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**Vietnam**

An *American* Tragedy.[1] When asked, most Americans today would still name the Vietnam War as their country's most traumatic foreign policy event, not superseded by recent disasters in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria. The Vietnam War occupies a special place in the national psyche, a cypher for the United States' most humiliating defeat and for the memory of divisions at home that still reverberate to this day in the nation's political cleavages and culture wars. While this is also the appropriate perspective and emphasis to assume within a volume on the history of U.S. foreign relations, we should remember that the war was first and foremost a *Vietnamese* tragedy, with perhaps as many of 3.5 million Vietnamese lost in both North and South Vietnam, combatants and civilians.[2]

The war's status as a "tragedy" helps explain the public's and historians' unabated fascination with the war and specifically with the prevalent research questions of how the United States could end up in and lose this disastrous war. Although there have been revisionist attempts to rehabilitate the war's purpose and even to reinterpret the result as a success since the 1980s, an earlier orthodoxy has prevailed that the Vietnam War was the result of fallacious decisions that led to the nation's first defeat in the jungles of Southeast Asia (leaving aside the controversy of whether the nation was defeated in the War of 1812).[3] Within that consensus, though, debates range on about when the momentum towards war had become irreversible, which administration bears the most responsibility and which part of the executive – presidents, their advisors, or the military – deserves the most blame for the disastrous course of the war. Do we have to look to Truman and Eisenhower who enabled the French to return, supported their futile First Indochina War and then inaugurated official U.S. support for the nascent South Vietnam? Or does the blame lie with John F.

[1] David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000) [emphasis added].
[2] Britannica.com
[3] Examples of revisionism and orthodoxy

Kennedy and/or Lyndon Johnson for increasing the United States' military investment until the main combat role fell to American soldiers by the mid-1960s?

Within these debates, the theme of tragedy also explains historians' search for "lost opportunities," moments of wisdom and understanding when a reversal was conceivable, possibly even considered, but ultimately foiled – often by equally tragic events. Could the slippery slope towards eventual U.S. intervention have been halted if President Franklin D. Roosevelt had lived beyond 1945 and been able to implement his anti-colonial postwar vision? Was his death decisive in allowing his less sophisticated successor Harry S. Truman to pursue a rigidly anti-communist policy instead that delegitimized Vietnamese dreams of independence? Did President Dwight D. Eisenhower's refusal to save the French garrison from defeat by the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 symbolize a budding recognition that military escalation in Indochina was futile? And, most importantly of all, did the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963 foil his plan to withdraw from South Vietnam altogether? Could the slide towards tragedy have been halted at any of these crucial junctures?

As dramatic as these debates may seem, they point to the role of historical agency and contingency. At the same time, however, they obscure a trajectory in U.S. approaches to Southeast Asia over thirty years that is characterized by more consistency than contingency. Several impersonal forces, rather than personal contingency, dominated the conflict from 1945 to 1973: As early orthodox historians have emphasized above all, anti-communism – albeit in different connotations and contexts – remained a key consideration throughout. Secondly, as historians have emphasized more recently, Vietnam was a place where the Cold War intersected with the other key force of the postwar world, the decolonization of the West's vast colonial empires and a rising wave of nationalism and revolutionary fervor throughout the Global South. Finally, for the United States, Vietnam was always more of a symbolic battlefield than a geographical place of real geopolitical significance. What mattered was that U.S. policymakers could show that they were able to prevail in such a region and in such a very particular conflict.

The first "lost opportunity" presented itself at the end of the Second World War when there was the chance of a new beginning in Indochina. During the Second World War, OSS agents had supported the Vietminh, the League for the Independence of Vietnam, founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1941, against Vichy France and Japanese occupying forces. At the same time, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt mused about ending European colonialism in general and he considered French colonialism a particularly egregious negative example. In January 1944, Roosevelt reminded his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, that he "had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indo-China should not go back to France but that it should be administered by an international trusteeship."[4] This narrative culminates in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945, which quoted heavily from the iconic American version and seemed to be a clear invitation of U.S. support.

Why did Washington not make good on FDR's anti-colonial promises? Was it because Harry Truman lacked his predecessor's sophistication and had replaced an anti-colonial with a rigidly anti-communist paradigm, as some historians have charged?[5] The answer is neither as simple nor as personal. As indicated in Roosevelt's letter, even his anti-colonial designs did not envision immediate independence for Vietnam, but a scheme of international trusteeship. Such reasoning was based on deeply racist assumptions about the incapacity of the Vietnamese to govern themselves. If U.S. policymakers did not perceive the choice to be between colonialism and independence, it was arguably much easier to reconcile any postwar scheme with some role for the French as well. In this regard, racism and Orientalism were influential at the very inception of U.S. intervention, as shown in Mark Philip Bradley seminal study.[6]

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[4] Roosevelt to Hull, January 1, 1945, cited in *The Pentagon Papers*, *Gravel edition,* Senator Mike Gravel, editor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. 1: 10.
[5] Footnote on those who blame Truman
[6] Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Irrespective of how much racist views contributed to a change of heart in the Roosevelt Administration, shortly before his death, the president tacitly consented to a French return by making any trusteeship decision in the Global South dependent on the colonial power's preferences. And in 1945, it was predictable that France wanted to have its colonies returned and its global prestige repaired. This reversal was also due to strong British reluctance throughout the war to change anything about the colonial status quo worldwide. It was only logical that they facilitated France's return to Indochina. By December 1945, members of the British Other Ranks of the Indian Infantry Brigade were confused and outraged, as they wrote to the *Manchester Guardian*, that they had been tasked with disarming the Vietminh, together with not only the French, but also re-armed Japanese forces. In this regard, French and British stubborn colonial ambitions from a bygone era were instrumental in dragging the United States into Indochina in the first place. Together with racism, this was another way in which the Vietnam War was a pseudo-colonial conflict, ultimately pitting the United States against the ambitions of millions who sought liberation from the colonial yoke in the wake of the Second World War.[7]

As orthodox historians have emphasized from the start, the other decisive factor for backing the French was the rising tide of anti-communism. At least initially, however, this consideration did not take the form of worrying about Vietnamese communism and a desire to contain it, but the potential of communist advances in Europe. U.S. policymakers worried that forcing the French into a humiliating retreat in Indochina and dismantling a large part of their colonial empire would weaken the postwar government. At the same time, it might bolden an already strong communist opposition that actually championed a French retreat from empire. European specialists within the State Department had worried even earlier, under FDR, that U.S. support for a dismantling of French colonial rule would obstruct "the established American policy of aiding France to regain her strength in order that she may be better fitted to share responsibility in maintaining the peace of Europe and

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[7] Roosevelt's tacit consent to a French return had already been recognized by the authors of the Pentagon study, which became the *Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel Edition,* Vol. 1: 2; "British in Indo-China," Letter to the Editor, *Manchester Guardian* (December 6, 1945), 4; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 112-5.

the world."[8] While this recommendation might aptly reflect the Eurocentrism of Washington policy-making elites and was the path eventually chosen, it would be wrong to conclude – as has sometimes been argued[9] – that there was ignorance and naivety about the situation in Indochina. Responding to the European experts' memorandum, the Department's Far Eastern Division emphasized that the demonstrated Indochinese desire for independence needed to be taken into account. If France were allowed to continue its oppressive regime, as before the war, "the millions who live in that area may well embrace ideologies contrary to our own" – a clear inference that communism might spread in Asia if the region's aspirations were not taken into account. On balance, though, these experts fatefully agreed to a French return to the region in spite of their reservations.[10] Thus, the United States had taken its first fateful and entangling step into the region in a symbolic fashion, not because of positive decisions about interests in Southeast Asia, but to prop up an important ally in Europe where U.S. interests were focused in 1945/6.

Over the next couple of years, this pattern continued. Washington supported the French indirectly, by supplying weapons and materiel to France, but not directly to their colony in Indochina. Of course, U.S. policymakers were under no illusion where those weapons were being deployed. Corresponding to primary fears and interests focusing on Europe, decisionmakers were surprisingly relaxed about Ho Chi Minh's communism as well, believing that this did not necessarily mean subservience to Moscow. In that sense, there was a fleeting 'Tito moment' in U.S.-Vietnamese relations.[11]

All of this was to change, however, with the events of 1949. The explosion of the first Soviet nuclear device, a good two years before U.S. intelligence had predicted, and even more the "fall" of China to communism not only increased global fears of monolithic communism, but also focused

[8] "Memorandum for the President," attached to H. Freeman Mathews to Dunn, April 20, 1945, Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Washington: GPO, 1971), Book 8 of 12, 7.
[9] **Authors about the ignorance/naivete of the State Department**
[10] "Memorandum for the President," attached to Stanton to Dunn, April 21, 1945, DoD, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967,* 15.
[11] **Relaxed about Ho's communism**

U.S. attention on Asia to a larger degree than before. What happened in Indochina therefore mattered more now, especially after Moscow and Beijing recognized Ho Chi Minh's government in January 1950. Against the background of Asia's most populous country "falling" to communism, Washington became much less relaxed about Ho's communism. Consequently, Washington hurriedly recognized the French-supported regime of former Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai in early February 1950. From now on, U.S. aid flowed directly to the French in Vietnam, eventually making up eighty percent of the French war effort.[12]

The Korean War that broke out in 1950 focused U.S. attention on Asia even more, with ominous implications of a major communist push in one of the most populous regions on the globe. Yet, even U.S. aid could not stabilize the French grip on its former colony. The Vietminh continued to wage a costly guerrilla war, which severely strained French finances and political stability in Paris. Especially during the Eisenhower years after 1952, U.S. patience with French failures wore thin and pressure on Paris for political and military reforms in the country increased. Yet, all to no avail, and in 1954, the French were beaten in a symbolic battle at Dien Bien Phu. Especially Eisenhower revisionists, those historians who generally credit the former general with more political acumen than those analysts who immediately followed his presidency, see this as another crucial moment in the United States' deepening commitment. Since Eisenhower rejected French pleas for a last minute intervention to save French forces at Dien Bien Phu, the revisionists see this as a rare moment of wisdom in the long involvement in Vietnam, a moment when an American president rejected the opportunity to escalate.[13]

Nevertheless, this interpretation exaggerates the importance of the decision. While refusing to extend such last-minute help, the Americans continued to make it difficult for the French to negotiate a withdrawal and peace agreement with Ho Chi Minh's forces at Geneva. Even more importantly, the Eisenhower Administration took over as an outside power from the French when they were eventually forced to completely relinquish their former colony. In light of that

[12] **80% of French war effort**
[13] **Eisenhower revisionism**

development, it is much more fitting to interpret Washington's refusal to fight on behalf of the French as a realization that their time and usefulness in Southeast Asia as a buffer against regional communism had come to an end and that a new American broom was needed to clean house. The refusal to help at Dien Bien Phu was a tactical decision, not a realization that propping up an anti-communist regime in part of Vietnam was bound to end in failure.[14]

Instead, the Eisenhower Administration forged ahead with "nation-building" in the southern part of Vietnam that remained non-communist after the temporary partition of the country at the Geneva Conference. They did so primarily by propping up Ngo Dinh Diem, a member of the Vietnamese elite from the North who seemed to have the twin attributes of having been both anti-French and anti-communist. In Washington, doubts about his ability to build a country and to enthuse its population waxed and waned over the years, as his authoritarian tendencies came increasingly to the fore, especially after John F. Kennedy gained the presidency in 1960. In the early years of Vietnam War scholarship, this relationship between patron and client had been examined almost exclusively from the U.S. point of view, creating the impression that all agency rested with Washington. This view was conditioned as much by perpetuating the 1960s antiwar position that the United States was backing an illegitimate puppet regime as it was by the over-reliance on U.S. sources. More recently, though, and in line with a new trend in Cold War historiography, scholars have looked again at Diem's agency, drawing increasingly on South Vietnamese sources.[15]

This research has revealed a much greater degree of agency on the part of the Diem regime, demonstrating that the puppet could also play the puppeteer. Essentially, neither the Eisenhower nor the Kennedy Administration were ever able to find the right balance with pressing Diem for political reforms to create a stabler South Vietnam that could count on the loyalty of its population and getting Diem to pursue the counter-guerrilla effort against the National Liberation Front with the necessary vigor and consequence. Essentially, Diem was able to delay reforms by pointing to the instability that more democracy would inevitably create. Washington remained afraid that

[14] **Those who disagree with revisionists**
[15] **Diem as puppet or agent – old and recent scholarship**

democratic reforms would give more power to neutralist forces that were exploring an accommodation with the NLF and North Vietnam. In the end, the fact that Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu led secret talks with Hanoi about neutralist schemes may have influenced the eventual decision by the Kennedy Administration to no longer object to a military coup against Diem. On November 2, 1963, Diem and his brother lay murdered, slain by the coup's leaders. After their death, the country descended into even deeper political instability, with various governments following one another in quick succession. This rapid degeneration, combined with the acknowledgment that Diem not only had more agency than long believed, but also a rudimentary vision for South Vietnam, has led some revisionist scholars to conclude that one of the worst mistakes of American leadership was to permit the coup. Had Diem been allowed to remain in office, these revisionists maintain, there might have been a realistic chance to hold South Vietnam. Nevertheless, this counterfactual belittles the very real problems the Diem regime confronted towards the end; an increasingly successful insurgency and a major political crisis, especially with the leadership of the large Buddhist opposition.[16]

But, of course, the more important counterfactual of 1963 is the question of whether John F. Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam without a major escalation if he had not been struck down by an assassin's bullets later three weeks after Diem's demise. This controversy expands on the theme of tragedy like none other connected to the Vietnam War. If we accept this as an accurate reading of events and decisions, we are left with an escalation, a war, that was the result of an equally tragic assassination of one of the youngest and most dynamic presidents in U.S. history. This reading also holds a lot of resonance among non-historian members of a certain generation who believe that the United States lost – and never recovered – its innocence in the 1960s. In popular culture, this view has been expounded especially in Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*, which goes a step further by presenting Kennedy's assassination as a government conspiracy, led by his successor Lyndon B. Johnson. The government cabal settled on killing the president precisely because he was

[16] Moyar et al.

preparing to withdraw from Vietnam when a war ostensibly presented such lucrative contracts to weapons contractors.[17]

Predictably, historians are not that sanguine or conspiratorial. They point to doubts that Kennedy expressed about the viability of holding on to South Vietnam, to escalatory options he rejected, to the neutralization of Laos as an alternative to escalation, and to speculations that Kennedy would have implemented his withdrawal plans after successful re-election in 1964. Another key piece of documentary evidence frequently mentioned is the seemingly dramatic juxtaposition between the last National Security Action Memorandum of the Kennedy Administration, which envisioned the withdrawal of 1,000 advisors and the first of the Johnson Administration, which emphasized renewed vigor across the board in Vietnam. More generally, advocates of the withdrawal thesis also emphasize that Kennedy had a more sophisticated grasp on foreign policy than Lyndon Johnson – an argument not unlike the one already mentioned in the context of Roosevelt's untimely demise.[18]

In a more systemic interpretation, I would maintain that continued escalation was already locked in by that point, with Kennedy increasing U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam from roughly 1,000 to 16,000. More importantly, the young president had waged an electoral campaign in 1960 that blamed the Eisenhower Administration for foreign policy stagnation and losing the initiative to communism. Instead, Kennedy promised a more muscular and masculine approach to the Cold War. Since the neutralization of Laos largely ended in failure, this can be read as much as a model for Vietnam as an incentive to persist there. In addition to that, It seems surprising that there was very little rhetorical de-escalation in 1963. On the contrary, Kennedy continued to emphasize South Vietnam's importance and even the speech he was scheduled to give the day he was assassinated in Dallas promised continuity in the American approach to Vietnam. Rather than preparing withdrawal, the Kennedy Administration was experiencing a deep crisis with its partner Ngo Dinh Diem whose administration had provoked a very serious crisis with the country's Buddhist majority. Kennedy

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[17] Oliver Stone, *JFK* (1991).
[18] Historians who believe that JFK would have withdrawn

tried to get Diem to moderate his approach and to fast-track political reforms and it is in this context that we have to understand the threatened withdrawal of 1,000 troops, as a signal to Diem that he could not count on *unconditional* U.S. support. This crisis culminated in the military coup against Diem. Even this, however, should be read as an argument for persistence in the effort. If the president seriously considered withdrawal, why not seize the opportunity to blame it on the impossibility of cooperating with a recalcitrant ally? Why embark on an alternative, with the political instability that entailed? Either way, having given green light to a coup and a new experiment in South Vietnam implicated U.S. policy and responsibility more deeply in the regional conflict.[19]

Even if Kennedy had intended to withdraw eventually, his successor – virtually excluded from Kennedy's foreign policy elite since 1961 – believed persisting in Vietnam was part of the legacy (or burden) that his predecessor had bequeathed to him. The coup against Diem, however, had destabilized the situation further, with political instability rife in South Vietnam and the communist insurgency emboldened. It is in this context that we have to appraise the call in NSAM 273 for increased vigor in the fight against the NLF. While and because the situation did not markedly improve over the next year, the Johnson Administration progressively deepened American involvement and took steps to gain legislative backing for further escalation, should the need arise. In August 1964, in response to one definite and one suspected (falsely, as it turned out) attack of North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin on two U.S. destroyers (in or near disputed North Vietnamese territorial waters), Johnson introduced a resolution in Congress that had already been drafted in June. In line with previous Cold War resolutions, asking Congress for potential preemptive powers in the case of "aggression," the president asked for the authority "to take all necessary measures" not only to repel further direct attacks, but also to "prevent further

[19] Literature that blames JFK; especially those who argue that coup tied him to the war effort

aggression" and to maintain peace in the region.[20] Fully aware of the implications that the administration could use this grant of power to go to war without seeking a formal declaration of war, Congress voted almost unanimously in favor. As surprising as that may sound, the country's representatives did so for a variety of reasons, including the perceived need to demonstrate patriotism and a united resolve in the face of an armed attack upon the nation's armed forces, the belief – wrong, as it would turn out – that the president only needed this show of strength in order to avoid war, and in order to defuse Vietnam as a political issue in a presidential election year when Johnson's rival, Barry Goldwater, urged the nation to face up to the fact that it was already involved in a real war in Southeast Asia. As it turned out, Goldwater was not that far off. What Johnson had not shared with Congressional leaders was the fact that U.S. destroyers were effectively shadowing South Vietnamese incursions and sabotage events along the North Vietnamese coast. It was not surprising, therefore, that the North Vietnamese perceived their presence as hostile.[21]

The resolution gave Johnson what he had desired, political cover for any course of action in Vietnam and the ability to neutralize Vietnam as a campaign issue. In this, he was also assisted by Goldwater himself because his bellicose rhetoric frightened and alienated many Americans. On the other hand, it left many Americans ill prepared for what was to follow in the next calendar year, especially because the president repeatedly promised during the campaign that he was doing everything to avoid "American boys starting to do the fighting that Asian boys ought to be doing to protect themselves."[22] The situation in South Vietnam did not improve, however, and the administration edged ever closer to committing 'American boys' after all.

Decisions taken in December 1964 and January 1965 put the country even more firmly on the course to escalation and eventual U.S. control of the war. At the same time, these decisions

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[20] "Joint Resolution of Congress H.J. RES 1145," August 7, 1964, Yale Law School, *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy,* https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/tonkin-g.asp [accessed September 5, 2020].
[2121] **GTR/1964 election**; short discussion of reality behind GTR
[22] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks in Louisville, Ky., at a Breakfast for Indiana and Kentucky State Party Leaders," October 9, 1964, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds., *The American Presidency Project,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-louisville-ky-breakfast-for-indiana-and-kentucky-state-party-leaders [accessed September 5, 2020].

showed how committed the Johnson Administration was to clinging to its position in Vietnam because, in those two months, it completely reversed its rationale for escalated intervention. Although the president had approved a program of escalated reprisal bombings of North Vietnam for guerrilla activity in the South, he was still reluctant to implement it immediately, in part because he demanded to see more effort and determination on the part of the Saigon regime. Nevertheless, when instability increased even further by the end of the year, administration thinking changed. On January 6, 1965, William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, argued the exact opposite: The United States needed to increase its investment and actions against North Vietnam in order to demonstrate their commitment to Saigon. With that symbolic backing, Bundy continued, Saigon would be able to increase its own investment and achieve stability.[23]

Bundy's memorandum was also notable for its emphasis on the symbolic character of the war and the utter lack of optimism towards the war effort that it reflected. In spite of recommending escalation, Bundy was actually skeptical about the chances of "saving" South Vietnam. Nevertheless, he thought it was important to persist to demonstrate to other allies in the region and beyond that the United States would stand by them if they were attacked by communist forces. Once again, the symbolic impact of persevering in Vietnam outweighed the chances for immediate success. The pessimism that was more pervasive in the halls of government than just in Bundy's memorandum yields two further conclusions. First of all, those analysts – especially contemporary ones – who alleged that the United States intervened with a sense of hubris and invincibility were not entirely accurate.[24] Decisionmakers were well aware of the odds against intervention and they were not confident about success. This skepticism is also instructive when recalling the Kennedy withdrawal thesis. In that context, presidential doubts are frequently taken as added evidence that he would have withdrawn. Yet, with the crucial decisions in the Johnson Administration, taken by some of the same advisors that Kennedy had had, were taken against the background of continued skepticism and apprehension. In other words, the decision for escalation was taken *in spite* of serious doubts

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[23] **The two memos; more info from secondary sources on this change in opinion**
[24] Footnote on those who blame US hubris for Vietnam War

about success *in Vietnam*. The more important motivation was the symbolic one of projecting determination, reliability and credibility *beyond Vietnam*.

As the decision for increased bombing had been taken in principle in early December, but not yet implemented, a pretext was required to trigger the escalation. The NLF obliged. On February 7, 1965, their units attacked U.S. Army barracks near Pleiku, killing nine Americans and destroying some aircraft. Heavy reprisal attacks against the North were soon transformed into a continuing and graduated bombing program, codenamed "Rolling Thunder." Once these crucial steps had been taken, the floodgates opened. Soon after U.S. planes began regular bombing sorties, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, demanded a detachment of marines to guard the airport installations at Danang. On March 8, 1965, two battalions landed in Danang, even though General Maxwell Taylor, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and now U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, predicted that it would be difficult to resist escalation once ground forces had been committed.[25]

And so it happened. By July 1965, Westmoreland demanded more troops to engage the enemy offensively, rather than just guarding U.S. installations. This request triggered a last round of discussions behind closed doors. Yet, reading summaries of these discussions evokes the awkward impression that policymakers were only going through the motions by now. While the meetings generally included key stakeholders and "experts" on Southeast Asia, the president also invited George Ball, Under Secretary of State for Economic and Cultural Affairs. Although his remit did not seem relevant to the proceedings, Ball fulfilled the role of in-house critic since he had bombarded Johnson with warning memoranda about Vietnam since 1964. Feeling that he had already argued his case – and lost – Ball did not want to reiterate his position, but the president specifically asked him to. Predictably, though, everyone else around the room contradicted Ball and the decision was taken

[25] Herring on Taylor's prophecy

to grant Westmoreland's request, although the administration initially sent less troops than the general had demanded.[26]

Although Ball's role seemed formulaic, as if Johnson wanted to signal to future historians that his administration had indeed weighed all options, the debate was still significant because it once again revealed, stereotypically, the most important reason for going to war: American credibility (and the credibility of its policymakers). As already indicated in William Bundy's January 1965 memorandum, decisionmakers did not enter the war full of confidence that they would carry the day in Vietnam, but they believed that persistence in Vietnam would signal to friends and foes alike that the United States was ready to assist its allies and to combat "wars of national liberation" in the Global South. If they were not prepared to do this, U.S. allies would lose faith and their enemies would be emboldened, ultimately leading to a cataclysm that would eclipse the catastrophe of the Second World War. Once again, Vietnam was more of a symbol than a real place, but the world's fate hung in the balance in Southeast Asia.

Ball clearly grasped the centrality of this argument, which he later referred to as the "psychological version of the domino theory."[27] He asked rhetorically how much worse it would be for American credibility if the superpower turned out to be incapable of combating the insurgency. In spite of decisionmakers' pessimism, however, that eventuality did not deter them either. Scholars have also pointed to how intertwined national credibility was with personal credibility. Both John F. Kennedy and especially Lyndon Johnson were concerned how failure in Vietnam might affect their election chances and the success of their domestic agenda, especially Lyndon Johnson's efforts on civil rights and social reform, which he believed to depend at least in part on his Republican opponents. Democrats were also laboring under the legacy of the "loss" of China, anti-communist Republican smears in the late 1940s that accused the Democratic Truman Administration of having either not done enough to prevent a communist victory or having actively furthered it by harboring communist sympathizers in the State Department. This politically charged legacy was still a burden

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[26] The July 1965 memoranda
[27] Ball on Psych DT

for Democratic presidents in the 1960s, giving them the impression that they had to prove their credibility as strong anti-communist defenders of the national interest. More recently, scholars have added to that a much more visceral desire by presidents to prove their manliness, to suppress doubts that they were anything less than tough and masculine in the international arena.[28]

Did all of these forces and considerations, psychological and otherwise, make the escalation in Vietnam an inevitable foregone conclusion, a "tragedy without villains?"[29] In traditional orthodox scholarship, this was very much the assumption. David Halberstam's image of Vietnam as a "quagmire" very much suggested escalation without agency, the notion that one president after another took small incremental steps to augment the American investment in Vietnam until, almost imperceptibly, it was too late to withdraw without a major loss to the United States' standing in the world.[30] Nevertheless, more recent scholarship very much rejects an interpretation that displaces responsibility. Especially Fredrik Logevall has argued strongly and persuasively that especially decisionmakers in the Johnson Administration made crucial decisions with the knowledge of potential pitfalls and consequences. More importantly than that, Logevall argues, Johnson and his advisors did have more peaceful alternatives – "real" negotiations, neutralization schemes – and the necessary political capital after Johnson's landslide victory in 1964 and his promises not to use U.S. troops in Vietnam. And yet, they jettisoned those in favor of a course of action that they were not even optimistic about. In that sense, Logevall and others place the bulk of the responsibility and the blame squarely at the feet of Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors.[31] There might be scope for compromise between both positions. While policymakers were not *objectively* forced into escalation, political and foreign policy considerations may have weighed on them to such an extent that they felt *subjectively* constrained to commit to escalation. Lyndon Johnson and his advisors felt constrained by a worldview that prioritized the projection of strength and deterrence, that considered even local confrontations, such as the one in Vietnam, as symbolically crucial for the

[28] From Schelll etc. to Dean
[29] Schlesinger quote
[30] Put in tragedy without villain people – Halberstam etc.
[31] Logevall et al.

global bipolar confrontation. In addition to that, Johnson was worried that his related projects of civil rights and social welfare legislation would fail if he faced a humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam. Nevertheless, such subjectively felt constraints do not absolve the administration of responsibility for the fateful escalation of the war.

Over the next four years, the war escalated steadily until there were almost 550,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam in early 1969. Until 1973, the U.S. air force also dropped more bombs over Vietnam than in Europe during the Second World War.[32] Despite these superlatives, the Vietnam War was actually waged as a "limited war," with crucial curbs on potential escalation. Bombing targets were carefully selected, sometimes personally by the president, entire regions of North Vietnam, close to the border with China, were taboo. Even more importantly, both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations refrained from invading North Vietnam, apart from limited clandestine operations. The reasons for conducting this war in a "limited" way were twofold: First of all, in the age of mutually assured destruction, the U.S. government was careful not to provoke the communist superpowers into becoming involved. This was also a lesson of the Korean War, but this time, also communist China possessed nuclear weapons. Escalation to the level of a world war therefore needed to be scrupulously avoided. At the same time, there were important political considerations, especially for the Johnson Administration. As a president who preferred and prioritized domestic reform over international engagement, Johnson was keenly aware that a larger, full-scale war effort could trigger either a declaration of war or calls for putting the nation on a war-footing, with negative consequences for the public purse on which he relied for financing his large-scale reform projects, especially the Great Society. Johnson and his advisors also feared popular passions in an all out war, clamoring for unrestricted escalation. That would, of course, again raise the specter of the first concern, escalation to a global and potentially nuclear conflict.[33]

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[32] Ascertain the fact!

[33] Herring Different War; other limited war lit

Limited war strategy was understandable, but it had debilitating consequences for the U.S. war effort, especially by a military that had been prepared for large-scale territorial war, but much less for small-scale counterinsurgency. The objective of the war no longer consisted in crushing the enemies and occupying their territory, but in persuading them – whether that was the South Vietnamese NLF or North Vietnamese support – to desist from mounting a guerrilla insurgency inside South Vietnam. Hanoi was, however, consistently prepared to make huge sacrifices for what it viewed as an effort of national self-defense, whereas the United States was increasingly constrained by declining public support and a burgeoning antiwar movement at home. In addition to that, Washington was never able to find a South Vietnamese leadership that commanded the respect and support of the country's population. Throughout the conflict, it appeared that a majority of the population would have sought an accommodation with the NLF and the North – something that Washington never seriously entertained, even though policymakers paid continuous lip service to their willingness to negotiate and compromise. The positions of the contestants were consistently too far apart to be bridged.

The shortcomings of limited war strategy were brutally exposed in the Tet Offensive of early 1968. The NLF and the North used Tet, Vietnam's New Year holiday, to launch coordinated attacks all across the South, in the countryside and in the city. Initial gains seemed impressive, as foreign correspondents witnessed street fighting in Saigon, the conquest of the old imperial city of Hue, and fighting even inside the US Embassy compound, but ultimately, the offensive was rebuffed. The North's and the NLF's objectives of inspiring a countrywide uprising were not realized and the NLF was near to being destroyed as an autonomous Southern organization. The Tet Offensive thus ironically seemed to transform the war into what the United States had always claimed it to be – an invasion of the South by the North. Despite this apparent success for American arms on the battlefield, Tet's impact in the United States was disastrous. Television news broadcast the desperate street fighting in Saigon, including the penetration of the inner sanctum of US representation in the country. Even one of the most venerated TV broadcasters, Walter Cronkite,

somberly concluded that the future did not hold victory, but only further stalemate. The political fallout in an election year was swift. Although Johnson was the incumbent president, a Democratic challenger, Senator Eugene McCarthy, came close to beating him in the New Hampshire primary in March. By the end of that month, the president surprised the nation and even most of his senior advisors by announcing that he would not run for re-election. It seemed that the Tet Offensive had finally ruined the career of one of the nation's most consummate politicians.

This seeming juxtaposition led revisionist historians to declare that Tet was a military victory, but a psychological defeat: The success of American soldiers in Vietnam was turned into defeat by a disheartened home front, irrespective of whether the blame for that development belonged to the media or to politicians and the antiwar movement.[34] Nevertheless, this revisionist take on Tet misses the mark because the war had always and necessarily been fought with an integrated strategy that included both military and psychological objectives. In the limited war setting of Vietnam, it did not matter that the United States undoubtedly had the capacity to prevail on any actual battlefield. It also needed to win the battle for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese – convincing the South Vietnamese that a thriving and successful non-communist Southern part was possible and the North Vietnamese that their stubborn persistence in the face of overwhelming American power was futile. Tet confirmed that the United States was never able to win this particular battle of wills and propaganda, in spite of its awesome military might.

Tet was the watershed of the U.S. engagement in Vietnam. Although President Johnson authorized a last increase in U.S. troops by 13,500, he roundly rejected General Westmoreland demand for more than 200,000 troops. From now on, the only direction U.S. troop strength went in Vietnam was down. In a presidential election year, the war had an ambiguous impact. On the one hand, it contributed to the destruction of the political career of a sitting president and tore his party apart. On the other hand, both candidates – Humphrey for the Democrats and Richard Nixon for the

[34] The stab in the back legend on Tet.

Republicans – were mostly satisfied to remain vague on their ideas for the future. Nixon reiterated that he had a “secret plan” to end the war, which conveniently freed him of the necessity to divulge details. The war only made headlines again towards the end of the campaign. Apart from the turbulent protests surrounding the Democratic Convention in Chicago, with street violence largely initiated by the police, but blamed on the protesters, new steps in Vietnam were only announced in the fall. Humphrey’s poll numbers began to rise after a speech in late September, in which he went against Johnson’s wishes and promised a bombing halt of the North if Hanoi consented to start peace negotiations. Less than a week later, the third party candidate and segregationist George Wallace’s campaign suffered a devastating blow when his running mate, General Curtis LeMay, refused to rule out the use of nuclear weapons to end the war in Vietnam. By mid-October, there was finally movement on the negotiations front. Johnson informed Nixon that he would soon be able to announce Hanoi’s consent to start formal peace negotiations – something that the Republicans retrospectively classified as an unfair “October Surprise” because it might give the Democrats an edge in the final weeks of the campaign.[35] Indeed, Humphrey eventually came within a little more than half a million votes from Nixon.

The real “October Surprise,” however, was perpetrated by the Nixon camp. In response to the prospect of peace negotiations starting soon, a Nixon associate lobbied the South Vietnamese, through the embassy in Washington, to boycott the start of negotiations, promising more consideration of Saigon’s concerns under a Nixon Administration. Although is difficult to claim that Saigon would not have resisted negotiations in any event, these actions were tantamount to treason – and they were known by the Johnson White House. Considerations of political stability and an otherwise embarrassing admission that the South Vietnamese embassy was bugged kept Johnson from divulging this information, but the episode – and indeed the entire election year – had vividly demonstrated how the war was straining the American political system to the breaking point.[36] Nixon narrowly won the election, and even though most historians agree that his emphasis on law

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[35] Republican version of October Surprise
[36] Real October Surprise

and order was more important than his promises on Vietnam, the slogan had as much to do with a reaction to the increase in race riots as to the tumultuous antiwar demonstrations. In that regard, then, the war undoubtedly influenced the outcome of the 1968 election and the subsequent conservative backlash even though it may not have played a central role as a campaign issue.

Nixon's "secret plan" was a mix of strategic retrenchment in Vietnam, punctuated and compensated by spectacular acts of escalation, mixed with a rapprochement to China and the Soviet Union that was designed to exert pressure on their North Vietnamese allies. These larger strategic steps were supplemented by more than four years of peace negotiations in Paris, which eventually led to an agreement in January 1973.

In Vietnam itself, Nixon introduced "Vietnamization," ostensibly a strategy to significantly strengthen the South Vietnamese allied forces, surrender more the tactical initiative to them, thus enabling the United States to facilitate a time scale of steady withdrawal of U.S. soldiers. To be fair, this strategy had already been initiated under the previous administration, but Nixon provided the name and a larger rationale, in part to provide political cover, lest someone think that Vietnamization was exclusively a reaction to the dilemma of the war. Vietnamization was effectively the local implementation of the Nixon Doctrine, an emphasis on the need for U.S. allies to largely help themselves against local and regional challenges, while the United States would still shield them against threats by the communist giants.

On paper, Vietnamization looked successful. Heavy investment and substantial arms shipments turned the South Vietnamese army into the fourth largest military in the world, equipped with some of the most advanced weaponry. Some revisionist historians have claimed more generally that the years after Tet, under the command of General Creighton Abrams, yielded "unexamined victories" in Vietnam.[37] At the same time, the number of U.S. troops in the country steadily declined, which gave Nixon at least some room for maneuver. Yet these limited tactical successes could not

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[37] Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York et al.: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

obscure the fundamental strategic dilemma of Vietnamization that was so brutally exposed by Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's chief negotiator in Paris, in conversation with his counterpart Kissinger. If the United States had not been able to defeat North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front with half a million troops, "how can you succeed when you let your puppet troops do the fighting?"[38] Hanoi was well aware that U.S. troop levels were descending quite rapidly and that they would theoretically only have to wait out their opponents, rather than make major concessions at the negotiating table.

This strategic dilemma forced Nixon and Kissinger into some of the major escalations of the war, including the bombing and subsequent invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and the invasion of Laos in 1971. In these instances, Nixon tried to build on his reputation as anticommunist stalwart in an effort to remain unpredictable and capable of escalation; a strategy that has been referred to as the "madman strategy." Nixon poured his entire frustration with the strategic impasse into the speech defending the Cambodian invasion when he emphasized that he would not have the nation act " like a pitiful, helpless giant."[39] Nevertheless, the Cambodian invasion did not result in tangible benefits at the conference table, but instead provided the necessary impulse for Congress to curtail, for the first time, executive room for maneuver in Southeast Asia. By the end of the year, the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment prohibited the use of any funds beyond the immediate Vietnamese theater of war. As David Schmitz has shown in the first detailed study of the Nixon years in Vietnam based on archival sources, the invasion of Cambodia and the madman theory symbolized the fact that this president was still seeking victory early in his term. But the Cambodian incursion and its aftermath demonstrated that his options were shrinking fast.[40]

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[38] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (4th ed., Boston et al.: McGraw Hill, 2002), 287.
[39] Richard Nixon, Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239701 [accessed April 9, 2021]. On the madman theory, see David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 46.
[40] Schmitz, *Nixon and the Vietnam War,* 146-7.

While Nixon's desperate escalatory measures failed to elicit substantial concessions at the negotiating table in Paris, Nixon was more successful with staving off domestic demands for a speedier withdrawal. Irrespective of the strategy's successes on the battlefield, Vietnamization steadily reduced U.S. troop strengths in Vietnam, which correlated to a decline in U.S. casualties. In addition to that, Nixon pursued a number of discursive, political and legal strategies to destabilize antiwar opinion and to drag out the end of the conflict. Most famously formulated in a speech in early November 1969, but repeated numerous times by Nixon and other members of the administration, he claimed that his policies were supported by a "silent majority," which he contrasted with an irresponsible and undemocratic "vocal minority" – the antiwar movement. Like Johnson before him, he deployed the FBI, CIA, and even the IRS against antiwar groups and individuals to undermine their viability, credibility and patriotism.[41] The Nixon Administration also managed to drag out negotiations with North Vietnam by instrumentalizing – and exaggerating – the issue of prisoners of war and missing in action. Although the numbers were comparatively small in comparison to previous wars, administration officials warned that POW were being tortured and hidden in North Vietnamese prisons. Emphasizing this narrative and the administration's determination to repatriate the POW not only facilitated dragging out the negotiations, but also enabled Nixon to celebrate their return as a substantial achievement – although, after initial doubts early in the war, it was never clear that Hanoi wanted to keep their American captives. After the war, successive U.S. administrations used the same narrative to avoid paying the reparations that had been agreed upon in the Paris Accords and the myth of captives in the jungle provided the basis for countless Hollywood revenge fantasies in the 1980s.[42]

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[41] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Great Silent Majority: Nixon's 1969 Speech on Vietnamization* (College Station, TX, 2014); James Kirkpatrick Davis, *Assault on the Left: The FBI and the Sixties Antiwar Movement* (Westport: Praeger, 1997); Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

[42] H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A., or, Mythmaking in America.* Expanded and updated ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Allen emphasizes, however, that also the antiwar movement sought to instrumentalize the fate of the POW by pointing to the danger of continued

These rhetorical devices and the very fact that it took four years after Nixon entered the White House with a "secret plan" to end the war has given rise to another passionate historiographical debates about the war, namely whether Nixon achieved "peace with honor," as he had promised in the 1968 election campaign, or whether the Paris Accords just provided a "decent interval" between U.S. withdrawal and the ultimate collapse of South Vietnam. Most scholars now agree that the Nixon Administration abandoned all hopes of victory around 1970 and that it since signaled its willingness to accept a "decent interval," a phrase that appears in Kissinger's hand in the margins of a briefing book for his first meeting with Zhou Enlai, China's premier. The administration was conveying this message to China and the Soviet Union in particular, in the hope that they would lean on their allies in Hanoi to accept a compromise peace.[43] In order to resolve the debate, it is also instructive to look at the peace agreement in some detail to see which side made the greater concessions. With the knowledge of conditions that the United States had insisted upon since the beginning, especially the refusal to recognize the South Vietnamese NLF as a legitimate player in the political process and the insistence that North Vietnam stop supplying the insurgency in the South, the magnitude of U.S. concessions comes into sharp focus: Not only did the United States implicitly recognize the NLF, it also agreed to leave substantial North Vietnamese forces *in situ* inside South Vietnam, creating a dangerous military predicament for Saigon. The United States also agreed to substantial reparations. The only substantial concession in return was that Hanoi gave up on its insistence that the Thieu government be dissolved before South Vietnamese elections could take place. Predictably, Nixon and Kissinger also celebrated the agreed return of the POW as a substantial

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captivity if the war continued. For propaganda purposes, Hanoi also released POW into the care of visiting American antiwar activists.

[43] Jeffrey Kimball, "Decent Interval or Not? The Paris Agreement and the End of the Vietnam War," *SHAFR Newsletter*, December 2003, https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/30066/Passport%20December%202003.pdf?sequence=2 [accessed June 24, 2021]; Hanhimaki, Jussi, "Selling the 'Decent Interval:' Kissinger, Triangular Diplomacy, and the End of the Vietnam War, 1971–73," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 14 (March 2003), 159–194; Schmitz, *Nixon and the Vietnam War,* 147.

achievement – even though doubts about their return had consistently been fanned by the administration itself.[44]

By celebrating the agreement as a major achievement that supposedly guaranteed South Vietnam's longer-term survival and the return of all American soldiers, including those missing in action, the Nixon Administration laid the foundation for postwar revisionism and revanchism. Hanoi's inability to account for each individual soldier was used to justify withholding the promised reparations. More importantly for the trajectory of the continuing debate on the Vietnam War, Nixon had also secretly promised his allies in Saigon that he would use American airpower to enforce North Vietnamese postwar compliance with the agreement. Nevertheless, by 1973, this was an impossible promise to make since there was no appetite in the United States to renew the war in any shape or form. In June 1973, Congress passed the Case-Church Amendment, which prohibited any further military action in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos without prior congressional approval. Consequently, when Nixon's successor Gerald Ford requested additional aid for Saigon in 1975, Congress declined and Saigon fell at the end of April.[45] Although it had been dishonest even in early 1973 to promise renewed military action in South Vietnam, this narrative allowed Nixon to add another stab-in-the-back narrative, namely that Congress had obstructed the administration's sincere desire to help its allies if North Vietnam violated the terms of the peace agreement. This narrative was another variation on those that blamed the media for "losing" the Tet Offensive or the antiwar movement for losing the war on the whole.

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[44] The Paris Peace Accords, 1973'; in McMahon, *Major Problems* (2nd and 3rd editions), or at: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Paris_Peace_Accords [accessed June 24, 2021]; Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, 'Address and Press Conference on the Paris Peace Accords', *Department of State Bulletin* 68 (1973), 153-69.

[45] Schmitz, *Nixon and the Vietnam War,* 144-5.