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Cold War Perspectives on U.S. Commitment in Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

The massive involvement of American forces in Vietnam was preceded by two previous crises in which the United States almost started military intervention. The “rst crucial moment was spring of 1954, when the French asked for help in defending their garrison at Dien Bien Phu, a basin in northwestern Vietnam near the Laotian border, under siege by the Viet Minh forces led by General Vo Nguyen Giap.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower•s hesitation in sending American soldiers was counter-balanced by his determination to maintain an anti-Communist stronghold in Indochina. He had established Ngo Dinh Diem•s regime in South Vietnam in July 1954, shortly before the Geneva Conference agreed on a cease-“re. •This was the basic decision,Ž recalled W. Averell Harriman, an experienced diplomat and politician, •which unwisely got us directly involved in South Vietnam.Ž

In September, the Manila Treaty was concluded, creating the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Eisenhower•s letter to Diem in the following month pledged American full support to South Vietnam•s survival as a nation. According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a historian and an aide to President John F. Kennedy, that letter created

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American "vital interests" in this newly born country. The CIA analyst Chester Cooper believed that American involvement had been "concrete and substantial enough" by the end of the 1950s.[2]

The second occasion for possible American military involvement came in 1961. While avoiding the dispatch of U.S. combat troops, the United States took on "almost unilateral responsibility" in defending South Vietnam, as Kennedy indicated to Pakistani President Mohammed Ayub Kahn.[3]

American military advisers were sent beyond the limits of the 1954 Geneva Accords and allowed to participate in operations side-by-side with the Vietnamese Army. The decision to transform American Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) into Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was also made during this crucial year.

In early 1962, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara felt that Vietnam was already "the one place where Americans were in a shooting war." Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., portrayed the situation when he arrived at Saigon in August 1963 as a new American Ambassador as one in which "regardless of how they got there, Americans were in Vietnam and were in combat."[4]

John Mecklin, a senior officer of the U.S. Mission in Saigon, admitted that the word "advice" changed to "something close to a form of warfare" under Kennedy's presidency. "President Eisenhower made our first commitment there in 1954," President Lyndon B. Johnson justified his escalation policy in 1965, "That was reaffirmed by President Kennedy many times in different ways."[5]

Why, then, did Eisenhower and Kennedy act in ways leading to America's long and agonizing war in Vietnam? The following analysis will show the three-dimensional Cold War diplomacy behind their decisions respectively in 1954 and in 1961: global struggle with the Russian and Chinese Communists; regional undertakings for security and integration in Southeast Asia; and local endeavors to build a strong and viable society within South Vietnam.

I. GLOBAL THREAT, WORLDWIDE RESPONSES

1 Countering Revolutions in the Developing Areas

In 1961, the forces of democracy seemed "on the defensive" everywhere on earth, and even in space. One of Kennedy's first diplomatic initiatives was to announce in a televised press conference that the United

States would intervene in Laos militarily if necessary. After less than one hundred days in office, he approved covert operations by the Cuban exiles against Fidel Castro. The goal of putting men on the moon within a decade was set. Among his decisions was the expansion of American commitment in Vietnam.[6]

According to Walt Rostow, an economist who joined in Kennedy's White House, the new administration was faced with "the second great Communist offensive of the postwar years." It was only two weeks before Kennedy's inauguration that Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev had declared Russian support for national liberation movements all over the developing world. His announcement, as Kennedy told Ayub Kahn several months later, "had sounded as if it could lead only to war."[7]

Rostow recollected that the so-called Third World was already "in a ferment." Kennedy once called it "the great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today." Especially important was the "vulnerable arc from Southeast Asia through the Middle East," as former Secretary of State George Marshall emphasized to the senior members of the administration, which was not only "adjacent to the Sino-Soviet heartland" but also under dual threat of domestic difficulties and national liberation wars.[8]

As a young Senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy had advocated his own remedy: the United States should offer the developing world "a political, economic and social revolution" far superior to—and far more peaceful and democratic than—what the Communists could provide. It was quite natural for him to commence such ambitious programs as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress. The key was the aspirations of "those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery."[9]

Senator Kennedy had criticized the Eisenhower Administration for its failure to appreciate the dynamics of nationalism which had been "rewriting the geopolitical map of the world." Now, as president, he complained to Mohammed Shoaib, Financial Minister of Pakistan, that it was "curious" that the United States should be grouped with the colonial powers by the people in the developing areas.[10]

2 In the Midst of Peaceful Coexistence

"Whether we should have drawn the line where we did," Schlesinger later said, referring to the 17th parallel dividing North and South Vietnam, "once it was drawn we became every succeeding year more

imprisoned by it." It is ironic that Eisenhower's commitment in 1954 was, in contrast to his successor's, made at one of the lowest ebb of Cold War tensions, following the death of Russian dictator Joseph Stalin.[11]

Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles emphasized that the recent Soviet move was hardly a change in their basic strategy and that it should rather be regarded as another "offensive weapon against the West" to isolate the United States from its allies. His press conference in December 1954 reminded the Americans and their friends that "the strength and direction of the current cannot be judged by whether the surface appears to be completely calm or whether there is a ruffle on it."[12]

Peaceful coexistence between the East and the West, as advocated by the Russians, would, however, as Dulles remarked at a NATO Council Meeting, provide the West with a "breathing spell" for strengthening their unity. In the Far East as well, the Americans were ready to accept "cessation of hostilities and stabilization of the situation in the area on terms acceptable to the United States," in spite of its reluctance on the surface to accept any negotiated settlement short of military victory either in Korea or in Indochina.[13]

In April 1954, according to Cooper, the United States "crept like a snail unwillingly" into the Geneva Conference. There Dulles refused to shake hands with Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-lai. He flew back to Washington as soon as negotiations started. And he instructed Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, head of the United States delegation, to limit the American role to merely that of "an interested nation" in the conference.[14]

Smith took great pains for more than two months only to "cheer the players," not to "pitch." He did not sign the Final Declaration of the conference since the agreements were unsatisfactory to the American public. That was an anticipated result, since French Foreign Minister Georges Bidaut "had hardly a card in his hand," as he complained to Dulles and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, "perhaps just a two of clubs and a three of diamonds."[15]

Disappointment at the loss of northern Vietnam did not prevent Dulles from feeling some optimism over "a chance of building a dike" in its southern half to stop further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Neither the Soviet Union nor the Communist China, nor the Western powers, challenged the American effort to save something out of the French defeat. There remained only one dissident: North Vietnam.[16]

3 A Truce Line of the Cold War

Ho Chi Minh's government in Hanoi decided in May 1959 to step up its support of armed struggle against Ngo Dinh Diem in the south. In December 1960 the National Liberation Front (NLF, the so-called Viet Cong) was created under Communist leadership. The Americans were increasingly aware of an urgent need to reestablish a "*Common Law for the Cold War in the Underdeveloped Areas*."[17]

Kennedy emphasized to Khrushchev when they met at Vienna in June 1961 that both the United States and the Soviet Union should "avoid getting involved in direct contact" in supporting the South Vietnamese Government and the Viet Cong guerrillas respectively. Before reaching any agreement with the United States on any subject, such as Berlin and the nuclear test ban, Khrushchev's sincerity first had to be proven by, for instance, terminating "a planned and consistent effort" by North Vietnam "to overthrow by violence the legitimate government of South Vietnam."[18]

A reunified Vietnam was desirable, Rostow remarked, only if it took place by negotiation among the Vietnamese themselves "without a pistol pointed at Diem's head." The Americans could not accept the "destruction of Diem via infiltration" any more than the Russians could accept the "destruction of Ulbricht [East German leader] via the Berlin flow of refugees." The "gut issue" was, accordingly, whether to allow "the systematic infiltration of men from outside and the operation from outside of a guerrilla war" in Vietnam or anywhere else.[19]

The Sudden construction of wall between East and West Berlin in August 1961 must have been shocking, but nonetheless something of a relief to Kennedy, because it showed Khrushchev's willingness to keep the status quo in Europe untouched. Contrastingly, no neat line of demarcation among conflicting groups could be found in Laos and in Congo. Kennedy tried hard to oust Castro from power in Cuba, because his existence infringed the line dividing the East and the West.

Rostow advocated military intervention in Vietnam because he thought it was a great mistake to "inhibit U.S. action on our side of the truce lines of the Cold War for fear of enemy escalation." Kennedy frankly told Indian Defense Minister Krishna Menon that "the best thing" was "for Vietnam to remain divided." Always essential were holding the line and making the Russians do likewise.[20]

The trouble in Vietnam was that it appeared a "more obscure and less flagrant" battleground than Korea, as Kennedy complained at a National

Security Coucil(NSC) meeting. The fighting was caused by infiltration, subversion, and terrorism. Neither combat troops nor clear fronts could be seen. The Americans were increasingly irritated by the incapability of world opinion to fully recognize the truth of what Rostow called a "muted warfare."[21]

4 To Prevent Dominoes from Falling

McNamara later admitted that the expansion of war efforts was justified by the sense of "danger of Vietnam's loss and, through falling dominoes, the loss of all Southeast Asia." William Bundy, another architect of Vietnam policy in the 1960s, recalled that it was "clear and unmistakable" to top-level officials in the Kennedy Administration that this particular struggle was linked to the security of Southeast Asia as a whole.[22]

This doctrine had been articulated by Eisenhower when he explained why the Americans should support the French colonial war:

> Now let us assume that we lose Indochina. If Indochina goes, several things happen right away. The Malayan peninsula, the last little bit of the end hanging on down there, would be scarcely defensible—and tin and tungsten that we so greatly value from that area would cease coming. But all India would be outflanked. Burma would certainly, in its weakened condition, be no defense. Now, India is surrounded on that side by the Communist empire. Iran on its left is in a weakened condition. . . . All of that weakening position around there is very ominous for the United States, because finally if we lost all that, how would the free world hold the rich empire of Indonesia? So you see, somewhere along the line, this must be blocked. It must be blocked now. That is what the French are doing.[23]

Indochina was "the keystone of the arch" of Southeast Asia. Especially Tonkin, the northern part of Vietnam adjacent to southern China, formed "the corridor between China and Southeast Asia" just as Korea was "the bridge between China and Japan," as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affaris Walter Robertson stated.[24]

The defense of Vietnam was inseparable from the safety of the Pacific for the United States. "Today, the vast Pacific is a friendly ocean," said Dulles, "only because the West Pacific islands and two peninsular positions are in friendly hands." He was particularly concerned that "close behind this island and peninsular screen" was located Communist China.[25]

The Pacific had to be kept as "a friendly body of water," or it would

sooner or later become "a Communist lake," according to Dulles. He was terribly fearful of this disastrous possibility, because both in the Asian Continent and in the Pacific there could be found "no strong bulwark against the Soviet Communist offensive." Indochina, and later South Vietnam, was to be one of such strongholds, possibly even with the help of the U.S. troops.[26]

Most essential in any American military enterprise was, as one NSC staff member in the Kennedy Administration explained, "how we tell the other side that we mean business." The Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1961 believed that American forces either in Vietnam or in Thailand would "demonstrate US intentions to fulfill our commitments to countries in the area."[27]

II. A QUEST FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

1 America's Adversary in Asia

"As in Korea, Iran, Malaya, and Burma," General Thomas Trapnell, Chief of American MAAG, said in 1954, "the war in Indochina is not a separate entity. It is another tentacle of the octopus, another brush fire on the periphery of the iron and bamboo curtains." The real enemies for American diplomacy in Vietnam was located in Moscow and in Peking.[28]

Particularly in Asia, Communist China was more formidable than the Soviet Union. Secretary of State Dulles revealed his anxiety over a "single Chinese Communist aggressive front" extending from Korea to Indochina. President Kennedy in his first State of the Union message warned that "the relentless pressures of the Chinese Communists" were menacing entire Asia.[29]

Dulles once portrayed Ho Chi Minh as a man who had been "trained in Moscow and developed as a Communist" for further aggression in Southeast Asia. McNamara later recalled that the Americans identified Ho Chi Minh "first as a Communist and only second as a Vietnamese nationalist."[30]

The Americans strongly opposed the "fiction" that the Viet Cong was a revolutionary movement arising spontaneously from within South Vietnam. Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay later asserted that it was merely "Hanoi's creation." In summer 1961 a group of Vietnamese and American economists concluded that the Viet Cong had been "supplied, reinforced, and centrally directed by the international Communist apparatus operating through Hanoi."[31]

SEATO was expected to contain the Communists' challenge in the whole of Southeast Asia. By 1961, according to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, it had become "the law of the land" linking South Vietnam to "the general structure of collective security." Lyndon Johnson later noted that "President Kennedy believed in our nation's commitment to the security of Southeast Asia, a commitment made in the SEATO Treaty and strengthened by his predecessor, President Eisenhower."[32]

Prior to the establishment of SEATO, Dulles augued before Congressional leaders that the "creation of a defense line in the Far East" was absolutely necessary. According to him, after the conclusion of the Geneva Accords in July 1954, the 17th parallel dividing two Vietnams became a line that the people in that area should be prepared to join in defending, for the United States could not be expected "to rush in singlehandedly."[33]

The Kennedy Administration was on the same track. Unless willing to allow the Pacific to become "a Red sea," Vice President Johnson warned the president, the United States could never retreat from Vietnam. "John Kennedy never questioned that Southeast Asia was vital to American security," recollected Rusk, "His only question: Where should we fight if we had to fight? His decision: South Vietnam."[34]

2 Mission Impossible: Seal Up the Vietnamese Borders

Kennedy's speech writer Theodore Sorensen later wrote that the Viet Cong guerrillas had been "bleeding South Vietnam to death" by the beginning of 1961. By that fall, the conflict there was a "hot war, with casualties averaging well over 1,000 every month."[35]

Kennedy pointed out how strange it was that "a native army of 200,000" could not match up "against 16,000 guerrillas." The reason was plain to Rostow. He attributed this to "the horrible arithmetic of guerrilla warfare" : one guerrilla could pin down at least 10, sometimes 20, or even 25 regular soldiers.[36]

In Saigon Ambassador Frederick Nolting, Jr., complained that large scale infiltration from North Vietnam via Laos and Cambodia was about to "swamp this country." But for the enormous influx of men, arms, munitions, equipments, foods, and directions, the Americans believed, "there would be no war" in Vietnam. Immediate task was therefore to create a "Cordon Sanitaire" or "Firebreak" along the Vietnamese borders.[37]

Rostow visited South Vietnam in 1961 and found the situation dan-

gerous "not because the Viet Cong were popular, but because there was an open frontier and safe haven and resources for the Viet Cong behind it." Nolting believed that South Vietnam could enjoy a "better than 50–50 chance of winning" only if its border was sufficiently protected, though it looked "like a sieve" to intelligence people.[38]

The Americans depended more and more upon "[e]xotic weapons," such as helicopters, short take-off and landing (STOL) airplanes, light propeller planes, anti-personnel mines, napalm, plastic bombs, and defoliants. Nevertheless, Schlesinger later stated before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee that all these efforts only showed "our incapacity to deal with a guerrilla movement."[39]

The American troops, the SEATO Border Patrol Troops, the United Nations Observer Corps, the International Control Commission (ICC), and the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) consisting of mountainous tribes, could be utilized as a "plate glass window" along the Vietnamese frontiers. Creating an "island of peace" in southern Laos, as Rusk later described it, by military intervention by the SEATO forces, might also deny the Viet Cong sanctuary outside South Vietnam.[40]

Another seemingly fundamental solution was, as General Maxwell Taylor advocated, to "attack the source of guerrilla aggression" in North Vietnam. Such an operation would cause little problem since, according to William Bundy, it would be "our equivalent" of the guerrilla operations conducted within South Vietnam by Ho Chi Minh. Rostow strongly demanded that the United States "make Hanoi pay enough in the North for it to be worth its while to close the frontier."[41]

3 A Dream Unfulfilled

SEATO was originally expected to be a catalyst for regional integration as well as a shield agaisnt Communist encroachment in Southeast Asia. It had to provide the region with "a nucleus for coordinated defense," according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur C. Davis. Under Secretary of State Smith told Georges Bidault that the Americans were confident of the need to bring about "some form of southeast [*sic*] Asian NATO."[42]

This collective security organization should also become "an *ad hoc* political association" similar to NATO. Its other job was to encourage "the prompt organization of an economic grouping by the maximum number of free Asian states," including Japan and India. "Free nations, when they unite effectively," said Eisenhower in his last days of presi-

dency, "can defeat specific efforts at economic penetration and political subversion in newly developing areas."[43]

However, Southeast Asia was, as former Ambassador to Thailand U. Alexis Johnson complained in 1961, always "much more a geographic expression than a political reality." Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles admitted to South Vietnamese Ambassador Tran Van Chuong that it was far from easy to "bring the people of Southeast Asia together so that they would have a sense of common destiny."[44]

The difficulty of regional integration in Southeast Asia was symbolized by the antagonism between South Vietnam and Cambodia. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem refused American calls for a rapprochement with this western neighbor. Cambodian leader Norodom Sihanouk called Vietnam and Thailand "the wolf and the tiger" threatening Cambodian survival as a nation.[45]

Asian members of the SEATO alliance—Thailand, Pakistan, and Philippines—were divided among themselves, despite their common anti-Communist sentiments. SEATO also witnessed conflict of interests between the British and the French on the one hand and the Asians on the other. According to Paul Kattenburg, a Vietnam Desk officer in the State Department, SEATO was nothing more than "a paper tiger, an empty gesture, from its creation." Watching its inability to act in an efficient way in the Laotian crisis in spring of 1961, Chiang Kai-shek in Taipei stated that it was "not much more than empty shell."[46]

4 Two Strongholds in Asia

In 1954 Dulles told Anthony Eden that the American "desire to cooperate with Britain and France in Asia, in North Africa and in the Near and Middle East" prevented their support of nationalism in the developing world. Dulles confessed to one of his aides that American diplomacy was "squeezed" between its opposition to colonialism and its ties to the colonial powers in Western Europe.[47]

In fact, the Americans judged as early as in 1954 that without their support "the British and French would not be in Asia at all." The imminent issue was who should fill the military and political vacuum, and how. One solution might be American unilateral involvement, because it seemed evident to Dulles that "the United States Government alone was able to face up to these hard decisions in Asia."[48]

In 1961 the South Vietnamese demanded the dispatch of American troops. Meanwhile the Thais wanted bilateral defense agreement with

the United States. They urged the Americans to act militarily to defend Laos even without the British and the French, threatening to leave SEATO otherwise, since, as Thai Ambassador Vistr Arthayukuti told Kennedy, Thailand would be the "next target" of the Communists.[49]

Instead of fortifying SEATO, the United States increasingly depended upon a less formal alliance of three anti-Communist Asian leaders: Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, Sarit Thanarat in Thailand, and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. A new form of regional grouping was also pursued. Rusk told British Foreign Secretary Alex Douglas-Home that even "the demise of SEATO" might be permissible if "a regional organization which countries like India could support" was to be established by nations such as Burma, Thailand, and South Vietnam.[50]

The Americans thought that they could count on India, Chairman of the ICC in Indochina since 1954 and a strong leader of the non-aligned nations. It was, as Kennedy insisted in the 1960 presidential campaign, one of "the two greatest poles of power in Asia." Its victory over Communist China "for the economic and political leadership of the East" as well as "for the respcet of all Asia" would be significant for the United States, too.[51]

Indian hostility toward the United States increased the importance of Japan in American diplomacy in Asia. It was "the heart and soul of the situation in the Far East," as Dulles expressed it at an NSC meeting in summer of 1954. It was the "only industrial power in Asia," and it would require "little imagination" to visualize what would happen if it was allied with Russia and China against the West.[52]

Southeast Asia would be the key to prevent such an ominous possibility, providing Japan with natural resources and purchasing its industrial products. Japan would in its turn contribute to economic prosperity and political stability in the region. "If we don't assist Japan, gentlemen," said Eisenhower to Congressional leaders, "Japan is going Communist. Then instead of the Pacific being an American lake, believe me it is going to be a Communist lake."[53]

III. NATION-BUILDING AND ANTI-GUERRILLA WARFARE

1 Wanted: Fortress Vietnam

Kennedy's speech writer Theodore Sorensen remarked in his memoirs of the Kennedy years that Vietnam was a "cockpit" in the Cold War struggle. It had been so for a long time—since the days of successful rev-

olution of the Communists in mainland China and the invasion by the North Koreans across the 38th parallel.[54]

In 1951, the French had established indigenous armed forces in Vietnam. They were relatively well-armed, well-equipped and with superior manpower, though Dulles could find "no capacity to fight" in them. In contrast, Ho Chi Minh had a "well-organized, disciplined formidable military force" controlling a considerable portion of the country, according to a press briefing made by Bedell Smith in Geneva.[55]

The Americans believed that they knew what was really wrong: poor training given by the French. Ambassador to Saigon Donald Heath was told by Dulles that the American experience of successfully converting the once shaky anti-Communist Korean Army into a "first-class fighting machine" could be transplanted into Vietnam.[56]

The French called the American way of military training a "troop factory" method, and insisted that it would never function in Vietnam. They were afraid that they would "lose face in the eyes of the Vietnamese" if American training personnel were introduced. French Chief of Staff Paul Ely told Admiral Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that American participation in training "would cause political repercussions in Paris."[57]

In Washington, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were fearful that it would be difficult to build up and train the native forces "in the absence of a stable government in South Vietnam." However, their opposition was overridden by the State Department. "If adequately trained and equipped," Dulles told Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, the Vietnamese Army would bring "some assurance of internal security" and "an increased sense of stability."[58]

The French agreed to give up the responsibilities of training and organizing of the Vietnamese Army to the Americans by the end of 1954. Withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps in 1956 further contributed to the creation of an "autonomous FVA [Free Vietnamese Army] along US lines," in the words of Ambassador Heath.[59]

Although, as Schlesinger recalled, it seemed "rather easy to teach the government troops a few tricks" so that they could take care of themselves, training of the Vietnamese forces remained insufficient. Their morale was low. Commanders lacked initiative. Their operations were always ineffective. Intelligence systems hardly functioned. Finally, there existed substantially no workable command structure.[60]

General Lionel McGarr, Chief of the MAAG, complained to Diem in summer 1961 that "37 miniature campaigns" in many provinces were being executed by the Vietnamese Army without any coordinated strategy. "The only thing wrong was that the war was not being won," according to David Halberstam, a young New York Times correspondent and later Pulitzer Prize winner, "it was, in fact, not even being fought."[61]

By early 1961 nearly two-thirds of the South Vietnamese territory was under the control of the Viet Cong forces. Darkness belonged to guerrillas in many areas. "The symbol of South Vietnam," one Vietnamese reportedly said in the fall, "is not its flag but the vultures wheeling over the National Assembly building."[62]

2 Military or Non-Military Prescriptions?

The Americans were afraid that failure of the South Vietnamese would be identified with American military doctrine. In 1961, Kennedy had only "a military policy which had left us wholly unprepared to fight—or even to train others to fight—a war against local guerrillas." Robert Komer, an NSC staff member, felt the need to establish "a new doctrine of deterrence" in Southeast Asia.[63]

General Taylor judged that Vietnam was "a going laboratory" of guerrilla warfare. It was, according to Robert Kennedy, the president's brother and Attorney General, the "*most troublesome to the world today*." It was, as Genral Trapnell had called in 1954, a "politico-military chess game" which needed special treatment.[64]

Admiral Radford's view of the war in Indochina was that its military end was "probably 50 percent," while its political end was "probably the other half." He believed that success in any military operation there depended upon "creating a political atmosphere and effective Vietnamese Government."[65]

Kennedy instructed General Taylor before he left for Saigon in October 1961 that the "political, social, and economic elements" of the war were as significant as its military part. John K. Galbraith, an economist and Ambassador to India, summarized Taylor's recommendation to dispatch a flood relief task force as having the soldiers "use a shovel with one hand and deal with the guerrillas with the other."[66]

Nevertheless, the Americans had a strong tendency to look to military prescription. Philip W. Bonsal, Director of Philippines and Southeast Asian Affairs in the State Department, maintained that political support

could never be anticipated "short of real military progress." Dulles insisted that "in the absence of a stronger military posture in Free Vietnam, there could be no political stability."[67]

The military task became important than any other subject year by year. In fall of 1961, Jim Howe, a program officer in the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) in Saigon, remarked that the position of South Vietnamese people was "analogous to that of businessmen in a city like Chicago or New York," who would refuse to cooperate with the police only because it could not provide them adequate protection.[68]

3 Vulnerability in a Political Game

One week before the conclusion of the Geneva Accords in 1954, Dulles told Eden and French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France that the United States "could not be in the position of assisting a French colonial war in Indochina." He added that there was "no chance of holding Vietnam unless they were granted real independence." Independence given in June 1954 proved to be too little, too late.[69]

Dulles' fear that the indigenous people were "neither ready nor willing to make an effort to preserve their independence," as he expressed it to French Foreign Minister Bidault, weakened American pressure upon the French. "I'm not convinced," he told one of his aides, "that every colonial people should automatically receive independence simply because they clamor for it. Along the desire for independence should go the capacity to assume the burdens and responsibilities that accompany independence."[70]

South Vietnam after the Geneva Conference was in essence, as the young Senator Kennedy said in 1956, America's "offspring." It was not long, however, before weakness of its leader Ngo Dinh Diem became more than evident to many observers. He could depend only on his own family, refugees from the north in fear of Communism, the Catholic minority. His rule was paralyzed by his justifiable fear of being overthrown from power at any time.[71]

Seven years of Diem's rule convinced British Foreign Secretary Alex Douglas-Home that this dictator was "hopeless." Vice President Johnson predicted to Kennedy that the day might come when the Americans would be faced with the "grave dilemma" that their aid to the South Vietnamese Government would be directed against its own people.[72]

Secretary of State Rusk portrayed El Salvador as "one place where a DDT gun would be more effective than a Tommy gun." In Vietnam, too,

"the first priority must be political," as Chief of CIA Station in Saigon William Colby recollected. According to Ambassador Nolting, the Americans first needed "an *infrastructure* of democratic institutions."[73]

4 Deeper and Deeper into the Paddies

The American effort to create a viable and enduring society in South Vietnam came to "a virtual standstill by unexpected resistance" from the South Vietnamese. President Ngo Dinh Diem was uneasy over "[w]ho would be responsible for running the show," as Nolting later described it, and refused every American demand for democratic reform.[74]

Most troublesome was his "basic impatience with democratic processes," which he considered dangerous to stability and security. "No amount of window dressing," he said to Nolting, "could substitute for the hard measures of self-sacrifice" required for truimph over Communism. "If we open the window," said Tran Le Xuan, Diem's sister-in-law and substantially the First Lady of the Republic of Vietnam, "not only sunlight but many bad things will fly in."[75]

It was less than three months after Diem's rise to power in 1954 that Ambassador Heath telegrammed the State Department that the United States must look for "a relief pitcher" and "get him warming up in [the] bullpen." Yet, the United States had to "stick by Diem at this moment" because he was the "only man now in sight with character enough to form and head an enduring government."[76]

Seven years later, McNamara concluded that Diem still remained "the only man we had." The United States had to accept the fact that he and his regime were "100 percent anti-Communists," as South Vietnamese Secretary of State Nguyen Dinh Thuan remarked to Rusk at a SEATO Council meeting that spring.[77]

Kennedy once itemized American alternatives in the crisis of the Dominican Republic in descending preference: first, "a decent democratic regime" ; second, "a continuation of the Trujillo regime" ; the worst, "a Castro regime." "We ought to aim at the first," admitted Kennedy, "but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third." In Vietnam as well, the United States had to "back Diem to the hilt," as General McGarr advised.[78]

"Like Nasser and Nehru he is there," American Ambassador to Djakarta Henry Jones once remarked about Indonesian leader Sukarno, "and we must learn to live with him as [a] fact of life." Harriman complained that it was "fantastic" that General Phoumi Nosavan, the right-

wing leader in Laos, had been "permitted to continue to dictate American policy," though he was an "entirely US creation."[79]

That was also the case in Vietnam. The experiment "to put a Ford engine into a Vietnamese ox-cart," as Nolting later described it, was doomed to failure. The United States became the "satellite" of its own satellites not only in Vietnam but also in many other places. As Galbraith had predicted, the "bright promise" of Kennedy's New Frontier was day by day "being sunk under the rice fields" of South Vietnam.[80]

CONCLUSION

In spring of 1954 the French Government demanded American air and naval intervention as "the only one of many possible course [courses] which might provide a solution to the Indochina impasse." As Admiral Radford insisted, it was also "the only ace" for the West in the Geneva Conference.[81]

Seven years later the Vietnam Task Force under the Kennedy Administration urged the dispatch of "U.S. flag forces." In the fall once again, the mission led by General Taylor concluded that American military intervention was "the best means" of saving Southeast Asia.[82]

First, Eisenhower in 1954 as well as Kennedy in 1961 had to win a global Cold War game with the Russians and the Chinese. Eisenhower undertook direct commitment to the defense of South Vietnam, which ultimately forced Kennedy to decide whether to help Southeast Asia, including South Vietnam, to the best of America's ability or to "throw in the towel" there and retreat to "Fortress America."[83]

Rusk recalled that Kennedy "did not want to Americanize the war" in Vietnam. He only wanted to provide the South Vietnamese with economic aid and advisory support so that they could win the war for themselves. However, he started fighting a substantially American war there, while still insisting that this was "their war."[84]

Secondly, both presidents promoted collective security in Southeast Asia. "Free Vietnam's ultimate security," said General J. Lawton Collins, who visited South Vietnam as Eisenhower's personal emissary, "would lie in the military and moral support" of SEATO. Rusk believed that the integrity of American commitment to collective security involved "the life and death of our nation."[85]

SEATO was supposed to offer an integrated defense and prosperity to the region. However, there was almost nothing within Southeast Asia

that could substitute for American leadership. The only solution left was, as Ambassador to Thailand Kenneth Young advocated, that the United States "pitch a hard ball into this catcher's mit [mitt] of Asia."[86]

Finally, Eisenhower and Kennedy wanted a democratic government, a self-sustained economy, and powerful indigenous military forces within South Vietnam. But their demand for any reform by the South Vietnamese was neutralized since the United States remained merely "a limited partner in the war." Kennedy told Korean leader General Park Chung Hee that there was "a limit, as the French found out, on what an occidental could do in a situation like this."[87]

To McNamara Vietnam was a "terra incognita." His Deputy Secretary Roswell Gilpatric confessed that the Americans never understood "what made the Vietnamese tick." With Diem always being "an engima [enigma]," as Ambassador Nolting put it, the Americans followed what New York Times correspondent Homer Bigart called a "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem" policy, which finally led to an expanded war in the mid-1960s.[88]

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