

99. John J. McCloy to the President, Dec. 14, 1968, NSF, Rostow files, Box. 11, LBJL.

100. On this "new maturity" in U. S. -Soviet relations see, John Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford, 1987), pp. 239–243.

101. On the revolution in intelligence, see Gaddis, *The Long Peace*, pp. 199–206; on "humint" see Jerrold Shechter and Peter Deriabin, *The Spy Who Saved the World: How a Soviet Colonel Changed the Course of the Cold War* (New York, 1992); a recent conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency, revealed that the Kennedy Administration had been informed from many sources about the missile deployments in Cuba, but had ignored this evidence. *The New York Times*, October 14, 1992.

102. In a sign of growing tension within Soviet elites some KGB, military and diplomatic officials either switched to the Western side in the Cold War or had to live a dual life. On the extreme side of this palitra was a GRU officer and double-agent Oleg Penkovsky. On the moderate side, Sergei N. Khrushchev, at the end of the 1960s managed to send the tapes with his father's memoirs for storage in the United States.

103. On the "lessons" on the American side, see: Walt W. Rostow. *The Diffusion of Power* (New York, 1972).

104. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 252.

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6

"It's Easy to Win a War on Paper": The United States and Vietnam, 1961–1968

ROBERT D. SCHULZINGER

From 1961 to 1968 U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam grew from a marginal issue into an obsession. A war in Southeast Asia, an area policymakers considered significant but distinctly subordinate to U.S. interests in Europe and the competition with the Soviet Union, gradually absorbed nearly all of Washington's attention. What began as an effort to fortify the policy of containment and enhance the credibility of American threats of the use of force against Communism, ended by alarming U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, destroying domestic consensus over foreign policy, and contributing to the collapse of trust in political leaders and institutions. Throughout the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, officials waged what they considered a limited war, designed to compel the North Vietnamese to quit the battle and convince the National Liberation Front (NLF) to abandon their guerrilla activities against the Saigon authorities. Yet American participation in the war failed to establish a viable government in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), capable of defending itself against Communist insurgents or an invasion from the North. Intervention created an unhealthy dependence on the United States. The more the Americans did, the less the Saigon government could or would do in its own behalf.

American policy makers persistently misunderstood fast changing conditions within Vietnam. Some critics of U.S. involvement claimed that what journalist Frances Fitzgerald characterized as the Americans' "invincible ignorance" of Vietnamese history, culture, and society made failure virtually inevitable.¹ It was understandable, however.

What the Americans attempted in Vietnam had little relevance to what happened in that country.

Intervention originated during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations as part of the Cold War. It continued in the 1960s because of the perceptions, memories, hopes for the future, concerns over domestic politics, and the personalities and rivalries of high officials. Officials in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations tried to build on and surpass the records of their predecessors in Vietnam. Under Kennedy American participation rose gradually, preparing the way for a dramatic escalation under Johnson. Sometime in the period 1964–1965 the U.S. commitment passed a point of no return; by 1968 the war pushed aside all other issues of U.S. foreign relations and domestic politics.

The New Frontier and Vietnam

Kennedy won the presidency in 1960 with promises to lift public policy from the torpor he claimed had characterized the Eisenhower administration's conduct since 1957. He pledged to "get America moving again," and shortly after taking office he asked his staff "how do we get moving" on Vietnam.² The question reflected Kennedy's own long-standing interest in Vietnam. While a senator he had belonged to the American Friends of Vietnam. He had been one of the staunchest supporters of Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of the Republic of Vietnam since 1955. Like most advocates of containment in the 1950s, Kennedy believed that an anticommunist Southeast Asia stood as a bulwark against the People's Republic of China. Americans expressed ambivalence toward nationalist movements in the region. They offered some support in the hopes that independence movements could create viable noncommunist nations. At the same time Americans feared that Asian nationalists might align with Communists.

Both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations supported France in its war with a Vietnamese Communist/nationalist alignment, the Vietminh, led by Ho Chi Minh. That war ended in 1954 when the Vietminh defeated the French at Dienbienphu. The United States attended the Geneva conference that followed Dienbienphu but Washington refused to sign the Geneva agreements. The accords called for elections throughout Vietnam within two years and created a temporary cease-fire line at the seventeenth parallel. Soon after Geneva the United States supplanted France as the major sponsor of the anticommunist elements in the southern sector of the country. The Central Intelligence Agency encouraged hundreds of thousands of mostly Catholic Vietnamese to

flee from the North to the South. The U.S. embassy backed the political aspirations of Ngo Dinh Diem, a nationalist who had been in the United States during the French-Vietminh war. In 1955 Diem became the president of a separate, independent Republic of Vietnam in the South. With American backing he refused to participate in the country-wide elections promised at Geneva, and Vietnam was divided into two states, one Communist and one noncommunist.

Additional attention to Southeast Asia generally and Vietnam specifically was timely in early 1961. A three way guerrilla war between Communist, anticommunist and neutralist factions gathered intensity in Laos.³ On December 20, 1960 the remnants of the Vietminh remaining in the South had formed a National Liberation Front and had initiated a guerrilla war against the government of President Diem. The Saigon government rested on the narrow social foundations of wealthy landowners, French educated civil servants, and Catholics, who made up fewer than 20 percent of the population. Walt W. Rostow, formerly an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and now on the staff of the National Security Council, responded to Kennedy's plea for action by recommending that South Vietnam be used as a showcase for the ways in which academic theories of economic development could be applied to the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union in the poor areas of the world. Rostow traveled to Vietnam in May 1961 and soon after his return Kennedy approved his suggestion that the United States increase its aid to Vietnam by \$42 million above the \$220 million it currently spent yearly to aid the South Vietnamese government.

Kennedy also accepted the suggestions for the more assertive use of armed forces made by General Maxwell Taylor, who had grown dissatisfied with the Eisenhower administration's disdain for ground troops. The president sent hundreds of additional U.S. army soldiers to South Vietnam to train the soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). He ordered 400 Special Forces (nicknamed Green Berets for their distinctive headgear) to lead 9,000 mountain tribesmen in an effort to stop infiltration of forces from North Vietnam. He directed the CIA to conduct commando raids against the North. The United States provided weapons for local militias to use against the Communist insurgents (known colloquially as the Viet Cong). By the end of 1961 3,205 American advisers were in South Vietnam, and the number climbed to 9,000 the next year. These advisers moved hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese peasants from their homes to so-called strategic hamlets, designed to deprive the Viet Cong guerrillas of access to food and support from the local population.

Planners in Washington hailed the strategic hamlets as a "quantum leap" in the war effort, but the creation of these new villages also hastened the ongoing disruption of daily life in South Vietnam.⁴ The movement of such large numbers of farmers from their traditional lands strained the resources of the South Vietnamese government and provided the National Liberation Front with propaganda to use against Saigon. The policy only alienated the rural population from the central authorities. Soon the South Vietnamese air force began bombing, napalming, and dropping defoliants on areas evacuated by the peasants removed to the strategic hamlets. Air actions took an enormous toll on the Viet Cong, but they also killed thousands of civilians. The NLF turned the destruction wreaked on the countryside to its own advantage by telling farmers who remained in their homes that the government was attacking its own citizens. American reporters, expressing skepticism that the Saigon government was winning the war, questioned General Paul D. Harkins, commander of the Military Advisory Command, Vietnam (MACV), about the complaints that indiscriminate bombing was alienating the peasantry from the Saigon government. Napalm, he replied "really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong, and that is what counts."⁵

From the beginning of the Kennedy administration American optimism and eagerness to progress in the war collided with President Diem's resistance to making his government more responsive to the South Vietnamese people. In May 1961 Vice President Johnson visited Saigon. Although he praised Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia," he added that South Vietnam needed to "pursue vigorously appropriate measures . . . to achieve a happy and prosperous society." A British diplomat who witnessed Johnson's speech cabled the Foreign Office that the Americans were full of plans to reform South Vietnam, but these blueprints were as useful as sticking "thickening paper over the cracks after the previous layer has split."⁶ By 1962 Americans had grown frustrated with Diem's unwillingness to delegate authority and broaden the base of his support. His insularity affected the war effort, and the ARVN refused to take the initiative against the Viet Cong. Theodore Heavner, deputy director of the State Department's working group on Vietnam, complained that American officials in comfortable offices in Washington or Saigon were brimming with ideas, but "it's easy to win a war on paper." He worried that the Vietnamese "don't change quickly," and the Viet Cong's continued offensive did not provide much time.⁷

American officials grew increasingly apprehensive as conditions in South Vietnam deteriorated in 1963. Their anxiety led them to

redouble efforts to persuade or force the government of South Vietnam to change. The war went badly, the NLF fought better than the ARVN, and Diem's support nearly collapsed in the face of an uprising by Buddhists who made up a majority of the population of the South. On January 2, 1963 a Viet Cong battalion, outnumbered four to one, scored a major victory over ARVN forces, supported by armor, artillery, and U.S. army helicopters, at the town of Ap Bac, approximately 35 miles southwest of Saigon. Reports in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* of a "major defeat" brought the issue before the public.⁸ The staff of the national security council became alarmed after receiving an angry report on the battle from Colonel John Paul Vann, the American adviser to the ARVN forces. Vann berated the Vietnamese for their "damn miserable" performance and accused their officers of cowardice.⁹

The White House reacted to the catastrophe at Ap Bac and the bad publicity it generated by looking for a new ambassador. A staff member of the national security council wrote that a "single strong executive" was needed to "use all the leverage we have to persuade Diem to adopt policies which we espouse."¹⁰ In the summer the administration asked a prominent Republican, Henry Cabot Lodge, to become U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. The Americans wanted a popular government in Saigon, one that could foster nationalist, anticommunist fervor on the part of the largely rural and Buddhist population. Only such a government had a chance to create an armed force that could move effectively against the NLF fighters. Currently the leadership of the ARVN seemed more interested in preserving their own privileges than in fighting the war. For his part Diem worried more about disloyal army officers threatening his regime than he did about fighting the Viet Cong.

American anxiety regarding Diem's unpopularity and his army's reluctance to fight boiled over in the summer of 1963. Religious leaders of the Buddhist majority had long resented the rule of the Ngo family. Diem, a self-contained, ascetic, almost mystical man, relied on the advice of his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and Tran Le Xuan (his brother's wife, better known as Madame Nhu). The Ngos barely concealed their contempt for Buddhism and rejected calls to relax restrictions on Buddhist religious and political activities. In May, the long-simmering dispute erupted into street demonstrations in which the Buddhists' demanded to fly their religious flags. The government, responding with clubs, tear gas, and gunfire, killed several demonstrators. Further demonstrations took place for the next month, climaxing on June 11. On that day a seventy-three-year old Buddhist monk, Thich Quang

Duc, turned the local Buddhist rebellion into an international crisis by pouring gasoline over himself and burning himself to death in the midst of a busy Saigon intersection. He had alerted members of the international press before taking his life and gory pictures of his suicide were captured on film and broadcast around the world.

The shocking images horrified Americans who previously had given little thought to Vietnam. Senator Frank Church, an Idaho Democrat, told the Foreign Relations Committee that "such grisly scenes have not been witnessed since the Christian martyrs walked hand-in-hand into the Roman arenas."¹¹ President Kennedy told ambassador-designate Lodge that "no news picture in history has generated as much emotion around the world as that one had."¹² Soon after the immolation the State Department pressed Diem to reach an agreement with the Buddhists to defuse the crisis. Within the White House, however, staff members of the national security council quickly abandoned what little hope remained of encouraging the Diem government to reform. They decided to move up the date of Lodge's ambassadorship and quietly informed South Vietnam's vice-president that the United States was ready to support him if President Diem were to lose power. Negotiations with the Buddhists did not end the demonstrations, and another burned himself in August. Madame Nhu's outrageous comment that the Buddhists had only "barbecued a *bonze* [monk] with imported gasoline" provoked the White House to inform Diem that he had to get his sister-in-law out of the country.¹³ Diem responded on August 21 by proclaiming martial law. His brother Nhu's special forces and police units raided Buddhist pagodas throughout the country, arresting monks and killing several who refused custody.

Lodge, who arrived in Saigon the next day, immediately learned of a plot on the part of several of the ARVN's top generals to oust Nhu and possibly Diem. The South Vietnamese president had survived several earlier coup attempts, but now the generals believed they had, for the first time, the unqualified backing of the United States. The ambassador supported their efforts, as did Michael Forrestal, the staff member on the National Security Council in charge of Vietnam, and Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman. Acting in the absence of the president, who was vacationing on Cape Cod, Forrestal prepared a cable to Lodge promising the generals "direct support" should they oust Diem.¹⁴ Despite assurance of U.S. backing, the generals aborted their coup on August 31, fearful that Diem had learned of their plans.

Their reluctance to go forward without certainty of success left American officials more perplexed than ever about what to do about

Vietnam. Most American officials were almost desperate for a government in Vietnam eager to press the war against the Viet Cong. As plans for the coup unraveled in late August, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor, and CIA director John McCone expressed support for Diem. But the current government was preoccupied with the Buddhists and a dissatisfied army. By the end of August, Washington had lost all confidence in the Diem government. Moreover, future relations between the Kennedy administration and Diem were likely to get even worse, since Diem suspected that Lodge had joined with his rivals in the ARVN. The plotters' desire for more aggressive action against the Viet Cong made Diem and Nhu wonder if fighting the Communists was in their own personal best interests.

In September, the future of U.S. policy toward Vietnam riveted the public. Kennedy addressed Vietnam in several interviews. He said "we are for those things which help win the war there. What interferes with the war effort, we oppose." He identified Diem and Nhu as interfering with the war. "I don't think the war can be won," he told Walter Cronkite "unless the people [of South Vietnam] support the effort, and in my opinion, in the last two months, the government has gotten out of touch with the people." He thought the Saigon government might regain some of that trust, as he signaled the American desire for Diem to drop his brother: "with changes in policy and perhaps with personnel, I think it can."¹⁵ Some journalists in Vietnam and academic experts went much further and publicly called for an end to support of Diem. Stanley Karnow, reporting in the *Saturday Evening Post* on the battles between the government and the Buddhists, condemned the Ngo family as "the strongest communist allies in the country. . . . They have sown suspicion and chaos."¹⁶ Cornell political science professor George McT. Kahin, later a severe critic of U.S. escalation of the war, encouraged Senator Church to "press the administration to . . . take the calculated risk of opening the way for new leadership, rather than *half* encouraging this while at the same time continuing with the existing policy of backing Nhu and Diem."¹⁷

Behind the scenes the White House moved fitfully toward a final break with Diem. Rumors flew that Nhu was looking to make a "deal with North Vietnam for a truce in the war, a complete removal of the US presence and a neutralist" South Vietnam.¹⁸ Kennedy sent two fact-finding missions to Vietnam in September. The first, led by Marine General Victor Krulak and Joseph A. Mendenhall, a Foreign Service officer who had served in Vietnam, returned with wildly divergent opinions. Krulak supported Diem and reported that despite the politi-

cal divisions with the Buddhists the war was going well. Mendenhall, on the other hand, brought back a gloomy assessment of a religious civil war and a government on the verge of collapse. An exasperated president asked "you two did visit the same country, didn't you?" After his advisers debated whether the war was being won or if the Diem government could be salvaged, Kennedy exploded. "This is impossible," he said, "we can't run a policy when there are such divergent views on the same set of facts."¹⁹

Kennedy thereupon sent another fact-finding mission to Saigon led by Secretary of Defense McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Taylor, both strong supporters of the war. Both men returned optimistic about the military effort. They proposed that the 16,000-man U.S. advisory contingent could be withdrawn in 1965 if things continued to go well. They also proposed that the president remove a 1,000-man construction battalion once it finished its work at the end of 1963. Kennedy agreed to do so but an additional 1,000 men were to be sent as their replacements. McNamara and Taylor presented a much grimmer view of an unpopular and oppressive Diem government. They suggested that the announcement of proposed troop withdrawals would be another mode of pressuring Diem.

By the middle of October communications had broken down between Washington and Diem. Nhu publicly charged that the cuts in U.S. aid to his country had "initiated a process of disintegration" in Vietnam.²⁰ The generals who had plotted Diem's overthrow in August once more approached the United States to determine its attitude. The White House responded that it "did not wish to stimulate" a coup but would not "thwart" one either. Internally, White House officials wanted to make certain that the coup would succeed and that it could maintain a "plausible denial" of Lodge's involvement.²¹ On October 29, Kennedy met with his Vietnam advisers to discuss the prospects for a coup, but once more they reached no consensus. On November 1 the Vietnamese generals moved anyway, convinced that once they succeeded support would flow from the United States. The army installed General Duong Van Minh as president. Lodge, informed in advance of the plot, made only a perfunctory offer to Diem and Nhu of safe conduct out of the country. They refused, and the next morning they were murdered in an armored car after having been captured by their military opponents. When Kennedy heard the news, his face turned white, and he fled from the room. He had been one of Diem's earliest supporters; now he wanted him replaced as president, not slain. Three weeks later he too was murdered.

Kennedy bequeathed a terrible legacy on Vietnam to his successor,

Lyndon Johnson. The United States was committed to participation in a civil war in Vietnam, without guarantees of success. Sixteen thousand U.S. Army, Navy and Marine Corps troops led ARVN soldiers in daily operations against the NLF, who exercised control over large parts of the countryside. In later years, when the war turned into a catastrophe for the United States, some of Kennedy's loyal supporters claimed that he had contemplated withdrawing U.S. forces from Vietnam. Purportedly, Kennedy had told Kenneth O'Donnell, his appointments secretary, and senate majority leader Mike Mansfield that he wanted to wait until the election of 1964 and then withdraw. He may have made such remarks, although there is no contemporary evidence of them. Even if he did, they represent more musings born of the frustrations of dealing with Diem than an acceptance of a Communist triumph.

Johnson's Vain Effort to Stay the Course

While the Kennedy administration had undertaken a reassessment of its tactics in Vietnam in September and October, the basic policy remained victory in the civil war over the NLF. Until the end Kennedy told Diem that he gave "absolute priority to the defeat of the Communists." He maintained the same position publicly. In remarks prepared for delivery in Dallas on the afternoon of November 22 he would have maintained that Americans "dare not weary of the task" of supporting South Vietnam no matter how "risky and costly" that support might be.²² Yet by November 1963 the White House recognized a trilemma in U.S. policy toward Vietnam: doing more, doing less, or doing the same all entailed enormous risks.

Johnson became president promising continuity with his predecessor's personnel and policies. Keeping the advisers proved easy: Johnson told each White House staff member how vital he was to the success of the new administration. Determining precise policy proved far more difficult in the case of Vietnam. From November 1963 until July 1965 Johnson alternated between activism and passivity in setting Vietnam policy. He took a series of steps, some smaller, some larger, which, taken together, made the war a fully American affair.

The advisers Johnson retained had an interest in the success of the policy of American intervention to determine the government of South Vietnam. They agreed that abandonment of the U.S. commitment to Vietnam would represent a setback in the Cold War competition with Communism. Reversing the course of additional involvement in Vietnam also held domestic political perils. According to national security

adviser McGeorge Bundy, "if we should be the first to quit in Saigon" Johnson would face the same sort of damage that President Harry Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson encountered when the Korean War went badly.²³ The coup of November 1, 1963 did not foster the political stability or renewed South Vietnamese war effort expected by planners who had recommended American participation in Diem's ouster. Complicity in the coup had breached a significant threshold. Now Americans were willing to say directly who they wanted to take charge in Saigon and what policies they should pursue. Other Vietnamese factions, dissatisfied with the authorities, now justifiably could look to Washington for support. Faced with what Ambassador Lodge characterized as the deep "dry rot and lassitude" within the government of South Vietnam, the new Johnson administration looked for ways to stiffen the nerve of the authorities in Saigon.²⁴

In January 1964 Johnson's militant advisers decided that the war had reached the point of a "definitive crisis." Walt Rostow warned of widespread defeatism in South Vietnam that could contribute to "the greatest setback to U.S. interests in the world scene in many years." To reverse the sense that the United States lacked a "viable concept for winning the war" he advocated "a direct political-military showdown with Hanoi" before the end of the year.²⁵ Johnson would not go so far in an election year, hoping to keep the Vietnam story off the front pages and the evening news before election day. Johnson did not directly discourage his subordinates from pursuing an assertive Vietnam policy, but hoped for a delay in any showdown with the North. He seemed to agree with national security adviser McGeorge Bundy's caution that the worst political damage would come from appearing to "quit Saigon." With the situation so desperate, the time was not ripe to contemplate a peaceful settlement. "When we are stronger," Bundy wrote, "then we can face negotiations."²⁶

In late January 1964 the Pentagon helped engineer another coup in Saigon, replacing General Minh with General Nguyen Khanh. Americans in Saigon and Washington spent the next six months looking for ways to demonstrate United States support for the government of South Vietnam. McNamara and Taylor returned to Vietnam in March and May. They reported that "the situation has unquestionably been growing worse" since September 1963. The Viet Cong controlled 40 percent of the territory and the Saigon government was discouraged about the morale of the ARVN fighters. General Khanh told the Americans that only some "glamorous, dramatic victory," perhaps involving a U.S.-led invasion, would rally the South Vietnamese.²⁷ Neither General William Westmoreland, the new U.S. commander in the South, nor

President Johnson would contemplate action against the North in the spring. Westmoreland thought that such activities would divert the ARVN from less theatrical, but more productive actions clearing the NLF from the area around Saigon and the Mekong River Delta. Wanting to run in November as a leader of a country at peace supported by a wide popular consensus Johnson resisted too. He remembered how Chinese intervention in the Korean war had nearly ruined the Truman administration, and he would not approve moves that might provoke a similar intervention in Vietnam.

American policymakers still believed that the Saigon government needed assurances from Washington to boost morale. In June the president's principal advisers floated the idea of a congressional resolution supporting American air or ground action against the north. The State Department prepared a draft of such a resolution, but Johnson declined to submit it. Congress was debating a wide-ranging civil rights bill, an important element on Johnson's domestic agenda. Johnson also did not want to draw attention to Vietnam before the Republican convention met in mid July. The Republicans nominated Senator Barry Goldwater, who had accused Johnson of inaction in Vietnam during the spring primary season.

In early August, however, two controversial incidents off the coast of North Vietnam revived the idea of introducing such a congressional resolution and provided excuses for the first air strikes by U.S. forces against the North. Two U.S. destroyers, the *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy*, had conducted so-called De Soto patrols in connection with a covert operation, OPLAN 34-A. In De Soto patrols the American vessels supported the activities of the South Vietnamese navy by conducting surveillance, sometimes within the 12 mile coastal limits claimed by North Vietnam, along the North Vietnamese coast bordering the Gulf of Tonkin. The destroyers approached the coast in order to provoke the operators of coastal radar installations to activate their machines. The radars would then emit radio signals that would reveal their location to the sophisticated electronic equipment on the American ships. In response, the *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy* would notify the accompanying South Vietnamese patrol boats of the position of the North's radar, allowing the South Vietnamese to attack.

These De Soto patrols provoked the North Vietnamese navy to attack the *Maddox* on the night of August 2. Two nights later the commander of the *C. Turner Joy* believed that his destroyer also was under attack and ordered his gunners to return fire. They did so but hit nothing, probably because there were no North Vietnamese ships in the area and no attack had occurred. Nevertheless, Johnson ordered air

strikes against four North Vietnamese bases and submitted to Congress the resolution prepared earlier in the spring. McNamara testified before Congress that both the *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy* had been attacked, although at the time he knew that only scanty evidence existed of the second attack. He also clearly did not tell the truth when he assured lawmakers that "the *Maddox* was operating in international waters and was carrying out a routine patrol of the type we carry out all over the world at all times."²⁸

McNamara's testimony and the conviction, expressed by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, that "an immediate and direct reaction by us is necessary," carried the day in Congress. On August 7 both houses passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing the president to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent any further aggression." The resolution also authorized the president "upon the request of any nation in Southeast Asia, to take . . . all measures including the use of armed force to assist" in its defense and resistance against aggression or subversion.²⁹ The vote in the House of Representatives was unanimous, while in the Senate only two Democrats, Ernest Greuning of Alaska and Wayne Morse of Oregon, voted no. The resolution's extraordinarily broad grant of authority had no time limit. Later Johnson would use it to justify the greatly expanded American role in the war.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution and the limited air strikes against the North did little to fulfill the planners' hopes of bolstering the morale of General Khanh's government. The moody and impatient Khanh wanted the United States to mount a continuing bombing campaign. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William P. Bundy thought that Khanh's chances of remaining in power were only 50-50. He told Johnson that "even if the situation in our own view does go a bit better, we have problems in maintaining morale."³⁰

Yet the resolution and the air raids of August removed Vietnam from the political debate during the 1964 election in the United States. Johnson followed the advice of his assistant Bill Moyers to "keep the public debate on Vietnam to as low a level as possible."³¹ Goldwater dropped his earlier condemnations of Johnson's timidity. The president broadcast an air of moderation toward the war, refusing to recommend either withdrawal or intensification. Most of his listeners believed that he wanted to keep the United States out of a full-scale shooting war while at the same time preventing a Communist victory. Most supported that course. He made one major campaign speech on Vietnam in which he sounded moderate while leaving considerable room for a deeper U.S. commitment at a later date. He said that only

"as a last resort" would he "start dropping bombs around that are likely to involve American boys in a war in Asia with 700 million Chinese." He could not predict the future, he said, but "we are not going north and drop bombs at this stage of the game, and we are not going south and run out and leave it for the Communists to take over."³²

The Americanization of the War

The point of no return for the United States came in 1965. By June Johnson had taken a series of decisions that transformed the fighting into an American war. In July the president presided over a celebrated discussion with his key advisers about whether to increase the number of U.S. ground forces by 100,000 and call up the reserves. These discussions ratified earlier decisions to increase the American involvement in the air and ground war. They represented the last chance to reverse course, but by the time they occurred Johnson had so deeply committed the United States to the fighting that it seemed far easier to Johnson and his advisers to go forward than to diminish their involvement.

Throughout this period of gradually increasing American involvement the Johnson administration strived to keep the participation limited. Planners expected to break the will of the North Vietnamese, force them to stop the NLF fighters, without at the same time provoking retaliation from the Soviet Union or China. Most officials thought that limiting the geographical extent of the war would lessen the impact on the American public, sustaining support for it. Johnson and his advisers did not want the war to get out of hand: to "get the American people too angry" as Dean Rusk put it.³³ An aroused public might demand greater force and the administration would lose control of management of the war. It became nearly impossible to limit the war and wage it effectively. Every step up the ladder of escalation alarmed the Soviets and Chinese and soon provoked reactions from a growing antiwar movement at home.

Political instability had persisted in South Vietnam after the U.S. presidential election of 1964. In December Senator Mike Mansfield warned Johnson that "we remain on a course in Vietnam which takes us further and further out onto the sagging limb."³⁴ The succession of military regimes drove Johnson nearly apoplectic. "I don't want to hear any more of this coup shit," he exploded to aides.³⁵ A continuous series of high-level visits went from Washington to Saigon and returned with the conclusion that the war was nearly lost. The morale of the ARVN had continued to sink as the initiative in the battle passed to the NLF

fighters. ARVN field commanders and the government in Saigon seemed paralyzed with fear that the United States would not support them. In this atmosphere U.S. military advisers continued their search for morale boosters for the Saigon regime. General Maxwell Taylor, appointed ambassador to Vietnam in the summer of 1964, told Johnson early in 1965 that a program of air raids, lasting longer than the retaliatory strike of the previous August, would "inject some life into the dejected spirits" in Saigon. Johnson was willing to try, but recognized that the air raids had more to do with encouraging the flagging spirits in Saigon than changing the military fortunes of the war. He predicted to Taylor that "this guerrilla war cannot be won from the air." Taylor thought it would buy time and "bring pressure on the will of the chiefs of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [North Vietnam]. As practical men, they cannot wish to see the fruits of ten years of labor destroyed by slowly escalating air attacks."³⁶

The program of sustained bombing of the North, code named Operation Rolling Thunder, began in February. On February 7 NLF fighters fired artillery at the barracks of American marine base at Pleiku in the central highlands of Vietnam, destroying ten planes and killing eight Americans and wounding 126. American officials considered the attack another episode in a series, but they believed that the cumulative impact of assaults on Americans would panic the already demoralized South Vietnamese. After first ordering a single retaliatory strike against the North, Johnson authorized Rolling Thunder on February 13. The bombing was extensive. In April U.S. and South Vietnamese air force and navy planes flew 3,600 monthly sorties against fuel depots, bridges, munitions factories, and power plants in the North.

As had been the case for the previous several years, the results of the offensive did not meet expectations. In early March national security adviser McGeorge Bundy presented Johnson his gloomy assessment that "the chances of a turn around in South Vietnam remain less than even."³⁷ Morale of the South Vietnamese government did not rebound sharply, because the infiltration of supplies and troops continued virtually unabated from the North to the South. North Vietnam quickly adapted to round-the-clock bombing. There were few industrial targets in the north and the North Vietnamese used darkness and cloud cover to rebuild destroyed highways and railroad bridges. Aware that Rolling Thunder offered little more than a temporary respite from the Viet Cong's ability to strike at will against the ARVN, General Westmoreland called for the American troops to conduct ground operations on their own throughout the South. The time had come, he told the president in March "to put our own finger in the dike."³⁸

Johnson still resisted a complete Americanization of the war. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University in April he offered "unconditional negotiations" with North Vietnam to end the war. He promised a development agency modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority to serve nations along the Mekong River. Hanoi responded by demanding that the United States quit Vietnam and the South accept the program of the NLF to end the war. A few low-ranking officials in Washington, fretful about the direction the war was taking, thought that Hanoi had not flatly turned Johnson down, only provided "a statement of final objectives."³⁹ Yet Johnson and his top advisers chose to regard the North Vietnamese statement as a rejection of calls to negotiate, setting the stage for the final, decisive escalation of U.S. participation in the war.

In early May, McNamara, Taylor, and Westmoreland met in Honolulu. Reluctantly agreeing that bombing alone would not force the North and the NLF to stop their war against Saigon, they decided that American forces had to fight the war on the ground in the South if the Saigon government were to have a chance to stabilize. Still, concerned about the implications of Americans fighting throughout the South, they called for 40,000 additional U.S. soldiers to fight within fifty miles of American enclaves on the coast of Vietnam.

The enclave strategy lasted barely a month. The NLF operated at will in the remainder of the South and the Saigon government, now led by Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, lost more authority daily. Westmoreland requested an additional 150,000 troops to carry the war throughout the South. McNamara returned to Vietnam and decided that Westmoreland was right. He recommended that Johnson approve sending an additional 100,000 men to Vietnam and ask Congress to authorize the potential call up of an additional 236,000 reservists. He told the president that "The situation in South Vietnam is worse than a year ago (when it was worse than a year before that). After a few months of stalemate, the tempo of the war has quickened."⁴⁰

McNamara framed two starkly unappealing choices: (1) To cut U.S. losses and leave under the best conditions possible—"almost certainly conditions humiliating the United States and damaging to our future effectiveness on the world scene." (2) To continue with present level of U.S. forces, approximately 75,000. That would make the U.S. position progressively weaker and "would confront us later with a choice between withdrawal and an emergency expansion of forces, perhaps too late to do any good." Rejecting both, McNamara concluded that Johnson could do nothing but follow his third option: "Expand promptly and substantially the U.S. military pressure against the Viet

Cong in the South and maintain military pressure against the North Vietnamese in the North." While no guarantee of eventual success "this alternative would stave off defeat in the short run and offer a good chance of producing a favorable settlement in the longer run."⁴¹

In late July, Johnson consulted with his principal advisers on the future of American involvement in the ground war. In a series of meetings Johnson appeared frustrated with the inability of the South Vietnamese to make progress, bewildered at the unresponsiveness of the North to his proposals for negotiations, and skeptical about the usefulness of the dispatch of additional United States troops. Most of all, however, he agreed with nearly all of the advisers that the costs of an NLF victory were unacceptably high, because it would shake world confidence in American credibility. Secretary of the Navy Paul Nitze, primarily interested in maintaining good relations with Europe and appearing strong to the Soviet Union, remarked that "the shape of the world will change" were the United States to acknowledge that "we couldn't beat the VC." Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor concurred that "we can't go back on our commitment. Our allies are watching carefully."⁴²

The only course tolerable to Johnson was continuation of a gradual buildup of U.S. forces—the very policy that had not succeeded in defeating the NLF or bolstering the morale of the South Vietnamese government for the previous year. He hoped to keep the buildup quiet and present it as a continuation of policy, not a dramatically increased American commitment. He expected that by downplaying the significance of the new commitment he would avoid a divisive public debate and prevent the sort of public war weariness that had wrecked the Truman administration during the Korean war. At the height of his authority with Congress, he feared that congressional discussion of Vietnam would interfere with passage of his ambitious program of domestic reform legislation, the Great Society.

The July reappraisals held elements of tragedy—and folly. Jack Valenti, a political adviser, told the president he wanted to "weep because the options are so narrow and the choices are so barren."⁴³ A sentimental man, Johnson liked this sort of histrionics from subordinates eager to show their empathy for the burdens borne by the chief executive. For his part, the president often expressed greater awareness of the risks than did some of his more militant advisers. Johnson voiced doubts about the usefulness of additional U.S. troops. He once turned to General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and asked: "Tell me this. What will happen if we put in 100,000 more men and then two, three years later, you tell me we need 500,000 more?"

How would you expect me to respond to that? And what makes you think that Ho Chi Minh won't put in another 100,000 and match us every bit of the way?" To which Wheeler replied: "That makes greater bodies of men from North Vietnam, which will allow us to cream them."⁴⁴ Johnson's fears proved prophetic, and Wheeler's reply foretold some of the military's foolish and wasteful tactics of attrition with which they waged the war. Johnson also recognized the fragility of public support for the war. When the Secretary of the Army pointed to public opinion polls showing strong support for a continuation of the American commitment, Johnson, an old political professional, rebuked him: "But if you make a commitment to jump off a building, and you find out how high it is, you may withdraw that commitment."⁴⁵

Only one of Johnson's principal advisers, Under Secretary of State George Ball, openly voiced dissent from the prevailing willingness to go forward with 100,000 more soldiers. He thought that the United States could not win in Vietnam without risk of drawing China, and possibly even the Soviet Union, into the fighting. Ball thought that public opinion would not tolerate a long war. The longer the war went on and casualties mounted there would be demands by an impatient public "to strike at the very jugular of North Vietnam." Ball thought that even greater dangers to U.S. credibility existed should the war go on for more than a year. "If the war is long and protracted, as I believe it will be," he said "then we will suffer because the world's greatest power cannot defeat guerrillas." Ball referred to the long history of Vietnamese fighting outsiders and doubted that "an army of westerners can successfully fight orientals in an Asian jungle." Johnson seemed struck by the image. "This is important," the president told McNamara and Wheeler. "Can Westerners, in the absence of accurate intelligence, successfully fight Asians in jungle rice paddies?"⁴⁶

No other advisers joined with Ball in expressing such pessimism in the public meetings. Sensing that Johnson believed the risk of a Communist victory greater than the challenges of greater commitment, they recommended sending the troops McNamara thought were needed. Long-time presidential adviser Clark Clifford did telephone a dissent. He too doubted that the United States could win: China and the Soviet Union would see to it that the NLF continued to fight. China was likely to send in troops, as they had done in the Korean war. He accurately predicted an unacceptably high number of U.S. fatalities. "If we lose 50,000 men there," he forecast, "it will be a catastrophe for the country. Five years, billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of men—this is not for us."⁴⁷ In the end, however, Clifford supported Johnson's decision to increase the American troop commitment.

Eventually the president and all of his advisers with the exception of Ball, and possibly Clifford, concurred that adding 100,000 Americans to the 90,000 troops already in Vietnam would stave off defeat without provoking a backlash against the war in Congress or with the public. Johnson and most advisers hoped to characterize the doubling of troops as only a continuation of current policy. To that end they rejected McNamara's request to call up reserves. Even so, Johnson's advisers worried about the implications of the Americanization of the war. Horace Busby, one of Johnson's most politically astute advisers, told the president that it was "self-deceptive" to claim that the troop buildup represented only an extension of what the U.S. had done in the past several years.⁴⁸ Yet Johnson encouraged such deception, hoping to maintain the wide consensus in support of his policies.

Johnson informed congressional leaders on July 27 of the decision to send another 100,000 soldiers but not to call up reserves. Most Democratic and Republican leaders expressed support. Speaker of the House John McCormack thought there was no alternative. He reflected that the "lesson of Hitler and Mussolini is clear."⁴⁹ Republican leader Gerald Ford agreed. The mood among members of Congress not called to the White House was apprehensive. Mike Mansfield, Johnson's successor as majority leader, told the president that many senators supported the president because they sensed "that your objective [is] not to get in deeply." Lawmakers worried about the administration's inability to define success in Vietnam. "Even if you win, totally," Mansfield reported, "you still do not come out well. What have you achieved? It is by no means a 'vital' area of U.S. concern." Senators sensed deep currents of public anxiety. They noted that the French had never used conscripts in their war in Indochina. News of casualties among American draftees could ignite angry revulsion at the war. Mansfield told Johnson that "the country is backing the president on Vietnam primarily because he is president, not necessarily out of any understanding or sympathy with policies on Vietnam; beneath the support there is deep concern . . . which could explode at any time; in addition racial factors at home could become involved."⁵⁰

Johnson could not be deflected by these reservations. He believed that the cost of seeing the NLF win quickly appeared too great. He announced the dispatch of additional troops at a low-key mid-day press conference on July 28, 1965. For the rest of 1965 the White House continued to insist that the additional troops did not change American policy in Vietnam, and Johnson stressed the Great Society as the centerpiece of his administration's accomplishments. When Secretary of

the Treasury Henry Fowler complained that the fighting strained the economy and had caused prices to rise, the White House warned him to keep his views quiet. "What the President doesn't want to do," Bill Moyers told Fowler, "is, in essence, say to the business community that we have declared war in Vietnam."⁵¹ Keeping the buildup quiet, however, backfired dramatically. The stealth with which Johnson announced the additional commitment of American troops contributed later to a wide belief that administration officials did not tell the truth, and a wide "credibility gap" opened.

Whether declared or not, the United States was fully at war after July 1965. The decision to send an additional 100,000 troops by the end of 1965 did not stop the buildup. During 1966 and 1967 the number of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam rose from 190,000 to 535,000. Many were conscripts, and perhaps as many as half of those who ostensibly volunteered did so because they faced induction through selective service. Yet this huge expeditionary force could not prevail against the NLF and several hundred thousand regulars from the North Vietnamese People's Liberation Army.

Fighting the War

The NLF and North Vietnamese decided when to engage the Americans and ARVN forces, thereby limiting their own casualties until the time they expected the Americans would weary of the war. General Westmoreland tried unsuccessfully to counter their tactics with an attrition strategy of his own. He sent giant B-52 bombers and smaller fighter-bombers over South Vietnam to terrorize the Viet Cong. After the bombers had prepared the battlefield helicopter-borne American units descended on the countryside on search and destroy missions to root out and kill enemy soldiers. Americans would fly out from their bases in the morning, pursue the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese in firefights, and return to bases in the evening. The tokens of progress in the war became the "body count" of soldiers killed, rather than territory captured or decapitation of the enemy's command and control structure. Westmoreland adopted the procedure because it seemed to provide the quantifiable data that McNamara insisted upon. Washington and MACV headquarters in Saigon hoped to reach an elusive crossover point at which they destroyed troops faster than North Vietnam could replace them. The lightning helicopter raids also reduced American casualties by limiting their exposure to hostile fire. The procedure encouraged serious abuses. Official reliance on the body count induced

soldiers to shoot first without asking questions. A marine recalled that "any Vietnamese out at night was the enemy."⁵²

The NLF continued political organization in rural South Vietnam in the face of the punishment inflicted by the American bombers. Critics of the tactics of helicopter borne search and destroy operations complained that the United States was leaving the countryside to the Communists. A correspondent berated a general, "How do you expect our forces to win the hearts and minds of the people when all they do is take off from one army base and fly overhead at 1,500 feet while Charlie [a nickname for the NLF] is sitting down there and he's got 'em by the testicles jerking, and every time he jerks their hearts and minds follow?"⁵³

Americans expected the ARVN to motivate the local peasantry to cooperate with the government and create popular local authorities. Yet the vast buildup of U.S. troops contributed to the ARVN's dependency. By the fall of 1966, McNamara recognized as much. He reported that the so-called pacification program, designed to encourage the peasantry to rally round the Saigon government, was "thoroughly stalled." Even if the Americans spent more time in the countryside, "it is known that we do not intend to stay; if our efforts worked at all, it would merely postpone the eventual confrontation of the VC and GVN [government of Vietnam] infrastructures. The GVN must do the job; and I am convinced that drastic reform is needed if the GVN is going to be able to do it." He ruefully told the president, "I see no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon. Enemy morale has not been broken . . . and he has adopted a strategy of attriting our national will."⁵⁴

The national will grew weary and the mood ever bleaker as the war dragged on. Richard Goodwin, a speechwriter coopted from the Kennedy camp, believed that Johnson became clinically paranoid. Goodwin recorded in his diary Johnson's intense reactions to criticism of the U.S. involvement in the war: "I can't trust anybody anymore. . . . I'm going to get rid of anybody who doesn't agree with my policies. I'm not going in the liberal direction. There's no future with them. They're just out to get me, always have been."⁵⁵ By the middle of 1966 Goodwin, Under Secretary of State George Ball, and national security adviser McGeorge Bundy had all left. The others had joined Ball in opposing further American involvement in the war and wanted a negotiated settlement. Walt Rostow, the new national security adviser, remained a hawk. He consistently bolstered Johnson's morale by likening his difficulties to those of "Lincoln in 1864" when it appeared certain that he would lose the presidential election.⁵⁶ By the end of the year, McNamara, who Johnson continually praised as the "star of the cabinet,"⁵⁷

wanted to stop bombing the north and explore negotiations with Hanoi.

Johnson faced unwelcome criticism from fellow Democrats. Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, reversed his support for the war in September 1965. He undertook a crash course in the history of American policy toward Vietnam. Fulbright's chief of staff informed him in early 1966 that "the powerful force of nationalism, which was instrumental in freeing Vietnam from the French, has been captured by the Viet Cong." Fulbright was particularly downcast by reports that "U.S. Vietnamese polices are found to be highly objectionable in Northern Europe: the Labor [*sic*] government in Britain would fall if it were to offer troops for use in Vietnam; the position of France [a persistent critic] is clear; the Japanese government would fall if it were to support the U.S. in Vietnam; Germany provides only medical support—just enough to encourage the United States not to withdraw its troops from Germany and Berlin."⁵⁸ In February 1966 Fulbright chaired televised hearings on the U.S. role in Vietnam. Numerous academic, military, and diplomatic experts, many of whom had been architects of American policy in the Cold War, told the committee that the United States risked jeopardizing its most cherished relations with European allies.

In the fall Fulbright planned more hearings in 1967 on the declining role of the United States in the world. His staff arranged for prominent witnesses "with strong personalities" to testify to "gain and retain both television and broad press coverage."⁵⁹ Johnson reacted peevishly. He alternately invited Fulbright to the White House and ordered aides to investigate him. "It's easier to satisfy Ho Chi Minh than it is Fulbright," he would explode.⁶⁰ The president loved derogatory reports on the senator. He was cheered by the news that an Israeli diplomat thought that Fulbright "reminded him of a 'modestly endowed don' at Oxford. He was full of historic parallels which did not bear serious examination."⁶¹ He encouraged the FBI to circulate comparisons of the positions taken by Fulbright at the 1966 hearing and those of the U.S. Communist party.

Such derision could not stem the tide of criticism from within the Democratic party. Nor could gestures toward the North such as temporary halts in the bombing of North Vietnam during the Christmas and New Year holidays in 1965–1966 and the Vietnamese observance of Tet, the lunar New Year, 1967. By 1967 about a dozen prominent senators opposed the war. They persistently called on the president to end the bombing of the North in order to encourage negotiations with Hanoi. Opposition to the president's conduct of the war from Robert F.

Kennedy, elected to the U.S. Senate from New York State in 1964, represented the most serious blow to Johnson from within the Democratic party. Ambassador at Large Averell Harriman warned Kennedy that his dissent would be considered "support for Hanoi against your government," a charge Kennedy resented.⁶² Kennedy berated Johnson for not permanently "halting the bombing in exchange for a beginning of negotiations."⁶³ The White House complained that such dissent only made it more difficult to begin meaningful negotiations with the North. "We must avoid 'negotiating with ourselves,'" Rostow told Johnson. In any event the White House remained as skeptical about the North's intentions in proclaiming their willingness to begin negotiations as it had been at the beginning of the buildup. "The North Vietnamese might merely be seeking alternative methods of achieving the domination of South Vietnam," Rostow warned.⁶⁴

But Senator Kennedy's criticism had a powerful impact on some of the late President Kennedy's lieutenants who had advised Johnson. McNamara had already concluded that additional bombing of the North would not hasten the end of the war. In mid-1967, former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy reversed his earlier doubts about the danger to the position of the United States and the Saigon government in seeking negotiations. He urged Johnson to put a ceiling on the number of U.S. troops to be sent to Vietnam and halt the strategic bombing of the North. Additional escalation would not compel the North to yield and anxiety about the extent of the future U.S. commitment "is now having destructive effects on the national will."⁶⁵

An even greater challenge to Johnson's authority came from a revived citizens' peace movement. Beginning in the spring of 1965, opponents of the war organized teach-ins on college campuses. The first occurred on the night of March 24-25 on the campus of the University of Michigan. Scores of prominent academic critics of the war lectured dozens of large audiences about Vietnam's historic resistance to outsiders, the failure of the French to quell the Communist uprising, the support in the North for the government of Ho Chi Minh, the unpopularity of the Southern authorities, and the destruction wreaked by U.S. bombs and search and destroy operations. The peace movement also sponsored huge demonstrations against administration policies, encouraged young men to question and then resist the draft, and in 1968 spearheaded an effort to replace Johnson as the Democratic presidential nominee with someone who could extricate the United States from the morass of Vietnam.

Public opposition to the war surged in the spring of 1967. Antiwar organizers hoped to undermine the Johnson administration's "claim to

legitimacy through the electoral process."⁶⁶ On April 15 about 100,000 people gathered in New York City and another 50,000 in San Francisco listened to speakers from the antiwar and civil rights movements call for an end to the war and a rededication to racial equality at home. Martin Luther King, Jr., who previously had expressed quiet misgivings about the war, addressed the crowd in New York. Opponents of the war encouraged speculation that King and the prominent pediatrician Benjamin Spock might run for president and vice president, respectively, in 1968. White House press secretary George Christian responded by providing columnists with copies of FBI reports alleging King's close connection to members of the American Communist party.⁶⁷

The president became frantic as plans developed for a massive march of more than 100,000 on Washington in October 1967 to demand a bombing halt and immediate negotiations to end the war. At a cabinet meeting, he asked his Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, who had usually been solicitous of the civil liberties of antiwar demonstrators, "Who are the sponsoring groups? Pacifists? Communists?"

Clark replied, "There is a heavy representation of extreme left wing groups with long lines of Communist affiliations."

Secretary of State Rusk interjected, "Wouldn't it help to leak that?"

Clark responded that "the fact of Communist involvement and encouragement has been given to some columnists."

"Let's see more," Johnson added.⁶⁸

Public war weariness rose dramatically in the fall of 1967. Antiwar activities, failure to achieve victory, and television coverage of the devastation wrought in Vietnam profoundly depressed many Americans. The public remained deeply divided between those who wanted stronger action to end the war quickly and those who favored negotiations. From the beginning of 1967 until the march on Washington in October the proportion of the public who believed that getting into the war had been a mistake rose from 30 percent to 46 percent. Only 10 percent of the public wanted the U.S. to withdraw from the fighting, but only 28 percent approved of the way Johnson was handling the war. A plurality of the public was neither hawk nor dove but wanted the war to end and bring relief from daily reports of death, destruction, and futility.

By the middle of 1967 the Johnson administration seemed ready for serious negotiations with Hanoi. Earlier that year the White House had summarily rejected efforts by two newspaper editors to act as go-betweens with the North Vietnamese. It paid more attention to overtures from Polish representatives to open communications with

Hanoi. Eventually, however, Washington concluded that the Polish diplomats spoke only for themselves and could not deliver representatives with the authority to make commitments on behalf of Hanoi.

In the late summer and early fall of 1967 the Johnson administration felt such serious pressure to show progress that it sent its own private intermediary, Harvard professor Henry Kissinger, to Paris to seek North Vietnamese negotiating partners. In talks, code named Pennsylvania, Kissinger relayed to the North Vietnamese an administration offer to cease bombing with the understanding that a pause would lead to prompt formal negotiations with the North. The United States would not demand that North Vietnam remove its troops from the South, but would expect the North not to take advantage of a bombing pause to increase its supplies flowing to the South. The United States would remain committed to the government of South Vietnam, now headed by President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, both elected in September. The United States might permit NLF participation in a coalition government, but the NLF would have to drop its revolutionary program. North Vietnam expressed some interest in Kissinger's proposals once the United States stopped bombing within a ten mile radius around Hanoi. Yet Hanoi wanted a complete bombing halt before going forward. It rejected the "words of peace" coming from Washington as "only trickery." Johnson suspected trickery on Hanoi's part and believed they "are keeping this channel going just because we are not bombing Hanoi." Finally the president accepted the judgment of two of his more militant advisers, Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas and Maxwell Taylor, to keep bombing. Taylor believed that the North had made its first genuine response, but he cautioned "by showing weakness we could prejudice any possible negotiations." Fortas, perhaps closest to Johnson's thinking, recommended that Kissinger tell the North Vietnamese "thanks, it's too bad. You know you could have gotten somewhere if you had really wanted to." Pennsylvania then collapsed.⁶⁹

With the disintegration of the Pennsylvania channel, Johnson sank into gloom, skeptical of the value of escalation but unwilling to stop the bombing to move negotiations forward. In November he accepted McNamara's resignation as Secretary of Defense and announced that the following March long-time Democratic party adviser Clark Clifford would replace him. After McNamara's announced departure the president's remaining advisers became more militant. Clifford himself changed his initial position resisting involvement in the war to advocating continued bombing. He expressed doubts about the North's commitment to negotiate through private intermediaries. "I do not

think they will use *this type of channel* when they are serious about really doing something." He believed that a bombing halt would invariably fail to yield negotiations, and the United States would increase its troop levels in the aftermath.⁷⁰ William Bundy, Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, and Maxwell Taylor further agreed that Johnson could not satisfy his domestic critics with a bombing halt. Instead, the president hoped that an optimistic assessment of the war from the battlefield commander might reduce public dissatisfaction. In November General Westmoreland returned to Washington and told a joint session of Congress that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong could not resist much longer and he hoped the American part of the war effort could end within two years.

Nevertheless, worries persisted among Johnson's civilian advisers that the war had so torn apart the country and reduced the position of the United States in the world. At the end of 1967 Johnson assembled a group of so-called Wise Men, senior foreign policy advisers who had served presidents since 1940, to advise him on Vietnam. They supported continuation of bombing but warned that "endless, inconclusive fighting" had become the "most serious cause of domestic disquiet."⁷¹ They urged him to review American participation in the ground war and find ways of reducing American casualties. Johnson agreed about the need to lower public anxiety, but he seemed almost muscle bound with ambivalence. "We'll do all we can to win the war," he told another group of senior advisers as they considered the merits of sending U.S. troops across the border into Cambodia.⁷²

1968

All planning for the future changed abruptly on January 30, 1968. At 2:45 that morning, during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, a squad of nineteen Viet Cong commandos blasted their way through the wall surrounding the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The attack on the embassy came as part of a coordinated Viet Cong-North Vietnamese offensive against the population centers of South Vietnam during the Tet truce. Benefitting from complete surprise, NLF and North Vietnamese units fought the Americans and ARVN for control of forty-four provincial capitals, five of six major cities, and sixty-four district capitals. The most intense fighting lasted about two weeks, and in most areas the Americans and South Vietnam repulsed the attackers. Casualties on the Communist side were enormous, as many as 40,000 dead, while the ARVN and Americans lost about 3,400 men. The Tet offensive took an

enormous toll on the civilian population, with as many as one million refugees swelling already teeming camps.

General Westmoreland considered the results of Tet a major defeat for the North and the NLF. A more important loss was suffered, however, at home, where televised scenes of the grisly fighting turned public opinion against continuing the war. After Tet 78 percent of the public told opinion pollsters that they did not think the United States was making progress in the war. A minuscule 26 percent approved of Johnson's handling of it. In New Hampshire pollsters detected signs of life in what had appeared to be a quixotic campaign by Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy to challenge Johnson in that state's presidential preference primary.

Johnson asked Clark Clifford to take a hard look at Vietnam policies before officially taking over as Secretary of Defense on March 1. Specifically, he wanted Clifford's advice on Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 troops. Clifford, reminded of the discussions of July 1965, concluded that Westmoreland could not guarantee victory with the additional soldiers, but only postpone a Communist triumph. Reverting to his earlier skepticism, Clifford advised the president not to endorse sending more soldiers to Vietnam. Instead, he pressed for negotiations, to be initiated by a bombing halt.

Johnson, remaining torn, convened another series of high-level meetings in March to discuss options. Clifford presented the case for deescalation while Rostow and Rusk counseled militancy. An astonishingly strong showing by Senator McCarthy in the new Hampshire primary and Robert Kennedy's entry into the presidential race a few days later raised the stakes even further. During the last week in March Johnson reconvened the Wise Men. He lamented that "there has been a panic" in the country since the *New York Times* published news of Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 troops. He estimated the cost of such an additional deployment at \$15 billion. The position of the dollar and the British pound would be affected. Already France demanded payment for its dollars in gold, costing the U.S. about \$1 billion of its reserves. Johnson seemed nearly to weep as he told his advisers about Kennedy's plan to convene a commission of notables to decide future Vietnam policy. "I will have overwhelming disapproval in the polls and the election. I will go down the drain. I don't want the whole alliance and the military pulled down with it."⁷³ The Wise Men reversed their earlier support for a militant course and urged Johnson to seek a negotiated settlement. Dean Acheson, reflecting his own agony during the Korean War, explained that the United States "could no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left and we

must take steps to disengage."⁷⁴ Johnson seemed bereft. "Everybody is recommending surrender," he complained on March 28.⁷⁵

Three days later Johnson capitulated. In a nationally broadcast speech on the evening of March 31, he announced a partial bombing halt that would stop the U.S. attacks everywhere over North Vietnam with the exception of the immediate vicinity of the Demilitarized Zone. He offered to expand the bombing pause to cover all of North Vietnam if Hanoi would not reinforce its troops in the South. He said that he was appointing Averell Harriman as a representative to explore prospects for opening negotiations with the North Vietnamese and NLF. Finally, he promised to devote himself to peace for the remainder of the year. Accordingly, "I shall not seek, nor will I accept the nomination of my party for another term as your president."⁷⁶

U.S. policy toward Vietnam in the remaining nine and one half months of the Johnson administration recapitulated the tragic and farcical elements of the previous four and one half years. Johnson continued to vacillate between hastening negotiations and increasing the military pressure. His principal advisers disagreed more openly than ever before about whether to bomb the North more heavily or move more quickly toward negotiations. Their divisions caused policy to lurch more suddenly after Johnson announced he would not seek reelection. With the sharp diminution in his political power, public attention focused on the competition among Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey on the Democratic side and Richard Nixon and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller on the Republican side to elect his successor.

The president became a maudlin and forlorn figure shortly after his surprising announcement. He expressed second thoughts almost from the day he proclaimed the partial bombing halt and the appointment of Harriman. He complained that the first calls he received after his speech came from the wife of Senator McCarthy and Senators Edward Kennedy, Ernest Greuning, and George McGovern, all prominent dissenters from his policies in Vietnam. "I knew something was wrong," he told his senior advisers, "when all of them approved."⁷⁷ He met Robert Kennedy in the White House on the morning of April 3 to tell him that "the situation confronted by the nation [was] the most serious he had seen in the course of his life." He "would do his very best to get peace," but "he was not optimistic." He assured Kennedy that he did not "hate him or dislike him" and that he would not play a major role in the upcoming presidential campaign.⁷⁸

Johnson then worked on creating the instructions for Harriman to carry with him. Harriman, accompanied by Deputy Defense Secretary

Cyrus Vance, went to Paris to explore whether North Vietnam would join "prompt and serious substantive talks looking for peace in Vietnam."⁷⁹ Harriman was told that the United States would stop all air, naval, and air bombardment against the North provided Hanoi would agree to begin talks within 3 to 7 days after bombing stopped. The United States also insisted that the North not take advantage of the total cessation of bombing by improving its military position in the South. While the negotiators were empowered to discuss a bombing halt, American diplomats dealing with Saigon and military officers feared the consequences of such a move. Ellsworth Bunker, the Ambassador to Saigon, warned Johnson about the dangers of a "collapse in morale in South Vietnam during negotiations" should the United States contemplate a total bombing halt over the north.⁸⁰ The Joint Chiefs of Staff also noted that "operations against North Vietnam provide major leverage to our negotiators, and the price of cessation of such action should be high."⁸¹

After a few weeks of discussion about where to hold preliminary conversations, Harriman and Vance went to Paris in May to begin a frustrating six month exercise in opening substantive conversations with the North. Harriman, thinking that arranging peace in Vietnam would cap a distinguished career, and Clifford wanted to go much further than Johnson's other aides. Harriman approached the negotiations with a view toward the forthcoming presidential election. His first priority was "not permitting [the continuation of the war] to elect Nixon as president."⁸² Almost immediately the American negotiators ran into suspicions from the North that the United States wanted to increase the bombing and fears from the South that Washington intended to exclude Saigon from the conversations. Harriman and Vance tried energetically to overcome Communist objections to recognition of the legitimacy of the government of South Vietnam with plans for negotiations on the basis of "your side [the North and the NLF], our side [the South Vietnamese government and the United States]." The South tentatively accepted this formula in July, "so long as the Government of Vietnam played the major role in 'our' side."⁸³

Saigon's reservations all but negated any progress Harriman and Vance made with the North Vietnamese, yet Harriman pressed Johnson to make concessions to the North Vietnamese. In late July Harriman urged Johnson to stop all bombing of the North in response to the Communists' apparent reduction in activity in the South. Vice-President Humphrey, assured of the Democratic nomination after the murder of Robert Kennedy on June 6, concurred. According to Harriman, Johnson "went through the roof" when he learned that Humphrey

endorsed a bombing halt.⁸⁴ Harriman and Clifford thought that Johnson wanted to see Humphrey defeated in the fall. Ellsworth Bunker, the ambassador to Saigon, Rostow, and Rusk all opposed declaring a total bombing halt for fear of provoking a collapse in Saigon. Johnson instructed Rusk to hold a press conference at which the Secretary of State condemned the Communists for intransigence.

Shocking events in Czechoslovakia and Chicago overshadowed the Paris negotiations in August. Harriman believed that Johnson's refusal to halt the bombing at the end of July represented "a historic tragedy." It made "Johnson look rigid regarding Vietnam," and may have convinced some fence-sitting Kremlin leaders that they had nothing to lose by ordering Soviet tanks into Prague to crush a liberal government.⁸⁵ A week later the Democratic Party nominated Hubert Humphrey for the presidency in a tumultuous convention in Chicago. Johnson refused Humphrey's entreaties to compromise with antiwar Democrats over a platform plank on Vietnam. The convention narrowly endorsed the administration's handling of the war. On the same night Humphrey was nominated the Chicago police force went mad, beating and tear-gassing a crowd of some ten thousand demonstrators who had come to the city to protest administration policy on Vietnam.

Humphrey left Chicago badly trailing Nixon in public opinion surveys. The Republican nominee fed the widespread suspicion that Johnson had mishandled the war. Nixon had advocated escalation in the early days and now condemned the Johnson administration for stalemate. He refused to offer specific recommendations to break the impasse, because he claimed that to do so would interfere with the ongoing negotiations. Yet he did reply affirmatively to a reporter's question asking if he had a plan to end the war. Humphrey remained loyal to Johnson's policy throughout September, while requesting permission to take a more independent position. None was forthcoming. Eventually, relying on the advice of George Ball, who had left his position as U.S. representative to the United Nations, he separated himself from current policy at a speech in Salt Lake City on September 30. He endorsed a total bombing halt "as an acceptable risk for peace, because I believe that it could lead to a success in negotiations and a shorter war."⁸⁶

Humphrey's presidential campaign gained momentum after his Salt Lake City Speech, and the tempo of negotiations in Paris picked up as well. On October 18 Harriman and Vance reached what they considered to be a breakthrough with Xuan Thuy of North Vietnam. The United States would halt all bombing over the North and the Communists satisfied the Americans that they would not take advantage of a bomb-

ing halt to reinforce their forces in the South. The "our side, your side" formula seemed a basis for seating the delegates. In this way the North would give tacit recognition to the government of the South while the United States would extend the same sort of acknowledgment of the NLF. The North Vietnamese mocked the Americans for deferring to the South's concerns. "Usually the man leads the horse," complained the north's Le Duc Tho. "This time the horse is leading the man."⁸⁷ The U.S. negotiators in Paris would agree to let the North Vietnamese have a few days to send diplomats to Paris and open formal talks three to seven days after the bombing halt. Once more, however, the White House did not want to go as far as Harriman proposed. Johnson would "rather not stop the bombing" until the Communist representatives actually arrived in Paris. "It could badly hurt us," he said if they had a week in which to resupply their forces in the South.⁸⁸ The White House ordered Harriman and Vance to insist on negotiations opening no more than twenty-four hours after the bombing halt.

Harriman and Vance dutifully reported Washington's conditions and negotiations continued. In the meantime, rumors that Johnson was on the verge of announcing a bombing halt sent the Nixon campaign into a panic. Anna Chennault, a prominent Republican fundraiser and longtime supporter of Asian anti-Communists, representing the Nixon campaign, informed the South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States of the White House's plans to start negotiations before election day. Chennault suggested that South Vietnam's President Thieu should refuse to participate in the talks before the election, since a Nixon administration would show more sympathy for South Vietnam than would a government led by Humphrey.

In the final days of October three complex and interrelated sets of conversations went on simultaneously on three continents. In Saigon, President Thieu pondered ways to prevent the United States from stopping the bombing. He refused to attend a peace conference without explicit recognition of the South. In Washington, Johnson met at 2:30 A.M. on October 29 with his foreign policy advisers to discuss the announcement of a bombing halt. Harriman reported that the North would agree to meet on November 2 if the bombing stopped on October 30. Johnson and his advisers received word that Nixon was trying to prevent a bombing halt before the election. Eugene Rostow wrote his brother Walt that Nixon wanted matters to get worse in Vietnam. An informant in the Republican campaign told Eugene Rostow that "these difficulties would make it easier for Nixon to settle after January. Like Ike in 1953, he would be able to settle on terms which the president could not accept, blaming the deterioration of the situation between

now and January or February on his predecessor." Johnson contemplated publicizing the connection between Thieu and Nixon. It "would rock the world if it were said he [Thieu] were conniving with the Republicans."⁸⁹

Unwilling to give Humphrey an edge, Johnson ultimately decided not to make an issue of Nixon's dealing with the South. Ambassador Bunker's support of Thieu's refusal to go to Paris on November 2 forced Johnson to agree to delay the bombing halt. He also dropped insistence that the peace talks begin immediately after the bombing halt. He did not think it was "of world shaking importance" whether the talks occurred before or after November 5, election day. Not that he had great faith in a Nixon presidency. "Nixon will doublecross them after November 5," he predicted to his senior advisers.⁹⁰ In Paris, Harriman relayed word from the White House to the North Vietnamese that the United States wanted negotiations to begin within four days after the proclamation of a bombing halt. On October 31 Johnson announced the bombing halt and the commencement of negotiations on Wednesday after election day. Humphrey's campaign took off in the public opinion polls, but the momentum slowed on Sunday when Thieu once more said that South Vietnam would not participate. On election day Humphrey lost the election to Nixon by a scant 510,000 votes, and the Saigon leaders agreed to come to Paris. Illinois Republican Senator Charles Percy told Harriman that Nixon was certain that Humphrey would have won the election had the bombing halt and the negotiations been announced three days earlier than they had been.

By the end of 1968 most Americans wanted relief from the endless war in Vietnam, although they disagreed on the methods for doing so. The war had exacted a terrible cost on the terrain, the people, and the society of Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands were dead and as many as two million people were homeless. Successive governments of South Vietnam had proved corrupt and incapable of defending their citizens against the Communists without massive American intervention. The war became a tragedy for the Americans who fought there. About 37,000 lost their lives by the end of 1968, and that number would rise to 58,000 by the time the U.S. withdrew the last of its troops in 1973. The war deeply divided American society, opening enduring chasms between supporters and opponents of intervention. Officials' persistently unfounded public optimism and the failure of a variety of plans for winning the war left many people radically disillusioned with the government and institutions. What began as an intervention to bolster the American position in the Cold War, became by 1968 a major contributor to American dissatisfaction with the aims of post-World War

II foreign policy. Involvement in Vietnam also undermined the global political and economic standing of the United States. Public disappointment with the war helped Richard Nixon win the presidency. When Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his new national security adviser, took over in January 1969 they pleaded for patience, but they agreed "it was essential to reduce American casualties and get some of our troops coming home in order to retain the support of the American people."⁹¹ It took them fully four years to arrange a cease-fire. They did so only by making Vietnam seem less important than American relations with the Soviet Union and China. In that way they followed the pattern of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' plans for Vietnam. The blueprints always originated with something—be it the Cold War, domestic politics, various presidents' desires to outshine their predecessors, the competition among policymakers—Americans considered more important than Vietnam.

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7

From Nonexistent to Almost Normal: U.S.-China Relations in the 1960s

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ARTHUR WALDRON

Only a bold analyst indeed would have suggested, at the end of the 1960s, that the diplomacy between the United States and China during that decade had prepared the way for a dramatic breakthrough. Bold because, judged by what had gone before and what came after, the 1960s seem a period in which little happened of any consequence. Yet that analyst would have been correct.

The fifties, the era of the high Cold War and containment, had been marked by dramatic military confrontations in Korea and then the two Formosa Straits crises. The 1970s, the era of détente, would see reconciliation between China and the United States, first with Nixon's visit to Peking in 1972 and then with Carter's establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1979.

By comparison, the sixties seem uneventful. Theodore Sorenson records that President Kennedy "felt dissatisfied with his administration's failure to break new ground," and had been planning to reconsider China policy in his second term.¹ But when the Johnson administration did attempt a modest opening, as Kennedy might have done, China responded negatively. Only when Nixon came to office in 1969 did Chinese-American relations begin to develop, although the climax of the process came after the decade had ended.

Such apparent lack of achievement, however, is not the whole story. Although the 1960s were an often frustrating period in American-Chinese relations, they witnessed two crucial developments. First, Washington made clearer than it had in the 1950s its wish to improve rela-

The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade

American Foreign Relations During the 1960s

Diane B. Kunz, Editor



NEW YORK

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Columbia University Press
New York Chichester, West Sussex
Copyright © 1994 Columbia University Press
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The diplomacy of the crucial decade: American foreign relations
during the 1960s/Diane B. Kunz, editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-231-08176-6 (cl: acid-free paper). - ISBN 0-231-08177-4

(pa: acid-free paper)

1. United States—Foreign relations—1961–1963. 2. United States—
Foreign relations—1963–1969. I. Kunz, Diane B., 1952–

E841.D46 1994

327.73—dc20

93-37995



CIP

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on
permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

E
841
.D46
1994

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