

The inevitable tragedy. The United States embroilment in Vietnam

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The embroilment of the United States in Indochina was a tragedy for the peoples of that region. In the late 1940s, the Truman administration supported French colonial interests; in the mid 1950s, the Eisenhower administration decided to champion an independent non-communist South Vietnam under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem; in 1965, the Johnson administration decided to bomb North Vietnam and deploy combat troops to South Vietnam in order to thwart a communist victory. Over three decades, between two and three million Vietnamese perished as they struggled to gain their independence and shape their own future. After 1965, much of their country was devastated by American bombing. Neighboring countries were engulfed by the strife and turmoil. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia and committed ghastly atrocities. American policy failed, horribly. In the 1970s, regional strife proliferated; people suffered. How can this tragedy be explained? How can American policy in the region be understood?

In this brief essay, I shall attempt to explain how the United States got so deeply and tragically embroiled in Vietnam between 1945 and 1965. On one level, the answer is simple: the conflict in Vietnam was one of the hot wars spawned by the Cold War. On another level the answer is complicated because American officials never cared about Vietnam per se. In fact, they understood that Ho Chi Minh was a popular nationalist leader enjoying the support of the Vietnamese people. But, alas, Ho was also a self-declared Marxist-Leninist, and U.S. officials cared deeply about containing the spread of communism, everywhere. Vietnam unfortunately bore the brunt of American efforts, initially, to placate and co-opt the French and, then, to rehabilitate and co-opt the Japanese. Subsequently, as revolutionary nationalist turmoil spread in Southeast Asia and the Third World, Vietnam became a test case of American credibility to thwart Moscow's and Beijing's efforts to capitalize on wars of national liberation. As American credibility became increasingly invested in Vietnam, it also became a factor in domestic politics, at least, as perceived by leading Democrats like John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson. Neither president wanted to give the Republicans a chance to castigate them for losing Vietnam as Senators Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and other

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political opponents previously had ridiculed Harry S. Truman for 'losing' China.

The embroilment in Vietnam, therefore, was a complicated offspring of ideological rivalry and the Cold War, of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism, and of domestic politics. But personality also mattered. Kennedy wavered, but did not deploy combat troops and even talked of disengagement. Like Kennedy, Johnson did not want to convert the war in Vietnam into an American war. But circumstances deteriorated, and defeat seemed imminent. Would Kennedy have intervened in the same circumstances? Historians disagree. But there is little disagreement that in the winter and spring of 1965 Johnson's fears, hopes and hubris transformed the nature of the American commitment. President Johnson escalated the war because he decided that he could not allow a communist triumph in a war of national liberation lest it redound to the advantage of his rivals in Moscow or Beijing. He could not permit America to appear weak lest it set an unfortunate precedent, perhaps encouraging other Third World leaders to recast their allegiance in the Cold War. Nor could he allow his partisan foes at home to use a communist victory in Vietnam to cast him as a president who had capitulated in the face of foreign aggression and had appeased totalitarian foes. If he were defeated abroad, his plans for a Great Society at home would be endangered. His reputation would be tarnished; his legacy dismissed. The convergence of domestic, international, and personal factors bestows a sense of inevitability around the Vietnam tragedy; it almost seems over determined. But was it?

Origins of the U.S. Embroilment

During World War II, the most important United States officials repeatedly declared their desire to see the end of imperial rule. 'The president and I', declared Secretary of State Cordell Hull in November 1942, 'earnestly favor freedom for all dependent peoples at the earliest date practicable.'¹ At wartime conferences, President Franklin D. Roosevelt favored trusteeship for Indochina. Colonialism, he said, meant degradation and poverty for indigenous peoples. After one hundred years of French rule, Roosevelt ruminated, the people of Indochina 'are worse off than they were at the

¹ R.J. McMahon, *The limits of empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York 1999) 10.

beginning.² Colonialism, Roosevelt contended, meant war. 'Don't think for a moment', Roosevelt told his son, Elliot, 'that Americans would be dying in the Pacific tonight if it hadn't been for the shortsighted greed of the French and the British and the Dutch.'³

In the closing weeks and months of the war, however, Roosevelt was unable to press forward his ideas of trusteeship. He was ill, and too many other priorities commanded his time and waning energy. Arguing with the British, French and Dutch about the future of their colonies seemed less important than winning their goodwill for postwar collaboration in Europe and elsewhere. To his dying day, Roosevelt favored eventual independence for Indochina, but he was willing, albeit grudgingly, to accept temporary French trusteeship in order to achieve more important goals.⁴

When Roosevelt died, America's most influential advocate of decolonization disappeared. His successor, Harry S. Truman, 'knew nothing and cared little about Southeast Asia and Indochina.'⁵ Ho Chi Minh wrote Truman in 1945 asking for U.S. and U.N. support against the French. In talks with U.S. diplomats, Ho sought economic aid and intimated that he might offer the Americans a naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. But President Truman ignored Ho's letters (as did the British and the Soviets). At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, Truman agreed to allow the British and Chinese to occupy Indochina and manage the surrender and repatriation of Japanese troops. Shortly thereafter, U.S. officials indicated that they would not interfere with the restoration of French sovereignty, although Truman still hoped that the French would support self-rule. When Truman met with French President Charles De Gaulle at the White House in August 1945, Truman advocated independence but did not insist upon it.⁶

Inside the Department of State and inside the American government there developed a struggle between officials oriented toward Europe and officials focusing on events in Asia. Asian experts fully grasped the appeal

² McMahon, *Limits of empire*, 11.

³ R.D. Schulzinger, *A time for war: the United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York 1997) 12-13.

⁴ Ibidem, 16; G.R. Hess, 'Franklin Roosevelt and Indochina', *Journal of American History* 59 (September 1982) 359-68; W. LaFeber, 'Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina, 1942-1945', *American Historical Review* 80 (December 1975) 1277-95; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: from World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York 1988) 22-23.

⁵ Schulzinger, *Time for war*, 17.

⁶ W.J. Duiker, *U.S. containment policy and the conflict in Indochina* (Stanford 1994) 36-67; Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 62-87.

of nationalism in the region. They knew that Ho was a communist, but they also knew that his appeal to the people inhered in his fervent nationalism, his intense desire to liberate his country from French rule. But the advice of the Asian experts and the views of Office of Strategic Services (OSS) officers who had dealt with Ho during the war were trumped by top officials in the State Department and in the White House who were much more concerned about events in Europe. These Europeanists, like H. Freeman Matthews and James C. Dunn as well as Assistant Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson and Clark Clifford, Truman's counsel in the White House, were much more focused on securing French goodwill, shoring up anti-communist parties, and refraining from complicating the lives of moderate French politicians who were opposed, either by principle or political expediency, to granting independence.⁷

American officials grasped that the real challenge was to balance their interests in Asia and in Europe. 'The essence' of the problem, reported the Central Intelligence Agency in an early analysis, is 'to satisfy the nationalist aspirations of colonial peoples while at the same time maintaining the economic and political stability of European colonial powers (...) US security interests in Europe and the Far East are in danger of appearing as mutually exclusive, when, in fact, the power position of the US vis-a-vis the USSR requires that they be pursued concurrently.'⁸

But it was not easy to achieve this balance because American power was limited and the principal actors in France and Indochina had political agendas of their own. The French rejected a negotiated settlement and their forces in Indochina often acted brutally to suppress the Vietminh. In this context, U.S. officials gradually decided to lean toward the French. They did not want to support French colonialism. They consistently and persistently pressed the French to make concessions, to grant real self-rule, and to accept the inevitability of independence. But they were unwilling to risk a rupture of relations over such matters and they were unwilling to jeopardize their foremost European priorities, like the implementation of the Marshall Plan, the reconstruction and unification of the western zones in Germany and the negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Americans needed

⁷ M.P. Leffler, *A preponderance of power: national security, the Truman administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford 1992) 92-94.

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, 'Review of the world situation', 19 January 1949, Box 250, President's Secretary File, Harry S. Truman Papers (Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri).

French collaboration to achieve these objectives.⁹

In other words, waging the Cold War successfully in Europe trumped American support for decolonization. After the end of World War II, U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated quickly. In January 1946, President Truman began ruminating about his deep distrust of Soviet intentions and goals. 'Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language another war is in the making (...) I do not think we should play compromise any longer.'¹⁰ In February 1946, Charge d'affaires George F. Kennan wrote his 'long telegram' to Washington from the embassy in Moscow, championing a containment strategy.¹¹ Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill visited the United States in February 1946 and delivered his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri saying that an iron curtain was descending on Europe.¹² In face of the perceived challenge from the Kremlin and the formidable strength of communist parties in France and Italy, and in view of the stagnation and paralysis of the economies in the western zones of Germany and in Japan, U.S. officials decided to concentrate on the economic reconstruction and non-communist political stabilization of western Europe and Japan. Support for nationalist movements in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa took a back seat to these priorities.¹³

But U.S. officials were deeply troubled by the choices they felt forced to make. They knew that nationalist fervor would not subside. They were very much aware that the Kremlin could capitalize on the unrest in the Third world. Even before World War II ended, experts in the State Department were warning that 'Communism has already made a strong appeal to nationalist movements in Southeast Asia.'¹⁴ Throughout the late

⁹ G.R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: origins and legacy of war* (Boston 1990) 33-38; R.J. McMahon, 'Harry S. Truman and the roots of U.S. involvement in Indochina, 1945-1953' in: D.L. Anderson ed., *Shadow on the White House: presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence 1993) 25-27; G. C. Herring, 'The Truman administration and the restoration of French sovereignty in Indochina', *Diplomatic History* 1 (Spring 1977) 97-117.

¹⁰ R.H. Ferrell, *Off the record: the private papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York 1980) 79-80.

¹¹ G.F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (New York 1967) 285-313.

¹² F. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America, and the origins of the Cold War* (New York 1986). Klaus Larres argues that Churchill wanted to combine negotiations with containment. K. Larres, *Churchill's Cold War: the politics of personal diplomacy* (New Haven 2002) 95-130.

¹³ Leffler, *Preponderance of power*, 100-181; J.L. Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of postwar American national security policy* (New York 1982) 1-98.

¹⁴ Unsigned memo, [Spring 1945], box 5, Records of the Philippines and Southeast Asia Division, Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives (College Park, Maryland).

1940s, in one memorandum after another, one policy paper after another, Asian experts, intelligence analysts, and policy planners acknowledged that the United States had to be on the right side of history, that American officials should champion independence movements. If they did not, they would tarnish America's image, damage its interests and allow the Kremlin to make inroads in regions that were strategically important and contained valuable resources and raw materials. State Department experts fumed at European officials who could not grasp that their own self-interest inhered in co-opting nationalist leaders and overseeing orderly decolonization. 'Short-sighted colonial policies', argued one CIA review in September 1948, 'will in the long run cause the colonial powers to lose the very economic and strategic advantages in their dependencies which they are anxious to retain.'¹⁵ The Dutch, wrote George Kennan, head of the Policy Planning Staff, in December 1948, had to come to terms with the Indonesian nationalists. 'The choice', he insisted, 'lies not between Republican and Dutch sovereignty (...) but between Republican sovereignty and chaos. We know that chaos is an open door to communism.'¹⁶

In contrast to Indonesia, however, the independence movement in Indochina was led by communists.¹⁷ This made it even more difficult for the most influential decision makers in Washington to throw their weight behind Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. They knew that Ho's connections with Moscow in the postwar years had not been close. But they also knew that Ho had spent several years in Soviet Russia during the 1930s, that he was a communist. The United States could not take chances allowing a communist to come to power, notwithstanding his nationalist credentials and popular support. Ho 'is the strongest and perhaps ablest figure in Indochina', commented one State Department report.¹⁸ But he could not be trusted. Secretary of State George C. Marshall put the matter bluntly in February 1947: 'Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, 'The break-up of the colonial empires and its implications for US Security', 3 September 1948, box 255, President's Secretary File, Truman Library.

¹⁶ Kennan to Robert Lovett, 17 December 1948, box 33, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Department of State, Record Group 59.

¹⁷ Frances Gouda with Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, *American visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia: US foreign policy and Indonesian nationalism, 1920-1949* (Amsterdam 2002).

¹⁸ Department of State, 'Policy statement on Indochina' 27 September 1948, Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States (FRUS), 1948* (Washington 1974) 6: 48-49; Marshall to embassy in France, 3 July and 30 August 1948, *Ibidem*, 6: 30, 40; G. Hess, *United States' emergence as a Southeast Asian power, 1945-1950* (New York 1987) 311-21.

should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by [the] philosophy and political organization directed from and controlled by [the] Kremlin.¹⁹

But still, the Americans were wary of supporting the French in the armed struggle they began to wage in 1946 against the Vietminh. Marshall and his successor, Dean Acheson, wanted the French to put non-communist nationalist leaders who would collaborate with the West yet maintain support of the people in power. They were not happy when instead, the French restored Bao Dai, the former emperor of Vietnam, to power in March 1949. They doubted that he had the will or capacity to compete with Ho and the Vietminh and rally the people behind him. Nonetheless, in 1949 and 1950, the Truman administration, even before the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, came around to giving lukewarm support to this solution.²⁰ The Communist seizure of power in China made it seem all the more important to thwart another communist victory in Vietnam. 'The extension of communist authority in China', wrote George Kennan, 'represents a grievous political defeat for us; if [Southeast Asia] is swept by communism we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East and in a then critically exposed Australia.'²¹ In May 1950, Secretary of State Acheson told European leaders that '[f]rom our viewpoint the Soviet Union possesses position of domination in China which it is using to threaten Indochina, push in Malaya, stir up trouble in Philippines, and now to start trouble in Indonesia.'²²

Once the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union recognized Ho's government in Vietnam in January 1950, Truman, Acheson, and their colleagues felt they had no other option than to support the French and the Bao Dai solution. When friends of Chiang Jieshi in the U.S. Senate passed the *China Aid Act* to support the Nationalist leader, now in Taiwan, Acheson decided to use some of the funds to assist the French and thwart the Vietminh in Indochina.²³ The CIA estimated that Ho had

¹⁹ Quoted in Schulzinger, *Time of war*, 30.

²⁰ Ibidem, 33-43; G. Hess, 'The first American commitment in Indochina: the acceptance of the 'Bao Dai' solution, 1950', *Diplomatic History* 2 (Fall 1978) 331-50.

²¹ Policy Planning Staff paper #51, 'United States policy toward Southeast Asia', 29 March 1949, Department of State, *Policy Planning Staff papers*, A.K. Nelson ed. (3 vols., New York 1983) 3: 39-42, 48-49, 52-54.

²² U.S. Delegation to James Webb, 11 May 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 3: 1038.

²³ Testimony by Acheson, 24 January 1950, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations,

the support of eighty percent of the population; a State Department Working Group calculated that he controlled two-thirds of the country.²⁴ But Acheson could not contemplate supporting him. Soviet recognition of Ho meant he was a 'mortal enemy' of true independence. The United States established formal diplomatic relations with Bao Dai.²⁵

Concern with Japan was critical to the evolution of U.S. policy in Indochina. According to George Kennan, building strength in the industrial core of northeast Asia was critical to the success of America's overall containment policies. 'Our primary goal' in Asia, wrote Kennan in January 1948, is to insure that our security 'must never again be threatened by the mobilization against us of the complete industrial area [in the Far East] as it was during the second world war.'²⁶ Japan needed to be rehabilitated and co-opted into an American-led orbit. But Army officials in Japan who were running the occupation and their superiors in the Pentagon and in the State Department believed that Japan could not be rehabilitated unless Japan had access to the markets and raw materials of Indochina and Southeast Asia. 'Japan's economic recovery', insisted Army Assistant Secretary Tracy Voorhees, 'depends upon keeping Communism out of Southeast Asia, promoting economic recovery there and in further developing those countries (...) as the principal trading areas for Japan.'²⁷

Once hostilities erupted in Korea, these views hardened. Japan was the key to northeast Asia. Japanese bases, of course, were essential for waging limited war in Korea. But far more important would be Japan's

Economic assistance to China and Korea: 1949-1950. Historical series. 81st Cong. 1st and 2nd sess. (Washington 1974) 193-230; see also: U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Historical series*, vol. 2. 81st Cong., 1st and 2nd sess. (Washington 1976) 300-302.

²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, 'Crisis in Indochina', 10 February 1950, box 257, President's Secretary File, Truman Papers; Department of State, 'Problem paper', 1 February 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 6: 713.

²⁵ Acheson statement, 1 April 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, 6: 711; Acheson to Truman, 2 February 1950, *Ibidem*, 716-17.

²⁶ Kennan, 'Problems of our foreign policy', 14 January 1948, box 17, George F. Kennan Papers, Seely G. Mudd Library, Princeton University (Princeton, New Jersey).

²⁷ National Security Council Paper #61, 'U.S. economic aid to Far Eastern Areas', 25 January 1950, box 3, Tracy Voorhees Papers, Rutgers University Library (New Brunswick, New Jersey); for the importance of Southeast Asia and Indochina to Japan's recovery, see also: W.S. Borden, *The pacific alliance: United States economic policy and Japanese trade recovery, 1947-1955* (Madison 1984); A.J. Rotter, *The path to Vietnam: origins of the American commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca 1987); H.B. Schonberger, *Aftermath of war: Americans and the remaking of Japan, 1945-1952* (Kent 1989).

industrial infrastructure and human resources in a protracted hot war or an interminable cold war. But those resources could slip into the Soviet bloc if the Japanese people turned against the West or if the Japanese economy was sucked into a communist orbit. The occupation, therefore, had to end and the Japanese people had to be convinced that their well-being rested with the West. But their well-being could not be insured and even more important their loyalty to the West could not be relied upon if they established trading ties with communist China akin to those they had had for most of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, alternative trade outlets had to be found in Indochina and Southeast Asia, and the raw materials of the region and its surplus rice had to be available for Japanese consumption. 'Rice, rubber, and tin', said Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1951, constituted 'the consummate prize of Southeast Asia.'²⁸ In fact, during 1950 and 1951, Japanese imports and exports to the region multiplied. In 1951, it was the only region in the world in which Japan had a large positive trade balance.²⁹

Secretary of State Dean Acheson asked the prominent Republican lawyer John Foster Dulles to oversee the negotiation of the Japanese peace and security treaties in 1951 and 1952. At the very least, this was Acheson's attempt to forge bipartisan support to insure future passage of the treaties through the U.S. Senate. In working on these treaties, Dulles' views about the importance of Indochina and Southeast Asia were solidified. Dulles started with the assumption that 'the future of the world depends largely on whether the Soviet Union will be able to get control over Western Germany and Japan by means short of war.' If it did, 'the world balance of power would be profoundly altered.' Hence Japan could not be allowed to trade with Communist China. Noting that before World War II, twenty percent of Japan's exports went to China, Dulles believed that new outlets had to be found in the 'underdeveloped areas of Southeast Asia.'³⁰

Thinking of this sort dictated that the United States could not permit Indochina and Southeast Asia to be lost to communism. Therefore, in 1951 and 1952, top officials in the Truman administration boosted their

²⁸ Rusk to Matthews, 31 January 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, 6:20-26; see also: M. Schaller, *The American occupation of Japan: the origins of the Cold War in Asia* (New York 1985) 212-33.

²⁹ For Japan's trade with Southeast Asia, see: United Nations, Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, *Economic survey of Asia and the Far East, 1951* (Lake Success 1952) 167-73, 181-82, 102.

³⁰ Study Group, Council on Foreign Relations, box 48, John Foster Dulles Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University; Dulles to Paul Nitze, 20 July 1950, *FRUS, 1950*, 6: 1247-48.

assistance to the French in their war against the Vietminh. Acheson believed that the French were fighting the same enemy in Vietnam as the Americans were fighting in Korea. Once the Chinese communists intervened in Korea in November 1950 and increased their assistance to Ho, Acheson was more and more convinced that the United States should accelerate its support to the French. Some of his subordinates remonstrated against French refusal to find a good alternative to Bao Dai and to cede real power to moderate nationalists. Acheson and top defense officials like Robert Lovett fully concurred. But they resisted arguments that the Americans should take over the war from the French. It was smarter and cheaper, they believed, to have the French wage the war and to organize an effective Vietnamese army than to have Americans pay the full price of defeating Ho's Vietminh. 'What we have been trying to do', Acheson explained in 1952, 'is to encourage [the French] and help them do everything we can to keep them doing what they are doing, which is taking the primary responsibility for this fight in Indochina, and not letting them in any way transfer it to us.'³¹

Eisenhower and Diem

When Dwight Eisenhower won the presidential election in 1952 and selected John Foster Dulles as his secretary of state policy did not change at all. During 1953 and 1954, the United States was supporting about eighty percent of the costs of the French war effort in Indochina.³² According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Department of State, there was little alternative. 'Loss of Southeast Asia', they said, would 'result in such economic and political pressures upon Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's accommodation to Communism.'³³ Nor did Dulles want to antagonize the French when he so desperately wanted their cooperation in support of the rearmament of West Germany and its integration either into the European Defense Community or NATO.³⁴

But during 1953 and 1954, the French war effort in Indochina

³¹ Acheson testimony, 8 February 1952, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive sessions. Historical series*. 82nd Cong. 2nd sess. (Washington 1976) 4: 151; for elaboration, see: Leffler, *Preponderance of power*, 469-76; Schulzinger, *Time for war*, 44-54.

³² McMahon, *Limits of empire*, 63-65.

³³ M. Schaller, *Altered states: the United States and Japan since the occupation* (New York 1997) 97.

³⁴ S.E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: the president* (New York 1984) 49-50, 215-16; R.H. Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: piety, pragmatism, and power in U.S. foreign policy* (Wilmington 1999) 88-90.

faltered badly. The Vietminh surrounded French forces at the garrison at Dien Bien Phu, not far from the Laotian border. Eisenhower and Dulles pondered the possibility of direct U.S. intervention. They thought of using American air power from aircraft carriers and bases in Okinawa and the Philippines. We 'must not lose Asia', Eisenhower declared. On April 4, 1954, he wrote Prime Minister Churchill that a communist victory in Indochina would place 'economic pressures on Japan which would be deprived of non-communist markets and sources of food and raw materials.' As a result, Tokyo could not 'be prevented from reaching an accommodation with the communist world which would combine the manpower and natural resources of Asia with the industrial potential of Japan.'³⁵

Eisenhower deliberated, came close to deploying U.S. forces, but decided not to do so. American legislators did not seem supportive; nor were the British. The prospects for military success were bleak. The French no longer had the will to prevail. They surrendered at Dien Bien Phu just as an international conference was convening in Geneva to decide the fate of the country.³⁶

The United States did not intervene militarily in the spring of 1954, but Eisenhower administration officials remained determined to thwart a communist takeover of the entire region. At Geneva, the French and Vietnamese agreed to cease fighting and to demarcate a temporary division line at the 17th parallel. The country eventually would be reunified through free elections. Laos and Cambodia would become independent nations. The United States did not sign the Geneva Accords, but acknowledged them publicly and intimated that it would not interfere with their fulfillment.³⁷ Nonetheless, on the very next day Dulles acknowledged privately to his colleagues, 'the great problem from now on out was whether we could salvage what the Communists had ostensibly left out of their grasp in Indochina.'³⁸ Knowing that in free elections Ho would win, both President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles agreed that 'our real objective

³⁵ Schaller, *Altered states*, 98-99.

³⁶ McMahon, *Limits of empire*, 63-65; M. Billings-Yun, *Decision against war: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York 1988).

³⁷ D.D. Eisenhower, *The White House years: mandate for change* (New York 1963) 447-48; D.L. Anderson, 'Dwight D. Eisenhower and wholehearted support of Ngo Dinh Diem' in: Idem ed. *Shadow on the White House*, 48.

³⁸ McMahon, *Limits of power*, 66.

should be to avoid having any such elections.³⁹

Dulles favored the creation of a regional defense organization, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), to protect Indochina from external or internal aggression. The organization would cover the areas of Indochina (South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) that had not already been lost to Ho and to the alleged worldwide communist conspiracy headquartered in Moscow, but orchestrated throughout Asia by Mao's People's Republic of China. At meetings of the National Security Council, Eisenhower and Dulles acknowledged that in the future the United States might have to intervene militarily to prevent local subversion, but they wanted flexibility. Should subversion occur, they agreed that the United States should be prepared to use forces either locally or against 'the external source of such subversion or rebellion (including Communist China if determined to be the source).'⁴⁰

The United States then decided to recognize and support the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. Diem had been invited back to Vietnam by Bao Dai in the Spring of 1954 and appointed prime minister. Diem was a fervent nationalist, a reality recognized even by Ho Chi Minh who had offered Diem a cabinet position in 1945. But Diem was also a catholic in a Buddhist country. A French-speaking Vietnamese with an aristocratic bent, he was staunchly anti-communist. He was also aloof, secretive and authoritarian. He relied on his brothers and extensive family connections to rule South Vietnam, as well as on support from a small but influential cadre of American politicians and church leaders who he had met and cultivated during a brief residence in the United States. After he consolidated power by exercising force effectively in 1955, the Eisenhower administration decided he was their man in Vietnam. Between 1955 and 1961, Diem's government received about \$250 million annually from the United States, making it the fifth largest recipient of U.S. aid worldwide. This assistance constituted about 58 percent of the country's budget.⁴¹

In South Vietnam, the United States embraced the policy of nation-building. South Vietnam had no history as an authentic entity, or as an independent state. South Vietnam was the area south of the seventeenth parallel, where, by the design of the Geneva Conference, French troops

³⁹ Memorandum of discussion at the 210th meeting of the National Security Council, 12 August 1954, *FRUS, 1952-54*, 12: 730.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 729, 731, 756.

⁴¹ McMahon, *Limits of power*, 76-78; Anderson, 'Eisenhower and Ngo Dinh Diem', 50-55.

would assemble before leaving the country. After Ho's forces regrouped north of this parallel, elections were supposed to take place within two years to unify the northern and southern parts of Vietnam. But none of the great powers, least of all the United States, was eager for these elections to occur. Instead, Eisenhower and his advisers wanted to modernize and uplift South Vietnam and make it a successful outpost for containing the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. 'American strategists were convinced', writes the historian Robert MacMahon, 'that Vietnam's unification under a communist regime would deal a severe geopolitical and psychological blow to the prestige and credibility of the United States, embolden China and the Soviet Union, undermine the independence of other states in the region, rock Japan, and ravage SEATO.'⁴² These assumptions and views were widely accepted in the United States by Democrats as well as Republicans. In a speech in 1956, Senator John F. Kennedy maintained that South Vietnam 'represents the cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike (...). It is our offspring [and] we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs.'⁴³

Kennedy and U.S. Credibility

Speeches like Kennedy's and policies like Eisenhower's attached more and more importance to South Vietnam. The initial impetus behind U.S. policies - to avoid alienating France and to expedite the reconstruction and cooption of Japanese power - lost their saliency in the late 1950s, once the French left Indochina and Japan's economic recovery became self-sustaining. But in pursuit of these goals, the United States had assumed leadership in the fight against the Vietminh and the support of a rival government in South Vietnam. Increasingly, American prestige was vested in making South Vietnam a successful enterprise. Strategic and material considerations became less and less salient. By the time Kennedy assumed the presidency in January 1961, psychological factors like prestige and credibility shaped American attitudes and policies. This was particularly so because the Americans believed they were immersed in a worldwide ideological struggle with the Kremlin to gain influence in the Third World, where nationalist

⁴² MacMahon, *Limits of power*, 75.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 77.

liberation movements were pulsating and new nations were forming.⁴⁴

Nikita Khrushchev was now the leader of Soviet Russia. He was a true believer in Marxism-Leninism, and believed communism promised a better future for all peoples. He embraced the idea of peaceful coexistence and relished the ideological competition with the United States. He reached out to nationalist leaders in the Third World and was willing to extend aid and sponsor huge development projects. His fervor was reinforced, if not inspired, by a sense of rivalry with his comrades in Beijing, who were now challenging the Kremlin for leadership among revolutionary nationalist leaders. In early January 1961, Khrushchev gave a speech to Soviet ideologists and propagandists. He talked about coexistence and said nuclear war would be an incalculable disaster, but he heralded wars of national liberation. They were 'sacred' and 'inevitable'. Socialism, he proclaimed, would triumph over capitalism. Khrushchev's words were disseminated publicly on the eve of Kennedy's inauguration. They had a huge impact on the young American president.⁴⁵

Kennedy, like his predecessors, believed he was locked in a fierce struggle with Soviet-led world communism. Notwithstanding his awareness of the growing split between Soviet Russia and Communist China, Kennedy wanted to thwart communist advances everywhere. 'We are opposed around the world', he declared in April 1961, 'by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence.' Khrushchev, he understood, wanted to avoid war and pursue the struggle through insurrection and subversion. If successful in places like Vietnam, Kennedy, warned, 'the gates will be opened wide.'⁴⁶ In November 1961, Kennedy wrote Khrushchev asking him to exert pressure on Ho's government to stop undermining Diem. Otherwise, he warned, the United States would have to consider additional means to support the viability and integrity of South Vietnam.⁴⁷ Kennedy meant what he said. He and his advisers believed in counterinsurgency warfare and modernization theory. They could and would apply theory, mobilize resources, and harness

⁴⁴ R.J. McMahon, 'Credibility and world power: exploring the psychological dimension in postwar American diplomacy', *Diplomatic History* 15 (Fall 1991) 455-71.

⁴⁵ W. Taubman, *Khrushchev: the man and his era* (New York 2003) 486-88; M.R. Beschloss, *The crisis years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-63* (New York 1991) 59-61; A.M. Schlesinger, jr., *A thousand days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York 1965) 282-83.

⁴⁶ G.R. Hess, 'Commitment in the age of counter-insurgency: Kennedy's Vietnam options and decisions, 1961-1963' in: Anderson ed., *Shadow on the White House*, 71.

⁴⁷ Kennedy to Khrushchev, 16 November 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 6: 61-64.

technology to successfully build a nation. Between Kennedy's inauguration and his death, the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam went from about 900 to almost 16,000. Extensive efforts were made to implement a strategic hamlet program in the countryside. When Diem's regime became less and less popular, programs to win support in the countryside floundered, and Buddhists protested Diem's growing authoritarianism, Kennedy tacitly approved a military coup to overthrow Diem, thereby increasing the likelihood that the United States would have to assume growing responsibility for the new government.⁴⁸

What is so striking about this growing commitment is that concrete strategic and economic motives played such a small role in shaping policy. More than anything, credibility and prestige were now the calculus determining America's growing embroilment. In a typical intelligence report, high level officials were informed that Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Nationalist China were all viewing events in Laos as a 'gauge of U.S. willingness and ability to help an anti-communist Asian government stand against a Communist "national liberation" campaign. They will almost certainly look upon the struggle for Vietnam as a critical test of such U.S. willingness and ability. All of them, including the neutrals, would probably suffer demoralization and loss of confidence in their prospects for maintaining their independence if the communists were to gain control of South Vietnam. This loss of confidence might even extend to India.'⁴⁹

The agreement to neutralize Laos, laboriously negotiated in 1961 and

⁴⁸ For the extensive literature on Kennedy and Vietnam, see, for example: D. Halberstam, *The making of a quagmire* (New York 1964); R. Hilsman, *To move a nation: the politics of foreign policy in the administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City 1967); L.J. Bassett and S.E. Pelz, 'The failed search for victory: Vietnam and the politics of war' in: T.G. Paterson ed., *Kennedy's quest for victory: American foreign policy, 1961-1963* (New York 1989) 223-52; W.J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York 1985); J.M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: deception, intrigue, and the struggle for power* (New York 1992); M.E. Latham, *Modernization as ideology: American social science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy era* (Chapel Hill 2000); D. Kaiser, *American tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass. 2000); H. Jones, *Death of a generation: how the assassinations of Diem and JFK prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York 2003); for some key statistical data, see: D. L. Anderson, *The Columbia guide to the Vietnam War* (New York 2002) 286-92.

⁴⁹ The Senate Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers: the Defense Department history of United States decisionmaking on Vietnam* (4 vols., Boston 1975), 2: 72; G.C. Herring, *America's longest war: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York 1979) 82-83; McMahon, 'Credibility and world power'.

1962, meant that it was even more important to take a strong stand to defeat the communists inside South Vietnam. Otherwise, confidence in American guarantees would wane even more. Many historians, like Gary Hess, Robert McMahon and John Gaddis stress that the symbolic importance of Vietnam far outweighed its strategic and economic significance. 'The president and his senior aides', writes MacMahon, 'feared that a communist victory in Vietnam would further embolden aggressive adversaries in Moscow and Beijing while leading its allies to doubt U.S. power and resolve.' Kennedy and his advisers could not tolerate the thought of appearing weak. Weakness meant humiliation. Credibility would be shattered. Additional dominos would fall throughout the region. Hence, negotiations to neutralize Vietnam were ruled out; more and more military advisers were sent in.⁵⁰

Because they assign so much importance to credibility, more historians are probing the cultural assumptions and psychological dimensions of U.S. decision makers. According to historians like Michael Hunt and Loren Baritz, Americans' sense of their own mission as God's chosen people, inherited from Puritan mythology and theology, played a decisive role. 'Above all else', writes Hunt, 'Vietnam figured (...) as a test - a test of American character and ideals. How Americans responded was a kind of referendum on their world leadership and the viability of their institutions and values.'⁵¹ But it was more than that, according to Robert D. Dean. In his book, *Imperial Brotherhood*, Dean argues that Vietnam was a test of American manliness, of cultural tropes, buried deep in the psyche of an elite class of male decision makers that rose to prominence after World War II. They embodied an 'imperial masculinity' tied to patterns of class and education; they assumed privilege and power and had an instinct for toughness.⁵² They believed that their superior ideals, their advanced technology, and their efficient and enlightened managerial practices meant that they could and should prevail over adversaries, adversaries whom they could not understand and whose humanity and ideals were denied.⁵³

⁵⁰ McMahon, *Limits of power*, 107; Hess, 'Commitment in the age of counter-insurgency', 69; Gaddis, *Strategies of containment*, 212.

⁵¹ M.H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's war: America's Cold War crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York 1996) 128.

⁵² R.D. Dean, *Imperial brotherhood: gender and the making of Cold War foreign policy* (Amherst 2001) 4-5, 241-43.

⁵³ L. Baritz, *Backfire: a history of how American culture led us into Vietnam and made us fight the way we did* (New York 1985).

These interpretations are suggestive, but they should not be overstated. New evidence, for example, suggests that Kennedy remained extremely reluctant to deploy combat troops to Vietnam and that he was pondering retrenchment and withdrawal at the time of his assassination. In other words, the cult of manliness and the sense of moral superiority did not stifle reflection and reassessment. In fact, Kennedy's successful handling of the Cuban missile crisis afforded him the self-confidence to reconsider the American commitment to Indochina.⁵⁴

Johnson and the Inevitable Tragedy

When Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the presidency in November 1963, the situation in Vietnam was deteriorating rapidly. In the aftermath of the overthrow and murder of Diem, the generals who carried out the coup had difficulty consolidating power. The Viet Cong and National Liberation Front continued to make substantial gains in the countryside. Johnson immediately pushed for more determined, more aggressive action to thwart a communist victory. When Senator Mike Mansfield told Johnson of his deep misgivings about the American embroilment in Vietnam, Johnson asked his top advisers, all inherited from Kennedy, to comment. McGeorge Bundy, the National Security advisor, warned against any negotiated deal aimed at neutralization. The communists would gradually seize power and other dominos would fall in the region. Secretary of State Dean Rusk concurred. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reiterated that the United States was confronted with 'a test of U.S. firmness and specifically a test of U.S. capacity to deal with wars of national liberation.' The stakes were so high, he concluded, 'we must go on bending every effort to win.'⁵⁵ Such advice reinforced Johnson's own convictions stemming from his first trip to Vietnam when he was vice president. 'The battle against communism', Johnson wrote Kennedy in May 1961, 'must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination to achieve success there - or the United States, inevitably must surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores.'⁵⁶

⁵⁴ R. Dallek, *An unfinished life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston 2003) 709-11; Jones, *Death of a generation*.

⁵⁵ Schulzinger, *Time for war*, 132-33.

⁵⁶ McMahan, *Limits of empire*, 113.

In 1964, however, Johnson did not immediately escalate the war. His attention was riveted on winning election for the presidency against the conservative Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater. Johnson wanted to avoid any obvious setback in Indochina, but he also wanted to appear prudent. He did not want to scare the American people. Bundy warned him that if he accepted neutralization schemes or quit Saigon, the American people would treat him as badly as they had treated President Truman and Secretary of State Acheson during the Korean War.⁵⁷ Johnson was fearful that a defeat in Vietnam might trigger a political backlash that might destroy his Great Society domestic programs. Subsequently, Johnson acknowledged, 'I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day the Communists took over China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.'⁵⁸ According to the historian Larry Berman, Johnson believed that defeat in Vietnam 'would be political suicide and result in political paralysis for the next three years.'⁵⁹

Although domestic politics and his concerns for his reform programs clearly reinforced the predilections of Johnson to avoid neutralizing or 'losing' South Vietnam, these factors were not decisive. Two major books by the historians David Kaiser and Fredrik Logevall minimize the significance of partisan politics. 'At the end of 1964', writes Logevall, 'a large percentage of Americans were apathetic about Vietnam.' Few wanted to escalate the war; substantial minorities favored some sort of negotiated settlement.⁶⁰ The president had room to maneuver. 'The Johnson administration', emphasizes Kaiser, 'did not decide upon the war out of fear of a right-wing backlash, or because of a belief that Congress or the American public demanded it, or as a means of saving the Great Society (...). While both the Congress and the public could be expected generally to support military action against Communism, neither had shown the slightest enthusiasm for such a course, and both would have been delighted to have been spared this rather dubious venture.'⁶¹

⁵⁷ Schulzinger, *Time for war*, 132.

⁵⁸ D. Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American dream* (New York 1976) 252-53.

⁵⁹ L. Berman, *Planning a tragedy: the Americanization of the war in Vietnam* (New York 1982) 145-47.

⁶⁰ F. Logevall, *Choosing war: the lost chance for peace and the escalation of war in Vietnam* (Berkeley 1999) 281-83.

⁶¹ Kaiser, *American tragedy*, 5-6.

So, Johnson had room to maneuver. In 1954, Eisenhower decided not to use air power to assist the French at Dien Bien Phu; in 1961 and 1962, Kennedy consistently refused to deploy combat troops; yet in late 1964 and the first half of 1965, Johnson chose to bomb North Vietnam and to send hundreds of thousands of American combat troops to defeat the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. Johnson's decisions were critical. Most historians now believe that his personality and his style of leadership were particularly ill suited for the challenges he faced in Vietnam. 'He was a man with a passion for success and a yearning for greatness', writes George Herring. He was emotional, impulsive, and impatient. He demanded loyalty. He could not abide the thought that he would be held responsible for 'losing' Vietnam to the communists.⁶² 'Johnson's profound personal insecurity and his egomania', Fredrik Logevall stresses, 'led him not only to personalize the goals he aspired to but also to personalize all forms of dissent.'⁶³ When Johnson made the key decisions for war in 1964 and 1965, he did all he could to manage the debate among his advisers, avoid systematic consideration of options to disengage, and conceal the significance of his decisions from the American public.⁶⁴

Johnson's decisions were tragic. He sought to act nobly, but his flawed character, his insecurity, his egocentrism, led to disaster for himself, for his country's foreign policy, and, most of all, for the Vietnamese people. He believed he was acting nobly, thwarting the forces of evil, of communism. And so did his key advisers. At a critical meeting at the White House on July 23, 1965, the discourse resonated with memories of the past. 'Can't we see the similarity to our indolence at Munich?' commented Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. If the United States did not honor its commitment to safeguard South Vietnam, said Dean Rusk, 'there was no telling where [the communists] would stop their expansionism. 'The world, the country, and the Vietnamese people', said McGeorge Bundy, 'would have alarming reactions if we got out.' Wouldn't we lose our credibility, said President Johnson, if we withdrew? 'Our honor is at stake. Our word is at stake.'⁶⁵ When the enemy was worldwide communism, such

⁶² G.C. Herring, 'The reluctant warrior: Lyndon Johnson as commander in chief' in: Anderson ed., *Shadow on the White House*, 89; see also: G.C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: a different kind of war* (Austin 1994).

⁶³ Logevall, *Choosing war*, 298.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 252-99; Kaiser, *American tragedy*, 284-442; Herring, 'Reluctant warrior', 87-108; Berman, *Planning a tragedy*, 79-129.

⁶⁵ For the quotations, see Berman, *Planning a tragedy*, 122.

matters could not be taken lightly. Fundamentally, emphasizes David Kaiser, the 'decision to fight in South Vietnam in 1965 grew above all out of an obsession with avoiding the mistakes, as the administration leaders saw them, of the 1930s.'⁶⁶

Although much responsibility must be assigned to President Johnson, there nonetheless was a sense of inevitability about the decision. The credibility of the United States as a nation, its honor and prestige, and that of the president, would not have been vested in a victory in Vietnam if not for the decisions made by Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower over the preceding twenty years. Those decisions initially were limited decisions based on geopolitical and economic imperatives of waging the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Concrete and understandable European priorities impelled Truman to withhold recognition of the Vietminh and avoid antagonizing the French. Notwithstanding recognition of Ho's popularity as a nationalist leader, his communist credentials invalidated him as a legitimate leader once containment assumed the strategic rationale of all U.S. foreign policy. Soon thereafter, the imperatives of Japanese reconstruction meant that the United States could not allow Japan to get sucked into a communist orbit once Mao and his comrades had seized power in China. Although these strategic and economic justifications waned in the late 1950s, the United States by then had invested so many resources and so much prestige that disengagement became harder even while the prospects for success diminished. Kennedy grasped the dilemmas. He might have managed disengagement after the 1964 elections, if he had won a decisive victory.⁶⁷ But he was assassinated before he had a chance to confront the actual loss of South Vietnam. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, was less attuned to pitfalls, more arrogant, more ethnocentric, more insecure. But his options would have been vastly different if not for the actions of his predecessors. Their choices, not his, made his choices inevitable; their choices, as much as his, made Vietnam an inevitable tragedy.

⁶⁶ Kaiser, *American tragedy*, 485; see also: Y.F. Khong, *Analogies at war: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965* (Princeton 1992).

⁶⁷ K. Bird, *The color of truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: brothers in arms* (New York 1998) 261.