on large-scale operations against enemy base areas. Operation CEDAR FALLS, a major campaign of early 1967, sent some 30,000 U.S. troops against the Iron Triangle, an NLF stronghold just north of Saigon. After B-52s saturated the area, American forces surrounded it, and helicopters dropped large numbers of specially trained combat troops into the villages. Following removal of the population, giant Rome plows with huge spikes on the front leveled the area, destroying what remained of the vegetation and leaving the guerrillas no place to hide. The region was then burned and bombed again to destroy the miles of underground tunnels dug by the insurgents.

It remains difficult to assess the results of U.S. ground operations from 1965 to 1967. American troops fought well, despite the miserable conditions under which the war was waged—dense jungles and deep

¹⁹Quoted in the *New York Times*, October 28, 1965. William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo., 1981), pp. 240–256, contains a persuasive assessment of North Vietnamese strategy. The story of the Ho Chi Minh Trail is well told in John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1999).



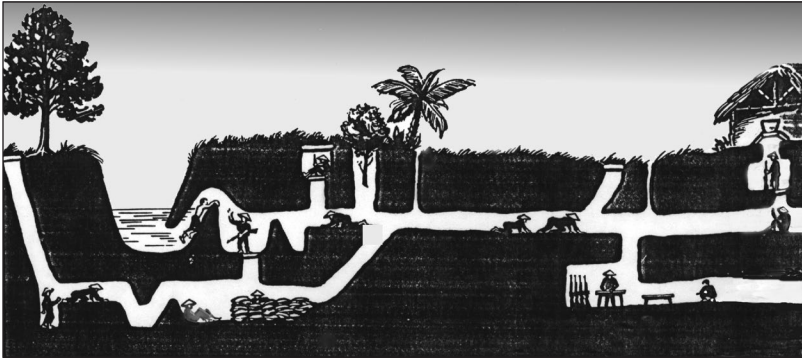
The Destruction of Ben Suc

The village of Ben Suc was a major NLF supply center in the notorious Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon. The NLF had dominated this area for years, and in 1967 the United States set out to save it by destroying it. More than 6,000 civilians were forcibly evacuated from Ben Suc, after which the village was bombed by B-52s for four days. Two Army divisions then moved in. Ben Suc ceased to exist. *Time* magazine reported that “even a crow flying across the Triangle will have to carry lunch from now on.” The NLF quickly returned to the Iron Triangle, however, and it became a staging area for the 1968 Tet Offensive.

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swamps, fire ants and leeches, booby traps and ambushes, an elusive but deadly enemy. In those instances where main units were actually engaged, the Americans usually prevailed. There was no place in South Vietnam where the enemy enjoyed security from U.S. firepower. It was clear by 1967 that the infusion of American forces had staved off what had appeared in 1965 to be certain defeat.

In a war without front lines and territorial objectives, the “body count” became the index of progress. Most authorities agree that the figures were notoriously unreliable. The sheer destructiveness of combat made it difficult to produce an accurate count of enemy killed in action. It was impossible to distinguish between guerrillas and noncombatants,



NLF Tunnel System

During the wars with France and the United States, the Viet Minh and later the National Liberation Front dug by hand thousands of miles of tunnels that connected villages and linked staging areas to battle zones. Inside these underground fortresses were supply depots, ordnance factories, hospitals, printing presses, sleeping quarters, kitchens, and even theaters for propaganda plays.

and in the heat of battle American “statisticians” made little effort. “If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC, was a rule of thumb in the bush,” Philip Caputo has recalled.²⁰ Throughout the chain of command there was heavy pressure to produce favorable figures, and padding occurred at each level until by the time the numbers reached Washington, they bore little resemblance to reality. Even with an inflated body count—and estimates of padding range as high as 30 percent—it is clear that the United States inflicted huge losses on the enemy. Official estimates placed the number as high as 220,000 by late 1967. Largely on the basis of these figures, the American military command insisted that the United States was winning the war.

As with the air war, attrition had serious flaws. It assumed that the United States could inflict intolerable losses on the enemy while keeping its own within acceptable bounds, an assumption that flew in the face of past experience with land wars on the Asian continent and the realities in Vietnam. An estimated 200,000 North Vietnamese reached draft age each year, and Hanoi was able to replace its losses and match each American escalation. Moreover, the conditions under which the war was fought permitted the enemy to control its casualties. The North

²⁰Caputo, *Rumor of War*, p. xviii.



Ho Chi Minh Trail

Vietnamese and NLF generally avoided contact when it suited them. They fought at times and places of their own choosing and on ground favorable to them. If losses reached unacceptable levels, they melted into the jungle or retreated into sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

The massive application of U.S. military power took a heavy toll on North Vietnam. The still fragile nation suffered huge setbacks in economic development. As casualties mounted and the bombing inflicted growing damage, war-weariness supplanted the initial surge of enthusiasm in the North. Dissent arose from some who wanted to spare North Vietnam the destruction of U.S. bombs and others like Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu, who deplored the waste of NVA main units in the South and pressed for a defensive, protracted war strategy.²¹

The arrival of U.S. troops with their enormous firepower dramatically altered the war in South Vietnam. American military operations battered some NLF main units, compounded supply problems, disrupted the party's organizational network, and even caused defections among its leadership. U.S. escalation forced the Front to impose conscription to fill its ranks and higher taxes to meet its most urgent needs, alienating the people on whose backing it relied. The costs of war for peasants in many areas began to exceed the benefits they had derived from the revolution. Growing competition between the Front and the Government of Viet Nam (GVN) for their loyalty along with the impact of U.S. firepower forced them to struggle merely to survive and made life increasingly untenable in some areas. Support for the revolution dropped sharply from its 1963–1964 peak. The departure of many peasants for the cities and towns, along with the demoralization of the civilian population, deprived the NLF of its base.²²

Still, the United States could gain no more than a stalemate. Despite popular grumbling and intraparty dissent, the Hanoi leadership pressed on with its aggressive strategy. The North Vietnamese and NLF had been hurt, in some cases badly, but their main forces had not been destroyed. The NLF political structure was damaged but still intact. The NLF and North Vietnam retained the strategic initiative and could strike quickly when and where they chose. In the South, in 1966 and 1967, the NLF shifted from costly engagements with U.S. forces to

²¹Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 76–79.

²²David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk. N.Y., 2007).

attacks on the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN), deemed an enemy point of vulnerability, and on the towns and cities, to force the enemy to disperse its forces and demonstrate to refugees that there was no safe haven. Westmoreland did not have sufficient forces to wage war against the enemy's regulars and control the countryside. Even in areas such as the Iron Triangle, when American forces moved on to fight elsewhere, the insurgents quietly slipped back in. It all added up to a "state of irresolution," Robert Shaplen observed in 1967.²³

Skeptics increasingly questioned whether the progress being made was not more than offset by the destruction wrought by U.S. military operations. From the early stages of the war, top officials had insisted that winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people (acronym, WHAM) was the key to success. The American way of war worked against that outcome. Massive bombing and artillery fire disrupted the agriculture upon which the South Vietnamese economy depended, produced huge civilian casualties, and drove hundreds of thousands of noncombatants into hastily constructed refugee camps or already overcrowded cities. In the CEDAR FALLS operation alone, Americans forcibly relocated some 6,000 civilians from the village of Ben Suc. During the summer and fall of 1967, a renegade U.S. Tiger Force commando unit went on a rampage in the Song Ve river valley, burning villages and brutally killing civilians. Later, in Quang Tin province, they killed hundreds of civilians and compounded the crime by mutilating the bodies of some victims, even women and babies. "It was as if we were trying to build a house with a bulldozer and wrecking crane," one U.S. official later observed.²⁴

Americanization of the war also had a debilitating effect on the South Vietnamese army. The United States did not neglect the ARVN. The U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) viewed it as a key element of allied strategy. Its numbers nearly doubled between 1964 and 1966; much time and money was spent training its soldiers and upgrading its weaponry and equipment. Westmoreland had appealed to Washington for troops mainly because of the ARVN's perceived ineffectiveness, however, and once the Americans were in the country he ordered them to take the offensive against North Vietnamese

²³Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam, 1965–1970* (New York, 1970), p. 167.

²⁴Stephen Young, quoted in W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1977), p. 225; George C. Herring, "How Not to Win Hearts and Minds," *New York Times*, September 17, 2017.

and Viet Cong main forces while the ARVN matured. Roughly two-thirds of the South Vietnamese troops were relegated to pacification duty, presumably because they would better relate to the villagers, an assignment some considered demeaning. The sense of inferiority thus engendered magnified the problem of morale that had hampered ARVN throughout the war. Some South Vietnamese units operated independently of the United States, often with American advisers, and mostly in the lowlands. At times, they fought well, but with low pay, bad housing, spotty leadership, and little sense of a cause, their overall performance was at best uneven.²⁵

The military alliance between the United States and South Vietnam suffered from what historian Andrew Wiest has called a “flawed symbiosis.” Westmoreland refused to create a unified command for fear it would smack of neo-colonialism. The United States thus had limited influence over ARVN’s policies and operations. MACV placed American advisers in many South Vietnamese units. Sometimes this worked well, but often there was a disconnect. The Americans were in Vietnam only twelve months, sometimes but six. The quick turnover of advisers hampered training and performance in combat. As short-timers possessed of what has been called “cultural hubris,” the Americans felt little compulsion to learn the language or familiarize themselves with Vietnamese culture. Some South Vietnamese soldiers had served in the French war, most were in for at least two years. The Americans bemoaned the lack of offensive spirit among the Vietnamese; ARVN soldiers complained of American impatience. It was not an alliance of equals. At first awed by the Americans’ skill and massive firepower, ARVN soldiers came to resent the abundance and advantages the GIs enjoyed. U.S. advisers alone could call in and target air support and artillery. In this and other ways, the Americans sometimes undermined their Vietnamese counterparts’ authority. Perhaps most significant—and telling—the United States helped create an army modeled after its own that came to rely on American firepower and advisers and was not prepared to stand alone.²⁶

The United States paid a heavy price for limited gains. In many operations vast quantities of firepower were expended, sometimes with

²⁵Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York, 2014), pp. 147–162; Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York, 2008), pp. 48–49, 65–72, 81–90.

²⁶Wiest, *Forgotten Army*, pp. 71–90.

negligible results. The ammunition costs of the war were “astronomical,” Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson later recalled, and some surveys revealed that as much as 85 percent of the ammunition used was unobserved fire, “a staggering volume.”²⁷ Although the United States killed 700 guerrillas in the CEDAR FALLS operation, the enemy’s main force escaped. American casualties were small compared with Vietnamese, but the number killed in action rose to 13,500 by late 1967. Swelling draft calls and mounting casualties in time brought rising opposition to the war at home.

Thus, despite the impressive body count figures, many observers agreed by mid-1967 that the hopes of a quick and relatively inexpensive military victory had been misplaced. Each American blow “was like a sledgehammer on a floating cork,” the journalist Malcolm Browne observed. “Somehow the cork refused to stay down.”²⁸ By this point, the United States had nearly 450,000 troops in Vietnam. Westmoreland conceded that even if his request for an additional 200,000 soldiers was granted, the war might go on for as long as two years. If not, he warned, it could last five years or even longer.

THE “OTHER WAR”: NATION BUILDING AND PACIFICATION

While drastically expanding its military operations in Vietnam, the United States also grappled with what many had always regarded as the central problem: construction of a viable South Vietnamese nation. Ky surprised skeptics by surviving in office for more than six months. Persuaded that it finally had a solid foundation upon which to build, the U.S. administration in early 1966 decided to make clear its commitment and press Ky to reform his government. At a hastily arranged “summit” meeting in Honolulu, Johnson publicly embraced a somewhat embarrassed Ky, symbolizing the new commitment, and secured his agreement to a sweeping program of reform. The president left no doubt of the importance he attached to the pledges. The Honolulu communiqué

²⁷ Harold Johnson oral history interview, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

²⁸ Malcolm W. Browne, *The New Face of War* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1968), p. ix.

was a "kind of bible," he declared. He would not be content with promises or "high-sounding words." There must be "coonskins on the wall," a phrase that befuddled his startled South Vietnamese listeners.²⁹

No sooner had Ky returned to Saigon than he faced a stiff internal challenge. Quiescent for nearly a year, the Buddhists viewed Honolulu as a clear sign that Ky, with American support, would attempt to maintain absolute power. Again they took to the streets. As in 1963, the demonstrations began in Hue and were led by Buddhist monks, but they quickly spread to Saigon and drew together the many groups dissatisfied with the regime: students, labor unions, Catholics, and even factions within the army. The demonstrations took on an increasingly anti-American tone. Signs reading *END FOREIGN DOMINATION OF OUR COUNTRY* appeared in Hue and Da Nang. An angry mob burned the U.S. consulate in Hue. Fire fighters refused to extinguish the blaze.

The Buddhist crisis exposed the fragility of the Saigon government and the weakness of the U.S. position in Vietnam. The existence of a virtual civil war within an insurrection dampened hopes for Ky's government. The protesters advocated the holding of elections and the restoration of civilian government, goals to which the United States could hardly take exception. The State Department nevertheless feared that giving in to the Buddhists would "take us more rapidly than we had envisaged down a road with many pitfalls." Rusk instructed the embassy to persuade moderate Buddhist leaders to drop their "unrealistic demands" because of the "grave danger of simply handing the country over to the Viet Cong."³⁰

The conflict in I Corps, the northern military section of South Vietnam, almost forced a reassessment of U.S. policy. Although they attempted to remain neutral, the U.S. Marines stationed in the area came under fire several times from ARVN units sympathetic to the Buddhists and from those loyal to Ky. On occasion the troops had to threaten to use force to defend themselves against one side or the other. The Marines naturally expressed "bitterness and disgust" that while they were putting their lives on the line to save South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese were fighting each other.

²⁹Transcript of Johnson briefing, February 8, 1966, Johnson Papers, National Security File, International Meetings File: Honolulu, Box 2.

³⁰Rusk to Embassy Saigon, March 16, 1966, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 28; Rusk to Embassy Saigon, April 5, 1966, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 29.

For the only time between 1965 and 1968, this second Buddhist crisis provoked serious discussion in Washington of a possible U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. In response to events in I Corps, U.S. public opinion polls revealed a sharp decline in popular support for the war and Johnson's handling of it. Legislators from both parties and both ends of the political spectrum expressed anger at the anti-American tones of the protests and dismay at the political chaos in South Vietnam. Some called for negotiations to end the war, others for a U.S. withdrawal. Even President Johnson conceded that in the event of a GVN collapse or a Buddhist takeover, the United States might *have* to leave South Vietnam. He ordered his aides to consider various fallback options and be prepared to make "terrible choices."³¹ The military drew up contingency plans. McNamara's close friend and top aide John McNaughton recommended that the United States use the "semi-anarchy in Vietnam as a foundation for disengagement." On one occasion, his boss seemed to agree, blurting out, "I want to give the order to our troops to get out of there so bad I can hardly stand it."³²

Acting without approval from Washington, an embattled Ky eventually solved the American dilemma and saved his own skin by dispatching a thousand South Vietnamese marines to Da Nang to suppress the rebellion. The Buddhists gave way in the face of superior force and withdrew in sullen protest. Although annoyed by Ky's independence, the administration was relieved and more than satisfied with the outcome. The president "categorically thrust aside the withdrawal option," William Bundy recalled, and "we all relaxed."³³

In the aftermath of the Buddhist crisis, Americans and Vietnamese struggled to live up to the lofty promises of Honolulu. From Washington's standpoint, pacification was a top-priority item. Improving the South Vietnamese standard of living was the one area of the war that struck a responsive chord in Johnson. A populist reformer at heart, he identified with the people of South Vietnam and deeply sympathized with their presumed desire for political freedom and economic progress. Like most of his colleagues, he believed it was necessary to win the support of the people to defeat the NLF. He felt a keen personal need to endow the war with some higher purpose. He could wax eloquent about such topics as

³¹Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964–1966* (Lexington, Ky., 2002), pp. 71–91.

³²Ibid, pp. 93–116; John McNaughton Diary, April 14, 1966, copy in author's possession.

³³William Bundy oral history interview, Johnson Papers.

inoculation programs, educational reform, and the use of American expertise to teach the Vietnamese to raise larger hogs and grow more sweet potatoes. "Dammit," he exploded on one occasion, "we need to exhibit more compassion for these Vietnamese plain people. . . . We've got to see that the South Vietnamese government wins the battle . . . of crops and hearts and caring."³⁴ Responding to Washington's prodding, U.S. officials in Saigon focused on pacification. MACV recognized its vital place in the overall allied strategy, especially at a time when the GVN controlled only about 25 percent of the countryside. After months of fumbling and false starts, the Johnson administration in 1967 created Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), a unique and in some ways effective experiment in civil-military coordination. The Saigon government sent teams to the villages modeled after VC cadre and trained in propaganda and social services to build support and undermine the guerrillas. U.S. officials and volunteers from private charitable agencies sought to modernize agriculture and improve schools and medical care.

Security posed major problems. Local forces assigned to protect villagers were often not up to the task. ARVN soldiers could be as much the problem as the solution. When asked what would most help pacification in his area, one U.S. adviser sharply retorted: "Get the 22nd [ARVN] Division out of the province."³⁵ GVN officials could be similarly corrupt and exploitative and rarely cultivated support for the government. Pacification operatives in insecure areas were harassed and terrorized by insurgents. Many fled. Those who stayed and worked effectively with the villagers were often found with their throats slit. During a seven-month period in 1966, 3,015 government personnel were murdered or kidnapped. American efforts to dislodge the VC through military operations killed some cadres but barely touched the deeply embedded infrastructure. The indiscriminate use of firepower and the sometimes brutal treatment of the people by GIs further undermined pacification goals. Roads were built and repaired, schools established, and village elections held, but even on the basis of the highly suspect methods used to measure progress, the number

³⁴Jack Valenti, *A Very Human President* (New York, 1973), p. 133; Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (New York, 1970), pp. 370–371.

³⁵Daniel Ellsberg memorandum, March 30, 1966, John P. Vann Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

of villages "pacified" increased only slightly. At a time when the military had attained no more than a stalemate, such results were discouraging.³⁶

Even in relatively secure provinces such as Hoa-Hao-controlled An Giang in the Mekong Delta, showcase American programs brought unpredictable results. An Giang enjoyed unique safety because of the Hoa Hao's deeply rooted enmity with the insurgents going back to the French war. It thus seemed an ideal location for an "accelerated development" program where American modernization schemes would be applied. U.S. officials set out to promote closer ties between the province and the Saigon government and to modernize agriculture and improve the quality of life. The United States furnished supplies and expertise; the GVN provided ample funds. But the outsiders were more "enablers" than "architects." Social and environmental conditions unique to An Giang shaped outcomes more than plans drawn up elsewhere. Loans to farmers to buy seeds, fertilizer, and equipment often went to large landowners who sold them to small farmers at markup prices. Experiments in agriculture were limited to areas close to paved roads, bypassing the waterlogged interior. An ambitious rural electrification project served less than 20 percent of the population. The United States helped build a library for which there were no books. Even in a secure province, the designation of free fire zones brought civilian deaths. Pacification in An Giang once again highlighted the limited ability of outsiders to change a bewilderingly complex society.³⁷

In at least one area, the two nations did live up to the goals of the Honolulu communiqué: a new constitution was drafted and national elections were held. The Americans did not presume that the export of democracy would solve South Vietnam's problems. On the contrary, many agreed with Lodge (who had returned for a second tour as ambassador) that the establishment of real democracy in a land with no Western democratic traditions was "clearly an impossible task." Some feared that a genuinely open political process would lead to chaos. The Americans nevertheless felt that a new constitution and elections would

³⁶Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, pp. 120–146; Wiest, *Forgotten Army*, pp. 70–81.

³⁷David Biggs, "Americans in An Giang: Nation Building and the Particularities of Place in the Mekong Delta, 1966–1973," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4 (No. 3): 139–168.

give South Vietnam a better image and might, in Lodge's words, "substitute a certain legitimacy for the hurly-burly of unending coups."³⁸

The Ky regime dutifully followed American advice, but in a way that ensured its own perpetuation. Elections for a constituent assembly were so tightly circumscribed that the Buddhists boycotted them. The assembly met in early 1967 and turned out a polished document, based on American and French models and including a Bill of Rights. The government nevertheless insisted on a strong executive and on provisions permitting the president to assume near-dictatorial powers in an emergency, which could be declared at his discretion. Those branded Communists or "neutralist sympathizers" were disqualified from office. The president was to be elected by a plurality, ensuring that opposition candidates did not band together in a runoff.

Throughout the preelection maneuvering, the United States quietly but firmly supported the government's efforts to remain in power. The State Department expressed concern about the wholesale disqualification of opposition candidates, but Lodge prevailed with his argument that the "GVN should not be discouraged from taking moderate measures to prevent [the] elections from being used as a vehicle for a Communist takeover."³⁹ The most serious challenge came from bitter internal squabbling, which was resolved only under intense pressure from the United States and after a long meeting, filled with histrionics, in which Ky tearfully gave way and agreed to run for the vice presidency on a ticket headed by Gen. Thieu.

The September 1967 elections were neither as corrupt as critics charged nor as pure as Johnson claimed. The regime conducted them under conditions that made defeat unlikely. There was evidence of considerable last-minute fraud. But the large turnout and the fact that elections had been held in the midst of war were cited by Americans as evidence of growing political maturity. What stands out in retrospect is the narrowness of the government's victory. The Thieu-Ky ticket won 35 percent of the vote, but Truong Dinh Dzu, an unknown lawyer who had run on a platform of negotiations with the NLF, won 17 percent. The elections may have provided the regime with a measure of respectability, but they also underscored its

³⁸Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., *The Storm Has Many Eyes* (New York, 1973), p. 215.

³⁹U.S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, *The Pentagon Papers (The Senator Gravel Edition)* (4 vols., Boston, 1971), 2: 384.

continued weakness. In a nation where political authority derived from the will of heaven and popular support was an obligation, the narrowness of the victory could only appear ludicrous. Many Vietnamese cynically regarded the entire process as “an American-directed performance with a Vietnamese cast.”⁴⁰

THE IMPACT OF AMERICANIZATION

Americanization of the war created new and equally formidable problems for the United States and South Vietnam. Those Americans who visited South Vietnam for the first time were stunned by the sheer enormity of the U.S. effort, a huge, sprawling, many-faceted military-civilian apparatus, generally uncoordinated, in which all too frequently the various components worked against rather than in support of one another. By late 1967, the United States had almost a half million troops in Vietnam. The civilian side of the war also expanded to elephantine proportions, with an aid program of \$625 million, one-fourth of the economic assistance given to the entire world, and 6,500 American civilians working in various capacities. Presidential speechwriter Harry McPherson spoke of the “colossal size of our effort.” White House aide John Roche described the American presence as “just unbelievable,” the “Holy Roman Empire going to war,” and observed sarcastically that cutting its size by two-thirds might increase its efficiency by 50 percent.⁴¹

One of the most serious—and most tragic—problems caused by Americanization of the war was that of refugees. The expansion of American and enemy military operations drove an estimated four million South Vietnamese, roughly 25 percent of the population, from their native villages. The United States furnished the government with some \$30 million a year for the care of the refugees, but much of the money never reached them. Resettlement programs were initiated from time to time, but the problem was so complex that it would have taxed the ingenuity of the most imaginative officials. In any event, nothing could have compensated the refugees for the loss of their homes and lands. A large portion of South Vietnam’s population was left rootless

⁴⁰Shaplen, *Road from War*, p. 151.

⁴¹Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, pp. 20–21.

and hostile. The refugee camps became fertile breeding grounds for insurgent fifth columns.

The sudden insertion into South Vietnam of the mammoth U.S. military machine profoundly disrupted a still quite fragile nation. The United States upgraded some roads to handle large trucks and heavy military equipment. It built six new seaports with berths wide enough for deep-draft ships, six new airports with 10,000-foot runways, and modernized two existing landing fields. Saigon's greatly expanded Tan Son Nhut became one of the busiest airports in the world. It housed the Vietnamese and U.S. military commands and was thus dubbed the "Little Pentagon." Americans also constructed twenty-six hospitals with more than 8,000 beds. The price tag for infrastructure in 1966 alone was \$1.4 billion. It was the "largest military construction project in history," *New York Times* columnist Hanson Baldwin marveled—and a gold mine for private U.S. contractors.⁴²

The massive American construction program also included base areas and enormous barracks complexes scattered across South Vietnam, some of them comparable to small U.S. cities. The vast, sprawling base at Long Binh north of Saigon, an "instant city" estimated as large as 145 square miles, had 3,500 buildings and housed as many as 35,000 people. To maintain morale, the military attempted to replicate stateside bases and to provide the GIs with "a degree of comfort unparalleled in history." Among other amenities, the Long Binh base had eighty-one basketball courts, sixty-four volleyball courts, and twelve pools, along with bowling alleys, crafts, libraries, and theaters for entertainment. Under difficult conditions, the military sought to provide food comparable to that at home. On bases and even at times in the field there was ice cream and cold beer. The Long Binh bakery produced 180,000 loaves of bread daily. The consumerism that so marked American life in the 1960s was transplanted to Vietnam through PXs where GIs could purchase the latest hot ticket items such as stereos, tape decks, and cameras. Long Binh also housed the notorious Long Binh Jail (called, naturally, the LBJ).⁴³

⁴²Mel Schenk, "Largest Military Construction Project in History," *New York Times*, January 16, 2018.

⁴³James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York, 2008), pp. 181–204; Meredith H. Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), pp. 31–44.

The buildup was so rapid and vast that it threatened to overwhelm South Vietnam. Saigon's ports were congested with ships and goods, and vessels awaiting unloading were backed up far out to sea. The city itself became a "thorough-going boom town," Shaplen remarked, its streets clogged with traffic, its restaurants "bursting with boisterous soldiers," its bars as "crowded as New York subway cars in the rush hour." Signs of the American presence appeared everywhere. Vietnamese children wore Batman tee shirts. Long strips of bars and brothels sprang up overnight around the newly constructed base areas, the one at Bien Hoa became known as Tijuana East. In a remote village near Da Nang, Caputo encountered houses made of discarded beer cans: "red and white Budweiser, gold Miller, cream and brown Schlitz, blue and gold Hamm's from the land of sky-blue waters."⁴⁴

The presence of thousands of Americans spending millions of dollars further destabilized a quite vulnerable Vietnamese economy. Prices increased by as much as 170 percent during the first two years of the buildup, making it impossible for ordinary Vietnamese to make ends meet. The United States eventually controlled the rate of inflation by paying its own soldiers in scrip and flooding the country with consumer goods, but the corrective measures themselves had harmful side effects. Instead of using American aid to promote economic development, South Vietnamese importers bought watches, transistor radios, and motorbikes to sell to people employed by the United States. The vast influx of American goods destroyed South Vietnam's few native industries and made the economy even more dependent on continued outside aid. By 1967, much of the urban population was employed providing services for the Americans.

In this atmosphere, crime and corruption flourished. Corruption was not new to South Vietnam or unusual in a nation at war, but by 1966 it operated on an incredible scale. Government officials rented land to the United States at inflated prices; required bribes for driver's licenses, passports, visas, and work permits; extorted kickbacks for contracts to build and service facilities; and took part in the illicit importation of opium. The black market in scrip and dollars became a major enterprise. Import licenses for items in the commercial import program became licenses to steal. With the connivance of Americans, garbage trucks left PXs loaded with stolen goods to be sold on the black market. On Saigon's PX Alley, an open-air market covering two city blocks and

⁴⁴Shaplen, *Road from War*, pp. 20–21; Caputo, *Rumor of War*, p. 107.

made up of more than 100 stalls, purchasers could buy everything from hand grenades to Scotch whiskey at markups as high as 300 percent. Americans and Vietnamese reaped handsome profits from the illegal exchange of currencies. International swindlers and "monetary camp followers" quickly got into the act. The currency-manipulation racket developed into a "massive financial international network" extending from Saigon to Wall Street, with connections to Swiss banks and Arab sheikhdoms. The pervasive corruption undermined the U.S. aid program and severely handicapped efforts to stabilize the economy of South Vietnam.⁴⁵

American officials perceived the problem, but they could not find solutions. Ky candidly admitted that "most of the generals are corrupt. Most of the senior officials in the provinces are corrupt." But, he would add calmly, "corruption exists everywhere, and people can live with some of it. You live with it in Chicago and New York."⁴⁶ The embassy pressed the government to remove officials known to be corrupt, but with little result. "You fight like hell to get someone removed and most times you fail and you just make it worse," a frustrated American explained to journalist David Halberstam. "And then on occasions you win, why hell, they give you someone just as bad."⁴⁷ The United States found to its chagrin that as its commitment increased, its leverage diminished. Concern with corruption and inefficiency was always balanced by fear that tough action might alienate the government or bring about its collapse. Lodge and Westmoreland were inclined to accept the situation and deal with other problems.

Tensions between Americans and South Vietnamese increased as the American presence grew. The two peoples approached each other with colossal ignorance. "My time in Vietnam is the memory of ignorance," one GI later conceded. "I didn't know the language. I knew nothing about the village community. I knew nothing about the aims of the people—whether they were for the war or against it."⁴⁸ Indeed, for many Americans, the elementary task of distinguishing friend from foe became a sometimes impossible challenge.

⁴⁵*New York Times*, November 16, 1966; Abraham Ribicoff to Robert McLellan, January 15, 1969, and memorandum, January 15, 1970, Abraham Ribicoff Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 432.

⁴⁶Harry McPherson to Johnson, June 13, 1967, Johnson Papers, McPherson File, Box 29.

⁴⁷David Halberstam, "Return to Vietnam," *Harpers* 235 (December 1967): 52.

⁴⁸Quoted in Clark Dougan and Stephen Weiss, *The American Experience in Vietnam* (New York, 1988), p. 62.

"What we need is some . . . kind of litmus paper that turns red when it's near a communist," one U.S. officer, half seriously, half jokingly, told journalist Malcolm Browne.⁴⁹ Many Vietnamese found American culture incomprehensible.

Although fighting in a common cause, the two peoples grew increasingly suspicious and resentful of each other. Because of chronic security leaks, the United States kept Vietnamese off its major bases. NLF infiltration of the ARVN's top ranks compelled U.S. officers to keep from their Vietnamese counterparts the details of major military operations. The more the Americans assumed the burden of the fighting, the more they demeaned the martial abilities of their ally. "I wish the southern members of the clan would display the fighting qualities of their northern brethren," a senior U.S. officer observed with obvious scorn.⁵⁰ The ARVN indeed became an object of ridicule, its mode of attack best depicted, according to a standard American joke, by the statue of a seated soldier in the National Military Cemetery. Vietnamese slowness to accept American methods exasperated U.S. advisers. "I am sure that if Saigon were left to fend for itself . . . in 20 years this place would be all rice paddies again," one American acidly observed.⁵¹ The apparent indifference of many Vietnamese, while Americans were dying in the field, provoked growing resentment and hatred. The seeming ability of the villagers to avoid mines and booby traps that killed and maimed GIs led to charges of collusion with the enemy.

Vietnamese attitudes toward the foreigners were at best ambivalent. Purveyors of goods and services, from prostitutes to cabbies, preferred to do business with the Americans, who paid them better, provoking great anger among their own people. Many Vietnamese appreciated Americans' generosity but objected to their way of doing things. Villagers complained that GIs "acted despicably," tearing up roads and endangering Vietnamese lives by reckless handling of vehicles and firearms. An ARVN major protested that Americans trusted only those Vietnamese who went along with their methods and doled out their aid "in the same way as that given to beggars."⁵² Many Vietnamese

⁴⁹Browne, *New Face of War*, p. 46.

⁵⁰General A. S. Collins to Edward F. Smith, November 15, 1966, A. S. Collins Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

⁵¹Curtis Herrick diary, January 13, 1965, Curtis Herrick Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

⁵²Weekly Psyops Field Operation Report, December 2, 1967, Vann Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

recognized their need for U.S. help. Some were probably content to let the United States take over the war. But others came to resent the domineering manner of the Americans and viewed the U.S. "occupation" as a "demoralizing scourge," even theorizing that "if we could get rid of the Americans, then we could worry about the Viet Cong." Thoughtful Vietnamese recognized that Americans were not "colonialists," Shaplen observed. But, he added, "there has evolved here a colonial ambience that can sometimes be worse than colonialism itself."⁵³

U.S.–South Vietnamese differences also festered in the urban areas, and prostitution was the most contentious problem. For the South Vietnamese, the proliferation of houses of prostitution that accompanied the influx of tens of thousands of GIs was largely a moral issue. It broke their anti-prostitution laws, affronted their cultural mores, and offered a blatant example of American indifference to their interests. Never the puppet he was accused of being, President Thieu pressed the United States to help suppress the sex trade in Saigon. For the U.S. military, prostitution was an inevitable outcome of war and a matter of G.I. morale. It also became a health issue. With an eye mainly on its own soldiers, the United States did establish clinics to prevent and treat sexually transmitted diseases. Prostitution also became a public relations problem at home in 1966 when dovish Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright fumed in a much-quoted speech that Saigon had become an "American brothel." To appease Thieu and Fulbright and spare itself the financial burden of high urban rentals, the United States implemented Operation Moose (Move Out of Saigon Expeditiously), shifting thousands of G.I.s out of the city to base camps (where the prostitutes soon followed). The United States did not do enough to satisfy Thieu; the problem continued to vex U.S.–South Vietnamese relations. Removal of American soldiers from Saigon also made the city more vulnerable to Viet Cong attacks during the 1968 Tet Offensive.⁵⁴

Progress in the critical area of nation building was thus even more limited than on the battlefield. To be sure, the government survived, and after the chronic instability of the Khanh era, that in itself appeared evidence of progress. Survival was primarily a result of the formidable U.S. military presence, however, and did not reflect increased popular support or intrinsic strength. Returning to South Vietnam after an

⁵³Shaplen, *Road from War*, p. 154.

⁵⁴Amanda Bozcar, "Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Politics in South Vietnam," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22 (No. 3, 2015): 187–215.

absence of several years, Halberstam was haunted by a sense of *déjà vu*. There were new faces, new programs, and an abundance of resources. The Americans continued to speak optimistically. But the old problems persisted, and the “new” solutions appeared little more than recycled versions of old ones. “What finally struck me,” he concluded, “was how little had really changed here.”⁵⁵

WAGING PEACE

The steady expansion of the war spurred strong international and domestic pressures for negotiations, but the military stalemate produced an equally firm diplomatic impasse. American officials later tallied as many as 2,000 attempts to initiate peace talks between 1965 and 1967. Neither side could afford to appear indifferent to such efforts, but neither was willing to make the concessions necessary to bring about negotiations. Diplomacy was a key weapon in North Vietnam's arsenal for waging a complex and multifaceted war. It provided a means to gain material support from allies and moral backing from “progressive forces” across the world. It could be used to manipulate world opinion as a way of “isolating the enemy to defeat him.” It could even be employed to sway antiwar forces in the United States. Hanoi was always careful to appear open to negotiations and to play the role of aggrieved party. It sought to exploit the various peace initiatives for propaganda advantage.⁵⁶ But the leadership continued to count on the United States, like France, to tire of the war and remained confident that it could win if it persisted. It refused to negotiate without first gaining major concessions from Washington.

Johnson and his advisers also could not ignore the various proposals for negotiations, but they doubted anything would come of them and suspected, with good reason, that Hanoi was expressing interest merely to get the bombing stopped. Despite any firm evidence of results, the president remained hopeful at least until 1967 that North Vietnam would bend to U.S. pressure. He feared that an overly conciliatory stance would be interpreted as a sign of weakness. To defuse international and domestic criticism, Johnson repeatedly insisted that he was ready to negotiate, but he refused to make the concessions

⁵⁵ Halberstam, “Return to Vietnam,” p. 50.

⁵⁶ Asselin, “Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy,” pp. 550–551.

Hanoi demanded. As each side invested more in the struggle, the likelihood of serious negotiations diminished.

The positions of the two sides left little room for compromise. The North Vietnamese denounced American involvement in Vietnam as a blatant violation of the Geneva Accords. As a precondition for negotiations, their Four Points required that the United States withdraw its troops, dismantle its bases, and stop all acts of war against their country. The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be resolved by the South Vietnamese themselves "in accordance with the program of the National Liberation Front." North Vietnam was apparently flexible in regard to the timing and mechanism for political change in the South, but on the fundamental issues it was adamant. The "puppet" Saigon regime must be replaced by a government representative of the "people" in which the Front would play a prominent role. Hanoi made clear, moreover, that the "unity of our country is no more a matter for negotiations than our independence."⁵⁷

The United States formally set forth its position in early 1966. "We put everything into the basket but the surrender of South Vietnam," Secretary of State Dean Rusk later claimed, but in fact the administration's Fourteen Points offered few concessions.⁵⁸ The United States indicated that it would stop the bombing, but only after Hanoi took reciprocal steps of de-escalation. It would withdraw its troops from the South, but only after a satisfactory political settlement had been reached. The administration accepted the principle that the future of South Vietnam must be worked out by the South Vietnamese. At the same time, it made clear that it would not admit the NLF to the government—that would be like "putting the fox in a chicken coop," Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey asserted.⁵⁹ The Fourteen Points conceded merely that the views of the NLF "would have no difficulty being represented," and this only after Hanoi had "ceased its aggression." Beneath these ambiguous words rested a firm determination to maintain an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam.

To silence domestic and international critics and test the diplomatic winds in Hanoi, the administration modified its position a bit

⁵⁷ Quoted in Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreements* (Bloomington, Ind., 1975), p. 29.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, 1970), p. 294.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Henry Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 67.

in late 1966. Throughout the summer and fall, various third parties struggled to find a common ground for negotiations. After a series of frenzied trips back and forth between Hanoi and Saigon, the Polish diplomat Janusz Lewandowski drafted a ten-point plan for settlement of the conflict. Johnson and his advisers were highly skeptical of the peace moves, which they dismissed as "Nobel Prize fever." They felt that the Lewandowski draft was vague on many critical points and that it gave away too much. The administration could not afford to appear intransigent, however, and it eventually accepted Lewandowski's proposals as a basis for negotiations with the qualification that "several specific points are subject to important differences of interpretation." Responding to Lewandowski's entreaties, the United States also advanced a two-track proposal to provide a face-saving way around Hanoi's opposition to mutual de-escalation. The United States would stop the air strikes in return for confidential assurance that North Vietnam would cease infiltration into key areas of South Vietnam within a reasonable period. Once Hanoi had acted, the United States would freeze its combat forces at existing levels and peace talks could begin.⁶⁰

Code-named MARIGOLD, the Polish initiative ended in fiasco. The extent to which the North Vietnamese were committed to the ten-point plan and were willing to compromise on the basic issues remains unclear. There is ample reason for doubt. But they did agree to ambassadorial-level talks in Warsaw without prior condition and even sent a high-level diplomat to brief their ambassador. American and North Vietnamese representatives were actually scheduled to meet. Several days before the talks were to begin, U.S. aircraft, for the first time in five months, unleashed heavy bombing against targets near Hanoi. The bombing had been scheduled weeks before but was delayed because of bad weather. Distrustful of the Poles and skeptical of the MARIGOLD initiative, Johnson and his top advisers apparently saw no reason to cancel the attacks. Even then, the Warsaw talks appeared ready to proceed, but through a remarkable and still not entirely explainable diplomatic snafu, the two men did not get together. Each felt stood up.⁶¹

Two weeks later, while diplomats from several countries were frantically trying to keep alive a once promising initiative, another

⁶⁰The most recent account is James G. Hershberg, *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C., 2012).

⁶¹*Ibid.*, pp. 281–313.

even heavier round of U.S. bombing attacks on Hanoi itself caused extensive civilian casualties and ended any hope of discussions. This round of bombing did result from a conscious decision. Lodge, McNamara, and Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach all urged the president to refrain from bombing near Hanoi during the most delicate stage of Lewandowski's diplomacy, but he would have none of it. Like other U.S. officials, he suspected that the entire arrangement was "phony." He insisted that a bombing halt had not been a precondition for the Warsaw talks. Johnson's assessment of North Vietnamese intentions may have been correct, but the December bombings, which came after a long lull forced by bad weather, must have appeared to Hanoi to be a major escalation of the air war timed to coincide with the peace moves. The North Vietnamese had always insisted that they would not negotiate under threat and pressure. They quickly broke off the contact. The Poles felt betrayed, and MARIGOLD withered.

In response to international and domestic pressures, each side in 1967 inched cautiously away from the rigid positions assumed earlier. North Vietnam no longer insisted on acceptance of its Four Points, including a complete American military withdrawal, as a precondition for negotiations, demanding only that the bombing be ended without condition. Hanoi also relaxed its terms for a settlement, indicating, among other points, that reunification could take place over a long period of time. The United States retreated from its original position that North Vietnam must withdraw its forces from the South in return for cessation of the bombing, insisting merely that further infiltration must be stopped. Despite these concessions, the two nations remained far apart on the means of getting negotiations started. And although their bargaining positions had changed slightly, they had not abandoned their basic goals. Each had met with frustration and had incurred heavy losses on the battlefield, but each still retained hope that it could force the other to accept its terms. The two sides thus remained unwilling to compromise on the central issue: the future of South Vietnam. The story of the 1965–1967 peace initiatives, one scholar has concluded, marks "one of the most fruitless chapters in U.S. diplomacy."⁶²

⁶²Allen E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, Calif., 1978), p. 24.

THE WAR AT HOME

By mid-1967, Johnson was snared in a trap he had unknowingly set for himself. He longed to end the war, but he had been unable to do so by force. In the absence of a clear-cut military advantage or a stronger political position in South Vietnam, he could not do so by negotiation.

As the conflict increased in cost, moreover, he found himself caught in the midst of an increasingly angry and divisive debate, a veritable civil war that by 1967 seemed capable of wrecking his presidency and tearing the country apart. Dissent in wartime is a firmly established American tradition, but Vietnam aroused more widespread and passionate opposition than any other U.S. war. It occurred in a time of social upheaval, when Americans were questioning their values and institutions as seldom before. It occurred in a time of generational strife. It occurred when the verities of the Cold War were coming into question. The war thus divided Americans as nothing since the debate on slavery a century earlier. It divided businesses, churches and campuses, neighbors and families. It set class against class. As the debate intensified, civilities were increasingly cast aside. Advocates of each side tried to shout the other down, denying basic rights of free speech. Argument was often accompanied by verbal abuse and even physical violence.

At one end of the political spectrum were the "hawks," conservatives who sometimes quite ardently supported the war. Modern American conservatism took root in the 1960s in response to the civil rights movement and racial integration. Foreign policy and Vietnam helped unify conservatives and energize their cause. The hawks included intellectual voices such as William Buckley's *National Review*, social and political activists, and in Congress right-wing Republicans and conservative, mostly southern, Democrats. The South was by no means monolithic, but because of its evangelical Protestant religion, its historical fixation with manhood and honor, and its long-standing martial tradition, it was the most bellicose of regions. The hawks were fiercely anti-Communist and aggressively nationalistic in their foreign policy views. They differed among themselves on the importance of Vietnam compared to other Cold War hot spots, and on the means to be employed there. Most of them viewed the war as essential to the global struggle against communism. Should the United States not hold the line, they warned ominously, Communists would be emboldened to further aggression; allies and

neutrals would succumb to Communist pressures. The hawks were certain of American invincibility and righteousness.⁶³

Between 1965 and 1967, hawks grew increasingly impatient with LBJ's limited—and stalemated—war. Some Republicans also saw a golden opportunity to exploit rising popular anxiety for political gain. Hawks expressed outrage at the positions taken and the anti-patriotic rhetoric of what many considered a treasonous antiwar movement. A mammoth “Support the Boys in Vietnam Parade” in New York in May 1967 put on by veterans' groups and the Young Americans for Freedom lasted nine hours, drew an estimated 7,000 people, and featured martial music, a “forest of flags,” and banners proclaiming “Escalate, don't Capitulate.” By this time, hawkish leaders urged Republicans to stop being Johnson's “loyal opposition.” They prodded the president to take the restraints off the military, mobilize the nation for war, and do what was necessary for victory, including expanding the bombing of North Vietnam and blockading Haiphong harbor. “Win or get out,” Democratic representative Mendell Rivers of South Carolina curtly instructed the commander-in-chief.⁶⁴

At the other extreme were the “doves,” a vast, sprawling, heterogeneous and fractious group who opposed the war with increasing force. The “movement” grew almost in proportion to the escalation of the conflict. It included such diverse individuals as the world-famous pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, actress Jane Fonda, author Norman Mailer, old-line pacifists such as A. J. Muste and new radicals such as Tom Hayden, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the conservative Senator Fulbright. The doves constituted only a small percentage of the population, but they were an unusually visible and articulate group. Their attack on American foreign policy was vicious and unrelenting. In time, their movement became inextricably linked with the cultural revolution that swept the United States in the late 1960s and challenged the most basic of American values and institutions, leaving divisions that would last into the next century.

⁶³Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst, Mass., 2013), pp. 17–42. For the South's special role, Joseph A. Fry, *The American South and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Ky., 2015).

⁶⁴Notes on meeting with congressional leadership, January 25, 1966, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 1. See also Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, pp. 43–71.

College students comprised the shock troops of the movement. Inspired by John Kennedy's idealism and appeals to service, schooled in the civil rights movement, and increasingly outraged by the war and the draft, a small but vocal and highly articulate group of students took the lead in 1965 in openly protesting the war. Brash, self-confident, often self-righteous, they proved skillful propagandists. They fused pop music with protest and in doing so "helped fix the minds of a generation." Only a minority of American college students opposed the war and an even smaller minority actively protested it. Spearheaded by organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society, however, these few students initiated and set the tone for the early antiwar protests, catching the government off guard and leaving it unsure how to respond. They raised public consciousness about the war. Through what has been called "offspring-lobbying," they exerted some influence on their elders. They continued to draw attention even as other groups assumed leadership of the movement.⁶⁵

Although it defies precise categorization, the antiwar movement tended to group ideologically along three principal lines.⁶⁶ For pacifists such as Muste, who opposed all wars as immoral, Vietnam was but another phase of a lifelong crusade. For the burgeoning radical movement of the 1960s, opposition to the war extended beyond questions of morality. Spawned by the civil rights movement, drawing its largest following among upper-middle-class youth on elite college campuses, the New Left joined older leftist organizations in viewing the war as a classic example of the way the American ruling class exploited helpless people to sustain a decadent capitalist system.⁶⁷

Antiwar liberals far exceeded in numbers the pacifists and radicals. Although they did not generally question "the system," they increasingly challenged the war on legal, moral, and practical grounds. Liberals charged that U.S. escalation in Vietnam violated the 1954 Geneva Accords, the United Nations Charter, and the Constitution of the United States. Many liberal internationalists who had supported World War II, Korea, and the Cold War found Vietnam morally repugnant. By backing a corrupt, authoritarian government, they contended, the United States

⁶⁵Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven, Conn., 1999), pp. 43–92.

⁶⁶See Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1990), and David W. Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam* (Baltimore, 1991), pp. 171–178.

⁶⁷Irwin Unger, *The Movement* (New York, 1974), pp. 35–93.

was betraying its own principles. The use of weapons such as cluster bombs, herbicides, and napalm violated basic standards of human decency. In the absence of any direct threat to American security, the devastation wreaked on North and South Vietnam was indefensible.

Many more liberals questioned the war on practical grounds. It was essentially an internal struggle among Vietnamese, they argued, whose connection with the Cold War was at best indirect. Liberals questioned the validity of the domino theory, especially after the Indonesian army in 1965 threw out the erratic President Sukarno and crushed the Indonesian Communist party. They agreed that Vietnam was of no more than marginal significance to the security of the United States. Indeed, they insisted, the huge investment there was diverting attention from more urgent problems at home and abroad, damaging America's relations with its allies, and inhibiting the development of a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union. The liberal critique quickly broadened into an indictment of American "globalism." The United States had fallen victim to the "arrogance of power," Fulbright claimed, and was showing "signs of that fatal presumption, that over-extension of power and mission, which brought ruin to ancient Athens, to Napoleonic France and to Nazi Germany."⁶⁸

The various groups that made up the movement disagreed sharply on goals and methods. For some pacifists and liberals, terminating the war was an end in itself; for radicals, it was a means to the ultimate end—the overthrow of American capitalism. Many New Left radicals indeed feared that a premature end to the war might sap the revolutionary spirit and hinder achievement of their principal goal. Most liberals stopped short of advocating withdrawal from Vietnam, much less domestic revolution, proposing merely an end to the bombing, gradual de-escalation, and negotiations. Disagreement on methods was even sharper. Liberals generally preferred nonviolent protest and political action within the system and sought to exclude Communists from demonstrations. Radicals and some pacifists increasingly pressed for a shift from protest to resistance. Some openly advocated the use of violence to bring down a system that was itself violent.

Opposition to the war took many forms. In early 1966, Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee conducted a series of nationally televised hearings, subjecting administration spokespersons to intense grilling and bringing before viewers such establishment figures and critics of

⁶⁸Quoted in Thomas Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home* (Boston, 1984), p. 118.

administration policies in Vietnam as Gen. James Gavin and diplomat George F. Kennan, the father of the Cold War containment policy. The hearings got full coverage on all three networks. By challenging the administration's rationale for the war and claims of progress, they forced the public debate LBJ had tried so desperately to avoid and signaled the end of years of executive dominance and congressional acquiescence. They did not convert the public or the Congress, but they made opposition to the war respectable and widened the president's already sizable credibility gap.⁶⁹

There were hundreds of acts of individual defiance. The folk singer Joan Baez refused to pay that portion of her income tax that went to the defense budget. Muhammad Ali declared himself a conscientious objector and refused induction orders, thereby forfeiting his title. Three army enlisted men—the Fort Hood Three—challenged the constitutionality of the conflict by refusing to fight in what they labeled an “unjust, immoral, and illegal war.” Army Capt. Howard Levy used the doctrine of individual responsibility set forth in the Nuremberg war crimes trials to justify his refusal to train medical teams for combat in Vietnam. Thousands of young Americans exploited legal loopholes, even mutilated themselves, to evade the draft; an estimated 30,000 fled to Canada. Some served jail sentences rather than go to Vietnam. Seven Americans adopted the method of protest of South Vietnam's Buddhists by publicly immolating themselves, as the young Quaker Norman Morrison did directly beneath McNamara's Pentagon office window in November 1965!

Some American antiwar activists took on the role of self-appointed ambassadors of peace. Delegates from the Women's Strike for Peace (WSP) met with North Vietnamese women in Indonesia in 1966. Various groups of U.S. women traveled to Hanoi that year and the next where they saw bombed out schools, hospitals, and churches in which women and children had been killed, learned how children had been separated from their parents and relocated to the countryside to spare their lives, and witnessed the horrific consequences of American cluster bombs. Back home, the returnees presented their findings to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and attempted to persuade other women to take up the antiwar cause and vote for peace candidates. Peace activists such

⁶⁹ Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington, Ky., 2011), pp. 106–107; Joseph A. Fry, *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and Their Senate Hearings* (Lanham, Md., 2006), pp. vii, 171–172.

as Dave Dellinger, Carl Oglesby of Students for a Democratic Society, and Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee actually served on philosopher Bertrand Russell's International War Crimes Tribunal that held sessions in Denmark and Sweden in late 1967. Not surprisingly, the tribunal found the United States guilty of war crimes in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Such findings had limited impact in America, but they helped mobilize international networks of opposition to war and imperialism.⁷⁰

Antiwar rallies and demonstrations drew larger crowds in 1966 and 1967, and the participants grew more outspoken. Protestors marched daily around the White House chanting, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?" and "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is going to win." Antiwar forces attempted lie-ins in front of troop trains, collected blood for the NLF, and tried to disrupt the work of draft boards, U.S. Army recruiters, and the Dow Chemical Company, producer of the napalm used in Vietnam.

The most dramatic act of protest came on October 21, 1967, with the March on the Pentagon, the culmination of Stop the Draft Week. A diverse group estimated at 100,000, including colorfully arrayed hippies and intellectuals such as Mailer, gathered at the Lincoln Memorial for songs of protest by performers such as Peter, Paul, and Mary and Phil Ochs and speeches proclaiming the beginning of "active resistance." As many as 35,000 protesters subsequently crossed the Potomac and advanced on the Pentagon. The demonstrators were unable to levitate the "nerve center of American imperialism" and exorcise its evil spirits, as radical Abbie Hoffman had promised, but a small group conducted a sit-in. Some carried NLF flags, others smoked marijuana, and a few put flowers in the barrels of the rifles of soldiers guarding the building. Soldiers were challenged to leave their posts. The demonstration ended that evening in violence when federal marshals moved in with clubs and tear gas and arrested nearly 700 demonstrators.⁷¹

The impact of the antiwar protests remains one of the most controversial issues raised by the war. The obvious manifestations of dissent in the United States undoubtedly encouraged Hanoi to hold out for

⁷⁰Jessica M. Frazier, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy during the Vietnam War Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2017), pp. 11–34; Cody J. Foster, "Did the United States Commit War Crimes in Vietnam?," *New York Times*, December 1, 2017.

⁷¹Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York, 1995), pp. 178–179.



March on the Pentagon

This picture of an antiwar protestor placing a flower in the barrel of the rifle of a soldier guarding the Pentagon was taken during the March on the Pentagon in October 1967, the largest antiwar demonstration to that time.

©The Washington Post/Getty Images

victory, although there is nothing to suggest that the North Vietnamese would have been more compromising in the absence of the protests. Antiwar protest did not turn the American people against the war, as some critics have argued. The effectiveness of the movement was limited by the divisions within its own ranks. Public opinion polls made abundantly clear, moreover, that a majority of Americans found the antiwar movement, particularly its radical and hippie elements, more obnoxious than the war itself. In a perverse sort of way, the protest may even have strengthened support for a war that was not in itself popular. The impact of the movement was much more limited and subtle. It forced Vietnam into the public consciousness and challenged the rationale of the war and indeed of a generation of Cold War foreign policies. It exposed error and self-deception in the government's claims, encouraging distrust of political authority. It limited Johnson's military options and may have headed off any tendency toward more drastic escalation. Perhaps most important, the disturbances and divisions set off by the antiwar movement caused fatigue and anxiety among the policymakers

and the public, thus eventually encouraging efforts to find a way out of the war.⁷²

The majority of Americans rejected both the hawk and the dove positions, but as the war dragged on and the debate became more divisive, public concern increased significantly. Expansion of the war in 1965 was followed by a surge of popular support—the usual rally-round-the-flag phenomenon. But the failure of escalation to produce any discernible progress and indications that more troops and higher taxes would be required to sustain a prolonged and perhaps inconclusive war combined to produce growing frustration and impatience.⁷³ If any bird symbolized the public disenchantment with Vietnam, opinion analyst Samuel Lubell observed, it was the albatross, with many Americans sharing a “fervent desire to shake free of an unwanted burden.” The public mood was probably best expressed by a woman who told Lubell: “I want to get out but I don’t want to give up.”⁷⁴

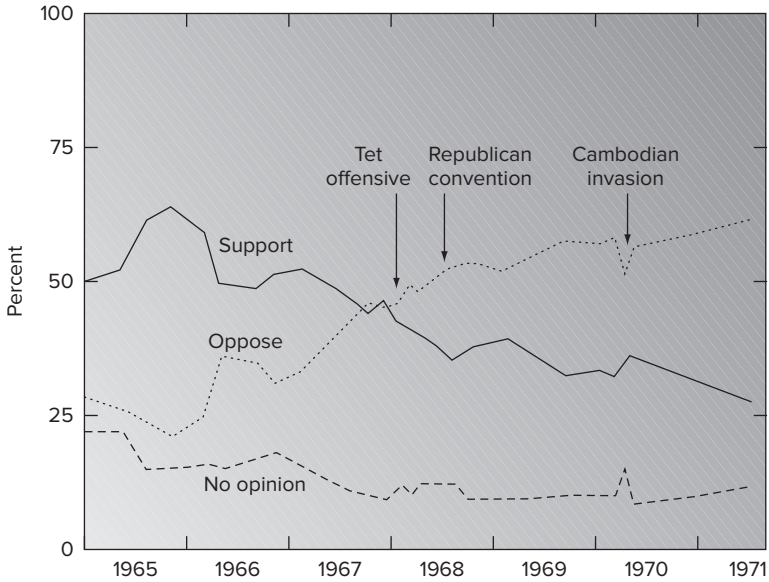
Support for the war dropped sharply during 1967. By the summer of that year, draft calls exceeded 30,000 per month, and more than 13,000 Americans had died in Vietnam. In early August, the president recommended a 10 percent surtax to cover the steadily increasing costs of the war. Polls taken shortly after indicated that for the first time a majority of Americans felt the United States had erred in intervening in Vietnam. A substantial majority concluded that despite a growing investment, the United States was not “doing any better.” Public approval of Johnson’s handling of the war plummeted to 28 percent by October.

African Americans opposed the war in numbers much larger than the general population. At first supportive of U.S. involvement, they grew increasingly and understandably dubious about fighting for freedom in Vietnam when they did not have full freedom at home.

⁷²DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *American Ordeal*, pp. 387–408; Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988), pp. 226–234. For a contrary view see Adam Garfinkle’s *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York, 1995).

⁷³Sidney Verba et al., “Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam,” *American Political Science Review* 61 (June 1967): 317–333; John E. Mueller, “Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam,” *ibid.*, 65 (June 1971): 358–375; and Peter W. Sperlich and William L. Lunch, “American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam,” *Western Political Quarterly* 32 (March 1979): 21–44.

⁷⁴Samuel Lubell, *The Hidden Crisis in American Politics* (New York, 1971), pp. 254–260.



Trends in support for the war in Vietnam.

Source: From John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, & Public Opinion*, p. 56. 1985, University Press of America.

Many came to view the war as a racial conflict whose goal was to oppress another people of color. They felt directly the mounting economic consequences of the war and, despite administration disclaimers, perceived that it was draining funds from government programs that benefited them. "The Great Society has been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam," King lamented in 1967. African Americans correctly saw themselves as the primary victims of an inequitable selective service system that drafted their sons in disproportionate numbers and used them as cannon fodder. King's speech of April 4, 1967, publicly breaking with the administration over the war, was a signal of revolt. Blacks did not join the antiwar protests in large numbers, but their growing opposition damaged the administration politically. Their resistance to the draft and discontent within the military itself weakened the war effort.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now*, pp. 94–117. The King quote is from p. 98.

Waning public confidence was mirrored in the press and Congress. A number of major metropolitan dailies shifted from support of the war to opposition in 1967, and even the influential Time-Life publications, fervently hawkish at the outset, began to raise serious questions about the administration's policies. By 1967, Congress was as uneasy with the war—and as divided over it—as the rest of the country. The two political parties were split within their own ranks. Doves and hawks from each at times formed alliances of expediency. Democratic doves had spearheaded the early opposition to the war, and Johnson on occasion had turned to Republicans for crucial support. As the 1968 elections approached, however, Republican hawks and doves increasingly challenged the president's policies. The defection of Kentucky Republican senator Thruston B. Morton in late 1967 was viewed as a "sort of political weather vane" for the nation at large. Admitting that he had once been an "all-out hawk," Morton spoke for the growing number of converts when he complained that the United States had been "painted into a corner out there" and insisted that there would "have to be a change."⁷⁶ White House aides nervously warned of further defections in Congress and major electoral setbacks in 1968 in the absence of dramatic changes in the war.⁷⁷

By late 1967, for many observers the war had become the most visible symbol of a malaise that afflicted all of American society. Not all would have agreed with Fulbright's assertion that the Great Society was a "sick society," but many did feel that the United States was going through a kind of national nervous breakdown. The "credibility gap"—the difference between what the administration said and what it did—had produced a pervasive distrust of government. Rioting in the cities, a spiraling crime rate, and noisy demonstrations in the streets suggested that violence abroad had produced violence at home. Increasingly divided against itself, the nation appeared on the verge of an internal crisis as severe as the Great Depression of the 1930s. Anxiety about the war had not translated into a firm consensus for escalation or

⁷⁶For the shift of 1967, see Johns *Second Front*, pp. 129–139, 160–161, 176; Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), pp. 83–92; and Louis Harris, *The Anguish of Change* (New York, 1973), pp. 60–61.

⁷⁷Walt Rostow to Johnson, August 1, 1967, Johnson Papers, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files (DSDUF), Box 2; Harry McPherson to Johnson, August 25, 1967, Johnson Papers, McPherson File, Box 32.

withdrawal, but the public mood—tired, angry, and frustrated—posed perhaps a more serious threat to the administration than did the anti-war movement.

THE WAR IN WASHINGTON

The public debate on Vietnam was paralleled by increasingly sharp divisions within the government. In February 1967, a fretful president, admitting that he was “operating on borrowed time” (and undoubtedly with an eye on the next year’s election), requested from his war cabinet proposals that would “get results.” Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs seized this opportunity to press for a major escalation. The general claimed that progress was being made but warned that at the present rate the war could “go on indefinitely,” not what his commander-in-chief wanted to hear. To break the stalemate, Westmoreland requested an additional 200,000 troops above the 470,000 already approved and the authority to use them in ground operations in Cambodia and Laos, even perhaps an amphibious “hook” into North Vietnam. Frustrated with restrictions on the air war, the Joint Chiefs advocated intensified bombing of the Hanoi–Haiphong area and the mining of North Vietnamese ports.⁷⁸

By this time, some of Johnson’s dovish civilian advisers advocated the abandonment of policies they had concluded were bankrupt. Bill Moyers of the White House staff and George Ball quietly resigned, feeling as another aide, James Thomson, later put it, “totally alienated from the policy, but helpless as to how to change it.”⁷⁹

The major proponent of change by the spring of 1967 was, ironically, the secretary of defense. Aptly tagged by the journalist David Halberstam as the “can do man in the can do era,” the cocksure former Ford Motor Company executive with the slicked-back hair and wire-rimmed glasses brought to Washington a reputation for getting things done. “He’s like a jackhammer,” Johnson admiringly exclaimed. “He drills through granite rock until he’s there.”⁸⁰ Through mathematical

⁷⁸Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965–1969* (Washington, D.C., 2011), pp. 135–136.

⁷⁹James C. Thomson, “Getting Out and Speaking Out,” *Foreign Policy* 13 (Winter 1973–1974): 57.

⁸⁰Quoted in Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 15.

acumen and sheer force of will, McNamara brought some rationality to the bloated defense budget, but he infuriated many a general and admiral in doing so. From 1961 to 1965, he was so closely identified with escalation that Vietnam came to be called "McNamara's War." In fact, as early as the fall of 1965, he began to doubt that it could be won. He somehow persuaded himself that each subsequent escalation might produce a position of strength that would enable the United States to negotiate its way out. By early 1966, he privately admitted that the United States should never have taken on a combat role.⁸¹ His pessimism grew throughout the year. He came to consider the bombing a "side show" of "minor military importance," and to deplore the civilian casualties it inflicted. He grew increasingly troubled by surging antiwar opposition brought home to him in public appearances when he had to shove his way through angry crowds and shout down protesters. McNamara and his closest adviser McNaughton reacted to the military's proposals with "an air of disbelief" and "looks of shock." If approved, they feared, the war would "go on indefinitely," and perhaps "spin utterly out of control." The secretary of defense sensed a sort of "1965 watershed." There were only two options, he concluded: escalate, or try to stabilize the war at an acceptable level.⁸²

On May 19, 1967, McNamara presented LBJ with a Draft Presidential Memorandum proposing radical changes in policy. The air war had brought heavy costs and slight gains, he advised. It had cost the United States enormously in terms of world and domestic opinion. "The picture of the world's greatest power killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one," he advised Johnson in early 1967." He urged either an unconditional bombing halt or restricting the bombing to the area south of the twentieth parallel. Increases in U.S. troops had not produced correspondingly large enemy losses. The United States should therefore put a ceiling on troop levels and shift from search and destroy to a ground strategy designed mainly to protect the people of South Vietnam.

Most dramatically, the secretary proposed to scale back U.S. war aims. The Communist defeat in Indonesia and rampant political turmoil

⁸¹McNaughton Diary, February 4, 28, 1966.

⁸²Drea, *McNamara*, Clifford, pp. 136, 138.

within China itself, he reasoned, eased the threat of Chinese expansion that had helped shape U.S. policy in Vietnam. The United States could thus adopt a more flexible negotiating position. It could still hope for an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, but it should not commit itself to "guarantee and insist upon these conditions." Without saying so, McNamara proposed changes in strategy and war aims that might help the United States get out of Vietnam.⁸³

By the summer of 1967, Lyndon Johnson was a beleaguered and deeply troubled man, physically and emotionally exhausted, pressured by hawks and doves, troubled by surging domestic opposition, frustrated by his lack of success, torn between his advisers, uncertain which way to turn. "Are we going to be able to win this goddamned war?," he blurted out at one top-level meeting. He shared some of McNamara's concerns. "Bomb, bomb, bomb, that's all you know," he complained to the Joint Chiefs. "When we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions?," he pointedly asked Westmoreland. "If so, where does it all end?"⁸⁴ He staunchly opposed mobilizing the reserves. Nor could he accept McNamara's recommendations. Westmoreland continued to report progress, and the president was not ready to concede defeat. He would not put a ceiling on troop levels or revert to the enclave strategy—"We can't hunker down like a jackass in a hailstorm," he said.⁸⁵ The May 19 memorandum would be a turning point in a once very close relationship, and at the end of the year McNamara would accept an appointment to head the World Bank. Johnson shared his secretary of defense's skepticism about the bombing, but he would not risk a confrontation with the hawks or a potentially explosive public debate on the air war. Nor would he order a bombing halt. Former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy cautioned him that the doves would not be appeased. Doves, like hawks, had "insatiable appetites," he warned, and if given something they would demand more.⁸⁶

Johnson continued to cling to the shrinking middle ground between his advisers. He rejected military proposals to expand the war and

⁸³ McNamara DPM, May 19, 1967, in Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers* (NYT), pp. 580–585.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Lawrence J. Korb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Bloomington, Ind., 1976), p. 181; Excerpt from Johnson-Westmoreland conversation, April 20, 1967, in Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers* (NYT), p. 567.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

⁸⁶ Bundy to Johnson, ca. May 4, 1967, *ibid.*, pp. 569–572.

for 200,000 additional soldiers, approving an increase of only 55,000. No ceilings were set, however, and there was no reassessment of the search-and-destroy strategy. He also refused to limit or stop the bombing. Indeed, to placate the Joint Chiefs and congressional hawks, he significantly expanded the list of targets, authorizing strikes against bridges, railyards, and barracks within the Hanoi-Haiphong "donut" and formerly restricted areas along the Chinese border.

Johnson's decisions of 1967, even more than those of 1965, defied military logic and did not face, much less resolve, the contradictions in U.S. strategy. The bombing was sustained not because anyone thought it would work but because Johnson deemed it necessary to pacify certain domestic factions and because stopping it might be regarded as a sign of weakness. The president refused to give his field commander the troops he considered necessary to make his strategy work, but he did not confront the inconsistencies in the strategy itself.

The administration did modify its negotiating position in late 1967. The so-called San Antonio formula backed away from a firm prior agreement on mutual de-escalation. The United States would stop the bombing "with the understanding" that this action would lead "promptly to productive discussions" and that North Vietnam would not "take advantage" by increasing the infiltration of soldiers and supplies across the seventeenth parallel.⁸⁷ The administration also indicated its willingness to admit the NLF to political participation in South Vietnam. This "concession" did not reflect the change of goals that McNamara had recommended, however. The commitment to the Thieu regime remained firm. The willingness to deal with the NLF appears to have been based on a hope that it could be coopted or defeated by political means.

By the end of the year, moreover, Johnson recognized that additional steps would be necessary to hold off disaster. After months of uncertainty, the administration finally concluded in the late summer that slow but steady progress was being made. Officials in Saigon optimistically reported that U.S. operations were keeping the enemy off balance and inflicting enormous losses. The NLF was encountering difficulties in recruiting. The ARVN's desertion rate had declined, and the performance of some units in combat had improved. After months of

⁸⁷ George C. Herring (ed.), *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin, Tex., 1983), pp. 538–544.

floundering, pacification seemed to be getting off the ground. Even the generally pessimistic McNamara was moved to comment in July that "there is no military stalemate."⁸⁸

By this time, however, the consensus Johnson had so carefully woven in 1964 was in tatters, the nation more divided than at any other time since the civil war. Opposition in Congress, as well as inattention and mismanagement resulting partly from the administration's preoccupation with Vietnam, had brought his cherished Great Society programs to a standstill. The president himself was a man under siege in the White House: He was the target of vicious personal attacks. His top aides had to be brought surreptitiously into public forums to deliver speeches. "How are we going to win?" he asked plaintively at a top-level meeting in late 1967. Anticipating his dramatic March 31, 1968, decision, a despondent LBJ pondered not running for reelection.⁸⁹

Johnson was alarmed by the position he found himself in, stung by his critics, and deeply hurt by the desertion of trusted aides. He angrily dismissed much of the criticism as unfair, and he repeatedly emphasized that his critics offered no alternatives. He recognized that he could not ignore the opposition, however. During the early years, he seems to have feared the hawks more than the doves, but by late 1967 he had changed his mind. "The major threat we have is from the doves," he told his advisers in September 1967.⁹⁰ Increasingly fearful that the war might be lost in the United States, he launched a two-pronged offensive to silence his most outspoken enemies and win public support for his policies.

Mistakenly believing that the peace movement was turning the public against the war, the president set out to destroy it. The FBI was already compiling huge dossiers on antiwar and civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, as well as leading peace groups and even the mainstream Protestant National Council of Churches. LBJ also instructed the CIA to institute a program of surveillance of antiwar leaders to prove his suspicions that they were operating on orders from Communist governments. This program, later

⁸⁸Notes on meeting, July 12, 1967, Johnson Papers, Tom Johnson Notes on Meetings, Box 1.

⁸⁹Notes on meetings, October 3, 16, 1967, Johnson Papers, Tom Johnson Notes on Meetings, Box 1.

⁹⁰Jim Jones notes on meeting, September 5, 1967, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 2.

institutionalized as Operation CHAOS, violated the agency's charter. It led to the compilation of files on more than 7,000 Americans. When the CIA failed to find the links Johnson suspected, he leaked information to right-wing members of Congress that he had such proof, leaving it to them to issue public charges that the peace movement was "being cranked up in Hanoi." As antiwar forces moved from opposition to resistance, the administration's war against them shifted from surveillance to harassment. Law enforcement agencies indicted antiwar leaders such as Dr. Spock for counseling draft resistance. The Internal Revenue Service examined the tax returns of antiwar leaders and organizations. The FBI recruited informants inside peace organizations, wiretapped telephones, broke into homes and offices, and infiltrated various groups with the object of disrupting their work and causing their members to do things that would further discredit them in the eyes of the public.⁹¹

Johnson also mounted an intensive campaign to shore up popular support for the war. Administration officials organized the ostensibly private Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam, to mobilize the "silent center" in American politics. Johnson's advisers supplied to friendly senators, including some Republicans, information to help answer the charges of congressional doves. A Vietnam Information Group was set up in the White House to monitor public reactions to the war, deal with problems as soon as they surfaced, and find ways to publicize success.⁹² The White House even arranged for influential citizens to go to Vietnam and observe the progress firsthand.⁹³

To counter the growing public perception of a stalemated war, the president ordered the embassy and MACV to "search urgently for occasions to present sound evidence of progress in Vietnam." Using body count figures some officers considered a "quaint fiction" and other statistical evidence that turned out to be flawed, MACV dutifully mounted a full-fledged Optimism Campaign. The enemy had been

⁹¹Charles DeBenedetti, "A CIA Analysis of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement: October 1967," *Peace and Change* 9 (Spring 1983): 31–35.

⁹²See the extensive correspondence in Johnson Papers, Marvin Watson File, Box 32.

⁹³Walt Rostow to Ellsworth Bunker, September 27, 1967, Johnson Papers, DSDUF, Box 4; Eugene Locke to Johnson, October 7, 1967, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 99.

seriously weakened, they claimed. Its morale was deflated; it was losing more troops than it could replace. The campaign rose to the level of a blitz late in the year. Visiting the United States in November at LBJ's request, Westmoreland admitted that the enemy had not been defeated but went on to insist that it had been badly hurt. In a statement he would later regret, he went a step further. "We have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view," he told the National Press Club on November 21. He even suggested that the United States might begin withdrawing troops in two years. The Optimism Campaign appears to have worked. The military arguments persuaded key journalists such as Joseph Alsop and Hanson Baldwin who in turn helped sway the public. The word "stalemate" appeared less often. The number of Americans convinced of progress rose from 35 percent in July to 50 percent in December.⁹⁴

Discussion of a change of strategy continued to the end of the year. McNamara's civilian advisers pressed for a shift to small-unit patrols that would be more "cost-effective" and would reduce U.S. casualties.⁹⁵ In his last major policy memorandum to LBJ, the secretary of defense proposed seeking ways to reduce U.S. casualties and force the South Vietnamese to assume a greater burden of the fighting. Recognizing that public disillusionment threatened not only success in Vietnam but also the internationalist foreign policy the nation had pursued since World War II, a group of leading "establishment" figures, meeting under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment, proposed a "clear and hold" strategy that would stabilize the war at a "politically tolerable level" and save South Vietnam "without surrender and without risking a wider war."⁹⁶

The major impetus for change came from the so-called Wise Men, a distinguished group of former government officials Johnson occasionally called upon for guidance. He appealed to them in early November to advise him on how to unite the country behind the war. The Wise

⁹⁴Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 145; Edwin E. Moise, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, Kans., 2018), pp. 96–108.

⁹⁵Depuy to Westmoreland, October 19, 1967, William Depuy Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., Folder WXYZ(67).

⁹⁶"Carnegie Endowment Proposals," December 5, 1967, Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., Box 34A.

Men generally endorsed existing policies, but they warned that “endless inconclusive fighting” was “the most serious single cause of domestic disquiet.” They proposed a ground strategy that would be less expensive in blood and treasure. They advised shifting to the South Vietnamese greater responsibility for the fighting. Former presidential assistant McGeorge Bundy went a step further, advising the president that he had an obligation to “visibly take command of a contest that is more political in its character than any other in our history except the Civil War” and to find a strategy that would be tolerable in cost to the American people for the five to ten years that might be required to stabilize the situation in Vietnam.⁹⁷ The president would go no further than to privately commit himself to “review” the conduct of ground operations with an eye toward reducing U.S. casualties and transferring greater responsibility to the South Vietnamese.⁹⁸ Even before the Tet Offensive of 1968, he was moving in the direction of what would later be called Vietnamization.

But he did not reevaluate his essential goals in Vietnam. To take such a step would have been difficult for anyone as long as there was hope of eventual success. It would have been especially difficult for Lyndon Johnson. Enormously ambitious, he had set high goals for his presidency, and he was unwilling to abandon them even in the face of frustration and massive unrest at home. It was not a matter of courage. By persisting in the face of declining popularity Johnson displayed courage as well as stubbornness. It was primarily a matter of pride. The president had not wanted the war in Vietnam, but once committed to it he had invested his personal prestige to a degree that made it impossible to back off. He chose to stay the course in 1967 for the same reasons he had gone to war in the first place—because he saw no alternative that did not require him to admit failure or defeat.

While quietly contemplating a change in strategy, Johnson publicly vowed to see the war through to a successful conclusion. “We are not going to yield,” he stated repeatedly. “We are not going to shimmy. We are going to wind up with a peace with honor which all Americans seek.”

⁹⁷ Jim Jones notes on meeting, November 2, 1967, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 2; Bundy to Johnson, November 10, 1967, Johnson Papers, Diary Backup, Box 81.

⁹⁸ Johnson memorandum for the record, December 18, 1967, in Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York, 1971), pp. 600–601.

At a White House dinner for the prime minister of Singapore, the president expressed his commitment in different terms. "Mr. Prime Minister," he said, "you have a phrase in your part of the world that puts our determination very well. You call it 'riding the tiger.' You rode the tiger. We shall!" The words would take on a bitterly ironic ring in the climactic year 1968.⁹⁹

⁹⁹Quoted in Stebbins, *United States in World Affairs*, 1967, pp. 397–398.



Tet, 1968

This classic photo of the street execution of a Viet Cong captive by the Saigon police chief brought home to Americans the savagery of the battles of Tet, and aroused growing concern about the type of government and war they were supporting.

©Eddie Adams/AP Images

A Very Near Thing

The Tet Offensive and After, 1968

At 2:45 a.m. on January 31, 1968, a team of National Liberation Front (NLF) sappers blasted a large hole in the wall surrounding the U.S. embassy in Saigon and dashed into the courtyard of the compound. For the next six hours, the most important symbol of the American presence in Vietnam was the scene of one of the most dramatic episodes of the war. Unable to get through the heavy door at the main entrance of the embassy building, the attackers retreated to the courtyard and took cover behind large concrete flower pots, pounding the building with rockets and exchanging gunfire with a small detachment of military police. They held their positions until 9:15 a.m., when they were finally overpowered. All nineteen were killed or severely wounded.

The attack on the embassy was but a small part of the Tet Offensive, a massive assault against the major urban areas of South Vietnam. In most other locales, the result was the same: The attackers were repulsed and incurred heavy losses. Later that morning, standing in the embassy courtyard amid the debris and fallen bodies in a scene one reporter described as a “butcher shop in Eden,” Westmoreland rendered his initial assessment of Tet. The “well-laid plans” of the North Vietnamese and NLF had failed, he observed. “The enemy exposed himself by virtue of his strategy and he suffered heavy casualties.” Although his comments brought moans of disbelief from the assembled journalists, from a short-term tactical standpoint Westmoreland was correct: Tet represented a major military defeat for the enemy.¹ As Bernard Brodie has observed, however, the Tet Offensive was “probably unique in that the side that lost

¹Quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City, N.Y., 1973), p. 34. For a more recent analysis, see James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York, 2007).

completely in the tactical sense came away with an overwhelming psychological and hence political victory.”² Tet had a tremendous impact in the United States and ushered in a new phase of a seemingly endless war.

GENERAL OFFENSIVE, GENERAL UPRISING

As early as the summer of 1966, Hanoi appears to have begun discussing plans for a “general offensive, general uprising,” a decisive blow to achieve victory. Such talks were not born of desperation, as some U.S. commentators later insisted, but rather of excessive optimism. They reflected pressures from the Soviets and the Chinese, whose increasingly bitter conflict put Hanoi in a perilous position. They also reflected growing concern about a military status quo in which North Vietnam was being pummeled by U.S. bombs and the war in the South remained stalemated. Party leaders at least dimly perceived the debate in Washington over possible escalation of the war. Some urged a decisive move before the United States could act. Others hoped to exploit the 1968 presidential election to force a change in U.S. policy.³

Serious planning began in 1967 and provoked fierce intraparty debate. Some leaders preferred to follow the Soviet line and open negotiations with the United States, at least as a way to get the bombing stopped. In January 1967, Hanoi relaxed its conditions for negotiations. Veteran revolutionaries Ho Chi Minh and Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap were especially wary of large-scale military operations, which would impose additional heavy losses on an already war-weary population, or a massive offensive directed at the urban areas of South Vietnam before conditions were ripe. As before, the relentlessly aggressive and overly optimistic first secretary Le Duan pressed for much bolder—and more risky—action. Although his daring gamble of 1964 had been thwarted by U.S. military intervention, the first secretary remained confident that the NLF and North Vietnam could strike a decisive blow.

The plan developed by his military advisers called for launching a series of diversionary attacks in remote areas of northern and western South Vietnam to lure U.S. forces away from the urban areas. These would be followed by massive main force and guerrilla assaults on the

²Bernard Brodie, “The Tet Offensive,” in Noble Frankland and Christopher Dowling (eds.), *Decisive Battles of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1976), p. 321.

³Merle L. Pribbenow II, “General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3 (Summer 2008): 3–10.



Le Duan, Architect of North Vietnam's Victory

Less known than the more charismatic Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan was second only to Ho as a leading Vietnamese revolutionary. A founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party, he served several terms in French prisons. During the First Indochina War and after, he headed Viet Minh operations in the South. From 1954–1956, he fiercely advocated a more aggressive policy to liberate southern Vietnam from the Diem regime. Relocated to Hanoi in 1956, he was named party general secretary in 1960 and from then until his death in 1986 he ran the government. Bold, even reckless, in demeanor, he launched win-the-war initiatives in 1964, 1968, and 1972, with disastrous consequences for his nation and people. He survived politically, in part by purging major challengers, and saw the war through to victory in 1975.

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cities and towns with the aim of crushing ARVN forces, toppling the Saigon government, and sparking a popular uprising. A successful offensive early in an election year might shake the will of the United States or even lead to a U.S. withdrawal. The attacks would be launched during Tet, a major Vietnamese holiday, when ARVN and U.S. units would be weakened by furloughs and the populace would be distracted.

During the remainder of the year, Le Duan ruthlessly solidified support for his bold plan. He outflanked Giap by recruiting his second-in-command, Gen. Van Tien Dung, to direct the war in the South. He ignored Ho's repeated objections. Ho and Giap subsequently left the country for extended periods, ostensibly for medical reasons. To ensure full support for their plan, in the summer and fall of 1967

Le Duan and his cohorts executed a sweeping purge of party dissidents, incarcerating many of them in Hanoi's Hoa Lo prison (which would later hold U.S. prisoners of war). They whipped up a paranoid frenzy as a basis for political repression. The full plan for a general offensive, general uprising gained final approval in January 1968 just weeks before it was to begin.⁴

Hanoi began executing its plan in late 1967. In October and November, North Vietnamese regulars attacked the U.S. Marine base at Con Thien, across the Laotian border, and the towns of Loc Ninh and Song Be near Saigon and Dak To in the Central Highlands. Shortly thereafter, two North Vietnamese divisions laid siege to the Marine garrison at Khe Sanh near the Laotian border. In the meantime, crack NLF units moved into the cities and towns, accumulating supplies and laying final plans. To undermine the Saigon government, the insurgents encouraged the formation of a "popular front" of neutralists and attempted to entice government officials and troops to defect by offering generous pardons and positions in a coalition government. To spread dissension between the United States and Thieu, the front opened secret contacts with the U.S. embassy in Saigon and disseminated rumors of peace talks. Hanoi followed in December 1967 by stating categorically that it would negotiate if the United States stopped the bombing.

The first phase of the plan worked to perfection. Westmoreland quickly dispatched reinforcements to Con Thien, Loc Ninh, Song Be, and Dak To, in each case driving back the North Vietnamese and inflicting heavy losses but dispersing U.S. forces and leaving the cities vulnerable. By the end of 1967, moreover, the attention of Westmoreland, the president, and indeed much of the nation was riveted on Khe Sanh, which many Americans assumed was Giap's play for a repetition of Dien Bien Phu. The press and television carried daily reports of the action. Insisting that the fortress be held at all costs, Johnson kept close watch on the battle with a terrain map in the White House war room. Westmoreland sent 6,000 soldiers to defend the garrison. B-52 bombers carried out the heaviest air raids in the history of warfare, eventually dropping more than 100,000 tons of explosives on a five-square-mile battlefield.

While the United States was preoccupied with Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese and NLF prepared for the second phase of the operation.

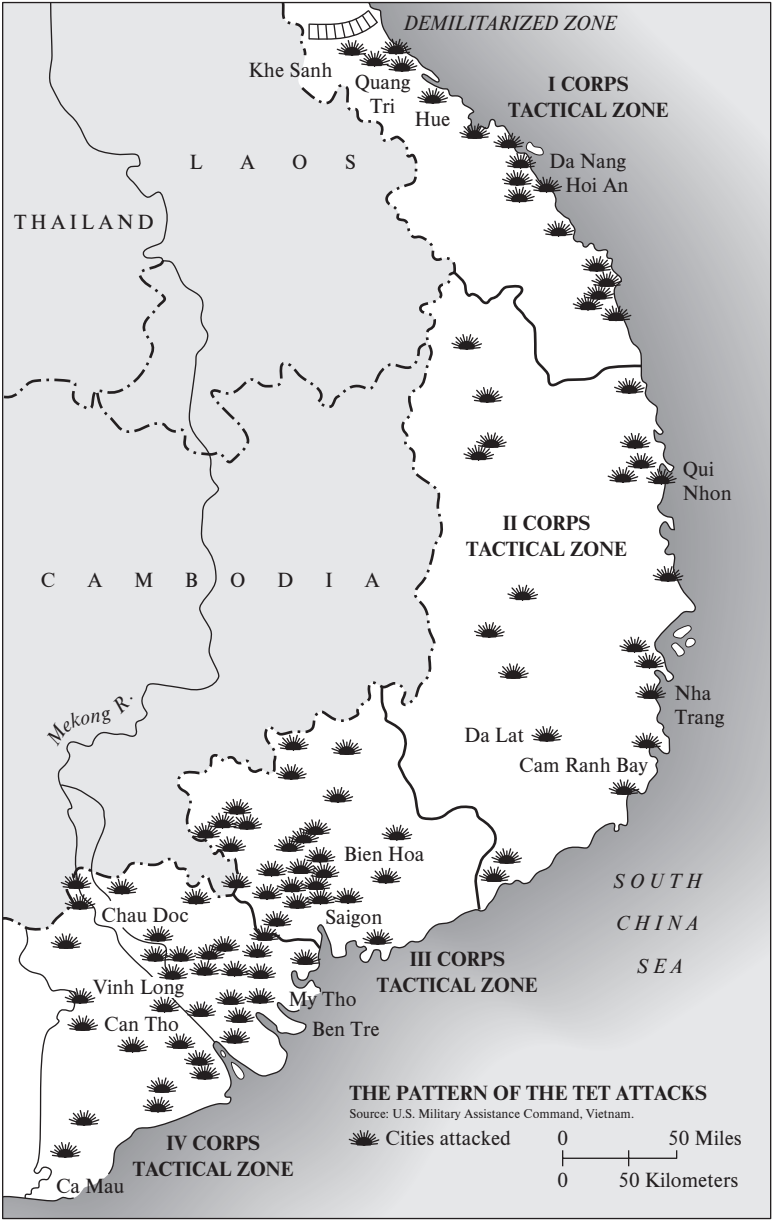
⁴Ibid, 13–24; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), pp. 88–103.

The offensive against the cities was timed to coincide with the beginning of the lunar new year. Traditionally, at Tet, people returned to their native villages and engaged in a week of celebrations, renewing ties with family, honoring ancestors, indulging in meals, and shooting fire-crackers. Throughout the war, both sides had observed a cease-fire during Tet. Hanoi correctly assumed that South Vietnam would be relaxing and celebrating, with soldiers visiting their families and government officials away from their offices. While the Americans and South Vietnamese prepared for the holidays, NLF units readied themselves for the bloodiest battles of the war. Mingling with the heavy holiday traffic, guerrillas disguised as Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers or as civilians moved into the cities and towns, some audaciously hitching rides on American vehicles. Weapons were smuggled in on vegetable carts and even in mock funeral processions. At Cu Chi in the Iron Triangle, recruits practiced getting inside a replica of the U.S. embassy grounds.

Within twenty-four hours after the beginning of Tet, January 31, 1968, the NLF launched a series of attacks extending from the demilitarized zone to the Ca Mau Peninsula on the southern tip of Vietnam. In all, they struck thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, five of the six major cities, sixty-four district capitals, and fifty hamlets. In addition to the daring raid on the embassy, NLF units assaulted Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Airport, the huge U.S. base at Long Binh, the presidential palace, and the headquarters of South Vietnam's general staff. In Hue, 7,500 NLF and North Vietnamese troops stormed and eventually took control of the ancient Citadel, the interior town that had been the seat of the emperors of the Kingdom of Annam.

U.S.–SOUTH VIETNAMESE RESPONSE

The offensive caught the United States and South Vietnam off guard. American intelligence had picked up signs of intensive enemy activity in and around the cities and had even translated captured documents that, without giving dates, outlined the plan in some detail. The U.S. command was so preoccupied with Khe Sanh, however, that it viewed evidence pointing to the cities as a diversion to distract it from the main battlefield. As had happened so often before, the United States underestimated the capability of the enemy. The North Vietnamese appeared so bloodied by the campaigns of 1967 that the Americans did not conceive





Hue during the Tet Offensive

This picture shows U.S. Marines walking the streets of Hue after a fierce, month-long battle to regain control from the North Vietnamese and NLF. Once the imperial capital of Annam and a city of great beauty and charm, Hue was left after the 1968 Tet Offensive, in the words of one observer, “a shattered, stinking hulk, its streets choked with rubble and rotting bodies.”

©MPI/Getty Images

they could bounce back and deliver a blow of the magnitude of Tet. “Even had I known exactly what was to take place,” Westmoreland’s intelligence officer later conceded, “it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody.”⁵

Although taken by surprise, the United States and South Vietnam recovered quickly. The timing of the offensive was poorly coordinated. Premature attacks in some towns sounded a warning that enabled Westmoreland to get reinforcements to vulnerable areas. In addition, the NLF was slow to capitalize on its initial successes, giving the United

⁵Quoted in William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), p. 321. For a full analysis of the U.S. intelligence failure at Tet, see James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991).

States time to mount a strong defense. In Saigon, U.S. and ARVN forces held off the initial attacks and within several days cleared the city, inflicting huge casualties, taking large numbers of prisoners, and forcing the remnants to melt into the countryside. Elsewhere the result was much the same. The ARVN fought better under pressure than any American would have dared predict, and the United States and South Vietnam used superior mobility and firepower to devastating advantage. The NLF launched a second round of attacks on February 18, but these were confined largely to rocket and mortar barrages against U.S. and South Vietnamese military installations and steadily diminished in intensity.

Hue was the only exception to the general pattern. The liberation of that city took more than three weeks, required heavy bombing and intensive artillery fire, and ranks among the bloodiest and most destructive battles of the war. The United States and South Vietnam lost more than 500 killed, whereas enemy killed in action have been estimated as high as 5,000. The savage fighting caused huge numbers of civilian casualties and created an estimated 100,000 refugees. The bodies of 2,800 South Vietnamese were found in mass graves in and around Hue, the product of NLF and North Vietnamese executions. Another 2,000 citizens were unaccounted for and presumed murdered.⁶

Despite some surprising early successes, the North Vietnamese/NLF failed to achieve their major goals. For security reasons, orders were not issued until days before the attacks, giving units little time to prepare. Confusion regarding the date of launching the operation led to premature attacks in some areas that alerted U.S. and South Vietnamese forces and gave them time to respond. The attackers were not welcomed as liberators and were unable to establish any firm positions in the urban areas. Many city dwellers rallied to the government. The enemy badly underestimated the U.S. ability to shift forces rapidly from one region to another. Exposed to the full wrath of its massive firepower, they suffered heavy losses: battle deaths alone estimated as high as 37,000. The NLF bore the brunt of the fighting at Tet. Its regular units were badly hurt; its political infrastructure suffered crippling losses, especially in the urban areas. In Saigon, it was all but eliminated.⁷

⁶The most recent account is Mark Bonden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (New York, 2017).

⁷Edwin E. Moise, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, Kans., 2017), pp. 134–142, 158–164.

If, in these terms, Tet represented a military defeat for the enemy, it was still a very costly victory for the United States and South Vietnam. ARVN forces had to withdraw from the countryside to defend the cities, inflicting another major setback on pacification. The massive destruction within the cities heaped formidable new problems on a government that had shown limited capacity to deal with the routine. U.S. and South Vietnamese losses did not approach those of the enemy, but they were still very high: Between January 29 and March 31, 1968, the United States lost an estimated 3,700 killed in action and 11,000 were seriously wounded, while South Vietnam suffered 7,600 killed and 18,000 wounded.⁸ An estimated 12,500 civilians were killed; Tet created as many as one million new refugees. As in much of the war, there was a great deal of destruction and suffering, but no clear-cut winner or loser.

CONFUSION AND UNCERTAINTY

To the extent that the North Vietnamese designed the Tet Offensive to influence the United States, they succeeded, for it sent instant shock waves across the nation. Early wire service reports exaggerated the success of the raid on the embassy, some even indicating that the guerrillas had occupied several floors of the building. Although these initial reports were in time corrected, the reaction was still one of disbelief. "What the hell is going on?" the venerable newscaster Walter Cronkite, once a strong supporter of the war, is said to have snapped. "I thought we were winning the war!"⁹ Televised accounts of the bloody fighting in Saigon and Hue made a mockery of Johnson's and Westmoreland's optimistic year-end reports, widening the credibility gap; cynical journalists openly ridiculed Westmoreland's claims of victory. The humorist Art Buchwald parodied the general's statements in terms of Gen. George Custer at the Little Bighorn. "We have the Sioux on the run," Buchwald had Custer saying. "Of course we still have some cleaning up to do, but the Redskins are hurting badly and it will only be a matter of time before they give in."¹⁰ The battles of Tet raised to a new level of public consciousness basic questions about the war that had long lurked just beneath the surface. The offhand remark of a U.S. Army officer

⁸Ibid, pp. 165–171.

⁹Quoted in Oberdorfer, *Tet!* p. 158.

¹⁰*Washington Post*, February 6, 1968.

who had participated in the liberation of the Mekong Delta village of Ben Tre—"We had to destroy the town to save it"—seemed to epitomize the purposeless destruction of the war. Candid photographs and television footage of the police chief of Saigon holding a pistol to the head of an NLF captive—and then firing—seemed to symbolize the way violence had triumphed over law.

The Tet Offensive left Washington in a state of "troubled confusion and uncertainty."¹¹ Westmoreland insisted that the attacks had been repulsed and that there was no need to fear a major setback. Administration officials publicly echoed his statements. Johnson and his advisers were shocked by the suddenness and magnitude of the offensive, however, and intelligence estimates were much more pessimistic than Westmoreland. Many officials feared that Tet was only the opening phase of a larger Communist offensive. Some felt that Khe Sanh was still the primary objective, a fear that seemed borne out when the besieging forces renewed their attack in early February. Others feared a major offensive in the northern provinces or a second wave of attacks on the cities. An "air of gloom" hung over White House discussions, Taylor later observed. Gen. Wheeler likened the mood to that following the first Battle of Bull Run.¹²

THE TROOP REQUEST

Out of this murky and fluid situation emerged a military request for 206,000 troops that would dramatically exacerbate the domestic political impact of Tet and force major changes in U.S. policy. The request originated in a strange, almost surreal manner, reflecting the persisting uncertainty about conditions in Vietnam and divergent concerns within the military establishment. Wheeler had long worried about the depletion of the strategic reserve, and the chaos in Vietnam, North Korea's January 23 seizure of the U.S. spy ship *Pueblo*, and a flare-up in Berlin heightened his fears. He encouraged MACV to ask for troops for Vietnam as a way to force mobilization of the reserves. Westmoreland's confused and at times contradictory cables to Washington left unclear whether he believed South Vietnam was in peril, the situation

¹¹Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York, 1970), p. 145.

¹²Earle Wheeler oral history interview, Johnson Papers, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.



LBJ and Robert McNamara, February 7, 1968

The facial expressions of President Johnson and his secretary of defense vividly betray their deep foreboding in the early days of the Tet Offensive. The two are shown here responding to Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler's gloomy briefing on the military situation in South Vietnam, especially in Saigon and Hue and at Khe Sanh. Wheeler also warned of more enemy attacks. A profoundly troubled president affirmed that Gen. Westmoreland should get what he needed to hold the line.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration (NLJ-WHPO-A-VN132)

was stable, or a resounding enemy defeat had created an opportunity for victory. At first, he appeared not to need troops; hours later, insisting that he faced a "new ball game" in which the enemy might go all-out to win, he claimed to "desperately need" six battalions of combat troops immediately with further augmentation later.¹³

Westmoreland's cables left Washington officials flummoxed. They so differed in tone and substance that Gen. Taylor wondered whether they might have been written by different people. Using the prize-fighting metaphor he often fell back on, a wary LBJ claimed to feel like he was in "a ring with a boxer and I didn't know who I was boxing."

¹³Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965–1969* (Washington, D.C., 2011), pp. 181–182.

He vowed not to “desert” his field commander. Nor would he desert the “home folks” or “act imprudently” and get in deeper “where I can’t get out.”¹⁴ He and McNamara both opposed a reserve call-up and a large increase in U.S. forces. On February 12, the president responded to Westmoreland’s most recent and urgent-sounding request by authorizing an additional 10,500 troops for Vietnam immediately while deferring any step requiring further mobilization of the reserves. He also dispatched Wheeler to Saigon for consultations.¹⁵

During Wheeler’s visit to the war zone, the two generals came up with a scheme to force the president’s hand. They agreed to request 206,000 troops, a number large enough to meet any danger in Vietnam—and to force mobilization of the reserves (Westmoreland appears to have intended all of the troops for Vietnam; Wheeler, at least at first, believed some of them would constitute a reserve). Wheeler’s report to Washington was darkly pessimistic. Calling the Tet Offensive a “very near thing,” he warned that although the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had suffered heavy losses, they had always shown a capacity for quick recovery and might attempt to sustain the offensive with renewed attacks. Without more troops, he concluded, the United States must be “prepared to accept some reverses,” a line likely calculated to sway a president who had vowed not to accept defeat. Large reinforcements were needed to defend the cities, drive the enemy from the northern provinces of South Vietnam, and pacify the countryside. By painting such a desperate picture, Wheeler hoped to pressure the administration into providing troops to take care of needs in Vietnam and rebuild the strategic reserve.¹⁶

Wheeler’s report stunned an already reeling government. Denial of the request for 206,000 troops risked military defeat or further prolonging the war. Approval would require another major escalation and impose enormous new financial demands in an election year and when public anxiety about Vietnam was already high. McNamara questioned whether the additional troops would be enough to do the job—the North Vietnamese, as before, would match U.S. escalation. At one point in a meeting devoted to the report, an exhausted and emotionally

¹⁴Johnson-McNamara phone conversation, February 12, 1968, 8:29 am, Phone Conversation Number 12711, LBJ Library.

¹⁵Drea, *McNamara*, pp. 182–183. On January 25, 1968, the president had mobilized about 14,000 Air Force and Navy reservists in response to the *Pueblo* incident.

¹⁶Wheeler Report, February 27, 1968, *FR*, 1964–1968, 6: 263–266; Moise, *Myths of Tet*, pp. 194–198.

distraught secretary of defense in his last days in office with shaky voice and close to tears appealed to his civilian colleagues and especially to his successor, Washington lawyer Clark Clifford, to “end this thing. . . It is out of control.”¹⁷ Not inclined to make a hasty decision on a matter fraught with such grave implications, LBJ turned the matter over to Clifford with the grim instruction: “Give me the lesser of evils.”

THE CLIFFORD TASK FORCE

Clifford seized the opportunity to carry out a sweeping reassessment of Vietnam policy. The magnitude of the request was such that it demanded careful study. His newness to the job and a need to clarify many fundamental issues also led him in this direction. He quickly began raising at the highest levels questions that had been avoided for years.

The secretary was encouraged by senior civilians in the Pentagon, men such as Paul Nitze and Paul Warnke, who had long been disenchanting with the war and had helped convert McNamara. The Pentagon civilians attacked the request for more troops as another “payment on an open-ended commitment” and questioned whether it would break “Hanoi’s will to fight.”¹⁸ It would, they warned, encourage “total Americanization of the war” and reinforce the Saigon government’s view that the United States would “continue to fight while it engages in backroom politics and permits widespread corruption.” Further expansion of the war would also bring increased U.S. casualties and new taxes, risking a “domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions.”¹⁹ Clifford’s advisers urged the administration to maintain existing limits on the war and give Westmoreland no more than a token increase in troops. Like McNamara in November 1967, they proposed shifting to a “population security” strategy, putting pressure on ARVN to assume a greater burden of the fighting, and scaling back U.S. objectives to permit a “peace which will leave the people of SVN [South Vietnam] free to fashion their own political institutions.”²⁰

¹⁷Drea, *McNamara*, p. 184.

¹⁸Quoted in U.S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, *The Pentagon Papers (Senator Gravel Edition)* 4 vols. (Boston, 1971), 4: 558. Hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 563–564.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 564–568.

The military bitterly opposed such recommendations. Westmoreland and Wheeler warned that rejection of their proposals would deny the United States an opportunity to exploit a rapidly changing strategic situation. A population security strategy would increase civilian casualties and leave the enemy the initiative.²¹ Supported by the Joint Chiefs, they continued to urge expanded military operations that would permit pursuing enemy forces into Laos and Cambodia, pounding North Vietnam by sea and air, and, after an Inchon-type landing, the occupation of parts of North Vietnam north of the demilitarized zone.²²

Clifford recommended against the military's proposals without resolving the debate on strategy. He was quickly disillusioned with his military advisers. Responding to his relentless questioning, they doubted that an additional 206,000 men would get the job done, acknowledged that North Vietnam could match U.S. escalation, and admitted they could not say when South Vietnam would be able to defend itself. When asked about a plan for victory, they candidly admitted they had none. "I was appalled," Clifford later wrote. "Nothing had prepared me for the weakness of the military's case."²³ His report kept the strategic issue alive by calling for further study of various alternatives, but it did not address the issues raised by his civilian advisers. The secretary merely recommended the immediate deployment to Vietnam of 22,000 troops, a reserve call-up of unspecified magnitude, and a "highly forceful" approach to get South Vietnam to assume greater responsibility.²⁴

THE PRESIDENT'S DECISIONS

The administration accepted Clifford's recommendations. During the long hours of February and March 1968, a weary president experienced sharp mood swings, between "despondency and optimism," "confidence and self-doubt."²⁵ In the immediate aftermath of the Tet attacks, Johnson had been ready to send additional troops if necessary to hold the line. By the time he received Clifford's report, the military situation

²¹Ibid., 568.

²²For the views of the Joint Chiefs, see Clifford notes on meeting, March 18, 1968, Clark Clifford Papers, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Tex.

²³Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, (New York, 1991), p. 494.

²⁴Draft presidential memorandum, March 4, 1968, in *Pentagon Papers (Gravel)*, 4: 575–576.

²⁵Kyle Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (New York, 2018), p. 59

in South Vietnam seemed well in hand. Westmoreland and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker reported that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had fully recovered from the initial shock of the enemy offensive and were ready to mount a major counteroffensive. Under these circumstances, there seemed no need for immediate large-scale reinforcements. Although Johnson did not formally approve Clifford's recommendations at this time, he agreed with them and was prepared to act on them.

The administration also accepted the principle that South Vietnam should do more to defend itself. Johnson's advisers agreed that from a long-range standpoint the key to achieving American objectives was South Vietnam's ability to stand on its own. They had concluded in late 1967 that more should be done to promote self-sufficiency. The ARVN's quick recovery from the initial panic of Tet and its surprising effectiveness in the subsequent battles reinforced the notion that "Vietnamization" might work. Indeed, in the discussions of late February and early March 1968, some of the strongest arguments against sending massive reinforcements were that it would encourage the South Vietnamese to do less at a time when they should be doing more and that it would take equipment that might better be used by the ARVN. In early March, Johnson, Rusk, and Clifford bluntly informed South Vietnamese ambassador Bui Diem that his nation must assume responsibility for its own destiny and could not continue to depend on the United States.²⁶ The decision represented a significant shift in American policy—a return, at least in part, to the principle that had governed U.S. involvement before 1965 and adoption, at least in a rudimentary fashion, of the concept of Vietnamization, which would be introduced with much fanfare by the Nixon administration a year later.

While agreeing in principle to Clifford's recommendations, the administration also began serious consideration of a cutback in the bombing and a new peace initiative. The secretary of defense had recommended against further peace moves in his report. Perhaps as a sop to the military, he had even urged intensification of the bombing. The initiative came from Secretary of State Rusk. Rusk had long felt that the bombing produced only marginal gains at a heavy cost. He proposed that the administration restrict it, without condition, to those areas "integrally related to the battlefield," namely, the supply routes and staging areas just north of the demilitarized zone. Such a move would cost

²⁶Longley, *LBJ's 1968*, p. 79.

the United States nothing, he argued, because inclement weather in the next few months would severely restrict raids over the northern part of North Vietnam. Bunker had speculated that Hanoi's purpose in launching the Tet Offensive may have been to establish a favorable position for negotiations. In late February, neutral intermediaries had brought several peace feelers to the State Department. Rusk believed that the chances for productive negotiations remained "bleak," but relaxation of the ambiguous San Antonio formula might entice Hanoi to the conference table or at least test its intentions. Even if North Vietnam did not respond positively, domestic critics would be persuaded that the administration was trying to get negotiations under way. The United States could resume air attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong later, if necessary, the secretary pointed out, probably with increased public support.²⁷

Johnson had steadfastly opposed any reduction of the bombing, but he was attracted to Rusk's proposal. The president was certain that North Vietnam had suffered heavily in the Tet Offensive. He appears to have concluded that the United States could undertake negotiations from a vastly strengthened position. He recognized the need to do something to still the growing outcry against the war at home. And he was responsive to the idea because it came from Rusk, a man whose loyalty, caution, and measured judgment he had come to cherish.²⁸ Johnson later claimed to have accepted the idea of a reduction of the bombing and a new peace initiative as early as March 7. But he was not inclined to move hastily. He remained outwardly noncommittal for several weeks. He urged his advisers to study the matter carefully and develop specific proposals for inclusion in a major speech he was to deliver at the end of the month.

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICS

The administration's inclination to move in new directions was strengthened by mounting evidence of public dissatisfaction with the war. Discussion of Vietnam during February and March 1968 took place in an atmosphere of gloom and futility. The media continued to depict

²⁷Ibid., pp. 181–193.

²⁸Of Rusk, Johnson once said: "He has the compassion of a preacher and the courage of a Georgia cracker. When you're going in with the marines, he's the kind you want at your side." Max Frankel notes of conversation with Johnson, July 8, 1965, Arthur Krock Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, N.J., Box 1.

events in highly unfavorable and sometimes distorted terms. Early reports of a smashing enemy victory went largely uncorrected. The fact that the United States and South Vietnam had hurled back the attacks and quickly stabilized their position was lost in the image of chaos and defeat.²⁹ For those television and newspaper commentators who had long opposed the conflict, Tet provided compelling evidence of its folly. "The war in Vietnam is unwinnable," the columnist Joseph Kraft reported, "and the longer it goes on the more the Americans will be subjected to losses and humiliation." Many opinion makers who had supported the president or had been only mildly critical now came out forcefully against the war. Tet made clear, *Newsweek* commented, that "a strategy of more of the same is intolerable." In a much-publicized broadcast on February 27, Cronkite eloquently summed up the prevailing mood: "To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest that we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only reasonable, yet unsatisfactory conclusion." "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost the country," a despairing LBJ moaned.³⁰

A *New York Times* story of March 10, reporting that the administration was considering sending another 206,000 soldiers to Vietnam, added to the furor. The story set off a barrage of protest.³¹ Critics asked why so many troops were needed and whether more would follow. Skeptics warned that the North Vietnamese would match any American increase. The only thing that would change, NBC's Frank McGee observed, would be the "capacity for destruction." The time had come, he concluded, "when we must decide whether it is futile to destroy Vietnam in the effort to save it."³²

The possibility of another major troop increase provoked a stormy reaction in Congress. Democrats and Republicans, hawks and doves, demanded an explanation and insisted that Congress share in any decision to expand the war. On March 11 and 12, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee grilled Rusk for eleven hours, dramatically revealing a growing discontent with the administration's policies and a

²⁹For a critical analysis of press and television coverage of Tet, see Peter Braestrup, *Big Story* (New York, 1978).

³⁰Oberdorfer, *Tet!* pp. 251, 275; Braestrup, *Big Story*, p. 137.

³¹Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J., 1977)

³²Oberdorfer, *Tet!* p. 273.

determination to exercise some voice in future decisions. A week later, 139 members of the House of Representatives sponsored a resolution calling for a full review of U.S. policy in Vietnam. The congressional outcry reinforced the administration's conviction that it could not escalate the war without setting off a long and bitter debate. It persuaded some officials, Clifford included, that major steps must be taken to scale down American involvement.³³

Indexes of public opinion also revealed a sharp rise in disillusionment. Support for the war itself remained remarkably steady between November 1967 and March 1968, hovering around 45 percent.³⁴ But approval of Johnson's conduct of it, which had risen to 40 percent as a result of the 1967 public relations campaign, plummeted to an all-time low of 26 percent during Tet. By March, moreover, an overwhelming majority of Americans (78 percent) believed that the United States was not making any progress in Vietnam. The polls indicated no consensus for either escalation or withdrawal, only a firm conviction that the United States was hopelessly bogged down and a growing doubt that Johnson could break the stalemate.³⁵

By mid-March, public discontent had assumed ominous political overtones. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, an outspoken dove, had audaciously challenged Johnson's renomination. His surprisingly strong showing in the New Hampshire primary on March 12 suddenly transformed what had seemed a quixotic crusade into a major political challenge. Johnson's name had not been on the ballot, but the party organization had mounted a vigorous write-in campaign for him. When McCarthy won 42 percent of the vote, it was widely interpreted as a defeat for the president. Subsequent analysis revealed that hawks outnumbered doves by a wide majority among McCarthy supporters in New Hampshire. Early appraisals emphasized, however, that the vote reflected a growing sentiment for peace. Within several days a more formidable peace candidate had entered the field. After weeks of hesitation and soul-searching, Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York announced that he, too,

³³Schandler, *Johnson and Vietnam*, pp. 207–217.

³⁴Approval and disapproval of the war were measured by the question "Do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to Vietnam?"—at best an imperfect way of judging a complex issue.

³⁵Louis Harris, *The Anguish of Change* (New York, 1973), pp. 63–64, and Burns W. Roper, "What Public Opinion Polls Said," in Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, pp. 674–704.

would run against the president on a platform of opposition to the war. With his name, his glamour, and his connections in the party, Kennedy appeared to be a serious threat to Johnson's renomination. Worried party regulars urged the president to do "something exciting and dramatic to recapture the peace issue" and to shift the emphasis of his rhetoric from winning the war to securing "peace with honor."³⁶

The impact of public opinion on the decision-making process in March 1968 is difficult to measure. Westmoreland and others have charged that a hostile and all-too-powerful media, especially the television networks, snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by turning the public against the war and limiting the government's freedom of action just when the United States had a battered enemy on the ropes.³⁷ Vietnam was the first television war, to be sure, and it is possible, over a long period of time, that nightly exposure to violence did contribute to public war-weariness. Until the Tet Offensive, however, television coverage of the war had been overwhelmingly neutral or favorable to the government. Because of the isolated and remote nature of combat in Vietnam, it had shown little of the actual horrors of war.³⁸ The intense and up-close action in the cities at Tet did expose the public more directly to the war, and the coverage was more critical. After the distorted accounts of the embassy battle, coverage was also for the most part more accurate and thus could not help but show the enemy's toughness and tenacity, increase already strong doubts about the South Vietnamese government and army, raise questions about the administration's claims of progress, and widen the president's already yawning credibility gap. It is difficult to measure the impact of television coverage on public attitudes, but it seems probable, as historian Chester Pach has concluded, that coverage of the battles at Tet was "unsettling" for viewers who had been lulled by the

³⁶James Rowe to Johnson, March 19, 1968, Johnson Papers, Marvin Watson File, Box 32.

³⁷Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 410; also Robert Elegant, "How to Lose a War," *Encounter* 57 (August 1981): 73–90.

³⁸Excellent analyses that challenge the view of the media as critic and minimize the media's impact on public opinion are Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986); William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968* (Washington, D.C., 1988); and Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1993).

optimism campaign and for top government officials who saw their credibility shattered.³⁹

The Johnson administration itself was at least partially responsible for media and public disillusionment during Tet. Its unduly optimistic pronouncements of 1967 magnified the shock of Tet. The president and his advisers might have challenged the reporting of the media, but their public response to Tet was itself halting and confused, in part because they were uncertain what was happening and how to respond.

The idea that a hypercritical media undercut support for the war just at the point when it could have been won is suspect on more basic grounds. That victory was within grasp, even had Westmoreland been given all the troops he requested, remains highly doubtful. Despite their later claims, many top military officials knew this at the time. They perceived quite clearly the enormous damage the enemy offensive had done to the war effort. They recognized that success was not forthcoming. By making requests they knew would not be approved, in fact, some military leaders may have been trying to put the onus for failure on the backs of the civilians.⁴⁰ The influence of public opinion does not appear to have been as great as Westmoreland alleges. None of Johnson's civilian advisers favored expansion of the war and another large troop increase. Evidence of growing popular discontent merely confirmed that it would be disastrous to escalate the war. Public anxiety persuaded some officials that the United States must move toward withdrawal from Vietnam, but the president did not go this far. He eventually concluded that he must make additional conciliatory gestures, but he did not alter his policy in any fundamental way or abandon his goals.

THE GOLD CRISIS

An economic crisis in mid-March, itself in part provoked by the war, also significantly affected post-Tet policy deliberations. Johnson had attempted to finance the war as he had dealt with public opinion—by deceit and trickery—and for the same reason. From the outset, he had

³⁹Chester J. Pach Jr. "Tet on TV," in Carole Fink et al. (eds), 1968: *The World Transformed* (Washington, D.C., 1998), pp. 55–81; and "The War on Television: TV News, the Johnson Administration, and Vietnam," in Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco, *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Malden, Mass., 2006), pp. 461–464.

⁴⁰Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York, 1996), pp. 316–328.

a reasonably clear idea what the war would cost, but in dealing with the public and Congress he repeatedly minimized the price tag and refused to ask for new taxes for fear such a request would force cuts in Great Society programs. Until 1967, he financed the war through budgetary sleight of hand. His tax request of that year was too little and came too late. In any event, as he had feared, an increasingly restive Congress refused to pass it without domestic spending cuts he would not make.

Thus, by March 1968, the United States faced an economic crisis some harried officials compared to the Great Crash of 1929. The war imposed a burden of as much as \$3.6 billion a year on a U.S. economy already strained by Great Society spending. Military expenditures stoked inflation and contributed to a spiraling balance-of-payments deficit that weakened the dollar in international money markets and threatened the world monetary structure. A late-1967 financial crisis in Britain, leading to devaluation of the pound, caused further problems, including huge losses from the gold pool. In March 1968, pressure on the dollar mounted again, and gold purchases reached new highs. On March 14, the United States lost \$372 million in gold trading. At Washington's urging, the London gold market was closed. The economic crisis in the spring of 1968 marked the beginning of the end of the post-World War II economic boom. It shattered the postwar myth of American invincibility and raised severe doubts among business and government leaders that the nation could do it all and have it all in terms of domestic reform and national defense.⁴¹

As a result of the gold crisis, Westmoreland's request for additional troops was increasingly linked to the nation's economic woes. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Fowler warned that adoption of Westmoreland's proposals would cost \$2.5 billion in 1968 and \$10 billion in 1969, adding \$500 million to the balance-of-payments deficit and requiring a major tax increase and cuts in domestic programs. Leading organs of business opinion began to question the nation's ability to finance the war at higher or even existing levels. "The gold crisis has dampened expansionist ideas," former Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote a friend. "The town is in an atmosphere of crisis."⁴²

⁴¹Robert M. Collins, "The Economic Crisis of 1968 and the Waning of the 'American Century,'" *American Historical Review* 101 (April 1996): 396–422.

⁴²Acheson to John Cowles, March 14, 1968, Dean G. Acheson Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn., Box 7. The gold crisis is discussed at length in Paul Joseph, *Cracks in the Empire: State Politics in the Vietnam War* (Boston, 1981), pp. 262–266; Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New York, 1986), pp. 313–320; and Diane B. Kunz, "The American Economic Consequence of 1968," in Fink, 1968, pp. 83–110.

In this context, some leading “establishment” figures, including the architects of America’s major Cold War policies, concluded that the war was doing irreparable damage to the nation’s overall national security position. Acheson, W. Averell Harriman, and Nitze, all of whom had served in the Truman administration and had helped formulate the original containment policy, agreed, as Acheson put it, that Vietnam was a dangerous diversion from Europe and that “our leader ought to be concerned with areas that count.”⁴³ Fearing that the nation was hopelessly overextended and that Vietnam was eroding popular support for an internationalist foreign policy, they pressed for a review of Vietnam policy. In a long letter on March 26, Acheson warned the president that the gold crisis and concern about America’s “broader interests in Europe” required a “decision now to disengage within a limited time.”⁴⁴ The old Cold Warriors labored tirelessly behind the scenes to influence the president’s decision and converted Clifford to their position.

On March 22, Johnson formally rejected Westmoreland’s proposals to seek victory through an expanded war. He was undoubtedly influenced by public opinion and the economic crisis. The steadily improving situation in South Vietnam seems to have been decisive. The Saigon government was responding to American pressures. Stability and order had been restored to the cities. In late March, Thieu announced a massive increase in draft calls that would raise the ARVN’s strength by 135,000. The intensity of enemy rocket attacks was steadily diminishing. Enemy forces were withdrawing from the positions established before Tet and splitting into small groups to avoid destruction or capture. In mid-March, Westmoreland informed the president of plans for a major offensive in the northern provinces, the central objective of which was to relieve the siege of Khe Sanh.

Under these circumstances, LBJ saw no need for a major increase in American forces, approving only a call-up of 24,500 reserves, with 10,000 slated for Vietnam. At the same time, he decided to bring Westmoreland back to Washington to be chief of staff of the army.

⁴³Quoted in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York, 1986), pp. 684, 689; see also David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, Md., 2005), p. 166.

⁴⁴Acheson to Johnson, March 26, 1968, Acheson Papers.

The general had come under heavy fire for his prophecies of victory and his failure to anticipate the Tet Offensive. Johnson wanted to spare him becoming a scapegoat. The president may also have wished to remove him from the untenable position of fighting a war under conditions he did not approve. The recall of Westmoreland signified the administration's determination to maintain the limits it had placed on the war and, tacitly at least, to check further escalation.

THE MARCH 31 SPEECH

During the last week of March, the internal debate reached a decisive stage and became increasingly sharp and emotional. Some of the president's advisers still insisted that the United States must "hang in there." At one time during the Tet crisis, Rostow had proposed sending to Congress a new Southeast Asia Resolution to rally the nation behind the war. He continued to urge the president to stand firm at what could be a critical turning point. Rusk persisted in working for the partial bombing halt he had outlined in early March. He was concerned by the domestic protest, but he had not despaired of success in Vietnam, nor was he disposed to capitulate to the administration's critics. He believed that the North Vietnamese would reject his proposal, but a conciliatory gesture would show the American people that the administration was doing everything possible to bring about negotiations, thus buying time to stabilize the home front and shore up South Vietnam.

Clifford had moved significantly beyond his position of early March. He was concerned by the apparent damage Vietnam was doing to the nation's international financial position. He was alarmed by the growing domestic unrest, particularly the "tremendous erosion of support" among the nation's business and legal elite. These executives felt the United States was in a "hopeless bog," he reported, and the idea of "going deeper into the bog" struck them as "mad." Although unclear how to proceed, he had set his mind on a "winching down" strategy that would put the United States irreversibly on a course of step-by-step de-escalation. U.S. forces should not be expanded above existing levels and should be used primarily to protect the South Vietnamese population from another enemy offensive. Thieu should be pressed to clean up and broaden his government. Clifford seems also to have been prepared to make major concessions to secure a negotiated settlement. He frankly conceded that the United States might have to settle for the best

it could obtain. "Nothing required us to remain until the North had been ejected from the South and the Saigon government had established complete control of all South Vietnam," he later wrote. At a meeting on March 28, he delivered an impassioned plea to initiate the process of de-escalation. Working behind the scenes with Acheson and presidential speechwriter Harry McPherson in what he called a "partnership" to get "our friend out of this mess," he waged an unrelenting battle for the president's mind.⁴⁵

While the debate raged about him, Johnson remained noncommittal. Instinctively, he leaned toward the Rusk position. He was infuriated by the desertion of Clifford, on whose support he had counted. He was deeply opposed to abandoning a policy in which he had invested so much, particularly in view of the improved situation in South Vietnam. Publicly, he continued to take a hard line, proclaiming that "we must meet our commitments in Vietnam and the world. We shall and we are going to win!"⁴⁶

On the other hand, he could not ignore the protest that was building around him. He concluded, gradually and with great reluctance, that some additional conciliatory steps must be taken. In a highly emotional March 26 meeting with Gens. Wheeler and Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's successor, an obviously embattled commander in chief sought to head off military criticism of his peace moves. In tones that verged on despondency, he lamented an "abominable" fiscal situation, panic and demoralization in the country, near universal opposition in the press, and his own "overwhelming disapproval" in the polls. "I will go down the drain," he gloomily concluded.

Trusted advisers from outside the government seem to have clinched it for Johnson. To move the president from his indecision, Clifford suggested that he call his senior advisory group, the Wise Men, back to Washington for another session on Vietnam. After a series of briefings by diplomatic and military officials on March 26, the group, in a mood of obvious gloom, reported its findings. A minority advocated holding the line militarily and even escalating if necessary, but the majority favored immediate steps toward de-escalation. After its last meeting in November, McGeorge Bundy reported, the group had

⁴⁵Clark Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal," *Foreign Affairs* 47 (July 1969): 613; memorandum of conversation with Clifford, March 20, 1968, Krock Papers; Harry McPherson oral history interview, Johnson Papers.

⁴⁶Schandler, *Johnson and Vietnam*, p. 248; Tom Johnson notes on meeting, March 26, 1968, Johnson Papers, Tom Johnson Notes on Meetings, Box 2.

expected slow and steady progress. This had not happened, and the majority view, as summed up by Acheson, was that the United States could “no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left and we must begin to take steps to disengage.” The Wise Men disagreed among themselves on what to do, some proposing a total and unconditional bombing halt, others a shift in the ground strategy. Most agreed that the goal of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam was probably unattainable and favored a move toward eventual disengagement. “Unless we do something quick, the mood in this country may lead us to withdrawal,” Cyrus Vance warned.⁴⁷ “The establishment bastards have bailed out,” a stunned and dispirited Johnson is said to have remarked after the meeting.⁴⁸

Keeping his intentions under wraps until the very end, the president in a televised address on March 31 dramatically revealed a series of major decisions. Accepting Rusk’s proposal, he announced that the bombing of North Vietnam would henceforth be limited to the area just north of the demilitarized zone. Responding to the entreaties of Clifford and the Wise Men, however, he went further. “Even this limited bombing of the North could come to an early end,” he stressed, “if our restraint is matched by restraint in Hanoi.” He named the veteran diplomat W. Averell Harriman his personal representative should peace talks materialize. He made clear that the United States was ready to discuss peace, any time, any place. In a bombshell announcement that shocked the nation, Johnson concluded: “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.” For some time, he had considered not running for reelection. His ambitions were far from sated, and he loved the office of the presidency. But his health had never been good, and the burdens of office left him physically and emotionally exhausted. “I want out of this cage,” he exclaimed on one occasion. He worried that he might not live out another four years. Moreover, he feared disability of the sort that had

⁴⁷ Summary of notes, March 26, 1968, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 2. The Wise Men were Dean Acheson, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Douglas Dillon, Cyrus Vance, Arthur Dean, John McCloy, Omar Bradley, Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor, Robert Murphy, Henry Cabot Lodge, Abe Fortas, and Arthur Goldberg.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Roger Morris, *An Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1977), p. 44. Johnson was furious with the negative tone of the March 26 briefings. The “first thing I do when you all leave is to get those briefers,” he told one of the Wise Men. Notes, March 26, 1968, Johnson Papers, Diary Backup File, Box 95. See also Depuy oral history interview, William Depuy Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

crippled Woodrow Wilson in his last year in office. Leaving at this point might help the public understand how much he had accomplished, he reasoned. Devoting the remainder of his presidency to working for an honorable peace in Vietnam rather than getting himself reelected was the right thing to do.⁴⁹

Johnson's speech is usually cited as a major turning point in American involvement in Vietnam, and in some ways it was. No ceiling was placed on U.S. ground forces, and the president did not obligate himself to maintain the restrictions on the bombing. Indeed, in explaining the partial bombing halt to the embassy in Saigon, the State Department indicated that Hanoi would probably "denounce" it and "thus free our hand after a short period."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the circumstances in which the March decisions were made and the conciliatory tone of Johnson's speech made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to change course. March 31, 1968, brought an inglorious end to the policy of gradual escalation.

The president did not change his goals. The apparent American success in the battles of Tet reinforced the conviction of Johnson, Rusk, and Rostow that they could yet secure an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. "My biggest worry was not Vietnam itself," the president later conceded, "it was the divisiveness and pessimism at home. . . . I looked on my approaching speech as an opportunity to help right the balance and provide better perspective. For the collapse of the home front, I knew well, was just what Hanoi was counting on."⁵¹ By rejecting major troop reinforcements, reducing the bombing, shifting some military responsibility to the Vietnamese, and withdrawing from the presidential race, Johnson hoped to salvage his policy at least to the end of his term. He felt certain that history would vindicate him for standing firm. The March 31 speech did not represent a change of policy, therefore, but a shift of tactics to salvage a policy that had come under bitter attack.

The new tactics were even more vaguely defined and contradictory than the old. Johnson's decisions marked a shift from the idea of graduated pressure to the pre-1965 concept of saving South Vietnam by denying the enemy victory. Precisely how this goal was to be achieved was

⁴⁹*Public Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–1969*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1970), vol. 1, pp. 469–476; Longley, *BJ's 1968*, pp. 86–90.

⁵⁰"March 31 Speech," Johnson Papers, National Security File, National Security Council Histories: March 31, 1968, Speech, Box 47.

⁵¹Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 422.

not spelled out. The debate over ground strategy was not resolved. Gen. Abrams was given no strategic guidance. Administration officials generally agreed that ground operations should be scaled down to reduce casualties, but it was not clear how this would contribute to the achievement of American goals. The bombing was to be concentrated against North Vietnamese staging areas and supply lines, but that tactic had not reduced infiltration significantly in the past, and there was no reason to assume it would be more effective in the future. The exigencies of domestic politics required acceptance of the concept of Vietnamization, and the surprising response of the ARVN during Tet raised hopes that it would work. There was little in the past record of various South Vietnamese governments to suggest, however, that Thieu and his cohorts could conciliate their non-Communist opponents and pacify the countryside while effectively waging war against a weakened but still formidable enemy. Negotiations were also desirable from a domestic political standpoint, but in the absence of concessions the administration was not prepared to make, diplomacy could accomplish nothing. Its failure might intensify the pressures the talks were designed to ease. In short, the tactics of 1968 perpetuated the ambiguities and inconsistencies that had marked American policy from the start.

FIGHTING AND TALKING

U.S. policy in the months after Tet makes clear that although the Johnson administration spoke a more conciliatory language and altered its tactics, it did not retreat from its original goals. The president made good on his pledge to negotiate, accepting, after numerous delays, Hanoi's proposal for direct talks. From the outset, however, he refused to compromise on the fundamental issues. In the meantime, the United States kept maximum pressure on enemy forces in South Vietnam, assisted the South Vietnamese in a frantic drive to gain control of the countryside, and made plans for a gradual shift of the military burden to the ARVN. The result was to harden the stalemate, leaving resolution of the problem to the next administration.

Divisions within the U.S. government became even more pronounced during this new phase of the war. Certain, as Westmoreland put it, that the enemy had suffered a "colossal" defeat and that in any negotiations the United States would "hold four aces," North Vietnam "two deuces," Rusk, Rostow, Ambassador Bunker, and the military

staunchly opposed concessions and sought to apply intensive military pressure. They feared that the North Vietnamese would use negotiations to divide the United States from its South Vietnamese ally. They insisted that if the administration could shore up the home front and improve its military position in Vietnam, Hanoi could be forced to make major concessions. "We can afford . . . to be tough, patient and not too anxious in our negotiating stance," Bunker affirmed.⁵²

Clifford and Harriman, on the other hand, sought to extricate the United States from what they viewed as a hopeless tangle. Certain that the war was hampering America's ability to deal with more important problems and undermining its position as the "standard-bearer of moral principle in the world," they sought through Clifford's "winching down process" mutual de-escalation and disengagement, even at the expense of South Vietnam.⁵³ A skillful bureaucratic infighter, Clifford attempted to move the president to positions he had not reached. At an April 11 press conference, for example, he stated that a ceiling had been imposed on U.S. ground troops, a policy that the president had not yet approved but could not challenge and that therefore became established.

The battle raged throughout 1968. The two factions fought bitterly over such issues as the U.S. negotiating stance, the scale and purpose of ground operations, and resumption or full curtailment of the bombing. The stakes were high, the participants exhausted, their nerves frayed. Clifford remembered 1968 as a year that lasted five years; Rusk recalled it as a "blur" and claimed to have survived by a regimen of aspirin, Scotch, and cigarettes. Personal attacks descended to unprecedented levels. The president himself was worn out, increasingly angry and frustrated, more indecisive than usual, at times petulant and petty. Rusk and Rostow's hard line appealed to his "nail that coonskin to the wall" mentality. On occasion, he regretted having made the March 31 speech, and he yearned to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong off the map. A man who thrived on consensus, he could not deal with the bitter divisions among his advisers, and his administration in its last months never developed a thought-out negotiating position. "The pressure grew so intense that

⁵²Bunker memorandum, "Viet-Nam Negotiations: Dangers and Opportunities," April 8, 1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 521.

⁵³Harriman memorandum, "General Review of the Last Six Months," December 10, 1968, Harriman Papers; Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York, 1991), pp. 534–536.

at times I felt that the government itself might come apart at the seams," Clifford later recalled. "There was, for a brief time, something approaching paralysis, and a sense of events spiralling out of control."⁵⁴

The Tet Offensive also spurred pressures for talks in Hanoi. For the second time in five years, a bold quest for victory had ended disastrously. North Vietnam failed to achieve its major goals in the South; its forces were devastated. Tet alienated China and the Soviet Union. Unlike Johnson, there were no political consequences for Le Duan. The 1967 purges had taken care of the opposition in advance. The ever zealous First Secretary did not abandon the goal of total victory, but in the aftermath of Tet he shifted to a more patient and pragmatic approach. He ordered NVA and NLF forces in South Vietnam to revert to guerrilla warfare and political struggle. At home, he significantly upped draft calls. He remained deeply suspicious of diplomacy. But the uproar in the United States and Johnson's March 31 speech provided openings that might be used to advantage. Hanoi had long foreseen a stage where "talking and fighting" would be advantageous. Talks would appease Moscow, which had long urged diplomacy. They might be used to manipulate antiwar opinion in the United States and secure complete stoppage of the bombing. Le Duan did not seek a negotiated settlement. Rather, he saw in talks a means to buy time and exploit tensions between Washington and Saigon. Shortly after LBJ's speech, North Vietnam agreed to talk with the United States for the purpose of securing an unconditional end to the bombing. "Victory will come to us, not suddenly, but in a complicated, tortuous way," one party document conceded.⁵⁵

Hanoi's response caught Washington by surprise. Some U.S. officials suspected a clever diplomatic trap, and the administration was determined not to rush into negotiations. Although LBJ had vowed to send diplomats "to any forum, any time," he rejected Hanoi's proposed sites of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and especially Warsaw, where he insisted, the "deck would be stacked against us." Despite the accommodating tone of his March 31 speech, the president approached the reality of negotiations with extreme caution. Harriman and Clifford advocated a generous initial offer to get negotiations moving. But Westmoreland and Bunker insisted that the U.S. position in South Vietnam had improved

⁵⁴ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, p. 461; Dean Rusk as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), p. 417.

⁵⁵ Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 111–115, 120–121; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York, 2018), pp. 168–169; Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York, 2017), p. 35.

significantly and that the United States would be negotiating from strength. Johnson and his more hawkish advisers sincerely desired peace, but the terms they were prepared to hold out for virtually ensured that nothing would be accomplished. Rusk even spoke of a restoration of the status quo antebellum.⁵⁶

Formal talks finally opened in Paris on May 13 and immediately deadlocked. North Vietnam had little interest in substantive negotiations while the military balance of forces was unfavorable. Its diplomats made clear they were establishing contact with the United States to secure the "unconditional cessation of U.S. bombing raids and all other acts of war so that talks may start." The United States expressed willingness to stop the bombing, but insisted on reciprocal de-escalation. Hanoi continued to reject reciprocity and any terms that limited its ability to support the war in the South while leaving the United States a free hand there.

To break the impasse, chief American negotiator Harriman subsequently introduced a new proposal. The United States would stop the bombing "on the assumption that" North Vietnam would respect the demilitarized zone and refrain from further rocket attacks on Saigon and other cities and that "prompt and serious talks" would follow. The offer brought no formal response or any indication that one might be forthcoming. American officials complained that the North Vietnamese seemed prepared to sit in Paris "and even read the telephone directory if necessary to keep non-productive talks going." The Joint Chiefs pressed relentlessly for re-escalation, including B-52 strikes against North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia.⁵⁷

Fearful that the talks might drag on inconclusively, perpetuating the war and exacerbating domestic divisions, Harriman urged the president to compromise. NLF rocket attacks had subsided, and there were indications that significant numbers of North Vietnamese troops had been withdrawn from the South. Harriman argued that the military lull

⁵⁶Notes on meeting, May 6, 1968, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 3; Harold Johnson notes on meetings, May 6, 8, 1968, Harold Johnson Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., Box 127; Andrew Goodpaster oral history interview, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

⁵⁷Notes on National Security Council meeting, May 22, 1968, Johnson Papers, National Security File, NSC Meetings, Box 3; notes on meetings, May 25, 28, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 3.

could be interpreted as a sign of de-escalation. He pressed Johnson to stop the bombing and reduce the level of U.S. military activity while making clear the next move he expected from Hanoi. Clifford supported Harriman's proposal, but the military argued that the lull was simply a regrouping for the next offensive and warned that stopping the bombing would endanger American troops. An enraged Johnson flatly rejected Harriman's proposal, privately dismissing it as "mush" and claiming that the enemy was using his "own people as dupes." Meeting with his advisers on July 30, he expressed a wish to "knock the hell" out of the North Vietnamese. At a press conference the following day he threatened that if there were no breakthroughs in Paris, he might be compelled to undertake additional military measures. "Our most difficult negotiations were with Washington and not Hanoi . . .," one U.S. diplomat later lamented. "We just couldn't convince the President that summer."⁵⁸

While the "peace" talks dragged on in Paris, the United States significantly stepped up the scale of military operations. Between March and December, U.S. planes dropped more bombs on Indochina than in the previous three years. B-52s and fighter bombers pounded enemy supply routes and base camps in South Vietnam. Beneath the twentieth parallel in North Vietnam, they all but stopped the flow of supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁵⁹ The crusty, profane, cigar-chomping Abrams contrasted sharply with Westmoreland in appearance and demeanor, but, with modifications, he followed his predecessor's strategic design, pushing his forces to deliver a "crushing blow" to the enemy, "defeat him decisively."⁶⁰ The goal was to keep NVA/VC forces off balance to facilitate progress in pacification and Vietnamization. Under Abrams, the United States continued to implement large-scale search and destroy operations. "Charlie [the VC] is being relentlessly pursued night and day and pounded to shreds whenever and wherever we catch him," one American exclaimed.⁶¹ As before, the major challenge was to "catch him." Enemy forces remained difficult to locate and

⁵⁸Quoted in Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, Calif., 1978), p. 69.

⁵⁹Merle L. Pribbenow, "Rolling Thunder and the Linebacker Campaigns: The North Vietnamese View," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 10 (Fall-Winter 2001): 204-205.

⁶⁰Daddis, *Withdrawal*, p. 40.

⁶¹Frank Clay to Gen. and Mrs. Lucius Clay, May 15, 1968, Frank Clay Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

bring to battle. They “part before you like water before a ship’s bow,” one officer complained.⁶² They remained strong enough to mount a third offensive in August. As of December 1968, U.S. deaths passed the 30,000 mark.

The United States and South Vietnam also launched an Accelerated Pacification campaign to secure as much of the countryside as possible in the event serious negotiations should begin. Abrams committed a major proportion of U.S. and ARVN personnel to the program. Local defense forces were enlarged and given modern military equipment. To use their resources more effectively, the United States and South Vietnam focused on key areas. The Chieu Hoi Program, which offered amnesty and “rehabilitation” to defectors, was intensified, as was the Phoenix Program, a direct attack on the NLF infrastructure through mass arrests. By late 1968, for the first time, the United States and South Vietnam were firmly committed to controlling the countryside.⁶³

The United States also pressed forward with Vietnamization. American officials candidly admitted that the South Vietnamese were nowhere near ready to assume the burden of their own defense. “If you took out all the United States . . . forces now,” Abrams conceded, “the Government would have to settle for a piece of Vietnam.”⁶⁴ New plans were nevertheless drawn up to expand and upgrade the South Vietnamese armed forces and gradually shift to them primary responsibility for military operations. The force level was increased from 685,000 to 801,000, training programs were drastically expanded, and ARVN units were given the newest equipment. To improve the combat-readiness of Vietnamese troops and smooth the transition, Abrams made plans to use ARVN and American units in combined operations.⁶⁵

The results of this sometimes frenzied activity are difficult to measure. In pacification, the gains seem to have been limited. U.S. officials produced positive statistics for the Accelerated Pacification Campaign,

⁶²Daddis, *Withdrawal*, p. 40.

⁶³Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrines and Performance* (New York, 1977), pp. 264–265; James H. Embrey, “Reorienting Pacification: The Accelerated Pacification Campaign of 1968,” Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1997.

⁶⁴A. J. Langguth, “General Abrams Listens to a Different Drummer,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 1968, p. 28.

⁶⁵Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington, D.C., 1988), pp. 293–296.

but it remains unclear whether quiet in some areas of the countryside resulted from allied actions or from the enemy stand-down. Despite the beating the VC had taken, its infrastructure remained intact. The allies continued to rely on military power, especially massive firepower, to pacify the countryside, often with dire consequences for the local inhabitants, especially women and children. The Saigon government never found a way to build solid ties with the rural population. Most important, perhaps, no American idea or program was likely to succeed with people inclined to question or resist foreign influence. The allies appear to have done no better by the end of 1968 than regain some of what had been lost at Tet.⁶⁶

Tet made Vietnamization seem feasible for Americans, indeed even mandatory in view of the surge of opposition to the war at home. Quite possibly, much of the glowing praise for the ARVN that came with Tet derived from wishful U.S. thinking. The South Vietnamese army grew significantly in size, but large additional draft calls further stressed an already war-weary society. The desertion rate reached an all-time high in late 1968. Although larger and better equipped, the army's basic problems remained. Its increased size exposed even more sharply the shortage of skilled leaders at various levels. At the end of the year, U.S. advisers rated two ARVN divisions "outright poor," eight no better than "improving," and only one "excellent."⁶⁷ The North Vietnamese matched the ARVN increase by sending as many as 90,000 troops South in the aftermath of Tet. ARVN's biggest problem continued to be its dependency on its American ally. "They are afraid to do without us," one American observed, "and at the same time are guilty at receiving so much."⁶⁸ Abrams's well-intended efforts to integrate ARVN into combat operations so that its units could "learn to fight by fighting" ran afoul of firmly entrenched habits. Most large operations continued to be unilateral. Americans observed among some Vietnamese a stubborn resistance to Vietnamization. Clifford returned from a visit to Saigon oppressed by the "pervasive Americanization" of the war. The United States was

⁶⁶Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York, 2014), pp. 144–145; Daddis, *Withdrawal*, pp. 91, 95–96.

⁶⁷Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam, 1965–1970* (New York, 1970), p. 250.

⁶⁸Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, p. 166.

doing most of the fighting; the South Vietnamese “seemed content to have it that way.”⁶⁹

Although it improved markedly in the aftermath of Tet, the performance of the government of South Vietnam remained at best uneven. Government and people cooperated to implement Operation Recovery, a massive program to repair the damage done to the cities by the battles of Tet. At American urging, Thieu adopted a new economic program to combat inflation and instituted anticorruption measures to deal with one of South Vietnam’s oldest and most pervasive problems. Some optimistic observers concluded late in the year that the government was functioning better than at any time since the mid-1950s. For every problem attacked, however, others remained unchallenged and new ones surfaced. Land reform progressed at a snail’s pace. Tet created thousands of new refugees, and American officials expressed grave concern at the government’s apparent indifference to their plight. The prospect of negotiations made Thieu more reluctant than ever to broaden the base of his government. He made some cosmetic changes, appointing a civilian, Tran Van Huong, as prime minister and promising to expand civilian influence in the government. Increasingly, however, he withdrew into himself, trusting no one and making most decisions on his own. “He is his own Nhu,” one American complained with more than a touch of resignation.⁷⁰

The possibility of a U.S. withdrawal exacerbated the fragmented political system of South Vietnam. “Divisiveness is still endemic,” Robert Shaplen observed in late 1968, “and rivalries exist across the board, in politics, in the Army, among religious groups, and so on.” The rivalry between Ky and Thieu intensified, factionalizing much of the government. The Buddhists remained more alienated than ever, demanding the foundation of a “peace cabinet” and urging the soldiers to lay down their arms. Both the Buddhists and the sects appeared to look forward to the collapse of the government so that they could pick up the pieces. New political groups proliferated after the peace negotiations began, but they were dissension-ridden and could not work together. Much of the

⁶⁹ Clifford, “Viet Nam Reappraisal,” pp. 614–615; also Clifford to Johnson, July 16, 18, 1968, Clifford Papers, Box 5. Andrew Wiest in *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York, 2007) is more upbeat about ARVN after Tet but does not differ significantly in his conclusions.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Shaplen, *Road from War*, p. 248. See also William Colby oral history interview, Johnson Papers, and James P. Grant to Ernest Lindley, September 21, 1968, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 101.

urban population persisted in watchful waiting. The South Vietnamese, Shaplen concluded, seemed "more and more like men who know they are suffering from an incurable malady."⁷¹

Vietnamese-American tensions heightened after Tet. The government and its supporters angrily protested that they had been railroaded into negotiations before they were ready. Those Vietnamese who had come to depend on the United States expressed bitter fears that they would be left at the mercy of the Viet Cong. American service personnel manifested more openly the accumulated frustrations of fighting in a hostile environment a war they could not "win," and the savagery of the battles of Tet and the heavy losses inflamed anti-Vietnamese feelings. A gallows humor solution to the Vietnam dilemma that went the round of fire-bases and GI bars typified the attitude. "What you do is, you load all the Friendlies onto ships and take them out to the South China Sea. Then you bomb the country flat. Then you sink the ship."⁷² The savage murder of more than 500 civilians, including women and children, in the village of My Lai by an American company under the command of Lt. William Calley in March 1968 starkly exposed the hostility some Americans had come to feel for all Vietnamese.

YEAR OF ANGUISH

Divisions inside the United States also increased dramatically in an incredible year of tumult and torment. Although the war in Vietnam was only one of numerous causes, it was often the focal point. Campus unrest mounted, some 200 demonstrations erupting at more than 100 colleges during the spring semester alone. The most publicized and violent demonstrations took place at Columbia University in New York City, where radicals took over several buildings and occupied the president's office. After eight days, 1,000 police wielding nightsticks forcibly drove out the protesters. The assassination of civil rights leader and antiwar activist Martin Luther King Jr. in April brought latent racial unrest to the surface, provoking rioting, looting, and the burning of buildings in urban areas across the nation. The most visible and destructive rioting was in Washington, D.C., where members of Congress could see the flames of burning neighborhoods from their office windows and

⁷¹Shaplen, *Road from War*, p. 208.

⁷²Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York, 1978), p. 59.

soldiers wielded guns on the steps of the Capitol building. Twelve people were killed, an estimated \$25 million of damage was done, and the races were further polarized. The assassination of presidential candidate Robert Kennedy in June brought more grief to an already emotionally exhausted nation and seemed a graphic demonstration of the extent to which violence had triumphed.

The Democratic convention in Chicago in August dramatized the stark reality of a nation furiously divided against itself. Within the movement, the left was in the ascendancy. Young radicals of the Youth International Party (Yippies) circulated rumors that the Chicago water supply would be laced with drugs and one thousand protesters would float nude in Lake Michigan. They put forth their own candidate for the presidency, a pig named Pigasus. In return, Chicago's hard-nosed Mayor Richard Daley, mobilized more than 25,000 police, national guard, and army troops to enforce law and order. While antiwar protesters engaged Daley's police in bloody battles in the streets, delegates inside the stormy convention hall bitterly debated the war and other issues. Johnson feared that his preferred candidate, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, would be too soft on Vietnam. He even contemplated making himself available for a draft to run again, abandoning the idea only when it was obvious there was little support. The administration micromanaged the convention, insisting on a hard-line plank on the war, splitting an already divided party still further, costing Humphrey crucial support, and proving to some critics that the war could not be ended within "the system." The bloodshed that ran in the streets of "nightstick city" was brought into the homes of Americans each night on television. The nation could "no longer turn away from the fact that the war in Southeast Asia . . . was causing a kind of civil war in the United States."⁷³

Protest spread around the globe in 1968. Inspired at least partly by Vietnam and energized by mass media, especially television, the protesters were loosely connected by "informal networks of sympathy and support." They were generally leftist in orientation and led by well-educated and privileged young people. They included advocates of various causes: African Americans and other people of color demanding an end to racism and promoting black power; feminists, with their own

⁷³Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest against the War in Vietnam, 1963–1975* (New York, 1984), p. 200. See also Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York, 1995), pp. 183–238; and Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided* (New York, 2000), pp. 221–240.

unique networks of international cooperation; student radicals bonded in protest against capitalism and imperialism. Spinning off the March on the Pentagon, students in London, Oslo, Paris, Amsterdam, and other European cities mounted protests against the war and American imperialism in October 1967. The Tet Offensive sparked a much wider and more boisterous round of uprisings the next year. Images of the NLF flag flying over Hue and heavy fighting in the streets of Saigon stirred dissidents worldwide to take to the streets to challenge capitalism and imperialism, in Latin American radical Che Guevara's inflammatory slogan, to "Create Two, Three, Many Vietnams." The 1968 uprisings nearly toppled the French government of Charles de Gaulle. Dissent spread to Eastern Europe, and in August provoked a Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to suppress the "Prague Spring."⁷⁴

THE OCTOBER BOMBING HALT

Largely in response to domestic pressures, Johnson in late 1968 made one last effort to get the peace talks off dead center. The convention in Chicago badly discredited the Democrats. In its aftermath, some party leaders pleaded for a dramatic peace move to assist Humphrey, who lagged well behind Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon, in the early polls. LBJ had repeatedly insisted that he would not be swayed by political considerations. When Humphrey sought to distance himself from the administration's Vietnam policy, the president expressed preference for a Nixon victory and refused even to see the vice president. But Johnson was sympathetic to the concerns of leading Democrats. He was eventually persuaded that he might be able to break the deadlock in Paris without undue risk. Harriman continued to argue that the military lull in South Vietnam was a clear sign of North Vietnamese interest in substantive negotiations. Abrams affirmed that a bombing halt would not pose a military threat. The North Vietnamese had been badly hurt by the spring campaigns. In any case, the approach of the monsoon season would severely limit the effectiveness of the bombing for several months. To appease the military and keep pressure on North Vietnam, Johnson agreed, in the event of a bombing halt, to redeploy American airpower against North Vietnamese supply lines in Laos. The president,

⁷⁴Fink, "Introduction," in Fink, 1968, pp. 1-27.

with apparent reluctance, finally committed himself to stop the bombing altogether if some concessions could be obtained from Hanoi.⁷⁵

Over the next few weeks, Harriman diligently negotiated an “understanding.” To meet North Vietnam’s continuing objections to reciprocity, he indicated that the bombing would be stopped unilaterally. Responding to Soviet pressure and hoping to exploit American presidential politics, Hanoi eventually dropped its insistence on an unconditional bombing halt. The U.S. delegation made clear, however, that the enemy would be expected to stop rocket and mortar attacks on South Vietnamese cities and limit the infiltration of soldiers and supplies across the demilitarized zone. In addition, the North Vietnamese informally agreed that serious peace talks would begin within four days after the bombing had been stopped. The administration was especially pleased to secure their consent to the Saigon government’s participation in the peace talks. To get around North Vietnam’s repeated refusal to negotiate directly with the “puppet” Saigon government and Thieu’s refusal to join negotiations in which the NLF participated, Harriman devised an ingenious “our side, your side” formula. The negotiations would be two-sided, but each side was free to work out its own composition and to interpret the makeup of the other as it chose. The NLF and the Saigon government could thus participate without recognizing each other as an independent entity. The North Vietnamese refused to commit themselves formally to these “understandings,” but they gave private assurances that they would “know what to do” once the bombing had stopped. Hesitant to the end, Johnson finally agreed to “go the last mile” for peace, although administration officials agreed that if the North Vietnamese took advantage of the bombing halt or appeared not to be negotiating seriously, the United States might resume air operations.⁷⁶

Johnson’s quest for an October surprise that might bring peace in Vietnam—and a Humphrey presidency—produced as many shenanigans as any political campaign in U.S. history. After losing the presidency by a hair in 1960, an understandably paranoid Nixon left nothing to chance, taking the lead in and even overseeing from a discrete distance a determined effort to ensure that South Vietnam obstructed LBJ’s plans. His campaign had a “mole” in the Johnson White House (who thought he was informing Democratic doves, not Republicans); Harvard professor Henry Kissinger

⁷⁵Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 514–515; memorandum for the record, October 23, 1968, Johnson Papers, Diary Backup, November 11, 1968, Box 115.

⁷⁶Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 518; notes on meetings, October 14, 31, 1968, Johnson Papers, Meeting Notes File, Box 3.

provided information from Paris. The Republican campaign used South Vietnam's ambassador to the United States, Bui Diem, and China Lobby operative and devotee of right wing causes, Anna Chennault, as "conduits" to the Thieu government. Nixon appears personally to have let Bui Diem know as early as July that South Vietnam would get a better deal from the Republicans. Nervously, in October, he inquired if there were other ways to "monkey wrench" Johnson's plans. A rightly suspicious president on October 29 ordered a phone tap on South Vietnam's embassy and round-the-clock surveillance of Madame Chennault. These sources immediately turned up evidence to confirm administration suspicions. "This is treason!," an alarmed LBJ exclaimed, shortly before he cleared the way for the bombing halt that was to jump-start peace negotiations.

The last days before the election were filled with maneuver, intrigue, and backbiting worthy of a spy novel. Without revealing what he knew and how he knew it, Johnson issued a veiled warning through Senator Everett Dirksen that he was aware of Republican ties with South Vietnam. He spoke again of treason and warned that it must stop. A surreal phone conversation with Nixon followed in which LBJ spoke as though the candidate himself was not involved and Nixon flat out lied about his role in and knowledge of what was going on and promised to do what he could to bring peace. Several times during these weeks, Johnson and his aides toyed with the idea of leaks to expose Republican skullduggery. Each time they stopped short. The president's lack of confidence in Humphrey's toughness on Vietnam may have played a role in his decision. Until the end, he assumed that Nixon would win, and he claimed not to want to create a constitutional crisis or taint the office of the presidency, whoever the occupant. Above all, he lacked evidence of Nixon's direct involvement, and he did not wish to divulge his own unsavory actions in wiretapping his political foes. He did push ahead with the bombing halt, and gave full if belated support to the Humphrey campaign.⁷⁷

The South Vietnamese needed no prompting from the Nixon campaign. GVN officials later claimed that their suspicions had first been aroused by a mid-July meeting with Americans in Honolulu devoted to negotiations. They did not need amateur diplomats like Madame Chennault to tell them how to deal with vital issues of war and peace.⁷⁸

⁷⁷The best account of these maneuverings is in Longley, *LBJ's 1968*, pp. 232–255. See also John A. Farrell, *Richard Nixon: A Life* (New York, 2017), pp. 342–345.

⁷⁸Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger's Responsibility for the Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, 2018), p. 5.

Only forty-four years old at this crucial juncture in his career, President Nguyen Van Thieu had demonstrated above all else in his rapid rise to military and political power an instinct for survival. He had collaborated with the Viet Minh, the French, and the Americans at various times. He had shown rare cunning in mastering the Byzantine intricacies of South Vietnamese politics. Shrewd and suspicious, he was painfully aware of his dependence on the United States, but he also increasingly recognized that he could not trust his ally. A wily, calculating politician, desperately fearful for his country's future and his own, Thieu probably would have concluded by himself that he would do better with the Republicans than with the Democrats and that delay was essential. Proclaiming that his government was not a "car that can be hitched to a locomotive and taken anywhere the locomotive wants to go," he insisted that he would not meet with the Viet Cong and that the American-arranged understanding was a "clear admission of defeat." Hanoi must issue formal assurances that it would de-escalate the war and must negotiate directly with Saigon.⁷⁹

Intensive U.S. pressure failed to budge the embattled South Vietnamese. Johnson sternly warned Thieu on October 30 that if Americans held him responsible for blocking peace, "God help South Vietnam, because no president could maintain the support of the American people." An emotional Thieu stubbornly retorted: "You are powerful. You can say to small nations what you want . . . but you cannot force us to do anything against our interests. This negotiation is not a life and death matter for the US, but it is for Vietnam."⁸⁰

Thieu's obstinacy posed a dilemma for the United States. LBJ recognized that to concede to Saigon's demands would "blow the whole peace effort sky high," perhaps wrecking Humphrey's chances as well.⁸¹ On the other hand, he feared that to negotiate without Saigon, as Harriman and even Rusk urged, offered little prospect of an acceptable settlement and risked Republican charges of a sellout. The president thus announced the bombing halt on October 31 without South Vietnamese approval, but he delayed the opening of formal talks. In the meantime, the United States combined renewed assurances that it would not recognize the

⁷⁹Quoted in Shaplen, *Road from War*, p. 243.

⁸⁰Secretary of State to Embassy Saigon, Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, October 30, 1968, copies in Harriman Papers, Box 554.

⁸¹Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 517-519.

NLF or impose a coalition government on South Vietnam with private pressures and eventually a public threat to begin talks without Saigon. After a two-week delay, during which Nixon won a precariously thin victory, Thieu agreed to send representatives to Paris.

Once in Paris, the South Vietnamese raised procedural objections that nullified any hope of a peace settlement. The United States had originally proposed that the delegations be seated at two long tables to emphasize the two-sided nature of the talks. But North Vietnam had demanded a square table with one delegate on each side to underscore its contention that the NLF was a separate party to the talks. To get around this impasse, Harriman had proposed a round table, and the North Vietnamese had acquiesced. But Saigon refused to go along. Thieu may have felt that the issue was of sufficient symbolic or even practical importance to merit resistance, or he may simply have seized on it to stall the talks until a presumably more sympathetic Nixon took office.

Americans railed at South Vietnamese intransigence, and the North Vietnamese mocked U.S. weakness. McPherson lamented that the "American Gulliver is tied down by the South Vietnamese Lilliputians." Outraged at what he later denounced as a "ridiculous performance" on the part of the South Vietnamese, Harriman again urged Johnson to negotiate without them. The South Vietnamese had been "coddled and cuddled beyond belief," an impatient and irate Clifford complained. "They're making all the decisions, but we pay, we die, we fight." He pressed Johnson to begin to withdraw U.S. troops irrespective of what Saigon and Hanoi did.⁸² North Vietnamese negotiators snidely observed that "usually the man leads the horse. This time the horse is leading the man."⁸³ The president upheld Thieu's objections, however, and the so-called battle of the tables raged for weeks. Instead of drafting cables at night, the U.S. delegation sketched table designs, the two sides proposing at various times such inventive geometric creations as a broken parallelogram, four arcs of a circle, a flattened ellipse, and two semicircles that touched but did not form a circle. Finally, under pressure from the Soviet Union, Hanoi agreed to a compromise: a round table placed between two rectangular tables. By the time the infamous battle had

⁸²McPherson to Clifford, August 13, 1968, Johnson Papers, McPherson File, Box 53; Clifford notes for meeting with Johnson, November 18, 1968, Clifford Papers, Box 6; Elsey Notes, December 18, 1968, January 4, 1969, Elsey Papers.

⁸³Harriman memorandum of conversation with Robert Shaplen, November 30, 1968, Harriman Papers, Box 556.

been resolved, the Johnson administration was in its last days. Any chance of substantive negotiations had passed.⁸⁴

It seems doubtful that Republican dirty tricks or South Vietnamese intransigence sabotaged an opportunity for a peace settlement. Hanoi's approach on procedural issues was more flexible in late 1968 than previously, probably because it wanted to get the bombing stopped, possibly because it hoped to extract an acceptable settlement from Johnson before he left office. Its flexibility did not extend to substantive issues, however. There is nothing to indicate that it would have agreed to anything short of an American withdrawal and a coalition government. These terms would not have been acceptable to Johnson. Although he had given in on the bombing halt and was deeply annoyed with Thieu, the president still clung to the goals he had pursued so doggedly since taking office. He made clear to Thieu that he would not recognize the NLF or accept a coalition government or some form of cosmetic settlement that would permit an American withdrawal. He seems to have felt that he could still achieve his original goals, and he remained convinced that he had the enemy on the ropes.⁸⁵ On the day he ordered the bombing halt, he instructed Abrams to "use his manpower and resources in a maximum effort" to "keep the enemy on the run." "Don't give them a moment's rest. Let the enemy feel the weight of everything you've got."⁸⁶ Thus, even if Thieu had gone along from the start, it appears doubtful that any meaningful peace agreement could have been reached in 1968, particularly in view of the short timetable.

The year 1968 ended as it had begun, with deadlock on the battlefield and in diplomatic councils. Each side in the aftermath of Tet saw itself on the offensive seeking a knockout blow against a weakened enemy. In fact, each had suffered enormous losses. In the eight weeks after March 31 alone, 3,700 Americans were killed, an estimated 43,000 enemy. Despite claims of victory, moreover, each combatant was significantly weakened; neither emerged with sufficient leverage to force a settlement. Tet merely

⁸⁴Harriman to Rusk, December 21, 28, 1968, Harriman Papers, Box 553; Rudy Abramson, *The Life of W. Averell Harriman: Spanning the Century, 1891–1986* (New York, 1992), p. 671.

⁸⁵The enemy could "still knock out a window light," Johnson remarked in November, but "they have been out of it since September." Henry Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 163. See also notes on meeting with Nixon, November 11, 1968, Johnson Papers, Tom Johnson Notes, Box 1.

⁸⁶Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 523; Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York, 1992), p. 253.

Comparative Military Casualty Figures

| Year | Killed in Action | | Wounded | |
|--------|------------------|---------------|---------|---------------|
| | U.S. | South Vietnam | U.S. | South Vietnam |
| 1960 | 0 | 2,223 | 0 | 2,788 |
| 1961 | 11 | 4,004 | 2 | 5,449 |
| 1962 | 31 | 4,457 | 41 | 7,195 |
| 1963 | 78 | 5,665 | 218 | 11,488 |
| 1964 | 147 | 7,457 | 522 | 17,017 |
| 1965 | 1,369 | 11,242 | 3,308 | 23,118 |
| 1966 | 5,008 | 11,953 | 16,526 | 20,975 |
| 1967 | 9,377 | 12,716 | 32,370 | 29,448 |
| 1968 | 14,589 | 27,915 | 46,797 | 70,696 |
| 1969 | 9,414 | 21,833 | 32,940 | 65,276 |
| 1970 | 4,221 | 23,346 | 15,211 | 71,582 |
| 1971 | 1,381 | 22,738 | 4,767 | 60,939 |
| 1972 | 300 | 39,587 | 587 | 109,960 |
| 1973 | 237 | 27,901 | 24 | 131,936 |
| 1974 | 207 | 31,219 | 0 | 155,735 |
| Totals | 46,370 | 254,256 | 153,313 | 783,602 |

Source: Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, p. 275.

hardened the deadlock, and it would take four more years of “fighting while negotiating” before it was finally broken.

In the long run, as historian Ronald Spector has observed, the battles of Tet were decisive “because they were so indecisive.”⁸⁷ Whatever its costs, Tet represented a major political victory for the enemy because it convinced most Americans that the war could not be won in an acceptable time and at an acceptable cost. Thus, although Johnson clung stubbornly to his goals and refused to make the concessions necessary to get a settlement, he initiated what turned out to be an irreversible process of de-escalation that would in time work in North Vietnam’s favor. In a still larger sense, Tet represented the high-water mark of post-World War II American hegemony, that point at which the nation’s establishment came to recognize that its international commitments had begun to exceed its ability to pay for them. From this point on, in Vietnam and elsewhere, the United States struggled with the dilemma of scaling back its commitments or finding alternative ways of maintaining its domestic and international well-being at a lower cost.

⁸⁷ Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York, 1993), pp. 311–314.



Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger

Nixon and Kissinger dominated U.S. policymaking on Vietnam between 1969 and 1973. The two men launched sometimes bold ventures such as the invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and the Christmas bombing of 1972 in an effort to win the war. The best they could do was the Paris Peace Agreements of 1973, a compromise that got the United States out of Vietnam militarily and secured the return of U.S. POWs but fell well short of the peace with honor Nixon had vowed to secure. Dependent on each other in many ways, the two men in time became bitter rivals.

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A War for Peace

Nixon, Kissinger, and Vietnam, 1969–1973

“We will not make the same old mistakes,” National Security Adviser Henry A. Kissinger proclaimed of Vietnam in 1969. “We will make our own.”¹ Kissinger’s remark underscored the Nixon administration’s determination to find new solutions to an old problem. The self-effacing humor, a Kissinger trademark, suggested a certainty of success. But the prediction turned out to be only partially correct. Kissinger and Nixon did try new approaches, some of which in time produced their own mistakes, but their policy suffered from the same flaws as those of their predecessors. Although disguising it in the rhetoric of “peace with honor,” the Nixon administration persisted in the quixotic search for an independent, non-Communist Vietnam. This goal was to be achieved primarily by a massive buildup of South Vietnamese military strength and by the application of military pressure against North Vietnam, methods that had been tried before in various forms and found wanting. The result was four more years of bloody warfare in Indochina, a marked increase in domestic strife, and a peace settlement that permitted American extrication but was neither honorable nor lasting.

PEACE WITH HONOR

U.S. foreign policy in the Nixon–Kissinger era bore the distinct personal imprint of its shapers. The middle-American professional politician and the German-born Harvard professor could not have been more different

¹Quoted in Roger Morris, *An Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1977), p. 4.

in background, but they shared a love of power and a burning ambition to mold a fluid world and establish their place in history. Nixon was intelligent and hard-working but also tormented, combative, and viciously vindictive. His hatreds burned deeply, especially when fueled by alcohol, which he handled poorly. Kissinger could be outwardly charming and gregarious, but he was also edgy and prone to tantrums. Loners and outsiders in their own professions, the two men were perhaps naturally drawn to each other. Insecure to the point of paranoia, they also became profoundly suspicious of each other and disparaging in the presence of others. In the first years, mutual dependence kept them together, Kissinger depending on Nixon for access to the prominence and power he so craved, Nixon relying on Kissinger to shape his broad designs. Eventually, their suspicions turned into bitter rivalry.²

Although both men had reputations as rigid ideologues, they were pragmatic and flexible in their approach to foreign policy. They shared an obsession with secrecy, a zest for intrigue, and a flair for the unexpected move. They also shared a certain disdain for democracy, equating dissent with treason and carrying to extremes the Cold War dogma that national security was too important to be left to an ignorant public and a parochial and cumbersome Congress. Above all, they shared a contempt for bureaucracy. They took the foreign policy controls firmly in their own hands and jealously guarded them, using, but rarely relying on or even keeping informed, the rest of the government, and employing deception and backchannel communications to dominate their colleagues. They created an atmosphere of oppressive secretiveness, backbiting, and conspiracy that makes the word *Byzantine* seem tame by comparison.

Their methods spurred extraordinary activities on the part of other government officials merely to keep abreast of what was going on. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, through Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, used a Navy liaison officer and an enlisted man employed in Kissinger's National Security Council (NSC) office as "spies" to find out what he and the president were up to. Former Wisconsin congressman and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird reveled in matching wits with Kissinger—and excelled at it. He named loyalists to head the Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency and used them to keep him informed of White House backchannel communications and telephone conversations. He secured from military units

²Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York, 2007), pp. 89–93.

handling top-level travel arrangements information about Kissinger's whereabouts.³

The result was a foreign policy sometimes bold and imaginative in conception, often crude and improvisational; sometimes brilliant in execution, sometimes bungling; a policy dedicated to the noble goal of a "generation of peace" but frequently ruthless and cynical in its use of military power and callous in its obliviousness to the enormous human costs inflicted at home and especially abroad. The result also was a systematic abuse of power that ultimately forced Nixon's humiliating resignation from the office he had pursued throughout his political career.

Prior to taking office, Nixon and Kissinger had firmly defended the American commitment in Vietnam. At the height of the domestic debate in 1967, Nixon had insisted that the presence of U.S. troops in Southeast Asia had helped contain an expansionist China and given the "free" Asian nations time to develop stable institutions. "Whatever one may think of the 'domino theory,'" he asserted, "it is beyond question that without the American commitment in Vietnam, Asia would be a far different place today."⁴ Kissinger conceded that the United States may have exaggerated the significance of Vietnam in the early stages of its involvement. "But the commitment of five hundred thousand Americans has settled the issue of the importance of Vietnam," he quickly added. "For what is involved now is confidence in American promises."⁵

By 1969, Nixon and Kissinger recognized that the war must be ended. It had become, in the words of a Nixon speechwriter, a "bone in the nation's throat," a divisive force that had torn the country apart and hindered any constructive approach to domestic and foreign policy problems.⁶ Nixon perceived, moreover, that his ability to extricate the nation from Vietnam would decisively affect his political future and his place in history. "I'm not going to end up like LBJ," he once remarked, "holed up in the White House afraid to show my face on the street. I'm going to stop that war. Fast."⁷

The two men nevertheless insisted that the war must be ended "honorably." Simply to pull out of Vietnam, they believed, would be a callous abandonment of those South Vietnamese who had depended

³Larry Berman, *Zumwalt: The Life and Times of Admiral Elmo Russell "Bud" Zumwalt, Jr.* (New York, 2012), pp. 312–344.

⁴Richard M. Nixon, "Asia after Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 46 (October 1967): 111.

⁵Henry A. Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 47 (January 1969): 219.

⁶William Safire, *Before the Fall* (New York, 1975), p. 121.

⁷H. R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power* (New York, 1978), p. 81.

on American protection and would be unworthy of the actions of a great nation. As a young Congressman, Nixon had led the right-wing Republican attack on Truman for “losing” China. Like Johnson before him, he feared the domestic upheaval that might accompany the fall of South Vietnam to Communism. The reaction would be “terrible,” he told a journalist in May 1969, “. . . we would destroy ourselves if we pulled out in a way that wasn’t really honorable.”⁸

Most important, Nixon and Kissinger feared the international consequences of a precipitous withdrawal. Even before taking office, they had begun sketching the outlines of a new world order based on American primacy. Their grand design included at least a limited accommodation with the Soviet Union and China. They felt they must extricate the United States from the war in a manner that would demonstrate to these old adversaries resoluteness of purpose and certainty of action, a manner that would uphold U.S. credibility with friends and foes alike. “However we got into Vietnam,” Kissinger observed, “whatever the judgment of our actions, ending the war honorably is essential for the peace of the world. Any other solution may unloose forces that would complicate the prospects of international order.”⁹ Nixon agreed. “The true objective of this war is peace,” he affirmed shortly after taking office—with no apparent sense of the paradox—“It is a war for peace.”¹⁰

An “honorable” settlement had to meet several essential conditions. The American withdrawal from Vietnam must be conducted in a way that avoided even the appearance of defeat. There must be no face-saving political settlement designed merely to permit a graceful U.S. exit from Vietnam. Kissinger explicitly rejected the idea of a coalition government, which, he said, would “destroy the existing political structure and thus lead to a Communist takeover.” Nixon and Kissinger set as their optimum goal a “fair negotiated settlement that would preserve the independence of South Vietnam.” At a minimum, they insisted on a settlement that would give South Vietnam a reasonable chance to survive.¹¹

Although this objective had eluded the United States for more than a decade, Nixon and Kissinger believed that they could succeed where

⁸Quoted in C. L. Sulzberger, *Seven Continents and Forty Years* (New York, 1977), pp. 505–507.

⁹Kissinger, “Vietnam Negotiations,” 234.

¹⁰Sulzberger, *Seven Continents*, p. 507.

¹¹Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978), p. 349; Safire, *Before the Fall*, p. 134.

others had failed. They perceived that the Saigon government could not survive an abrupt American withdrawal, but it appeared stronger than ever in early 1969. With continued U.S. backing, South Vietnam's president Nguyen Van Thieu might hold on indefinitely. The North Vietnamese must recognize, Kissinger reasoned, that they could not eject the United States from Vietnam by force. They might therefore be persuaded to exchange an American withdrawal for a political settlement that would leave Thieu firmly in control.

Nixon and Kissinger were confident, moreover, that they could compel Hanoi to accept terms it had consistently rejected. The Soviet Union had made clear its keen interest in expanded trade with the United States and an agreement limiting strategic arms. This leverage, or "linkage," as Kissinger called it, could be used to secure Russian assistance in getting North Vietnam to agree to a "fair" settlement. Great power diplomacy would be supplemented by the use of force. Nixon felt that military pressure had failed thus far because it had been employed in a limited, indecisive manner. A "fourth-rate power like North Vietnam" must have a "breaking point," Kissinger insisted. He and Nixon were prepared to use maximum force, threatening the very survival of North Vietnam, to get what they wanted.¹² Nixon compared his situation to that faced by Eisenhower in Korea in 1953. He was certain that the threat of "massive retaliation" would intimidate the North Vietnamese as he believed it had the North Koreans. He counted on his image as a hard-line anti-Communist to make the threat credible. "They'll believe any threat of force Nixon makes because it's Nixon," he told one of his advisers. "We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon's obsessed about Communism . . . and he has his hand on the nuclear button.'"¹³

The Nixon-Kissinger strategy for ending the war was based on a large dose of wishful thinking. Their concern about U.S. credibility was exaggerated and was based on dubious reasoning to begin with. In any event, as Walter Isaacson has concluded, in their stubborn and ultimately futile pursuit of a settlement that would uphold United States' credibility, they "squandered the true sources of its influence—and of its credibility—in the world: its moral authority, its sense of worthy purpose and its reputation as a reasonable and sensible player." It was naive to assume that they could accomplish what Johnson had failed to do at

¹²Quoted in Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, p. 164.

¹³Quoted in Haldeman, *Ends of Power*, p. 83.

a time when they had less military power at their disposal and when the patience of the American public had already worn thin. Like their predecessors, they grossly underestimated their adversaries. They also overestimated the willingness and ability of the Kremlin to pressure North Vietnam to accept a settlement favorable to the United States. And the lessons Nixon drew from Eisenhower's ending of the Korean War represented yet another example of misuse of historical analogy by American leaders.¹⁴

MANY FRONTS

Peacemaking in Vietnam posed complex challenges on many fronts: a still tenuous political-military situation in South Vietnam; a relentlessly defiant foe in Hanoi; deadlocked negotiations in Paris; and a wobbly home front. A major problem was that steps taken to deal with any of these fronts could fatally undercut others. Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam might quiet the home front, for example, but it would also undermine the allied position in South Vietnam and convey weakness to Hanoi. Kissinger and Nixon believed that a dramatic escalation of the war might force North Vietnam to terms. They also recognized that it could provoke outrage at home, even perhaps spur a Democratic-controlled Congress to take control of the war. These two approaches coexisted uneasily during much of Nixon's first year, the president shifting between them as circumstances and his own mood dictated.

Nixon and Kissinger fancied themselves clever diplomatists, but in 1969 they seem to have been making it up as they went along. With that casual self-confidence common to leaders new to power, they first experimented in a rather desultory fashion with coercion. The national security adviser understood the urgency of ending the war before popular support further weakened. He and the president hoped to put Vietnam behind them quickly and get on with things they considered more important. Kissinger persuaded Nixon to initiate planning for a "brutal" strike, up to and possibly including tactical nuclear weapons, that would force North Vietnam to settle. If Hanoi spurned U.S. peace

¹⁴Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York, 1992), p. 161; Edward C. Keefer, "President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the End of the Korean War," *Diplomatic History* 10 (Summer 1986): 267–289.

proposals, the administration would threaten the use of force, and, if necessary, take action.

Following this script, Nixon sent warnings to North Vietnam through French and Soviet intermediaries that he would level Hanoi and Haiphong before he would abandon South Vietnam. To signal his willingness to do things Johnson had refused, he ordered in March a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. Code-named MENU, the program's individual components (with singular inappropriateness) were called BREAKFAST, LUNCH, SNACK, and DESSERT. Over the next fifteen months, B-52 bombers conducted more than 3,000 raids, dropping more than 100,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia. At Nixon's insistence, the bombing was kept secret from the public and indeed most of the government. It caused huge civilian casualties in Cambodia, and helped plunge that nominally neutral nation into a conflict that would have tragic consequences for its people.¹⁵

While Nixon and Kissinger focused on coercion, Secretary of Defense Laird methodically and skillfully pushed an alternative. Dubbed the "Midwest Machiavelli" by a Wisconsin newspaper, Laird, as a member of Congress, had established a reputation for cunning—former president Eisenhower called him "devious"—and as a savvy political operator. Early in the war, and especially when it pertained to the bombing, he had been an outspoken hawk, but he soured on the conflict when he concluded that Johnson would not pursue victory. A politician who thought mostly of the war's impact at home, he was persuaded by Tet that America could save itself only by getting out of Vietnam. The secretary had a better instinct than Nixon and Kissinger for Hanoi's staying power. His solution was what he first called de-Americanization, reducing the number of U.S. troops and casualties, building up South Vietnamese military forces, and shifting the burden of combat to South Vietnam. In March, he secured the agreement of Abrams and Thieu for an initial withdrawal of U.S. troops. Nixon still insisted on mutual withdrawal, but at an NSC meeting upon returning from Saigon Laird got the president's consent for a small U.S. withdrawal done in a "deliberate way" that would not "show panic." Laird renamed the policy "Vietnamization" to "put the emphasis on the right issues." He used leaks to the press and assorted unauthorized

¹⁵David L. Prentice, "Choosing the 'Long Road': Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, Vietnamization, and the War over Nixon's Vietnam Strategy," *Diplomatic History* 40 (June 2016): 451; Kenton Clymer, *Troubled Relations: The United States and Cambodia since 1870* (DeKalb, Ill., 2007), pp. 94–102.

statements to give his approach some credence, even the semblance of approval. In early April, Nixon authorized him to begin planning for Vietnamization.

An unusually costly May battle at a remote location the GIs called Hamburger Hill came to starkly symbolize for many Americans the growing futility of the war. The resulting furor threatened a sharp drop in public support and highlighted the need to do something. To calm the home front, Nixon, at a June meeting with Thieu on Midway Island, tilted further toward Laird's approach by announcing that 25,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn in August.¹⁶

Alarmed that Vietnamization seemed to be gaining acceptance, Kissinger mounted a vigorous summer counteroffensive. He dismissed Laird's approach as "unilateral withdrawal," and warned that it would weaken the U.S. negotiating position in Paris and drag the war out indefinitely. He correctly saw the need in terms of domestic opinion to end the conflict quickly. He pushed what came to be called Operation Duck Hook as a "belligerent alternative" to Vietnamization (a later military version was called Pruning Knife). He urged Nixon to defer troop withdrawals while plans were devised for an "intense air and naval offensive to decimate North Vietnam." The United States would give Hanoi a deadline for a peace agreement. If it refused or stalled, the administration would respond with maximum force. Kissinger persuaded Nixon to "go for broke" with Duck Hook. "We can't have you nibbled away," the president told Thieu.¹⁷

In mid-summer, the administration orchestrated a series of warnings to Hanoi. Making Soviet-American negotiations on issues such as trade and arms control contingent on Moscow's assistance with North Vietnam, what he called "linkage," Kissinger in July warned Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that if Hanoi did not come to terms, the United States would have to think of "other alternatives." Nixon dispatched a personal letter to Ho Chi Minh, more conciliatory in tone, but also containing only slightly veiled warnings. In early August, Kissinger bluntly informed North Vietnamese diplomat Xuan Thuy in secret talks in Paris that if there was no progress toward a settlement by November 1, the United States, "with great reluctance," would take "measures of great consequence." Nixon postponed the scheduled troop withdrawal. Over the next few months, Kissinger continued to press Duck Hook,

¹⁶ Prentice, "Long Road," 451–458; Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military, 1969–1973* (Washington, D.C., 2015), pp. 90–109.

¹⁷ Prentice, "Long Road," 462–463.

advising the president that the United States must act “with a firm resolve to do whatever is necessary to achieve success.” The action must be “brutal”; there would be civilian casualties. The United States could not relent until North Vietnam had conceded. Nixon seems to have concurred.¹⁸

While pursuing two alternative strategies, the administration also focused on the home front. After a brief honeymoon period in its first months in office, antiwar opposition and activity surged anew. As no peace agreement materialized, approval of the president’s handling of the war fell sharply. Expressing the rising frustration of the hawks, Georgia senator Richard Russell demanded that the administration make a “meaningful move” against North Vietnam. Dormant since the Democratic convention of 1968, the antiwar movement announced plans for massive demonstrations in October and November. Congressional doves spoke out once more. Republican senator Jacob Javits of New York charged Nixon with pursuing the same “sterile and unsuccessful approach” followed by Johnson. Senate doves expressed dissatisfaction with Nixon’s peace proposals and troop withdrawal. Many Democrats rallied behind Clark Clifford’s call for the removal of all U.S. forces by the end of 1970.¹⁹

Nixon and his advisers mounted a multi pronged campaign to combat their domestic foes. The administration used public relations techniques to draw favorable attention to those who backed the president and discredit those who opposed him. Nixon unleashed his equally combative vice president, Spiro Agnew, for a series of vitriolic attacks against antiwar protestors and the liberal media that allegedly encouraged them. Believing that student protest derived mainly from narrow self-interest, the administration reduced draft calls and in time changed a notably inequitable draft system into a lottery. Like LBJ before him, Nixon grew obsessed with the protestors. He and his advisers spent hours agonizing over how to deal with them. White House staffers dreamed up options ranging from the bizarre—using helicopters to blow out protestors’ candles—to the sinister—hiring thugs to beat them up. Through the illegal CHAOS program created by Johnson, the administration expanded surveillance of antiwar groups and also engaged in sabotage. The IRS and FBI harassed major peace organizations and their leaders.

¹⁸Prentice, “Long Road,” 469; Hunt, *Laird*, p. 119.

¹⁹Russell to L. M. Thacker, July 26, 1969, Richard M. Russell Papers, University of Georgia Library, Athens, Ga., Dictation File, Box IJ7.

Agents planted within various groups helped disrupt their lawful activity, tried to incite them to violent acts against each other, and took actions that would make them look bad.²⁰

The White House also sought to use the increasingly important prisoner of war (POW) issue to build popular support for its Vietnam policies. The families of U.S. POWs (most of them pilots shot down over North Vietnam) had put together several potent organizations to lobby the government to secure their release. To establish a rallying point and link support for the president to return of the POWs, Nixon met with the families. He urged Americans to contact North Vietnamese delegates to the Paris peace talks. U.S. officials helped sponsor advertisements in newspapers and magazines and encouraged use of such items as POW bracelets, postage stamps, and bumper stickers. The POW campaign also marked the beginning of a subtle shift in U.S. war aims from preserving an independent, non-Communist Vietnam to getting American prisoners home.²¹

By November 1969, a once confident Nixon administration faced crises on multiple fronts. Despite government efforts to undermine it, the peace movement gained momentum during the late summer and early fall. A nation-wide moratorium on October 15 succeeded spectacularly. Organized mainly by liberals, it attracted an estimated two million people in some 200 cities, a record for such affairs. One of the largest expressions of mass protest in the nation's history, it drew large numbers of sober, middle-class people and signaled a new respectability in the movement itself. In contrast to the chaos of Chicago, 1968, the protests were generally peaceful and dignified affairs often with religious overtones. Church bells tolled, attendees called out the names of U.S. war dead at candlelight services, and participants solemnly intoned John Lennon's haunting "Give Peace a Chance." The activists scheduled a follow-up protest for November.

North Vietnam ignored U.S. warnings. For the Hanoi government, the years 1969–1970 marked a low point in a long war. The Sino–Soviet split erupted into actual fighting along the two nations' common border, leaving North Vietnam, for a time, on its own. American talk of Vietnamization was troubling since it portended a Vietnamese civil war rather than the outside war of aggression that Hanoi preferred to portray.

²⁰Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York, 1995), pp. 323–325; Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), pp. 306–377.

²¹Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), pp. 29–36.

But there was no inclination to compromise. Le Duan and his cohort agreed to secret talks with the United States with the intention of using them as a stalling device. They continued to insist that the United States must withdraw its troops and abandon Thieu. Hanoi oversaw establishment of a Provisional Revolutionary Government in the South to compete with and delegitimize the Saigon regime. Instead of persuading North Vietnam to compromise, the Soviet Union quickly recognized the PRG. Ho's formal response to Nixon's letter, written shortly before his death on September 2, in the president's words, was a "cold rebuff." North Vietnam's leaders used the revolutionary hero's passing to rekindle backing for the cause. They continued to hope that antiwar activity in the United States would limit what its government could do. Hanoi Radio tossed back at Washington statements by Senate doves that Nixon's policies were prolonging the war, and expressed hope that the fall peace demonstrations would "succeed splendidly."²²

Nixon and Kissinger's coercive strategy for Vietnam proved the victim of its own deficiencies. In early October, the Joint Chiefs sent Laird a plan for naval and air operations to achieve "maximum practicable psychological and military impact." It called for neutralizing North Vietnam's air force, closing its ports, destroying its logistical capabilities, and sharply reducing its ability to make war. Laird warned that it might take a year to implement and questioned whether it could achieve "decisive results," a view shared by some of Kissinger's aides. He also suggested that it would outrage an already aroused peace movement in the United States and people abroad and that it would be enormously costly, perhaps tempting a Democratic-controlled Congress to chip away at the defense budget. Kissinger himself was not pleased with the plan, and he urged the president to have the military rethink it in favor of "short, sharp blows of increasing severity." Many advisers doubted it would work.²³

The president found himself caught in a trap at least partly of his own making. He raged at North Vietnamese defiance and at his critics at home. He yearned to strike back, but lacked weapons. As a limp, face-saving alternative to the "massive blows" Kissinger had called for, the administration ordered the conduct of a military readiness test in hopes that close surveillance of Soviet ships heading to North Vietnam

²²Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), pp. 129–137; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York, 2018), pp. 173–175.

²³Prentice, "Long Road," 470–471; Hunt, *Laird*, pp. 121–123.

and putting Strategic Air Command (SAC) bombers on high alert would send the requisite signals to Moscow and Hanoi. Neither showed any signs of getting the message.²⁴

Without other options, Nixon fell back on Vietnamization. A lull in combat in South Vietnam at this time, and reports from Saigon of military progress offered some promise that Laird's scheme might succeed. Troop withdrawals could reassure a troubled public. Just days before the October moratorium he made his decision. "If there is a chance that Vietnamization will work," the president observed, "we must take that chance." While keeping open the possibility of taking more drastic military steps, he settled on Laird's scheme almost by default, partly in hopes that further troop withdrawals would take some of the steam out of the surging antiwar protest. He realized that Vietnamization was the "long road" to peace, but contented himself that the United States could wait out North Vietnam and get an honorable settlement.²⁵

On November 3, 1969, an embattled president sought to rally the nation with a major speech. He firmly defended the U.S. commitment in Vietnam. He spelled out the Vietnamization policy in some detail, offering the alluring prospect that it would not only reduce U.S. casualties but also terminate involvement in an honorable fashion regardless of North Vietnam's actions. He dismissed the protestors as an irrational and irresponsible element and accused them of sabotaging his policies. He openly appealed for the support of those he called "the great silent majority." He concluded with the ringing admonition: "North Vietnam cannot humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."²⁶

The silent majority speech produced short-term gains at home. Nixon placed his foes on the defensive, at least momentarily. By offering a policy that promised an honorable peace with lessened American sacrifice, he seemed to reconcile the contradictory elements in public attitudes toward the war. He cleverly appealed to the patriotism of his listeners and to their reluctance to accept anything resembling a defeat. By identifying a silent majority, he helped to create a bloc of support where none had existed. Polls indicated solid backing for the administration. Another round of demonstrations took place in cities across the

²⁴William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History* 3 (January 2003): 113–156.

²⁵Prentice, "Long Road," 471–472; Hunt, *Laird*, p. 120.

²⁶Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing Nixon's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York, 2018), pp. 116–117.

country November 13–15. In Washington's March Against Death, some 40,000 protestors marched from Arlington National Cemetery to the White House and then to the Capitol, each carrying a sign with the name of an American killed in Vietnam. The November rallies did not get the media attention of those in October, especially from television, which focused on the antics of extremists. Following these demonstrations, the steam seemed to go out of the movement. Later in the month, *pro-Nixon* rallies were held in a number of cities. "We've got those liberal bastards on the run now," Nixon exulted, "and we're going to keep them on the run."²⁷

VIETNAMIZATION IN PRACTICE

Making Vietnamization work proved a much more formidable task. Whatever they said publicly, U.S. officials undertook the program with grave doubts. Most military experts agreed that without full American assistance, the South Vietnamese could not stand up against the combined threat of the North Vietnamese Army and NLF forces. Gen. Creighton Abrams criticized Vietnamization as "slow surrender" and repeatedly protested the size and pace of U.S. troop withdrawals.²⁸

The South Vietnamese also objected to the Nixon policy. Typically, they were not consulted in decisions on and planning for Vietnamization. Although Nixon publicly proclaimed that Thieu had recommended U.S. troop withdrawals, in fact he bitterly opposed them. The South Vietnamese grudgingly acquiesced in what they saw as a political expedient for the United States. But they found the term *Vietnamization* demeaning, protesting that they had been fighting for years before the Americans became involved and even after 1965 had "sacrificed and suffered the most." Some Vietnamese cynically dismissed Vietnamization as a "U.S. Dollar and Vietnamese Blood Sharing Plan." Most saw it as a fig leaf to cover U.S. abandonment.²⁹

There was talk of changes in military operations under Abrams's command, but what stands out in retrospect is how little really changed. A tank commander under the legendary Gen. George S. Patton in World War II, the gruff, sometimes unkempt, Abrams did make

²⁷Quoted in Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Power* (New York, 1973), p. 158.

²⁸Quoted in Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 235–236.

²⁹George C. Herring, "'Peoples Quite Apart': Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Winter, 1990): 17–18.

strategic adjustments. He attempted to integrate combat missions more closely with pacification. He used small-unit patrols to disrupt enemy logistics. Post-Tet military operations aimed to keep pressure on a battered enemy so that pacification could recapture its lost momentum and ARVN's buildup could proceed. The words "search and destroy" were no longer used, but Abrams continued to dispatch large units on missions against NVA and VC forces. "[B]ashing the VC down," the general opined, would enable the GVN to "raise its head up."³⁰

Despite still robust military activities, real security remained a fragile commodity in post-Tet South Vietnam. It was even more difficult to locate enemy units now holed up in sanctuaries. Violence remained the key to U.S. strategy. Belatedly recognizing the possibly horrific consequences of herbicides for South Vietnamese and Americans, MACV stopped using them in 1970. But it still relied on firepower, which continued to inflict grim hardships on the rural population and increase the already enormous number of refugees. Lacking reliable instruments to measure progress, Abrams's command still depended on body counts. Even more than before, GIs fighting in a war they knew would not be won evinced hostility, often racially tinged, toward the local population. In that sense, military operations designed to expand security often undermined the allied position in the countryside. As U.S. units left Vietnam, there were not sufficient qualified ARVN forces to replace them. Some areas were ceded to the enemy by default.³¹

Through the controversial Phoenix program, the CIA sought to cripple the NLF infrastructure by apprehending and assassinating its leadership, a "ruthless business," Abrams allowed. U.S. officials claimed to have "neutralized" some 80,000 VC cadre between 1968 and 1972, an estimated 20,000 of them killed. Some NLF operatives later admitted that in some areas Phoenix was quite effective. Americans conceded that despite the impressive numbers and the damage done to the VC, its clandestine apparatus remained intact. The abuses that accompanied the program sometimes drove the local people to side with the NLF.³²

With pacification also, there was heightened activity, uncertain progress. The Accelerated Pacification campaign was expanded in 1969–1970.

³⁰Daddis, *Withdrawal*, p. 95.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 27, 39–47, 69, 95–96.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 96–98. Conflicting assessments of this controversial program can be found in Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Mass., 1990); Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (New York, NY, 1990); and Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* (Annapolis, Md., 1997).

Local forces and militia were beefed up and given modern weapons. Village elections were reinstituted, restoring the autonomy taken away in the Diem era. Elected officials were trained in civic responsibilities. Strenuous efforts were made to clear roads, repair bridges, establish schools and hospitals, and expand agricultural production. In March 1970, the government launched an ambitious land reform program through which nearly one million hectares were redistributed. Such programs inevitably took time, however, and time was not available for South Vietnam. Pacification continued to suffer from a lack of leaders at the district and provincial level. Only in rare cases did the government connect with the people. U.S. officials often complained of the seeming indifference of villagers toward things that shaped their lives.³³

The government itself posed one of the biggest obstacles to success. Thieu had cleverly built a governing structure made up of Chinese merchants, loyal bureaucrats, and army officers, held together by the cement of corruption. It was a narrowly based operation, dependent on U.S. money, and, ironically, largely resistant to U.S. influence. The government did not use the opportunity provided by Tet to enact major reforms. Quite the contrary, Thieu sought to purge provincial officials with connections to his rival, Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky. One senior U.S. official observed, moreover, that although significant progress had been made in some areas, the GVN had not yet succeeded in mobilizing the people against the VC and behind its programs.

The key to Vietnamization was the South Vietnamese army, and here too there was change driven by dire necessity. The force level swelled to more than one million. The United States turned over to South Vietnam huge quantities of the newest weapons, along with ships, planes, helicopters, and so many vehicles that one member of Congress wondered whether the object of Vietnamization was to “put every South Vietnamese soldier behind the wheel.”³⁴ Military schools were expanded. To improve morale and check the desertion rate, the promotion system was modernized, leave policies improved, pay scales

³³Memorandum by Gen. Arthur S. Collins, Fall 1970, A.S. Collins Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.; see also Report by Vietnam Special Studies Group, January 10, 1970, and Charles S. Whitehouse to William Colby, September 22, 1970, both in John P. Vann Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

³⁴Thomas Buckley, “The ARVN Is Bigger and Better, But—,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 12, 1969, 132.

increased, veterans' benefits expanded, and efforts made to improve conditions in military camps and dependent housing.

On paper, the oft maligned ARVN appeared a formidable force, but fundamental weaknesses remained. Many South Vietnamese soldiers were deeply patriotic. An estimated 200,000 died in combat, confirming a willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice. Some profoundly distrusted their own government. Drafted into service through an inequitable system, they served long enlistments. Soldiers more attuned to the needs of their families than to the abstraction of a South Vietnamese nation simply left; desertions peaked in 1969. Often poorly trained, they were not well prepared for combat. They endured poor food and inadequate medical care. Increases in pay were offset by inflation. In an economy where prostitutes might earn as much in a week as senior officers in a year, corruption was an accepted means to redress inequities. The lack of skilled leaders remained the most pressing problem. Many officers were appointed for reasons of politics and loyalty rather than competence. Some soldiers welcomed Vietnamization as a chance to fight on their own rather than be told what to do by outsiders. Others recognized that by themselves they were no match for the enemy. A monumental change in policy driven by U.S. domestic political needs "did not change the fact that we were poorly trained, poorly led, and suffering from low morale," one soldier later recalled.³⁵

The "nagging question" was whether the ARVN could fill the vacuum left by departing U.S. troops. Even some of the better units still hesitated to engage the enemy in sustained combat. Some Americans conceded that they had made the South Vietnamese dependent. ARVN's solid performance after Tet was made possible by U.S. fire-power. Conditioned to rely on American advisory support, air support, and medical support, its units were not ready to fight by themselves, and many U.S. advisers conceded that much time would be required before they could do so. Abrams estimated that it would be 1972 before the ARVN would be ready to take on the VC, much less the NVA as well. Vietnamization timetables were driven by U.S. politics, not military plans.³⁶ And North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho openly posed to Kissinger the most troubling question. If the United States could not win with a half million of its own troops, he asked, "How can

³⁵Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence, Kans., 2006), especially pp. 98–100.

³⁶Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York, 2008), pp. 177–194, provides a sympathetic but balanced appraisal.

you succeed when you let the puppet troops do the fighting?" It was a question, Kissinger conceded, that "also torments me."³⁷

By the spring of 1970, the contradictions in Nixon's Vietnamization strategy had become all too apparent. The silent majority speech had quieted the opposition temporarily. In March, Nixon announced the phased withdrawal of 150,000 troops over the next year to "drop a bombshell on the gathering spring storm of anti-war protest."³⁸ He recognized that this withdrawal, however necessary from the standpoint of domestic politics, would weaken his hand in other areas. Abrams had bitterly protested the new troop withdrawals that would leave South Vietnam vulnerable to enemy military pressure and could be devastating to the Vietnamization program. Nixon had rather naively hoped that his professed determination to remain in Vietnam indefinitely and the demonstrations of public support that had followed his November 3 speech would persuade the North Vietnamese to negotiate. But there had been no breakthrough in Paris. He recognized that the announcement of additional troop withdrawals would probably encourage Hanoi to delay further. Increasingly impatient for results and still hopeful that he could end the war by a dramatic show of force, he once more began looking for "initiatives" to "show the enemy that we were still serious about our commitment in Vietnam."³⁹ He even ordered that the Duck Hook option, rejected the previous year, be dusted off for another look.

CAMBODIA

The overthrow of Cambodia's neutralist Prince Sihanouk in March by a pro-American clique headed by Prime Minister Lon Nol posed new dangers to the Vietnamization policy and presented enticing opportunities for the initiative Nixon sought. Kissinger has vigorously denied American complicity in the coup, and no evidence has ever been produced to prove that the United States was directly involved. The administration appears not to have been surprised by Lon Nol's move, however, and Washington's long-standing and obvious dislike for Sihanouk and its interest in attacking the North Vietnamese sanctuaries

³⁷Quoted in Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 253.

³⁸Nixon, *RN*, p. 448.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 445.



in Cambodia may have encouraged Lon Nol to believe that a successful coup would gain U.S. support.⁴⁰

Kissinger's later claim that the United States intervened in Cambodia only hesitantly and belatedly and only after being persuaded that the North Vietnamese were committed to the destruction of Lon Nol's government appears at best misleading. Shortly after the coup, with U.S. authorization, South Vietnamese units conducted raids across the border into Cambodia. The United States recognized the new Cambodian government and initiated covert military aid. That North Vietnam decided in the aftermath of the coup to take over Cambodia remains unproven today and was open to serious question at the time. On the other hand, from the outset, some U.S. officials were eager to exploit developments in Cambodia. The military for years had urged attacking North Vietnamese sanctuaries. The change of government in Phnom Penh removed the long-standing concern about violating Cambodian neutrality. Attacks on the sanctuaries could now be justified in terms of sustaining a friendly Cambodian government as well as easing the military threat to South Vietnam. Nixon therefore quickly endorsed a Defense Department proposal that South Vietnamese units with American air support attack an enemy sanctuary on the Parrot's Beak, a strip of Cambodian territory thirty-three miles from Saigon. Even before plans for this operation had been completed, the president approved a more dramatic—and much more risky—move. After nearly a week of careful and apparently agonizing study and over the vigorous opposition of Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers, he approved Abrams's proposal that U.S. forces attack Fishhook, a North Vietnamese base area fifty-five miles northwest of Saigon.

In taking one of the most controversial steps of his tumultuous presidency, Nixon hoped to achieve several aims. He was swayed by Abrams's insistence that destruction of North Vietnam's sanctuaries and seizure of its supplies would weaken its military capabilities, providing some security to U.S. troops in South Vietnam and buying precious time for Vietnamization. The incursion into Cambodia could bolster the fragile Lon Nol government. The southern command center for enemy forces (COSVN) had been located there, and destruction of what some Americans viewed as a sort of Communist Pentagon might

⁴⁰The controversy over Cambodia is one of the most bitter and emotional to come out of the war. The respective positions are spelled out in Shawcross, *Sideshow*, especially pp. 112–127, and in Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), pp. 457–521.

further weaken the enemy. An unexpected and forceful move might also shock Hanoi into a settlement or at least into substantive negotiations. The president recognized that his decision could have a “shattering effect” at home.⁴¹ His willingness to run this risk for uncertain gains reflected, in part, what he called his “big play philosophy,” his belief that because the administration was “going to get unshirted hell for doing this at all,” it might as well “go for all the marbles.”⁴²

Rather than fearing the domestic backlash, he seems to have welcomed it. By the spring of 1970, he was embattled at home as well as abroad. The Democratic-controlled Senate had just rejected for the second time his nominee for a Supreme Court vacancy. He was determined to show “those Senators . . . who’s really tough.”⁴³

Most important, he still believed that he could make peace by threatening Hanoi. Embarrassed by backing down from the November ultimatum, a move that conveyed precisely the wrong message, he seems to have reasoned that widening the war into previously off-limits Cambodia would make clear that, unlike his predecessor, he would not be bound by restraints. The North Vietnamese would then have to decide “whether they want to take us on all over again,” he explained to his staff, and in terms of pressures on them to negotiate, “This was essential.”⁴⁴

Preoccupied throughout his career with the urgency of responding to crises, Nixon put himself through an emotional wringer in making the Cambodian decision. Kissinger described him as “overwrought,” “irritable,” and “defiant.”⁴⁵ Exhausted from stress and lack of sleep, obviously agitated, at times frenetic and drinking heavily, Nixon repeatedly viewed the epic World War II film *Patton*, apparently as a way of pumping himself up to make a tough decision. The Cambodian crisis represented yet another effort on the part of a profoundly insecure individual to prove his toughness to an ever-widening list of enemies, real and imagined, an opportunity he felt he must seize to demonstrate his courage under fire and show his adversaries that he would not be intimidated. Although he later depicted himself as a voice of reason and a calming influence, Kissinger too was strung out during this period. He seems to have had reservations about going into Cambodia, but he went along

⁴¹Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 449.

⁴²Safire, *Before the Fall*, pp. 102–103.

⁴³Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, pp. 174–175.

⁴⁴Safire, *Before the Fall*, p. 190.

⁴⁵Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence, Kans., 1998) pp. 204–205.

with the president, in part as a way of outflanking Laird and Rogers in the raging turf war that was Nixon's Washington.

The president explained his decision in a belligerent, provocative televised speech on April 30. He justified the Cambodian "incursion" as a response to North Vietnamese "aggression," although Hanoi's intentions remained unclear, and as a necessary action to protect American forces in Vietnam, although he did not explain why an old threat suddenly required such a vigorous response. The real target of the operation, he explained, was COSVN, the "nerve center" of North Vietnamese military operations, although the Defense Department had made clear to him its uncertainty where COSVN was located or whether it even existed. Anticipating a furor at home, Nixon indicated that he would rather be a one-term president than preside over America's first defeat. He concluded with a bit of inflated rhetoric that appeared to make America's very survival hinge on his Cambodian venture. "If when the chips are down," he warned, "the world's most powerful nation acts like a pitiful helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."⁴⁶

From a military standpoint, Nixon's Cambodian venture produced significant, if short term and limited, results. The U.S. command claimed to have killed some 2,000 enemy troops, cleared more than 1,600 acres of jungle, and destroyed 8,000 bunkers. It uncovered huge caches of supplies and "treasure troves" of intelligence. The incursion rendered the sanctuaries temporarily unusable and vastly complicated North Vietnam's supply problems, thus buying some vital time for Vietnamization. The South Vietnamese army performed at least adequately in most areas. Predictably, on the other hand, the invaders did not locate the elusive COSVN. Americans were also painfully aware that the gains made in Cambodia were no more than "ephemeral." As Abrams himself lamented about the resilience of the enemy, "You give them thirty-six hours and, goddamn it, you've got to start the war all over again."⁴⁷ Whatever advantages the operation gained for Vietnamization may have been more than offset by enlargement of the theater of war. At a time when the United States was seeking to scale down its role in Vietnam, it had to divert precious resources to support an even more fragile client state in Cambodia.

⁴⁶ *Public Papers, Richard M. Nixon, 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1971), pp. 405–410.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (New York, 1999), p. 204. See also John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, Kans., 2005).

In Cambodia itself, U.S. actions contributed to one of the great tragedies of recent history. The United States was not exclusively responsible for Cambodia's misery. North Vietnam had violated Cambodia's precarious neutrality first, and Cambodians of all political factions inflicted their share of suffering on one another. The United States did, however, encourage the Lon Nol government to initiate a war it could not win. The American invasion forced the North Vietnamese to move out of their sanctuaries and into the heartland of Cambodia, threatening the capital, Phnom Penh, and other cities. Whether as a direct or indirect consequence of the U.S. invasion, North Vietnam initiated large-scale support for the Khmer Rouge insurgents fighting Lon Nol. In the particularly brutal civil war that followed, the United States lavishly supported the Cambodian government and unleashed thousands of tons of bombs on Cambodia. The ultimate tragedy was that from beginning to end, the Nixon administration viewed its new ally as little more than a pawn to be used to help salvage the U.S. position in Vietnam, showing scant regard for the consequences for Cambodia and its people.⁴⁸

The domestic reaction exceeded Nixon's worst expectations—in tragic ways. The incursion into Cambodia "reignited an antiwar movement that had been smoldering that spring." The unexpected expansion of a war the president had promised to wind down enraged his critics. His intemperate defense of his actions, including a statement indiscriminately branding protesters as "bums," added to the furor. Demonstrations erupted at campuses across the nation. The protest took on new force when four students at Kent State University in Ohio and two at Jackson State College in Mississippi were killed in angry confrontations with the National Guard and police. More than 100,000 demonstrators gathered in Washington the first week of May to protest Cambodia and Kent State. Students at 350 colleges and universities went on strike, and as many as 450 schools were closed to avert further violence. The Kent State killings provoked outbreaks even at normally conservative and placid institutions. At the University of Kentucky, a building was burned, and student demonstrations were broken up by armed National Guard troops using tear gas.⁴⁹

The Cambodian incursion also provoked the most serious congressional challenge to presidential authority since the beginning of the war.

⁴⁸ Clymer, *Troubled Relations*, pp. 109–115.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Movement*, pp. 351–352; Mitchell K. Hall, "'A Crack in Time': The Response of Students at the University of Kentucky to the Tragedy at Kent State," *Kentucky Historical Register* 83 (Winter 1985): 36–63.



Kent State, 1970

This classic photo captures the shock and anguish of a war now come home. The shooting of students at Kent State University in Ohio by National Guardsmen following protests against the invasion of Cambodia sparked massive protests on college campuses across the country.

©Bettmann/Getty Images

The president had consulted with only a handful of members of Congress, all known to be sympathetic. Many legislators, including Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott, were outraged at having been kept in the dark. Others were infuriated by Nixon's broadening of the war.⁵⁰ In a symbolic act of defiance, the Senate voted overwhelmingly in June to terminate the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964. An amendment sponsored by Senators John Sherman Cooper (Kentucky Republican) and Frank Church (Idaho Democrat) proposed to cut off all funds for American military operations in Cambodia after June 30. An even more restrictive amendment sponsored by Senators George McGovern (South Dakota Democrat) and Mark Hatfield (Oregon Republican) would have required the administration to withdraw all U.S. forces from Vietnam by the end of 1971.

⁵⁰Scott to Kissinger, May 21, 1970, Hugh Scott Papers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va., Box 65.

Thin-skinned and pugnacious, Nixon throughout his career had shown a singular capacity to provoke virulent attacks—and respond in kind. There would be no more “screwing around” with congressional foes, he instructed his staff. “Don’t worry about divisiveness. Having drawn the sword, don’t take it out—stick it in hard.”⁵¹ The president publicly blamed his domestic opponents for prolonging the war. He bluntly warned congressional leaders that if “Congress undertakes to restrict me, Congress will have to assume the consequences.”⁵² He approved one of the most blatant attacks on individual freedom and privacy in American history, the so-called Huston Plan, which authorized the intelligence agencies to open mail, use electronic surveillance methods, and even burglarize to spy on Americans. The agencies subsequently refused to implement this specific plan, but they did use many of its methods in the futile effort to verify suspected links between radical groups in the United States and foreign governments.⁵³

The administration rode out the storm. Nixon removed American troops from Cambodia by the end of June, depriving his opponents of their most telling issue; the protests gradually abated. Despite the flurry of activity, Congress was not yet ready to challenge the president directly or assume responsibility for ending the war. The more dovish Senate approved the Cooper–Church amendment, but the House rejected it, permitting the administration to continue air operations in Cambodia and send money and supplies to Lon Nol. The Hatfield–McGovern amendment could not secure a majority of the Senate.

Although Nixon escaped with his power intact, the Cambodian venture tightened the trap he had set for himself. The domestic reaction reinforced his determination to achieve “peace with honor” while sharply limiting his options for attaining it. Cambodia may have bought some time for Vietnamization, but it also imposed clear-cut, if implicit, limits on the future use of American combat forces and increased the pressures for speeding the pace of withdrawal. Divisiveness within the United States increased even beyond the level of 1968, with far-reaching, if still unforeseen, implications for Nixon’s future. In the summer of 1970, an embittered president declared war on his enemies: the “mad-men” on the Hill, the “liberal” press, the “trash” and “rabble” who marched in protest. “Within the iron gates of the White House, quite

⁵¹Safire, *Before the Fall*, p. 190.

⁵²Henry Brandon, *The Retreat of American Power* (New York, 1974), pp. 146–147.

⁵³Athan Theoharis, *Spying on Americans: Political Surveillance from Hoover to the Huston Plan* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 13–39.

unknowingly, a siege mentality was setting in," one of Nixon's aides later stated. "It was now 'us' against 'them.' Gradually, as we drew the circle closer around us, the ranks of 'them' began to swell."⁵⁴

Hoping to break the diplomatic deadlock by going into Cambodia, Nixon seems merely to have hardened it. At first shocked and alarmed by the bold U.S. move, North Vietnam's leaders soon found reassurance in the upheaval in the United States and clung to their waiting game. North Vietnamese and NLF delegates boycotted the formal Paris discussions until U.S. troops had been withdrawn from Cambodia. The secret talks lapsed for months. Hanoi continued to bide its time. The uproar in the United States certainly reinforced its conviction that domestic pressures would eventually force an American withdrawal.

DEADLOCK AND DISSENSION

To resolve his foreign and domestic problems, Nixon launched in October 1970 what he described as a "major new initiative for peace." The proposals he made in a televised speech, while cleverly phrased, offered no concessions on the fundamental issues. Hanoi promptly rejected his call for a cease-fire in place, which, it perceived, would restrict the NLF to areas they now controlled without assuring them any role in a political settlement. In any case, the speech appears to have been designed primarily for the upcoming congressional elections. Nixon followed it up by touring ten states, angrily denouncing the anti-war protesters and urging the voters to elect representatives who would "stand with the President." Even here, the results were disappointing. Several doves were defeated, but the Republicans gained only two seats in the Senate and lost nine in the House.

After two years of continued heavy fighting, intensive secret diplomacy, and political maneuvering, Nixon's position was worse than when he had taken office. The negotiations with North Vietnam remained deadlocked. A National Security Council study of late 1970 grimly concluded that the United States could neither persuade nor force Hanoi to remove its troops from the South. At home, Nixon kept "one step ahead of the sheriff," as he would put it, narrowly heading off restrictions on his war-making powers. But he still faced a hostile and even more determined opposition in Congress and a revived antiwar movement.

⁵⁴Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan, N.J., 1976), p. 41.

The situation in South Vietnam remained stable. By the end of the year, however, intelligence reported a sharp increase in the infiltration of troops and supplies into Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, posing an ominous threat to the northern provinces and Hue, where sizable American forces had been withdrawn.

Instead of rethinking a policy that had brought no results, Nixon clung stubbornly throughout much of 1971 to the approach he had improvised the preceding year. To appease critics at home, he speeded up the timetable of American troop withdrawals. Over the protests of Abrams, he ordered the removal of 100,000 troops by the end of the year, leaving 175,000 in Vietnam, of whom only 75,000 were combat forces. To make clear, at the same time, his continued determination to secure a "just" peace and to counter the threat to Vietnamization posed by increased North Vietnamese infiltration and American troop reductions, he stepped up the military pressure against North Vietnam. U.S. aircraft mounted heavy attacks against supply lines and staging areas in Laos and Cambodia. Using as a pretext North Vietnamese firing upon American "reconnaissance" planes, the administration ordered "protective reaction" air strikes against bridges, base camps, and trails across the demilitarized zone and in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.

In early 1971, Nixon once again went for the "big play," this time with a strike in Laos. After the Cambodian invasion, the North Vietnamese focused their logistical system in Laos. Abrams strongly advocated attacking it. Despite lingering skepticism about ARVN, Nixon and Kissinger enthusiastically endorsed the plan and even persuaded themselves that it might win the war. The idea, as before, was to cripple enemy military capabilities and buy time for Vietnamization. Nixon sought ways to strengthen the U.S. bargaining position. Because of Congressional restrictions, this operation had to be handled by the South Vietnamese with only U.S. air support. The original plan as in Cambodia called for a quick in-and-out based on the assumption that, as before, North Vietnamese units would refuse to engage the invaders in battle. It was later modified to permit ARVN troops to stay if things went well.

The Laos operation ran into problems from the outset. Tipped off by spies in Saigon—and also by the Western media—the North Vietnamese quickly seized an opportunity to test Vietnamization. Unlike Cambodia, in Laos they beefed up their forces and fought. A quick strike instead became a bloody slugfest between two conventional armies with heavy losses on both sides. The ARVN was used to

operating as an adjunct of the U.S. Army and in small units at the local level. It had no experience of planning or conducting an operation of this size. Coordination was often a problem. Bad roads limited the use of its tanks and heavy vehicles. The South Vietnamese fought well under difficult circumstances and with air support sometimes limited by foul weather and the absence of U.S. advisors to make precise call-ins. As losses mounted, a panicky Thieu, facing election later in the year, took steps to limit his army's losses. The invaders inflicted substantial damage on North Vietnamese logistics, although the enemy was still able to mount a major offensive in a little over a year. An estimated 13,000 NVA were killed in action, while 3,800 South Vietnamese were killed with as many as 8,000 casualties. ARVN lost 150 helicopters and 100 tanks and armored personnel carriers. After six weeks of some of the bloodiest fighting of the war, the battered ARVN units limped back into South Vietnam. The incursion demonstrated that the South Vietnamese had made real progress, but also that they were not ready to take on the NVA alone. Pictures of South Vietnamese soldiers clinging to the skids of departing helicopters (they were actually evacuating a battlefield where they had been routed) did further damage to ARVN's already negative image. High hopes in Washington turned into bitter disillusion and White House fury at Abrams for allegedly bungling the operation. Publicly, Nixon still claimed victory and announced a speedup of U.S. troop withdrawals later in the year.⁵⁵

At home, the protests drew new faces and became more rancorous and unruly. In early 1971, at a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge in Detroit, the newly invigorated Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW) conducted its "Winter Soldier" investigation of U.S. war crimes; members testified to the atrocities they had seen in the war, such as prisoners being tossed out of helicopters and ears being cut off dead enemy soldiers. In April, in Operation Dewey Canyon III, "a limited incursion into the country of Congress," Vietnam veterans, clothed symbolically in faded uniforms adorned with combat ribbons and peace symbols, gathered in front of the Capitol, told of their own war crimes, and ceremoniously tossed away their medals. Speaking before the Fulbright committee, former Navy lieutenant John Kerry raised a haunting question: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

⁵⁵Daddis, *Withdrawal*, pp. 170–176; Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, pp. 199–229.

Several days later, 30,000 self-styled members of the Mayday Tribe descended on Washington with the avowed intention of shutting the government down. They conducted lie-ins on bridges and major thoroughfares and at the entrances of government buildings. Mobs roamed the streets, stopped traffic, and broke windows, creating one of the worst riots in Washington's history.

Many Americans would undoubtedly have preferred that the war simply go away, but by the summer of 1971 the history of a conflict now more than a decade old had begun to come back to trouble the nation. After a long and much-publicized trial, a military court found Lt. William Calley guilty of at "least twenty-two murders" in the My Lai massacre of 1968 and sentenced him to life imprisonment, once more bringing before public attention the horrors that had attended the war and setting off a brief but bitter debate on the question of responsibility for alleged war crimes. No sooner had the Calley furor abated than the *New York Times* began publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers, a history of decision making in Vietnam initiated by Robert McNamara in 1967, based on secret Defense Department documents, and leaked by a former Pentagon official, Daniel Ellsberg. The documents confirmed what critics of the war had long been arguing—among other points, that Kennedy and Johnson had consistently lied to the public about their intentions in Vietnam and the progress being made.

An increasingly isolated and embattled Nixon responded fiercely to what he regarded as sinister threats to his authority to govern. The White House mounted a major campaign to smear the VVAW and especially Kerry. The Justice Department secured an injunction to prevent the veterans from sleeping on the Mall. The government hauled off to jail some 12,000 Mayday protesters, often without bothering to charge them with any specific offense. Nixon personally intervened in the Calley case while it was still under appeal, ordering Calley released from prison and indicating that he would review the conviction.

The president also took a tough line on the Pentagon Papers. Some of his advisers shrewdly suggested that, because the documents seemed to deal entirely with the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies and would therefore embarrass the Democrats, the administration might best ignore them. But Kissinger flew into a rage, perhaps nervous about his own prior association with Ellsberg, and Nixon, already obsessed with leaks, determined to act. He took the unprecedented step of securing an injunction to stop publication of the Papers. Enraged when the Supreme Court overturned the order, he approved the creation of a clandestine

group of “plumbers,” ostensibly to plug leaks within the government but in fact to do all kinds of dirty work. Labeling Ellsberg a “rat” (Kissinger called him “the most dangerous man in America today”), Nixon instructed the group to use any means necessary to discredit him. Nixon even discussed the possibility of firebombing and burglarizing the Brookings Institution, a liberal Washington think tank, to determine whether additional classified documents might be held there. Nixon’s certainty that he faced a vast and sinister conspiracy intent on destroying him, along with his growing willingness to use any means to fight back, led straight to the Watergate break-in and the demise of his presidency.⁵⁶

Neither Nixon’s withdrawal policy nor his vigorous counterattacks against the opposition could stem the war-weariness and general demoralization that enveloped the nation by the summer of 1971. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson lamented the plight of “this floundering republic.” Journalist Robert Shaplen labeled the United States “the sick man of the western hemisphere.”⁵⁷ While the antiwar movement was splintering into hundreds of groups often in conflict with one another, an antiwar mood increasingly pervaded the nation. Disillusionment with the war reached an all-time high, a whopping 71 percent agreeing that the United States had made a mistake by sending troops to Vietnam and 58 percent regarding the war as “immoral.” Nixon’s public approval rating on Vietnam had dropped to a low of 31 percent, and opposition to his policies had increased sharply. A near majority felt that the pace of troop withdrawals was too slow. A substantial majority approved the removal of all troops by the end of the year, even if the result was a Communist takeover of South Vietnam.⁵⁸

Congress reflected the growing public uneasiness, although it continued to stop short of decisive action. On two separate occasions, the Senate approved resolutions setting a specific deadline for the removal of all American troops pending Hanoi’s release of the prisoners of war.

⁵⁶ Stanley I. Kutler (ed.), *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York, 1998), pp. 1–17; John Prados & Margaret Pratt Porter (eds.), *Inside the Pentagon Papers* (Lawrence, Kans., 2004).

⁵⁷ Acheson to Matthew B. Ridgway, July 5, 1971, and Shaplen to Robert Aspey, n.d., both in Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., Box 34B.

⁵⁸ Louis Harris, *The Anguish of Change* (New York, 1973), pp. 72–73. See also Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1990), p. 298.

Each time, the House removed the deadline and otherwise watered down the language.

The mood that increasingly pervaded the nation by 1971 inevitably seeped into the armed services. Antiwar coffee houses sprang up near military bases across the nation, many of them in the South. They provided food, drink, and large doses of antiwar opinion and also served as places of solace for the disaffected. They acted as way stations on the road to escape for deserters from the military and for those seeking to evade the draft. As many as 300 underground, antiwar newspapers were printed on or near military bases, including *Fun, Travel, Adventure*, published at Ft. Knox, Kentucky (whose title was drawn from an army recruitment slogan and whose initials stood for an anti-army slur). The newspapers printed articles on such topics as racism in the military and offered critiques of military life and U.S. policies in Vietnam and elsewhere.⁵⁹

Until 1969, American GIs had fought well, under difficult circumstances. But the failure to call up the reserves and the well-intentioned policy of requiring Americans to serve one-year tours in Vietnam deprived the army of experienced leaders, forced constant turnover in units, and transported to Vietnam problems already deeply entrenched in the United States. After the initiation of Nixon's troop-withdrawal policy, moreover, the purpose of the war became increasingly murky to those called on to fight it. Many GIs became much more reluctant to put their lives on the line. Discipline broke down in some units, with enlisted personnel simply refusing to obey their officers' orders. Attempts to assassinate officers in time of war were not unique to Vietnam, but fragging (so called because of the fragmentation grenades often used) reached unprecedented proportions in the Vietnamization period; more than 200 incidents were reported in 1970 alone. The availability and high quality of drugs in Southeast Asia meant that the drug culture that attracted growing numbers of young Americans at home was easily transported to Vietnam. The U.S. command estimated in 1970 that as many as 65,000 American service personnel were using drugs and that 40,000 were hooked on heroin. In addition, the armed services were not immune to the racial tensions that tore America apart in the Vietnam era. Numerous outbreaks of racial conflict in units in

⁵⁹ John Ernst and Yvonne Baldwin, "The Not So Silent Minority: Louisville's Antiwar Movement, 1966–1975," *The Journal of Southern History* LXXIII (February 2007): 111–116; David L. Parsons, "How Coffeehouses Fueled the Vietnam Peace Movement," *New York Times*, January 9, 2018.

Vietnam and elsewhere drew growing attention to the breakdown of morale and discipline. "I need to get this Army home to save it," Abrams moaned to a friend.⁶⁰

Although determined not to be stampeded, Nixon and Kissinger were sufficiently concerned by their predicament to try once again to break the stalemate in Paris. Their willingness to make concessions reflected their concern about the Laos debacle and the prospects for Vietnamization and their unease with the surge of war-weariness and antiwar activity in the United States, especially in Congress. Kissinger expressed repeated fear that the administration might not be able to get through the year without Congress "giving the farm away."⁶¹ Nixon recognized that he would probably need a peace settlement to win reelection, but he hoped to get it far enough in advance to avoid the appearance of desperation or a blatant political maneuver. As a consequence, in May 1971 Kissinger secretly presented to the North Vietnamese the most comprehensive peace offer yet advanced by the United States. In exchange for release of the American prisoners of war, he pledged to withdraw all troops within seven months after an agreement had been signed. The United States also abandoned the concept of mutual withdrawal, insisting only that North Vietnam stop further infiltration in return for the removal of American forces.

This offer initiated the most intensive peace discussions since the war had begun. The North Vietnamese quickly rejected Kissinger's proposal, perceiving that it would require them to give up the prisoners of war (their major bargaining weapon), to stop fighting, and to accept the Thieu regime in advance of any political settlement. Hanoi's delegate, Le Duc Tho, promptly made a counteroffer, however, agreeing to release the POWs simultaneously with the withdrawal of American forces, provided that the United States dropped its support for Thieu prior to a political settlement. Kissinger found the North Vietnamese offer unacceptable, but he was deeply impressed by Tho's serious and conciliatory demeanor and sensed "the shape of a deal." It was a "major step forward," he told Nixon, the first time the North Vietnamese had responded to a proposal with a "negotiating document" rather than

⁶⁰Quoted in Sorley, *Better War*, 289. Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, N.Y., 2008), and James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War* (New York, 2016) are excellent surveys of the GI experience.

⁶¹Quoted in Vernon A. Walters, *Silent Missions* (New York, 1978), p. 516.

a “set of peremptory demands.” He could “almost taste peace,” he excitedly informed friends.⁶²

The national security adviser was much too optimistic. The North Vietnamese sensed America’s eagerness to settle and sought to exploit it. About this same time, the Politburo advised Le Duc Tho that the essential aim of its diplomacy was to “shatter the American Vietnamization program.” It was not “yet the right time for a settlement.” To jump at the American proposal might give the appearance of being weak. “Timing is the important thing,” and acting too quickly could be “harmful to the cause.”⁶³

The summer 1971 discussions eventually broke down over the issue of the Thieu regime. From the start of the secret talks, the North Vietnamese had insisted on Thieu’s removal as an essential precondition for any peace agreement. On several occasions, they had even hinted that the United States might assassinate him. Elections were scheduled to be held in South Vietnam in September. Tho now proposed that if the United States would withdraw its support for Thieu, permitting an open election, it could take the first step toward a settlement without losing face. Uninformed of the substance of the secret talks but sensing just such a deal, Thieu vastly complicated matters by forcing the removal of the two opposition candidates, Nguyen Cao Ky and Duong Van Minh. Thieu’s blatant interference in the political process so enraged the American embassy that Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker urged Nixon to publicly disassociate himself from Thieu and privately force him to accept a contested election. Nixon and Kissinger were unwilling to run the risk of abandoning Thieu at this critical juncture, however, and rejected both the North Vietnamese proposal and Bunker’s advice. The administration would only declare its “neutrality,” a position that was meaningless while Thieu was running unopposed.

After Thieu had been safely reelected, Kissinger attempted to resuscitate the secret talks, proposing elections within sixty days after a cease-fire and Thieu’s withdrawal one month in advance. From Hanoi’s standpoint, this offer was undoubtedly an improvement, but it did not guarantee that Thieu would not be a candidate or that he would be prevented from using the machinery of the government to rig the election. The North Vietnamese thus concluded that it was “necessary

⁶²*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Vol. XLII; *Vietnam: The Kissinger–Le Duc Tho Negotiations*, ed., John M. Carland (Washington, 2017), Doc. 9; Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston, 1971), p. 180.

⁶³Kissinger–Le Duc Tho *Negotiations*, Doc. 11.

not to appear impatient." They promptly rejected the American proposal. The secret talks once again broke off in late November, leaving a frustrated Kissinger to fantasize about building a dam across the Mekong River and flooding all of Vietnam.⁶⁴

Although the negotiations of 1971 were the most serious yet undertaken, they eventually broke down for the same reasons earlier efforts had failed. Having invested so much blood, treasure, and prestige in a struggle of more than ten years' duration, neither side was yet willing to make the sort of concessions necessary for peace. Perhaps more important, each side still felt it could get what it wanted without compromise.

More than anything else, a stunning, mid-1971 diplomatic turn-about, pulled off with airtight secrecy and announced with great drama and fanfare, doomed any prospect of a negotiated settlement. Nixon had set as an essential part of his Grand Design a rapprochement with China and the Soviet Union, partly to promote what he called a "generation of peace" but also to isolate North Vietnam from its major allies in hopes of securing an acceptable peace agreement. In July 1971, the administration announced to a shocked world that the president would visit China the following year. The breakthrough in Sino-American relations helped nudge the Kremlin into a summit meeting. These dramatic moves enormously boosted Nixon's confidence, making him less eager for a deal in 1971.⁶⁵

Chinese and Soviet willingness to talk with the United States evoked from North Vietnamese leaders still bitter memories from Geneva 1954 and angry charges of betrayal. Hanoi correctly perceived that the United States was pursuing "choking warfare" to separate North Vietnam from key allies. Out of necessity, it maintained ties with Moscow and Beijing, but it was not appeased by promises of continued aid.

Along with Thieu's reelection, Soviet and Chinese perfidy confirmed Hanoi's inclination to pin its hopes on yet another major military offensive timed to coincide with another U.S. presidential election. Once again, Le Duan was the prime mover. His go for broke mentality exceeded that of Nixon. Despite two previous colossal failures, his confidence appears not to have been shaken. Encouraged by the success of the Laos campaign, Hanoi this time pinned its hopes on a massive, conventional

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 185.

⁶⁵Nguyen, *War for Peace*, pp. 213–215.

invasion of South Vietnam led by newly acquired Soviet tanks. It was called the Nguyen Hue Offensive, ironically—or tellingly—for the eighteenth-century ruler who had thwarted a Chinese invasion. It aimed at nothing less than crushing the South Vietnamese armed forces, toppling the Saigon regime, and forcing the United States to negotiate from a position of defeat. At a minimum, it sought to sever the top third of South Vietnam from GVN control or occupy key provinces to bolster its negotiating position. Military success would presumably insulate North Vietnam from possible Chinese and Soviet pressures to compromise. It might disrupt Nixon's rapprochements with Beijing and Moscow. The North Vietnamese counted upon electoral pressures and antiwar sentiment to prevent Nixon from sending troops back to Vietnam.⁶⁶

THE EASTER OFFENSIVE

On March 30, 1972, North Vietnam launched its invasion of the South. At the time, only 95,000 U.S. forces remained there, only 6,000 of them combat troops. The North Vietnamese timed the invasion to coincide with the beginning of the American presidential campaign in hopes that, as in 1968, by striking a decisive blow they could cripple Nixon as they had Johnson, thus giving them the upper hand in negotiating a settlement. They aimed the offensive directly at ARVN main-force units, hoping to discredit the Vietnamization policy and tie down as many enemy regular forces as possible, enabling the NLF to resume the offensive in the countryside, disrupt pacification, and strengthen its position prior to the final peace negotiations.

In its first stages, the offensive achieved unqualified success. Spearheaded by Soviet tanks, 120,000 North Vietnamese troops struck on three fronts: across the demilitarized zone, in the Central Highlands, and across the Cambodian border northwest of Saigon. Expecting a series of smaller attacks during the Tet holidays, American intelligence—again—completely misjudged the timing, magnitude, and location of the invasion. Achieving near complete surprise, the North Vietnamese routed the thin lines of defending forces and quickly advanced toward the towns of Quang Tri in the north, Kontum in the highlands, and An Loc just sixty miles north of Saigon. Thieu was forced to commit most of his reserves to defend the threatened towns, thus

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 223–236; Pierre Asselin, "Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 13(Fall, 2011), pp. 109–119.



Kim Phuc, 1972

This photograph of Kim Phuc, taken on June 8, 1972, during the furious battles of the Easter Offensive, became one of the defining images of the war. A nine-year-old peasant girl, Kim Phuc was running in terror in a futile effort to escape the napalm clinging to her body after an inadvertent South Vietnamese attack on her village. Used by Hanoi for a time as a poster child for the evils of capitalism, Kim Phuc later defected to Canada. In a moving ceremony on Veteran's Day, 1996, she joined with a former American POW in laying a wreath at the base of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.

©Nick Ut/AP Images

freeing the NLF to take the offensive in the Mekong delta and in the heavily populated regions around Saigon.

Although stunned by the swiftness and magnitude of the North Vietnamese strike, Nixon responded with all the force he could muster. Hanoi had mistakenly assumed that his hands would be tied by electoral politics. In fact, he viewed what came to be called the Easter Offensive as a brazen and dire threat to his triangular diplomacy, indeed to his presidency. "We're playing a Russia game, a China game, and an election game," he thundered, "and we're not gonna have the ARVN collapse."



Eager to give the enemy a “bloody nose,” he also sensed an opportunity to revive the end-the-war strategy he had so reluctantly discarded in 1969.⁶⁷

In his own distinctively awkward manner, Nixon took personal control of the U.S. response. It was his madman moment, and he played it to the fullest. Amidst rambling discourses on great battles and bold leaders past, he pushed relentlessly for an all-out response against the enemy challenge. He ranted at the “damned Air Force,” for its excess caution and seeming lethargy—“I want to give it to them [the North Vietnamese] ten times in the butt”; at Abrams, for his drinking and incompetence; and at Laird for his obstructionism. “[W]e’ve got to use the maximum power of this country against a shit-ass little country to win this war.” He saw an opportunity to do what he wanted to do since 1969. There was even talk about threatening the use of nuclear weapons. Kissinger suggested that the president should give the appearance of “being on the verge of going crazy.” “Oh, absolutely,” Nixon concurred.⁶⁸ Nixon and Kissinger, sometimes working with new Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) chairman Adm. Thomas Moorer, plotted strategy and oversaw operations. They dispatched to the war zone from around the world a vast armada of warships and aircraft, especially the fearsome B-52 bombers. Instead of restricting targets and limiting sorties, as LBJ had done, they ordered the use of maximum firepower. In the first stage, they unleashed a torrent of naval gunfire, artillery, and bombs against North Vietnamese troops in the South and North Vietnam itself, focusing on slowing the NVA advance by knocking out air defenses and crippling logistics with attacks on fuel depots, railyards, and transportation routes.⁶⁹

In the meantime, Kissinger met secretly with Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev. For the first time, he made explicit an American willingness to permit North Vietnamese forces to remain in South Vietnam after a cease-fire. He also held the Soviet Union responsible for the invasion and warned that continuation of the war could severely damage Soviet–American relations and have grave consequences for North Vietnam. The offer and the threats were repeated to Le Duc Tho on May 2.

Still confident of victory, the North Vietnamese flatly rejected Kissinger’s offer, leaving Nixon difficult choices. Reporting that Hue and Kontum might soon fall and the “whole thing may be lost,” Abrams

⁶⁷ Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Eastern Offensive* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), p. 86.

⁶⁸ John S. Farrell, *Richard Nixon: A Life* (New York, 2017), pp. 491, 493; Daddis, *Withdrawal*, pp. 185–186.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–101; *FR*, 1969–1976, 6: 154ff.

pressed for intensification of the bombing of North Vietnam and even for the mining of Haiphong harbor.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Laird and Rogers warned that drastic countermeasures could have disastrous domestic consequences. Kissinger worried that the Soviets might cancel Nixon's impending visit to Moscow, undoing months of tedious negotiations on strategic arms limitation and other major issues.

Enraged by Hanoi's defiance and unwilling to accept defeat, Nixon struck back furiously. Still intent on persuading the enemy of his resolve and unpredictability, he set out to demonstrate his willingness to take "*whatever steps are necessary*" to end the war. Johnson lacked the will, he privately boasted (as if to reassure himself). "I have the *will* in spades." More than any one else, Secretary of the Treasury—and LBJ protégé—John Connally persuaded the president to escalate the war regardless of the Moscow summit. Soviet cancellation would not cost him support at home, Connally reasoned, but if he lost the war, he would "lose the country." The result was a "tough watershed decision": to "stop at nothing to bring the enemy to his knees." Where Johnson had fretted about civilian casualties, Nixon instructed Moorer to aim for military targets but "if it slops over, that's too bad." On May 8, he announced to a startled nation the most drastic escalation since 1965: the mining of Haiphong harbor and the massive sustained bombing of North Vietnam. "The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time," he vowed. Throughout the lifetime of what came to be called Operation *LINEBACKER*, Nixon, dissatisfied with the military's performance in the April bombing, pressed them to overcome bad weather and other obstacles to do more and do it better.⁷¹

Nixon's gamble succeeded, at least to a point. Caught up in an extremely delicate diplomatic game, the two major Communist powers responded cautiously to the events of 1972. Because of their continuing rivalry, neither would sacrifice North Vietnam on the altar of diplomatic expediency. At the same time, each now viewed the war as a sideshow that must not be allowed to jeopardize the major power realignment then taking place in the world. The Soviet Union continued to provide North Vietnam with massive military and economic assistance. But the summit went ahead as scheduled. At the outset of Nixon's visit to Moscow in late May, Brezhnev and his colleagues went through the motions of protesting, charging the United States with "sheer aggression" in Vietnam and even comparing it to Nazi Germany.

⁷⁰Nixon, *RN*, p. 594.

⁷¹Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, pp. 158–199; *FR*, 1969–1976, 6: 424–431.

The negotiations then proceeded in a cordial and businesslike manner. Major agreements were concluded. The Soviet Union also sent a top-level diplomat to urge Hanoi to make peace. The Chinese protested Nixon's escalation of the war and provided North Vietnam crucial assistance, especially with minesweeping Haiphong harbor. But they, too, urged Hanoi to compromise with the United States.⁷²

The domestic reaction also proved manageable. Some media organs strongly backed the president, but others were sharply critical, in some cases reflecting a growing war-weariness among the journalists themselves. Nixon privately fumed at the media for reporting only the bad news and downplaying the good. "The press is the enemy," he exclaimed. He set "the discrediting of the press" as a "major objective over the next few months."⁷³ Senate doves were "shocked," "mad," and "depressed," according to Vermont Republican George Aiken, and another flurry of end-the-war resolutions went into the congressional hopper.⁷⁴ But Americans had always considered bombing more acceptable than the use of ground troops, and many felt that the North Vietnamese invasion justified Nixon's aggressive response. As on earlier occasions, the public and Congress rallied around decisive presidential initiatives. The success of the Moscow summit cut the ground from under those who had argued that Nixon's rash actions would undermine détente. Unwilling to leave anything to chance, zealous operatives from the Committee for the Reelection of the President (CREEP) forged thousands of letters and telegrams to the White House expressing approval of Nixon's policies, but even without such antics the president enjoyed broad support. His public approval rating shot up dramatically, Congress did nothing, and he emerged in a much stronger position than before the North Vietnamese invasion.⁷⁵

Nixon's decisive response appears also to have averted defeat in South Vietnam. Although the bombing operations ordered in May never fully met his expectations, they far exceeded all previous attacks on North Vietnam. From April to June, U.S. aircraft flew more than 14,000 sorties, and in June alone they dropped 11,200 tons of bombs,

⁷²Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1226–1227; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000), pp. 202–206.

⁷³Chester Pach, "'Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press': TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969–1973," *Diplomatic History* 34 (June 2010): 564.

⁷⁴George Aiken, *Senate Diary* (Brattleboro, Vt., 1976), pp. 55–57.

⁷⁵Harris, *Anguish of Change*, p. 74.

including new so-called smart bombs precisely guided to their targets by computers receiving signals from television cameras and laser beams.

The attacks paralyzed North Vietnam's transportation system and exhausted its air defenses. The conventional military tactics employed by the NVA in the summer of 1972 required vast quantities of fuel and ammunition. The bombing and blockade made resupply extremely difficult. Even more critical was U.S. tactical air support in South Vietnam. American aircraft flew round-the-clock missions—B-52 sortie rates reached an unprecedented three per hour each twenty-four hours—pummeling enemy supply lines and encampments. With the crucial assistance of U.S. airpower, the ARVN eventually stabilized the lines in front of Saigon and Hue and even mounted a small counteroffensive.

In the final analysis, the ferocious campaigns of the summer of 1972 merely raised the stalemate to a new level of violence. Both sides endured huge losses—the North Vietnamese suffered an estimated 100,000 casualties, and the South Vietnamese lost as many as 30,000 killed, 78,000 wounded, and 14,000 missing in action—but neither emerged appreciably stronger. Although it fought determinedly at times, the ARVN continued to be afflicted by severe leadership problems, especially in top positions. Its ability to prevail without the support of U.S. airpower was highly suspect. The Easter Offensive again demonstrated, one scholar has concluded, that the “‘strategy’ of Vietnamization could never compensate for a lack of national will.”⁷⁶ North Vietnam had exposed ARVN's continued vulnerability, gained a sizable slice of territory along the Laotian and Cambodian borders that would be important in its final offensive, and retained sizable troops in the South. The NLF scored some major gains in the Mekong Delta. But Hanoi had again badly miscalculated the U.S. response. By spreading its forces over three fronts rather than concentrating on one, it succeeded nowhere. The North Vietnamese again paid a huge price for their mistakes. Their offensive capabilities were set back for three years. Thieu clung stubbornly to power; the United States remained in South Vietnam.

Frustrated in their hopes of breaking the diplomatic stalemate by military means, by the fall of 1972, each side found compelling reasons to do so by diplomacy. The Nixon administration was by no means desperate to get a settlement. The Democrats had nominated George McGovern, an outspoken dove whose extreme views appeared to make

⁷⁶Dale Andradé, *Trial by Fire: The 1972 Easter Offensive, America's Last Vietnam Battle* (New York, 1995), p. 533. See also Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp. 324–327.

him the easiest opponent to defeat, leaving Nixon substantial room to maneuver. Nonetheless, the president and especially Kissinger recognized that an indefinite continuation of the air war could cause problems at home. In any event, U.S. airpower was reeling from months of grueling around-the-clock operations. "My planes are broken," Gen. John Vogt conceded. "We are flat on our ass."⁷⁷ War-weary themselves, Nixon and Kissinger were also increasingly frustrated by the persistence of a conflict they had come to see as a major impediment to their larger foreign policy aims. They were impatient to uphold their promises to end it.

For North Vietnam, the pressures were more compelling. Through total mobilization, superhuman effort, and amazing adaptability, the nation survived "the second war of US destruction." But it suffered horrendous losses. The bombing and blockade inflicted disastrous effects on its economy and its army in South Vietnam. Its allies pushed ahead with détente with its enemy. The Soviet Union refused to challenge the blockade. Moscow and Beijing pressed Hanoi to gain a settlement by dropping its demand for the ouster of Thieu. Thwarted for the third time in its quest for decisive military victory, the Hanoi leadership made a "watershed" decision of its own in June, shifting from pursuit of military victory in the short run to a diplomatic solution that would enable it to achieve its political aims in the long run. Recognizing that it must seize the opportunity presented by the U.S. election, it sought mainly the removal of all U.S. troops from South Vietnam so that it could deal with Thieu on his own later. By September, when it became obvious that Nixon would win by a landslide, Hanoi realized that it must settle immediately.⁷⁸

PEACE IS AT HAND

From late summer on, the two nations inched toward a compromise. When the secret talks resumed in mid-July, Kissinger reiterated the U.S. proposal for a unilateral withdrawal, thus permitting North Vietnamese troops to remain in the South after a cease-fire, a huge concession. He also took a big step away from America's long-standing commitment to Thieu by agreeing to a tripartite electoral commission. Composed of the Saigon regime, the PRG, and neutralists, this body would work out a settlement after the cease-fire went into effect, thus separating the United States from the political outcome.

⁷⁷Randolph, *Brutal and Powerful Weapons*, p. 329.

⁷⁸Asselin, "Revisionism Triumphant," pp. 120–126.

By the early fall of 1972, both sides were ready to settle. The “time is ripe,” Kissinger admitted; Nixon agreed that “This war has got to stop.” They were quite aware that the settlement they were moving toward would come at the expense of South Vietnam and especially of Thieu. “[O]ur terms will eventually destroy him,” Kissinger conceded. And yet, incongruously, they expected him to go along. Surprised at the generous concessions offered by the United States, North Vietnam’s Politburo agreed that the war must be ended before the election to “foil Nixon’s scheme” to “continue Vietnamization and to negotiate from a position of strength.” With the United States out of Vietnam, it could deal with the GVN on its own. In a dramatic and decisive shift in mid-September, Tho dropped Hanoi’s long-standing demand for the ouster of Thieu, accepting a cease-fire that would leave him in office temporarily but would also grant the PRG status in the South. Kissinger agreed to a cease-fire and U.S. withdrawal before political arrangements were agreed upon, thus reneging on an earlier promise to Thieu. The national security adviser exulted at what he considered his “most thrilling moment in public service.”⁷⁹

During three weeks of intensive, sometimes frantic negotiations, Kissinger and Tho hammered out the fundamentals of an agreement. Within forty-five days after a cease-fire, the United States would withdraw its remaining troops, and North Vietnam would return U.S. POWs. The tripartite National Council of Reconciliation and Concord would then administer elections and assume responsibility for implementing the agreement. The United States would provide for Vietnam \$9 billion in aid for reconstruction. By October 11, all but several issues had been resolved. Eager to wrap up the matter as quickly as possible, Kissinger and Tho agreed to leave these items until later. After consulting with Nixon and Thieu, Kissinger would proceed to Hanoi to initial the treaty on October 22.

In his haste to work out an agreement, Kissinger made several critical mistakes. He had routinely deceived both Vietnams by taking one position with Hanoi and quite another with Saigon. He also badly overestimated Thieu’s willingness to do what the United States told him and underestimated Nixon’s willingness to go along with Thieu.

The imperious and impatient American spent five tension-filled days in Saigon employing what he called “shock tactics,” going over the

⁷⁹Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger’s Responsibility for the Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, 2018), pp. 200, 213; Kissinger–Le Duc Tho Negotiations, Document 21.

treaty item by item, embellishing its advantages for South Vietnam, and issuing only slightly veiled warnings that a refusal to go along would compel the end of American support. Increasingly frustrated that the leader of a mere client state could threaten his grand design, Kissinger complained that Thieu's objections "verge on insanity." While trying to sway the South Vietnamese, he continued to practice masterful self-deception. "We face the paradoxical situation," he wrote Nixon, "that the North, which has effectively lost, is acting as if it had won, while the South, which effectively won, is acting as if it has lost."⁸⁰

Thieu was not appeased. He deeply resented his dependence on the United States. He was understandably frightened at the prospect of abandonment. He was understandably furious that he had not been consulted during the negotiations and especially that he had learned of the terms through captured NLF documents. He was incensed that the draft Kissinger presented to him was in English. Kissinger's heavy-handed and arrogant efforts to present him with a *fait accompli* reinforced his already deep-seated suspicion of the United States. Of all the parties concerned, Thieu had the least interest in an agreement providing for an American withdrawal. He found the terms completely unacceptable. He could not go along with an agreement that permitted North Vietnamese troops to remain in the South and accorded the PRG sovereignty. He brought to Kissinger's attention some notably careless phraseology that accorded the tripartite commission the status of a coalition government. He had been faithful to his ally, he claimed, but now he was being sacrificed. "If we accept the document as it stands, we will commit suicide—and I will be committing suicide." He demanded sixty-nine major changes, including establishment of the demilitarized zone as a boundary between two sovereign states and removal of North Vietnamese troops from the South. Perhaps attempting to repeat his maneuver of 1968 (although McGovern was no help to him), he sought to drive a wedge between the United States and North Vietnam by blocking the treaty and allowing the war to continue.⁸¹

Thieu succeeded for the short term. Exhausted from his arduous negotiations and outraged at this unexpected threat to his handiwork, Kissinger denounced Thieu's demands as "preposterous" and urged Nixon to go ahead without Thieu's cooperation. Concerned primarily

⁸⁰ Quoted in *New York Times*, April 30, 2000.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp. 328–332. For the South Vietnamese perspective, see Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York, 1986), pp. 98–106.

with getting the United States out of Vietnam, Kissinger seems to have been willing to cut South Vietnam loose.

Nixon's views were more complex and ambivalent and tended to shift with his moods. He desperately wanted to end the war—"this cancer eating at us at home, eating at us abroad," he called it. He acknowledged that North Vietnam had made important concessions and that Kissinger's agreement offered a way out. He also painfully recognized that it fell far short of his original goals and that leaving NVA troops in the South after the United States departed would put the GVN at grave risk. Unlike Kissinger, Nixon was not surprised when Thieu balked. South Vietnam's interests clashed fundamentally with those of the United States. He looked down upon his Saigon counterpart and evinced little concern for South Vietnam itself. He suggested to Kissinger at one point that he might string Thieu along until after the election and then "we'll do what we goddamned please." He seems to have been willing, if necessary, to dump Thieu. But appearances were crucial to him, the very essence of what he meant by peace with honor. He did not want the United States and especially the White House to seem responsible for "flushing" the South Vietnamese leader. He also found a separate deal with Hanoi "repugnant" because, he said, "we lose everything we've done." Nixon was angry that by pushing ahead with Hanoi without consulting Saigon, Kissinger had boxed him in. At times he even fantasized that with the election behind him he could force a better deal from North Vietnam. Kissinger sought to keep hopes of an early settlement alive by stating publicly on October 31 that "peace is at hand," but Nixon's refusal to abandon Thieu at this point ensured the breakdown of the October agreement and a new round of negotiations.⁸²

For the remainder of the year, Nixon struggled to extricate himself from the bind created by Kissinger and his two Vietnamese adversaries. His landslide reelection gave him some leverage, but he also recognized that time was not on his side. Members of Congress, hawks and Republican stalwarts as well as doves, realized that Thieu was responsible for the breakdown of the October agreement and threatened to terminate aid to South Vietnam if the war had not ended by the time the legislature reconvened in January. Nixon's solution to his dilemma was to appear sympathetic to Thieu's demands by seeking modest revisions from North Vietnam while making plain to the South Vietnamese leader that his patience had limits.

⁸²The quotations are from *FR, 1969–1976*, 9: 123; *ibid.*, 8: 1058; and *ibid.*, 9: 419–420.

In the first phase of its implementation, the strategy failed. Through intermediaries, the president assured Thieu that he was seeking concessions from Hanoi and also promised to respond forcibly should North Vietnam violate any peace agreement. He also warned Thieu that his present course could bring “disaster” to the U.S.–South Vietnamese alliance and threatened “brutal actions” if he did not go along. Apparently determined by this time to sabotage any peace agreement in hopes that the war—and U.S. aid—would continue, Thieu refused to budge and even upped his demands to complete North Vietnamese withdrawal from his country.

The secret discussions resumed in Paris on November 20 in an atmosphere markedly different from when the diplomats had last met. To mollify Thieu, Kissinger raised his objections for reconsideration. He asked for at least a token withdrawal of NVA troops from the South and requested changes in the text that would have weakened the political status of the PRG, restricted the powers of the tripartite commission, and established the demilitarized zone as a virtual boundary. He added a veiled threat that Nixon, having gained a landslide reelection victory, would not hesitate to “take whatever action he considers necessary to protect United States interests.”⁸³ Claiming to have been betrayed, refusing to give in to threats, and determined not to be steamrolled into a disadvantageous agreement, Le Duc Tho angrily rejected Kissinger’s proposals and raised numerous demands of his own, even reviving Hanoi’s insistence upon the ouster of Thieu.⁸⁴

For weeks Kissinger and Tho sparred back and forth across the negotiating table in an atmosphere rife with tension and marked by outbursts of anger. Concessions were offered, debated, sometimes heatedly—and then withdrawn. Proposals were revised and re-revised. The negotiations were complicated on the American side by growing suspicion and mutual antagonism between Nixon and Kissinger. Both men were frustrated and exhausted from the unrelenting stress of events. Although still dependent on his chief diplomat to implement his goals, Nixon seethed with resentment that Kissinger was gaining public recognition rightfully his own. He and his new confidant (and Kissinger’s top aide) Gen. Alexander Haig railed about the national security adviser’s paranoia and mood swings and blamed him for the impasse. The president was planning to reshuffle his cabinet, and

⁸³Nixon, *RN*, p. 721.

⁸⁴Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, pp. 350–351.

Kissinger's place was uncertain. The national security adviser may have pushed a harder line to reestablish his credibility with a distrustful and sometimes vengeful boss.⁸⁵

Strangely, just when peace again seemed in reach—if not at hand—both nations balked. Fearful that the agreement that had seemed so close in October might yet slip away, each side made concessions. By late November, they had crawled back to the essence of the original compromise with only the status of the demilitarized zone unresolved. Certain that Thieu would never accept any proposal that resembled the October agreement, Nixon contemplated—but ultimately rejected—Kissinger's proposal to dump him and sign a bilateral agreement with Hanoi. Diplomats Tho and Thuy urged Hanoi to settle lest an opportunity to get the United States out of Vietnam be squandered. The Politburo rejected their appeal. The North Vietnamese leadership feared that Kissinger's proposal on the demilitarized zone could be read as a permanent dividing line. At a minimum, it could hamper resupply of troops in the South. "We cannot abandon the principle to end the war at all cost," one official insisted. Believing that time was on its side and that Congress might cut off funds for the war, Hanoi refused to compromise, knowingly risking another round of bombing.⁸⁶ The talks recessed in mid-December, presumably to resume at the start of the new year.

Wearily, frustrated, angry, sometimes using locker room language, Nixon and Kissinger vented their fury that the world's greatest power was being manipulated by two small, relatively weak nations, one an enemy, the other an ally. Kissinger denounced North and South Vietnam as those "two maniacal parties," "nuts," he called them, "both of them facing us down in a position of total impotence," the North Vietnamese "stringing us along," South Vietnam "ignoring us." Nixon moaned that the North Vietnamese "figure they have us where the hair is short" and they will "continue to squeeze." A stubbornly defiant Thieu had "cut off our nose to spite our face," the president raged. He had "destroyed his usefulness" as far as the United States was concerned and must not be permitted to push a great power around. Yet the president continued to believe that abandoning the South Vietnamese leader would cost *him* peace with honor. It would be better, Nixon mused, to continue the alliance with Thieu and "have the Congress do the evil deed."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 353; *FR*, 1969–1976, 9: 496.

⁸⁶ Asselin, "Revisionism Triumphant," p. 130; Brigham, *Reckless*, pp. 232–233.

⁸⁷ *FR*, 1969–1976, 9: 492, 496, 583, 618–619; Kissinger–Le Duc Tho *Negotiations*, Doc 40; Brigham, *Reckless*, p. 235.

Certain that the LINEBACKER bombings had forced the North Vietnamese into the October agreement, throughout the fall of 1972 Nixon had toyed with the idea of another, even more massive bombing campaign to compel a settlement. When Kissinger returned from Paris, he and the president decided to persist in their strategy but drastically escalate the pressures on both Vietnams. Although South Vietnam had been mainly responsible for the breakdown of the October agreement, the United States would blame the North Vietnamese—and then “bomb the hell out of them.” In the meantime, it would develop a “menu” of compelling economic and military pressures to force Thieu to go along with an agreement.

Over the next few weeks, Nixon put the heat on South Vietnam. He ordered the immediate delivery of more than \$1 billion of military hardware, leaving Thieu with, among other assets, the fourth largest air force in the world. Nixon gave “absolute assurances” that if the North Vietnamese violated the peace agreement, he would order “swift and severe retaliatory action.” He instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to begin immediate planning for such a contingency.⁸⁸ At the same time, in Kissinger’s words, Nixon sought to “brutalize” Thieu, warning in what he termed his “absolutely final offer” that if South Vietnam rejected the best treaty that could be obtained, the United States would “seek a settlement with the enemy which serves U.S. interests alone.”⁸⁹ Thieu continued to defy his more powerful patron, refusing to give Nixon carte blanche to negotiate for him and brazenly informing the press that he had rejected a U.S. ultimatum. Although enraged by the intransigence of an ally he now labeled a “complete SOB,” Nixon was not entirely displeased, perceiving that Thieu’s defiance gave him ample pretext for a break should it come to that later.⁹⁰

While attempting to bludgeon Thieu into submission, Nixon employed what Kissinger called “jugular diplomacy” against North Vietnam, ordering over the Christmas season a massive dose of bombing against Hanoi and Haiphong. The motive was to force the North Vietnamese to conclude an agreement. But the decision reflected the accumulated anger and frustration of four years. It was also designed to reassure Thieu and reduce North Vietnam’s capacity to threaten South

⁸⁸Nixon, *RN*, p. 718; Zumwalt, *On Watch*, pp. 413–414.

⁸⁹H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, 1994), p. 543; Nixon to Thieu, December 17, 1972, Richard Cheney Files, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Mich., Box 13.

⁹⁰Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, p. 558.

Vietnam after a settlement had been concluded. Nixon knew that he must end the war quickly or Congress might take control out of his hands. He was egged on by hard-liners such as Connally and Haig. An intensive bombing attack could end the war with a dramatic flourish—a bang rather than a whimper—as Nixon had predicted at the outset of his presidency. It would enable him to portray the peace that had resulted from compromise as a victory for U.S. military power and his own courage and diplomatic skill.⁹¹ It would demonstrate to the North Vietnamese that he was prepared to uphold the peace that was negotiated, thus helping to make any agreement more inforceable.

Between December 18 and 29, Nixon unleashed the most ferocious and devastating air attacks of the war. He made absolutely clear to the Joint Chiefs his determination to inflict maximum damage. “I don’t want any more of this crap about the fact that we couldn’t hit this target or that one,” he lectured Moorer. “This is your chance to use military power to win this war, and if you don’t, I’ll hold you responsible.”⁹² During *LINEBACKER II*, also called the Christmas bombing, U.S. aircraft flew close to 2,000 sorties and dropped nearly 42,000 bombs, exceeding the tonnage for 1969–1971. The all-weather, high-flying B-52s, which gave no warning but inflicted enormous destruction, bore the burden of *LINEBACKER II*. The campaign was designed to cripple North Vietnam’s war-making capacity and, by focusing directly on Hanoi and Haiphong, also to destroy its will by psychological damage and by hitting targets such as radio stations and power plants. Offering a small carrot to go with a heavy stick, Nixon proposed to North Vietnam on December 22 resumption of the Paris talks on January 3, 1973.

The Christmas bombing gave Hanoi strong incentive to return to the conference table (although there is every reason to believe it would have done so anyway). North Vietnamese leaders had expected another round of bombing, but they were caught off guard by the magnitude of the December attacks and by the focus on the major cities. The bombing severely set back North Vietnam’s industrial and war-making capabilities. It did not compare in destructiveness to the air attacks on Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Dresden during World War II. U.S. pilots went to some lengths to minimize civilian casualties; large numbers of civilians had already been evacuated from the cities. Still, the destruction in parts of Hanoi and Haiphong was extensive. More than 1,600 civilians

⁹¹Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, pp. 362–364.

⁹²Sulzberger, *Seven Continents*, p. 593; Nixon, *RN*, pp. 725–726.

were killed and 1,261 injured in what Vietnamese called “the twelve days of darkness.” By the end of December, North Vietnam had exhausted its stock of surface-to-air missiles, leaving it more vulnerable to B-52 attack. As at Geneva in 1954 and during the Easter Offensive, China and the Soviet Union again pressed Hanoi to settle with the United States. On December 26, a day on which B-52s dropped 4,000 tons of bombs in fifteen minutes, Hanoi conveyed to Washington its willingness to resume peace talks on January 8.

The Christmas bombing also gave Nixon compelling reasons to return to the negotiating table. In part because of U.S. tactics designed to limit civilian casualties, North Vietnamese air defenses exacted a heavy toll, bringing down fifteen B-52s (nine in the first three days) and eleven other aircraft, leaving ninety-three crew members missing, and creating thirty-one new POWs. North Vietnamese propagandists defiantly labeled the Christmas bombing a “Dien Bien Phu of the skies.” The bombing also provoked cries of outrage across the world. The Soviets and Chinese, in marked contrast to their restraint in May, heatedly protested. In a remark that especially stung Nixon, Swedish prime minister Olof Palme compared it as an act of cruelty to those perpetrated by the Nazis. The reaction at home was one of shock and anger. Critics condemned Nixon as a “madman” and accused him of waging “war by tantrum.” Columnist Joseph Kraft denounced the bombing as an act of “senseless terror which stains the good name of America.”⁹³ Many Americans who had accepted the May bombings questioned both the necessity and the unusual brutality of the December attacks, a “sorry Christmas present” for the American people, in the words of Senator Aiken.⁹⁴ Nixon’s approval rating plummeted to 39 percent overnight. Congressional doves made it clear that when they returned to Washington after the Christmas recess, they would be ready to do battle with the president. “We took the threats from Congress seriously,” one of Nixon’s aides later observed. “We knew we were racing the clock,” and if North Vietnam refused to negotiate, “we faced stern action.”⁹⁵ Under intense pressure at home and abroad and with the bombing as cover, Nixon readily endorsed Hanoi’s acceptance of his proposal to go back to the conference table.

⁹³James R. Powell, *Going for Broke: Richard Nixon’s Search for “Peace with Honor,”* October 1972–January 1973, Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1997, p. 206.

⁹⁴Aiken, *Senate Diary*, p. 136.

⁹⁵Colson, *Born Again*, pp. 77–79.

The two parties returned to Paris on January 8 and quickly came to terms. Nixon told Kissinger on January 6 that “almost any settlement would be tolerable.” Hanoi desperately wanted the bombing stopped and the United States out and was prepared to accept, in the words of a Vietnamese historian, “a partial victory to create conditions conducive to a complete victory.”⁹⁶ After four days of marathon negotiations marked by give-and-take on both sides, Kissinger and Tho hammered out an agreement. North Vietnam made important concessions by accepting more restrictive language on the demilitarized zone and by agreeing that the release of PRG prisoners in the South would be tied to the withdrawal of its own troops. While pledging to release U.S. prisoners of war, it secured its primary objectives: the end of the U.S. bombing and withdrawal of the remaining American forces. That accomplished, it could begin to rebuild for yet another stage of the war. Nixon hoped to use the threat of U.S. airpower and the promise of reconstruction aid to North Vietnam to uphold the settlement. His best hope—a pipedream it would turn out—was for a Korea-type outcome with two separate Vietnams that would enable him to claim peace with honor.

This time, the United States imposed the settlement on South Vietnam. Nixon again promised continued aid after the peace agreement and vowed to “respond with full force” if North Vietnam violated its terms. He warned that if Thieu continued to resist, he would cut off further assistance and sign the treaty alone. In one especially heavy-handed letter, he reminded Thieu of the fate of Ngo Dinh Diem.⁹⁷ To underline the threat, the United States cut off assistance under the Commodity Import Program. The White House also enlisted conservative senators such as Barry Goldwater to make plain to Thieu he had no support in Congress. Thieu stalled right up to the deadline, raised more objections, asked for additional revisions, and even sent agents to the United States to lobby for him, an act that especially infuriated Nixon. Finally, emotional and despondent, he caved in, remarking with resignation, “I have done all that I can for my country.” The Saigon government never formally endorsed the treaty, but Thieu made known in a cryptic way he would no longer oppose it.

Nixon and Kissinger claimed to have achieved their major objectives through the Paris agreement. Privately, the president boasted that the Christmas bombing had “enormously increased” U.S. credibility in the world.

⁹⁶Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace; Washington, Hanoi, and the “Making” of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), p. 155.

⁹⁷Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, pp. 73–74.

The Communist nations would realize they were “dealing with a tough man, a strong man.” He insisted that he had achieved peace with honor when his critics “would have bugged out. . . .” The agreement was not perfect, he conceded, “but it was a peace that can work.”⁹⁸

In fact, there was no peace. The Paris agreements permitted American extrication from the war and left the Thieu government in place, at least for the moment. But the major question over which the war had been fought—the political future of South Vietnam—was left unresolved. The political mechanism established to resolve it was inherently unworkable. At the time Kissinger and Tho emerged from the Hotel Majestic in Paris smiling broadly at their achievement, the combatants in South Vietnam were busy preparing for the final round. All sides recognized that the 1973 agreements marked the beginning of yet another phase in the thirty-year struggle for the control of Vietnam.

Nor was there honor. Although South Vietnam was indeed intact when the peace agreement was signed, the presence of 150,000 North Vietnamese troops below the demilitarized zone, along with the U.S. withdrawal and recognition of the PRG, represented huge concessions on the part of the United States, concessions that Thieu saw so clearly as imperiling the existence of his already rickety government. With the use of or the threat of using American airpower, Nixon might have been able to delay the outcome. But U.S. forces would not be deployed in Vietnam again. Even the threat increasingly lacked credibility. This inability to act was in part a result of the Watergate scandal, as Nixon and Kissinger later claimed. What they conveniently omit is that Watergate was the result of illegal actions taken by a paranoid administration and a vindictive president determined to destroy his political enemies. Even without Watergate, Nixon’s threats to use American airpower and his promises to Thieu would probably have turned out to be empty. Because Nixon had not consulted with Congress, they were of dubious legality. In any event, once U.S. forces had been removed from Vietnam, a war-weary nation and a rebellious Congress were not inclined to permit them to return. Nixon may have seen this outcome and sought to shift blame for the inevitable fall of South Vietnam to Congress. Or, he may have planned through American airpower to maintain a perpetual stalemate. Whatever the case, he failed. Although he had succeeded in buying some time for Vietnamization, he had never built a base of public support to

⁹⁸Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter (eds.), *The Nixon Tapes 1973* (Boston, Mass., 2015), pp. 2, 17, 22.

uphold the standards he had set for peace with honor. In the end, his standards had to give way to public unwillingness to invest more resources in a losing cause.⁹⁹

Nixon's Vietnam policies in time produced their own mythmaking, a process aimed at rehabilitating the president's reputation, salvaging America's pride, and promoting a robust interventionism in foreign policy. The key policymakers themselves became the first mythmakers. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Nixon and Kissinger insisted that the 1973 Paris agreement had been viable but that vengeful members of Congress, backed by liberals and a hostile media and abetted by the Watergate scandal, denied them the means to enforce it and drastically cut aid to South Vietnam, thus producing a tragic outcome. Years later, revisionist writers claimed that Abrams's "one-war" approach, by coordinating military operations more closely with pacification, had won the war in South Vietnam, only to have defeat snatched from the jaws of victory by a feckless Congress. Soldier-writer Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (1999), as the title suggests, by portraying a squandered victory in Vietnam became a sort of Bible for those pushing for the implementation of counterinsurgency methods in Iraq to salvage a botched 2003 military intervention.

Such arguments are fundamentally flawed. In moments of candor, Nixon privately conceded that the Paris agreement was a "fragile" document threatened by North Vietnam's "single-minded quest for hegemony."¹⁰⁰ He and Kissinger both expressed doubt that the Saigon regime could survive—at times, they evinced little concern for its fate. The better war thesis is not supported by evidence and seems built largely on wishful thinking. Abrams followed Westmoreland's strategy with only minor modifications. He would have been the first to admit that the war was far from won when the peace agreement was signed in 1973. No better than his predecessors was he able to translate military gain into political success. As before, in fact, military operations often undermined the achievement of political aims. Nor could they compensate for the persistent failure of the Saigon government to connect with its people. Historian Gregory Daddis correctly concludes that the Nixon–Abrams years, like the rest of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, offer a "case study in the limits of U.S. power abroad."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Andrew Z. Katz, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Nixon Administration and the Pursuit of Peace with Honor in Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27(Summer 1977): 499–501.

¹⁰⁰ FRUS, 1969–1976: Kissinger–Le Duc Tho Negotiations, Doc. 48.

¹⁰¹ Daddis, *Withdrawal*, p. 206.

For all concerned, “peace with honor” came at an enormous price. Official U.S. estimates place the number of South Vietnamese battle deaths for 1969–1973 at 107,504 and North Vietnamese and NLF at more than a half million. There will probably never be a full accounting of civilian’s deaths and casualties. The tonnage of bombs dropped on Indochina during these years far exceeded that of the Johnson era, wreaking untold devastation, causing permanent ecological damage to the countryside, and leaving millions of civilians homeless.

The United States suffered much less than Vietnam, but the cost was still substantial. An additional 20,553 Americans were killed in the last four years of the war, bringing the total to more than 58,000. Continuation of the war fueled an inflation that neither Nixon nor his successors could control. The war polarized the American people and poisoned the political atmosphere as no other issue since slavery a century before. Although Nixon had prolonged the fighting four years mainly to uphold America’s credibility in the world, the United States emerged from the conflict with its international image substantially tarnished and its people weary of international commitment.

For Nixon, too, the price was steep. In January 1973, at the very moment when he should have been savoring his electoral triumph and his diplomatic successes, he was exhausted, embittered, and isolated, his administration reduced to a “small band of tired, dispirited, sometimes mean and petty men, bickering among themselves, wary and jealous of one another.”¹⁰² Ironically, at the very height of their political and diplomatic triumphs, Nixon and Kissinger gave vent to jealousy and backbiting over who deserved the credit. Enraged when Kissinger leaked to the press that he had opposed the Christmas bombing, Nixon characteristically ordered the monitoring of his key adviser’s telephone. He was furious that Kissinger shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Le Duc Tho (who declined the award). At the beginning of the second term, the president and his staff were preparing to remove Kissinger from his position.

More than any other single issue, the Vietnam War brought a premature end to the Nixon presidency. The extreme measures he took to defend his Vietnam policies led directly to Watergate, which would eventually force his resignation. Thus, when the final crisis came in 1975, the person who claimed to have achieved peace with honor was no longer in the White House, and the nation was in no mood to defend the agreement he had constructed at such great cost.

¹⁰²Colson, *Born Again*, p. 80.



Veterans at the Wall

Vietnam war veteran Gary Huber of Michigan locates a friend's name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—the Wall—on Veterans' Day 2002. The war touched the souls of Americans as few other events in their history. The stark but moving memorial came to symbolize the nation's pain and grief and for veterans especially served as a place for healing and reconciliation.

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The Postwar War and the Legacies of Vietnam

The “peace” agreements of January 1973 established a framework for continuing the war without direct American participation. North Vietnam still sought unification of the country on its terms; South Vietnam still struggled to survive as an independent nation; and President Nixon still supported the South’s aspirations. The cease-fire existed only on paper.

This last phase of the war was remarkably short. Dependent on the United States from its birth, the Saigon government had great difficulty functioning on its own. Because of the surging Watergate scandals and American war-weariness, moreover, Nixon could not live up to his secret commitments to Thieu. Indeed, in August 1974 he was forced to resign. Congress drastically cut back aid to South Vietnam, further eroding the Saigon government’s faltering will to resist. When North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front (NLF) mounted a major offensive in the spring of 1975, South Vietnam collapsed with stunning rapidity, dramatically ending the thirty-year war and leaving the United States, on the eve of its third century, frustrated, angry, and bewildered.

THE POSTWAR WAR

The “postwar war” began before peace was proclaimed. The United States had some difficulty arranging with North Vietnam for the return of the 591 prisoners of war, at one point threatening to delay troop withdrawals in the absence of cooperation. By the end of March, the details had been worked out and the POWs were released. Some had been held

more than eight years. All had suffered through horrible living conditions, cruel captors, isolation, beatings, and other forms of torture. Some broke under the stress and made statements demanded by their captors. As a group, however, the POWs bore their captivity with courage, dignity, and remarkable inner strength. They developed ingenious methods to communicate with one another—and to survive. They returned in March 1973 to a heroes' welcome. Jeremiah Denton's understated response—"We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances"—added to their appeal. That the POWs were singled out as the only true heroes of an unpopular war did a disservice to the thousands of Americans who served in Vietnam, but their dramatic return helped a divided and war-weary nation salvage some pride and redemption.¹

The return of the POWs and the withdrawal of U.S. troops were the only tangible accomplishments of the teams assigned to implement the peace accords. From the start, efforts to effect a cease-fire proved unavailing. The Vietnamese combatants had not abandoned their goals; they observed the agreements only to the extent that it suited their interests. For Saigon, the agreement permitted, with U.S. assistance, continuation of the war and possible improvement of its position. For Hanoi and the NLF, it provided a political mechanism to win the war.

Buoyed by Nixon's promises, Thieu defied the peace agreement from the outset. The NLF had launched a series of land-grabbing operations immediately before the cease-fire, and Thieu wanted to retrieve as much of the lost territory as possible. Although he controlled an estimated 75 percent of the land and 85 percent of the people when the agreements were signed, he sought to solidify his position while U.S. support remained firm. To secure as much additional territory as possible, he resettled refugees and built forts in contested areas. Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units attacked North Vietnamese bases and supply lines. Artillery and aircraft indiscriminately shelled and bombed villages under Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) control. During the first three months of "peace," the ARVN lost more than 6,000 soldiers, among its highest casualties during the entire war. Thieu's aggressive approach brought short-term advantages but cost his country over the

¹Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C., 2000), pp. 527–528. For a companion official history of the POWs' captivity, see Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Washington, D.C., 1998).

long run by overextending its forces, putting them on the defensive, and leaving the initiative with the enemy.²

After three disastrous failures in bold—or foolhardy—end-the-war offensives, Le Duan out of necessity adopted the cautious, pragmatic approach he had criticized Ho Chi Minh for. Hanoi made major concessions to get a peace agreement that offered no clear path to victory. It chose to observe the Paris Accords out of expediency, especially to help get the United States out of Vietnam and secure American economic assistance. North Vietnam's armed forces were battered, exhausted, and demoralized. The civilian population suffered from extreme war-weariness. The nation's logistics and transportation systems had been devastated; its economy was crippled. The government, armed forces, and people desperately needed a respite to recuperate, rebuild, and prepare for the next stage of the war. As with the period after 1954, Hanoi ordered its forces in the South to stop fighting, consolidate the territory under their control, and continue the struggle only through political means. By appearing to support the peace accords, it hoped to gain sympathy from the war-weary people in South Vietnam, win over world opinion, and make Thieu appear as the major enemy of peace. It did little more than quietly infiltrate supplies into Laos and Cambodia.³

North Vietnam's caution was short-lived. As Thieu's forces took the offensive and the Saigon government gained territory, southern cadres, as after the Geneva Conference, protested their abandonment by Hanoi. To its dismay, the Politburo found that allies and other friendly nations lost interest in Vietnam once the United States left. The Soviet Union and China even cut their aid to North Vietnam. In late March 1973, the leadership resumed the infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam and began preparations for major military operations. In July, with Resolution 21, the Central Committee reauthorized armed struggle in the South to prevent the further erosion of its position. It allowed southern forces to counterattack when threatened but not to mount major operations to retake territory until it was certain the United States would not return. With Resolution 21, North Vietnam began to infiltrate troops and supplies into the South, build a system of modern paved roads with concrete bridges linking staging areas to strategic zones, and even construct a thousand mile pipeline to ensure adequate

²James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, Kans., 2004), pp. 190–193; Maynard Parker, "Vietnam: The War That Won't End," *Foreign Affairs* 53 (January 1975): 365–366.

³Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York, 2018), pp. 206–216.

supplies of petroleum for its forces in the field. By the late summer of 1973 fighting raged across South Vietnam.

Painfully aware of its diminished leverage in Vietnam, the Nixon administration also moved with great caution. Shortly after the signing of the peace agreement, the president reaffirmed to Saigon's ambassador America's continuing military, economic, and "spiritual" support and boasted that the United States had a "stick and a carrot to restrain Hanoi."⁴ Throughout 1973, the administration employed various subterfuges to maintain a high level of military aid without overtly violating the Paris accords. Instead of dismantling its bases, it transferred title to the South Vietnamese before the cease-fire went into effect. Supplies were designated "nonmilitary" and thus eligible for transfer. The military advisory group was replaced by a team of 50 military and 1,200 civilian advisers, some of the latter hastily discharged from service and placed in the employ of the Saigon government. The United States kept a formidable armada of naval and airpower in the Gulf of Tonkin, in Thailand, and on Guam. The Nixon administration continued to bomb Cambodia, in part to support the embattled Lon Nol government against a determined Khmer Rouge offensive, and also to maintain the president's reputation for fierceness.

Nixon and Kissinger quickly perceived their lack of weapons to influence events in Indochina. In March, Kissinger urged responding to North Vietnam's violations of the Paris agreement by bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail, thus reinforcing the president's image of irrationality, his "greatest asset," according to the national security advisor. A newly cautious president found all sorts of reasons not to do so. Such a move would be much too risky as long as all the American POWs were not home, he warned. Bombing would be useless because the Air Force "never hits a goddamned thing." And in the absence of a "raw, naked invasion," it would be impossible to resume the bombing without provoking outrage in Congress. By late spring, the president recognized that public interest in Vietnam had plunged to "zilch." The postwar "American psychology," he complained, was "basically, a new isolationist bug-out psychology." Because the United States had provided massive aid to South Vietnam, Americans would insist that Saigon should defend itself. Early on, Nixon believed that the promise of U.S. aid would give him some leverage with Hanoi. He quickly came to realize that Congress would not support such a request. In any

⁴Kissinger memorandum, January 30, 1973, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, 10: 12-13.

event, the administration sacrificed this carrot in the spring when it suspended discussion on postwar aid in response to continued North Vietnamese infiltration.⁵

Under these circumstances, expectations were adjusted. Kissinger admitted at one point that he did not believe South Vietnam would last through 1974. It remains difficult to fathom Nixon's thinking. Still mainly concerned about U.S. credibility, he once expressed hope that the Saigon government could hang on until events elsewhere began to eclipse Vietnam in importance. "You can't have it collapse immediately," he told Alexander Haig in late March. Admitting that it was hard to be optimistic, he comforted himself with the notion that his administration had "gone the extra mile" in support of Thieu.⁶

VIETNAM, WATERGATE, AND CONGRESS

By the early summer of 1973, Nixon's ability to dangle carrots or brandish sticks had been further curtailed by an increasingly rebellious Congress. The congressional challenge reflected a pervasive war-weariness and a widespread feeling among Americans that once their troops had been safely removed, the nation should extricate itself entirely from the conflict. Mounting evidence of White House involvement in the Watergate scandal increased Nixon's vulnerability. Republicans joined Democrats in condemning the bombing of Cambodia as illegal. On May 10, the House voted to cut off funds for further air operations. Congress displayed no enthusiasm for reconstruction aid for North Vietnam, especially after returned POWs started to divulge the grim details of their captivity. Doves protested that it would not promote peace; hawks denounced it as "reparations." In the fall of 1973, Congress voted that no funds would be provided until Hanoi gave a full accounting of U.S. personnel missing in action, something it refused to do.

Perceiving the relentless erosion of administration influence over events in Indochina, Kissinger journeyed to Paris once again in May in a

⁵Nixon conversation with Brent Scowcroft, March 20, 1973, *ibid.*, pp. 160–161; Nixon telecon with Kissinger, March 16, 1973, with Alexander Haig, March 20, 1973, with Scowcroft, March 20, 1973, with Haig, March 30, 1973, with Scowcroft, June 12, 1973, in Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes 1973* (Boston, New York, 2015), pp. 228–230, 248–252, 252–255, 394–399, 756–760.

⁶Haig–Nixon telecon, March 30, 1973; *ibid.*, p. 175; Nixon–Scowcroft telecon, June 12, 1973, *ibid.*, p. 335.

last-ditch and ultimately futile effort to persuade Hanoi to observe the cease-fire. Le Duc Tho responded angrily to American charges of violations with countercharges that South Vietnam and the United States were not upholding their commitments. More annoying, Tho dismissed U.S. accusations as attempts to deceive public opinion, "as you have done with Watergate." Operating without any leverage, Kissinger cobbled together a new agreement that did little more than establish a timetable for implementing the old one. Once again, Thieu balked, stalling for days and refusing to acquiesce until faced with another series of letters containing escalating Nixon threats to cut off U.S. aid to his government. Nixon gushed that Kissinger "went into the thing with a broken flush" and was looking at "four aces" and "by golly you pulled it off." More accurately, the national security adviser sensed it was over. He subsequently informed a South Vietnamese diplomat that he was done negotiating with North Vietnam (a message that may have cheered some Saigon officials): "I am washing my hands of this." Upon returning to Washington he told the press that he was going to reduce his involvement in Indochina affairs "in order to preserve my emotional stability."⁷

Kissinger's remark was more prophetic than he could have realized, for during the summer of 1973 Nixon's power drastically waned. Ever-widening investigations of what had seemed a routine break-in at the Democratic party headquarters in Washington's posh Watergate Hotel a year earlier had revealed ties between the burglars and the president's reelection committee and even to the White House itself, sensational exposes of other presidential abuses of power, and details of a frenzied administration cover-up. Senate hearings on the Watergate affair were televised by the networks and mesmerized a huge national audience. Nixon's efforts to save his own skin by firing his top aides backfired when some of them divulged yet more about goings-on in the White House. Most of his working hours were consumed with discussing the events of the scandal and desperately seeking ways to salvage his increasingly imperiled presidency.

Nixon's steadily weakening position encouraged more vigorous Congressional efforts to terminate military activities in Southeast Asia. Long-embittered Democrats were encouraged to take on the president, and Republicans were increasingly reluctant to support him. Nixon and Kissinger vigorously defended the bombing of Cambodia as necessary to sustain Lon Nol and uphold the cease-fire. But an overwhelming majority

⁷Nixon-Kissinger telecon, June 16, 1973, Brinkley and Nichter, *Nixon Tapes* 1973, p. 761; Memorandum of conversation, June 15, 1973; *FRUS*, 1969-1976, p. 354; Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston, 1974), p. 432.

of legislators agreed with Senator George Aiken that the bombing was “ill-advised and unwarranted.” Many accepted the outspoken affirmation of Representative Norris Cotton (New Hampshire Republican): “As far as I’m concerned, I want to get the hell out.”⁸ In late June, Congress approved an amendment requiring the immediate cessation of all military operations in and over Indochina. The House upheld Nixon’s angry veto, but the president was eventually forced to accept a compromise extending the deadline to August 15. For the first time, Congress had taken decisive steps to curtail American involvement in the war. “It would be idle to say that the authority of the executive has not been impaired,” Kissinger remarked with obvious understatement and disappointment.⁹

By the end of 1973, Nixon was virtually powerless. Watergate had reduced his popular approval ratings to an all-time low and left him fighting a desperate rearguard action to save his political life. His complete absorption in his survival rendered him increasingly incapable of dealing with other issues. In November, Congress passed, over another veto, the so-called War Powers Act, a direct response to the abuse of presidential authority in Vietnam. The legislation required the president to inform Congress within forty-eight hours of the deployment of American military forces abroad and to withdraw them in sixty days in the absence of explicit congressional endorsement. Some members of Congress protested that the act conferred on the president a more direct power to commit American troops to war than was provided by the Constitution, but the circumstances under which the debate took place, combined with Watergate and the vote terminating operations in Indochina, made virtually certain the end of direct American involvement in Vietnam. The administration could do little more than mount a covert disinformation program to delude Hanoi into believing that a major offensive on its part would provoke massive U.S. military retaliation.

A CRUMBLING BASTION

In the meantime, the Paris agreements had become a dead letter. Discussions of a political settlement had begun in early 1973 and continued sporadically throughout the year, but the basic issue—the future of

⁸ George Aiken, *Senate Diary* (Brattleboro, Vt., 1976), p. 198; Kalb and Kalb, *Kissinger*, p. 432.

⁹ Kalb and Kalb, *Kissinger*, p. 434.

South Vietnam—was nonnegotiable. Thieu proclaimed the “Four Nos”: no recognition of the enemy, no coalition government, no neutralization for South Vietnam, and no concession of territory. Still confident of U.S. support despite the darkening cloud of Watergate, he formally announced in late 1973 the start of the “Third Indochina War,” stepping up ground and air attacks on enemy bases and launching a series of land-grabbing operations in PRG-held territories along the eastern seaboard, in the Iron Triangle, and in the Mekong Delta.

This time, North Vietnam and the PRG responded. Fearing a reprise of the post-Geneva time when the Viet Minh had been nearly wiped out by Ngo Dinh Diem’s forces, southerners urged action. Stretching Resolution 21 beyond its intended limits, they began to strike deeply into territory held by the Saigon regime. Integrating regulars with local forces, they tried to put maximum pressure on the enemy wherever they could and take any territory they could get. They scored major successes, mauling ARVN units in the Iron Triangle near Saigon, retaking some places that had been lost, and seizing other land once under GVN control. At first, southern aggressiveness troubled a still wary Hanoi leadership. But the passage of the War Powers Act and the growing seriousness of the Watergate scandal made increasingly clear that the United States would not return to Vietnam. Le Duan admitted his mistake in adhering to the Paris Accords for too long. The fighting intensified in late 1973. By year’s end, the Third Indochina War was underway.¹⁰

Over the next year, the military balance shifted decisively. Thieu’s “hold at all costs” strategy produced crippling overextension. The more hamlets the Government of Vietnam (GVN) acquired, the more vulnerable it became. More than half of its million-soldier army was tied down in static defense positions and scattered through the northern provinces. They could not attack North Vietnamese supply routes. Modeled after the U.S. Army, the ARVN had a huge logistics tail. Only about 150,000 of its regular forces were actual combat troops. As many as 20,000 of these were “flower soldiers” who had purchased their freedom from fighting. Pay cuts and loss of perquisites spurred an even higher desertion rate. Corruption and weak leadership continued to undermine ARVN effectiveness. Like its mentor, the ARVN had come to rely on airpower and heavy firepower, and the departure of U.S. air units from South Vietnam

¹⁰ Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War*, pp. 223–224.

had weakened its fighting effectiveness. The numbing sense of dependency persisted as the South Vietnamese still insisted on “checking with the Americans,” even though it was unclear what Americans should be checked with.¹¹

South Vietnam’s perennial economic and political problems had been sharply aggravated by the American withdrawal. Loss of the \$400 million the United States spent annually in South Vietnam, reduction of military aid from \$2.3 billion in 1973 to about \$1 billion in 1974, and a steep rise in worldwide inflation combined to produce an annual inflation rate of 90 percent, massive unemployment, a drastic decline in morale in the armed forces and among the urban population, and an increase in the ever-present corruption. Scavengers stripped the American-built port at Cam Ranh Bay to a bare skeleton. Pilots demanded bribes to fly missions in support of ground troops.

A belated, sometimes frantic effort to compensate for the loss of U.S. aid by getting help from other countries produced few results. “[O]ur destiny now lies in our own force and ability,” one Saigon official admitted in 1968, and South Vietnamese set out to portray themselves as a progressive new nation worthy of assistance. They floundered from the start. A tight budget left scant funds for a global initiative, and the lack of experienced diplomats further hampered their work. The GVN’s reputation as a corrupt, authoritarian government did not help. South Vietnam was also a victim of the diplomatic revolution of the early 1970s. With China’s impending entry into the world community, the GVN lost its position as a bulwark against Asian communism. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seemed a likely candidate for friendship and possible aid, but its member nations rebuffed Saigon’s overtures. More than anything else, Thieu’s blatant manipulation of the electoral process in 1971 turned off possible sources of assistance. An ambitious 1973 world tour to get desperately needed aid met roadblocks at every step. The arrival of Saigon delegates in West Germany ignited such protest among leftists that the travelers were limited to a brief and unproductive meeting at the Berlin airport. The message to Thieu was pointed: “We need you to help us help you.” In Australia, a supportive ally through much of the war, Saigon’s delegates did not even get a meeting.¹²

Thieu’s policies compounded South Vietnam’s problems. In the spring of 1974, he attempted to starve out the enemy by blockading

¹¹Parker, “Vietnam,” pp. 366–367; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, pp. 201–206.

¹²Sean Fear, “Saigon Goes Global: South Vietnam’s Quest for International Legitimacy in the Age of Détente,” *Diplomatic History* 42 (June 2018): 429, 431, 438–439, 452–454.

PRG areas and enacting various measures to deny them rice. The so-called Rice War backfired, causing enormous suffering throughout all of South Vietnam, even in Saigon. By 1974, there were three to four million unemployed people in areas controlled by the GVN. The increase in hunger and joblessness stimulated a rise in crime and corruption. The economic crisis of 1974 compounded Thieu's political woes. The Buddhists became more active than at any other time since 1966, agitating for peace and reconciliation with the Communists. The Catholics, the government's most important base of support, organized an anticorruption campaign, the major target of which was Thieu himself. A spirit of defeatism grew among those fence-sitters who had not supported the government but had not actively opposed it either. Growing political unrest spurred demonstrations. The government responded as it always had with jailings and beatings.¹³

By early 1974, the balance of forces had shifted in North Vietnam's favor. Its once embattled army had recovered from the losses of 1972–1973, and increased Soviet military aid further boosted morale. It had an estimated 285,000 troops in the South, vast stockpiles of supplies, and a highly sophisticated logistics system that permitted the shifting of regulars, along with tanks and artillery, to any battlefield within hours. The once primitive Ho Chi Minh Trail was now a gravel-paved two-lane highway with way stations every hundred kilometers. North Vietnam had also built a north–south supply route from the demilitarized zone to within one hundred kilometers of Saigon. Still closely watching events in Washington, Hanoi's leaders in late 1973 hesitated to launch an end-the-war offensive. But they sharply escalated the fighting, exhorting forces to “attack point by point, grasping partial victories and advancing toward final victory.” They assaulted ARVN bases and headquarters and towns held by the GVN. During 1974, they regained the initiative, took substantial new territory, especially in the Central Highlands and the vital Mekong Delta and land deemed crucial for the final offensive, and gained invaluable combat experience. Throughout the summer and fall, they inflicted heavy losses on South Vietnamese forces, further eroding morale and confidence. By late in the year, the NVA stood poised for the final offensive.¹⁴

¹³Ngo Vinh Long, “Post-Paris Struggles and the Fall of Saigon,” in Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (eds.), *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (New York, 1993), pp. 206–212.

¹⁴Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, pp. 208–213; Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, pp. 224–228.

The American abandonment of South Vietnam was manifest by the end of 1974. Nixon was forced to resign in August, removing from power the individual who had promised continued support and leaving a stunned and despondent Thieu to contemplate abandoning the northern part of South Vietnam and building a new nation around the former Cochinchina. Throughout the year, Kissinger pleaded with an increasingly defiant Congress to expand military aid to \$1.5 billion, insisting that the United States had a moral obligation to South Vietnam and warning that failure to uphold it would have a “corrosive effect on our interests beyond Indochina.”

Arguments that had been accepted without challenge for nearly a quarter of a century now fell flat. Runaway inflation in the United States evoked insistent demands for reducing expenditures. Many members of Congress agreed with Senator William Proxmire (Wisconsin Democrat) that there was less need for continued military aid to South Vietnam than for “any other single item” in the budget. Critics insisted that the Thieu government was in no immediate peril and warned that much of the money would line the pockets of Saigon’s corrupt bureaucrats. A continuation of massive American military aid would encourage Thieu to prolong the war, whereas a reduction might impress on him the need to seek a political settlement. It was time to terminate America’s “endless support for an endless war,” Senator Edward Kennedy insisted. In September 1974, Congress approved an aid program of only \$700 million, half of which comprised shipping costs.¹⁵

The aid cuts of 1974 had a devastating impact in South Vietnam. Without the continued large infusion of U.S. funds and equipment, the armed forces could not fight the way the Americans had trained them. Air force operations had to be curtailed by as much as 50 percent because of shortages of gasoline and spare parts. Ammunition and other supplies had to be severely rationed. The inescapable signs of waning American support had a crushing effect on morale in an army already reeling under North Vietnamese blows. Desertions reached an all-time high of 240,000 in 1974. The aid cutbacks heightened Thieu’s economic and political woes, spurring among many Vietnamese a “growing psychology of accommodation and retreat that sometimes approached despair.”¹⁶

¹⁵ *Congressional Record*, 93d Cong., 2d Sess., 29176–29180.

¹⁶ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978), p. 208.

THE END OF THE TUNNEL

From the time of the First Indochina War, overly optimistic French and U.S. officials had promised a light at the end of the tunnel. When that light finally appeared in 1975, it came with a stunning rapidity and brought an outcome that turned a cliché into a cruel irony.

Since the beginning of the postwar war, North Vietnamese and NLF leaders had watched events in South Vietnam and especially in the United States with “an almost obsessive curiosity.” Planning for a final offensive began in the spring of 1974 and quickened following Nixon’s resignation. Exiled during preparations for the Tet Offensive, the venerable hero of Dien Bien Phu, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, this time played a key role. The offensive aimed to destroy South Vietnam’s military forces and take its major cities one by one rather than all at once as at Tet. It was daring and innovative in conception, but cautious and opportunistic in implementation. It relied on surprise and deception rather than attrition. The aim was to attain total victory as quickly as possible before China or the United States could interfere. It was to begin with probing attacks at the end of the year.¹⁷

In December 1974, North Vietnamese main units and PRG regional forces attacked Phuoc Long, northeast of Saigon. Within three weeks they had killed or captured 3,000 ARVN troops, seized huge quantities of supplies, and “liberated” the entire province. The ease of the victory underscored the relative weakening of the ARVN during the past year and made clear, as the North Vietnamese chief of staff, Gen. Van Tien Dung, later put it, that Thieu was now forced to fight a “poor-man’s war.” Thieu refused to withdraw from Phuoc Long—or send additional troops to defend it. Its fall and America’s silent response shattered morale among South Vietnamese civilians and military and left the president fearful of a coup.

Aware from intelligence that Saigon was not expecting a major offensive in 1975, in January, Hanoi adopted a two-year plan, a series of large-scale offensives in 1975 to create the conditions for a general offensive and a general uprising in 1976. U.S. failure to respond to the fall of Phuoc Long confirmed what many North Vietnamese strategists

¹⁷Truong Nhu Tang with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York, 1985), p. 225; planning for the final offensive is discussed in Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War*, p. 225–226; Merle L. Pribbenow, “North Vietnam’s Final Offensive: Strategic Endgame Nonpareil,” *Parameters* 19 (Winter 1999–2000): 2–7.

had long suspected, that having pulled out of South Vietnam, the Americans would not “jump back in.” After days of sometimes heated debate, the leadership concluded that even if the United States responded with naval and airpower, it could not “rescue the Saigon administration from its disastrous collapse.”¹⁸

The collapse came with a suddenness that surprised even the North Vietnamese. Massing vastly superior forces against the stretched-out ARVN defenders, Dung attacked Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands in early March and took it within two days. To secure control of the highlands before the end of the dry season, he moved against Pleiku and Kontum. Belatedly scrapping his hold-everything strategy, a now panicky Thieu ordered a withdrawal from the highlands, a necessary decision, perhaps, but no plans had been formulated, and a retreat is among the most difficult of military maneuvers to execute. The withdrawal quickly turned into a rout. Soldiers deserted to look after their families, and thousands of civilians joined the soldiers in flight, clogging the avenues of escape. The breakdown of discipline sparked riots and looting. Hundreds died of hunger and sickness. Much of the army was captured or destroyed, and thousands of civilians died from enemy or friendly gunfire or from starvation in what journalists called the “Convoy of Tears.” “It was a true hell,” one survivor recalled.¹⁹ Pleiku and Kontum fell within a week. This disastrous, largely self-inflicted defeat cost the Thieu government six provinces, at least two divisions of troops, and the confidence of its army and people. It opened the way for even greater catastrophe in the nation’s coastal cities.

Sensing that total victory was now in reach, Hanoi put into effect contingency plans for the conquest of South Vietnam. The important coastal city of Da Nang, normally populated by 300,000 citizens, was crammed with an additional two million refugees. When North Vietnamese forces approached the outskirts, the city fell apart. The defending army, along with hundreds of thousands of civilians, fled for Saigon, duplicating on an even larger and more tragic scale the debacle in the highlands. Air evacuation had to be stopped when frantic refugees mobbed the planes. Soldiers looted, and money-hungry citizens charged up to \$2 for a glass of water. An estimated 60,000 died trying to get out of Da Nang.

¹⁸Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory* (New York, 1977), pp. 17, 19–20.

¹⁹Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 244.

Ten days after the attack had begun and almost ten years to the day after the U.S. Marines had splashed ashore at Da Nang, the two coastal cities were in North Vietnamese hands. South Vietnam had been cut in two and half its army lost without putting up any resistance. Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay were abandoned before they were even threatened. Dung now threw all his forces into the “Ho Chi Minh Campaign” to liberate Saigon. Many South Vietnamese were frightened by the prospect of a northern victory but unwilling or unable to do anything to stop it.

The United States was stunned by the collapse of South Vietnam but resigned to the outcome. American intelligence had correctly predicted that the major enemy thrust was not planned until 1976, but the capacity of the South Vietnamese to resist was again overestimated. Washington was shocked by the sudden loss of the central highlands. America’s disinclination for further involvement was obvious: On the day Ban Me Thuot fell, Congress rejected President Gerald Ford’s request for an additional \$300 million in military aid for South Vietnam.

The legislators’ vote seems to have accurately reflected the wishes of their constituents. A few diehards issued one last appeal to honor the nation’s commitments and defend freedom against Communist aggression. Some Americans raised the specter of a bloodbath in which hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese would be slaughtered by the Communist conquerors. For the most part, such appeals fell on deaf ears. Weary of the seemingly endless involvement in Vietnam and pinched by an economic recession at home, Americans were not in a generous mood. Why throw good money after bad, they asked. At a time when they themselves were in “desperate financial straits,” they saw no reason to sacrifice for a government that was “not only corrupt but grossly wasteful and inefficient.” It was about time that the South Vietnamese were made to stand on their own feet, one “fed-up taxpayer” exclaimed. “My God, we’re all tired of it, we’re sick to death of it,” an Oregonian wrote. “55,000 dead and \$100 billion spent and for what?”²⁰

The fall of Da Nang and Hue and the imminent threat to Saigon did nothing to change Americans’ views. Ford gave no thought to employing U.S. air and naval power. To stiffen South Vietnamese morale and shift to the legislative branch blame for a debacle that seemed

²⁰Mrs. J. S. Mozzanini to James J. Kilpatrick, February 6, 1975, and numerous other letters in James J. Kilpatrick Papers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va., Box 5.

inevitable, he made a personal appearance before Congress to ask for \$722 million in emergency military assistance, setting off a final, bitterly emotional debate on the war. Persisting in the self-delusion that had marked U.S. involvement from the outset, administration officials held out the chimera that additional aid might yet bring about a stalemate and a negotiated settlement within the framework of the Paris accords. Now insisting for the sake of expediency that the domino theory was not valid, Secretary of State Kissinger reiterated the shopworn warning that if America let South Vietnam down, the "impact on the United States in the world would be very serious indeed." The nation must not have on its conscience "pulling the plug" on the South Vietnamese. It must give them some chance to succeed rather than "doom them to lingering deaths."²¹

Such arguments evoked little support. Legislators responded to Ford's speech with stony silence. They retorted that the South Vietnamese had abandoned more equipment in the northern provinces than could be purchased with the additional funds. No amount of money could save an army that refused to fight. It was time for the United States to end its involvement in "this horrid war."²² The specter of the Gulf of Tonkin and Watergate hung over the debate. Revelations of Nixon's secret promises to Thieu provoked cries of outrage. Administration efforts to pin the blame on Congress infuriated some who had supported the war. Congress eventually approved \$300 million for the evacuation of Americans and for humanitarian purposes and endorsed Ford's request to use American troops to evacuate U.S. citizens from South Vietnam. But it would go no further. "The Vietnam debate has run its course," Kissinger commented with finality on April 17.²³

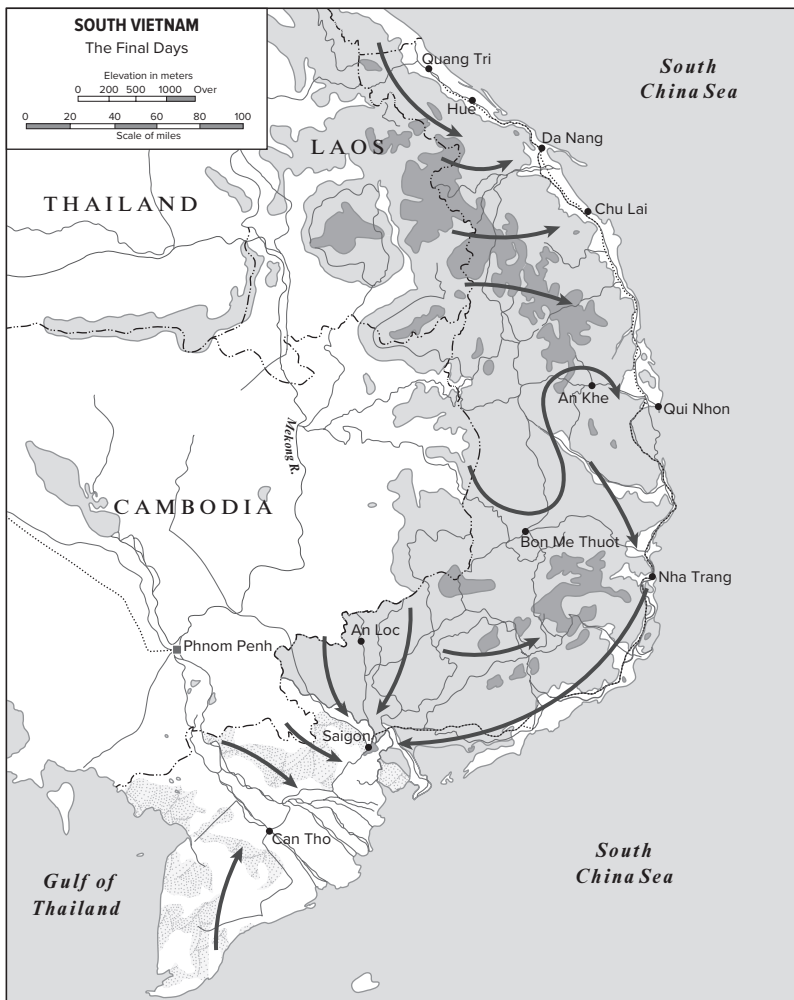
The growing certainty that the United States would not intervene doomed what glimmer of hope South Vietnam may have had. North Vietnamese forces advanced from Da Nang to the outskirts of the capital in less than a month, meeting strong resistance only at Xuan Loc, where a small but courageous and stubborn ARVN contingent fought desperately against superior numbers and firepower.

With the fall of that town on April 21 and the congressional rejection of Ford's request for aid, the intransigent Thieu finally and

²¹Notes on cabinet meeting, April 16, 1975, Ron Nessen Papers, Gerald Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Mich., Box 294; memorandum of conversation, Kissinger, Ford, and congressional leaders, March 5, 1975, Kissinger/Scowcroft File, Box A1, Ford Library.

²²*Congressional Record*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 10101-10108.

²³*New York Times*, April 18, 1975.



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reluctantly resigned, bitterly blaming the debacle on his ally. "It is so easy to be an enemy of the United States," he moaned, "but so difficult to be a friend." He was replaced by the aged and infirm Tran Van Huong, who vainly attempted to negotiate a settlement on the basis of the 1973 agreements, and then by the pathetic Duong Van Minh, the

architect of the 1963 coup, to whom was left the odious task of surrendering unconditionally. On April 30, 1975, enemy tanks crashed through the gates of the presidential palace. NLF soldiers triumphantly ran up their flag over a quickly renamed Ho Chi Minh City. A week earlier, Ford had formally proclaimed at Tulane University in New Orleans what had already become obvious: The Vietnam War was “finished as far as the United States was concerned.” When he uttered the word *finished*, the crowd of mostly students cheered robustly, many jumped to their feet, and there was prolonged applause.²⁴

The U.S. evacuation of Saigon revealed in microcosm much of the delusion, frustration, and tragedy that had marked the American experience in Vietnam. Some U.S. officials persisted in the belief that the South Vietnamese would mount an effective defense of their country until the North Vietnamese were at the gates of Saigon and clung stubbornly to hopes of a negotiated settlement long after any such possibility had vanished. Ambassador Graham Martin had pronounced upon his appointment in 1973 that he was “not going to Vietnam to give it away to the Communists.” He stubbornly supported Thieu long after it was evident that the president had no backing within his own country. Martin thwarted several coup attempts and encouraged Thieu’s refusal to resign, resignation being perhaps the only chance of avoiding unconditional surrender.

Fearful of spreading panic in Saigon and hoping to arrange the American exit in a way that “would not add a further disgrace to the sad history of our involvement,” Martin delayed implementation of evacuation plans until the last minute.²⁵

With Tan Son Nhut Airport unusable, the United States, through Operation FREQUENT WIND, managed to airlift by helicopter 7,100 Americans and South Vietnamese. Many Washington officials were intent on extricating only Americans, but Ford, to his credit, insisted that the United States had a moral obligation to evacuate as many as possible of those South Vietnamese who had worked closely with their ally. U.S. Navy ships transported some 70,000 to ships in the South China Sea, leaving behind 420 who had been promised help. The U.S. evacuation triggered total panic in the city, “a vision out of a nightmare,” one participant called it, fraught with unbelievable human agony. Looting and plunder were common. Senior military officers fled, and the remnants of the army, as

²⁴New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, April 23, 2000.

²⁵Martin to Kissinger, April 18, 1975, Kissinger/Scowcroft File, Box A1, Ford Library.



The End of the Tunnel

This iconic image of a North Vietnamese tank crashing through the gates of Saigon's presidential palace on April 30, 1975, symbolized the fall of South Vietnam and the end of nearly three decades of war in Vietnam. The former capital of the Republic of Vietnam was quickly renamed Ho Chi Minh City in honor of the revered leader of the revolution.

©AP Images

in the North, simply melted away. Corruption ran rampant, escape often going to the highest bidder. The U.S. Embassy paid enormous fees for exit visas for some of those seeking to flee. Because of delays in implementing the evacuation plan and the unavailability of adequate transport, many who wished to leave could not. The spectacle of U.S. Marines using rifle butts to keep desperate Vietnamese from blocking escape routes and of angry ARVN soldiers firing on the departing Americans provided a tragic epitaph for twenty-five years of American involvement in Vietnam. The indelible image of the last helicopter departing a Saigon rooftop starkly symbolized the U.S. failure. Ford recalled April 30, 1975, as "one of the saddest days of my life"; journalist Evan Thomas later labeled it a "low moment in the American century."²⁶

²⁶ Evan Thomas, "The Last Days of Saigon," *Newsweek*, May 1, 2000, pp. 37–42. The fullest and most up-to-date account is George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–1975* (New York, 2012).

The United States bears a heavy burden of responsibility for the debacle of April 1975. Americans had made the South Vietnamese armed forces dependent and then left them to save themselves before they were ready and without the air support on which they had come to rely. The “peace” agreement of 1973 was designed more to get the United States out of Vietnam than to end the fighting among the Vietnamese. Despite Nixon’s protestations of peace with honor, it was fundamentally flawed, especially by leaving more than a hundred thousand North Vietnamese troops in the South. In the two years after the signing of the Paris agreements, the Nixon administration gave Thieu enough support to encourage his defiance but not enough to ensure his survival. Nixon’s ill-advised promises were intended to secure Thieu’s adherence to the Paris agreements. They encouraged his continued dependence on Washington. They tempted him to reject the admittedly risky choice of negotiations and launch a war he could not win. The reduction of U.S. involvement in the war and subsequent congressional cutbacks of American aid undoubtedly demoralized the South Vietnamese and weakened their capacity to fight. The refusal of the United States to intervene in the final crisis sealed their fate. But Nixon and Kissinger’s cynical and self-serving efforts to blame the collapse of South Vietnam on Congress ring hollow. Without consulting Congress, Nixon made *secret* promises that would have required congressional assent for implementation, and at a time when it was in full rebellion against a never-ending war and the stretching of presidential powers. An administration that had repeatedly spurned Congress could hardly expect its compliance in time of crisis. Nixon’s ability to implement his promises was severely hampered by the Watergate scandals—for which his administration was responsible.

In the final analysis, Vietnamese factors determined the outcome more than anything the United States did or failed to do. The fall of South Vietnam just fifty-five days after the onset of the North Vietnamese offensive was symptomatic of the malaise that had afflicted that ill-fated nation since its birth. The Saigon regime could never quite overcome its origins as a French puppet government. Political fragmentation, the lack of able and far-sighted leaders, and a tired and corrupt elite that could not adjust to the revolution that swept Vietnam after 1945 afforded a fragile basis for nationhood. Given these harsh realities, America’s effort to create a bastion of anti-communism south of the seventeenth parallel was probably doomed from the start. The United States could provide money, weapons, and advice, but it could not furnish the ingredients necessary for political stability and military

success. The Saigon regime failed to mobilize the people to fight internal subversion and external invasion. Despairing of the ability of the South Vietnamese to save themselves, the United States had assumed the burden in 1965, only to toss it back in the laps of its clients when Americans tired of the war. The dependency of the early years persisted long after the United States had shifted to Vietnamization. To the very end—and despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary—Thieu and his cohorts clung desperately to the belief that the United States would return and rescue them. “Saigon collapsed from within as much as from external assault,” historian David Elliott has written, “and fell apart from the top down rather than from the bottom up.”²⁷ Thieu’s gross strategic errors and desperate attempts to save himself while his nation was dying suggest that the outcome would probably have been the same whatever the United States had done. Without firm leadership from their president and high command, the South Vietnamese people surrendered to hysteria. The nation simply disintegrated.

The North Vietnamese and the NLF were not superpeople, as they were sometimes portrayed in U.S. antiwar propaganda. They made colossal blunders. They repeatedly miscalculated the United States’ response to their actions. Their stubborn determination to prevail, no matter what, inflicted astronomical and sometimes cruel burdens on their own people. Despite their claims to revolutionary zeal, they were at times bitterly divided among themselves. Their leaders also struggled to hold onto power and stamped out dissent with brutal efficiency. Especially toward the end, they faced slackening morale among their army and people, the result of decades of bloody warfare.

Still, in waging this conflict they had distinct advantages. From the outset of the revolution, the Communists drew into the fold the most dedicated and able political activists, who provided superior leadership, from the top down to the village level. Le Duan lacked Ho Chi Minh’s charisma and international stature, but he shared his predecessor’s determination to endure, and he was ruthless in his use of power. Skilled organizers, the North Vietnamese and the NLF tapped the wellsprings of their people’s nationalism and mobilized the resources of Vietnam in a total and concentrated effort to achieve their goals. Time after time, defeat after defeat, they demonstrated incredible staying power and resiliency, rebounding for the next round of an endless war. At least until

²⁷Stephen T. Hosmer et al., *The Fall of South Vietnam* (Santa Monica, Calif., 1978), pp. 118–120; Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, pp. 438–439.

1972, they exploited the Sino-Soviet split to secure maximum aid while safeguarding their freedom of action. They formulated a sophisticated strategy that blended military, diplomatic, and political means to achieve the long-sought end of liberating the South and unifying the nation. They skillfully employed the concept of protracted war, perceiving that the Americans, like the French, could become impatient and that if they bled long enough, they would grow weary of the war.

CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACT

With the North Vietnamese/NLF victory, the “dominoes” in Indochina quickly toppled. Cambodia fell before South Vietnam, ending a peculiarly brutal war and initiating a period of unbelievable cruelty. Between 1970 and 1972, the United States had spent more than \$400 million in support of Lon Nol’s government and army. Heavy bombing continued until Congress legislated its end in August 1973. In six months of 1973, the bombing exceeded 250,000 tons, more than was dropped on Japan in all of World War II. Lon Nol’s government and army were ineffectual even by South Vietnamese standards, however, and with extensive support from North Vietnam and China, the Khmer Rouge pressed on toward Phnom Penh, using human-wave assaults in some areas. The government collapsed in mid-April. The Khmer Rouge took over the capital on April 17. Thousands of lives were lost in the war; more than two million people were left refugees. The country as a whole faced starvation for the first time in its history. Upon taking over, the Khmer Rouge imposed a gruesome totalitarianism and began the forced relocation of much of the population.

The end in Laos was only slightly less convulsive. The Laotian settlement of 1962 had been a dead letter from the start. A flimsy coalition government nominally upheld a precarious neutrality, while outsiders waged war up and down the land. The North Vietnamese used Laotian territory for their infiltration route into South Vietnam and supported the insurgent Pathet Lao with supplies and as many as 20,000 “volunteers.” While backing the neutralist government, the United States waged a secret war against North Vietnamese positions in Laos from 1962 to 1972. When the bombing of North Vietnam was stopped at the end of 1968, Laos became the primary target. By 1973, the United States had dropped more than two million tons of bombs there, leaving many areas resembling a desert. The CIA sponsored an

army of Hmong tribes people, led by Gen. Vang Pao, that waged guerrilla warfare against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos at a huge cost: More than 17,000 soldiers and 50,000 civilians had been killed by 1975. The U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam left the government without any chance of survival. An agreement of February 1973 created a coalition government in which the Pathet Lao held the upper hand. With the fall of Cambodia and South Vietnam, the Pathet Lao took over, making no effort to hide its subservience to North Vietnam. In one of the great human tragedies of the Indochina wars, America's loyal allies, the Hmong, were the victims of Pathet Lao genocide. Roughly 100,000, including the legendary Vang Pao, escaped. Another 100,000 were killed in a systematic campaign of extermination that employed bombing, artillery, and possibly chemical-biological weapons. Thousands more suffered in what the Pathet Lao euphemistically called "seminar camps."²⁸

The impact on world politics of America's failure in Vietnam was considerably less than U.S. policymakers had predicted. From Thailand to the Philippines, there was obvious nervousness, even demands for the removal of U.S. bases. Outside Indochina, however, the dominoes did not fall. On the contrary, in the years after the end of the war, the non-Communist nations of Southeast Asia prospered and attained an unprecedented level of stability. The Soviet Union continued to build up its military arsenal in the 1970s. Spurred by a hubris deriving from American failure, it intervened in civil wars in Angola, Zaire, and Ethiopia. As with the United States, however, the Soviets' reach soon exceeded their grasp, luring them into their own quagmire in Afghanistan, a "bleeding wound" that reformist Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev bound up in the late 1980s only at great cost.

One of the most significant and ironic effects of the end of the Vietnam War was to heighten tensions among the various Communist nations of East Asia. The brutal Pol Pot regime launched a grisly effort to rebuild Cambodia from the "Year Zero," killing millions of its own people in the process. More important from the Vietnamese standpoint, Cambodia established close ties with China. In response to Khmer Rouge cross-border raids and to preserve a "friendly" government next door, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, drove out Pol Pot, and established a puppet regime. China retaliated by invading

²⁸Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1962* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), pp. 337-410.

Vietnam, provoking a short and inconclusive war. The United States, which had gone to war in Vietnam in 1965 to contain China, found itself in the ironic and morally dubious position in the mid-1980s of indirectly supporting China's efforts to contain Vietnam and sending "humanitarian" aid to an unlikely assortment of Cambodian bedfellows, including the notorious Pol Pot.

THE WAGES OF VICTORY

In Vietnam itself, the principal legacy of the war was continued human suffering. The ultimate losers, of course, were the South Vietnamese. The bloodbath predicted by some Americans did not occur, but many of those South Vietnamese who remained in Vietnam endured poverty, oppression, and forced labor. As many as 400,000 suffered the horror of "reeducation" camps, some for as long as ten years.

With the fall of Saigon, more than 130,000 South Vietnamese fled for the United States, the first group of what came to be called "boat people." To his credit, President Ford took up the cause of these refugees, granting them special entry status in Operation New Life. The U.S. military played an essential role in getting them out of South Vietnam, transporting them to way stations on Pacific islands such as Guam and eventually to camps in the United States, and caring for them en route and upon arrival. Post-Vietnam soldiers and sailors thus added a humanitarian component to their traditional combat mission. Operation New Life was also a way for the United States to salvage its reputation as a strong, benevolent nation and counter the negative image of a defeated great power deserting an ally. U.S. image-making was tarnished when a group of 1,600 South Vietnamese on Guam demanded to be returned home, some claiming to have been coerced into leaving, many because of family ties. While awaiting a decision on their fate, these repatriates burned their barracks and went on a hunger strike, providing grist for Hanoi's propaganda mill. They were eventually put on a ship and sent back to Vietnam. Their fate remains unknown.²⁹

^{29a}Jana K. Lipman, "A Precedent Worth Setting. . ." Military Humanitarianism: The U.S. Military and the 1975 Vietnamese Evacuation," *The Journal of Military History* 79 (January 2015): 153, 158, 162, 164, 176; Heather Marie Stur, "'Hiding Behind the Humanitarian Label': Refugees, Repatriates, and the Rebuilding of America's Benevolent Image After the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History* 39 (April 2015): 224–227, 232–233, 243–244.

An estimated 1.5 million boat people left southern Vietnam in several waves between 1975 and 1989. Some perished at sea in leaky boats or at the hands of pirates; others languished in squalid refugees camps scattered across Southeast Asia. Around one million eventually settled in the United States. Many left family behind. Most had to sacrifice their wealth and all their possessions to escape. Because of the language barrier even those who had held high positions in South Vietnam had to start over in their adopted country. Arriving in the United States at a time of acute economic stress, the Vietnamese often met hostility provoked by racial antagonism, nativist sentiments, and fear for the loss of jobs. For some Americans, the new arrivals provided a reminder of a painful defeat. Like other immigrant groups, the Vietnamese faced problems of adaptation to a radically different culture. Members of the South Vietnamese armed forces may have had the greatest difficulty unburdening themselves of the past. Profound tensions often developed between Vietnamese parents clinging to traditional ways and their American-born children. Some Vietnamese Americans remained unassimilated and lived near or below the poverty line. Many enjoyed remarkable success, causing Vietnamese Americans as a group to be viewed as a “model minority.” In time, they began to return to their home country for visits and contributed to its economic development.³⁰

In one of the most cruel ironies of a war that had more than its share of irony, the NLF, or at least most of its members, lost the war as well even though they had initiated the revolution in the late 1950s and had played a key role in the victory. In July 1976, Hanoi proclaimed the birth of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), reunifying the country under the tight control of the Communist party. It disbanded the front organizations—including the NLF—that had been formed to fight the Saigon regime and the United States. Non-communists in the PRG were quickly purged. Some endured persecution; others, in time, fled. Some of the southerners who had led the struggle and had suffered heavily in the process were considered a threat and were kept under surveillance or even sent to reeducation camps. The NLF army was merged with the NVA in such a way that its separate identity was destroyed. Northerners came south and ran local and regional governments. To affirm its

³⁰ Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore, Md., 1997), pp. 148–161; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2006), pp. 111–128.



Boat People

Between 1975 and 1989, as many as 1.5 million so-called boat people fled South Vietnam, many in small boats, in search of refuge abroad. Around one million settled in the United States. In this 1984 image, 35 refugees huddled in a small fishing boat 350 miles northeast of Cam Ranh Bay awaiting rescue by a U.S. Navy ship after more than five weeks at sea. Many boat people did not survive the perils of escape. Some remained scattered in refugee camps throughout Southeast Asia.

©American Photo Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

legitimacy, the new regime soon openly boasted of what it had repeatedly denied during the war—its instrumental role in creating and running the southern insurgency.³¹

Even for the ostensible winners, victory was a bittersweet prize. In the aftermath of war, the regime went to great lengths to root out bourgeois attitudes, revamping the education system along Communist

³¹Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (2009), pp. 174–176.

lines, banning some forms of popular music, and confiscating the property of some rich people. But unification was difficult to achieve. Historic differences between north and south had been accentuated during three decades of war, and it proved impossible to force the freewheeling and resilient south into a made-in-Hanoi mold. Just as it resisted American direction in the 1960s, southern Vietnam continued to resist outside influence, complicating the task of consolidation. By the 1980s, there were even signs that, in the classic tradition of the East, the ways of the conquered had rubbed off on the conqueror. The corruption and consumer culture that epitomized Saigon during the American war carried over to the postwar Ho Chi Minh City, where the black market continued to flourish and bribery was necessary to accomplish anything.

The Hanoi regime achieved its goal of hegemony in Indochina, but only temporarily and at a cost it could not afford. In time, it became bogged down in its own quagmire in Cambodia, where, again ironically, for a decade it waged a costly and generally ineffectual counterinsurgency war against stubborn Cambodian guerrillas. The Vietnamese in 1991 happily accepted a United Nations–sponsored agreement that provided for their withdrawal from Cambodia and for the holding of elections to form a coalition government. Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia further strained already bad relations with China, the United States, and other nations of Southeast Asia, leaving it diplomatically isolated and entirely dependent on the Soviet Union.

For all Vietnamese, the most pressing and enduring legacy of the war has been economic deprivation. Thirty years of conflict, especially the destruction visited on north and south during the American war, left the entire nation a shambles. The situation was made much worse by continued high military expenditures and by a punitive U.S. embargo on trade with Vietnam. In 1978, the regime mounted an ill-conceived effort to impose communism, force industrialism, and collectivize agriculture. It banned private trade, drove out leading merchants (many of them Chinese, who took at least some of their wealth with them), and relocated people into collective zones. The results were disastrous. In the immediate postwar years, economic growth lagged at the paltry rate of 2 percent; per capita income averaged around \$100. “Waging a war is easy,” veteran revolutionary and premier Pham Van Dong lamented, “but running a country is difficult.”³²

³²Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), p. 9.

Responding to necessity and emulating Gorbachev's *perestroika* ("reconstruction"), in the mid-1980s, a more pragmatic and reformist regime dominated by southerners launched a program of *doi moi* ("renovation"). The new leadership hoped to stimulate growth by freeing up the economy, providing some capitalist incentives, and seeking foreign investment. Hanoi even attempted to promote economic development through tourism. Vietnamese leaders still claimed to be pursuing socialism, but they talked more and more like capitalists, proclaiming the goal of a prosperous country in which people could be rich.

Doi moi brought modest gains. Agriculture flourished under the new system, and by the end of the century Vietnam was the world's second largest exporter of rice. The parallel, or unofficial, economy also prospered for a time, especially in the cities, where there were signs of an incipient boom. Foreign investment jumped, making up for the termination of external assistance after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the growth rate increased to around 7 percent. There were significant increases in the production of consumer goods and foreign trade.

Huge problems persisted. Despite the "tiny economic miracle" of the mid-1990s, Vietnam remained one of the world's poorest countries. The infrastructure was in horrible shape, and the economy suffered from ineffective management and a lack of capital and technology. Per capita income rose only to \$376 by the end of the century; there was high unemployment. The growth rate lagged, and foreign investment declined. Although Vietnam was rich in natural resources and blessed with a high literacy rate and a people with a strong work ethic, its economic potential was nevertheless limited by rising overpopulation, a shortage of skilled labor, inadequate public services, an omnipresent and creaking government bureaucracy, and corruption reportedly as pervasive as that in South Vietnam at the end of the war.³³

The problems at century's end raised serious doubts about the future of what was called "market Leninism." Whether real economic growth could be achieved in an oppressive political climate remained open to question. Intent on insulating itself from the changes that had destroyed communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the regime staunchly refused to couple economic reform with political freedom and continued to infringe on basic rights. Traditional fears of

³³Andrew Pierre, "Vietnam's Contradictions," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2000): 69–86.

interaction with foreigners reinforced instinctive suspicions of globalization. An aging party leadership continued to stake its legitimacy on its “revolutionary heroism” in defeating the French and Americans. But its appeals increasingly fell on the deaf ears of a population, 85 percent of which was younger than forty years of age and many of whom saw the old enemy, the United States, as the model of modernity. In addition, many Vietnamese, including war veterans, were increasingly disillusioned that the sacrifices made during the war had not brought rewards in terms of a better life.³⁴ For the nation as a whole, the promises of victory in 1975 had not been realized.

THE AGONY OF DEFEAT

For America’s allies, the war had consequences that exceeded the size of their contribution. In Australia, participation in Vietnam led to sharp internal divisions and conflict. Failure to recognize the contribution of those who served left a legacy of bitterness among veterans. In New Zealand, despite the small size of the commitment, the war aroused widespread opposition and eventually provoked a major foreign policy debate that raised searching questions about the nation’s role in the world and especially its relations with the United States. For South Korea, participation in Vietnam produced enormous economic benefits, helping to stimulate its rise as a major economic power. Since the end of the war, the Korean government has remained silent about its role. Only with the emergence of democracy did Vietnam become a subject for open discussion. Long-alienated veterans who bore their anger in silence now began to speak openly of the “blood money” earned at the price of those lives that “fuelled the modernization of the country.”³⁵

Although the United States emerged physically unscathed, the Vietnam War was among the most debilitating in its history. The price tag has been estimated at \$167 billion, a raw statistic that does not begin to measure the full economic cost. The war triggered an inflation that helped undermine, at least temporarily, America’s position in the world

³⁴Robert K. Brigham, “Revolutionary Heroism and Politics in Postwar Vietnam,” in Charles E. Neu (ed.), *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (Baltimore, Md., 2000), pp. 85–104.

³⁵Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle, *Vietnam: War, Myth, and Memory* (St. Leonards, Australia, 1992), especially pp. 137–150; Roberto Rabel, “The Vietnam Decision Twenty-Five Years On,” *New Zealand International Review* 15 (May/June 1990): 3–11; *New York Times*, May 10, 1992.

economy. Along with Watergate, the war also had a high political cost, increasing popular suspicion of government, leaders, and institutions. It discredited and crippled the military, at least for a time, and temporarily estranged the United States from much of the rest of the world.³⁶

Much like the effect of World War I on the Europeans, the Vietnam War's greatest impact was in the realm of the spirit. Like no other event in the nation's history, it challenged Americans' traditional beliefs about themselves, the notion that in their relations with other people they have generally acted with benevolence, the idea that nothing is beyond reach. It was a fundamental part of a much larger crisis of the spirit that began in the 1960s and raised searching questions about America's history and values and marked a sort of end of American innocence.

The fall of Saigon had a profound impact. Some Americans expressed hope that the nation could finally put aside a painful episode and get on with the future. Among a people accustomed to celebrating peace with ticker tape parades, however, the end of the war left a deep residue of frustration, anger, and disillusionment. Americans generally agreed that the war had been a "dark moment" in their nation's history. Some comforted themselves with the notion that the United States should never have become involved in Vietnam in the first place. For others, particularly those who had lost loved ones, this notion was not enough. "Now it's all gone down the drain and it hurts. What did he die for?" asked a Pennsylvanian whose son had been killed in Vietnam. Many Americans expressed anger that the civilians, allegedly, did not permit the military to win the war. Others regarded the failure to win and to support an ally as a betrayal of American ideals and a sign of national weakness that boded poorly for the future. "It was the saddest day of my life when it sank in that we had lost the war," a Virginian lamented.³⁷ The fall of Vietnam came at the very time the nation was preparing to celebrate the bicentennial of its birth, and the irony was painfully obvious. "The high hopes and wishful idealism with which the American nation had been born had not been destroyed," *Newsweek* observed, "but they had been chastened by the failure of America to work its will in Indochina."³⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the nation experienced a self-conscious, collective amnesia. The angry debate over who lost Vietnam,

³⁶The war's legacy is analyzed in Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore, Md., 1997); Neu, *After Vietnam*; and Schulzinger, *Time for Peace*.

³⁷Jules Low, "The Mood of a Nation," Associated Press Newsfeature, May 5, 1975.

³⁸"An Irony of History," *Newsweek*, April 28, 1975, 17.

so feared by Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, consisted of nothing more than a few sharp exchanges between the White House and Capitol Hill over responsibility for the April 1975 debacle. Perhaps because both parties were so deeply implicated in the war, Vietnam did not become a partisan political issue; because the memories were so painful, no one cared to dredge them up. On the contrary, many public figures called for restraint. Vietnam was all but ignored by the media. It was scarcely mentioned in the presidential campaign of 1976. "Today it is almost as though the war had never happened," the columnist Joseph C. Harsch noted in late 1975. "Americans have somehow blocked it out of their consciousness. They don't talk about it. They don't talk about its consequences."³⁹

Those 2.7 million men and women who served in Vietnam were the primary victims of the nation's desire to forget. Younger on the average by seven years than their World War II counterparts, having endured a war far more complex and confusing, Vietnam veterans by the miracles of the jet age were whisked home virtually overnight to a nation hostile to the war and indifferent to their plight. Some were made to feel the guilt for the nation's moral transgressions; others, responsibility for its failure. Most simply met silence. Forced to turn inward, many veterans grew profoundly distrustful of the government that had sent them to war and deeply resentful of the nation's seeming ingratitude for their sacrifices. The great majority adjusted, although sometimes with difficulty, but many veterans experienced problems with drugs and alcohol, joblessness, and broken homes. Many also suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, the modern term for what had earlier been called shell shock or battle fatigue. In the first years after the war, veterans experienced a much higher suicide rate than the general population. The popular stereotype of the Vietnam veteran was that of a drug-crazed, gun-toting, and violence-prone individual unable to adjust to civilized society. When in 1981 America gave a lavish welcome home to a group of hostages returned from a long and much-publicized captivity in Iran, Vietnam veterans poured out their bottled-up rage. They themselves constructed a memorial in Washington to honor the memory of the more than 58,000 comrades who died in the war.⁴⁰

³⁹Joseph C. Harsch, "Do You Recall Vietnam—And What About Dominoes?" *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 2, 1975.

⁴⁰For two very different perspectives, see Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993) and B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor* (Dallas, Tex., 1998). The story of the memorial is told in Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* (Amherst, Mass., 2009), pp. 49–79.

Within a short time after the end of the war, Vietnam's place in the national consciousness changed dramatically. The amnesia of the immediate postwar years proved no more than a passing phenomenon. By the mid-1980s, the war was being discussed to a degree and in ways that would once have seemed impossible. Vietnam produced a large and in some cases distinguished literature, much of it the work of veterans. Hollywood had all but ignored the war while it was going on, but in its aftermath filmmakers took up the subject with a vengeance, producing works ranging from the haunting *Deer Hunter* to the surreal and spectacular *Apocalypse Now*, to Oliver Stone's antiwar epics, and to a series of films in the 1980s in which American superheroes returned to Vietnam to take care of unfinished business. No television leading man was worth his salt unless he had served in Vietnam. The Vietnam veteran, sometimes branded a "baby killer" in the 1960s, became a popular culture hero in the 1980s, the sturdy and self-sufficient warrior who had prevailed despite being let down by his government and nation. Not surprisingly, the design for the memorial in Washington sparked a sometimes angry dispute among veterans and sponsors reflecting still unresolved divisions over the meaning of the war. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) dealt with the controversy by separating the warrior from the war, by deliberately refusing to take a stand on the war while celebrating the service of those who fought it. The unveiling of the memorial on November 10, 1982, evoked an outpouring of emotion from the thousands of veterans in attendance. The stark but moving V-shaped monument on Washington's Mall soon became the most visited site in the nation's capital; for many, it was a place for healing. In 1993, a memorial was added to honor the 265,000 women who served in the military during the Vietnam War. In state capitals, courthouses, and communities across the nation, Vietnam *veterans* (as opposed to *war*) memorials were constructed to honor those who served, many of them following the VVMF precedent of neutrality on the war itself.⁴¹

THE UNENDING WAR

Wars never end when the guns stop firing, and the Vietnam conflict was no exception. In marked contrast to its generous treatment of the defeated Axis powers after World War II, the United States, even as

⁴¹Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, pp. 10, 16, 110, 399–401.



The Kentucky Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Perched on a hillside high above the Kentucky River and the state capitol in Frankfort, the Kentucky Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is one of numerous such structures put up by states and municipalities following the war. Like the national monument, its design became the subject of heated controversy with some of its planners pushing for a positive statement about the war. Ultimately, the design conformed to the national memorial by merely honoring the deceased without taking a political stance on the war. This unique and strikingly powerful monument is in the form of a giant sundial with the shadow of the gnomon falling on the names of soldiers on the day of their death. Kentucky ranked third among the states in the number of war deaths per capita.

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Saigon fell, turned economic weapons against its victorious enemies in a different kind of warfare that would last for two decades. Washington froze \$70 million in South Vietnamese assets held by U.S. banks. Government agencies subsequently imposed an array of economic sanctions that retained the wartime embargo on North Vietnam, slapped export controls on South Vietnam and Cambodia that prevented them from receiving humanitarian aid, denied Vietnam any U.S. foreign assistance and access to international capital, prevented shipment of agricultural equipment and medical supplies by charitable organizations, and even forbade Americans to travel to Vietnam. As yet another

way of isolating Vietnam, the United States in the fall of 1975 vetoed its membership in the United Nations, an action widely viewed as spiteful. The Ford administration further claimed that North Vietnam's violations of the 1973 agreement absolved the United States of any responsibility to provide economic assistance.⁴²

Vietnam fought back against U.S. pressures. Its leaders were practical enough to recognize their vast reconstruction needs. They feared becoming dependent on their unreliable allies, the Soviet Union and China, and perceived that the United States was the only nation with sufficient resources to meet their requirements. Understandably still hubristic and mistakenly convinced that American opinion was on their side, they insisted that the United States could heal itself only by providing the economic assistance they claimed had been promised in 1973. Their talk of American "obligations" to supply what amounted to reparations as a precondition for discussions of normalizing diplomatic relations further provoked Washington's ire. Not surprisingly, given the positions taken by both sides, sporadic efforts to move toward normalization got nowhere. Throughout much of the 1970s and in the next decade, the two nations engaged in an "awkward dialogue of mutual misunderstanding and increasing diplomatic tension."⁴³

In the late 1970s, discussions of normalization got tangled up in the often bewildering and sometimes frantic geopolitical maneuvering that derived from and helped provoke the Third Indochina War and a reintensification of the Cold War. The murderous Cambodian regime of Pol Pot mounted border raids on its former sponsor, sparking Vietnamese counterattacks. Vietnam blamed China for Cambodian provocations and signed a treaty with Moscow before invading and occupying Cambodia. China in turn provided aid to Cambodia and invaded the northern provinces of Vietnam. By this time, the era of Soviet-American détente had ended. To counter a newly perceived Soviet threat, the United States played the "China card" by moving toward diplomatic relations with Beijing. While giving aid to Cambodian rebels resisting the Vietnamese occupation, Washington now also demanded that Vietnam sever its ties with the USSR and withdraw from Cambodia before normalization could be discussed.

During the 1980s, the POW/MIA issue emerged as the major impediment to U.S.-Vietnam reconciliation. The number of MIAs and the

⁴²Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Amherst, Mass., 2007), pp. 13–24, 35–38, 83–85.

⁴³Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War, 1975–1979* (Jefferson, N.C., 2006), p. 102.

percentage of MIAs to casualties were lower than in America's previous wars. Most MIAs were air personnel who disappeared in isolated and rugged areas that made their survival and the location of their remains difficult. The linkage of MIAs to POWs further muddled an already confusing issue. Roughly half of the more than 2,000 Americans listed as POW/MIA were known to have been killed in circumstances where the body could not be recovered. Numerous Congressional groups studied the matter and found no evidence that a single American was being held captive in Indochina. But the issue would not go away. An increasingly potent POW/MIA lobby kept up a drumfire of criticism of Hanoi—and Washington. A stark black and white POW/MIA flag soon flew above the White House, the U.S. Capitol, and other public buildings (and in many places still flies today). Sensationalist films such as *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* boosted popular acceptance of the myth that Americans were being held captive behind the “bamboo curtain.” That fiction was used to demonize the Vietnamese, and stood as a major barrier to closure at home and normalization with Vietnam. President Ronald Reagan reasserted the demand for a full accounting by Vietnam and even approved covert operations into Laos by private citizens and soldiers of fortune of dubious reputation.⁴⁴

In the late 1980s, the two nations began to inch toward normalization. Reagan's shocking transformation from fire-breathing anti-Communist to advocate of détente with the USSR and the equally stunning end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet regime rendered U.S. hostility to Vietnam outdated, even irrelevant. The advent of *doi moi* and the end of Soviet aid to Vietnam made reconciliation with the United States essential. Vietnam complied with U.S. demands to leave Cambodia and took major steps to deal with the MIA issue, even permitting Americans some access to its archives. Never in the history of the war had a loser imposed such one-sided terms on the ostensible winner.

From these first steps, the two nations pressed ahead. A Senate committee headed by Vietnam veterans John McCain of Arizona, himself a POW, and John Kerry of Massachusetts, after months of investigation found no evidence that Americans were being held captive in Indochina. U.S. businesses increasingly clamored for access to Vietnamese markets. An antiwar protestor in his student days, President Bill Clinton, moving with great caution, ceased blocking international loans to Vietnam, lifted the trade embargo, and finally in July 1995, twenty years after the fall of

⁴⁴Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1993) and Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009) are indispensable on this issue.

Saigon, established full diplomatic relations. The two nations subsequently signed a trade treaty. Clinton's historic visit to Vietnam in 2000 stirred old memories on both sides and opened exciting new opportunities. It also exposed lingering rifts. Americans criticized the government of Vietnam for human rights' abuses. Vietnamese insisted that the United States should help clean up the deadly remnants from the herbicides and unexploded bombs and shells it deployed in Vietnam.

NORMALIZATION TO PARTNERSHIP

In the years after normalization, the United States and Vietnam developed economic ties that were mutually beneficial but sometimes contentious. Nike, PepsiCo, and United Airlines immediately moved into Vietnam; Nike became its largest foreign employer. Americans invested substantial funds in Vietnam, and that nation became one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, much of it going to the treatment and prevention of AIDS/HIV and to deactivating live explosives from the war. After the turn of the century, the two nations concluded a bilateral trade agreement. In 2007, the U.S. Congress agreed to full normal trade relations. Trade totaled \$1.76 billion in 2009, a tenfold increase since 2001, with the balance heavily in favor of Vietnam. In 2015, President Barack Obama extracted major concessions from Vietnam in regard to the treatment of workers in return for its membership in the Trans-Pacific Pact (TPP), a multilateral trade agreement giving Vietnam free access to the U.S. market. Vietnam's \$38 billion surplus in 2017 provoked complaints from some Americans, as did its alleged dumping of catfish on the U.S. market and its refusal to respect intellectual property standards. An unabashed nationalist whose slogan was "America First," Obama's successor, Donald Trump, took the United States out of the TPP and mounted trade wars with China and America's European and North American allies. For the moment, he seemed content to leave U.S.-Vietnam trade alone.

So-called legacy issues continued to divide the former enemies and also brought them together. After a fitful start, Vietnam provided the United States quite extraordinary assistance in helping locate the remains of MIAs (usually in return for economic aid). As of 2017, 1606 Americans were listed as missing. Vietnam's assistance to the United States provoked some Vietnamese to wonder why, when an estimated 300,000 of their own sons were also missing, "you are looking for Americans." Through technological assistance and searches in its own records, the United States has helped locate

some of these missing Vietnamese. For years, Vietnam had pressed the United States to provide help in dealing with the estimated 20 million gallons of herbicides sprayed across roughly ten percent of South Vietnam. In 2007, the United States provided funds for dioxin removal and health care for some victims. Five years later (and fifty years after the beginning of operation RANCHHAND), it agreed to clean up the site of its former air base in Da Nang, work that continues to the present. The United States has done less to deal with the estimated 350,000 tons of live bombs, shells, mines, and other explosives that have killed some 40,000 Vietnamese and maimed 67,000 others since the end of the war.⁴⁵

Human rights issues still loom large. Vietnam has changed significantly since *doi moi*. Individuals can engage in private enterprise. Vietnamese enjoy limited freedom of worship; church membership has increased. To promote tourism, the government even approved the construction of a decidedly bourgeois string of golf courses running north to south and called the Ho Chi Minh Golf Trail. To the consternation of some Americans, Vietnam remains a one-party authoritarian state. The party's strategy has been to permit some freedoms, but to crack down hard on any dissent that threatens its power. It has specifically targeted minority groups in the Central Highlands and the northwest mountain regions. Press freedoms have been restricted, and bloggers shut down. The roughly two million Vietnamese in the United States, some of them prosperous and many of them critical of Hanoi, have lobbied Washington to press the Vietnam government for additional political and religious reforms. Some Americans have sought to use trade to leverage change in Vietnam. Congress and human rights groups regularly introduce legislation to punish the SRV for political repression.

In the world of diplomacy, enemies can quickly become friends, friends enemies. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, two once-implacable enemies have taken quite extraordinary steps toward a rapprochement through growing collaboration on security and military issues. The major catalyst has been the looming presence of Asia's economic giant and rising military power, China.

Vietnam's current policies mirror its historical love-hate relationship with its larger northern neighbor. Its economic reforms are patterned on those of Beijing. China is its largest trading partner. But Vietnam has protested China's plans to build enormous hydroelectric

⁴⁵ Caroline Alexander, "Across the River Styx," *New Yorker*, October 25, 2004, pp. 44–54; Ariel Garkinkel, "The Vietnam War is Over. The Bombs Remain," *New York Times*, March 20, 2018.

dams on the Upper Mekong River, a waterway vital to its economy and ecology. It fears rising Chinese influence in Laos, traditionally part of its area of influence. The most heated clashes have come over the South China Sea and its numerous islands, vital shipping lanes, and natural resources. China's claims to "indisputable sovereignty" over the entire region threaten interests Vietnam considers vital. The two nations, along with others, have asserted conflicting claims to the many islands. China has seized Vietnamese fishing boats. Although it is careful not to provoke China, Vietnam sees strategic value in a larger U.S. presence in Southeast Asia and closer ties with its former enemy.

The United States, too, has substantial trade with China, and China holds much of its national debt. As a Pacific power, the United States also is uneasy about China's assertive claims and its bullying of smaller Southeast Asian nations. In a major policy shift, President Barack Obama announced in 2010 a U.S. "pivot" toward an area likely to be the center of world commerce in coming years. While claiming neutrality in the conflicts that roil the South China Sea, the United States has firmly defended freedom of navigation. Its position on the island disputes has been closer to that of the small nations of the region than to that of China.

U.S.-Vietnam relations have thus warmed in recent years. Hanoi speaks of a "multidirection approach" in its foreign relations. As part of its pivot, the United States upgraded its defense ties with numerous Asia/Pacific nations including Vietnam. U.S. Navy ships regularly visit Vietnamese ports. The two navies have participated in joint nonmilitary activities. Officers from each country have exchanged visits to Hanoi and Honolulu. In 2011, the two nations signed their first defense pact, an arrangement dealing with military medicine.

U.S.-Vietnam cooperation has grown steadily. In 2013, the two former enemies agreed to establish a "comprehensive partnership," a mechanism to promote working together in areas ranging from education and climate to "defense policy dialogue." Visits by top officials and fulsome rhetoric about mutual friendship have become standard fare. Vietnam's Communist party leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, traveled to the United States in 2015 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of normalization, a step without precedent. Obama visited Vietnam to much fanfare in May 2016. Trump stopped through the following year. A most important step in the budding relationship came with Obama's termination of the arms embargo, "a lingering vestige of the Cold War," he called it, making it possible for Vietnam to purchase U.S. armaments on a case-by-case basis. That was followed in March 2018 by the hugely

symbolic visit of the massive, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, *USS Carl Vinson*, accompanied by another carrier and a destroyer, to the port of Da Nang where U.S. Marines had landed in March 1965.

Just as concern about China has drawn the two nations together, the importance of each nation's ties with China appears to limit how far their rapprochement can go. Both nations have been careful to stress that their budding friendship is not aimed at China. Still, the improvement of U.S.–Vietnam relations since 2010, after more than a half century of conflict, has been one of the more fascinating, if little noticed, developments in a rapidly changing world.

THE WAR THAT NEVER GOES AWAY

It has been easier for the United States to reconcile with Vietnam than for Americans to come to terms with the war they fought on Vietnamese soil. More than fifty years after the Tet Offensive, the war is beginning to recede into history. It is less often a topic of discussion and debate. It does not lurk just below the surface of popular consciousness as it did even into the twenty-first century. The anger and bitterness seem to have subsided. Obviously, those born after the mid-1960s have no memories of the war at all. Following the example of the builders of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Americans seem to have settled on a crude and tenuous consensus “that the war was a tragic mistake and that those who fought and died in Vietnam were brave young men who deserve this country’s respect and gratitude.”⁴⁶

Yet that war still lingers in our memory. It continues to influence the way we think and the decisions our leaders make. It still haunts and divides us, especially the generation that fought and protested it, the so-called Vietnam Generation. The questions it raises go to the very heart of our national identity. “Vietnam is a piece of shrapnel. . . embedded in our definition of who we are,” the novelist Robert Stone has written.⁴⁷

From the end of the war to the present, Vietnam has been the “prism” through which Americans have viewed themselves and the

⁴⁶David W. Levy, “Closure: How the National Discussion of Vietnam Will Eventually Be Resolved,” *Long-Term View* (Summer 2000): 144–148; Hagopian, *Vietnam War in Modern Memory*, pp. 10, 16, 91, 100.

⁴⁷Stone is quoted in Charles J. Gaspar, “Searching for Closure: Vietnam War Literature and the Veterans’ Memorial,” wlajournal.com/wlajournal/wlaarchive/1_1/CharlesJGaspar.pdf (accessed 6/26/18).

world.⁴⁸ From the Central America crises of the 1980s, through the 1991 Gulf War, the ill-fated foray into Somalia and the debates over humanitarian interventions in the 1990s, the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it has colored and significantly shaped discussions of major foreign policy issues. Ronald Reagan tried to “heal” the so-called Vietnam Syndrome by tough talk, a huge military buildup, the branding of Vietnam as a “noble war,” and invading tiny Grenada. George H. W. Bush claimed with his smashing victory in the Gulf War to have buried it in the sands of the Arabian desert. Bill Clinton dealt with it in Kosovo by intervening with air power only and getting out when criticism began to rise. After the shock and horror of 9/11, George W. Bush set out to accomplish what his father had failed to do by waging successful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq only to get entangled in both countries in fighting insurgencies that Americans predictably likened to Vietnam. As late as the Obama administration, during debates on escalating the war in Afghanistan, Vietnam still “walked the halls of the White House,” in the words of a participant.⁴⁹ The failure of that escalation to achieve decisive results, combined with the growing expense and mounting war-weariness at home, produced a sort of “Vietnam Syndrome” in the form of popular and elite skepticism about military intervention abroad. The United States remains mired in Afghanistan today, sixteen years after the initial entry with no exit strategy and no end in sight. Politicians and the public seem to have reached an unspoken compromise that makes military interventions tolerable as long as they are carried out by small detachments of volunteer forces drawn from a tiny percentage of the population with low casualties and no war taxes.

Debates over these issues have followed now familiar scripts. Critics of wars and interventions, usually to the left of the political spectrum, have ominously warned of new Vietnams with all the imagery of disaster that word conjures up. Interventionists on the political right insist that Vietnam was a war that should have been fought and could have been won. Liberal interventionists, “compassionate warriors” or “liberal hawks,” they have been called, many of whom opposed the war in Vietnam, have supported the use of American power to combat evil and promote good causes.⁵⁰

⁴⁸David Kieran, “Why Americans Still Can’t Get Past Vietnam,” *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2017, and *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory* (Amherst, Mass., 2014).

⁴⁹Marvin Kalb and Deborah Kalb, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* (Washington, D.C., 2011), p. 258.

⁵⁰Kieran, *Forever Vietnam*, pp. 139–150.

The questions that so divided us during the war remain hotly contested. Was it a good war or bad war, a noble cause or essentially immoral? Was it necessary in terms of the national security, or basically needless or senseless, the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong enemy, as Gen. Omar Bradley once said of the Korean conflict? Or, in the words of television historian Ken Burns, was it a war “begun in good faith by decent people, out of fateful misunderstanding?” Was it a good war waged poorly? Or was it a war that could and indeed should have been won? Or was it a war that could not have been won at a price we were willing to pay? The sometimes quite heated reaction to Burns’s eighteen-hour Vietnam television spectacular makes clear that Americans remain deeply divided on these questions today.⁵¹

This war has touched us so deeply and its impact has so lingered because like no other event in our history it caused us as a people to confront a deeply encrusted set of beliefs that forms a basic part of our national identity. The idea of American exceptionalism holds that we are a people apart. More than other nations, we have been a force for good in the world. In our dealing with other people we have acted generously, not exploitatively. When we have used force, it has been reluctantly and only in pursuit of worthy goals. Forgotten or rationalized along the way are such things as slavery, the near extermination of Native Americans, the subjugation of Filipinos.

For many Americans, to be sure, the Vietnam War remained from start to finish, in Reagan’s words, a noble cause. For many others, including some who fought there, many who opposed the war, and some who supported it, there was confusion or outright revulsion. Some Americans were troubled that their massive power was being unleashed against a small, backward nation. Others wondered how, in the absence of any direct threat to our security, we could justify the level of destruction we visited on Vietnam. Some “grunts” in the field were bothered that what they were doing did not square with their own notions of America’s proper role in the world. The My Lai massacre, in particular, raised in the most horrific way basic questions about what we were doing in Vietnam, indeed about us as a nation. It was the sort of thing Americans did not do. Our attempts to “excuse or explain away”

⁵¹ See for example Alex Shepherd, “The Insidious Ideology of Ken Burns’s *The Vietnam War*,” *The New Republic* <https://newrepublic.com/article/144864/insidious-ideology-ken-burns-Vietnam-War> (accessed 6/26/18).

such atrocities, historian Christian Appy has written, “reflected a powerful need to evade the most troubling realities of the Vietnam War and maintain pride in the nation and its military.”⁵²

By the late 1960s, Vietnam had become for Americans more than a country or a war. It was a metaphor for what their nation was or should be. Many continued to believe we were doing the right thing. Others went backward from Vietnam to discover wrongs deeply entrenched in American history. The “national argument was thus not about Vietnam,” journalist Arnold Isaacs has observed, “but about America’s vision of itself, about conflicting ideas on who we are as a people and what we value and believe.” That helps explain, he concluded, “why the divisions have lingered in a cultural clash that reverberates. . . long after the war ended.”⁵³

The war also called into question our belief in our invincibility, the notion that we could do anything we set our minds to. This too derives from history, our spectacular and unmatched record of accomplishment, the relative ease with which we conquered a continent, our remarkable wealth, our success in war. Indeed, the historian C. Vann Woodward observed in the late 1960s that among Americans only southerners had true insights into the totality of the human experience because only they had endured military defeat.

At each step along the road to war in Vietnam, despite pessimistic estimates of the prospects of success, our leaders plunged ahead, confident, or at least hopeful, that with a bit of luck they would succeed—as the United States always had. Our failure to do so came as a rude shock to the national psyche. We were so accustomed to success that we took it for granted. Failure came hard, especially in the case of Vietnam, where our armies were not, strictly speaking, defeated and we were frustrated by a small, backward, Asian enemy.

One approach Americans have used to come to terms with Vietnam has been called separating the warrior from the war, commemorating the service of our veterans without addressing the issues raised by the war itself. Obviously, we should recognize the sacrifices of those we sent to war—something we did not do at the time. But in refusing to look closely at the war we fail to examine the fundamental issues of what we did in Vietnam and its consequences.

⁵²Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The War and Our National Identity* (New York, 2015), p. 149.

⁵³Quoted in George C. Herring, “The War That Never Seems to Go Away,” in David Anderson and John Ernst, eds., *The War That Never Ends* (Lexington, Ky., 2007), p. 344.

Typically, perhaps, and not surprisingly, our remembrances of the war have been highly ethnocentric. The word “Vietnam,” as we most often use it, refers to the war we fought, not to the country in which it was fought. We take into account only our own losses. We have found the reasons for the outcome of the war mainly here in the United States in such things as the alleged timidity of our leaders, the flawed strategies they devised and employed, and the near treasonous opposition of the media and antiwar movement. The civilian leadership did not permit the military to win the war, according to one popular myth, perfectly captured in the words of 1980s film superhero John Rambo when given the assignment to go back to Vietnam and fight a second round singlehandedly: “Sir, do we get to win this time?”

Americans have even concocted a narrative that portrays themselves and especially their veterans as the true victims of this war. Vietnam, an *American* tragedy, Vietnam, an *American* ordeal, are titles often used. The GIs, it has been argued, were sent into a bafflingly complex war zone with an inhospitable climate and terrain, let down by gutless politicians, undermined by draft dodgers, war protestors, and the media, became victims of a “massive conspiracy to betray them by ensuring their defeat,” and then were spurned or even abused on their return. The myth that after the war ended Americans were being held captive behind the bamboo curtain spawned a series of trashy but quite popular films that offered “partial redemption” through a fictional opportunity to fight the war over again “with clear objectives, a just cause, and unambiguous victory.”⁵⁴

Coming to terms with the Vietnam War demands an honest look at why we intervened there and why we remained for almost twenty-five years. In 1945, in the name of anti-communism and to promote perceived Cold War interests we helped make possible France’s return to its former Vietnam colony. We then bankrolled France’s war to subdue indigenous, anti-colonial revolutionaries and subverted the Geneva Accords that ended the First Indochina War. Mainly for the sake of our national credibility—and to meet the electoral exigencies of our leaders—we hung on for twelve years, even after major geopolitical changes deprived Vietnam of the seeming significance it had in the 1950s. Nobility is hard to find here.

It also requires recognition of the larger significance of our involvement. Without the United States, the First Indochina War might well have been shorter and might have ended more decisively. There would

⁵⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, pp. 246–250.

have been turmoil in Indochina after the 1954 Geneva Conference and possibly war. North–South divisions are deeply rooted in Vietnam’s history, and ideological differences fueled by the Cold War added another volatile element. But the war probably would not have lasted as long, and certainly would not have been as destructive without the presence of the United States.

It requires us to look beyond our own losses. A “just memory,” scholar/writer Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us, “recalls the weak, the subjugated, the enemy, and the forgotten.” This war’s destruction was nowhere near mutual or equal. The numbers are staggering. A nation of 200 million people lost 58,000 killed; a nation of 35 million lost an estimated three million. America’s massive firepower inflicted devastation all over Vietnam, especially in the South. Four million tons of bombs were dropped on the South; one million on the North. “There were no massacres on American soil, no bombs dropped on our cities, no Americans forced to become sex workers, no Americans turned into refugees.” The tribute to 58,000 American war dead in Washington, DC, is 150 yards long. If the estimated three million Vietnamese killed in the war were added it would be nine miles long.⁵⁵

To understand the outcome of the war, we must ask not simply why we failed but also why the other side succeeded. Le Duan and the Hanoi leadership repeatedly and disastrously miscalculated U.S. reactions to their reckless efforts to win the war, with horrific consequences for their people. North Vietnam paid an enormous—to Americans all but incomprehensible—price for its victory. But in a war where the stakes for the major belligerents were quite asymmetrical, North Vietnam’s stubborn will and remarkable resiliency eventually made the difference.

The task the United States took upon itself in Vietnam ultimately proved beyond its ability to achieve, a concept difficult for Americans to grasp. Such interventions will inevitably ensnare us in the complex and often bewildering tangle of local cultures and politics. They do not lend themselves to the quick fixes we prefer. Vietnam offers no easy lessons.⁵⁶ But it should stand as an enduring testament to the pitfalls of interventionism and the limits of power. Nobody has put it better than former

⁵⁵Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), pp. 17, 66, 114.

⁵⁶George C. Herring and Michael C. Desch, “From Hanoi to Kabul,” *The National Interest* 153(Jan./Feb. 2018): 63–68 seeks to draw some cautionary lessons for today.

U.S. Marine, Vietnam veteran, participant in the bloody battle of Hue, 1968, and poet William Ehrhart. "I didn't want a monument. . ." "What I wanted was a simple recognition of the limits of our power as a nation to inflict our will on others. What I wanted was an understanding that the world is neither black-and-white nor ours."⁵⁷

⁵⁷William Ehrhart, "The Invasion of Grenada" from *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984. www.wdehrhart.com/poem-invasion-of-grenada.html

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE OF VIETNAMESE WORDS

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|---|---|
| An Loc , <i>battle of</i> [ahn-lok] | Mu Gia Pass [moo-zah] |
| Annam [ahn-nahm] | My Lai , <i>village of</i> [mee-lye] |
| Ap Bac , <i>battle of</i> [up-bahk] | Nghe An [ngay-ahn] |
| Ban Me Thuot , <i>battle of</i> [bhan-may-twoot] | Ngo Dinh Diem [ngoh-deem-zyem] |
| Bao Dai [bow-dye] | Ngo Dinh Kha [ngoh-deen-kah] |
| Bay Vien [bay-vyen] | Ngo Dinh Nhu [ngoh-deen-nyoo] |
| Ben Tre [ben-tray] | Nguyen Ai Quoc [ngwen-eye-kwuck] |
| Bien Hoa , <i>attack on</i> [byen-hwah] | Nguyen Cao Ky [ngwen-kow-kee] |
| Binh Xuyen [bin-swyen] | Nguyen Chanh Thi [ngwen-chahn-tee] |
| Bui Diem [boo-ee-zyem] | Nguyen Khanh [ngwen-kahn] |
| Cam Ranh Bay [kahm-rahng] | Nguyen Van Thieu [ngwen-vahn-tyew] |
| Cao Bang [kow-bahng] | Nha Trang [nyah-trahng] |
| Cao Dai [kow-dye] | Nhu, Madame [nyoo] |
| Chieu Hoi Program [chyoo-hoy] | Nhu, Ngo Dinh <i>See</i> Ngo Dinh Nhu |
| Cho Lon [chah-luhn] | Pham Van Dong [fahm-vahn-dohng] |
| Con Thien , <i>battle of</i> [kohn-tyen] | Phan Boi Chau [fahn-boy-chow] |
| Dak To , <i>battle of</i> [dahk-toh] | Phan Huy Quat [fahn-hwee-kwaht] |
| Da Lat [dah-laht] | Phuoc Long [fook-lawng] |
| Da Nang [dah-nahng] | Pleiku [play-koo] |
| Danh va dam , <i>strategy of</i> [dahn vah dahn] | Quang Tri [kwang-tree] |
| Diem, Ngo Dinh <i>See</i> Ngo Dinh Diem | Qui Nhon [kwee-nyahn] |
| Dien Bien Phu , <i>battle of</i> [dyen-byen-foo] | Saigon [shye-gone] |
| doi moi [doy-mye] | Song Be [shawng-bay] |
| Duong Van Minh [zwahng-vahn-meen] | Tan Son Nhut Airport [tun-shun-nyut] |
| Giap, Vo Nguyen <i>See</i> Vo Nguyen Giap | Tet Offensive [tayt] |
| Haiphong [hye-fawng] | Thich Quang Duc [teek-kwahng-dook] |
| Hanoi [hah-noy] | Tran Hung Dao [trun-hung-dow] |
| Hmong tribe [hmawng] | Tran Van Huong [trun-vahn-hwahng] |
| Ho Chi Minh [hoh-chee-meen] | Trieu Au [trew-oh] |
| Hoa Hao [hwah-how] | Trung Sisters [trung] |
| Hon Me [hahn-may] | Truong Dinh Dzu [trwahng-deen-zoo] |
| Hue [hway] | Vang Pao [vahng-pow] |
| Khanh, Nguyen <i>See</i> Nguyen Khanh | Van Tien Dung [vahn-tyen-zoong] |
| Khe Sanh , <i>battle of</i> [kay-shahn] | Vietcong [vyet-kohng] |
| Ky, Nguyen Cao <i>See</i> Nguyen Cao Ky | Viet Minh [vyet-meen] |
| Lao Dong [loud-awng] | Vietnam [vyet-nahm] |
| Le Duan [lay-zwun] | Vinh [veen] |
| Le Duc Tho [lay-dook-taw] | Vo Nguyen Giap [vaw-ngwen-zahp] |
| Le Loi [lay-loy] | Vung Tau [voong-tow] |
| Loc Ninh [lok-neen] | Xuan Loc , <i>battle of</i> [swun-lok] |
| Minh Mang [meen-mahng] | Xuan Thuy [swun-twee] |
| Minh, Duong <i>See</i> Duong Van Minh | Yen Bay Revolt [ee-yen-bay] |
| Minh, Ho Chi <i>See</i> Ho Chi Minh | |

Suggestions for Additional Reading

[This brief list is designed for students and general readers. Those interested in more detailed information on sources may consult the footnotes in this edition, the extensive and comprehensive bibliographies in the previous editions, and the updated bibliography on the *America's Longest War* Web site (www.mhhe.com/herring).]

GENERAL

Surveys of the war abound. Among the best are Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (2009), William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise History* (2008), and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (2018), all of which focus on Vietnam. Merle Pribbenow (trans.), *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (2002) is also quite valuable. Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* treats the war from a global perspective. A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954–1975* (2000) is a readable and insightful history by a journalist who covered the war. Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (1991) and Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War* (1997) are excellent. John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (2009) is richly detailed and especially good on military matters. Andrew Wiest, *The Vietnam War, 1956–1975* (2003) is a good, brief introduction with profiles of participants. Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016) and Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, 2017) are magisterial studies by historians of Vietnam that put what Vietnamese call the American War in the larger context of centuries of Vietnamese history. Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (2012) treats America's war in Vietnam in the context of its other Asian conflicts. Michael G. Kort, *The Vietnam War Re-examined* (2017), a recent, revisionist account,

claims the war could have been won—at less cost than it was lost. Geoffrey Ward, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (2017), the companion volume to Ken Burns’s television series, is readable and richly illustrated. Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1954–1975* (2018) is by a British military historian. Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (2011) breaks new ground. Ron Milam (ed.), *The Vietnam War in Popular Culture* (2 vols., 2017) is a most valuable compendium of articles on a variety of topics.

THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR, 1949–1954

Fredrik Logevall’s splendid *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Origins of America’s Vietnam* (2012) is the best introduction to this critical period in Vietnamese history and U.S. foreign policy. A good way to get at the origins of the Vietnamese revolution and the war with France is through Ho Chi Minh. Two first-rate biographies are William Duiker’s *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (2000) and Pierre Brocheux’s, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (2007). David Marr, *State War and Revolution (1945–1946)* (2013) and Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (2009) provide richly detailed analyses of the origins of the Viet Minh state and the outbreak of war with France. Laura Calkins, *China and the First Indochina War, 1947–1954* (2013) and Mari Olsen, *Soviet–Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949–1964* (2006) document the important role of North Vietnam’s allies in the early years. Still useful for military operations are Bernard Fall’s classics *Street without Joy* (1972) and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1966). A more recent study of that epic battle is Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (2004). Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (2000) introduces important new ideas into our understanding of early U.S. involvement. Graham Greene’s classic novel *The Quiet American* (1955) is still valuable for the ambience of these years, as is journalist Robert Shaplen’s *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (1966).

THE ERA OF NGO DINH DIEM, 1954–1963

Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (2013) is a pathbreaking study that significantly reshapes interpretations of Diem and his era. Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and Southern Vietnam* (2013) is also excellent on this period. Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (2004) and *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam* (2006) emphasize cultural factors in the U.S.–South Vietnam relationship. David Anderson, *Trapped by*

SR-3 Suggestions for Additional Reading

Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961 (1991) is important for early U.S. involvement, as is Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France* (2007). Nation building in South Vietnam has gotten a great deal of attention in recent years. Among the most important studies are Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (2002), James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (2008), Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (2006), which provoked much controversy, Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (2016), and Geoffrey Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963* (2017). Two essential studies based on Vietnamese sources explore the origins of the revolution in South Vietnam's crucial Mekong Delta: David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (2007) and David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (2008). Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* (2013) analyzes North Vietnam's major decisions. James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927–1961* (1997), Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, 2017), and Monique Brinson Demery, *Finding the Dragon Lady: The Mystery of Vietnam's Madame Nhu* (2013) look at three of the most controversial figures from these early years.

Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (2003) is a good place to start for JFK. Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (2006) analyzes personalities and the policy process in the Kennedy and early Johnson years. The best book on Kennedy and Vietnam is Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (2003), a well-researched study that draws generally persuasive conclusions. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (1999) argues that had Kennedy lived, he might have resorted to diplomacy rather than war. Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (2012) and William Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (2012) and *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos* (2014) deal with Laos. Rust covers Cambodia in *Eisenhower and Cambodia: Diplomacy, Covert Action and the Origins of the Second Indochina War* (2016).

LBJ'S WAR, 1964–1968

Brian VanDeMark, *Road to Disaster: A New History of America's Descent into Vietnam* (2018) is a worthy successor to David Halberstam's classic *The Best and the Brightest* (1972). Two excellent, up-to-date biographies of LBJ are Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant* (2004) and Randall Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (2006), the latter of which gets at the essential Johnson and interprets his Vietnam policies more favorably than most scholars. Logevall, *Choosing War*

is insightful on the 1963–1965 decisions to escalate the war, and Preston, *War Council* stresses McGeorge Bundy's role. Johnson's phone conversations make fascinating and instructive listening and can be accessed through the Web sites of the LBJ Library and the University of Virginia's Miller Center. George C. Herring, *The War Bells Have Rung: The LBJ Tapes and the Americanization of the Vietnam War* (2015), an e-book, analyzes Johnson's critical July 1965 decision and includes samples of those conversations. Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (1996) remains the authoritative account of that pivotal event. North Vietnam's decisions for war and the crucial role of Le Duan are skillfully examined in Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (2012). For Hanoi's allies, see Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (1996) and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (2000). A stunningly researched and quite useful analysis of one of the most important of the numerous peace initiatives is James Hershberg, *MARIGOLD: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (2011).

Official histories produced by the Defense Department are rich in detail and solid in their analysis. Lawrence S. Kaplan, Ronald D. Landa, and Edward J. Drea, *The McNamara Ascendancy 1961–1965* (2006) and Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965–1969* (2011) cover this period. The best analysis of the air war remains Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (1989). Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (2011) and Westmoreland's War: *Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (2014) provide up-to-date, insightful analyses of the ground war. For pacification, see Thomas L. Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (2010) and Frank L. Jones, *Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy* (2013), a study of a key figure in that area. Edwin A. Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* (2012) is important. Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (1998) convincingly argues that the United States failed because it underestimated the enemy's staying power and overestimated its own. Meredith Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (2011) is a fascinating study of the military's exportation of American consumer culture to South Vietnam.

The year 1967 was a critical year in the war for both the United States and North Vietnam. David Maraniss, *They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967* (2004) skillfully juxtaposes military operations in Vietnam with protests in the United States. The *New York Times* series, *Vietnam, 1967*, edited by Clay Risen, provides essays on a fascinating variety of topics by journalists, historians, and participants dealing with 1967 and the war more generally.

The domestic side of the war has attracted much attention in recent years. Joseph A. Fry, *Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and Their Senate Hearings* (2008) and Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party,*

and the War (2010) are important recent studies seeking to get at the role of Congress. The best analysis of public opinion remains John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (1976), which compares the wars in Korea and Vietnam with interesting results. Joseph A. Fry, *The American South and the Vietnam War: Belligerence, Protest, and Agony* (2015) is an invaluable regional study. For the antiwar movement, the classic general accounts are Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (1990), Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (1995), and Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Battle for American Hearts and Minds* (2002). Study of domestic protest has taken interesting and important new directions in recent years. See, for example, Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War* (2003), David L. Parsons, *Antiwar Coffeehouses and Military Dissent* (2017), George Bogaski, *American Protestants and the Debate Over the Vietnam War: Evil Was Loose in the Land* (2014), Jessica Frazier, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy during the Vietnam War Era* (2017), Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (2013), and Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (2013). Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War* (2013) looks at an important and much less studied dimension of the war.

Recent books dealing with America's allies include Eugenie Blang, *Allies at Odds: America, Europe, and Vietnam, 1961–1968* (2011), Ian MacGibbon, *New Zealand's Vietnam War: A History of Combat, Commitment, and Controversy* (2016), and a new survey by Australia's official historian of the war, Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War: The Essential History* (2014).

One of the biggest remaining gaps in the literature on the war is South Vietnam. An important monograph is Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (2004). Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (2008) is sympathetic to the South Vietnamese soldiers but critical of their leaders and the United States. Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After* (2016) contains oral histories of forty South Vietnamese veterans.

The war produced a voluminous and distinguished literature dealing with the GI experience. Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War* (1993), Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Experience in Vietnam* (2007), and James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War* (2017) are excellent scholarly introductions. Longley's *The House of the Purple Hearts: The Morenci Marines and Small Town America in the Shadows of the Vietnam War* (2013) is a compelling account of the war's impact on a small Arizona mining town. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (1990), a classic novel, can be instructively compared with the more hawkish James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (1978), and Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War* (1991) and Duong Thu Huong, *Novel without a Name* (2002), which deal with North Vietnamese soldiers. Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam*

War (2009) is also excellent. Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once. . . and Young* (1992) is a first-rate account of the important 1965 battle of the Ia Drang. Christian Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (2003) includes oral histories with people who played various roles in the war. Viet Thanh Nguyen's prize-winning *The Sympathizer* (2015) concerns Vietnamese-Americans in the postwar years. Duong Von Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (1999), as the topic suggests, looks at the experiences of a family during an era of war.

For the Tet Offensive, Don Oberdorfer's classic *Tet!* (1971) is readable and still quite worthwhile. It can be supplemented with the more recent James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (2001) and David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (2005), which is especially good on the domestic U.S. response to Tet. Edwin E. Moise, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (2017) is a valuable corrective based on extensive research. Kyle Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (2018), an excellent day-by-day account of this year of crises, puts Tet in the context of other issues the president had to deal with. William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Military and Media at War* (1998) is a valuable analysis of that controversial subject. Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (1993) remains the best study of that pivotal period. Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968* (2018) provides a gripping, day-to-day, house-to-house account of that epic battle. For the horrors of My Lai, see David L. Anderson (ed.), *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* (1994), and the more recent Howard Jones, *My Lai and the Descent into Darkness* (2017). Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (2013), a searing indictment of the U.S. military's actions, concludes that My Lai was typical, not an aberration.

NIXON, LE DUAN, AND THE END OF THE WAR

Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (2007) is a valuable dual biography. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (1998) remains the best study of that subject. Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (1999) is a fine analysis of a controversial presidency, and William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Administration* (1998) is a useful study by one of LBJ's top foreign policy advisers. John A. Farrell, *Richard Nixon: The Life* (2017) contains some important information on Vietnam, and David Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (2014) is an excellent survey. Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military* (2015), an invaluable official history, documents Laird's major role in Vietnam policy. Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger's Responsibility for the Tragedy in Vietnam* (2018) critiques the Vietnam work of Nixon's top negotiator. The

telephone tapes that helped bring down Nixon's presidency offer a fascinating source for historians. They have been published in Douglas Brinkley and Luke Nichter (eds.), *The Nixon Tapes, 1971–72* (2014) and *The Nixon Tapes, 1973* (2015).

On more specialized topics, Ken Hughes, *Chasing Shadows: The Nixon Tapes, the Chennault Affair, and the Origins of Watergate* (2014) is the fullest account of that sordid episode. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (1999) overstates the success attained in these years, and, as Nixon and Kissinger hoped, blames Congress for South Vietnam's defeat. Gregory Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (2017) is an essential corrective. Kevin M. Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969–1971* (2016) agrees that pacification in this showcase province achieved little. William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (2015) examines the retreat from Duck Hook. Kenton Clymer, *Troubled Relations: The United States and Cambodia Since 1870* (2007) provides a broad perspective on the topic. Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War* (2017) is a new account of the so-called secret war in Laos. The 1971 Laotian incursion is well covered in Robert D. Sander, *Invasion of Laos, 1971, Lam Son 719* (2014) and James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (2014). The Kent State story is told in Thomas M. Grace, *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties* (2016) and Howard Means, *67 Shots: Kent State and the End of American Innocence* (2016). Two useful books on resistance in the armed services are David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance during the Vietnam War* (2005) and George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (2011). John Prados, *Inside the Pentagon Papers* (2005) is a useful introduction to that important topic. See also Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (2002). Dale Andrade, *Trial by Fire: The 1972 Easter Offensive* (1994) remains the best analysis of that pivotal event. Pierre Asselin, *Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (2002) and Nguyen, *War for Peace* (2012) are essential sources for North and South Vietnam's perspectives on the Paris peace agreements. Special mention should be made of John M. Carland, *Kissinger–Le Duc Tho Negotiations* (2017), an e-book in the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, which is a treasure trove of documents that unlocks the secrets of these negotiations that began in the summer of 1969 and ended with the breakdown of the Paris agreements in 1973.

AFTERMATH AND LEGACIES

James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (2004) is good on the postwar war and the fall of South Vietnam as is the more recent Johannes Kadura, *The War After the War: The Struggle for*

Credibility during America's Exit from Vietnam (2016). George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam* (2012) covers the last days.

Books exploring the various legacies of the war include Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (1997), Charles Neu (ed.), *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (2000), and Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (2006). Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini (eds.), *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War* (2013) covers a variety of legacies in both Vietnam and the United States. David Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (2009) is superb on the way the memorialization of the war has reflected American efforts to come to terms with it.

Edward A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (2007) is the best book on that important subject. David Kieran, *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory* (2014) and David Ryan, *U.S. Collective Memory, Military Intervention, and Vietnam: The Cultural Politics of U.S. Foreign Intervention Since 1969* (2018) analyze how memories of Vietnam have influenced subsequent interventions. Both Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (2015) and the prize-winning Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016) are superb.

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