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Kennedy and Vietnam

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Between 1961 and 1963, US President John F. Kennedy strengthened and transformed the American commitment to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, better known as "South Vietnam"). Building upon the program he inherited from President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy provided Saigon with economic aid, military assistance, and political support – and increasing numbers of US troops – in quantities that underscored the perceived importance of South Vietnam to US national security. He did so to help the RVN stanch a communist insurgency south of the 17th parallel that was receiving increasing amounts of support from fellow communists living north of that line. At no time did he fundamentally revisit that commitment, nor did he evaluate it in the context of a more searching review of American grand strategy. In short, Kennedy sustained and enhanced the US commitment to South Vietnam largely because Washington had already made it.

The durability of that commitment, as well as its meaning for Kennedy, remains contested. Much as JFK has eluded the grasp of biographers in search of his core convictions, scholars, journalists, and pundits continue to debate his approach to Vietnam, endowing his public and private pronouncements with extraordinary import. They could hardly do otherwise, given the course of the war following his death. Early, favorable treatments qualified his role in the conflict, drawing a distinction between his actions and the more expansive measures adopted by his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson. Subsequent work, more critical of Kennedy writ large, faulted JFK for narrowing Johnson's options.[1] Still later accounts emphasized Kennedy's reservations about the war

1 For representative favorable accounts, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965) and Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965). For more critical works, see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972) and Lawrence J. Bassett and Stephen E. Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War," in Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963* (Oxford, 1989), 223–52.

and even the likelihood of him extricating the United States from the looming tragedy – a virtual history that is, ultimately, unknowable.[2]

More evident is Kennedy's inability to escape the tensions at work in his approach to Vietnam. By the end of his administration, he had become frustrated with and discouraged by the actions of his ally in the conflict, South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm. Yet even as he sanctioned the withdrawal of American soldiers from Vietnam and expressed his concerns about the war, Kennedy was still invested in winning it. Those conflicting imperatives shaped his program in ways he was unable to reconcile. In the end, Kennedy's Vietnam policy was defined by his failure to align US objectives with Washington's means for achieving them, and by the resulting drift toward deeper engagement.

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Kennedy entered the presidency without a well-formed national security strategy. He was highly conscious of flashpoints likely to pose problems in the years ahead, but he never calibrated ends and means in ways that prioritized and resourced the matters that came before him. Nor did he establish a systematic process to assess those challenges, having replaced the bureaucratized Eisenhower machinery with an ad hoc, task-force approach to policy formation. Berlin, Laos, Cuba, the balance of payments, nuclear weapons – all received concerted attention, but often as discrete challenges disaggregated from a conceptual whole. As a result, his engagement with these concerns, including his eventual absorption with Vietnam, would remain episodic and, to a large extent, improvised.[3]

Kennedy's approach to national security flowed from that reactive stance. In fact, it amounted to a posture more than a strategy. "Flexible response," a concept that aimed to shift the country's emphasis away from nuclear weapons and massive retaliation, sought to grant Kennedy greater latitude to address a range of military contingencies. Offering a slate of options of graduated intensity, flexible response allowed him to meet all levels of provocation,

2 John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992); Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in Mark J. White (ed.), *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (New York, 1998), 19–62; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA, 2000); Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston, 2003); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford, 2003); James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch, *Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived: Virtual JFK* (Lanham, MD, 2009).

3 Marc J. Selverstone, "John F. Kennedy and the Lessons of First-Year Stumbles," in Michael Nelson, Jeffrey L. Chidester, and Stefanie Georgakis Abbott (eds.), *Crucible: The President's First Year* (Charlottesville, VA, 2018), 101–6.

from the brushfire wars of the developing world to the conventional and nuclear exchanges of state-based conflict. While Kennedy expanded the United States' strategic arsenal by procuring more nuclear warheads and augmenting their delivery systems, he greatly enhanced the nation's conventional and unconventional warfare capabilities – necessities, as he put it, for defending freedom in its "hour of maximum danger."[4]

Kennedy's alarming rhetoric, which he delivered repeatedly during his first year in office, reflected a consensus, shared broadly in the United States, about the malign intentions of international communism. While those fears had grown following World War II, and especially as the Cold War enveloped both Asia and Europe, they encompassed new worries that communism was on the march and setting its sights on the postcolonial world. Of particular concern was the speech on "wars of national liberation" that Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev delivered two weeks before Kennedy's inaugural in January 1961. Although Khrushchev's primary audience was a socialist camp embroiled in an ever-widening Sino-Soviet split, his focus on developing nations alarmed JFK, who made it required reading for his national security team. The prospect of a newly energized Cold War on the periphery thus created threats and opportunities for an administration that was younger and more activist than its predecessor.

Those threats, whether perceived or real, challenged the credibility of Kennedy officials as responsible stewards of the national interest. Though populated in key posts by nominal Republicans, the Kennedy administration and the Democrats who ran it recognized the burden of governing as the party that "lost" both China and the US atomic monopoly during the late 1940s. Comprising a self-professed New Generation of Americans, those officials signaled a willingness to experiment in the international field, particularly in areas where they found the previous administration wanting. Kennedy was determined to engage the decade's brushfire wars to prevent the further erosion, as he saw it, of the West's position in the Cold War. Failure to do so would result in blowback for both party and nation, and especially for Kennedy, who sought to convey an image of strength in foreign affairs. The dictates of credibility spoke to the dangers of appearing weak and of accommodating communist gains in a seemingly zero-sum battle between East and West.[5]

4 "Inaugural Address," 20 January 1961, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*, hereafter *PPP:JFK* (Washington, DC, 1962), 1961:1–3, Doc. 1.

5 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Reappraisal of US National Security Policy*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2005 [1982]), 197–234; Robert J. McMahon, "Credibility and World

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While international developments shaped the contours of US policy toward Vietnam, a series of political, institutional, and intellectual currents shaped the nature of Kennedy's commitment. Several of them transcended the Kennedy administration, taking root prior to the 1960s and persisting well beyond it. Their influence during the Kennedy years was nevertheless acute and greatly affected the nature of the US project in Vietnam.

For Kennedy, Vietnam's problems were part and parcel of the broader challenges facing countries in the Global South. JFK had been more finely attuned to these issues than most elected officials in Washington. Visiting Southeast Asia during a 1951 trip designed to enhance his stature for a Senate run the following year – he had been elected to the House in 1946 – Kennedy witnessed the strength of nationalism coursing through Indochina during the Franco-Việt Minh War. That experience informed his critique of French policy and Washington's support of it, as well as positions he later took as a US senator. His subsequent criticism of the French in Algeria reflected an awareness of the changing tides of history, and his interest in Africa and Asia highlighted the need to engage the developing world more proactively than was currently the case. His appraisal of those dynamics remained couched within a Cold War framework, however – and a partisan one at that – especially as he burnished a national reputation and made a run at the presidency in 1960. Those impulses collided in Kennedy's approach to Vietnam. Championing Ngô Đình Diệm and the fledgling state he was building, Kennedy regarded South Vietnam as "the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike" in the "Free World"'s struggle against communism in Southeast Asia.[6] Success in Vietnam was thus crucial and depended largely on American aid if the West were to win the "hearts and minds" of the postcolonial world.

That battle took shape alongside prevailing assumptions about societies emerging from colonial rule. Theories about modernization, which traced those transitions from their preindustrial roots to economic maturity, gained traction in the postwar years in conjunction with a reverence for social science and its insights about national development. Incubating at universities and think tanks such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 15 (4) (Fall 1991), 455–71.

6 Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, 2012, xi–xv, 286–7, 665–6; Fredrik Logevall, *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century* (New York, 2020), 574–8.

and RAND, modernization offered explanations for the social, economic, and political conditions at work in developing societies. But it also sought to channel those communities toward progressively greater productivity, democracy, and stability. Kennedy initiatives such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, as well as the Agency for International Development (AID) and the Foreign Assistance Act that created it, reflected the modernizing impulse at work in the postwar era, as well as the more deeply seated missionary impulse animating it. Those initiatives and institutions spoke to the dangers of the modernizing process and the fear that communists would exploit its frictions and instabilities. In South Vietnam, those dynamics informed a raft of civic action and rural affairs projects following Diệm's ascendance in the mid-1950s. By the early 1960s, they would lead US officials to embrace the thrust of the Strategic Hamlet Program, which Saigon devised to build self-sufficient enclaves loyal to the RVN and hostile to the communists. Each of these efforts signaled a belief in the malleability of societies and a commitment on the part of US officials to bend them to their will.[7]

That reflex to impose allegedly universal concepts upon the developing world dovetailed with an activist posture that Kennedy adopted and radiated. He had vowed to "get the country moving again" during the 1960 presidential campaign and his frustration with the perceived torpor and drift of the Eisenhower years was central to his electoral appeal. Kennedy and his band of "action intellectuals" pledged to usher the United States into the New Frontier of the 1960s, challenging Americans to accept risk and sacrifice in their promotion of liberty and prosperity. His was an administration that vowed to do hard things, whether expanding the welfare state and going to the Moon or bearing the burden of its international demands and obligations. Although Kennedy described himself as a pragmatic realist – an "idealist without illusions" – his policies projected an ethos of romantic daring, of exuberant energy, and set the country on course that promised greater engagement in national life and greater activism in world affairs.[8]

That sense of boldness expressed itself as a quasi-cult of toughness – an assertive posture that informed Kennedy-era policymaking. Cultivating a hypermasculine ethic, the administration sought to enact hard-headed

7 For overviews, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Early Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2004); for tensions between the United States and South Vietnamese approaches, see Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 127–8.

8 Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 95.

solutions to a series of problems at home and abroad. Whether redressing the humiliation at the Bay of Pigs, preserving Western rights in a divided Berlin, or contesting the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba, Kennedy sought to validate his inaugural pledge to "pay any price" and "bear any burden" to "assure the survival and the success of liberty." Informed by their collective upbringing in an "imperial brotherhood" of elite institutions, Kennedy officials would apply brains and brawn to the management of national problems, and the hothouse environment in which they worked informed elements of both the Kennedy style and Kennedy policy.[9]

Yet for all the macho talk emanating from the White House, Kennedy displayed a more subtle appreciation of power and its uses than did many of his aides. Rather than double down on his vow to "oppose any foe" in the twilight struggle of the Cold War, Kennedy showed a willingness to absorb potentially damaging political hits, to parry communist provocations, and to respond creatively to international challenges.[10] In several cases, it would be his capacity for empathy, rather than an impulse toward confrontation, that marked his pursuit of the national interest. Whether neutralizing Laos, accommodating to the Berlin Wall, or negotiating a resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy demonstrated a reflex toward restraint and reflection that also marked his approach toward Vietnam.

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His engagement with Vietnam was, and would remain, intermittent, as it was one of numerous challenges Kennedy faced when he assumed the presidency. Berlin, Cuba, Laos, the strategic balance – these and other demands, foreign and domestic, would absorb his attention and crowd out time to work on Vietnamese matters that were challenging to begin with and growing progressively worse. Between Kennedy's election and his inauguration, antipathy toward Diệm had risen to such levels that elements of the South Vietnamese military had sought to overthrow his government; weeks later, Southern Vietnamese communists, with support and direction from the North, formed the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF) to guide the revolt against the Ngôs. The implications of those developments would soon become clear. Although Kennedy's two transition meetings with outgoing president Dwight D. Eisenhower failed to touch on Vietnam directly,

9 "Inaugural Address," 1; Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst, MA, 2001).
10 "Inaugural Address."

JFK received a briefing on the RVN's prospects at the end of his first week in office. It came from Air Force Colonel Edward Lansdale, whose experience in the country dated to the earliest days of the Diệm regime. The picture Lansdale painted was a damning one, leading Kennedy to frame it as the "worst" problem the administration now faced.[11]

But it was not the most immediate, as Kennedy was confronting impending crises near and far, including those of his own making. Tensions in Laos threatened to erupt into superpower proxy war as competing communist, neutralist, and royalist factions vied for control after the collapse of a power-sharing arrangement. National security officials considered the deployment of ground troops and even nuclear weapons to forestall a communist triumph before Kennedy bluffed all sides with a show of force. Washington's reluctance to Americanize the conflict and further militarize it, combined with Moscow's unwillingness to do the same, ultimately led Kennedy and Khrushchev to neutralize the kingdom, a lone, encouraging result from their otherwise frank and chilly meeting that June in Vienna. Negotiations over the fate of Laos would ensue against the backdrop of political intrigue and the occasional battlefield flare-up, but by July 1962, diplomats from 14 nations had fashioned a deal, albeit shaky, to remove the country from the chessboard of Cold War competition. Still, the failure of North Vietnamese forces to vacate Laos, in accordance with the agreement hammered out at Geneva, facilitated the continued infiltration of communist forces into South Vietnam, further complicating efforts to secure its independence.

Kennedy's initial decisions on Laos, and ultimately on Vietnam, also took shape in the context of the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation of mid-April 1961. Planning to unseat Cuban strongman Fidel Castro had begun in March 1960 and had continued throughout the year, even as presidential candidate Kennedy chastised the ruling Republicans for allowing Castro to consolidate power on their watch. By the time of Kennedy's inauguration, the covert operation had evolved from a guerrilla infiltration into an amphibious invasion. It soon became clear that Kennedy had failed to ask the right questions and review key particulars. Ultimately, he took responsibility for the ensuing debacle, though not without his own press leaks distributing blame. Still, he saw a silver lining in the episode: If it wasn't for the Bay of Pigs, he remarked on more than one occasion, "we'd be in Laos by now – and that would be a hundred times worse."[12] His skepticism about the "expert" advice

11 W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1972), 265.
12 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 644; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 339.

he received, from intelligence as well as from military officials, remained throughout his time in office and conditioned his assessment of recommendations on Vietnam.

In fact, the Cuban fiasco affected Kennedy's decision-making for the rest of his presidency. For starters, it left him more inclined to trust his own judgment on national security matters. But it also led him to centralize planning and policy more fully within the White House. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy moved formally into its West Wing and established a Situation Room in the basement, improving the flow of critical information to and from the president's staff. Retired general Maxwell Taylor, the epitome of the action-intellectual soldier-statesman, became Kennedy's personal military advisor, mediating between the Oval Office and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And both Special Counsel Ted Sorensen and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy – men whose portfolios bore little relation to foreign policy but whose loyalty and judgment the president valued – became increasingly engaged on a range of international problems.[13]

Given his absorption in the Caribbean and Laotian troubles, Kennedy turned his attention to Saigon only after the end of the Cuban operation. The day after its ignominious conclusion, the president empaneled an interagency task force, chaired by Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric, to evaluate the situation in Vietnam. By mid-May, JFK had implemented its recommendations: an increase in economic aid; the use of psychological and covert operations; an expansion of the South Vietnamese army; and the dispatch of US Special Forces to train the South Vietnamese military. Those measures coincided with the visit to Saigon of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, who sought to convey the depth of the United States' commitment to the RVN. Collectively, those actions, along with the continued use of the task force approach, comprised an effort to assist the South Vietnamese in waging their war against the Vietnamese communists. Although control of the "Presidential Program" would migrate nominally to the State Department, real power flowed through the Pentagon, which controlled most of the program's resources, decision-making, and direction.

Kennedy's interest in Vietnam also reflected his fascination with counterinsurgency and his determination to enhance the nation's unconventional capabilities. Tailored to the military demands of the era, which were likely to feature sublimited guerrilla engagements more than the set-piece battles of conventional conflict, counterinsurgency appealed to JFK's activist agenda

13 Selverstone, "John F. Kennedy."

and willingness to confront communism on the global periphery. Kennedy thus took steps to develop the tools for meeting the communists on every front. He called for the creation of a special school for counterinsurgency; directed the Pentagon to inventory American paramilitary assets; asked AID to consider further support for local forces; enhanced the federal machinery to promote and support such forces; augmented and expanded existing means for improving counterinsurgency techniques and operations; created a senior-level special group as a clearing house on counterinsurgency (staffing it with some of his most trusted aides, including his brother Robert); and established a national counterinsurgency doctrine to guide all federal agencies involved in such efforts. In short, Kennedy embraced counterinsurgency wholeheartedly and recalibrated the machinery of government to further its development.[14]

South Vietnam was a proving ground for this type of warfare. As much as its defense stemmed from concerns about US credibility and the activation of "domino" dynamics – the fear that Saigon's fall would lead neighboring and otherwise vulnerable states to collapse as well – its security became equally compelling because of the challenge itself. Incorporating elements of nation-building, special operations, covert warfare, and military assistance, the counterinsurgency program in South Vietnam was emblematic of the challenges of the New Frontier, demanding a response from the "best and the brightest" that Kennedy had assembled for that very purpose. The opportunity to experiment with an array of newly designed tools appealed to senior officials, including Kennedy and McNamara, who likened Vietnam to a laboratory for their efforts. In all, the program to aid the RVN in its war against the NLF and its military arm, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), was one that Kennedy embraced and continued to expand throughout his time in office.

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The most critical moment for doing so came in the fall of 1961. An increase in PLAF operations, the infiltration of additional forces from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, and the collapse of RVN defenses in several provinces presented Saigon with an increasingly parlous situation. Diệm requested further American assistance and Kennedy responded by sending a fact-finding team, headed by Taylor and the National Security Council's Walt Rostow,

14 For writing on Kennedy and unconventional war, see Jeff Woods, "Brushfire Wars," in Marc J. Selverstone, *A Companion to John F. Kennedy* (Malden, MA, 2014), 436–57.

to assess Saigon's needs. The report they submitted reflected their anxiety about the war and proposed a more sweeping effort to stanch the communist onslaught. In addition to recommending that the United States increase South Vietnam's capacity to provide for its own defense, Taylor called for the insertion of up to 8,000 American combat troops, ostensibly to provide flood relief following catastrophic rains, as a means of stiffening Saigon's morale and stopping the infiltration of soldiers and supplies.

Kennedy, however, rejected the use of US combat troops. Dubious of the merits of a deeper commitment, he stood virtually alone among senior national security officials in calling for a more deliberate and restrained response. Much preferring the provision of aid and assistance so that South Vietnam could manage its own affairs, Kennedy sent additional military advisors rather than combat units to assist the RVN. Although he remained steadfast in opposing the introduction of combat troops, he placed no ceiling on the insertion of military advisors. Their numbers would expand exponentially – from less than 700 to more than 16,700 – during his time in office.

Indeed, Kennedy's aversion to a combat-troop deployment failed to prevent his program from assuming a militarized cast. Following discussion of the Taylor Report, Kennedy consented to a range of measures intended to improve Saigon's fighting capacity, as well as its ability to win the political struggle against the NLF. Beyond the deployment of military advisors, the provision of economic aid, and renewed attention to civil affairs, Kennedy authorized the introduction of fixed-wing aircraft and greater use of helicopter squadrons and seaborne units, and expanded intelligence operations. In time, he would support the use of herbicides to deny the PLAF the cover of foliage and the availability of foodstuffs in the countryside. He also elevated the profile of both the US–RVN relationship and the US military mission in South Vietnam (Figure 20.1). To signal their heightened importance and direction of an increasingly complex and wide-ranging operation, Kennedy sanctioned the establishment of a "limited partnership" between Washington and Saigon, as well as the creation of MACV – the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – with a four-star general at the helm. In time, MACV would not only direct the assistance effort but assume the functions of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group – headed by a three-star general – that in one form or another had been operating in Vietnam since 1950.

While MACV sought to improve the capabilities of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), the counterinsurgency revolved around initiatives

Figure 20.1 John F. Kennedy meeting with Nguyễn Đình Thuận, Chief Cabinet Minister to President Ngô Đình Diệm of South Vietnam. Thuận delivered a letter from Diệm regarding the communist threat to his country (June 14, 1961).
Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

designed to protect the population and isolate the communists. Those efforts took shape through the Strategic Hamlet Program, conceived of and administered by Saigon, but supported by US and British officials. In seeking to create an archipelago of self-sufficient, noncommunist villages loyal to the government, Saigon, Washington, and London all borrowed from the recent past. Prior attempts to create model villages or agrovilles had met with mixed success throughout Southeast Asia, but planners hoped a more targeted and systematic program would guide the social revolution in a favorable direction. That transformation, which sought to counter the maladies of "communism, underdevelopment, and disunity," required the mass mobilization of society but on a local level. Entire villages were uprooted and forced to secure their own provisions, often without compensation. Ultimately, the program failed to provide its promised benefits, alienating many of those swept up in the experiment and providing valuable grist for communist propaganda. But it was indicative of the era. As much as its implementation collapsed under its own weight and mismanagement, its focus on progress, nation-building, and "rational engineering" reflected a belief in

social science and the possibility of translating concepts about modernization and development from theory into practice.[15]

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While American and Vietnamese officials continued to tout reports of progress throughout 1962, troubling signs were apparent. In early January 1963, a military engagement at Ấp Bắc, 35 miles (55 kilometers) southwest of Saigon, seemed to indicate growing confidence among the communists and a willingness to stand and fight rather than hit and run; three Americans died in the skirmish, which resulted in the downing of five US helicopters. Military officials put a positive spin on the battle, but Kennedy was troubled by critical reporting of it. Likely more disturbing was the about-face of Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Montana), whose long-standing support of Diệm was eroding, as was his confidence in the prospect of victory. His gloomy, private report to Kennedy in December 1962, following an extended trip to the region, became public the following February, contributing to a more widely shared sense of concern in the early months of 1963. Those worries were as palpable in South Vietnam as they were in the United States. RVN displeasure with US officials, the US media, and especially with the growing number of US personnel in-country – a challenge to the Ngôs' control of the populace and their stance as nationalists – led Diệm and Nhu to lobby for sending some of them home.

By then, the NLF was controlling ever larger swaths of the South Vietnamese countryside. Reports from the field indicated that the number of fulltime communist guerrillas had expanded from 4,000 in early 1960 to 23,000 in 1963, with upward of 100,000 part-time fighters joining the hard-core PLAF.[16] Their control of the countryside likewise expanded over the course of Kennedy's presidency. By the fall of 1962, the NLF could claim roughly 20 percent of South Vietnamese villages and 9 percent of its rural population and exercised varying degrees of control over another 47 percent of the villages.[17] Those numbers would continue to grow throughout 1963, with the PLAF in the ascendance. By the fall of that year, communist forces were also

15 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2003); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

16 "A Program of Action," Annex 1, *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967* (hereafter *US–VR*), 11:89–90; RFE 1, September 29, 1961, ibid.; RFE-59, December 3, 1963, *US–VR*, 12:488.

17 RFE-59, December 3, 1962, *US–VR*, 12:488.

enjoying a downward trend in casualties, weapons losses, and defections, while engaging more readily in armed attacks and violent incidents.[18]

Political developments had by then turned concern into crisis. In early May, an armed attack by RVN forces on Buddhist celebrants in Huế sparked a protracted confrontation between South Vietnam's largest religious group and the Saigon government, casting further doubt on Diệm's ability to unify his country in its fight against the communists. Following the incident, US officials caucused on how best to resolve the tensions. But the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk one month later – a martyrdom photographed and published in media outlets around the world – heightened unease in Saigon and Washington. Kennedy groused at advisors who failed to alert him to the Buddhists as a political force and called on them to impose more effective leverage against the Diệm government.[19]

They hoped to do so through a change in representation. Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., who had tried to mollify Diệm since his posting to Saigon in early 1961, had fallen out with officials at the State Department and the White House who thought him ineffectual. The administration thus turned to Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., a choice with bipartisan appeal, to manage relations with Diệm. Kennedy had a history with Lodge, besting him in their Massachusetts Senate race of 1952 and then again in 1960, when Lodge ran as vice president on the Republican (also known as the "Grand Old Party" or GOP) ticket. Lodge's fluency in French, as well as his personality and stature – he had been ambassador to the United Nations during the Eisenhower administration, and had a long family pedigree of government service – made him an attractive candidate for the challenging post.

But it was the political cover Lodge offered that made him so valuable. The administration was taking increasing fire for its handling of Diệm, heightening the stakes of its escalating commitment. Partisan battles over Vietnam had emerged after the creation of MACV and the expansion of the Presidential Program in 1962; the sniping continued as GOP figures charged JFK with fighting an undeclared war, especially with reports of American casualties and managed news appearing in the press. The difficulties of 1963 – Ap Bac, the Mansfield Report, the "Buddhist Crisis" – only heightened the likelihood that Vietnam would emerge as a campaign issue the following year. Although a Harris poll indicated popular support for Kennedy's policy by margins of two to one, the presence of Lodge on the Kennedy team was

18 RFE-90, October 22, 1963, *US–VR*, 12:579–82.
19 Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 271.

meant to insulate the administration from partisan attack. His selection as ambassador, therefore, was a shrewd but fateful decision. Fully convinced of his own rectitude, Lodge approached his mission with an imperious and unilateral bearing that, combined with his deep skepticism about Diệm, left him favorably disposed toward supporting a coup.

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Recent events in South Vietnam gave Lodge little reason to think otherwise. On the eve of his arrival – and likely because of it – Nhu's forces launched raids on the pagodas and jailed thousands of protestors, many of them students. Diệm instituted martial law, raising the stakes in his showdown with the Buddhists and his standoff with the Americans. Days later, on August 24, the State Department's George Ball, Averell Harriman, and Roger Hilsman, along with Michael Forrestal at the White House – officials who had been deeply critical of the Ngôs – cabled Lodge, acknowledging that Diệm's ability to "rid himself" of Nhu would likely determine the future of US support for the RVN president. More senior officials at State, the Pentagon, and the CIA, who were not party to the wire, railed against the freewheeling of their subordinates. Kennedy, too, snapped at aides who circumvented a more deliberative policy process. But his failure to institute a more rigorous system of policymaking, as well as profound fissures on Vietnam policy itself, shaped an environment that allowed for improvisation and indiscipline.

The August 24 missive – Cable 243 – touched off a mini-crisis within the administration. For the first time since the fall of 1961, senior US officials held sustained discussions about the direction of American policy. In fact, for the first time in his presidency, Kennedy engaged in daily, high-level meetings on South Vietnam. They lasted the better part of a week, as the White House struggled to keep abreast of developments, including talk of coup plotting, and what the United States should do about it. Significantly, the administration never reversed the thrust of Cable 243, an implicit acknowledgment of its willingness to drop Diệm. But the coup fizzled; Nhu sniffed it out and divided the generals, who themselves were unsure of American support. The United States was thus in no better position after those events than before they occurred. In fact, given the rancor between pro- and anti-Diệm factions on Kennedy's team and Diệm's knowledge of Washington's scheming, the administration was much worse off.

Searching for firmer footing, Kennedy launched several initiatives – public as well as private – to provide him with better information about the war and better leverage against the RVN. In appearances on US television news

programs, JFK discussed the challenges facing Vietnam and the nature of US assistance. Speaking with CBS anchor Walter Cronkite on September 2, Kennedy emphasized the need for changes in RVN policy and personnel to gain the allegiance of the Vietnamese people – a thinly veiled suggestion to lessen Nhu's influence. Washington could provide assistance and advice, Kennedy said, but the war was South Vietnam's to win or lose. The United States would nevertheless remain in Vietnam, a mantra Kennedy had long voiced and which he repeated in a subsequent interview with NBC's David Brinkley and Chet Huntley. At several points in that latter conversation, he warned against American impatience and affirmed his belief in the domino theory, referencing the dangers of China's regional ambitions – a key concern to US officials – and the risk of American withdrawal. While he likely overstated his belief in domino dynamics, he still subscribed to a worldview, grounded in the importance of credibility and the dangers of appearing weak, that argued for staying engaged.[20]

All the while, Kennedy remained disheartened by Diệm's leadership, confounded by brother Nhu and the irresponsible pronouncements of his wife, Trần Lệ Xuân, and increasingly alarmed by the trajectory of events. As summer turned to fall, Kennedy's frustrations boiled over and contributed to his worry that Diệm might ultimately lose the war – a concern clearly evident on the recordings he secretly made of White House conversations that September.[21] These sources reinforce the argument that Kennedy's primary focus was on progress in the counterinsurgency, and that related developments in Vietnam – Diệm's failure to broaden his political base, his crackdown on protestors, his mistreatments of the Buddhists – mattered only insofar as they affected the war effort.

Kennedy's resolve to continue the fight also reflected his aversion to a compromise solution that would have removed Vietnam as a site of Cold War competition. Responding to an August 29 appeal from French president Charles de Gaulle to explore the possibility of neutralizing Vietnam, Kennedy dismissed the gambit outright. With Laos continuing to teeter politically, JFK had little interest in pursuing a similar solution across the shared border; it was a position the administration had long held. Kennedy's rejection

20 "Transcript of Broadcast with Walter Cronkite Inaugurating CBS Television News Program," September 2, 1963, *PPP:JFK, 1963*: 650–3, Doc. 340; "Transcript of Broadcast on NBC's 'Huntley-Brinkley Report,'" September 9, 1963, ibid., 658–61, Doc. 349.

21 Meeting Tape 111, September 19, 1963; Meeting Tape 112, September 23, 1963; Meeting Tape 114/A49, all in Papers of John F. Kennedy (hereafter JFK Papers), President's Office Files (hereafter POF), Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

of neutralization also stemmed, in part, from friction with Paris over alliance matters in Europe and de Gaulle's lack of full support for American efforts in Southeast Asia. In fact, suspicions that the French were engaged in back-channel meddling with Nhu, leading toward possible talks with Hanoi and the ouster of American advisors, worried Kennedy aides who feared that events were slipping out of their control.[22]

To regain the administration's balance, Kennedy dispatched a series of fact-finding teams to South Vietnam. Their purpose, ostensibly, was to collect better information about the military and political situations so the president and his aides might devise an effective response. Yet Kennedy was also reacting to reports of disarray within his administration; the search for better policy, therefore, reflected his need to project an air of competence and a sense of unity. Nevertheless, a joint mission from the State and Defense departments, headed by Joseph Mendenhall and Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, delivered a report so incongruous in its findings that Kennedy jokingly wondered whether the two had visited the same country. Seeking clarity, JFK sent the more senior team of Defense Secretary McNamara and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Taylor for a week-long visit to assess the state of the war, as well as actions Washington might take to improve Diệm's chances of victory.

The report they delivered in October unified the administration around measures they hoped would ensure better performance from Diệm's government. Tying together policies that had been percolating for months and preserving the pragmatic thrust of Kennedy's program – supporting those activities that helped the counterinsurgency and opposing those that hindered it – the report called for economic sanctions on South Vietnamese infrastructure projects, import programs, and security forces.[23] Acknowledging the tenacity of the Diệm regime and the likelihood of having to live with it, Kennedy harbored faint hope that the sanctions would leverage Diệm into better performance. But he also recognized that they might reinvigorate planning for a coup – a development he was prepared to accept.

The McNamara-Taylor report also recommended the gradual withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam. Planning for their removal had begun informally in May 1962, when McNamara first asked Harkins about a calendar for their

22 See, for instance, Saigon to State, August 31, 1963, and Memorandum of a Conversation, August 31, 1963 in Department of State, Edward C. Keefer (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963* (Washington, DC, 1991), vol. IV, 67, 72, docs. 34 and 37.

23 McNamara-Taylor Report, October 2, 1963, *US–VR*, 12:554–73.

departure. Two months later, he directed Harkins to initiate formal planning for a reduction in force, part of a comprehensive effort to harmonize all elements of the counterinsurgency. That planning continued over the next fifteen months and landed on Kennedy's desk in early October 1963. Although JFK had long been open to drawing down troops if the opportunity arose, the documentary record is virtually silent on his connection to such planning. On the other hand, the record shows clearly that McNamara was the prime advocate for withdrawing almost all US troops by 1965.[24]

That timetable signified more than simple frustration with the war, as it was central to McNamara's vision of a more coordinated approach to Vietnam and a more systematized method for devising and implementing defense policy. Indeed, the impetus to change the nature of the counterinsurgency program in Vietnam from one of ad hoc, makeshift responses to that of a sustained, comprehensive approach took shape alongside a similar effort to conceive of the entire Pentagon budget according to more long-range, coordinated estimates. As McNamara made clear upon taking command at the Pentagon, he intended to rationalize its budget process, rein in wasteful spending and duplication, and impose the strictures of sound business practices upon Department of Defense operations.[25]

Those measures heightened the value of relying on indigenous forces for local defense. The cost of stationing troops overseas had been increasing dollar expenditures abroad and the outward flow of gold, leaving Kennedy greatly worried about a ballooning balance of payments deficit. Lowering the nation's military profile in Europe, where the majority of its overseas forces were stationed, thus became a major administration initiative, with implications for the United States' force structure and the health of its finances. To address the diminution of deployments abroad, McNamara emphasized the need for greater air and sealift capacity, measures that addressed both military and economic concerns.

That desire to limit the number of troops abroad sparked a similar urge to bring some of them home. In addition to considering a reduction of force in Europe, McNamara worried about conditions in Korea, where thousands of US troops reinforced efforts to preserve the peace along the 38th parallel. He was troubled by the amount of assistance flowing to Seoul and the ballooning budget for arming and equipping its forces. Korea thus stood as a

24 Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2022).

25 Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, 78–88.

cautionary tale about making long-term, open-ended commitments to the developing world. McNamara made clear to Kennedy his interest in scaling down that commitment and the danger of letting a similar situation develop in Vietnam.[26]

Those fiscal concerns dovetailed with Kennedy's preferred approach to Vietnam, which held that the United States should provide local forces with the tools to manage their own defense. The president thus seems to have endorsed McNamara's planning for withdrawal, but not without reservation. At key points in 1963, following meetings with senior officials on Vietnam, McNamara briefed the president on the scope and progress of withdrawal planning. At each juncture, which included one-on-one encounters as well as sessions with other officials present, Kennedy voiced his skepticism about the merits and context of a US troop withdrawal. In both May and October of 1963, in remarks captured on his White House taping system, the president stressed his reluctance to remove those troops in the face of adverse military conditions. Having shared those sentiments in private as well as in widely attended meetings, those comments most likely represented Kennedy's genuine concern about the circumstances of an American withdrawal.[27]

To be sure, Kennedy's private reservations reinforced as well as clashed with his public statements about the virtues of the American presence in Vietnam. In press conferences and televised interviews, JFK maintained that the United States would stay in Vietnam to help Saigon confront the communist challenge. At the same time, he also expressed – repeatedly and consistently – his belief that the war was Saigon's to win or lose. The tension between those conflicting positions, which Kennedy was never able to reconcile, had been present in his approach to Vietnam since the earliest days of his administration. Still, his reluctance to accept a South Vietnamese defeat, reflected in his apparent willingness to delay a US withdrawal, continued to drive policy and lay at the heart of his thinking about Vietnam.

With the presentation of the McNamara-Taylor Report on October 2, withdrawal planning had reached maturity. Its two strands – the removal of 1,000 troops by the end of that year and practically all the rest by the end of 1965 – developed separately but came together in a White House statement following a day of high-level meetings. Both strands worked to counter headwinds the administration was facing in Washington as well as in Saigon. At home, Kennedy sought to mollify congressmen frustrated not only with Diệm's

26 Meeting Tape 65, JFK Papers, POF, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.
27 Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, 124–5, 158–62, 170–2, 181–2.

behavior but with the disbursement of foreign aid; JFK had been facing a bipartisan backlash against American largesse for the better part of eighteen months and hoped that a firmer and more unified approach to Saigon might rescue his broader aid package. Abroad, the withdrawal plan functioned as both bait and leverage. While it acknowledged the adverse impact that US troops were having on RVN politics – Diệm feared the increasing contact between Americans and South Vietnamese – it also began the countdown on a US departure. As both a carrot and a stick, the planned withdrawal offered multiple means to wrest better performance out of Saigon.[28]

That performance was essential, as earlier optimism about the war was fading. While McNamara and Taylor described the military effort as unaffected by the "Buddhist Crisis," privately the defense secretary was deeply worried about the course of events. Additional study by the State Department, which used the Pentagon's own figures on the war, suggested that momentum now lay with the PLAF.[29] It would swing even further in their direction following the early November coup against Diệm and Nhu – an operation the United States ultimately sanctioned and supported – as the communists took advantage of the chaos and disorganization following the fall of the Ngôs.[30]

Kennedy's appraisal of those developments remains somewhat shrouded. While he expressed shock upon learning that Diệm and Nhu had been murdered, his assessment of the war itself is difficult to discern. He had long received a steady stream of conflicting reports, leaving him none the wiser about its progress. Most likely, his frustrations with Diệm and his skeptical bearing left him more bearish than bullish about its prospects, even after Diệm's demise. But they also left him no less committed to a successful outcome.[31]

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Given the war's subsequent trajectory, Kennedy's own assassination, just weeks after the killing of Diệm and Nhu, has generated endless speculation about the meaning and direction of his Vietnam policy. Several aides later argued that JFK was fully intent on withdrawing from Vietnam. Their testimonies have appeared in memoirs, biographies, oral histories, and scholarly works, and have been joined by the reflections of friends and journalists,

28 Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, 158–203.
29 RFE-90, October 22, 1963, *US–VR*, 12:579–82.
30 For a narrative of the coup, see Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 386–434.
31 Dictabelt 52.1, JFK Papers, POF, Presidential Recordings, JFKL; Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, 195–6.

as well as military and public officials. From the observations of assistants Kenneth O'Donnell and Dave Powers to the pained reflections of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, many of these accounts state flatly that Kennedy was determined to reduce the United States' involvement in Vietnam. At the very least, they maintain, he would not have escalated in the fashion of LBJ.[32] Most of these claims appeared after US prospects in the war had dimmed or after the fighting had ended altogether. Several were infused with more than a wisp of Camelot nostalgia. New sources, such as Kennedy's White House tapes, continue to stir debate about the president's ultimate aims, with a consensus acknowledging the reality of withdrawal planning, if not his definitive commitment to seeing it through.

In the end, Kennedy sought to have it both ways. While loath to deploy combat troops in support of Saigon, JFK appeared equally committed to winning the war against the communists. While open to reducing those troops already in-country, he wavered on the timing of their possible withdrawal. And while publicly hawkish about the need to remain in Vietnam, he privately questioned the virtues of an extended commitment. He was a conflicted Cold Warrior, especially on Vietnam, and the tensions in his policies grew ever sharper as he sought greater room to enact them.

Ultimately, Kennedy's commitment to Saigon, which escalated throughout his time in office, was less than iron clad. For all the rhetoric about South Vietnam as an outpost of freedom, Kennedy never defined its preservation as a vital American interest – not when his 1961 task force highlighted the dangers of Saigon's collapse; not when he entered into a "limited partnership" with the RVN later that year; not when economic and military aid began to flow more freely in 1962; and not when a host of military and political troubles arose in 1963, demanding more of his public and private attention. The "survival and the success of liberty," as Kennedy noted in his inaugural, was an important American concern, but its realization in Southeast Asia was not an essential one.

The commitment to Ngô Đình Diệm was equally instrumental. Kennedy genuinely admired the South Vietnamese president but backed Diệm only so long as he was able to prosecute the counterinsurgency effectively. When Diệm proved wanting, Kennedy indicated his disapproval, setting in motion a series of events that led to Diệm's downfall. The November 1963 coup failed

32 Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, with Joe McCarthy, *"Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye": Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Boston, 1972); Robert S. McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995).

to calm the upheaval in Saigon; in fact, it generated lasting turmoil in South Vietnamese politics, endowing the RVN state with a pervasive instability it was never able to overcome. Hanoi's own escalatory measures would render Saigon's position increasingly dire, and it would fall to Kennedy's successor to manage the deteriorating state of affairs. Still, the rhetoric of Kennedy's commitment, and the policies that flowed from it, diminished LBJ's room for maneuver as surely as they were designed to preserve that flexibility for JFK himself. In the end, that may have been the most consequential legacy of Kennedy's policy toward Vietnam.

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