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THREE ATTEMPTS AT COLD WAR NEUTRALIZATION:  
ITS SUCCESS IN AUSTRIA AND LAOS  
AND ITS FAILURE IN VIETNAM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by

Benjamin J. M. Crawford

B.A., University of Arkansas, 2001

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## **Abstract**

During the Cold War, the inherent mistrust between the United States and the Soviet Union kept the two superpowers from cooperating even on many projects that might have proven mutually beneficial. Nevertheless, they were willing to work together at least occasionally; two such examples are the neutralizations of Austria (in 1955) and of Laos (in 1962). Despite very different world orders in those two countries at those times, the weaker superpowers in each contest, the Soviets in Austria and the Americans in Laos, took very similar actions. They followed the same three-stage process from the outbreak of the dispute to its negotiated conclusion.

This process failed, however, in Vietnam. In trying to explain why neutralization failed so soon after its success, this thesis postulates a number of possible explanations. Ultimately, it was several factors coming to result in the failure of neutralization in Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

The only two national neutralizations successfully negotiated by the superpowers during the course of the Cold War were those of Austria and Laos.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, the events that led to the treaties guaranteeing these neutralizations differed greatly. The Austrian State Treaty was signed in 1955 after a decade of occupation by Western and Soviet troops. The signing of the treaty in May of that year capped an agonizingly slow, and frequently stalled, process of negotiation. In Laos, however, civil war raged intermittently from 1954 to the signing of the neutralization agreements in 1962. Moreover, the talks themselves went relatively quickly once they were started, and there was no long-term procrastination of the sort that had happened in Austria. The end result in both countries, however, was the same. Both Austria and Laos entered into international agreements with the superpowers that pacified them and placed them beyond the reach of the various alliances and blocs. For the remainder of the Cold War, they would remain outside both the American and Soviet spheres of influence.

During the decades of American involvement in Vietnam, however, this pacification and neutralization never took place, despite several similarities to the crises in Austria and Laos. This has been blamed on a number of causes over the years: hawkishness on the part of President Lyndon Johnson or other American officials, a failure by the Diplomatic Corps in Washington to fully understand the political situation in Southeast Asia, or perhaps simply an inevitable ignition of the Cold War. A study of

this failure of neutralization in Vietnam and of its successes in Austria and Laos reveals that while neutralization might have been possible during the Kennedy administration, its likelihood was significantly reduced under President Johnson. The assassination that initiated his presidency came at the worst possible time for peace in Vietnam.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first describes a three-stage neutralization process that took place both in Austria and Laos. While outwardly the two countries appear very different, the diplomatic decisions mirrored each other in a number of ways and provide a framework to understand the neutralization process. In the second section, this three stage framework will be applied to the conflict in Vietnam. In theory, the Johnson Administration had a workable design to impose on their greatest foreign policy crisis. This paper will attempt to answer the question of why that framework was never fully applied.

### **The Three-Stage Neutralization Process**

A thorough examination of the events leading up to the signing of the treaties that neutralized Austria and Laos reveals a number of similarities in the measures taken prior to neutralization, specifically, between the actions and situations of the Soviet Union in Austria and of the United States in Laos. The most important of these is that each was operating in its respective theater from a position of weakness relative to the other superpower. The USSR never had much support in Austria; acting through the Austrian Communist Party, its allies never managed to secure the kind of power base they would need in order to dictate the terms of the negotiations. Consequently, they were reluctant to make any changes to the political status quo in Europe, having little chance of securing

Austria for the Eastern Bloc. Similarly, in Laos, the United States found itself backing the weaker party, the rightist force in the ongoing civil war. A combination of a weak support base and a large military disadvantage (due partly to support of the opposition by the North Vietnamese) meant that any long-term agreement in Laos would be unlikely to leave the country in the Western Bloc. Thus, the Soviets in Austria and the Americans in Laos were the weaker superpower, and will be referred to as such throughout the paper.\*

These weaker powers followed similar courses of actions in very different situations. They began with similar goals, which gradually adjusted along closely parallel paths as the situations changed. Despite a wide gulf in ideologies and remarkably different political situations in the nations in question, a similar script was followed closely by the weaker power in both cases.

In the first of these stages, the weaker superpower attempted to determine the strength of its support in the country in question. This could consist of a number of actions, from the entirely legitimate – such as backing candidates and canvassing for support – to the blatantly illegal – such as buying off voters and attempting to stage coups. While the exact actions varied, they consistently tended to become more overt as time went on. Eventually – after a final gambit demonstrated to the weaker power that it lacked the leverage to impose its will in the region in dispute, the process moved on to stage two.

In the second stage of the neutralization process, the weaker powers attempted to minimize their losses. Realizing the country in question would not enter the orbit of the weaker power, the superpower tried to salvage a benefit from its presence in the country.

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\* “Weaker Superpower” and “Weaker Power” will be used interchangeably; in both cases, these refer to the Soviets in Austria and the Americans in Laos when describing the process in general terms.



While negotiations may have taken place, these were not true efforts at diplomacy, but rather attempts to stall for time. During this stage, the superpower had two main options: dividing the country into two and giving one half to each bloc, or putting the country into a coalition of neutrals to make sure its neutrality would be the “right kind”, that is, one that did not threaten the weaker power. A third option, escalation, was also considered if it was politically viable. When these plans also collapsed, the process entered Stage Three.

In the third stage of the neutralization process, the weaker power accepted that the country in question was going to be, at best, neutral favoring the other side. The weaker superpower utilized the ongoing dispute to de-escalate tension on an international scale and enter into genuine negotiations. The most divisive issues of earlier years by this time had answers that were much clearer to the weaker power, and the negotiated neutrality was hailed as a victory (of sorts) for Cold War diplomacy.

### **Stage One: Introduction**

In the first stage of the neutralization process, the weaker power tried to determine how much influence it carried within the country in dispute. The Soviets in Austria investigated the prospects for creating a “worker’s paradise” in the Alps. The Americans, similarly, hoped that the staunch anti-communism they favored in Laos could take hold. The superpowers’ discovery method was simply to test their strength by exerting it. In both of these nations, the superpower first tried to apply power relatively subtly – by backing candidates, or pushing for overthrows. Following this (unsuccessful) political phase, there was an aggressive phase. The frustrated weaker power moved on to more

open (and less internationally acceptable) methods: the Soviets tried a series of uprisings, while the Americans backed the rightist side in a civil war. Eventually, the weaker powers realized that they lacked the leverage to force their will on these nations and the process moved on to Stage Two.

For all the similarities between the two nations, it is important to note that while there were widespread concerns of a third World War being set off by any armed conflict in Europe, the same cannot be said of Southeast Asia. In all stages, any action could generally be carried much further in Laos, located in the periphery, than in Austria, placed centrally along the fault line in Central Europe. This was especially true in the second stage of the process, but contributed in the first stage to the presence of an ongoing civil war in Laos. There was never a realistic chance of anything comparable happening in Austria.

### **Stage One: Austria**

In Austria, the first stage of the neutralization process began with the end of World War Two and the Four Power occupations of Germany and Austria. It lasted until the failure of the Communist uprising in Austria in September and October of 1950. During this stage, Stalin and his ministers still seemed to have some hope that Austria might join the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe by forming a Communist government under the control of Moscow. The first few years were spent gauging their support among the electorate using the legal political process, through the Austrian Communist party, and resulted in a resounding failure. A series of what have been described alternately as “strikes” and “putsches” followed; these were no more successful. After five years of

frustration and failure, the Soviets realized that they had little leverage in Austria, and moved on to stage two.

It is important to note that the intentions of the Soviet Union towards Austria during the first five years of occupation are still largely uncertain. Certain scholars, such as Audrey Kurth Cronin, have argued persuasively that the Soviet actions taken from 1945-1950 in Austria were part of a deliberate attempt to seize the country for the Eastern Bloc.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Günter Bischof, perhaps more representative of the balance of recent scholarship, has insisted that, “The Soviet Union never tried to take over Austria and incorporate it into its post-war empire.”<sup>3</sup> The debate is clearly not yet closed. Ironically, American onlookers at the time of the uprisings may have sided with Bischof; American High Commissioner for Austria Walter Donnelly did not seem to regard the uprisings, in and of themselves, as a particular threat.<sup>4</sup>

The first free elections held in Austria since the rise of fascism in that country were conducted on November 25, 1945.<sup>5</sup> Expectations were that the communists would do relatively well; American estimates were roughly ten to twenty percent, while those of the Communists themselves ranged from twenty-five to thirty percent.<sup>6</sup> The results proved disastrous for the Communist party: only 5.42%, less than 175,000 votes. With only four seats in Parliament, and one very minor cabinet post (Minister of Electrification) that served only to counter claims of bias, the party would have only token representation and thus no effective power in the government.<sup>7</sup> In no one region did they poll particularly well; in Vienna and Carinthia, their strongest showings, they still only managed eight percent. The Communists then turned their attention to the trade unions, hoping that they could build up support that would transfer to national elections.

They campaigned extremely heavily, and it paid off to some extent; they had a strong showing in the industrial province of Styria.<sup>8</sup> Accompanied by a new public relations campaign, the elections of 1949 followed these local gains, but the Communists achieved only token success. They marginally increased their votes (to 213,000, though more voters were eligible than in the previous election) and received one additional seat in parliament.<sup>9</sup> Following this latest disaster, the Soviets abandoned hope of achieving victory in Austria through election; they turned to riskier methods.

The Austrian Communist Party staged the first street demonstrations in May of 1947, shortly before their counterparts in Hungary took control of that country.<sup>10</sup> Intending to incite a general strike and occupy the office of the Chancellor, the Austrian Communists failed completely; the unions refused to cooperate and the American Military Police quelled the mob. Later that year, the Austrian Communist Party tried to convince several of the more jittery members of the (non-Communist) Socialist party to sign a separate state treaty with the Soviets. This also failed, when word of the plan leaked to the anti-Communist People's Party Foreign Minister, Karl Gruber, who in turn leaked it to the press.<sup>11</sup> In 1948, Marshall Plan aid began to flow into Austria, and the discontent that had fueled what little success the Communists had achieved so far began to dwindle.

The final uprising staged by the Communists occurred in the fall of 1950. The outbreak of the Korean War in the summer of 1950 caused a worldwide spike in the price of consumer goods, and Austria was not immune to this increase in costs.<sup>12</sup> Food prices shot up, without a similar rise in wages, and negotiations began between the government and representatives of the workers to try to correct the imbalance and remedy the food

shortage that was developing. These talks dragged on until late September, and dissatisfaction began to grow among the working populace. The Communists seized on this situation as an opportunity to win over support for their cause. With the unexpected announcement on September 23 that the negotiations had been completed (though no details were forthcoming), the Communist press insisted that the workers had been betrayed and called for a series of strikes. Though the uprising was at first supported by many of the rank and file Socialists, and numbered as many as 120,000 workers, it originated with the Communist minority in the unions. While the Soviet troops present in the city did help the strikers both by providing logistical aid and interfering with the police, they were careful never to violate the terms of the occupation openly. On September 26, starting in those districts in the Soviet zone of occupation which were most sympathetic to Marxism, the strike spread throughout Vienna, and on to other industrial cities such as Linz. Strikers seized control of some local buildings, and a few officials were injured. The Austrian government, under Leopold Figl, panicked, and the Austrian police proved inept at dealing with the mob.<sup>13</sup> The strike began to lose momentum by September 27, however, and by the next day most of the workers had returned to work. A second wave of strikes broke out the following week, on October 3, accompanied by rumors of Red Army troops massing on the Czechoslovakian border. The rumors proved unfounded, and this second wave eventually petered out as well. Austria, seemingly, did not and would not succumb to pressure from the Soviets. The best that the USSR could hope for now was to keep Austria out of the American sphere.

### **Stage One: Laos**

The major players within Laos were two former allies who polarized the conflict in that country around them. Prince Souvanna Phouma, usually referred to as Souvanna, was the elected Prime Minister, and a left leaning, though non-Communist neutralist. His opponent, Phoumi Nosovan, usually referred to as Phoumi, was a right-wing General and close ally of the United States. While there were other players in the conflict, such as the determined neutralists Kong Le and Phoui Sananikone, the conflict eventually became a battle between the military forces of – and ideologies behind – Souvanna and Phoumi.

Within Washington, however, the Laos crisis had its roots firmly planted in Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency; the conflict reached its zenith shortly before he left office. The entirety of the first stage took place during his two terms, as his administration tried to install a pro-Western government in Vientiane; Eisenhower's departure marks the transition point between the first and second stages. As in Austria, the first stage of Laotian neutralization can be divided into two phases. During the initial, political phase, beginning in 1958, the United States (acting primarily through the CIA) replaced Prime Minister Souvanna with General Phoumi, in a dizzying series of coups and counter-coups. The overthrow of Phoumi himself in 1960 set off the second, military phase. The deposed rightist leader raised an army and began a civil war in Laos that threatened to engulf all of Southeast Asia. It was not until the weakness of Phoumi's army compared with the Communist Pathet Lao became apparent that American officials began to realize that they needed to change tactics.<sup>14</sup>

The origin of the conflict in Laos stretches back to the early days of French colonialism in Southeast Asia, but a more convenient starting point for purposes of this

paper is the Geneva Conference of 1954. Following the defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu, a treaty was signed guaranteeing, among other things, the independence and neutrality of Laos. It also provided for the “integration” of independent armies (such as the Pathet Lao) into the Royal Laotian Armed Forces (usually abbreviated FAR).<sup>15</sup> The Pathet Lao was also supposed to be represented in the government, and an International Control Commission (ICC) was formed to ensure that the treaty was followed properly. Many of the stipulations of the treaty dealing with internal political matters were worded so vaguely as to be unenforceable, however, and so disagreements began almost immediately.<sup>16</sup> A genuine neutralist, Prince Souvanna Phouma, was installed as Prime Minister, but the Pathet Lao, along with its allies, was the most powerful bloc in the coalition government. Receiving aid directly from North Vietnam, the Communist forces remained strong in the northern part of the country, but were effectively contained there.<sup>17</sup> In the summer of 1958, the United States delayed payments to Laos to bring about a parliamentary crisis, forcing Souvanna to retire as Prime Minister on July 23.<sup>18</sup> A pro-Western centrist neutralist, Phoui Sananikone, followed.<sup>19</sup> Phoui expelled the Pathet Laos’ political wing (the NLHX) from the government, and set about trying to secure his power base. On New Years Eve, 1959, however, the CIA-backed rightist General Phoumi Nosovan seized control of the government in a quick, bloodless action, following his dismissal from Phoui’s cabinet.<sup>20</sup> Rigged elections followed in April of 1960. New rules virtually forbade any participation by the NLHX, CIA money was used openly to buy votes, and Phoumi’s CDNI was victorious.<sup>21</sup> However, his base of support was far too narrow to sustain his administration, and his victory was short-lived. Phoumi was overthrown in August in a coup d’etat led by neutralist Captain Kong Le, who restored

Souvanna to office. The “quiet” phase of the American attempt to secure Laos had ended, and the more violent phase of the campaign was about to begin.

Following Kong Le’s reinstatement of Souvanna, the restored Prime Minister opened negotiations with the Pathet Lao to form a coalition government.<sup>22</sup> He also allowed the Soviet Union to open an embassy in Vientiane, the Laotian capital. The United States once again suspended payments to the Laotian government and issued a series of demands intended to minimize the power of the communists and restore Phoumi to a position of power.<sup>23</sup> While he kept up a pretext of negotiation, Phoumi began to assemble an army, which by December was approaching Vientiane. American advisors by that time were also helping to fill the officer shortage in the Laotian army.<sup>24</sup> On December 13, the battle began for the Laotian capital. American “military technicians” in civilian attire were already in Laos, and in the opening days of the renewed civil war, Eisenhower sent fighter-bomber aircraft in support of Phoumi as well.<sup>25</sup> In its final days, the Eisenhower administration officially recognized Phoumi’s regime, and many Western powers followed his lead. The Communist Bloc, however, still saw Souvanna as the legitimate ruler. The civil war reached a climax of sorts at the Plain of Jars in Eastern Laos. The Pathet Lao, strengthened by a large contingent of experienced North Vietnamese Army regulars, routed Phoumi’s forces on March 9.<sup>26</sup> The American-allied forces faced the prospect of crushing defeat, as the Leftist forces already controlled much of the country and were only getting stronger, while the inexperienced Royal Laotian army could accurately be called incompetent and unmotivated.<sup>27</sup> It was against this backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating situation in Laos that President John F. Kennedy was inaugurated on January 20, 1961.



**Stage One: Conclusion**

During the first stage of the neutralization process in both Austria and Laos, the Americans and Soviets used comparable methods to determine whether they could bring the countries into their respective orbits. In each case, the superpower first investigated the prospects of establishing control in an essentially legal manner, before moving on to a more open grab for power. The Soviets, failing miserably to make any kind of showing in Austrian national elections, staged an uprising, hoping either to test the breadth of their support or possibly even effect a coup. The United States took advantage of an unstable political climate in Laos to force its candidate into high office, and – when he could not remain there – supported him more openly in a civil war. In both Austria and Laos the later moves could be seen as acts of desperation; as the initial attempts failed dramatically, the superpowers tried the most overt methods available to them. They were unsuccessful, however, and the process moved on to the next stage.

**Stage Two: Introduction**

In the second stage of the neutralization process, the weaker power gave up hope for an outright victory (i.e., assimilation of the contested country into its bloc). They replaced it with hopes of getting some sort of consolation prize, either a neutrality that worked in their favor, or influence over at least a portion of the country. Plans of action generally fell into two categories: coalition and partition. As regards the former, the superpowers envisioned regional organizations of similarly-inclined neutrals, intended as buffers against aggression or infiltration by the other power. While none of these plans

were ever realized, they were major goals that the weaker powers abandoned only reluctantly. Regarding the latter course of action, the countries considered either formal or informal partition, dividing the nation in question into communist and capitalist states. This possibility was also eventually discarded, as the path to negotiation – and genuine neutrality- began to take shape.

### **Stage Two: Austria**

Following the failure of the putsch in late 1950, the Soviet leadership linked the fate of Austria increasingly closely with that of Germany. The political situation elsewhere in Western Europe was essentially settled; the defection in 1948 of Yugoslavia from the Soviets was the last major change, and Communist attempts to gain power in Italy and Greece had failed to keep them out of the American orbit. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the uprisings in Eastern Europe were all crushed by the Soviets.

The German question occupied the minds of many diplomats at that time. Both sides claimed that they wanted Germany neutral and unified, but the differences in Soviet and American demands for that neutrality were irreconcilable. Both sides in the debate feared the risks of a neutral Germany more than they desired the benefits. Because Austria was, on the surface, politically very similar to Germany (divided into several occupation zones), the Soviets feared that any compromise that they offered on Austria would be expected of Germany as well. The Kremlin hoped for a band of neutral buffer states stretching from Finland and Sweden through Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia to the Adriatic Sea.<sup>28</sup> This “band of neutrals,” preferably modeled after Finland (and thus friendly to the Soviet Union, though officially neutral), was supposed to inspire Western

countries to leave NATO. Such a plan was never realized, of course, but the Soviet leadership continued to press for it even in the late 1950's.<sup>29</sup> The disposition of Germany was critical to this plan, however, and thus it never reached fruition.

Following the death of Josef Stalin, there was a gradual warming of US-Soviet relations. Several openings for negotiation presented themselves. One such window of opportunity occurred during the brief reign, following Stalin's death, of Lavrenti Beria, but the premier was arrested and executed before the opportunity could be exploited by the Western powers.<sup>30</sup> Despite the instability following Stalin's demise, however, progress was made in many disputes, most notably in the Korean peninsula - but Austria still proved an intractable problem. Soviet withdrawal of troops from the Alpine country was contingent on a peace treaty with Germany, which would not occur for decades.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the Kremlin continued a variety of tactics to keep talks from continuing, such as insisting that they were conditional on settlement of the status of Trieste, or the resolution of Yugoslav claims on Austrian territory. During this time, from 1950 to 1954, a de facto partitioning of Austria was in effect, and was proving increasingly problematic to Moscow. Americans and their allies could use Western Austria to cross between Germany and Italy without repercussions, the Austrians were increasingly hostile to the Soviet occupying armies, and the cost of occupation was mounting. In the elections of 1953, the Communists continued to lose ground even in Soviet-dominated sectors.<sup>32</sup> Finally, in February 1954, at the Berlin conference, talks resumed, albeit slowly. It was not until the following year that any substantial progress was made, but by then the Soviets had moved on to the third stage of the neutralization process.

## **Stage Two: Laos**

The second stage of the neutralization process in Laos took much less time than it had in Austria; it began approximately January 20, 1961, with Kennedy's inauguration, and was over by October of that year. Though the process unfolded much more quickly, the Kennedy administration considered a set of options in Laos remarkably similar to the choices the Soviets had in Austria. One option, highly favored by some in the White House, was to have Laos join in a Neutral Nations Commission with some of its rightist neighbors, to form a large bloc that could resist the "falling dominoes" of Communism. A partition of the country – essentially setting boundaries based on what land the Laotian Royal Army could hold on to – was considered fairly late in the proceedings as well, though it was never seen as anything other than a desperation move. Finally, one option that had never received significant consideration in Austria – use of overt military force – was briefly considered. The failure at the Bay of Pigs shattered Kennedy's faith in armed intervention, however, and brought an end to serious consideration of that course of action in Laos.<sup>33</sup>

The suggestion that Laos might form a Neutral Nations Commission surfaced during the earliest days of the Kennedy presidency. In a report for Robert McNamara, the new Secretary of Defense, the Inter-Agency Task Force on Laos wrote "General Lines of Recommended Action":

“...we should see that a plan is put forward by the King of Laos for the creation of a commission comprised of Cambodia, Burma, and Malaya under the chairmanship of Prince Sihanouk, which will supervise the carrying out a plan of

action that has promise of being acceptable to other allied and neutral nations, should satisfy any legitimate international concern of the bloc to the future status of Laos, and gives evidence of achieving minimum U.S. objectives in Laos. This concept should be merged with the concept of the buffer zone proposed by the King of Cambodia to include Cambodia and Laos. This proposal should be put to our allies with request for their support in the most forceful possible way, making full use of the prestige and momentum of the new U.S. Administration.”<sup>34</sup>

On February 19 the King of Laos, at the request of the United States, called on the neighboring nations to join with Laos in the creation of the commission.<sup>35</sup> Only the US and Britain pursued the offer; the Communist powers rejected it forcefully. Chinese officials declared the plan, “Part of an American scheme to turn Laos into a second Congo and a United States colony.”<sup>36</sup> The following day, the Soviet Union declared that the King lacked the executive power to make such a request, and reiterated their stance that only Souvanna Phouma was the legitimate Prime Minister of Laos.<sup>37</sup> Of the countries intended to compose the commission, only Malaya even considered the offer; Burma declined outright, and Cambodia deemed it “a unilateral proposition.”<sup>38</sup> In a later meeting of the task force, it was decided that “for the Neutral Nations Commission proposal to have any chance of success, there had to be an element of strength.”<sup>39</sup> As the military situation was bleak and looked only to get bleaker, the United States had no leverage to impose such a plan on unwilling opponents. The plan was effectively abandoned, and the Americans were looking more and more to the ICC by April 1. The Asian version of Europe’s proposed “Band of Neutrals” never materialized.

Plans for partition, however, took longer to evaporate. While never proposed for open, public debate like the Neutral Nation Commission, a split of Laos was kept as an option until negotiations were well underway. A de facto partition of Laos had taken place already as a result of the ongoing civil war, and a long-term arrangement (similar to Austria prior to 1955 or Germany throughout the Cold War) could easily be envisioned. Phoumi's forces and their allies were stronger in the southern, panhandle part of the country, and American officials actually considered negotiating a formal division.<sup>40</sup> On August 8, Presidential advisor Walt Rostow sent a memo including a detailed description of the benefits and risks of partition to General Maxwell Taylor. One of the chief drawbacks raised was that such an arrangement would increase Viet Cong infiltration into South Vietnam, already a serious problem.<sup>41</sup> While a contingent of officials (especially Frederick Nolting, the new Ambassador to Vietnam) continued to push for partition, enthusiasm for the idea had died down in the administration by the end of the summer.<sup>42</sup> By September, due to the dangerous escalations in Berlin and Cuba, Kennedy officials were more concerned with bringing about a negotiated settlement, and had entered the next stage of the neutralization process.

Escalation was never a viable option for the USSR in Europe; any attempt by Soviet forces to drive the Westerners out of Austria might have sparked a third world war. In Laos, however, American officials reserved it as a possible final action throughout this second stage, when it looked like it might be the one course of action that could keep the country from being lost entirely. Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman argued in a 1992 article that while Eisenhower made a point of raising the possibility to Kennedy, he stopped far short of endorsing it unreservedly.<sup>43</sup> Rather, he

seemed to prefer intervention only to the total loss of Laos to the Communists, an act which the outgoing President saw as the “cork in the bottle” to the absorption of all of Southeast Asia into the Communist Bloc. Intervention (preferably through SEATO) was considered alongside the other alternatives prior to the end of April, 1961.<sup>44</sup> By April 26, however, Kennedy and his advisors had agreed that Laos was not worth the risks of military intervention, even if it would be lost entirely otherwise.<sup>45</sup> This argument was probably in large part a response to the failure, earlier in the month, at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba; Kennedy was unwilling to risk a second such disaster.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, pressure in the international community had begun to build by that time for a cease-fire. While the defense department continued to show support for intervention, Kennedy had essentially abandoned the path towards escalation, and the administration policy was to try to enact a real cease-fire in Laos.<sup>47</sup>

### **Stage Two: Conclusion**

The second stage of the neutralization was essentially bounded by two events. This stage began with the failure to secure victory, while the initiation of genuine negotiation concluded it, brought on by a major concession by the weaker power. During this stage, a number of plans were introduced to try to secure “victory without victory.” A coalition of neutrals gave the Soviets hope for a “Finlandization” of Austria, and the Americans a vision of a “Thailand in Laos.” Similarly, partition, whether negotiated or simply accepted, held the promise of retaining at least part of the country for the weaker superpower. As a final option, while the Americans could consider the invasion of Laos, the Soviets could never realistically consider the same tactics in Austria.<sup>48</sup> With the

chance for any sort of real victory having slipped away, the weaker superpowers moved on to the one option that at least avoided losing the whole of the country to the other bloc: negotiating neutralization.

### **Stage Three: Introduction**

The final stage of the neutralization process consisted primarily of negotiation; by the time that this step was reached, most of the major issues separating the two sides had been resolved. In the case of Austria, the Soviets first had to realize that the Central European country would never willingly be a Marxist state, and that they could not force it to become so. Additionally, the Soviets realized that neither could their dream of a “band of neutrals” be realized, as West Germany was firmly in the embrace of the West. In Laos, the Americans had to recognize that they could not keep Souvanna Phouma out of power and that best they could hope for was neutrality. The sort of Western-allied neutral status they had enjoyed with countries like Thailand was not possible in Laos. Whether it was due to residual resentment of the French, genuine sympathy with Communist powers, or a combination of these, the Laotian people did not support the leaders of the pro-Western faction. Once this final stage began, true neutrality was inevitable; the weaker power finally accepted that victory was unattainable and compromise was necessary to avoid total defeat.



### **Stage Three: Austria**

For nearly two years following Stalin's death, no progress was made towards an Austrian state treaty. Suddenly, on February 8, 1955, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov made an announcement that the USSR had "de-linked" the signing of the treaty from the German question.<sup>49</sup> While this came as a shock to American diplomats, the events of the intervening years had made such a dramatic change in policy much easier for the Soviets. The most important of these probably was West German entry into NATO. With that country's ratification of the Paris agreements in October of 1954, there was no real reason to continue to link Austria's fate to West Germany's. There was no longer a reasonable chance that Germany could be united and neutralized, and Austria was being held hostage to a now anachronistic idea, the prospect of a vast neutral buffer zone dividing Europe. Additionally, Austria had changed from a Soviet asset to a liability, for a number of reasons.<sup>50</sup> The soldiers the USSR had stationed there were in an exposed position, not easily defensible. By withdrawing to the Czechoslovakian and Hungarian borders, and enacting the removal of American troops as well, the Soviets had an easy attack route towards Western Europe should the need arise. True Austrian neutrality also meant that NATO forces had to fly around the country, rather than (as they were doing at the time) over it. Additionally, Austria was no longer making money for the Soviets; the cost of occupation exceeded any of its financial benefits. Finally, the Soviets were no longer concerned that they might be abandoning a group of fellow Marxists (as in Hungary or Czechoslovakia); even the minimal support the Communist party had at that time was drying up. The Soviets decided, for these reasons, to use Austria to try and reduce the growing international tension of the Cold War.

Deborah Welch Larson's 1987 article, "Crisis Prevention and the Austrian State Treaty," contends that the Soviet decision to "unlink" Austria and Germany's fates was part of a coordinated series of actions intended specifically to reduce tension between the superpowers.<sup>51</sup> This process, called GRIT (for Graduated Reciprocation in Tension Reduction) called for a series of unilateral steps taken by one of the powers with the express purpose of encouraging (though not requiring) the other power to act in kind. Larsen contends that the process was initiated by Malenkov shortly after Stalin's death, and continued under Khrushchev. Such a theory goes a long way toward explaining why the change in policy was so sudden; the Soviets were making a public attempt to signal change. Faced with an opponent who was actively pushing for peace, the Americans risked becoming the obstructionist party if they did not follow the Soviet lead. Furthermore, if the Americans appeared to be doing anything that might extend the occupation, it would have caused a serious rift between themselves and the Austrian people. Now that the last major obstacle to Austrian statehood had been cleared, negotiations proceeded relatively rapidly. Almost ten years of occupation and obstructed negotiations came to an end, and the treaty was signed May 15, 1955.<sup>52</sup>

### **Stage Three: Laos**

The first serious movement towards a break in hostilities in Laos began on April 5, 1961 with a proposal from Sir Frank Roberts, Britain's ambassador in Moscow, to the Soviet Union for a cease-fire and renewed negotiations.<sup>53</sup> Unlike the excruciatingly slow negotiations in Austria, there was a general desire by all parties in the Laos crisis to get the conference going quickly. Additionally, there was no major issue such as the fate of

Germany to serve as a roadblock in the path to negotiation. There were some differences in the positions of the two parties that had to be overcome, however. The first of these was the makeup of the Laotian government and the placement of the major players (especially Phoumi and the Pathet Lao) within it. The second was the nature of the ceasefire, which proved to be much easier to negotiate than implement. Like the Soviets in Austria, the Americans essentially conceded on every major point, preferring to sacrifice victory for stability.

While Deborah Welch Larson made a brief mention of Laos in her consideration of GRIT theory's application in Austria, she never tried to apply the theory to the neutralization of the Asian nation.<sup>54</sup> The theory does seem applicable, however, especially in comparison with the alternative model presented, reciprocity, during which a process of give and take continues until compromise is reached. Once the Kennedy administration had decided on a course of action, the neutralization of Laos was accomplished almost without exception by unilateral concessions on the part of the Americans. Both of the major obstacles on the path to neutralization were resolved in this manner: the Americans never really received anything in return for what they gave up except for the benefits of relaxed tension and peace.

The nature of the neutral Laotian government was probably the most difficult and divisive issue; American unwillingness to accept Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister had been driving the civil war since 1959. Additionally, US officials were very unwilling to approve a Laotian government that included any Communist presence, fearing that Marxists would eventually come to dominate the country. In the last days of the Eisenhower administration, Secretary of State Christian Herter expressed the opinion that

“the introduction of Communist members into the Laotian government would undoubtedly lead to subversion of the government, and the ultimate replacement of a coalition government with a communist government.”<sup>55</sup> While Eisenhower expressed some doubt, many officials in his and Kennedy’s administrations thought that if there was any communist representation in Souvanna’s government, the Marxist faction would inevitably attempt to seize power. The Americans eventually conceded on both governmental issues. Souvanna’s future as head of the government in Laos was ultimately the least divisive of these. As early as March 10, Llewellyn Thomson, US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, raised the possibility of accepting the Prince as government head, if American allies could be persuaded to accept him.<sup>56</sup> By early April, while some officials were still looking for other candidates, and others simply did not trust Souvanna, the administration had warmed to the possibility.<sup>57</sup> By November, Kennedy was willing to tell Khrushchev, “It is now clear that Prince Souvanna Phouma will become the new Prime Minister.”<sup>58</sup> The presence of Communists in the government was closely related to this; many officials saw no way to have Souvanna as head of state without at least some Pathet Lao representation in his cabinet. In a move consistent with GRIT theory, however, Kennedy officials eventually allowed a “4-8-4” formula proposed by Prince Souvanna, consisting of four from the Pathet Lao, eight of Souvanna’s neutralists, and four from Phoumi’s group.<sup>59</sup> By November, 1961, the United States had conceded on most of the major obstacles to peace.

A precondition to the beginning of the conference had been the establishment of a genuine, verifiable cease-fire. Agreement was reached for a cessation of hostilities on May 12, 1961, and for talks to begin that same day (though they were postponed until

May 16).<sup>60</sup> While much of the literature about the beginning of talks seems to give most of the credit to the Soviets for agreeing to the cease-fire, it becomes clear that the Americans probably had every right to withdraw due to the bad-faith nature of the armistice. Pathet Lao forces began attacking Royal Lao Army forces at Pa Dong on April 22, well before the cease-fire, and continued their attacks until the city collapsed on June 7, weeks after the cease-fire was enacted.<sup>61</sup> While the American delegation briefly boycotted the conference, they returned without any change in the status quo, or guarantees against future actions. Despite later attacks, and the continued violation of the agreement, the Kennedy officials continued to negotiate. Had the American team been operating under a reciprocity, rather than GRIT, program, the boycott would have likely continued until the attacks ended. The Americans chose instead to take unilateral action to defuse tension. Following a long period of negotiation (spent mainly ironing out minor differences that were still in place), the process finally came to an end. On July 23, 1962, fourteen countries signed an agreement in Geneva that secured Laotian neutrality.<sup>62</sup>

### **Stage Three: Conclusion**

The final stage of the neutralization process was dominated by negotiation; there was little of the political excitement more characteristic of the earlier stages. The biggest change in stage three was an attitudinal one by the weaker power. In Austria, in 1955, the Soviet Union realized that a reduction in international tension was of more value to the communist bloc than anything they could still extract from Austria. Thus, they were willing to concede on many of the most divisive issues separating the two sides in the interest of showing their new willingness to work with the West. In Laos, the Americans

learned a similar lesson. Any attempt to try to “save” Laos from the communists was likely to come at a very high cost in lives. Thus, they had more to gain by defusing the situation by whatever means necessary rather than allowing it to deteriorate.

This change in attitude was accompanied by a change in strategy. Prior to the third stage, the weaker actors seemed to be operating on a reciprocal negotiating system; they were unwilling to make any sort of concession without an immediate response from the other party. The shift to the GRIT method was likely in part due to the presence of a new administration. While Austria’s uncertain fate began with Stalin, it was settled with Khrushchev; similarly, Laos collapsed under Eisenhower but was stabilized under Kennedy.

### **The Failure of the Neutralization Process in Vietnam**

This three-stage process provides a new framework for the study of the decisions that led to American involvement in the Vietnam War. The history of that conflict is far too complex to recount in detail here.<sup>63</sup> Certain actions taken prior to the peak of the war and their relationship to what had happened before in Laos and Austria, however, provide a new explanation of what exactly went wrong for the Johnson administration. From this viewpoint, Vietnam can more accurately be deemed a failed neutralization attempt rather than a war of aggression.

The first stage of the neutralization process proceeded in Vietnam much as it had in Austria and Laos. From the establishment of a divided North and South Vietnam in 1954 to the time that the government of the South essentially collapsed ten years later, Vietnam’s history closely resembled that of Laos.<sup>64</sup> While the government of President

Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam was much more stable than that of Laos's Prince Bon Oum, at least until Diem's overthrow, the civil war that resulted from infiltration from North Vietnam into the South was starting to turn strongly in favor of the communist forces by 1963. In November of that year, American allies in South Vietnam, operating with the consent of President Kennedy, authorized a coup against Diem, resulting in the leader's death.<sup>65</sup> Diem had maintained a powerful, autocratic rule in his country since 1954, but was increasingly alienating both his own people and the Americans. American leaders were also concerned that Diem might try to negotiate a separate peace with North Vietnam, thus defying the goals of the Kennedy administration.<sup>66</sup> A series of weak leaders followed Diem; none had a particularly firm control over the country, and American advisors repeatedly helped to overthrow any leader who failed to display sufficient strength or anti-communist credentials. A growing number of American "advisors" were sent to Vietnam during this period, in an attempt to stave off the increasingly aggressive infiltration of South Vietnam by its northern neighbor. The American presence during this period would eventually be dwarfed by the troop presence of later years, however.<sup>67</sup> By the spring of 1964, the weakness of Diem's successors had become apparent, and officials in the Johnson Administration began to realize that the South Vietnam that they hoped for – a free and independent capitalist country, oriented towards the West – would probably never be realized. The American officials directing the war effort began to turn their attention more seriously towards neutralization.

The second stage of the neutralization process in Vietnam lasted approximately from the spring of 1964 until the first months of 1965. At the beginning of this period, there was still hope for neutralization. American policy in Vietnam was more aggressive,

or at least more direct, than it had been in Laos, but the ostensible goal was still similar to that in Laos at a comparable time: to avoid losing South Vietnam to the communists. During this period, Johnson Administration officials still were avoiding direct diplomatic contact with the North Vietnamese, hoping to possess more leverage with which to negotiate whenever those talks took place.<sup>68</sup> The Americans postponed sending any ground forces, hoping that the South Vietnamese forces might at least maintain the status quo and that the North's resolve might lessen. The military situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated dramatically by August, however. As Fredrik Logevall puts it, "For American officials, the nightmare scenario was coming true: South Vietnam was falling apart."<sup>69</sup> Earlier that month, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had passed nearly unanimously in Congress, giving Johnson greater freedom to retaliate militarily in Vietnam.<sup>70</sup> By early 1965, however, the strength of the Army of South Vietnam, as well as that of the Government, had eroded to the point that the Americans were faced with two choices: make whatever concession was needed to get to the conference table, or prolong the war by introducing American ground troops. On January 27, Presidential advisor McGeorge Bundy gave Johnson the "fork in the road" memo outlining those two choices, and urging the initiation of "Phase II": direct action against the North Vietnamese.<sup>71</sup> It was at this time that the Johnson administration abandoned a potential path towards neutralization in favor of an option not taken either in Austria or Laos before it: escalation.

The advocates of neutralization continued to campaign for their cause, even though they had essentially been defeated by that point. The first serious push towards neutralization had come in 1963 from French Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle.<sup>72</sup> On August 29 of that year, de Gaulle delivered a statement urging a neutral solution to the



conflict in Vietnam. On November 3, the *New York Times* began advocating neutralization on its editorial page.<sup>73</sup> In the first few months of 1964, de Gaulle renewed his call for neutralization, adding that China should be part of the negotiations.<sup>74</sup> By the spring of that year, more newspapers and public figures were advocating negotiation than were endorsing escalation, chief among them Senators Wayne Morse of Oregon, Ernest Gruening of Alaska, and Mike Mansfield of Montana.<sup>75</sup> In the summer, United Nations Secretary General U Thant began to push for neutralization, and was followed by a renewal of de Gaulle's proposal.<sup>76</sup> Publicly, there was widespread support for negotiation; had Johnson followed such a course of action he could claim the backing of a number of parties across the political spectrum. Johnson, however, not only ignored such advice, he at times banished those who advocated it from his presence.<sup>77</sup> When the choice came to either escalate or negotiate in the early months of 1965, Johnson chose the former.

It was at this point that the Johnson administration abandoned the path that might have eventually followed the three-stage neutralization model.<sup>78</sup> He had continued the first stage of the model from Kennedy and taken it into the second during his short first term as President. Lyndon Johnson chose in the first weeks of his second term, however, not to continue along the path that Khrushchev had in Austria or Kennedy had in Laos.

The remainder of this paper will attempt to explain why Johnson rejected neutralization in Vietnam. The first section will compare the three countries, and the actions of the United States within those countries, at their most decisive moments: Vietnam in 1965, Austria in 1955, and Laos in 1961. The second section will compare Lyndon Johnson's White House in 1965 with the Kremlin in 1955 and Kennedy's White

House in 1961. The goal of this final part of the paper is to explain why the Johnson administration was unwilling to make the kind of concession on the negotiating table that led to the final stage of neutralization in Austria and Laos. The examination will reveal that Johnson probably made his decisions based on simple political expediency. While it is clear now that Johnson's actions did not serve his political interests in the long run, he probably thought that they were in his best political interests at the time.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Political and Geographic Situation within Vietnam**

On the surface, the conflict in Vietnam that reached a crisis point under Johnson has many similarities both with Austria prior to 1955 and Laos prior to 1962. This was due in part to geographic and political parallels between Vietnam and the other two countries.

Despite Vietnam's geographical proximity to Laos, the political situation in the former country more closely resembled Austria's in a number of ways. The partitioning and military occupation of Austria that followed the Second World War provided a fixed border between the Western and Soviet occupation zones that was analogous to the 1954 division of Vietnam along the Seventeenth Parallel. Even as porous as this border was, it was still more stable than the fronts in the ongoing civil war in Laos. In both nations the stronger power was extremely dominant, while the weaker power had only token support and leaders who served at the behest of the superpowers.<sup>80</sup> In Austria there was little doubt that the democratic system had more support and would provide the leadership for a unified, independent Austria when it existed. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh clearly was the

dominant politician in the country who would emerge as the leader of a unified Vietnam.<sup>81</sup> Vietnam also resembled Austria, rather than Laos, in the lack of a true consensus compromise neutralist leader like Souvanna Phouma in Laos. However, while Austria could overcome the absence of a Souvanna Phouma figure, Vietnam could not.

The similarities between Vietnam and Laos were no less pronounced. The most important of these was that both nations were experiencing an ongoing civil war. This made the stakes potentially higher; while inaction in Austria on the part of the superpowers simply meant continuation of the status quo, any delay in action in Laos or Vietnam could benefit the communist forces. Additionally, in both countries, the terrain and climate were inherently unsuitable to waging war using established American methods. The populations of both Laos and Vietnam were largely agrarian, there were few major cities, and the terrain was inhospitable for tanks or large infantry formations. This made the prospects for a clean American military victory very slim; this was frequently noted by members of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.<sup>82</sup> Finally, both countries were little-known in America and were located on the periphery of the contested territory in the Cold War. Unlike Austria or China, a failure in Indochina could potentially be “swept under the rug,” and not prove a major rallying point for an American president’s political enemies.

### **American Policies in Vietnam**

In the early stages of the conflict in Vietnam, American decisions resembled those taken in Laos. Kennedy and Johnson administration officials repeated the conduct of the Eisenhower White House in attempting to seize on the instability of the government. In

Laos, that had meant installing Phoumi Nosovan and his allies in power, hoping to establish a secure, pro-western government. In Vietnam, the Americans began by backing the coup that eventually deposed Diem, replacing him with a series of leaders who were each, in turn, replaced themselves.<sup>83</sup> The military presence - that of “advisors” – also more closely resembled the situation in Laos than it did that in Austria or elsewhere. Initially, there were not enough American troops in Vietnam to fight a war; for some time, their presence was small enough not to cause major political repercussions either in the region or in America.<sup>84</sup> The end of this approach coincided with that of the end of the first stage of the neutralization process in Vietnam; as it became apparent that an anti-communist regime could not survive under its own power in South Vietnam, the Johnson administration shifted its strategy.

In the second stage of the neutralization campaign in Vietnam, President Johnson and his advisors more closely emulated Soviet actions in Austria; they recognized the weakness of their position politically and hoped time would take care of the difference. The Soviets, following the electoral disasters in Austria which gave them little leverage in the negotiations, essentially “sat out” on Austria from 1951-1954. There was no substantial movement diplomatically and the Soviet troop level was actually gradually reduced, and Soviet-American tensions began to ease, especially following Stalin’s death in March of 1953.<sup>85</sup> In Vietnam, unlike Austria, total disengagement was the same as accepting a loss, however – had the American leadership elected to do nothing, the South Vietnamese would likely have been overrun by their counterparts from the north. What resulted in Vietnam, then, from the time the American allies began losing their grip (in 1963, around the time of the coup against Diem) until the war expanded (in early 1965)

was the equivalent of the stall in Austria. The American leadership sent just enough troops to maintain the status quo and hoped that a better solution would eventually present itself.<sup>86</sup> In this similarity – the main example of how the Kennedy and Johnson administrations tried to emulate earlier actions, the seeds were sown for the disaster that was to come.

The strategy that the Americans took towards the South Vietnamese leadership – specifically, exercising direct control over the choice of leader – was even less effective in Vietnam than it had been in Laos. In the latter country, the goal had been to replace an unacceptable leader – someone over whom they had little or no influence – with their candidate of choice (namely Phoumi). In Vietnam, the leaders the Americans helped to overthrow had originally been their candidates of choice; the enemy parties were in Hanoi, not Saigon. The net effect of this sort of direct control over the government had been more effective in Laos; among other things, it was much clearer what the Americans sought by the series of coups and counter-coups, and the White House had consistently backed the same person (namely Phoumi). In Vietnam, however, it seemed more like a desperation move rather than any kind of strategy. Any time that Diem, Khanh, or any of their successors failed to entirely please the Americans, they were replaced. This gave the reasonable impression to much of the Vietnamese populace that anyone who held onto power was effectively a puppet of the Americans.

Likewise, the stalling technique was not viable due to the ongoing civil war. In Austria, the Soviets could stall because nothing was happening that could cause the political situation in that country to drastically deteriorate. Once the possibility of gaining any substantial ground with the Austrian populace had slipped away, the continuing

economic growth of Austria, due to American Marshall Plan aid, gradually moved the Austrians further from, rather than closer to, the Soviets. The stall could continue indefinitely because the presence of Soviet troops was not likely to be jeopardized in the short term. In Vietnam, however, the situation was inherently unstable. Due to a combination of weak leadership in Saigon, successful infiltration of the countryside by the North Vietnamese, and the war-weariness of the Vietnamese populace, any refusal to negotiate on the part of the Americans was much more likely to endanger their cause than it was to help it.<sup>87</sup> Soviet stalling had been based on the concept that any change in the situation was liable to make things worse for the Communist forces and their allies. What soon became clear in Vietnam is that the status quo was no more stable; the tenuous grip that the government held over the populace was growing weaker by the day.

### **Johnson and His Predecessors**

While there were political components in the neutralization of both Austria and Laos, they did not overwhelm the primary goal – neutralization - in those instances as they eventually did in Vietnam. There were four main political concerns for the new Johnson administration in late 1963 that did not exist, at least not to the same degree, for Khrushchev in 1955 in Austria or Kennedy in 1961 in Laos. The first of these was the legacy of John F. Kennedy; the circumstances of Johnson's ascension to the Presidency handicapped his actions prior to his reelection in 1964. The second concern was the degree to which Vietnam dominated Johnson's foreign policy. Austria and Laos had figured among many crises at the times of their neutralizations; Vietnam, however, clearly dominated Johnson's foreign policy agenda. The third concern was the legacy of

the “loss” of China under a Democratic President; Johnson saw himself as much more vulnerable to appearing “weak” than either of his counterparts. The fourth concern was the legacy of Korea and the risk of inciting intervention by the Chinese, as had happened in late 1950; there were enough superficial similarities between Vietnam in 1963 and Korea in 1950 to cause alarm within the Johnson administration.<sup>88</sup> These concerns did not exist in Austria at all, and in Laos the situation appeared to the casual observer to resemble a civil war, not an invasion, and the threat of Chinese intervention was much lower.

Lyndon Johnson had greater political limitations placed on his actions in Vietnam than his counterparts had in Austria or Laos. The first of these was simply the circumstance of his ascent to the presidency; any attempt to change policies radically might have been seen as politically disrespectful to his slain predecessor.<sup>89</sup> Johnson was thus encouraged to allow the momentum of Kennedy’s policies to direct his actions. Kennedy also had more freedom of action in Vietnam than Johnson would have because of his foreign policy experience elsewhere; Johnson’s priorities generally had been with the domestic agenda, and many considered him “untried” in foreign affairs.<sup>90</sup> This made it politically risky to try to initiate new policies overseas that conflicted with those of Kennedy.

Unlike Kennedy, Johnson had to deal with Vietnam in something of a vacuum. Kennedy had faced a series of crises at the time of his inauguration, all of which he addressed: Laos, Cuba, Berlin, and Vietnam. At the time of his death, the first three had been effectively settled, while the fourth was just emerging into prominence. Johnson only had one crisis of that magnitude – Vietnam – and in all likelihood his foreign policy

as a whole would be judged by how he handled it (as was eventually the case).<sup>91</sup> Johnson thus was probably less capable of downplaying a loss than Kennedy had been; if he failed in his most important foreign policy challenge, his political enemies could easily exploit that weakness. All of these conditions together encouraged Johnson to avoid any risk or appearance of failure, and to postpone any negative consequences from Vietnam for as long as possible if they could not be avoided. He had no reason to try and settle Vietnam in a less than satisfactory way before the election, and every incentive not to, if he wanted to be reelected in November of 1964. If he decided on either “extreme” choice, either escalation or withdrawal, his reelection might depend on postponing it until after the polls closed.

Additionally, Johnson seems to have been driven by fear of being labeled “soft on communism”, a charge that haunted his party throughout the Cold War era since the Communist revolution in China in 1949-1950.<sup>92</sup> A quick withdrawal from Vietnam might have left Johnson open to that charge; his worst nightmare was to be accused of “losing Vietnam” like Truman was of “losing China.”<sup>93</sup> Specifically, Johnson did not want to be seen as having done too little, something that an early evacuation might suggest. Johnson’s predecessors had less to be concerned about on this charge. Khrushchev had to answer only to the party, not the voters; while being “soft on capitalism” was eventually part of his downfall, it was not a serious risk in the early days of his premiership. Additionally, by the time of the reversal of Soviet Austrian policy in 1955, there could have been little doubt in the minds of even the most die-hard communists that the Soviet Union had truly done all it reasonably could do to “save” Austria for their cause. Kennedy had probably feared the charge of being “soft on communism” as well, but, due



to his handling of the crises in Cuba, Berlin, and Laos, had more secure anti-communist credentials than Johnson. Regardless, by 1963 his outstanding reputation in foreign policy issues had probably immunized him from that particular concern.

The legacy of the Korean War of 1950-1953 provided arguments both for and against escalation. In support of military action, Vietnam, unlike Laos, had a concrete border along the seventeenth parallel separating the North and South. This border provided a clear line behind which the Americans could carry out military action, either directly or through the South Vietnamese forces, in support of the government of South Vietnam. In Korea, the Chinese had not engaged the American forces directly until the United Nations-led troops were well into North Korea; Johnson administration officials could expect a similar response in Vietnam. But this similarity with Korea was also an argument against military action; the Korean War had been extremely unpopular with the American public and any threat of a repeat, even if “done right”, was politically risky. Thus, to avoid the risk of infuriating the Chinese, a full scale invasion of North Vietnam was not a realistic option, as it had also not been in Austria and Laos. Johnson had the option of gradual, almost imperceptible military escalation, as long as it was kept from dominating the headlines.<sup>94</sup>

Johnson’s decisions regarding Vietnam generally seem to have consisted of a series of considered, calculated risks based on what appeared politically expedient at the time. His chief concern seemed to be that Vietnam would be used against him by his political opponents in Washington, and that he was far more vulnerable on Vietnam than Khrushchev had been on Austria or Kennedy on Laos. The context in which Johnson was forced to make those decisions was very different from that in which Khrushchev and

Kennedy had helped steer the fates of Austria and Laos. Khrushchev chose to withdraw from Austria after the integration of West Germany into NATO threatened his preferred settlement on Germany. Kennedy could not justify committing troops to Laos but not to Cuba, and Berlin at times overshadowed them both. Johnson, however, only could make a stand in Vietnam. This led to the peculiar phenomenon of fighting a war as quietly as possible, to avoid being attacked by either the right or the left.<sup>95</sup>

Ultimately, the major concession that led to genuine negotiation in Austria and Laos never took place in Vietnam. In Austria, the “de-linking” of Austria from Germany led to neutralization; in Laos, it was the willingness to negotiate in the presence of an imperfect cease-fire. It was these concessions which had paved the way for the negotiations in Austria and Laos to reach the point that neutralization was a realistic possibility. President Johnson, however, was never willing to make the one concession that would have been necessary for negotiations to continue and thus for neutralization to enter the third stage: accepting the end of the existence of South Vietnam as an independent, anti-communist state. He either failed to understand that the unification of Vietnam was not a negotiable point to the North Vietnamese, or he considered it an unacceptable condition. Had Johnson been willing to accept the eventual end of South Vietnamese independence, neutralization might have been realized.

## **Conclusion**

The three stage neutralization process describes a route followed by the Soviets in Austria and the Americans in Laos. In both of these situations, unrealistic expectations early in the history of the conflict gave way to a willingness to consider compromise, and

finally a desire for genuine negotiation and cooperation. The reality of the situation took some time to dawn on the weaker superpowers in each case, but the truth eventually became apparent. Once the weaker powers realized the fragility of their hold on the country in dispute, and saw the need and the form of the concession needed to spark negotiations, they both followed it to neutrality.

In Vietnam, however, the unrealistic expectations never entirely went away. The Johnson administration's policy seems to have been to stall for as long as possible and hope that some other option would arise. With hindsight, it is easy to see that the political repercussions of settling for the neutralization of South Vietnam in late 1964 or early 1965 would have been far less severe than the eventual fallout from escalation. At the time, however, the Johnson administration did what seemed to be the course of action least likely to cause a political backlash. Johnson was trying to walk a tightrope between the legacies of China and Korea, and the fear of falling victim to either trap dominated his policy decisions. His main concern was to avoid being blamed for Vietnam like Truman had been for either China or Korea.

This narrow focus on Asian precedents for Vietnam might have doomed the one reasonable hope Johnson had for neutralization, however. By alienating Ho Chin Minh early in the process, and doing nothing to heal that rift, the Americans made an implacable enemy out of a potential ally. Had the Americans studied the Austrian model more closely, they might have realized that there was probably a stable option that they could take. The Soviets had sacrificed what they hoped might become a communist Austria for a neutralized Austria. Similarly, the Americans could have sacrificed a capitalist Vietnam for a unified, probably communist – but neutral – Vietnam. The

American insistence on preserving the independence of South Vietnam probably doomed the best hope for neutralization. The United States, especially after the death of Diem, had no long-time ally that they would be abandoning. A Titoist Vietnam - a neutral, communist country, like Tito's Yugoslavia - was a viable option.<sup>96</sup> The Chinese and Vietnamese were historically hostile to each other, and the new, unified Vietnam might even have hoped to become an American ally in the region. The course taken by the Johnson administration, however, focused on short-term political goals rather than the long-term effects. Had Johnson and his advisors taken the longer view – and looked more carefully at the cases of Austria and Laos – the Vietnam War might have ended nearly a decade earlier, before the full-scale escalation of the war began in 1965.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The neutralization of Finland was negotiated between the Soviets and Fins directly, and not between the superpowers, and can thus be considered a special case.

<sup>2</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria, 1945-1955* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), throughout, notably pp. 50, 63, 108, 111.

<sup>3</sup> Günter Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War, 1945-55: The Leverage of the Weak* (Basingstoke, St. Martin's Press Inc., 1999), p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> The United States High Commissioner for Austria (Donnelly) to the Secretary of State, November 24, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Vol. IV: Central and Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), pp. 423-424.

<sup>5</sup> William B. Bader, *Austria Between East and West 1945-1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Also Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War*, pp. 69-70. Bischof notes that Karl Renner, head of the Provisional Government, predicted a range as low as five percent.

<sup>7</sup> Bader, *Austria Between East and West*, p. 45-46, and Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War*, p. 69-70. Also Sven Allard, *Russia and the Austrian State Treaty: A Case Study of Soviet Policy in Europe* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Bader, *Austria Between East and West*, Chapter 7. There seems to be some question as to how well the Communists actually did; some figures imply the support might have as low as six percent, only slightly higher than in the general elections, though the Communists themselves reported figures over twenty percent. The former number seems closer to the truth.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Allard, *Russia and the Austrian State Treaty*, p.101.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Sources for this section are Allard, *Russia and the Austrian State Treaty*, pp. 103-104, Bader, *Austria Between East and West*, pp. 162-183, Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold*

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*War*, p. 120, and Gordon Shepherd, *The Austrian Odyssey*, (London, Macmillan and Company, 1957), pp. 196-197.

<sup>13</sup> Bader notes that Colonel Mayr's American-trained *Alarmbataillon* was extremely effective, however.

<sup>14</sup> Questions about the morale of the FAL troops were raised by the Kennedy administration as early as February 3, 1961; by May 3, it was apparent that Phoumi's forces could not maintain even the territory they possessed for much longer. See Nitze to McNamara, January 23, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV: *Laos Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994) 38, and Embassy in Laos to Department of State, May 3, 1961, *ibid.*, p.173.

<sup>15</sup> John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), p. 222.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 293-294.

<sup>17</sup> Freedman describes it as "not quite a civil war but instead ... a form of partition." Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, p. 294.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Patrick, "Leadership in Foreign Affairs Reexamined: Kennedy and Laos Without Radical Revisionism," *World Affairs*, Vol. 140 (Winter 1978): 245-258. Also Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1967), pp. 117-118.

<sup>19</sup> Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>20</sup> The sources disagree as to how exactly this took place. Freedman calls it a coup, and makes no mention of a parliamentary crisis. Prados seems to put some of the blame on the new monarch, claiming he was, "induced to stand aside while anti-communists strangled neutralist government", and that Phoumi did not come to power until the (fixed) election of April of 1960 brought him to power. It is also important to note that while Phoumi was clearly in charge of the rightist forces, Prince Bon Oum was nominally head of the government at that time and thus it is usually referred to as the Bon Oum government in official documents.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur J. Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> This later became a key difference between Laos and Vietnam – there was no figure willing to take similar actions in Vietnam, at least not one the American "advisors" in that country allowed to rise to power in the South.

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- <sup>23</sup> Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, pp. 124-125.
- <sup>24</sup> Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina*, p. 70.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- <sup>26</sup> Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, p. 127.
- <sup>27</sup> Comparisons to the ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) would not be unfair.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Gehler, "State Treaty and Neutrality: The Austrian Solution in 1955 as a 'Model' for Germany?" in: Günter Bischof/Anton Pelinka, eds., *Austria in the Nineteen Fifties* (Contemporary Austrian Studies Series, Vol. 3) (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), pp. 39-78.
- <sup>29</sup> Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War*, p. 151.
- <sup>30</sup> James Richter, "Reexamining Soviet Policy Towards Germany During the Beria Interregnum," Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 3, Woodrow Wilson Center, June 1992.
- <sup>31</sup> Bader, *Austria Between East and West*, pp. 184-185.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- <sup>33</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, pp. 299-300.
- <sup>34</sup> Nitze to McNamara, January 23, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 34.
- <sup>35</sup> Rusk to President Kennedy, March 1, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, February 23, 1961.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, February 24, 1961.
- <sup>38</sup> Rusk to President Kennedy, March 1, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 67.
- <sup>39</sup> Task Force on Laos, March 7, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>40</sup> Bundy to Kennedy, April 1, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 114. In a memo from McGeorge Bundy to President Kennedy, the advisor raises the possibility of negotiating a "fall-back position of a divided Laos."
- <sup>41</sup> Rostow to Taylor, August 8, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 354-358.

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<sup>42</sup> Rostow to Taylor, September 20, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 425-426.

<sup>43</sup> Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception", *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 79 (September 1992): 568-587.

<sup>44</sup> *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, throughout, notably pp. 84-85 (Clifton to President Kennedy, March 10, 1961), 126 (Rostow to President Kennedy, April 13, 1961), 129-132 (Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, April 14, 1961), and 136 ((Rostow to President Kennedy, April 17, 1961). Of particular note is a memo (pp. 72-79) recounting a meeting held March 9, which included President Kennedy, and set as a possible D-Day for invasion April 1.

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum of Meeting with President Kennedy (McGeorge Bundy), April 26, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>46</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>47</sup> Regarding Defense Department support, McNamara and Gilpatric to President Kennedy, May 2, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 166-169. The action under consideration would have been conducted, however, to try to force a cease-fire, something both sides were saying they wanted at that point yet that was experiencing real birthing pains.

<sup>48</sup> Though it is possible that the subject was broached in the Kremlin, no strong evidence of this presented itself. It is highly unlikely it was ever given serious consideration.

<sup>49</sup> Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War*, p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> The following list is adapted from Bader, *Austria Between East and West*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Welch Larson, "Crisis Prevention and the Austrian State Treaty," *International Organization*, Vol. 41 (Winter, 1987): 27-60.

<sup>52</sup> Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War*, p. 149.

<sup>53</sup> Department of State (Rusk) to the Embassy in the Soviet Union, April 12, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 124.

<sup>54</sup> Larson, "Crisis Prevention", p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> McNamara to President Kennedy, January 24, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 41.



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<sup>56</sup> Embassy in the Soviet Union (Thompson) to Department of State, March 10, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 81.

<sup>57</sup> Memorandum of Conversation (Kennedy et al.), April 6, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 117. McGeorge Bundy had expressed doubt on April 1 in a memo to the President that Souvanna was the only candidate (*FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 112).

<sup>58</sup> President Kennedy to Khrushchev, October 16, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Vol. VI: *Kennedy-Khrushchev Correspondences* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> Khrushchev to President Kennedy, September 29, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. VI, pp. 36, and President Kennedy to Khrushchev, November 16, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>60</sup> Department of State (Bowles) to Rusk, May 11, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. XXIV, p. 189-190.

<sup>61</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff (Lemnitzer) to McNamara, July 12, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>62</sup> Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina*, p. 73.

<sup>63</sup> For two excellent studies of the Vietnam War, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002) and Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

<sup>64</sup> North and South Vietnam were supposed to be united in 1956 following an election in both countries. This voting never took place.

<sup>65</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 43

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64. Also Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 113.

<sup>67</sup> There were fewer than 700 American advisors in Vietnam when Kennedy came into office, and over 16,000 when he left. Under Johnson, the number eventually reached 500,000. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1979), p. 281.

<sup>68</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 268.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-205.

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<sup>71</sup> David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (London: Belknap Press, 2000), p. 302.

<sup>72</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67. It is important to note that the Times was not consistent in this view at this point in time, however.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137. Morse and Gruening were the only congressmen to vote against the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, though others, such as Mansfield, Arkansas Senator William Fulbright and North Dakota Senator George McGovern, were reluctant converts. For a more thorough discussion of Fulbright's role in the resolution (as well as other Vietnam issues), see Mark David Carson, "Beyond the Solid South: Southern Members of Congress and the Vietnam War" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2003), throughout, esp. pp. 206-298.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-189.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>78</sup> February of 1965 is generally seen as the beginning of the Americanization of the war, and thus the time at which neutralization was truly abandoned. See Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 331-335 and H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997) p. 217.

<sup>79</sup> Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> It is important to note that Johnson was inaugurated only three weeks after South Vietnamese President Diem was killed. While Diem had been wildly unpopular, none of his successors could maintain control as securely as he could, and the government of South Vietnam was increasingly being propped up by the Americans. In Austria, the Communists never really had been in charge of anything, and had only a token presence even with Soviet support.

<sup>81</sup> Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 339.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, throughout, especially pp. 299-343.

<sup>83</sup> Ironically enough, most of the coups were initiated by the Americans when the South Vietnamese leaders began to strongly consider negotiating toward neutralization.

<sup>84</sup> Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 120. The first substantial ground force deployments did not occur until 3500 Marines landed at Da Nang in 1965.

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<sup>85</sup> Günter Bischof, “Eisenhower, the Summit, and the Austrian Treaty, 1953-1955” in Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose (eds.), *Eisenhower: A Centenary Assessment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 136-161.

<sup>86</sup> Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>87</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 268.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>92</sup> Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, p. 115.

<sup>93</sup> Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth, McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 272.

<sup>94</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 256-257.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 333-336.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

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## Vita

Benjamin Crawford was born on September 8, 1975, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Moving to Kenner, Louisiana at the age of five, he attended St. Martin's Episcopal School in nearby Metairie, graduating in 1993. He received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Arkansas in 2001 with a double major in Physics and Classical Studies and minors in History and Religious Studies. He returned to the New Orleans area in 2001 and decided to further his studies, entering the Master of Arts program at the University of New Orleans in the Spring of 2002. He graduated from that program in 2003, entering the Doctoral program in History at the University of Florida.

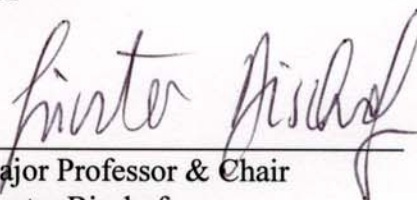
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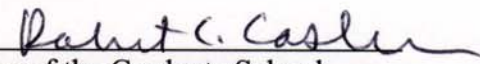
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Major Field: History

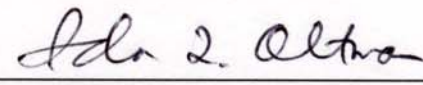
Title of Thesis: Three Attempts at Cold War Neutralization: Its Success in Austria and Laos and Its Failure in Vietnam.


Approved:

  
Major Professor & Chair  
Gunter Bischof

  
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EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

  
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Date of Examination:

August 15, 2003