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THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND THE
VIETNAM WAR

Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships

Part II

1961-1964

PREPARED FOR THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE

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LETTER OF SUBMITTAL

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Washington, DC, December 10, 1984.

Hon. CHARLES H. PERCY,
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations,
U.S. Senate, Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: In response to the request of the Committee on Foreign Relations for an extensive analysis of the role in the Vietnam war of the Committee, the Senate, and the Congress, and of the major decisions made by the Executive, as well as of the relations between the two branches, I am submitting the second of four parts of that study by the Service. The study is entitled, "The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part II, 1961-1964."

The author of all four parts is Dr. William Conrad Gibbons, Specialist in U.S. Foreign Policy, in the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division.

Sincerely,

GILBERT GUDE, *Director.*

FOREWORD

This volume, which is part of an overall study of the roles and relationships of the Executive and the Congress in the Vietnam war being prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, describes events during the 1961-64 period as the United States became progressively more involved in the struggle taking place in Vietnam.

When President Kennedy took office in 1961, the United States had about 800 advisers in Vietnam, a number that had not changed significantly since 1955. The situation in 1961 appeared to be growing more serious, however, and a decision was made by the Kennedy administration to increase the U.S. commitment in an effort to prevent South Vietnam from being overrun by the Communists, as well as to demonstrate to the Soviets, in particular, that the United States was going to stand firm throughout the world. Vietnam was also viewed by Kennedy and his associates as a test case of the ability of the United States to combat Communist-led "wars of national liberation."

Despite some improvement in the situation in 1962 as a result of increased U.S. assistance and greater efforts by the South Vietnamese, the Kennedy administration decided in 1963 that the existing Government in South Vietnam either had to be reformed or replaced. After several months, South Vietnamese military leaders launched a coup against the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, as a result of which Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were assassinated on November 2, 1963.

After President Kennedy's assassination later that same month, President Johnson, who had opposed the break with Diem, vowed to continue Kennedy's policies. As Vice President, Johnson had visited South Vietnam in May of 1961 on behalf of the Kennedy administration, and had taken a strong stand on the importance of defending the country.

When Johnson took office in 1963, there were almost 18,000 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam, many of whom were actively engaged in combat alongside the Vietnamese.

Johnson's first action was to approve in January 1964 a new, broad program of covert military action against North Vietnam by the South Vietnamese with U.S. help and direction.

In May 1964, as the situation again appeared to be growing more critical, Johnson's advisers prepared a plan for direct U.S. military action against North Vietnam, but the plan was shelved in June 1964.

In August 1964, the North Vietnamese attacked a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, and President Johnson, supported by the Congress, retaliated with U.S. air strikes on North Vietnam. Con-

gress also passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing the President to use U.S. forces to defend South Vietnam against aggression. At the time, it was generally assumed that this resolution, like others which Congress had passed in previous years, would have a deterrent effect, and would not lead to or be used as the authority for a larger war.

In November 1964, immediately after his election, and an attack by the North Vietnamese on a U.S. base which had occurred at the same time, President Johnson directed his advisers to draw up a new plan for military action against North Vietnam. In early December, he approved that plan, and ordered the beginning of its first phase. By the end of 1964, when this present volume of the study concludes, there was continuing political instability in South Vietnam—a condition that had persisted since the assassination of Diem—and the President and his advisers were considering further U.S. involvement.

Thus, during 1961-64, in the name of anticommunism and containment, the United States Government—the Executive and the Congress—raised the U.S. ante in Vietnam. The Communists responded in kind. There was some dissent on the U.S. side on the part of a few individuals in both branches who warned that the war could not be “won,” and that the United States would make a tragic mistake in becoming so involved that large-scale U.S. combat forces would eventually have to be used to defend South Vietnam. There was also a sharp difference of opinion within the government between those, primarily in the State Department and the CIA, who argued that the war could be won only by political action accompanied by nonconventional counterinsurgency warfare, and those, primarily in the military but also in the State Department, who thought more direct military action was required to provide the necessary security for political action and for successful counterinsurgency warfare.

The material and findings contained herein are the work of the Congressional Research Service, and do not necessarily represent the views of the committee or its present or past members.

December 31, 1984.

CHARLES H. PERCY,
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations.

PREFACE

This is the second of a four-part study of the course of U.S. public policymaking during the 30 years of the Vietnam war, 1945-75. It does not seek to judge or to assess responsibility, but it does attempt to locate responsibility, to describe roles, and to indicate why and how decisions were made. It is nonpolitical and nonpartisan, as all products of the Congressional Research Service (CRS) are required to be. Occasional references in the text to "liberal" or "moderate" or "conservative," as well as to "internationalist" or "nationalist," "interventionist," or "noninterventionist," or the use of such adjectives as "influential" or "powerful" to denote relative power or influence, are intended to be guides to understanding rather than political labels.

The first part of the study, which was published by the Foreign Relations Committee in April 1984, covered 1945-60, a period for which documentary material is somewhat more available than for the 1961-64 period covered by the present volume. There is, however, better oral history material for the latter period than for the former.

For the Executive, much of the available documentary material for 1961-64 is in the Presidential libraries, but important departmental documents are not in the White House collection, and that limits one's ability to provide a well-rounded treatment of the subject. Numerous key White House and departmental documents are still classified, thus further limiting the treatment of the subject. In the Kennedy Library, there are also about 50 classified tape recordings of meetings on Southeast Asia, including key meetings in August-November 1963 prior to the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem. There are also reported to be White House tape recordings of meetings and telephone conversations during the Johnson administration, presumably including discussion of Southeast Asia, but the location and content of these are unknown, and the tapes are not available. The only exception is a printed transcript or partial transcript of one telephone conversation. (See page 222.)

For the Congress, documentation is also a problem during the 1961-64 period. To date, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has published through 1961 the executive session transcripts of its closed committee hearings, and has authorized CRS to use unpublished executive session transcripts for 1962-64, and to quote from those by authority of the committee. CRS has also had access to some, but not all, of the other papers of the committee for 1961-64. Papers for this period, including executive session transcripts, of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, and other relevant committees, especially Appropriations, are not presently open, however.

In describing historical events, there is also the common problem of giving greater attention to the views of those persons or groups who were the most prolific producers of documentary material, and less attention to the views of those who frequently communicated their position orally and privately in unrecorded conversations.

In an effort to fill in some of the resulting gaps, CRS has conducted a number of oral history interviews in preparation for this study as well as using selected oral histories from the Presidential libraries. In addition, the draft of each part is being submitted to selected individuals who are in a position to advise on the validity and accuracy of the study. For the present volume, the following distinguished former officials and staff of the Executive and Congress served (without remuneration of any kind) as reviewers: from the Executive—William P. Bundy, who served in the CIA in the 1950s, and was then Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Johnson administration, after which he served for 12 years as editor of *Foreign Affairs*; Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, (U.S. Army, Ret.), who was on the Eisenhower White House staff, and served in many posts, including that of NATO Supreme Commander, and is now president of the Institute for Defense Analyses; U. Alexis Johnson, a career Foreign Service officer who served in many positions in which he dealt with Southeast Asia, including Under Secretary of State, Deputy Ambassador to Vietnam, and Ambassador to Thailand; W. W. Rostow (for the 1961 period), a former professor at Cambridge and Oxford universities and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and now a professor at the University of Texas, who was a Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Kennedy, and counselor and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council in the Department of State, and then Special Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Johnson; and William H. Sullivan, former U.S. Ambassador to Laos and Iran, and now president of the American Assembly at Columbia University, who actively participated in Vietnam policymaking during his many years in the Foreign Service, including serving as Chairman of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee; from Congress—Mr. Boyd Crawford, staff administrator of the House Foreign Affairs Committee during the entire 30 years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam (1945–75), Dr. Francis O. Wilcox, chief of staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s, then Assistant Secretary of State, and now Vice Chairman of the Atlantic Council and Dr. Carl Marcy, who served in the State Department during the 1940s, after which he became a member of the staff of the Foreign Relations Committee and succeeded Wilcox as chief of staff. CRS and the author are grateful to those reviewers. William P. Bundy deserves particular thanks for his unstinting assistance and expert advice. The author also thanks his friend Dr. Robert Klaus, director of the Illinois Humanities Council, for his helpful review.

We are also very grateful to Senator Charles Percy, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, 1980–84, for his support of this project, and to Scott Cohen, staff director, and Jerry Ehrenfreund, editor.

In the Congressional Research Service, the author again thanks Director Gilbert Gude, as well as James Robinson, Coordinator of Review, Susan Finsen, Coordinator of Management and Administration, Edgar Glick in the external research section, as well as Michael R. Pearse and Frank D. Posey in the administrative section. In the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, the Chief, Dr. Stanley Heginbotham, and Section Head Robert Goldich, provided outstanding support. Also helpful were the staff of the Foreign Affairs Division library, and Warren Lenhart, head of the Central Research Unit.

At George Mason University, where the author is a visiting professor, the Chair of the Public Affairs Department, Dr. Harold F. Gortner, was especially helpful. Also helpful were Mary Blackwell, Director of Office Support Services, Byron Peters of the Academic Computing Services, and Richard O'Keeffe, Reference Librarian.

Once again the exceptional dedication and hard work of Anne Bonanno, the author's assistant and a member of the staff of Office Support Services, deserve special praise. For this part of the study, as well as for part I, she has been responsible for transcribing the interviews, and for typing, proofing and coding the text, as well as for all the other tasks involved in preparing the manuscript for publication.

There was also excellent cooperation on the part of the staffs of the John F. Kennedy Library and the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, especially Martin F. McGann, Archivist, Barbara L. Anderson, Archivist, Suzanne K. Forbes, Classification Review Archivist, and Ronald Whealan, Librarian, at the Kennedy Library, and Dr. David Humphrey, Senior Archivist, Tina Lawson, Supervisory Archivist, Linda Hansen, Archivist, and Nancy Smith, Archivist, at the Johnson Library. Ted Gittinger, a historian in charge of oral history interviews for Vietnam for the Johnson Library, was also helpful, as were Betty Austin, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, and Sheryl B. Vogt, Head of the Russell Library, University of Georgia.

None of those cited above, nor anyone else connected with the project outside of CRS, bears any responsibility for the facts and views presented herein, which are the final responsibility of the author and CRS.

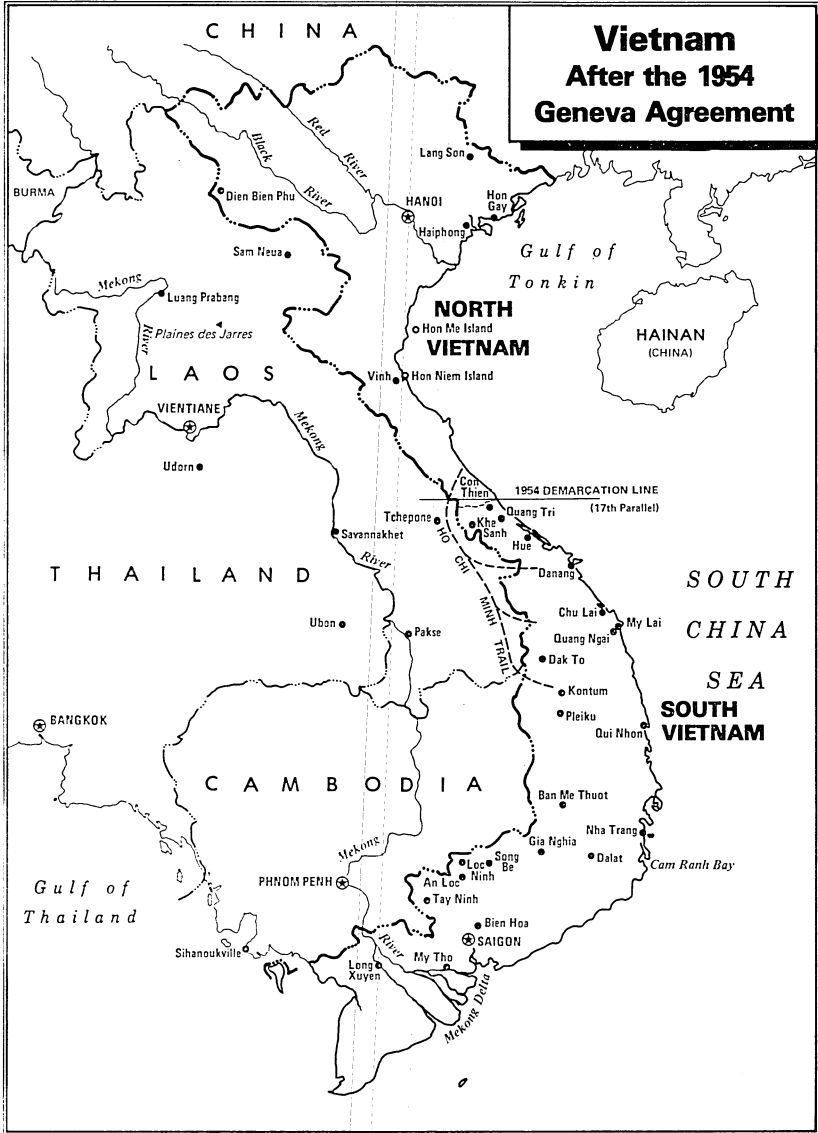
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CHAPTER 1

THE 1961 DECISION TO STAND FIRM IN VIETNAM

By 1961, after years of U.S. support for existing governments in Vietnam and Laos, the Communists appeared to be making greater inroads in those countries, and it seemed clear to U.S. policymakers that further action needed to be taken to protect American interests in Southeast Asia.¹ In Vietnam, the government of Ngo Dinh Diem was becoming increasingly unpopular, while being faced with more intense military and political pressures from the Communists. In November 1960, the Communists, together with some of the non-Communists who opposed the Diem government, organized a new political action group, the National Liberation Front, as a part of the growing movement to bring about changes in the government. In November 1960, there was also an abortive military coup against Diem as dissatisfaction spread. In late 1960, U.S. officials proposed a new counterinsurgency plan for South Vietnam which called for more U.S. aid, as well as more Vietnamese self-help.

In Laos, the rightist government supported by the U.S. faced a serious threat from the Communists by the end of 1960, and appeared to be failing rapidly.

Events in other parts of the world also affected U.S. attitudes toward the situation in Southeast Asia, and had a direct bearing on America's involvement in Vietnam.

The relationship of the United States and the People's Republic of China continued to be hostile. In 1954-55, the Chinese had attacked the Pescadores islands off the China coast which were occupied, as was the island of Formosa, by National Chinese forces who had fled the mainland when it was overrun by the Communists in 1949. The United States responded by increasing its military aid to the Nationalists and by threatening to intervene directly in the conflict. In 1955, Congress passed the Formosa Resolution, the first of five such resolutions between 1955 and 1965, giving the President advance approval for the use of the armed forces in the area "as he deems necessary." (The other resolutions were the Middle East Resolution in 1957, the Cuba Resolution in 1962, the Berlin Resolution in 1962, and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964.) Faced with the threat of U.S. action, especially the possibility of air attacks which might have involved atomic bombs, the Chinese pulled back and the situation became less critical. A similar series of events occurred in 1958, and once again the threat of direct U.S.

¹For background information on years prior to 1961, see *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part I, 1945-1961, prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, by the Congressional Research Service, Senate Print 98-185 Pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1984).

military action appeared to have successfully deterred the Chinese. Although there was no further repetition of these attacks, the relationship between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China did not improve noticeably after the 1958 incidents, and by 1961, China, together with the Soviet Union, the "Sino-Soviet Bloc" as it was called, was still viewed as the major threat to the security of Southeast Asia.

Competition and conflict between the U.S. and Russia, which had eased somewhat during the middle 1950s, increased in the late 1950s. In 1958-1959, after nine years of relative quiet, the Russians resumed their pressure on the U.S. in Berlin. Tension eased again later in 1959 after President Dwight D. Eisenhower sought to revive the spirit of *détente* which had existed earlier. He invited Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev to come to the United States, and this, together with a meeting of the two leaders during that visit, led to renewed hope for greater cooperation. In the spring of 1960, they met again in Paris for a "summit conference" to discuss outstanding issues, but as the meeting was about to begin, an American intelligence aircraft was brought down in the Soviet Union, and Khrushchev denounced the U.S. and left the meeting.

The Eisenhower administration also suffered a setback in its efforts to prevent the Communists from gaining power in countries like Vietnam and Laos which were faced with political insurgencies. Having successfully used American power to prevent this from happening in those two countries, as well as in Iran and Guatemala, the administration was confronted with a new threat to American security when Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba in 1959 and the new government soon established close ties with the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. This resulted in the decision by Eisenhower in March of 1960 to approve a CIA plan for training Cuban refugees for a possible anti-Communist insurgency operation in Cuba.

Meanwhile, developments in the Russian missile program were posing what many American leaders regarded as a basic challenge to U.S. security. In August 1957, the Russians had successfully fired an intercontinental ballistic missile, and in October and November they launched the world's first earth satellites. The Eisenhower administration reacted by accelerating the U.S. missile and space programs, but there was widespread concern that the U.S. was falling behind technologically, and that the Russians were in a position to gain strategic military superiority over the United States by the early 1960s. Despite the successful launching of a U.S. space satellite in January 1958, and rapid development of the U.S. missile program during 1958, there was increased criticism of alleged weaknesses in the U.S. defense posture.

In November 1957, after the announcement of the first Russian satellite, a committee which had been appointed to advise the White House on defense needs, the Gaither committee, whose chairman was H. Rowan Gaither, chairman of the board of the Ford Foundation, recommended a large increase in defense spending to prevent the Russians from becoming strategically superior. One of its recommendations was that the U.S. should develop greater capability to fight limited wars, the logic being that such

limited conflicts were more apt to occur because of the destructiveness of a general nuclear war.

The major recommendations of the Gaither committee were rejected by President Eisenhower for what, in retrospect, would seem to have been substantially valid reasons, but they were supported by many prominent Americans, including a number of leading Democrats, and the "missile gap" became one of the principal themes in the 1960 Presidential campaign of Senator John F. Kennedy (D/Mass.).²

The need for improving limited warfare capability also became a major theme in the late 1950s among some military leaders, academic theorists and politicians, including Senator Kennedy. Army Generals Maxwell D. Taylor, Matthew B. Ridgway, and James M. Gavin argued that rather than relying on strategic airpower and the ultimate use of atomic bombs, the U.S. needed a "flexible response," in Taylor's words, to situations involving the possible use of force, especially in a non-nuclear limited war.³

The Kennedy Administration and the Defense of Southeast Asia

In November 1960, John F. Kennedy defeated Vice President Richard M. Nixon for the Presidency, thus ending eight years of Republican control of the White House and setting the stage for changes in response to these trends in the world situation and in U.S. foreign and defense policy.

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, Kennedy set an expansive, militant tone for his administration:⁴

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

"In the long history of the world," Kennedy added, "only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility; I welcome it."

He also promised to continue assisting countries in the third world, especially those, like Vietnam, threatened by the Communists: "To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not

²For an excellent analysis of the arguments involved, and of Eisenhower's position, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), ch. 6. For an analysis by a prestigious Rockefeller Foundation study group, headed by Henry A. Kissinger, which supported the Gaither committee's findings, see the report "International Security: The Military Aspect," published in 1958 and reprinted in *Prospect for America: The Rockefeller Panel Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

As historian Anna Nelson has explained, the Eisenhower administration was not oblivious to the problem of fighting limited wars while relying on a strategic nuclear deterrent. At an NSC meeting on May 1, 1958, she reports, there was a candid discussion of the problem, and the Council agreed to develop a supplementary strategy for "defensive wars which do not involve the total defeat of the enemy." Anna Kasten Nelson, "The 'Top of Policy Hill': President Eisenhower and the National Security Council," *Diplomatic History*, 7 (Fall 1983), p. 311.

³Maxwell Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1960). Major academic studies included Henry A. Kissinger *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1957); Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

⁴U.S., President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service), John F. Kennedy, 1961, pp. 1-3.

have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny." U.S. assistance to those trying to "help themselves," he said, would continue "for whatever period is required, not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right."

This statement of intent, together with Kennedy's own beliefs, and those of his top associates, about the importance of defending Southeast Asia, and of making American power credible throughout the world, had a direct and, as it turned out, critical bearing on the Kennedy administration's decision to reaffirm and to expand the U.S. commitment. (When Kennedy became President there were approximately 750 U.S. military advisers in Vietnam. At the time of his assassination in late 1963 there were almost 20,000, many of whom were actively engaged in combat despite their formal, legally-prescribed noncombatant status.) He believed, as had Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman before him, in containment, and in the policy of providing assistance to countries threatened by the Communists.⁵ He also believed in the efficacy of American action, and his activist political style, among other things, caused him to engage in an activist foreign policy involving increased intervention in situations in which the use of American power was considered desirable. Thus, as one historian aptly says, "Kennedy did not represent a sharp break with the past or a uniqueness in the fundamental tenets of American foreign policy. Yet the different methods he chose to use, the personal elements he applied to diplomacy, did matter in heating up the Cold War, threatening nuclear war, and implanting the United States in the Third World as never before."⁶

With respect to Southeast Asia, and Vietnam in particular, President Kennedy had long taken the position that the U.S. should help to defend that area against the Communists, both for the sake of the countries themselves, and in order to protect vital U.S. interests in the region.⁷ As a Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, he visited Vietnam in 1951, denounced French colonialism, and declared, "There is no broad, general support of the native Vietnam Government among the people of that area. To check the southern drive of communism makes sense but not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is rather to build strong native non-Communist sentiment within these areas and rely on them as a spearhead of defense. . . . To do this apart from and in defiance of innately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure."

In 1954-55, Kennedy strongly supported the U.S. choice of Ngo Dinh Diem for premier of South Vietnam after the country was divided at the Geneva Conference of 1954, and opposed the plan for

⁵See Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, ch. 7. In the words of James A. Nathan and James K. Oliver, *United States Foreign Policy and World Order*, 3d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), p. 237, Kennedy's inaugural message "was an eloquent reaffirmation of the Truman Doctrine. It was containment with vigor."

⁶Thomas G. Paterson, "Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK's Foreign Policy," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 54 (Spring 1978), p. 195.

⁷The following is taken from pt. I of the present study, cited above, which contains source notes and further discussion.

nation-wide elections in Vietnam in 1956 as stipulated by the Geneva Declaration.

In 1955, Kennedy joined the newly-organized American Friends of Vietnam, and was its keynote speaker at a symposium on Vietnam in June 1956. His statement on that occasion was the most definitive explanation given during his service in the Senate, as well as during his Presidency, of his position on "America's Stake in Vietnam," the title of the speech. These were his major points:

(1) *First*, Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike. Burma, Thailand, India, Japan, the Philippines and obviously Laos and Cambodia are among those whose security would be threatened if the red tide of Communism overflowed into Vietnam. . . .

(2) *Secondly*, Vietnam represents a proving ground of democracy in Asia. However we may choose to ignore it or deprecate it, the rising prestige and influence of Communist China in Asia are unchallengeable facts. Vietnam represents the alternative to Communist dictatorship. If this democratic experiment fails, if some one million refugees have fled the totalitarianism of the North only to find neither freedom nor security in the South, then weakness, not strength, will characterize the meaning of democracy in the minds of still more Asians. The United States is directly responsible for this experiment—it is playing an important role in the laboratory where it is being conducted. We cannot afford to permit that experiment to fail.

(3) *Third* and in somewhat similar fashion, Vietnam represents a test of American responsibility and determination in Asia. If we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth, we gave assistance to its life, we have helped to shape its future. As French influence in the political, economic and military spheres has declined in Vietnam, American influence has steadily grown. This is our offspring—we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs. And if it falls victim to any of the perils that threaten its existence—Communism, political anarchy, poverty and the rest—then the United States, with some justification, will be held responsible; and our prestige in Asia will sink to a new low.

(4) *Fourth*, and finally, America's stake in Vietnam, in her strength and in her security, is a very selfish one—for it can be measured, in the last analysis, in terms of American lives and American dollars. It is now well known that we were at one time on the brink of war in Indo-China—a war which could well have been more costly, more exhausting and less conclusive than any war we have ever known. The threat of such war is not now altogether removed from the horizon. Military weakness, political instability or economic failure in the new state of Vietnam could change almost overnight the apparent security which has increasingly characterized that area under the leadership of President Diem. And the key position of Vietnam in Southeast Asia, as already discussed, makes inevitable

the involvement of this nation's security in any new outbreak of trouble. . . .

. . . We should not attempt to buy the friendship of the Vietnamese. Nor can we win their hearts by making them dependent upon our handouts. What we must offer them is a revolution—a political, economic and social revolution far superior to anything the Communists can offer—far more peaceful, far more democratic and far more locally controlled. Such a revolution will require much from the United States and much from Vietnam. We must supply capital to replace that drained by the centuries of colonial exploitation; technicians to train those handicapped by deliberate policies of illiteracy; guidance to assist a nation taking those first feeble steps toward the complexities of a republican form of government. We must assist the inspiring growth of Vietnamese democracy and economy, including the complete integration of those refugees who gave up their homes and their belongings to seek freedom. We must provide military assistance to rebuild the new Vietnamese Army, which every day faces the growing peril of Vietminh armies across the border.

The position stated in Kennedy's inaugural address was uniquely applicable to Vietnam, which, at the time, was probably the foremost representative of a "new state" freed from colonialism and threatened by communism. Thus, when he took office, Kennedy, whose personal commitment to Diem and to the defense of Vietnam was consonant with the commitment to Vietnam made by previous Presidents, did not seriously question or feel the need to reexamine U.S. policy toward Vietnam. He readily approved a major expansion of the U.S. commitment only a few days after becoming President, possibly doubting whether the proposal he was approving was the most effective way to accomplish the desired objective, but without having any apparent misgivings or uncertainty as to the validity of the objective itself.

Kennedy's views of the responsibility of the U.S. toward Vietnam were shared by all but two of his new policymaking team. (One was Chester Bowles, Under Secretary of State until November 1961, when he became Ambassador at Large and later Ambassador to India. The other was George W. Ball, who replaced Bowles.) So, too, were the general lines of U.S. foreign and military policy which characterized at least the first few weeks of the new administration, until the trauma produced by the failure of the Cuban (Bay of Pigs) invasion in April 1961 resulted in a hardening of attitudes and a reassessment of existing patterns of policymaking, and, to some extent, of policy and operations.

Kennedy's choice as Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, who had been a key member of the State Department's Far East team during the Truman administration, fully shared Kennedy's view of the importance of defending Southeast Asia. As he stated later:⁸

. . . collective security was the key to the prevention of World War III. My generation of students had been led down the path to the catastrophe of World War II which could have

⁸Letters to CRS from Dean Rusk, Apr. 1, 1983 and Oct. 22, 1984.

been prevented. We came out of the war deeply attached to the idea of collective security; it was written very clearly and strongly into Article 1 of the United Nations Charter and was reinforced by certain security treaties in this hemisphere, across the Atlantic and across the Pacific. When the Kennedy administration took office, the SEATO Treaty was a part of the law of the land. How we responded under the SEATO Treaty was strongly linked in our minds with the judgments that would be made in other capitols as to how and whether we would react under other security treaties such as the Rio Pact and NATO.

"Indeed," Rusk added, "NATO had been severely tested in the Berlin crisis of 1961-62 and the Rio Pact had been severely tested in the Cuban missile crisis. President Kennedy was very much aware of the question as to what might have happened had Chairman Khrushchev not believed him during that Berlin crisis and the Cuban missile crisis. The reputation of the United States for fidelity to its security treaties was not an empty question of face or prestige but had a critical bearing upon the prospect for maintaining peace."

Kennedy's views toward containment and toward Vietnam were also highly compatible with those of most Members of Congress. Although some cracks had begun to appear in the consensus established at the end of World War II and during the beginning of the cold war, in 1961 there was still strong support in Congress for containment and for U.S. assistance to countries threatened by Communist expansion or subversion. Defense of Vietnam and of Southeast Asia as a whole was still a specific article of congressional faith, despite the growing doubts of some Members about Diem himself.⁹

What distinguished the Kennedy administration was not its policy assumptions or its worldview, but its approach to problem solving. It is here that a key can be found to understanding the administration's handling of Vietnam, as well as many of the other foreign policy problems of the time. "The style, personality, and mood of the Kennedy team," as Thomas G. Paterson has written, "joined the historical imperatives to compel a vigorous, even belligerent foreign policy. . . . Bustle, zeal, energy, and optimism became the bywords."

"The Kennedy people considered themselves 'can-do' types, who with rationality and careful calculation could revive an ailing nation and world. Theodore H. White has tagged them 'the Action Intellectuals.' They believed that they could *manage* affairs. . . .

"With adequate data, and they had an inordinate faith in data, they were certain they could succeed. It seemed everything could be quantified. When a White House assistant attempted to persuade Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, the 'whiz kid' from Ford Motors, that the Vietnam venture was doomed, the efficient-minded McNamara shot back: 'Where is your data? Give me

⁹For more information on congressional support for U.S. policy toward Indochina in the 1950s, see pt. I of this study, cited above.

something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry."¹⁰

At another point, Frederick E. ("Fritz") Nolting, Jr., who replaced Elbridge Durbrow as U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam in March 1961, objected to some of the proposed reforms which Washington policymakers were considering for Vietnam, saying that it would be difficult if not impossible to put a Ford engine into a Vietnamese ox-cart. McNamara is reported to have replied that although it might be difficult, "We can do it."¹¹

Beginnings

Prior to taking office, Kennedy had met twice with Eisenhower to discuss problems facing the U.S., as well as other questions pertaining to foreign and domestic policy and the operation of the government. In preparation for their first meeting on December 6, 1960, Kennedy, who had already been briefed a number of times by CIA Director Allen Dulles, suggested an agenda on which the first three items (in order) were Berlin, the Far East, and Cuba. The White House notified Kennedy that the President intended to discuss seven subjects, including Laos. Vietnam was not specifically mentioned on either list.¹² In preparing Kennedy for the meeting, his foreign policy team, headed by John H. Sharon and George W. Ball, drafted memoranda on each subject. In their memorandum on Laos they concluded by suggesting, in the form of questions, that neutralization of Laos might be the most desirable course to pursue, provided the Communists could be excluded from participating in a neutralist government. They asked, "If a neutralist government can be established without Communist participation, may not this now be the best the West can hope for?" and, "Taking into account the strong evidence of neutralist sentiment, and the danger inherent in attempting to get Laos to take sides in any future conflict involving the Communist states and SEATO, may not Laos make its best contribution to the peace of Southeast Asia, as well to its own security, by carrying on as a neutral buffer state?"¹³

The only available account of the December 6 meeting is Eisenhower's notes, in which he states that he and Kennedy discussed several foreign policy subjects, but that most of the meeting concerned organization and staffing in the area of national security affairs.¹⁴

The second Kennedy-Eisenhower meeting was held on January 19, 1961, the day before the inauguration. Meanwhile, the situation in Laos had taken a decided turn for the worse in the eyes of the Eisenhower administration. The Prime Minister of Laos, Prince

¹⁰Patterson, "Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK's Foreign Policy," pp. 201, 203.

¹¹Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 82.

¹²Vietnam or Laos (or Indochina) was not even on a list of seven topics which the chief of staff of the Foreign Relations Committee, Carl Marcy, proposed to Chairman Fulbright as the most important foreign policy problems for the committee to consider during 1961. University of Arkansas, Fulbright Papers, Marcy to Fulbright Memorandum, Dec. 27, 1960, series 48, box 1.

¹³Kennedy Library, POF Spec. Corres. File, Memorandum to Senator John F. Kennedy from John H. Sharon and George W. Ball, Dec. 5, 1960.

¹⁴For the text of Eisenhower's notes see *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 712-716.

Souvanna Phouma, who was considered by the administration to be too closely associated with the Laotian Communists (the Pathet Lao), had been toppled on December 8 by a rightist coup led by Gen. Phoumi Nosavan and supported by the U.S. In turn, the Russians and the North Vietnamese increased their assistance to the Pathet Lao. By the end of December 1960, as Pathet Lao forces advanced, U.S. policymakers in Southeast Asia and in Washington became very concerned about the possibility that the Communists would gain control of Laos. Eisenhower viewed this with alarm, and began to consider military action. As he said in his memoirs:¹⁵

This was disturbing news. Possibly we had another Lebanon on our hands. While we needed more information—such as indisputable proof of North Vietnamese or Red Chinese intervention—before taking overt action, [he had already approved covert action],¹⁶ I was resolved that we could not simply stand by. I thought we might be approaching the time when we should make active use of the Seventh Fleet, including landing parties.

In an NSC meeting on December 31, 1960, Eisenhower declared, "We cannot let Laos fall to the Communists, even if we have to fight, with our allies or without them."¹⁷

By the time Eisenhower and Kennedy met on January 19, the situation had eased only slightly, and Kennedy himself put Laos at the top of the agenda for that meeting. Vietnam was not included.¹⁸ At this second meeting, Eisenhower reportedly said to Kennedy, "with considerable emotion," that the U.S. could not afford to let the Communists take Laos. If Laos, the "key to the whole area," were to fall, "it would be just a matter of time until South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma would collapse." The U.S. had a responsibility under the SEATO Treaty to defend Laos, Eisenhower added, but Britain and France were opposed to SEATO intervention. If efforts to achieve a political settlement failed, the U.S. "must intervene in concert with our allies. If we were unable to persuade our allies, then we must go it alone."¹⁹

Thus, Kennedy, who earlier had told one of his assistants that he hoped "whatever's going to happen in Laos, an American invasion, a Communist victory or whatever," would happen "before we take over and get blamed for it,"²⁰ was faced upon taking office with his

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 610.

¹⁶See *ibid.*, p. 609.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Kennedy Library, POF Spec. Corres. File, Memorandum of Subjects for Discussion at Meeting of President Eisenhower and Senator Kennedy on Thursday, January 19, 1961, n.d. (The other items on the list under "State" were, in order after Laos, "Cuba, Dominican Republic and Caribbean area; The Congo, and the African situation generally; Berlin; Nuclear Test Talks and Disarmament; Algeria, and other current problems with France." The list also included one item for Defense and one item for Treasury.)

¹⁹These excerpts are from a memorandum on the meeting prepared in 1969 for President Lyndon B. Johnson by Clark Clifford, who, along with the newly appointed top Cabinet officials, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, accompanied Kennedy to the meeting. The memorandum is reprinted in *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), vol. II, pp. 635-637 (hereafter cited as *PP*). There is an earlier, shorter but similar memorandum on the meeting to Kennedy from Clifford, Kennedy Library, POF Spec. Corres. File, Jan. 24, 1961. Eisenhower does not discuss the details of the meeting in his memoirs.

²⁰Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Bantam Books ed., 1966), p. 722.

first potential "crisis," and with applying the principles of his inaugural speech to a very knotty problem.²¹

Because of the seriousness with which the Laotian "crisis" was perceived at the time, there was concern in Congress, and key Members were being kept abreast of the situation. Some Senate Democrats close to Kennedy and interested in the Far East, particularly Mike Mansfield (D/Mont.), were also communicating with him privately.

On January 21 and 23, 1961, Mansfield, who had just been elected Senate majority leader, sent memos to Kennedy urging that Laos be neutralized—an idea that the State Department was already considering, and that had been recommended by Winthrop G. Brown, U.S. Ambassador to Laos, in a cable to Washington on January 18, 1961. Mansfield said he had received a personal communication, via the State Department, from Souvanna Phouma, then in Cambodia, in which Souvanna criticized the U.S. for exaggerating the Communist threat in Laos—there were "at the most," he said, 100 Laotian Communists—and for blocking Laotian neutrality, which he told Mansfield was the only practicable course for Laos because of its cultural characteristics and geographical location. In his memo, Mansfield added that, from his standpoint, another major shortcoming of U.S. policy was "The corrupting and disrupting effect of our high level of aid on an unsophisticated nation such as Laos."

In discussing the need for Laotian neutrality, Mansfield said, among other things, "It is difficult to see how the U.S. commitment can be limited or a SEATO military involvement avoided except by an active attempt by this country to neutralize Laos in the pattern of Burma or Cambodia." "There are risks in such a policy," he added, "but the risks in our present policies seem even greater for they create the illusion of an indigenous Laotian barrier to a communist advance when, in fact, there is none."

In order to achieve a neutral Laos, Mansfield said, the U.S. should seek to establish a commission for Laos similar to the International Control Commission (ICC) established for Indochina under the 1964 Geneva Accords, but it should consist entirely of Asians (the ICC was composed of India, Canada and Poland). He recommended India, Pakistan and Afghanistan as members. Second, U.S. involvement should be reduced, "primarily by cutting down our military aid commitments while working for the restoration of the French military training mission to replace our own."

The significance of the plan proposed in these two memos, Mansfield said, "is that it may permit us to extricate ourselves from an untenable over-commitment in a fashion which at least holds some promise of preserving an independent Laos without war."²²

On January 6 and February 2, 1961, the Foreign Relations Committee met in executive session for hearings, the first on the world

²¹For details of this and other aspects of the Laotian aspect of the Indochina War see the standard works, Arthur L. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1971), and Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). For 1960-1961 specifically see Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-61* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

²²The two memos are in the Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Laos, where there is also a translation of Souvanna Phouma's letter of Jan. 7, 1961, to Mansfield.

situation, with Secretary of State Christian A. Herter (John Foster Dulles had died in 1959) and Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, J. Graham Parsons, and the second with Winthrop Brown, U.S. Ambassador to Laos, to discuss the Laotian situation. (There was another executive session hearing on January 11, 1961, with CIA Director Dulles, but only eight pages were transcribed. It appears to have dealt primarily with Cuba.) In the first hearing there were questions on Laos (none on Vietnam), but fewer than on the Congo, which was considered another "crisis" area. In the second hearing, members of the committee were interested in why the U.S., unlike the British and the French, had not supported Souvanna Phouma. There were also questions about U.S. covert involvement in Laos.²³ The committee did not, however, indicate any strong disagreement with the administration's Laotian policy.

On February 28, 1961, the Foreign Relations Committee met in executive session for a general review of the world situation by Secretary of State Rusk. There was no discussion of Vietnam, but Laos was discussed to some extent. Rusk reported to the committee that the administration was interested in getting Laos "into a stable and independent position" and removing it as a "major battle ground in the cold war." Laos, he said, was "something of a quagmire."

Rusk said that the U.S. did not want Laos to be set up as a "strongly pro-western ally." The United States was not looking for an ally, he said, but wanted to prevent Laos from becoming an ally of the Communists, a Communist "puppet." He told the committee that the Russians had proposed an international conference, but, "We feel that an international conference for the purpose of settling Laos would not be particularly productive at this time and could, indeed, simply further inflame the situation . . . at the present time we do not see how a conference can bring about a solution which we would find tolerable."²⁴

The urgency of the Laotian situation was so compelling that Kennedy is said to have spent more time on Laos during February and March 1961 than on anything else.²⁵ Vietnam, however, was also of great concern to the President, partly as a result of a report on the subject from Gen. Edward G. Lansdale (the famed CIA agent who had played a central part in the U.S. role in Vietnam 1954-56). On January 27, in preparation for a meeting on January 28 to discuss Cuba and Vietnam, McGeorge Bundy (Kennedy's new national security adviser), sent a memorandum to Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Allen Dulles in which he said, "The President's interest in Cuba needs little explanation. His concern for Vietnam is a result of his keen interest in General Lansdale's recent report and his awareness of the high importance of this country."²⁶

²³U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee* (Historical Series), vol. XIII, pt. 1, 87th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1984), pp. 1-38, 49-90 (hereafter this series will be cited as *SFRFC His. Ser.*).

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 188-190.

²⁵Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), p. 329, and Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 722.

²⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

According to Walt W. Rostow, the new deputy to McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's comment after the meeting was, "This is the worst one we've got, isn't it? You know, Eisenhower never mentioned it. He talked at length about Laos, but never uttered the word Vietnam."²⁷

Lansdale's report, dated January 17, 1961, was made after a trip to Vietnam January 2-14, during which he talked to Diem and a number of other Vietnamese leaders, as well as to members of the U.S. mission.²⁸ In the report he warned that "The free Vietnamese, and their government, probably will be able to do no more than postpone eventual defeat—unless they find a Vietnamese way of mobilizing their total resources and then utilizing them with spirit." He proposed that the U.S. treat Vietnam as a "combat area of the cold war, as an area requiring emergency treatment," and that under such conditions we should send to Vietnam "our best people," people who are "experienced in dealing with this type of emergency . . . who know and really like Asia and the Asians, dedicated people who are willing to risk their lives for the ideals of freedom. . . ." In addition to a new Ambassador with these skills and attitudes he suggested that a similar person be sent to Vietnam for "political operations, whose primary job would be to work with the "oppositionists," with the goal of establishing a responsible opposition party by which to "promote a two-party system which can afford to be surfaced, end much of the present clandestine political structures, and give sound encouragement to the development of new political leaders." "There are plenty of Aaron Burr's, a few Alexander Hamilton's and practically no George Washington's, Tom Jefferson's or Tom Paine's in Saigon today," he added, "largely as a result of our U.S. political influence. This certainly was not the U.S. policy we had hoped to implement."

Lansdale said that Diem was "still the only Vietnamese with executive ability and the required determination to be an effective President," and that "We must support Ngo Dinh Diem until another strong executive can replace him legally. President Diem feels that Americans have attacked him almost as viciously as the Communists, and he has withdrawn into a shell for self-protection." The U.S. needed, Lansdale said, to understand Diem, and to treat him as a friend. "If the next American official to talk to President Diem," he said, "would have the good sense to see him as a human being who has been through a lot of hell for years—and not as an opponent to be beaten to his knees—we would start regaining our influence with him in a healthy way." "If we don't like the heavy influence of Brother [Ngo Dinh] Nhu," he added, "then let's move someone of ours in close."

Lansdale also recommended that American military advisers be allowed to work in combat areas, and that the effects of the U.S. aid program on the Vietnamese—which "has filled their bellies but has neglected their spirit"—should be reassessed. "The people have more possessions but are starting to lose the will to protect their

²⁷W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 265.

²⁸The text of the report is in *PP*, DOD (Department of Defense) ed., (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1971), book 2, IV. A. 5., pp. 66-77, as well as in book 11, pp. 1-13.

liberty. There is a big lesson here to be learned about the U.S. aid program."

Shortly after returning from his trip, Lansdale met with Secretary of Defense McNamara, who had requested that Lansdale brief him on Vietnam. (At that point Lansdale was an assistant to McNamara.) Lansdale has recounted their meeting:²⁹

I had a lot of Viet Cong weapons, punji stakes, and so on, that I'd collected in Vietnam to get the Special Forces to start a Fort Bragg museum of guerrilla weapons. They still had Vietnamese mud on them, rusty and dirty. They were picked up from the battle field. So, I tucked all of these under my arm and went to his office. He had told me on the phone that I had five minutes to give him a briefing on Vietnam. I went in and he was sitting at his desk, and I put all of these dirty weapons down—crude looking, and including those big spikes that they had as punji stakes with dried blood and mud on them—I put them on this beautiful mahogany desk—I just dumped them on that. I said, "The enemy in Vietnam used these weapons—and they were just using them just a little bit ago before I got them. The enemy are barefoot or wear sandals. They wear black pajamas, usually, with tatters or holes in them. I don't think you'd recognize any of them as soldiers, but they think of themselves that way. The people that are fighting them, on our side, are being supplied with weapons and uniforms and good shoes and all of the best that we have; and we're training them. Yet, the enemy's licking our side," I said. "Always keep in mind about Vietnam, that the struggle goes far beyond the material things of life. It doesn't take weapons and uniforms and lots of food to win. It takes something else, ideas and ideals, and these guys are using that something else. Let's at least learn that lesson." Somehow I found him very hard to talk to. Watching his face as I talked, I got the feeling that he didn't understand me.

Counterinsurgency Plan Approved for Vietnam

In submitting to Washington in January 1961 the counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam which had been developed during the fall of 1960, Ambassador Durbrow stated that he had reservations about one of the proposals, which would increase the Vietnamese Army by 20,000 men (from 150,000 to 170,000), primarily for action against the Communist insurgents. He preferred, he said, that "more calculated risks . . . should be taken by using more of the forces in being to meet the immediate and serious guerrilla threat." Some of the proposals for reforms, Durbrow added, would probably be unpalatable to the Government of Vietnam. "Consideration should, therefore, be given to what actions we are prepared to take to encourage, or if necessary to force, acceptance of all essential elements of the plan."³⁰

²⁹CRS Interview with Edward G. Lansdale, Nov. 19, 1982.

³⁰From the text of Durbrow's cable, in *PP*, DOD ed., book 10, p. 1359. See also Durbrow's cable of Dec. 4, 1960, excerpted in *ibid.*, book 2, IV. A. 5., pp. 63-65, in which he described the situation in Vietnam after the attempted coup in November, and explained why the U.S. needed to continue to insist on reforms and liberalization. The text of the counterinsurgency plan and its annexes is still classified, but a portion of the plan is in *ibid.*, pp. 87-93.

The proposed plan provided for a substantial increase in U.S. military assistance to Vietnam. In addition to an increase of 20,000 men in the army, it called for increasing the Civil Guard by 32,000 (to 68,000). The total cost of these increases would be about \$42 million, added to approximately \$225 million a year already being paid by the U.S. for maintaining Vietnamese forces.

The plan also called for Diem to institute certain political reforms, including having opposition leaders in the Cabinet, giving the National Assembly power to investigate charges of mismanagement and corruption in the executive, improving "civic action" and other means of winning more popular support. The position of Durbrow and of the Department of State was that Diem's cooperation in achieving these reforms should be required before the U.S. agreed to provide the additional aid, and this was the position that was accepted, however tacitly, by the President when he approved the plan.

It is also of interest to note that the memorandum setting forth the proposed counterinsurgency plan is said to have stated that if the provisions of the plan were carried out, "the war could be won in eighteen months."³¹

Indicative of the prevailing attitude about the importance of providing such additional assistance was a memorandum on February 1 from Robert W. Komer (a former CIA employee then serving as Rostow's deputy) and an unnamed State Department official in the Far East bureau, "Forestalling a Crisis in South Vietnam," in which they said, among other things, that such aid ". . . will probably require circumvention of the Geneva Accords. We should not let this stop us."³²

At the White House meeting on January 28 at which the new counterinsurgency plan was discussed, Kennedy asked whether increases in Vietnam's Armed Forces "would really permit a shift from the defense to the offense," which the plan purportedly would do, or "whether the situation was not basically one of politics and morale."³³ This led to a discussion of the situation in Vietnam in which Lansdale argued that the Communists considered 1961 "as their big year," but that a "maximum American effort" in 1961 could thwart their plans, and enable South Vietnam, with U.S. help, to "move over into the offensive in 1962." In his comments, as in his written report, Lansdale stressed the need to support Diem. "The essentials were three," he said: "First, the Americans in Vietnam must themselves be infused with high morale and a will to win, and they must get close to the Vietnamese; secondly, the Vietnamese must, in this setting, be moved to act with vigor and confidence; third, Diem must be persuaded to let the opposition coalesce in some legitimate form rather than concentrate on the task of killing him." ("It was Diem's view," Lansdale said, "that there are Americans in the Foreign Service who are very close to those who tried to kill him on November 11, [1960] . . . Diem felt confidence

³¹Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 541. In writing this book, Schlesinger had access to classified materials, many of which, such as the counterinsurgency memorandum, are still classified.

³²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

³³This account of the meeting is from a memorandum at the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, W. W. Rostow to McGeorge Bundy, Jan. 30, 1961.

in the Americans in the CIA and the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group].")

Secretary of State Rusk commented that U.S. diplomats in Vietnam faced an "... extremely frustrating task. They were caught between pressing Diem to do things he did not wish to do and the need to convey to him American support. It was a difficult balance to strike; and Diem was extremely sensitive to criticism."

Kennedy said he would like to see guerrillas operating in North Vietnam, and asked about this possibility. CIA Director Dulles replied that four teams of eight men each had been organized for harassment, but had been used only in the south, despite CIA interest in more offensive operations. Dulles urged a build-up of counter guerrilla forces before the addition of the 20,000 men to the regular army, and also advocated increased U.S. training of such forces.

Lansdale mentioned the importance of Laos to the defense of Vietnam. "... if Laos goes to the Communists," he said, "we might not have time to organize the turn-around required in American and Viet-Nam morale and action."

As the meeting ended, Kennedy concluded by asking "... how do we change morale; how do we get operations in the north; how do we get moving?" And, referring to the four "crisis areas: Viet-Nam; Congo; Laos; and Cuba," he said "... we must change our course in these areas and we must be better off in three months than we are now."

Kennedy's approval of the counterinsurgency plan two days later (January 30), as the *Pentagon Papers* observes, "was seen as quite a routine action."³⁴ Kennedy's major concern seems to have been to make the U.S. role more effective, to "get moving." He wanted to do more rather than less, including expanding operations by undertaking, among other things, espionage and sabotage by guerrilla infiltration into North Vietnam. According to former Ambassador Durbrow, who had received a photostat from the State Department, Kennedy made a notation in the corner of the cover page of his copy of the counterinsurgency plan, to the effect, "Why so little? JFK. January 28."³⁵

Thus, the expansion of the U.S. role in Vietnam provided for by the counterinsurgency plan was approved by the President quickly, firmly and without change. Presidential aide Theodore C. Sorensen later commented, "... an abandonment of Vietnam, an abandonment of our commitment would have had a very serious adverse effect on the position of the United States in all of Southeast Asia. Therefore, we had to do whatever was necessary in order to prevent it, which meant increasing our military commitment."³⁶

On February 3 (National Security Action Memorandum—NSAM—2), Secretary McNamara was directed to make a report on conducting guerrilla operations in North Vietnam.³⁷ On March 9

³⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 27.

³⁵CRS Interview with Elbridge Durbrow, Oct. 25, 1978.

³⁶Kennedy Library, Oral History Interview with Theodore C. Sorensen, Mar. 26, 1964, p. 97.

³⁷The subject of the first NSAM was "Separate Budgeting of Spending Abroad." A list of all Kennedy NSAMs by number and subject was provided CRS by the Kennedy Library. A similar listing of NSAMs during Johnson's administration, made available by the Johnson Library, does

(NSAM 28), McNamara was again directed to make the report on guerrilla operations "in view of the President's instructions that we make every possible effort" to undertake such activities "at the earliest possible time."³⁸ Kennedy also suggested (NSAM 9, February 6, 1961), that Lansdale's "... story of the counter guerrilla case study would be an excellent magazine article for magazine like the *Saturday Evening Post*. Obviously it could not go under Lansdale's signature, but he might, if the Department of Defense and the State Department think it is worthwhile, turn this memorandum over to them and they could perhaps get a good writer for it. He could then check the final story."³⁹

Khrushchev's Speech and the Special Group (Counterinsurgency)

While approving the new plan for Vietnam, and taking prompt action to prevent further Communist gains in Laos, the Kennedy administration launched a new counterinsurgency program to combat Communist "wars of national liberation." As described by Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev in a speech on January 6, 1961, such "wars of liberation or popular uprisings," which began as "uprisings of colonial peoples against their oppressors" and developed into "guerrilla wars," were supported "without reservation" by the Communists.

Khrushchev's speech, the meaning and significance of which may have been exaggerated or even misinterpreted by Kennedy and his associates, made a "conspicuous impression" on the President, and besides sending copies of it to his newly appointed top aides and associates, he "... read the Khrushchev speech time and again—in his office, at cabinet meetings, at dinners with friends, alone. At times he read it aloud and urged his colleagues to comment."⁴⁰

Spurred by what he and his associates considered to be a direct challenge to the U.S., as well as by the need they felt to respond more vigorously to Communist subversion in Indochina and elsewhere in the third world, Kennedy began, as a "personal project," the development of a U.S. counter guerrilla or counterinsurgency program. He personally looked over the Army's field equipment for counter guerrilla warfare, studied the training manuals, and read studies on the subject, including Communist doctrine.⁴¹ He then ordered the Army to expand its counter guerrilla training, and to augment its Special Forces, or "Green Berets." Counterinsurgency training courses were eventually required for all personnel, civilian as well as military, serving in countries facing Communist subversion. "The hybrid word [counterinsurgency] became a passkey to the inner councils of government, to the trust of the President. If a high official expressed skepticism about the significance or newness ascribed to this style of warfare, it was said, he risked shortening

not provide, for alleged security reasons, and at the direction of the NSC staff, the subjects of most NSAMs issued during Johnson's administration. The texts of all NSAMs cited herein were provided by the two libraries unless otherwise noted.

³⁸NSAMs 2 and 28 are also in the *Pentagon Papers*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 17-18.

³⁹This was done and the piece in question appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1961, under the title, "The Report the President Wanted Published," By an American Officer ("whose name, for professional reasons, cannot be used").

⁴⁰Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 302, and Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel, *Roots of Involvement, The U.S. in Asia, 1784-1971* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 110.

⁴¹Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 341.

his tenure in office. McNamara, [Maxwell] Taylor, and Rostow became early converts, and their White House standing soared. Rusk never converted."⁴²

In March 1961, Kennedy established a counterinsurgency task force, headed by Richard Bissell, a Deputy Director of the CIA, which in January 1962 became the Special Group (CI) chaired by Presidential adviser Maxwell D. Taylor, with the Deputy Under Secretary of State, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the JCS, the Director of the CIA, the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, the Administrator of the Agency for International Development, and the Director of the U.S. Information Agency, as members.⁴³

Maxwell Taylor, a distinguished General and Army Chief of Staff in the latter part of the 1950s, who took early retirement from the Army in 1959 because of his disagreement with current strategy, and W. W. Rostow, who had been a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before becoming McGeorge Bundy's deputy, were foremost leaders in the development of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and programs, along with Roger Hilsman, the new head of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, who had a strong academic and research background as well as having been a West Point graduate and a member of the U.S. commando unit in Southeast Asia in World War II, "Merrill's Marauders."

One of the earliest proponents of a shift in strategy was Henry A. Kissinger, who propounded in 1955 an argument for defense of the "grey areas" around the periphery of the Soviet Union by a military policy based on fighting "little" or "local" wars, rather than on the threat of "massive retaliation" by strategic forces.⁴⁴ Rostow and other Kennedy theorists carried Kissinger's argument to its ultimate conclusion. In order to fight "little" or "local" wars in which the Communists were seeking to "liberate" countries through internal, indirect aggression, assisted from outside but not involving open, external aggression, the U.S. needed, to paraphrase Hilsman, to use the tactics of the guerrilla against the guerrilla. Whereas Kissinger advocated building up the indigenous capacity for self-defense, the counterinsurgency argument of the Kennedy era was open-ended, as experience later demonstrated. When the U.S. was unable to develop adequate indigenous strength, it began to substitute American strength.

One of the experts recruited for counterinsurgency planning in the Kennedy administration later described the early Kennedy period as "one of change, of ferment, of self-confidence—of 'knowing' what had to be done and of unquestioning 'can do.'" Kennedy, he said, "Taking seriously the threat to American power and influence implicit in Khrushchev's words, . . . set about building our

⁴²Kalb and Abel, p. 124.

⁴³See Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: Free Press, 1977). The Special Group (CI) was established by NSAM 124, Jan. 18, 1962, which is reprinted in *PP*, DOD ed., book 12, pp. 442-444. Other relevant documents are NSAM 131, Mar. 13, 1962, "Training Objectives for Counter-Insurgency" in *ibid.*, pp. 457-459, and NSAM 162, June 19, 1962, "Development of U.S. and Indigenous Police, Paramilitary and Military Resources," in *ibid.*, pp. 481-486.

⁴⁴Henry A. Kissinger, "Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas,'" *Foreign Affairs*, 33 (April 1955), pp. 416-428. For a more complete discussion of Kissinger's argument, see pt. I of this study.

military and government instruments to meet an obvious and serious challenge. That challenge may appear shadowy and full of braggadocio from the vantage point of the bitter experience of all parties in the late sixties. But who can deny that it was uttered seriously, and was meant to succeed, if it could, ten years earlier?"⁴⁵

Many policymakers in the Kennedy administration, like those under Eisenhower, did not have the specialized knowledge required to deal with Southeast Asia, however, and this factor greatly complicated the attempt to intervene in situations in which such knowledge could be decisive. One of Kennedy's closest advisers has singled this out as a key lesson to be learned from studying the development of U.S. policy toward Vietnam after 1961:⁴⁶

... our system has many strengths and the drawing of talent from outside the government and bringing it into government brings many advantages. But it also brings many costs, and one of the costs is bringing people into high policy-making positions who *aren't* prepared to deal with many of the questions they face. . . . So I think in a very real sense we assumed responsibilities unprepared; we didn't see clearly the full extent of those responsibilities; there were very few resources in the country to draw upon. And I mention all of this because I think it colored the behavior thereafter. And I don't think to this day it is understood. What, in a sense, evolved as a feeling of public officials misleading the public was, in a major respect, much worse than that; much different—let me put it this way. It was public officials not seeing the problem clearly, and, at least in hindsight, not acting in the public interest.

What To Do About Laos?

In early February 1961, Kennedy established a task force on Laos consisting of the Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, J. Graham Parsons, and his Deputy, John Steeves, both of whom had been appointed to those posts during the Eisenhower administration, as well as Kennedy's new Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Paul H. Nitze, (who had worked on Indochina under Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean G. Acheson), W. W. Rostow from the NSC staff, and others from State, the military and the CIA.

A day or so later, Secretary Rusk sent a memorandum to Kennedy in which he said that the task force had completed a draft report. He enclosed a proposed cable to set in motion a new plan for Laos.⁴⁷ This plan called for the King of Laos to declare the neutralization of the country, followed by establishment of a Neutral Nations Commission by Cambodia and Burma, among others. At

⁴⁵Seymour J. Deitchman, *The Best-Laid Schemes* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), pp. 4-5. In Schlesinger's description, "The future everywhere . . . seemed bright with hope. . . . The capital city, somnolent in the Eisenhower years, had come suddenly alive. The air had been stale and oppressive; now fresh winds were blowing. There was the excitement which comes from an injection of new men and new ideas, the release of energy which occurs when men with ideas have a chance to put them into practice." *A Thousand Days*, p. 206.

⁴⁶Confidential CRS Interview, Feb. 1, 1979. (emphasis in original)

⁴⁷Undated memo from Rusk to Kennedy in the Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Laos.

the same time, General Phoumi was to conduct an offensive against the Pathet Lao for the purpose of strengthening the position of the government. These actions would be supported by SEATO moves, including the deployment of a U.S. military unit to Thailand.

On February 7, in preparation for a White House meeting to discuss the Laos plan, McGeorge Bundy and W. W. Rostow sent the President a memorandum commenting on the plan and suggesting possible questions to raise.⁴⁸ They called the plan a "carefully worked out and intelligent attack on a very tough problem." As for questions, they suggested the President might ask whether deploying the U.S. military unit to Thailand was "the best way of signaling support to Sarit [Sarit Thanarat, the leader of the military junta then ruling the country] and general concern for the area?"

They also suggested linking Laos to the broader question of U.S. relations with the Soviet Union:

Does this whole approach fully recognize that the decisive dialogue here is with Khrushchev? Are we not coming to a time when something should be said directly to him? In this area where all the local advantages are against us, one clear asset is that Khrushchev wants serious talks with you, there must be a real cooling-off in Laos. Should we not move in ways which make it as easy as possible for him to face down the CHICOMS [Chinese Communists] on this point, while emphasizing quietly the depth of our commitment?

Kennedy approved most of the proposed plan, with the exception of sending the U.S. military unit to Thailand, and on February 19 the King of Laos issued a neutrality declaration and asked Cambodia, Malaya and Burma to form a neutral commission. Only Malaya agreed to do so, however. Meanwhile, Phoumi's offensive failed, and U.S. policymakers were back at square one.

On March 1, Rusk sent Kennedy a memo reporting on the status of U.S. plans for Laos in which he said that the "key obstacle" to acceptance of the U.S. position by countries like Cambodia and Burma was the "narrow composition" of the Laotian Government, i.e., that it did not include Souvanna Phouma.⁴⁹

A few days later, the Laos Task Force sent Kennedy another proposed plan. By this point, according to a memo to the President from Rostow on March 9, in which he recounted events during February, "our initial dispositions with respect to Laos, both diplomatically and militarily, have not succeeded, and we enter a new phase."⁵⁰

The task force recommended that in this "new phase" there should be increased military assistance to Laos, as well as U.S. military moves to demonstrate U.S. determination to resist Communist control of Laos. A "seventeen-step escalation ladder" was proposed. The members of the group, according to one knowledg-

⁴⁸Same location.

⁴⁹Same location.

⁵⁰Same location.

able source, "were much more willing to favor the use of American force than the President and his senior advisers."⁵¹

This plan was discussed and generally approved by the President and his advisers on March 9, 1961. Possible intervention by U.S. forces was not ruled out, but there was considerable reluctance to take such a step, and the President decided to continue efforts to find a diplomatic solution. These efforts, specifically the attempt to get the Russians to terminate their airlift into Laos, were unsuccessful, however, and within a few days there was a plan in the works to undertake limited U.S. military action. According to a memorandum from Rostow to the President on March 17,⁵²

State is preparing for the Secretary's consideration a plan for the movement of an international SEATO force into Laos. If SEATO did not accept, the idea is that the U.S., Asian members of SEATO, and possibly Australia and New Zealand, would work on a modified plan. Diplomatically it would be based on the Lebanon case; that is, it would be triggered by an appeal from the King of Laos for us to hold the line and permit peace to be negotiated, looking to an independent, neutral country. The troops would go in merely to hold certain key centers for diplomatic bargaining purposes, not to conquer the country. They would only shoot if shot at. There would be talks with the Russians explaining our position and a report to the UN. The total force envisaged is about 26,000, which seems a bit high. At least half would be Asian troops. There would be U.S., Australian and, hopefully, New Zealand contributions.

On March 20-21 this plan was discussed by the President and his advisers. Details of these meetings are still classified, but apparently Rostow, on behalf of the task force, argued the case for deploying U.S. forces to Thailand. The Joint Chiefs, however, argued that this could result in North Vietnamese moves into Laos, and possible war with China, and that if U.S. troops were to be used there would have to be an adequate force to insure a favorable outcome. They estimated that a U.S. move into Laos would require 60,000 men, as well as air cover, and the use, if necessary, of atomic bombs against targets in North Vietnam and China.

Kennedy, it is said, recognized the difficulties involved in committing a large force to Laos. He had learned, for one thing, that if 10,000 men were sent to Southeast Asia there would be almost no strategic reserve force for other emergencies.⁵³

He is also said to have recognized that a neutralization of Laos was the "only feasible alternative." Remembering what had happened in Vietnam in 1954, however, he did not want to negotiate prior to a cease-fire.⁵⁴ He thought that Laotian anti-Communist forces, with U.S. help, had to hold Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, in order to establish a stronger basis for negotiations, and in order to prevent a defeat that would have repercussions on the credibility of the United States in other areas. "We cannot," he

⁵¹Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 142. One senior adviser, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, was strongly opposed to a U.S. military commitment in Laos. See Bowles' *Promises to Keep* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 335-407.

⁵²Kennedy Library, POF Staff Memos File.

⁵³Cited in Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 135.

⁵⁴Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 724.

was quoted as saying, "and will not accept any visible humiliation over Laos."⁵⁵

In addition, Kennedy recognized and apparently alluded in the meetings to what he considered to be the "contradictions" in American public opinion, "... between the desire to 'get tough' with the communists and the disinclination to get involved in another Asian War. . . ." But he apparently also felt, and confirmed in consultations with Members of Congress, that the public would support U.S. intervention in Laos if that became necessary.⁵⁶

The meetings of March 20-21 resulted in a decision to undertake a limited show of force by the U.S., to be followed by possible SEATO action. Kennedy authorized (there was no NSAM on the subject) immediate military moves similar to the ones made by Eisenhower in December 1960:⁵⁷

Three aircraft carriers moved toward Laos with 1,400 marines. Long-range troop and cargo transport planes flew from the continental United States to the Philippines. About 150 marines were dispatched to Udorn, Thailand, to service fourteen additional helicopters being given to the Royal Lao Army. On Okinawa Task Force 116 was alerted and its staffs brought up to operational size. . . . Two thousand marines in Japan were pulled away from a movie which they were assisting in filming. . . . In all, about 4,000 troops were ready for battle in Laos—not enough to carry out the intervention plans, but, hopefully, enough to force a change in the diplomatic stalemate.

At the same time, Kennedy authorized various covert actions, including increased reconnaissance flights over Laos. These had previously been conducted primarily by the Thais, but when the Thai Government decided in February 1961 not to continue such flights the JCS recommended that they be made by the U.S. Air Force. Instead, Kennedy told the U.S. military to borrow planes from the Philippine Air Force (RT-33s), paint them with Laotian markings, and use U.S. Air Force pilots in civilian clothes to fly reconnaissance over Laos. "On April 24, 1961, the first American-piloted RT-33 sortie flew from Udorn under the code name 'Field Goal.'"⁵⁸

On March 23, 1961, Kennedy took his case to the public. Speaking on nationwide television, he said that the U.S. supported a neutral and independent Laos. Without mentioning the military moves which he had already authorized, he said that attacks by "externally supported Communists" would have to cease, and if they did not that the U.S. would "honor its obligations." "No one should doubt our resolutions [*sic*] on this point," he added "The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence."⁵⁹

⁵⁵Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 332.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 333. There are few available details on the consultations that apparently were held with Congress during the latter part of March, including an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Mar. 22 which was not transcribed.

⁵⁷Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 146.

⁵⁸Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1980), pp. 34-35. On Mar. 24, 1961, the first U.S. Air Force plane piloted by an officer in uniform had been shot down in Indochina while flying an electronic surveillance mission over Laos. See *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁹*Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1961, p. 214.

Congress reacted favorably to Kennedy's speech, with both Democrats and Republicans declaring their support for negotiations while also supporting Kennedy's firmness and determination to honor U.S. commitments. Except for the concern of some Republicans and a few Democrats about having Communists included in the government of a neutral Laos, there was no dissent in Congress to the administration's proposals for handling the Laotian situation.⁶⁰

In a letter to Kennedy on March 24, the day after the speech, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright (D/Ark.) said, "Your explanation of the Laotian situation was extremely effective." He enclosed a study on Vietnam for Kennedy's use, saying that he thought it would be of interest: "The thought occurred to me," Fulbright added, "that the extent to which you might be willing to go in defending Laos could possibly be influenced by the stability in Viet-Nam. It would be embarrassing, to say the least, to have Viet-Nam collapse just as we are extended in Laos."⁶¹

Meanwhile, after the White House meetings of March 20-21, the U.S. had informed the British of the military moves which it was making, and had urged them to join in getting SEATO to implement "Plan 5/60" (usually referred to as SEATO Plan 5, this was a contingency plan for the deployment of a major SEATO force to Laos and Vietnam which would seek to defend Southeast Asia from a position on the Mekong River) under which U.S. Marines would be augmented by the Mobile Commonwealth Brigade consisting of troops from Britain, New Zealand and Australia. The British, however, urged continued efforts to achieve a cease-fire, and stated their reservations about military intervention. Kennedy then asked British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to discuss the matter. The two leaders met on March 26, 1961, and according to Macmillan, Kennedy ". . . was not at all anxious to undertake a military operation in Laos. If it had to be done (as a sort of political gesture) he definitely wanted it to be a SEATO exercise. He did *not* want to 'go it alone.'" Kennedy, he said, commented that a number of people in the U.S. would consider British support to be the "determining factor," and that unless the British decided to join the U.S. in such an effort "he was not sure he could get his people to accept unilateral action by the United States."

Kennedy told Macmillan that he was considering a very limited force of four or five battalions to hold Vientiane and other key posts, apparently referring to a modified version of the Vietnam Task Force proposal. Macmillan said he understood Kennedy's need to convince the Russians, "at the beginning of his presidency," that the U.S. would not be "pushed out" of Laos, and that he would agree to participate, with cabinet approval, in "the *appearance* of resistance and in the necessary military planning." But

⁶⁰See *Congressional Record*, vol. 107 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off.), pp. 4706-4708, 5114-5115, 5292-5293, (hereafter cited as CR).

⁶¹Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Laos. The 16-page study enclosed with the letter was "The Struggle in South Vietnam," prepared in Mar. 1961 by Oliver E. Clubb, Jr., Legislative Reference Service, Library of Congress. In 1962, Clubb, then at the Brookings Institution, prepared the study, *The United States and the Sino-Soviet Bloc in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1962).

while undertaking such planning, the U.S. and Britain should make every effort to get the Russians to agree to a cease-fire and a conference.⁶²

On April 1, Khrushchev responded favorably to the idea of an international conference on the subject, and tension eased momentarily.

At this point, a very serious event occurred, an event which critically affected the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration. Carrying out a plan developed in the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy agreed to let Cuban refugees, trained, armed and supported by the CIA, invade Cuba (Operation Zapata). After the resulting fiasco, commonly referred to as the "Bay of Pigs," the Kennedy administration, seeking to prove to the world, and especially to the Russians, that the U.S. was not the "paper tiger" it appeared to be, assumed an even more militant (although perhaps less bold) foreign policy stance which, in turn, may well have affected U.S. policy toward Vietnam.⁶³

Some have suggested that the failure of the Bay of Pigs, together with the subsequent "bullying" to which Khrushchev is said to have subjected Kennedy at their "summit meeting" in June 1961, heavily influenced the Kennedy administration's decision to stand and fight the Communists in Vietnam, on the grounds that the U.S. had to demonstrate its determination to confront them, by force if necessary, and that Vietnam was the most auspicious place for such a confrontation. There is considerable validity to this argument. Most U.S. policymakers apparently did assume that the U.S.

⁶²Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959-1961* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 333-338. Quotations from the book are from Macmillan's diary.

⁶³Immediately after the Bay of Pigs failure, President Kennedy asked Maxwell Taylor, Robert Kennedy, Adm. Arleigh Burke (Chief of Naval Operations) and Allen Dulles to review the operation, as well as "governmental practices and programs in the areas of military and paramilitary, guerrilla and anti-guerrilla activity." With respect to the Bay of Pigs (Operation Zapata), the Cuban Study Group concluded after a month of secret hearings, "... we are of the opinion that the preparations and execution of paramilitary operations such as Zapata are a form of cold war action in which the country must be prepared to engage. If it does so, it must engage in it with a maximum chance of success." With respect to the broader question of U.S. cold war operations, the group concluded that there was need for "... a changed attitude on the part of the government and of the people toward the emergency which confronts us. The first requirement of such a change is to recognize that we are in a life and death struggle which we may be losing, and will lose unless we change our ways and marshal our resources with an intensity associated in the past only with times of war. To effect this change, we must give immediate consideration to taking such measures as the announcement of a limited national emergency, the review of any treaties or international agreements which restrain the full use of our resources in the cold war, and the determination to seek the respect of our neighbors, without the criteria being international popularity, and a policy of taking into account the proportioning of foreign aid to the attitude shown us by our neighbors. In the light of the strained situation in Laos and the potential crisis building up over Berlin, we should consider at once affirmative programs to cope with the threat in both areas. There should be a re-examination of emergency powers of the President as to their adequacy to meet the developing situation." For one comment on the Kennedy administration's response to these recommendations see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 459-460. See below for actions taken by Kennedy.

The Cuban Study Group also recommended a division of responsibility between the CIA and the military that was later implemented in Vietnam: "... the Department of Defense will normally receive responsibility for overt paramilitary operations. Where such an operation is to be wholly covert or disavowable, it may be assigned to CIA, provided that it is within the normal capabilities of the agency. Any large paramilitary operation wholly or partly covert which requires significant numbers of militarily trained personnel, amounts of military stocks and/or military experience of a kind and level peculiar to the armed forces is properly the primary responsibility of the Department of Defense with the CIA in a supporting role."

These quotations from the Cuban Study Group report are from *Operation Zapata: The "Ultra-sensitive" Report and Testimony of the Board of Inquiry on the Bay of Pigs* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1981), pp. 43, 51-52, and 48-49.

could not back down in Vietnam, and that it was Vietnam, rather than Laos, where, if necessary, a confrontation should occur. "What happened," commented James C. Thomson, Jr. (an Asian specialist, who was then assistant to Under Secretary Bowles, and subsequently a member of the NSC staff dealing with Vietnam), "as my colleagues put it at the time, was that we discovered that the Laotians were not Turks. That was the phrase of the moment. What did that mean? That meant that they would not stand up and fight. And, once we discovered that the Laotians were not Turks, it seemed advisable to pull back from confrontation in Laos. . . . But once Laotians were discovered not to be Turks, the place to stand one's ground, it was thought, was Vietnam because the Vietnamese were Turks. . . . That's my recollection of the climate—let's call it 'the search for Turks.'"⁶⁴

Former Ambassador William H. Sullivan, who was very closely associated with Indochina affairs for many of his years in the State Department, gave this description of the prevailing attitude:⁶⁵

The attitude was that Laos was a secondary problem; Laos was a poor place to get bogged down in because it was inland, had no access to the sea and no proper logistics lines . . . that it was rather inchoate as a nation; that the Laos were not fighters, et cetera. While on the other hand if you were going to have a confrontation, the place to have it was in Vietnam because it did have logistical access to the sea and therefore, we had military advantages. It was an articulated, functioning nation. Its troops were tigers and real fighters. And, therefore, the advantages would be all on our side to have the confrontation and showdown in Vietnam and not get sucked into this Laos operation.⁶⁶

Sullivan made a very important additional point: ". . . I think, in saying that the White House recognized and that all of us did recognize that Vietnam was the main show, it wasn't at all the same to say that people were afraid of Vietnam as a quagmire; people were looking at Vietnam as something that could be a more solid instrument for settling this thing."⁶⁷ In other words, Vietnam

⁶⁴CRS Interview with James C. Thomson, Jr., Oct. 17, 1978. In his very perceptive article, "How Could Vietnam Happen?" *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1968), p. 48, Thomson stated: ". . . the legacy of the fifties was apparently compounded by an uneasy sense of a worldwide Communist challenge to the new Administration after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. A first manifestation was the President's traumatic Vienna meeting with Khrushchev in June, 1961; then came the Berlin crisis of the summer. All this created an atmosphere in which President Kennedy undoubtedly felt under special pressure to show his nation's mettle in Vietnam—if the Vietnamese, unlike the people of Laos, were willing to fight."

⁶⁵Kennedy Library, Oral History Interview with William H. Sullivan (second of two), Aug. 5, 1970, p. 33.

⁶⁶Of interest is a portion of a "Dear Joe" letter of Mar. 18, 1967, from Sullivan, then serving as U.S. Ambassador to Laos, to Joseph W. Alsop, the noted U.S. journalist, regarding a series of articles Alsop had just written on Laos (Library of Congress, Joseph Alsop Papers): ". . . you may wish some documentary support for your contention that President Kennedy deliberately put Laos on the back burner so that he could pursue the confrontation more advantageously in Vietnam. There will be those who will accuse you of hindsight in this regard. To silence them, I would refer you to an article which appeared in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine some time in the late summer of 1962 over the signature of Averell Harriman. This article made precisely the point which you are contending; namely, that the President did not intend to handle the situation in the same manner as in Laos. I recall this article well because I wrote it and it had the President's personal clearance before it was printed."

⁶⁷Kennedy Library, Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan, p. 33.

was more than just an auspicious place to confront the Communists and to demonstrate the American commitment to containment—it was a “solid instrument” for proving U.S. mettle; for “settling” the question of defending “free” countries against wars of national liberation. Thus, as Sullivan said, Vietnam was not feared as a quagmire; it was perceived as an opportunity.

W. W. Rostow made this same point in a memorandum to Kennedy on June 17, 1961, after Kennedy’s meeting with Khrushchev, entitled “The Shape of the Battle.”⁶⁸ Rostow said that the administration was heading into “our crucial months of crisis,” and that to “turn the tide” it was necessary to win two “defensive battles”—Berlin, and Vietnam. If these battles could be won, he said, the U.S. could then “provide a golden bridge of retreat from their present aggressive positions for both Moscow and Peking.” Berlin would have to be held against the Russians, he added, and the Communists would have to be turned back in Vietnam, in order to demonstrate that wars of national liberation could and would be defeated, which, in turn, would deter guerrilla activities in other unstable situations.

This argument doubtless would have been made if there had not been a Bay of Pigs invasion or a summit meeting, but those incidents seem to have caused the Kennedy administration to take a firmer stand in Vietnam, both to convince the Communists that the Bay of Pigs was an aberration, and to demonstrate that the U.S. could use its power effectively—and in unconventional ways if necessary—in combatting wars of national liberation, despite the failure of the unconventional means used in the attempt to overthrow the Communists in Cuba.

Ironically, it was also the Bay of Pigs that may have prevented active U.S. military involvement in Laos, and strengthened the President’s resolve to find a diplomatic solution for Laos by which the U.S. could avoid having to fight in an area of lesser importance, and one where it would be at such a disadvantage militarily. After the failure of the Cuban invasion, Kennedy became much more cautious about the advice he was getting. As Presidential assistant Sorensen said,⁶⁹

... the Bay of Pigs fiasco had its influence. That operation had been recommended principally by the same set of advisers who favored intervention in Laos. But now the President was far more skeptical of the experts, their reputations, their recommendations, their promises, premises and facts. He relied more on his White House staff and his own common sense; and he asked the Attorney General and me to attend all NSC meetings. He began asking questions he had not asked before about military operations in Laos. He requested each member of the Chiefs of Staff to give him in writing his detailed views on where our intervention would lead, who would join us, how we would react to a massive Red Chinese response and where it would all end. Their answers, considered in an NSC meeting on May 1, looked very different from the operations originally envisioned; and the closer he looked, the less justifiable and de-

⁶⁸Kennedy Library, POF Staff Memos File.

⁶⁹Kennedy, p. 726.

finable those answers became. "Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did," he would say to me in September. . . , "otherwise we'd be in Laos by now—and that would be a hundred times worse."⁷⁰

Cease-Fire in Laos

Before turning to the developments occurring during February-May 1961 with respect to Vietnam, this discussion of events in Laos, culminating in May with the agreement between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to negotiate a settlement for Laos, should be concluded. Prior to the Laos negotiations, which began in Geneva on May 16, 1961, the U.S., facing a renewed offensive by the Pathet Lao, and fearing that the Russians were stalling, again considered using American forces. On April 27, Kennedy met with his advisers. Rostow, speaking for the Laos Task Force, again recommended limited troop deployment to Thailand.⁷¹ W. Averell Harriman, who had been appointed Ambassador at Large, and was to head the U.S. team in Geneva, agreed with this proposal. He thought the presence of U.S. forces in Thailand would strengthen the negotiating position of the U.S. The JCS again argued that if there was to be a show of force, there should be an adequate force available to undertake a military offensive, should one be required. This time, possibly in part because of the Bay of Pigs experience, the JCS proposed a force of 120,000-140,000 men, with authority to use nuclear weapons if necessary. There were so many differences of opinion expressed by military representatives attending the meeting, however, that Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson finally suggested to Kennedy that each one be asked to state his views in writing. Kennedy agreed, and they were asked to do so. As a result, Kennedy received separate statements from all four members of the JCS, from all three service secretaries, and from McNamara. Although the Army apparently predicted problems of supplying U.S. troops in Laos, as well as difficulties in effectively fighting guerrillas holed up in the mountains, "The majority," according to Sorensen,⁷² "appeared to favor the landing of American troops in Thailand, South Vietnam and the government-held portions of the Lao-tian panhandle. If that did not produce a cease-fire, they recommended an air attack on Pathet Lao positions and tactical nuclear weapons on the ground. If North Vietnamese or Chinese then moved in, their homelands would be bombed. If massive Red troops

⁷⁰As Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 339, recounts the story, Kennedy told him on May 3, "If it hadn't been for Cuba, we might be about to intervene in Laos." Waving a sheaf of cables from Lemnitzer [Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, Chairman of the JCS], he added, "I might have taken this advice seriously." In a memorandum on June 1, 1961, Robert Kennedy took a similar position. See Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 702.

⁷¹On Apr. 28, the day following this meeting, Rostow sent the President a memorandum, (still classified), stating his views on what should be done about Laos. The President asked him to give him another memorandum on the "action consequences" of his memo of Apr. 28, and on May 6 he did so. Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia. Included was this comment:

"... our total effort must be more expensive than it now is and the American public must gear itself to the self-discipline required to sweat out this protracted battle, notably by devising a method of voluntary wage restraints to be combined with price cuts geared to productivity increases. In addition, our society must understand that it is in a protracted struggle which will require from time to time that we face with unity, poise, and determination very dangerous tests of will."

⁷²Kennedy, p. 727. The memoranda are still classified.

were then mobilized, nuclear bombings would be threatened and, if necessary, carried out. If the Soviets then intervened, we should 'be prepared to accept the possibility of general war.'"

In an interview some years later, David E. Bell, then Director of the Bureau of the Budget, recalled: "To us outsiders, that is to say to those of us who weren't part of the Pentagon-State Department complex, this was a shocking meeting, because at least two of the Joint Chiefs . . . were extremely belligerent, as we saw it, and were ready to go in and bomb the daylight out of them or land troops or whatever." ". . . there was a predisposition," he added, "in some members of the military leadership to go shooting off into the Southeast Asian jungles on what at that time was plainly no substantial provocation. It seemed to most of us to have been simply a militaristic adventure, not at all justified in terms of American foreign policy interests."⁷³

According to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.,⁷⁴ "The President was appalled at the sketchy nature of American military planning for Laos—the lack of detail and the unanswered questions," and in a meeting on April 29 after the memoranda were submitted he questioned military representatives on a number of points, and was said to have been quite dissatisfied with the answers he received.

Despite their differences of opinion, the military had already begun to order contingency plans for military action. On April 26, the JCS alerted the U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC) to be prepared to undertake airstrikes against North Vietnam and possibly southern China, and after the meeting on April 29 CINCPAC was told to prepare to move 5,000 U.S. combat troops into Thailand and another 5,000 into Vietnam, together with supporting units, including air. The cable ordering this move said that Washington hoped to give a "SEATO cover" to these actions.⁷⁵

In addition, on April 20 Kennedy had ordered U.S. military advisers in Laos to put on their uniforms, to organize openly and officially as a MAAG, and to start advising on combat operations. (Approximately 400 U.S. advisers had been sent to Laos by Eisenhower in 1960, ostensibly to advise the French military mission—the only military mission permitted in Laos by the 1954 Geneva Accords—on technical matters, but they had worn civilian clothes to avoid the charge of violating the Accords.)

On April 29, there was an important meeting of top policymakers, including Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and the four service Chiefs, as well as Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (who was sitting in, as a result of the Bay of Pigs experience, to represent his brother and to protect the President's interests), to discuss Laos.⁷⁶ In response to a question by Robert Kennedy, who asked where would be the "best place to stand and fight in Southeast Asia, where to draw the line," McNamara replied that he thought the U.S. would take a stand in Thailand and Vietnam. Kennedy asked again, saying that what he wanted to know was not only whether any of Laos could be saved by U.S. forces, but wheth-

⁷³CRS Interview with David E. Bell, Oct. 27, 1978

⁷⁴*A Thousand Days*, p. 338.

⁷⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 41.

⁷⁶See *ibid.*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 62-66.

er the U.S. would stand up and fight. McNamara said that "we would have to attack the DRV" [Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in North Vietnam] if Laos were to be given up. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George H. Decker said that there was "no good place to fight in Southeast Asia but we must hold as much as we can of Viet-Nam, Cambodia and Laos." Adm. Arleigh Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, urged that U.S. forces be sent into Laos. Burke said that "each time you give ground it is harder to stand next time. If we give up Laos we would have to put US forces into Viet-Nam and Thailand. We would have to throw enough in to win—perhaps the 'works.' It would be easier to hold now than later. The thing to do was to land now and hold as much as we can and make clear that we were not going to be pushed out of Southeast Asia."

John Steeves, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, said that if the U.S. decided that defense of Laos was not tenable, "we were writing the first chapter in the defeat of Southeast Asia."

Rusk also took the position that U.S. forces should be sent to Laos. "The Secretary suggested that Thai and US troops might be placed together in Vientiane and, if they could not hold, be removed by helicopter. Even if they were defeated they could be defeated together and this would be better than sitting back and doing nothing."

General Decker added, ". . . we cannot win a conventional war in Southeast Asia; if we go in, we should go in to win, and that means bombing Hanoi, China, and maybe even using nuclear weapons. He suggested that U.S. troops be moved into Thailand and Vietnam in an effort to induce agreement on a cease-fire. Robert Kennedy, playing his role as provocateur, ". . . said we would look sillier than we do now if we got troops in there and then backed down." Again he asked "whether we are ready to go the distance." Responses were mixed and unclear. Rusk said that if a cease-fire was not achieved quickly it would be necessary to resort to SEATO Plan 5 under U.N. auspices.

During the meeting, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, who later became known for his opposition to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, "said he thought the main question to be faced was the fact that we were going to have to fight the Chinese anyway in 2, 3, 5 or 10 years and that it was just a question of where, when and how. He thought that a major war would be difficult to avoid."

The meeting adjourned without agreement on a specific course of action.

On Sunday, April 30, Rusk sent Kennedy a memorandum discussing two alternative solutions for Laos.⁷⁷ "Track No. 1" discussed the procedures to be followed if the Communists agreed by Tuesday, May 2, to a cease-fire. "Track No. 2" discussed what would need to be done if there was no cease-fire. In this event, Rusk said, Laos, supported by the U.S. and Britain, should take its case to the U.N. At the same time, there should be action by SEATO, either SEATO Plan 5, or deployment of a SEATO force

⁷⁷Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Laos.

into Thailand which could move into Laos if necessary. (If Plan 5 were implemented, SEATO forces would not undertake offensive action against the Communists, or be deployed near the sensitive northern frontier.)

Rusk's conclusions were as follows:

If either Track 1 or Track 2 succeed in getting a cease-fire we will then face the real issue: what kind of a Laos to envisage emerging from the Conference. Our actions and the realities of Laos will all anticipate a "mixed up Laos." The more we can fracture it the better.

It will be best for the time being for Laos to become a loose federation of somewhat autonomous strong men. Given the military capability of the Pathet Lao, a centralized government under a coalition government would tend to become a Communist satellite. Even partition would be a better outcome than unity under leadership responsive to the Communists.

Rusk went on to suggest that the U.N. act as a "third party" in Laos between the two contending forces in order to preserve the peace and promote development.

Meanwhile, congressional committees had been kept informed of Laotian developments. On April 11, for example, there was a long executive session briefing of the Foreign Relations Committee by Secretary of State Rusk.⁷⁸ On April 27, President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson met with congressional leaders and found that with the exception of Senator Styles Bridges (R/N.H.), they were opposed to the use of U.S. forces in Laos.⁷⁹ According to Admiral Burke, who briefed the congressional group at the April 27 meeting, after he told the leaders that the U.S. should stand firm in Laos, even at the risk of war, the President asked others for their advice, and only the Vice President supported Burke's position.⁸⁰ Other reactions were reported by U. Alexis Johnson, a veteran Foreign Service officer who had been a ranking member of the U.S. delegation to the Geneva Conference in 1954 and U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, 1958-61, and who became Deputy Under Secretary of State in April 1961. "I think the whole thing would be rather fruitless," said Mansfield. "When we got through we would have nothing to show for it," said Senate Republican leader Everett McKinley Dirksen (Ill.). "We should get our people out and write the country off," said Senator Richard B. Russell (D/Ga.). But if not Laos, then where would we draw the line? Some of the senators favored putting American troops in Vietnam and Thailand but letting Laos alone."⁸¹

⁷⁸See *SFRCS His. Ser.*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, pp. 281-307.

⁷⁹Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power*, p. 268. The notes on that meeting are still classified. Attending the meeting were, from the Senate, Democrats Richard B. Russell (Ga.), Fulbright, and Hubert H. Humphrey (Minn.) and Republicans Everett McKinley Dirksen (Ill.), Bridges, Leverett Saltonstall (Mass.), Alexander Wiley (Wis.) and Bourke B. Hickenlooper (Iowa); from the House, Speaker Sam Rayburn (D/Tex.) and Democrats Carl Albert (Okla.), Carl Vinson (Ga.) and Thomas E. Morgan (Pa.), and Republicans Charles A. Halleck (Ind.), Leslie C. Arends (Ill.) and Robert B. Chiperfield (Ill.).

⁸⁰Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 152, based on Stevenson's interview with Admiral Burke.

⁸¹U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p. 324.

Appearing on the television program "Meet the Press" on April 30, 1961, Senator Fulbright, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said he did not think the U.S. should send troops to Laos. Conditions there, including the terrain and the peaceful nature of the people, were factors against such a move, he said. But he added, interestingly enough, that he thought it would be entirely proper to send U.S. troops to Thailand and South Vietnam if those countries were willing to cooperate with us, and requested such assistance. In both of these countries, he said, the terrain and other conditions, including the public's interest in self-defense, were much more conducive to the success of such an operation than were the conditions in Laos.⁸²

After a private meeting with Kennedy on May 4, Fulbright, who had asked for the meeting, reiterated this position, declaring that he would support U.S. troop commitments to Thailand and Vietnam if such forces were considered necessary and if those countries wanted them. He said that the Thais and the South Vietnamese, unlike the Laotians, appeared willing to defend themselves. But he emphasized that he was not willing to make the United States the primary defensive factor in Southeast Asia over a long period of time. He said it was up to Japan and India to play a role.⁸³

On May 6, the *New York Times* in an editorial noted Fulbright's views, but discounted the possibility of getting India or Japan to play such a role, and concluded: "An important defensive role for the United States in Southeast Asia must therefore be envisaged for an indefinite time if this area is to be protected from Communist aggression. . . ."

Other congressional leaders indicated their support for the President and for his leadership in handling the Laotian "crisis." It should be remembered that the traditional "honeymoon" between Congress and the President, during which there is customarily a higher degree of tolerance and deference between the branches, was still in effect at the time, and that this support reflected that fact. It also obviously reflected the continuing tendency of Congress to defer to the President in the making of decisions and the use of the armed forces.

In an appearance on May 7, 1961, on ABC-TV's "Issues and Answers," for example, Senate Majority Leader Mansfield and Senator George Aiken (R/Vt.), both members of the Foreign Relations Committee, took the position that although the President should and would confer with Congress before using the armed forces in Southeast Asia, he had the power under the Constitution, as reinforced by the SEATO Treaty, to deploy troops as necessary. Mansfield was asked "Do you think the Congress would approve of sending troops to any of these [SEATO] countries?" He replied:

Oh, I am quite certain that the President would confer with the necessary individuals in the Congress before any action was undertaken, but we must remember that under the Constitution, the President is charged with the conduct of our foreign

⁸²*New York Times*, May 1, 1961. For a staff background briefing paper for Fulbright's use in preparing for the program, see the memorandum from John Newhouse to Carl Marcy, Apr. 26, 1961, University of Arkansas, Fulbright Papers, series 48, box 2.

⁸³*New York Times*, May 5, 1961.

policy, and he is the Commander in Chief of our armed services, and furthermore, we do have this treaty [SEATO] which we are obligated to adhere to.

Mansfield and Aiken were then asked, "Do you think it is worth risking a global war to keep the Communists from getting, say, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia?" Mansfield's reply was that this was a question no one could answer at that time, adding, "I would again have to refer you to the responsibility of the President of the United States as far as this country is concerned." Aiken agreed with Mansfield, saying, "The final determination is up to the President of the United States. He would supposedly act upon the best advice which he could get and the best opinions which he could secure and I am sure that the Congress of the United States would support him in whatever his decision might be."⁸⁴

During this time Mansfield continued to communicate privately with the President, and on May 1, 1961, he sent another memo to Kennedy on the Laotian situation in which he took the position that, beginning with Laos, the U.S. needed to bring commitments in Southeast Asia into line with American interests in that region.⁸⁵ The U.S. needed, he said, referring specifically to Laos, "to get out of the center of this thing and into a position more commensurate with our limited interests, our practical capabilities, and our political realities at home." Laos, he said, was not like Lebanon, to which the U.S. had sent troops in 1958. Among other things, in Laos the Russians could "call all the shots" without intervening, meanwhile condemning the U.S. for the bloodshed.

Referring to the administration's plan to use ground forces from Thailand, Pakistan and the Philippines (at a SEATO meeting on March 27, the U.S. had been given preliminary indications that this would be possible), and to limit U.S. participation to air and sea power, Mansfield said that the U.S. might end up having to use its own ground forces as well. Moreover, pressures could be put on the United States elsewhere, including South Vietnam. Intervention could also prove costly at home:

If we intervene, we can possibly anticipate an initial reaction of public approval for your "standing firm." If the intervention succeeds in the Lebanese pattern, there will be some sustained approval but it is not likely to drown out the complaints about the increased costs of aid which will follow. If the intervention involves U.S. forces, the initial approval, such as it is, will start to disappear as soon as the first significant casualty lists are published. And it will not be long before the approval of "standfirm" gives way to the disapproval of "Kennedy's War" and "what are we doing in Laos?"

On the contrary, he said, although the U.S. would take some risks by not intervening, they would be small compared to the costs of intervention. If the U.S. did not intervene militarily, Souvanna Phouma would emerge after negotiations as the principal leader, and while he might cooperate with the Communists, there would be greater advantages in such a situation than in U.S. intervention. Mansfield described these, and said that even if there were to

⁸⁴From the text of the program, reprinted in *CR*, vol. 107, pp. 7587 ff.

⁸⁵Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Laos.

be a government which cooperated with the Communists, "we will at least be in a position to cut our losses with some measure of dignity and we will be relieved of an enormous over-commitment." Adverse reaction in the U.S., he added, would be "mild" compared to the reaction if the U.S., "with American blood and treasure," tried to keep the existing government in power.

Mansfield concluded by recommending that the U.S. concentrate on assisting Vietnam, which he thought had the "greatest potential in leadership, human capacities and resources" in the area, and on cultivating neutral, friendly relations also with Cambodia, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and Thailand, rather than continuing to search for "cold-war 'allies.'" By the same token, he, like Fulbright, advocated that the U.S. seek to encourage India to play a more active role in Southeast Asia, beginning with possible Indian efforts to prevent the situation in Laos from worsening prior to the forthcoming Geneva Conference.

Mansfield suggested that if the U.S. reduced its military program in Laos those funds could be redirected to Vietnam, but that in doing so the U.S. should avoid raising the level of aid "so high that it atrophies the will of the Viet Nameese government to do what it must do to strengthen its ties among the Viet Nameese people."

Facing a difficult choice, and feeling the effects of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy struggled with the possibility of "losing" Laos to the Communists, apparently feeling that the domestic political consequences of such an outcome would be more serious than Mansfield estimated. He is said to have told Rostow that whereas Eisenhower was able to withstand the political fall-out from the loss of Dien Bien Phu because it was the French, rather than the Americans, who were defeated, "I can't take a 1954 defeat today."⁸⁶

On May 1, Kennedy met again with his advisers. The situation in Laos was more ominous, and the group decided that the U.S. had no choice but to threaten to take military action unless a cease-fire was arranged. Unlike the meeting on April 29, at which they were divided, the military were all agreed on the need to act. During the meeting, McGeorge Bundy sent Kennedy the following note:⁸⁷

Mr. President:

On Saturday [April 29] the Joint Chiefs of Staff divided 1-1 (Navy-Air vs. Army-Marine) on going into Laos; it's not at all clear why they now are unanimous. . . .

The diplomatic result of the meeting is probably best described by British Prime Minister Macmillan, based on messages he was receiving that day from Washington:⁸⁸

6 p.m. [London] Meeting on Laos. . . . The Americans, supported by Australia and New Zealand, now want to take the preliminary troop movements for a military intervention. . . . They want to declare the alert at the SEATO meeting tomorrow. Their reason is that the two sides have not yet managed to meet to discuss the cease-fire; that the Pathet Lao are obviously stalling till the whole country has fallen; that they are

⁸⁶Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 339.

⁸⁷Undated handwritten note in Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Laos.

⁸⁸*Pointing the Way*, p. 346.

advancing all the time; that the Thais are getting restless; that only the United Kingdom and France are out of step, etc., etc.

Later that day, however, cease-fire talks were agreed upon, and the alert was postponed and then cancelled when it became clear that the Geneva Conference would be held.

It should be noted, however, that on May 5 Rusk met with the members of the newly-created Vietnam Task Force to discuss whether the U.S. should send combat forces to South Vietnam prior to the Geneva Conference on Laos as another means of demonstrating U.S. determination to take a stand in Southeast Asia. It was decided not to do so at that point, but to keep the possibility under review.⁸⁹ (It should also be noted that the day before the Geneva Conference was to begin, Kennedy, in connection with increased U.S. assistance to Vietnam, authorized covert military operations against the North Vietnamese in both North Vietnam and Laos. Among other things, he approved intelligence and harassment missions by South Vietnamese units into southeastern Laos, and the use of U.S. advisers, "if necessary," in attacks on the North Vietnamese supply center in Tchepone, Laos, on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.)⁹⁰

Later that day (May 5), Kennedy met with his advisers to discuss the Laos situation as well as Vietnam. "Most agreed the chance for salvaging anything out of the cease-fire and coalition government was slim indeed." The group discussed ways in which to reassure Vietnam and Thailand, one of which was a visit to Vietnam by Vice President Johnson, which was agreed upon and announced after the meeting.⁹¹

Vietnam Moves Up on the Agenda

During February and March 1961, Ambassador Durbrow attempted to extract from Diem the agreement on reforms which the U.S. was insisting be reached before the new counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam was implemented. As these negotiations dragged on, U.S. military leaders became restive, and began to urge that the plan be implemented even though Diem had not met the prior conditions established by Washington.

The President was also restive. On March 14, McGeorge Bundy sent a memorandum to Lucius D. Battle, Executive Secretary for the State Department, expressing Kennedy's concern that Nolting would not be arriving in Saigon until June. "This is simply one sample," Bundy said, "of repeated questioning which we get here on Vietnam from the President. He is really very eager indeed that it should have the highest priority for rapid and energetic action, and I know that anything the Secretary [Rusk] can do to encourage him on that point will be much appreciated."⁹²

By the end of March, Rostow, who had been given primary NSC staff responsibility for Vietnam, was urging Kennedy to organize for an "effective counter-offensive" in Vietnam.⁹³ Among other

⁸⁹PP, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 67-68.

⁹⁰Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 336, and Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 153.

⁹¹PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 9.

⁹²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. (Nolting's arrival in Vietnam subsequently was moved up to late March.)

⁹³Memorandum from Rostow to the President, Mar. 29, 1961, same location.

things, he advocated having Diem visit Washington, or sending Vice President Johnson on a visit to Vietnam. "In any case," he added, "we must help [Ambassador] Nolting persuade him that our support for him is unambiguous, but that he must face up to the political and morale elements of the job, as well as its military component."

Rostow also said, "We must somehow bring to bear our unexploited counter-guerrilla assets on the Viet-Nam problem: armed helicopters; other Research and Development possibilities; our Special Forces units. It is somehow wrong to be developing these capabilities but not applying them in a crucial active theater. In Knute Rockne's old phrase, we are not saving them for the Junior Prom."

On March 28, in a special message on the defense budget, the President asked Congress for authority to increase limited warfare forces, including counterinsurgency, in addition to a larger force of intercontinental ballistic missiles.⁹⁴

Senator Richard B. Russell, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, agreed. In a memorandum on April 20, 1961, addressed to both Kennedy and Johnson, Russell said, among other things, "The President's suggested program for specialized training in ranger or counterguerrilla operations for certain units of the Army and Marine Corps should be prosecuted with relentless vigor."⁹⁵

The JCS was also recommending accelerated action in Vietnam. After receiving a report on March 28, 1961, from Lt. General T. J. H. Trapnell (former head of the MAAG in Indochina in the early 1950s), who had just returned from a review of the situation in Vietnam and Laos, the JCS agreed with most of Trapnell's suggestions, and asked the Secretary of Defense to approve those actions requiring his concurrence. These included letting the MAAG operate independently of the Embassy, and increasing U.S. support for the Civil Guard.⁹⁶

In conjunction with moves concurrently underway with respect to Laos, orders also were given on March 26, 1961, for U.S. planes to destroy "hostile aircraft" over South Vietnam, but to avoid publicity. According to the JCS cable to Saigon:⁹⁷

. . . it is mandatory that . . . you work out ways and means to ensure maximum discretion and minimum publicity. This effort must be kept in lowest possible key. In the event of loss of US aircraft, a plausible cover story or covering action must be ready.

On March 29, Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr, Chief of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon, with Nolting's concurrence (his arrival had been moved up), replied that such a plan had been devised, and that, among other things, "In event an enemy aircraft is destroyed by US air action we will remain silent. No results US missions will be passed via air-ground radio. . . . In the event a US aircraft is lost on an operations mission from any

⁹⁴*Public Papers of the President*, John F. Kennedy, 1961, pp. 230 ff. On May 25, this was followed by a "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs," same source, pp. 396-397, in which Kennedy asked also for approval of a large civil defense program to support the credibility of U.S. strategic forces.

⁹⁵Johnson Library, Vice Presidential Security File.

⁹⁶*PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 19-21. These proposals were not approved by McNamara.

⁹⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

cause whatsoever, the explanation in reply to press query is that accident occurred while aircraft engaged in routine operational flight. . . ."98

On April 12, Rostow recommended to Kennedy, among other things, that he appoint a top-level Washington coordinator for Vietnam, (Rostow was thinking of Lansdale), raise the MAAG ceiling, and, besides sending Vice President Johnson to see Diem he suggested that Kennedy consider writing a letter to Diem like that of Eisenhower's in 1954, reaffirming U.S. support, stating what new assistance the U.S. was prepared to give, and urging him to make more progress toward creating a "more effective political and morale setting for his military operation. . . ."99

On April 19, Lansdale recommended that "The President should at once determine the conditions in Vietnam are critical and establish a Washington Task Force for the country."¹⁰⁰ Among other things he proposed that he himself should accompany the new U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam "to facilitate good working relationships with the Vietnamese Government" as well as to implement the actions of the task force. After getting Diem's consent, one of his first goals would be ". . . to call non-Communist political opposition leaders together and encourage them to rely on legal means of opposition, to help in the fight against the Communist Viet Cong, and to ease scheming *coup d'etats*." To help him with this and other tasks Lansdale asked that all those who had worked with him in 1954-55 be sent to Vietnam, along with Generals John W. O'Daniel and Samuel T. Williams, former chiefs of the Saigon MAAG, and other personnel as needed.

Among other steps to achieve U.S. goals in Vietnam, Lansdale recommended that the U.S., as a way of weakening the position of the North, "Encourage again the movement of refugees into the South by stimulating the desire to do so among the people in the North, by establishing better means of ingress to the South, and by re-establishing the highly successful refugee settlement program. . . . The goal should be a million refugees."

On April 20, the day after the Bay of Pigs invasion ended in failure, Kennedy established a Vietnam Task Force. (Prior to that time Vietnam had been handled also by the Laos Task Force, which, at least by the end of March, was being called the Laos-Viet-Nam Task Force.) This new group was to be headed by Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, with Lansdale as operations officer. Other members included, Rostow, Paul Nitze, (Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs), Gen. Charles H. Bonesteel III from the JCS, U. Alexis Johnson (Deputy Under Secretary of State), and Desmond FitzGerald, (then Chief of the Far East Division of the covert side of the CIA). The group was told to recommend by April 27 measures to "prevent Communist domination" of Vietnam.

In an interview some years later, Gilpatric reflected on a basic problem that faced the task force:¹⁰¹

⁹⁸Same location.

⁹⁹PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 34-35.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 32-34.

¹⁰¹CRS Interview with Roswell Gilpatric, Jan. 9, 1979.

The first thing that we ran into was what I felt then and still feel was a basic lack of understanding of what motivated the people in the whole Indochina area, their culture, their history, their politics. And we really went on the basis of recommendations from people in prior administrations. In other words, none of us of the new group that came in with the President, who were charged with responsibility for this area, had any preparation for this problem. What we didn't comprehend was the inability of the Vietnamese to absorb our doctrine, to think and to organize the way we did. We just assumed they would react the way our Western European allies had. We really were dealing with a mentality and a psychology that we didn't understand.

Gilpatric added that it would have been difficult for any of the policymakers involved to have gained such an understanding, and that "You certainly couldn't do it under the kinds of conditions that we were faced with in 1961 and 1962 when we were making these decisions—exchange of cables and hurried meetings and this development and that development. All of us did a great deal of reading. We were briefed. But we really didn't understand what kinds of people we were dealing with and how they would respond to this assistance, direction, support that we were trying to give them, initially, to make them more effective."

Gilpatric was asked to speculate as to what the task force would have done differently in preparing its report if it were to do it again, and he replied:

I think it would be a much more tentative, exploratory longer-phased program than we came up with. I think we wouldn't have been as brash and bold in just assuming that we could, within certain time frames, train certain units and bring about certain results. I think we would have been far less confident of our judgments than we were then. We took all of these masses of suggestions that came in from all of these people, Lansdale and others, who had been out there and we talked them over and threw them around at various sessions we had at State and Defense, and came up with this whole package of different measures. I think we bought that whole line and then put it forward as our own with much more assurance than I would ever do again. I think we were kidding ourselves into thinking that we were making well-informed decisions.

"Come what may, the U.S. intends to win this battle"

On April 26, the Vietnam Task Force submitted the first draft of its report.¹⁰² Noting that South Vietnam "is nearing the decisive phase in its struggle for survival," the report recommended that primary emphasis should be placed on internal security, and that additional U.S. assistance should be given to strengthen the programs approved earlier in January in the CIP. Included were proposals for financing the increase of 20,000 in the armed forces as well as for the entire Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps; 100 more

¹⁰²For the text see PP, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 43-56.

men for the MAAG; installation of a radar surveillance system for monitoring overflights; and support for a Vietnamese junk force to prevent Communist supply and infiltration by water.

The report also strongly reflected Lansdale's concerns about political and psychological warfare, especially his emphasis on attacking the problem in the rural areas rather than insisting on reforms that were of interest primarily to urban elites. It also assumed that Lansdale would return to Vietnam to take charge of implementing the report and subsequent follow-up action, with Gilpatric and the other members of the task force serving as the key coordinating group in Washington.

The report, which contained an annex dealing with the situation in Laos, was predicated on the assumption that the level of Communist activity in South Vietnam would remain substantially the same. If it increased, either directly or as a result of a "collapse" of Laos, the draft stated, additional assistance would be needed, and preparations should be made for that eventuality.

The reaction of top White House staff members, partly as a result of the Bay of Pigs experience, was that the task force report was inadequate, and that the President needed "a more *realistic* look." (emphasis in original) In a memorandum to Kennedy, on April 28, 1961, his Counsel, Theodore Sorensen, speaking also for McGeorge Bundy and David Bell, Director of the Bureau of the Budget, urged that at the NSC meeting on April 29 at which the report was to be discussed, the President should approve "only the basic concept of an all-out internal security effort to save Vietnam."¹⁰³ The memo proposed that the report be reshaped and taken by Vice President Johnson to Vietnam for discussion with Diem. It might become necessary, it said, if Johnson and Diem reached agreement, for the report then to be recast as a joint plan to be implemented by both countries.

Besides raising various specific questions about the report, the Sorensen-Bundy-Bell memo challenged two broad aspects of the task force report:

To the extent that this plan depends on the communists being tied down in Laos and lacking further forces, on our blocking land corridors through which communist support flows, or on our obtaining effective anti-infiltration action from

¹⁰³Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. Also in that location there are memos to Rostow on Apr. 28, 1961, from two other NSC staff members, Robert W. Komer and Robert H. Johnson, assistants to Rostow, commenting on the task force report. Both urged that greater pressure be put on Diem. As Komer said, "If we are bailing Diem out, why aren't we entitled to *insist* . . . that he overhaul tax system, halt waste of foreign exchange and devalue currency to a realistic rate? To my mind one of the flaws of our Korean operation has been that we always gave and never demanded. This is war for Diem too; he's got to understand that continued procrastination on his part will be fatal." (emphasis in original) Komer also urged that the U.S. demonstrate its determination: "At a minimum, why not give Diem now a public commitment that if things get to the stage of overt fighting, we will come to his support. We should consider ways and means of putting token US forces in South Vietnam as further evidence (if this is possible under Geneva Accords)." By May 4, Komer was arguing that a way needed to be found to "seal" off South Vietnam in such a way as to deter another Laos." He said he was not convinced that the U.S. should send troops to Vietnam, but he questioned whether the decision should be postponed until after the Laos conference had begun, and the situation in Vietnam had deteriorated even further. He also questioned whether a large force was needed. "The purpose of sending forces is *not* to fight guerrillas. It would be to establish a US 'presence'; this could be accomplished by no more than a battalion supported by naval power." Memorandum from Komer to Bundy and Rostow, May 4, 1961, same location. (emphasis in original)

Laos, Cambodia and the Laotian negotiations, the outcome is highly doubtful.

To the extent that it depends on wider popular support among the Vietnamese, tax and foreign exchange reforms by Diem, and his agreement to the military and governmental reorganizations required, the outcome is speculative at best.

In other words, Sorensen, Bundy, and Bell questioned whether the U.S. could count on reforms by Diem, and also doubted whether it was realistic to think that Communist infiltration into Vietnam could be blocked, even by U.S. military action.

These three advisers went on to say that the U.S. could not prevent the "loss" of South Vietnam, but that U.S. insistence on reforms was justified in order to help the South Vietnamese save themselves:

There is no clearer example of a country that cannot be saved unless it saves itself—through increased popular support; governmental, economic and military reforms and reorganizations; and the encouragement of new political leaders. We do not want Vietnam to fall—we do not want to add to Diem's burdens—and the chief purpose of insisting upon such conditions should not be the saving of American dollars but the saving of Vietnam.

Kennedy appears to have been influenced by or to have agreed with the advice of Sorensen, Bundy, and Bell, and at the NSC meeting on April 29 at which the report of the Vietnam Task Force was considered, he approved only a few of the recommendations of the task force, including its proposal that the MAAG be increased by approximately 100 in order to assist in training the Self Defense Corps, that there should be additional 20,000 men for the armed forces, and the suggestion that U.S. military assistance funds be used to support the entire Civil Guard force.

On May 1, 1961, a revised draft of the task force report was distributed. At this point, the primary responsibility was transferred from Defense to State, doubtless at the insistence of the White House, and the report was redrafted on May 3 to reflect State's views.

The task force was also downgraded in importance, with a Foreign Service officer, Sterling J. Cottrell, appointed as Director, and another FSO, Chalmers B. Wood, as Executive Officer, thus making it an interagency working group rather than a sub-Cabinet level task force. Lansdale was not even made a member of the group.

In arguing for State's direction of the group it was said that Rusk "... was able to turn the trick with a phrase. 'If you want Vietnam,' he said to McNamara, 'give me the Marines.'" ¹⁰⁴

On May 6 the task force report was again redrafted for an NSC meeting on May 11. In this, its final form, the report, which stated that "come what may, the U.S. intends to win this battle" (this language had been in the first draft of the report), recommended that in addition to the actions approved by the President on April 29, he approve other military moves, including dispatching 400 U.S. Special Forces to help train Vietnamese Special Forces; consideration

¹⁰⁴Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 41.

of increasing the Vietnamese Armed Forces from the newly-approved 170,000 to 200,000; and consideration also of sending U.S. forces to Vietnam should this be agreed upon in the meetings of Vice President Johnson and Diem. The paper stated that the Defense Department had begun a study of the use of U.S. forces, and that one action being considered was the deployment of two U.S. battle groups (with supporting units) and an engineer battalion.

In one of the annexes to the report these military moves were discussed at greater length.¹⁰⁵ With respect to the use of U.S. forces, it was stated in the annex that such a U.S. military group would be "specifically designed for carrying out a counter-guerilla—civic action—limited war mission in South Vietnam," in which "In the absence of intelligence indications of an overt attack on the G.V.N., it is contemplated that this composite force would be deployed throughout the country in small 'task force' units on specific mission assignments of a counter-guerrilla or civic action nature."

The report itself also proposed that these troops be stationed in Vietnam under a U.S.-Vietnam defensive alliance. Advantages and disadvantages of having U.S. forces in Vietnam were discussed. One of the advantages would be that "It would place the Sino-Soviet Bloc in the position of risking direct intervention in a situation where U.S. forces were already in place, accepting the consequences of such action. This is in direct contrast to the current situation in Laos."

Among the disadvantages was the following: "The danger that a troop contribution would provoke a DRV-CHICOM, [Democratic Republic of Vietnam—Chinese Communist] reaction with the risk of involving a significant commitment of U.S. force in the Pacific to the Asian mainland."

The report also discussed political, economic and psychological aspects, as well as covert action and unconventional warfare.

Also in preparation for the May 11 NSC meeting, McNamara asked the JCS to review the question of deploying U.S. forces in Vietnam. JCS Chairman Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer stopped by Vietnam on his return from another trip, and on May 9 the JCS recommended to McNamara that Diem should "be encouraged" to request that the U.S. fulfill its SEATO obligation, by sending "appropriate" forces to Vietnam.¹⁰⁶

Assuming that the political decision is to hold Southeast Asia outside the Communist sphere, the JCS are of the opinion that U.S. forces should be deployed immediately to South Vietnam; such action should be taken primarily to prevent the Vietnamese from being subjected to the same situation as presently exists in Laos, which would then require deployment of US forces into an already existing combat situation. . . . Sufficient forces should be deployed to accomplish the following purposes:

A. Provide a visible deterrent to potential North Vietnam and/or Chinese Communist action.

¹⁰⁵Annex 2, the text of which is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 93-100. For the final May 6 task force report and all of the annexes see pp. 70-130.

¹⁰⁶A copy of this JCS paper is in the Johnson Library, Vice Presidential Security File.

B. Release Vietnamese forces from advanced and static defense positions to permit their fuller commitment to counterinsurgency actions.

C. Assist in training the Vietnamese forces to the maximum extent consistent with their mission.

D. Provide a nucleus for the support of any additional major US or SEATO military operation in Southeast Asia.

E. Indicate the firmness of our interest to all Asia nations.

On May 10, Rostow sent Kennedy a memorandum commenting on the task force report that was to be discussed the next day, and it is of interest to note his position on a possible coup against Diem:¹⁰⁷

Although we have no alternative except to support Diem now, he may be overthrown, as the accompanying cables suggest. If so, we should be prepared to move fast with the younger army types who may then emerge. Such a crisis is not to be sought, among other reasons because its outcome could not be predicted; but should it happen, we may be able to get more nearly the kind of military organization and perhaps, even, the domestic political program we want in Viet-Nam but have been unable to get from Diem.

On May 11, Kennedy approved additional steps recommended by the task force, including the proposals for covert action, and deployment of a 400-man Special Forces team, which was the first open violation by the U.S. of the Geneva Accords. (Both sides had been violating the Accords for many years.) The military were told to assess the value of increasing the Vietnamese Armed Forces from 170,000 to 200,000. With respect to the possible use of U.S. forces, he ordered a complete study of this question, including the "diplomatic setting" for such a move. He also authorized Ambassador Nolting to begin to negotiate a bilateral U.S.-Vietnam defense pact, but to make no commitment until receiving further approval from the White House.

Kennedy's decision, which became known as the "Presidential Program for Vietnam," was promulgated by NSAM 52, May 11, 1961, the opening statement of which reaffirmed the long-standing U.S. commitment to the defense of Vietnam:¹⁰⁸

The U.S. objectives and concept of operations stated in report are approved: to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam; to create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society, and to initiate, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a military, po-

¹⁰⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

¹⁰⁸The text of NSAM 52 is in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 642-643. After the NSAM was issued, there were progress reports about every two weeks on the status of the 33 actions (later 44) which were proposed. The first of these reports was issued on May 23, 1961, and the last on July 1, 1962. (After the Nov. 15, 1961, decision to increase U.S. aid to Vietnam—see below—the reports were broadened to cover also the new "limited partnership" program.) Copies of some of these reports are now available at the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, and others are at the Johnson Library, Vice Presidential Security File. Generally the reports are very uninformative except for details on the implementation of specific forms of assistance.

On Mar. 20, 1972, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee issued a brief staff study on this subject, *Vietnam Commitments, 1961*, based on the *Pentagon Papers*.

litical, economic psychological and covert character designed to achieve this objective.

This is William P. Bundy's comment on the significance of Kennedy's decision:¹⁰⁹

The decision to compromise in Laos made it essential to convey by word and deed that the US would stand firm in South Vietnam and in the rest of Southeast Asia. And the situation was deemed too critical to permit a more leisurely approach, or an effort to enlist systematic allied support in the SEATO framework. . . . What was going on in Vietnam seemed the clearest possible case of what Khrushchev in January had called a "war of national liberation." The Administration was impregnated with the belief that Communism worldwide . . . was on the offensive, that this offensive had been allowed to gain dangerous momentum in the last two years of the Eisenhower Administration, and that it must now be met solidly. . . . Although some have suggested that Kennedy was reluctant in this early decision this was certainly not the mood of his advisors nor the mood that he conveyed to them. Rather, the tone was: "Sure, Diem is difficult, but this one has got to be tackled."

Johnson's Trip and the Increased U.S. Commitment

In order to affirm and promote the U.S. commitment, as well as to extract more of a commitment from Vietnam, Kennedy decided, as was indicated earlier, that Vice President Johnson should confer with Diem. There were several reasons for sending Johnson, in addition to emphasizing the importance of the mission. He was an experienced politician who was known for his ability to persuade, and thus might be able to influence Diem. He also had considerable power and influence in Congress, and the President anticipated that Johnson would, as he did, become more committed himself, and work to get congressional support for increased aid to Vietnam.

Another important reason for sending Johnson to Vietnam was that it could be (and was) made to appear that Johnson's conclusions and recommendations were his own, and represented his point of view rather than Kennedy's. Thus, while controlling every important aspect of the trip, the White House could give the impression that the President was not directly involved in the taking of another important step toward a major expansion of U.S. assistance to Vietnam. At the same time, the fact that these recommendations were coming from Johnson would not only help Kennedy gain approval for the program in Congress, but would help insulate him from criticisms by some of the conservatives, who, by the same token, would hesitate to criticize Johnson.

Johnson's mission to Vietnam, May 9-15, 1961, was a very important step in the evolution of U.S. policy toward Vietnam. It has often been ridiculed and belittled by those who have reacted nega-

¹⁰⁹For this and subsequent observations which will be cited as Bundy MS., CRS is indebted to William P. Bundy for permission to quote from his unpublished manuscript, written in 1970-72, dealing with key decisions concerning Southeast Asia in the period from early 1961 to early 1966. The quotation here is from ch. 3, pp. 36, 41-42.

tively to Johnson's reference to Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia," unaware, perhaps, of the fact that Johnson had been directed to laud Diem and his accomplishments.¹¹⁰

When he arrived in Vietnam, Johnson gave Diem a letter from Kennedy in which the President told Diem of the additional assistance he had approved, and said that ". . . we are ready to join with you in an intensified endeavor to win the struggle against Communism and to further the social and economic advancement of Vietnam."¹¹¹ It was to be, Kennedy said, a "joint campaign."

Acting on explicit instructions from the White House, Johnson raised with Diem the key questions being considered in Washington, namely, whether there should be a U.S.-Vietnam mutual defense pact, and whether U.S. combat troops should be sent to Vietnam to establish a visible American military presence. Diem was not in favor of either proposal, but he said he would welcome U.S. troops for training. (Based on this, General McGarr requested that 16,000 U.S. troops be sent to Vietnam, ostensibly for training purposes, or 10,000 if Diem rejected the larger number.)¹¹²

Johnson also discussed with Diem the reforms that the U.S. wanted him to make, and although Diem again appeared to be agreeable, it is questionable whether Johnson accomplished any more than others had or would.

On May 13, Johnson and Diem issued a joint communiqué, drafted by State Department officials in Saigon and Washington, which had been completely cleared in Washington, summarizing the talks.¹¹³ It was evident from this document that the Kennedy administration was expanding the U.S. commitment to Vietnam in an effort to prevent the country from being overrun by the Communists. Eight points of agreement on new programs were announced, including the various measures approved earlier by Kennedy through which the joint effort would be intensified. These measures, the communiqué said, ". . . represent an increase and acceleration of United States assistance to the Republic of Vietnam. These may be followed by more far-reaching measures if the situation, in the opinion of both governments, warrants."

¹¹⁰It had been agreed in the administration that one of the principal purposes of the Johnson mission was to create in Diem a higher sense of his own importance in the eyes of the United States and the world, and Johnson's statements, written for him by State Department representatives on the trip, deliberately sought to convey this impression. This same point was made in the instructions Johnson received from the State Department prior to the trip, which were conveyed in a letter from Under Secretary Bowles, Kennedy Library, NSF Trips and Conferences File, May 8, 1961.

According to one member of the Johnson group, Francis Valeo, (Mansfield's assistant, who had been asked by Johnson to go with him as a "foil" against the advice he would be getting from the State Department), Johnson's comparison of Diem to Churchill may have been suggested by one of the State Department representatives on the mission.

Valeo also concluded that as a result of this trip Johnson became committed to Vietnam, and that this affected his handling of the matter after he became President. CRS Interview with Francis Valeo, Oct. 29, 1978.

After the trip, Valeo himself concluded that the mission had been useful. In a cable to Mansfield on May 21 as the group was returning to Washington he said, "Over-all effect of mission highly useful in Southeast Asian area. Opens up possibility of great improvement in our performance here if it is followed by adjustments in policy at home and follow-through with tight and unmodified administration in Southeast Asia." Kennedy Library, NSF Trips File.

¹¹¹PP, DOD ed., book 11, p. 132. For Diem's reply, see pp. 155-156. For whatever reason, Kennedy's letter to Diem was not included in the *Public Papers of the Presidents*.

¹¹²PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 11.

¹¹³The text is in the *Department of State Bulletin*, June 19, 1961.

The communiqué stated that the United States recognized "its responsibility and duty, in its own self-interest as well as the interest of other free peoples, to assist a brave country in the defense of its liberties against unprovoked subversion and Communist terror," and also recognized that Diem "is in the vanguard of those leaders who stand for freedom on the periphery of the Communist empire in Asia."

Ambassador Nolting cabled Washington on May 15 that Johnson had "avoided any commitments beyond those in President Kennedy's letter to Diem. . . ." He said Johnson had "repeatedly stressed necessity of having adequate evidence to convince Congress it should vote additional aid funds especially in economic field. We believe general expectation left with Diem is that additional aid will be forthcoming."¹¹⁴

This expanded commitment by the President of the United States, with the acquiescence of Congress, raised the level and enlarged the scope of existing U.S. commitments to Vietnam. Previously the U.S. had taken the position that it was assisting Vietnam in its efforts to defend itself. Although in practice the United States was deeply involved in activities in Vietnam, it had never taken the position that this was a joint effort by the two countries—a concept with many implications for the role of the United States and the role of Vietnam, as well as for the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam.

This shift from providing assistance to assuming responsibility for part of a joint effort was based on a recognition of two salient facts. First, the previous commitment was not adequate and existing programs were not working. The situation in Vietnam was deteriorating, and a stronger commitment as well as new programs were required in order to prevent this from happening and to achieve U.S. objectives. Second, by 1961 the failure of the South Vietnamese to act effectively to prevent substantial Communist gains in the country had convinced the new Kennedy administration that the U.S. had to intervene more fully, and play a stronger, more direct role in Vietnam in order to prevent the Communists from winning.

It is important in this connection to understand that the Kennedy administration did not consider negotiating a settlement of Vietnam, even though there was a move among several State Department officials to do so in conjunction with the Geneva Conference on Laos. In a subsequent interview, Kennedy's assistant Theodore Sorensen explained the administration's conception of the differences between Laos and Vietnam, and the reasons for not seeking a negotiated settlement for Vietnam:¹¹⁵

In Laos it was clear that a negotiated settlement was the best we could reach. It was not accessible to American forces. It was up against the border of the Red Chinese. A policy of trying to establish an American protege there was contrary to the wishes of our allies. And therefore, inasmuch as a negotiated settlement was possible, since negotiations with the Soviet Union were possible, that was the most desirable alternative.

¹¹⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Trips File.

¹¹⁵Kennedy Library, Oral History Interview with Theodore Sorensen, Mar. 26, 1964, p. 96.

In Vietnam, on the other hand, exactly the opposite was true. It was militarily more accessible, and there was no obvious route to negotiations inasmuch as we were not and could not be in a position of dealing directly with the Red Chinese and the North Vietnamese. And therefore, the President felt that we would have to maintain our military presence there until conditions permitted a settlement which would not be a disaster for the United States.

Carl Kaysen, who was interviewing Sorensen on this occasion, and who himself had been on Kennedy's NSC staff, noted that the U.S. had negotiated with the Chinese over Korea, and then asked Sorensen, "Were the possibilities or prospects for a settlement by negotiation ever considered, to your knowledge, examined—any sounding made?"

Sorensen. No, not to my knowledge.

Kaysen. So the President assumed from the first that we had to deal with this problem by military means?

Sorensen. That's right.

Sorensen added that Kennedy did not consider it to be just a military problem. "He felt that getting the enthusiastic support of the country, its population, and its army was at least one-half of the problem and, therefore, would require economic and political and social reforms as well as military action on our part."

Kaysen. Yes, but from the first, there was this judgment that we have to support military action with whatever also was required to do that. And throughout the whole of the President's Administration, we found ourselves increasing our commitment to Vietnam, although at no time did the prospects improve. Did this reflect a judgment that a favorable decision in Vietnam was really vital to U.S. interests?

Sorensen. It reflected rather the converse of that—that an unfavorable decision, or a retreat, an abandonment of Vietnam, an abandonment of our commitment would have had a very seriously adverse effect on the position of the United States in all of Southeast Asia. Therefore, we had to do whatever was necessary to prevent it, which meant increasing our military commitment.

Sorensen added: "... I think the President did feel strongly that for better or worse, enthusiastic or unenthusiastic we had to stay there until we left on terms other than a retreat or abandonment of our commitment."

Johnson Reports, and Fulbright Becomes Concerned

On May 24, 1961, Johnson returned to Washington and gave Kennedy an oral and a written report on his trip.¹¹⁶ For the oral report Kennedy invited selected congressional leaders to the White House to hear Johnson in a closed 1 hour session attended also by Rusk.¹¹⁷ In his written report, which State Department officers on the trip and in Washington had also prepared, and which had been cleared and approved by the White House itself, Johnson began by

¹¹⁶The text of the written report is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 159-166.

¹¹⁷Kennedy's appointments calendar does not list the participants in that meeting, nor did published reports in the press.

emphasizing that the mission had helped to offset the adverse affects in Asia (he visited India, Pakistan, Taiwan and the Philippines as well as Thailand and Vietnam) created by the Lao situation. Laos, he said, "... has created doubt and concern about the intentions of the United States throughout Southeast Asia. No amount of success at Geneva can, of itself, erase this. The independent Asians do not wish to have their own status resolved in like manner in Geneva." He said, however, that the mission had "... arrested the decline of confidence in the United States. It did not—in my judgment—restore any confidence already lost. The leaders were as explicit, as courteous and courtly as men could be in making it clear that deeds must follow words—soon.

"We didn't buy time—we were given it.

"If these men I saw at your request were bankers, I would know—without bothering to ask—that there would be no further extensions on my note."

The principal conclusion of the report was as follows:

The basic decision in Southeast Asia is here. We must decide whether to help these countries to the best of our ability or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a "Fortress America" concept. More important, we would say to the world in this case that we don't live up to treaties and don't stand by our friends. This is not my concept. I recommend that we move forward promptly with a major effort to help these countries defend themselves.

Johnson said that combat troops were neither required nor desirable:

Asian leaders—at this time—do not want American troops involved in Southeast Asia other than on training missions. American combat troop involvement is not only not required, it is not desirable. Possibly Americans fail to appreciate fully the subtlety that recently-colonial peoples would not look with favor upon governments which invited or accepted the return this soon of Western troops.

He added this interesting and important point:

To the extent that fear of ground troop involvement dominates our political responses to Asia in Congress or elsewhere, it seems most desirable to me to allay those paralyzing fears in confidence, on the strength of the individual statements made by leaders consulted on this trip. This does not minimize or disregard the possibility that open attack would bring calls for U.S. combat troops. But the present probability of open attack seems scant, and we might gain much needed flexibility in our policies if the spectre of combat troop commitment could be lessened domestically.

Johnson concluded the report by reiterating the need for deciding whether to make a "major effort" in Southeast Asia: "The fundamental decision required of the United States—and time is of the greatest importance—is whether we are to attempt to meet the challenges of Communist expansion now in Southeast Asia by a major effort in support of the forces of freedom in the area or throw in the towel." He underlined the implications: "This decision must be made in a full realization of the very heavy and continuing costs involved in terms of money, of effort and of United States

prestige. It must be made with the knowledge that at some point we may be faced with the further decision of whether we commit major United States forces to the area or cut our losses and withdraw should our other efforts fail." And then there was this haunting sentence: "We must remain master in this decision."

The next day, May 25, 1961, Johnson went to Capitol Hill to report to the Senate on his trip. The meeting was hosted by the Foreign Relations Committee, and 57 Senators were present. (Prior to going to Asia, Johnson had talked to Fulbright, Mansfield and others.)¹¹⁸ Johnson repeated for the group the conclusions he had stated in his report to the President, including the need to understand that a decision to make a major effort in Southeast Asia could later entail, on the one hand, a decision to withdraw, or, on the other, to commit major forces.

Tailoring his language for his political audience, Johnson, saying that he favored such a major effort, added, "If a bully can come in and run you out of the yard today, tomorrow he will come back and run you off the porch."

During the question period Johnson was asked whether Laos was a "lost cause." "No," he said, "I did not get that feeling out there, but I have been very depressed about Laos. I don't see what we can do there. I don't think anything is going to come out of the conference."

"I think that the Russians are going to bust it up, and I think that the Communists will practically have it." He added that he was glad he did not have to discuss this subject with Asian leaders, "because there was not any hope I could give them or any promises I could make."

Congressional reaction to Johnson's trip was generally favorable. Senator Thomas J. Dodd (D/Conn.), the newest member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and a committed anti-Communist who was also a strong supporter of Johnson, praised the Vice President, but argued that the U.S. should increase its role in Asia. Based on a trip he had just completed, he said, "... the drama which may toll the death knell for the United States and for Western civilization is now being played out in southeast Asia." Laos is the center of that crisis, he said, but throughout the area there is a "crisis of confidence" in U.S. leadership. He proposed a plan of action in which the U.S. would insist at Geneva that Laos be "truly free," without Communists in a coalition government, and that if this could not be achieved the U.S. should then "make an inviolable commitment of our prestige and our resources to achieve an independent Laos by force of arms." Moreover, the U.S. should increase its aid to freedom-loving countries, and carry the battle to the enemy. Guerrillas should be sent into North Vietnam "... to equip and supply those patriots already in the field; to make every Communist official fear the just retribution of an outraged humanity; to make every Communist arsenal, government building, communications center, and transportation facility a target for sabotage; to provide a rallying point for the great masses of oppressed

¹¹⁸Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 53. For Johnson's meeting with the Senators, see *SFRC His Ser.*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, pp. 629-651. Quotations here are from p. 640.

people who hate Communism because they have known it." Also, if sending SEATO forces to Laos resulted in an increased Communist offensive, the U.S. should "carry the offensive to North Vietnam, and wherever else it may be necessary."¹¹⁹

There was another reaction of interest, given his later opposition, beginning in 1967, to the war. This was the position taken by Representative Paul Findley (R/Ill.), then in his first year in Congress, who criticized Johnson's announcement that he would not recommend the deployment of U.S. combat forces to Vietnam. Findley said, "U.S. combat forces are the most effective deterrent to aggression, and we should publicly offer such forces to South Vietnam without delay." "If we commit our forces in advance of Communist action," he argued, "the attack will probably never come. If we get into the fight in midstream, we may trigger a big war." He said that no country in which U.S. forces had been stationed had ever been attacked, and that for the Vice President to state that we would not send forces to Vietnam was "an invitation to trouble." Another Laos "was in the making," he added. "Supplies and training are not enough. Sooner or later, we will be forced to send combat forces to a war already in progress, or once more be identified with failure."¹²⁰

This same argument was made within the executive branch only a few months later by a number of civilian and military advisers, including the Vietnam Task Force itself.

Fulbright also reacted. Although he had indicated in early May that he would support using U.S. combat troops in Vietnam or Thailand if necessary, by the beginning of June, partly as a result of his reaction to Johnson's trip and to what he correctly perceived to be the beginning of a major expansion of U.S. military aid to Vietnam and of the U.S. role in Southeast Asia, he began to have second thoughts. This led him to send a private memorandum to Kennedy as the President was preparing for his "summit meeting" with Khrushchev, in which he urged Kennedy to "reconsider the nature of American policies in Southeast Asia, specifically U.S. programs in Korea, Taiwan, South Vietnam, Laos and Thailand."¹²¹

On June 29, Fulbright continued this line of argument in an important foreign policy speech in the Senate in which he said that it was "dangerous doctrine" to argue that because the U.S. was strong it would commit its strength to the "active defense of its policies anywhere outside the Communist empire . . . nothing would please Communist leaders more than to draw the United States into costly commitments of its resources to peripheral struggles in which the principal Communist powers are not themselves directly involved." The attempt by the U.S. to make Laos into an "armed anti-Communist bastion," he said, ". . . was a mistake, because it [U.S. policy] was not related to the needs of the country or to the nature of its people and their interests." South Vietnam, however, deserved U.S. support. Its people were anti-Communist,

¹¹⁹CR, vol. 107, pp. 9176.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 8587.

¹²¹Haynes Johnson and Bernard M. Gwertzman, *Fulbright, The Dissenter* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), p. 178. The Kennedy Library staff reports that they have not located this document in their files.

and its regime, although "perhaps unnecessarily severe," had been strong. But he warned that U.S. programs in Vietnam had been "too heavily weighted on the military side," and more attention was needed in the "struggle for dignity and economic independence." Referring to the success of Magsaysay in the Philippines, he said that the proper role for the U.S. in countries such as Vietnam was to enable "well-intentioned governments" to bring about social and economic reforms that, with the necessary security, would cause the populace to reject Communist domination.¹²²

Fulbright's words fell on deaf ears. No effort had been or was thereafter made by the administration to review or reevaluate U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, except for the decision to seek a negotiated settlement of Laos.

The Staley Mission

After meeting early in June 1961 with Khrushchev, who seemed agreeable with respect to the neutralization of Laos but was truculent on almost every other subject, Kennedy and his associates became even more intent on getting an agreement on Laos, on the one hand, and stepping up U.S. assistance to Vietnam on the other. In an interview some years later, Dean Rusk commented:¹²³

When Kennedy met with Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961, they seemed to reach some kind of understanding about Laos. That was the only positive thing to come out of that meeting. At the same time, Khrushchev tried to intimidate and bully this young President of the United States with an ultimatum. He told Kennedy, "We Russians are going to go ahead now and make this peace treaty with East Germany; if the West tries to interfere, there will be war." Kennedy said, "Mr. Chairman, there will be war. It is going to be a very cold winter." It was a tough situation. Kennedy was very much aware of this as he looked at the problem of Vietnam. I think he felt up to the point of his death that he was being tested by Khrushchev. Of course, that feeling was underscored by the Cuban missile crisis.

Just after his meeting with Khrushchev, Kennedy told James Reston of the *New York Times*, "Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place."¹²⁴

¹²²CR, vol. 107, pp. 11702-11705. At several points in the 1961 public hearings on the foreign aid bill, as well as in executive session hearings on June 13 and 14, Fulbright asked administration witnesses whether the executive branch had reviewed the program in order to "affirmatively decide" which aid commitments were in the U.S. national interest, and whether it was "within our capacity to continue to try to support every area in the world that is not now within the Communist orbit." (The witnesses said that no such review had been made.) He said, referring specifically to South Vietnam, but including also Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and South Korea, "I am really questioning the validity of the concept which we are trying to fulfill, if it is not a false one, basically false, that it is impossible, and I am inclined at the moment to think that it probably is, due to reasons beyond our control; these are things we cannot change." For these and other comments by Fulbright in the public hearings see U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *International Development and Security*, Hearings on S. 1983, pts. 1 and 2, 87th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1961), pp. 86-87, 586-587, 606-608, 644-645, 866-869.

¹²³CRS Interview with Dean Rusk, Nov. 17, 1978.

¹²⁴David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 76. Of interest also are Reston's comments in his column in the *New York Times* for June 10, 1979 (for his original report on this subject see the *Times* for Jan. 18, 1966):

But if Vietnam rather than Laos was "the place," then it was all the more important that a negotiated settlement be reached on Laos. Accordingly, after returning from Europe, Kennedy called Harriman to stress the need for an agreement. According to Harriman, the President said, "You understand Averell," or Governor, he always used to call me, "that I want a settlement. I don't want to send troops."¹²⁵

There was still something of a disjunction, however, between the White House and the working level in the departments. Despite Kennedy's emphasis on Laos negotiations, the Vietnam Task Force continued to take the position, which the Laos Task Force had taken earlier in the year, that the U.S. should undertake military action in Laos. Such action was recommended to the task force at a meeting on June 19, 1961, by the Director, Sterling Cottrell, in a draft report which argued that this action was necessary in order to defend South Vietnam. On June 20, Robert H. Johnson, a member of the NSC staff, sent Rostow a memorandum on this new report, saying that he had "expressed some surprise" in the meeting at Cottrell's statement "that, unless we undertake military action in Laos, it would be virtually impossible to deal effectively with the situation in Viet-Nam."¹²⁶

Johnson's comment itself is somewhat surprising, in view of the fact that there had long been very strong support in State and Defense for the proposition that the defense of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, necessarily was based on a defense line along the Mekong River—SEATO Plan 5. Even after the agreement on Laos in 1962, many planners continued to argue that such a line of defense was the key to protecting all of Southeast Asia, and that unless the infiltration of men and supplies into Vietnam through Laos could be controlled, the insurgency in Vietnam could last indefinitely. (This argument—that U.S. (SEATO) forces should be sent to Laos in order to protect Vietnam—was made, especially by the JCS, during the weeks of planning for action in Southeast Asia preceding the Taylor mission in October 1961.)

The President and his associates lost no time in implementing the Johnson-Diem communiqué. On June 14, 1961, Kennedy met with Diem's key Cabinet officer, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, to discuss

"I had an hour alone with President Kennedy immediately after his last meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna at that time. Khrushchev had assumed, Kennedy said, that any American President who invaded Cuba without adequate preparation was inexperienced, and any President who then didn't use force to see the invasions through was weak. Kennedy admitted Khrushchev's logic on both points.

"But now, Kennedy added, we have a problem. We have to demonstrate to the Russians that we have the will and the power to defend our national interests. Shortly thereafter, he increased the defense budget, sent another division to Europe and increased our small contingent of observers and advisors in Vietnam to over 16,000.

"I have always believed, on the basis of that private conversation, that this particular summit was an event of historic significance, leading to Khrushchev's decision to send nuclear weapons to Cuba and to Kennedy's decision to confront Khrushchev by increasing our commitment in Vietnam.

"Kennedy dealt with Khrushchev's misjudgment by forcing him to turn back his nuclear weapons for Cuba or risk the possibility of war. Khrushchev turned them back, but the American commitment to Vietnam went on. The Kennedy people have always denied that there was any connection between Khrushchev's threats in Vienna and Kennedy's decision to confront the Communist threat to South Vietnam. But I know what I heard from Kennedy in Vienna 17 years ago, and have reflected on the accidents of summit meetings ever since."

¹²⁵CRS Interview with Averell Harriman, Sept. 26, 1978.

¹²⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

Diem's suggestions for implementing that agreement. These were contained in a letter of June 9 from Diem to Kennedy, which Thuan presented, in which Diem recommended, among other things, an increase in the Vietnamese Armed Forces from the 170,000 men just approved in May to 270,000 men, with the increase occurring over 3½ years.¹²⁷ (It is interesting to note, by the way, that this increase would be in regular army units, rather than in local militia or the Civil Guard. By this time, however, a large percentage of the regular army was engaged in fighting the guerrillas.) This plan, which had been worked out in conjunction with General McGarr, would necessitate, Diem said, a "considerable expansion" of the U.S. military assistance group, but, "Such an expansion, in the form of selected elements of the American Armed Forces to establish training centers for the Vietnamese Armed Forces, would serve the dual purpose of providing an expression of the United States' determination to halt the tide of communist aggression and of preparing our forces in the minimum of time." In other words, Diem apparently had been persuaded to agree to the American formula of having U.S. forces deployed in Vietnam for training purposes as well as serving as an armed presence, or "trip wire," that might deter the Communists.

In this meeting, Kennedy asked, among other things, about the problems of infiltrating guerrillas into North Vietnam. According to the memorandum of the conversation, "Mr. Thuan replied that a few highly trained troops were available but that if Viet-Nam were to risk these men in an attempt to stir up unrest in North Viet-Nam, the United States should be prepared to make a major effort to give them the full support needed to carry out such an action to a successful conclusion."¹²⁸

The President seemed to agree completely with Diem's proposals. He instructed the State Department to expedite financing for the 20,000 increase already approved for the Vietnamese Army, and told McNamara to give a copy of Diem's letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee, where the Secretary was testifying that day, "... in order that the Senators could better understand and appreciate the magnitude of the task involved in helping Viet-Nam to maintain its independence." He also asked which Members of Congress Thuan would be seeing, and suggested he see some Republican Senators, especially Everett McKinley Dirksen (Ill.) and Bourke B. Hickenlooper (Iowa). The State Department said it would arrange these meetings. It had already arranged for Thuan to see Fulbright, Mansfield, and Frank J. Lausche (D/Ohio), the

¹²⁷For the text of the letter see *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 168-173.

¹²⁸Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Memorandum of Conversation, June 14, 1961.

Consistent with President Kennedy's interest in increasing covert activity, especially against North Vietnam, the CIA authorized William E. Colby, then the Station Chief in Saigon, to accelerate operations against the North. "... we pressed ahead," Colby said. "Flights left Danang in the dusk headed north with Vietnamese trained and equipped to land in isolated areas, make cautious contact with their former home villages and begin building networks there. Boats went up the coast to land others on the beaches, and we started leaflet drops and radio programs designed to raise questions in North Vietnamese homes about their sons being sent to South Vietnam to fight and about the vices of Communist rule." William Colby, *Honorable Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 173.

chairman of the Far East Subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee.¹²⁹

On the sensitive subject of U.S. forces, Kennedy carefully avoiding making a commitment, even though he agreed that the MAAG should be increased in order to speed up the training of Vietnamese forces, adding that "... this increase should be done quietly without publicly indicating that we did not intend to abide by the Geneva Accords."

In mid-June 1961, in accordance with the Johnson-Diem agreement, the U.S. sent a team of specialists to Vietnam to work with a Vietnamese team on a financial plan. The U.S. group (U.S. Special Financial Group) was headed by a private economist, Dr. Eugene Staley, president of SRI (Stanford Research Institute), but most of its members were from the government.

After spending a month in Vietnam the group made its report.¹³⁰ Although it was responsible for developing a financial plan, it had necessarily become involved in discussions of military force levels on which such a plan would rest. Two projections were made. Alternative A called for a level of 200,000, an increase of 30,000 over the level already approved. Alternative B called for increasing forces to the level of 278,000, which was 8,000 more than had been recommended by Diem. The first alternative assumed a continuation of the existing level of the insurgency, whereas the second assumed a significant increase in Communist activity in Vietnam, and a deterioration in Laos ending in *de facto* control by the Communists. The report then analyzed the costs involved in each alternative, and how these funds could be provided jointly. Other economic and political programs were discussed, including the Vietnamese plan to build 100 agrovilles ("strategic hamlets" or fortified villages) during the next 18 months. Calling these "one of the more promising counter-guerrilla methods tried up to this time," the report recommended that agrovilles be given top priority.

The report stated that although the military situation was the most critical, an "emergency" plan of economic and social action was also needed, especially in the rural areas. The long-run success of military operations, it said, would hinge on the success of economic and social action.

The concept of this "Joint Action Program," the report stated, was, by applying adequate resources in a prompt and effective manner, to achieve an early victory or "breakthrough." "Our joint efforts must surpass the critical threshold of the enemy's resistance, thereby putting an end to his destructive attacks, and at the same time we must make a decisive impact on the economic, social, and ideological front."

On August 4, 1961, President Kennedy approved the Staley group's recommendations, including alternative A (a 200,000 man army).¹³¹ (Because the level of 200,000 could not be achieved for

¹²⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, cables to Saigon from Washington, June 15, 1961.

¹³⁰The text is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 182-226.

¹³¹The Joint Chiefs had recommended alternative A. See *ibid.*, p. 239.

over a year, he thereby left himself the option of moving later to a higher number.) He also agreed that the U.S. would pay most of the increased costs involved in these new actions, but he urged that Vietnam increase its own financial efforts, including tax reform and an increase in the exchange rate for U.S. commodities under the commodity import program, and that Diem provide more of an opportunity for non-Communist opposition political groups to participate in public life.¹³²

On its face, the Staley report appeared innocuous enough. Consistent with the announced mission of the group to develop a financial plan, the report discussed at length the financial and economic aspects of the situation in Vietnam at that time. What was not apparent was the extent to which the Staley plan was a military-security plan. Furthermore, approval of the plan, which seems to have been almost automatic, set in motion another series of incremental actions by which the United States strengthened its military-security commitment to Vietnam.

In its actions during the summer of 1961 on the authorization and appropriation bills for the foreign aid program, Congress approved the administration's increased assistance to Vietnam resulting from the Johnson and Staley missions. Although there were more policy questions than in previous years, especially on the part of Fulbright, as was indicated earlier, support for U.S. assistance to Vietnam continued to be strong, and the requested funds were generally approved without significant change. Once again, however, it is appropriate to note that although some of its leaders may have been informed about the decisions on Vietnam being made in the executive branch, Congress was largely acting on this legislation without knowledge of those decisions and of the growing U.S. commitment in Vietnam. Although Kennedy consulted leaders of Congress about sending U.S. forces to Laos, and included them in the meeting with Johnson upon his return from Vietnam, there is no record of similar consultations with Congress about the decisions made during the early months of 1961, as well as during the summer and fall, to increase the commitment and role of the U.S. in Vietnam. In part this lack or absence of consultation resulted from the customary reluctance of executive branch personnel to divulge information to Congress. It also reflected the reluctance of Congress to press the administration for information on sensitive foreign policy subjects, or to attempt to ferret out information in investigations or trips to the field. The President also was still enjoying to some extent his "honeymoon" with Congress, and, being a

¹³²The decision on the Staley plan was promulgated as NSAM 65, Aug. 11, 1961, and appears in *ibid.*, pp. 241-244. At the same time Kennedy appears to have approved a letter to Diem, as suggested by the State Department, confirming and explaining the U.S. decision. No copy of this has been found. The memoranda to the President from the State Department, signed by George Ball (n.d.), and from Rostow (Aug. 4, 1961) in which the proposed plan was explained and Presidential action requested, are in the Kennedy Library, POF Staff Memos File. Rostow noted in his memo that the draft of the letter to Diem was a compromise between the two basic views within the U.S. Government on the best methods for getting the Vietnamese to act. State and Defense, he said, believed that this could best be achieved "not by specific conditions on our aid, but by creating a general atmosphere of cooperation and confidence," whereas "staff levels" in the Bureau of the Budget and the foreign aid program "believe that such action is much more likely to be forthcoming if our aid is specifically conditioned upon Vietnamese performance. . . ."

Democrat, he tended to have the presumption of support from a Democratic Congress.

There was also a tendency to exclude Congress from the decision-making process when the White House itself was taking the lead in debating alternatives, making plans, and recommending action. Thus, during July-October 1961, when Rostow and Maxwell Taylor, both on the President's staff, took personal charge of planning the next moves in Vietnam, Congress appears to have been almost totally excluded from the process.¹³³

While there may have been some consultation or at least communication with a few Members and committees, especially on military matters, the general exclusion of key Members and committees of Congress from Vietnam decisionmaking during the last half of 1961 also had the effect of dulling Congress and the public's interest in the subject. In two executive sessions of the Foreign Relations Committee to discuss the world situation with Rusk, one on September 20 and the other on December 20, there was not even any mention of Southeast Asia or of Vietnam or Laos, either by Rusk or by members of the committee.¹³⁴ With the exception of the foreign aid bill, and of one hearing on Laos on August 16 by the Far East Subcommittee (which kept no transcript or minutes of the meeting), no hearings on Southeast Asia were held by the Foreign Relations Committee during the balance of the year after Johnson's report on his visit in late May. As was previously indicated, this did not imply a lack of interest in the area by the chairman and other key Members.

During the late summer and fall of 1961, however, the overriding foreign policy concern of the President and Congress was the growing tension with the Russians over Berlin, culminating in late August with the construction of the Berlin Wall. As had been the case earlier in the year, this more important foreign policy problem tended to eclipse the situation in Southeast Asia.

Contingency Planning for Action in Southeast Asia

Although Berlin was the primary focus, Southeast Asia continued to be of great concern. By late June 1961, the small group of White House staff members, supported by a few agency personnel, chiefly from the State Department, had begun to develop contingency plans for that area. They were particularly worried about the course of U.S. policy in the event that the Laos negotiations failed to produce a settlement, and/or the Communists increased their military activities in South Vietnam.

The principal persons working on Southeast Asia in the White House at the time were Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who had become a special assistant to Kennedy in June, and W. W. Rostow. Others directly involved were NSC staff members Robert Komer and Robert Johnson. From outside the White House the key participant was Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson.¹³⁵

¹³³As Henry Fairlie has observed, however, "There was always sufficient knowledge within the public realm on which to form a political judgment. . . ." "We Knew What We Were Doing When We Went Into Vietnam," *Washington Monthly*, 5 (May 1973), pp. 7-26.

¹³⁴*SFRC His. Ser.*, vol. XIII, pt. 2, pp. 605 ff. and 629 ff.

¹³⁵John Steeves of the Far East Bureau, who was made the director of the Southeast Asia Task Force in July 1961, as well as Cottrell, the director of the Vietnam Task Force, were active in assisting U. Alexis Johnson.

On June 20, 1961, Rostow sent President Kennedy a memorandum on "The Present Situation in Southeast Asia," which he also sent to U. Alexis Johnson on July 6 with a note saying that he was attempting through the memorandum to do two things:¹³⁶

(1) To get the town [Washington] to examine the question of whether there might not be a better and more persuasive military contingency plan than putting many thousands of troops in the Mekong Valley [SEATO Plan 5].

(2) To get the town to consider more explicitly the military and political links between the Laos and the Viet-Nam problems.

On July 10, Rostow thanked Johnson for responding and said, "The crucial issue that remains, it seems to me, is whether we take the initiative fairly soon to raise the question of aggression against Viet-Nam in some international forum."¹³⁷ "... the crucial role of the Viet-Nam—as a diplomatic issue," he added "—is to provide a political base for more persuasive military posture; for I assume we agree that without the other side becoming persuaded that we mean business in Southeast Asia, there is unlikely to be a Laos settlement acceptable to us."

Rostow continued:

It goes without saying, of course, that we should not raise the Viet-Nam issue on the international level unless we are prepared to see it through, if international action is unnecessary. Here, as you know, I favor designing and looking hard at an air-sea (iron-bomb)¹³⁸ counter-guerrilla war, with as many SEATO friends as will play, along with continued vigorous efforts within Diem's boundaries. But if that more ambitious course should be rejected, we would have still strengthened our position before the world, should it be necessary for us sharply to increase our assistance to Diem inside South Viet-Nam. And, at the minimum, this seems likely.

On July 12, Rostow made these same points in a conversation with Rusk. For his part, Rusk emphasized that if the U.S. raised the Vietnam issue in the U.N. as a case of aggression under the U.N. Charter, it would have to be "ready to go" in following up on that charge.¹³⁹ In a memo to Rusk on July 13, Rostow said he agreed:¹⁴⁰ "We must know quite precisely what kind of international action we want—action which might radically reduce the external component in Diem's guerrilla war." But if the U.S. was not able to get effective international action, Rostow said, this would "free our hands and our consciences for whatever we have to do." He said that he believed—and he thought U. Alexis Johnson agreed—that in order to achieve a satisfactory settlement in Laos the U.S. had to persuade the Communists that it would "fight." He did not think that the existing SEATO Plan 5, which was based primarily on defending the area from the Mekong Valley to the south, would be an adequate deterrent. He favored the develop-

¹³⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. The memorandum itself is still classified.

¹³⁷Same location. Johnson's response is still classified.

¹³⁸I.e., non-nuclear bomb.

¹³⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Memorandum from Rostow to Rusk, July 13, 1961.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

ment of a plan under which the U.S. would take direct action against North Vietnam.

Rostow told Rusk that if the U.S. was not able to get adequate help from the U.N., it would need to be prepared for these three levels of action:

- A sharp increase in the number of Americans in South Viet-Nam for training and support purposes;

- A counter-guerrilla operation in the north, possibly using American Air and Naval strength to impose about the same level of damage and inconvenience that the Viet Cong are imposing in the south;

- If the Vietminh cross their border substantially, a limited military operation in the north; e.g., capture and holding of the port of Haiphong.

On July 14, 1961, Rostow sent Kennedy a memorandum in response to a question the President had apparently asked concerning the implications of the Southeast Asia situation for the handling of the Berlin crisis. Rostow, who noted that Taylor had approved the memo, said that rather than focusing just on Berlin, the President should, for a variety of reasons (which he stated), deal with the broader question of the increasing seriousness of the world situation, including Southeast Asia, and the need for the U.S. to prepare to meet the growing threat to its security. He also suggested the desirability of doing so under the President's emergency powers by a "modification" of the state of emergency arrangements which were still in effect as a result of World War II and the Korean war. This, he said, could help provide a legal basis for such preparations, as well as strengthening the administration's case for foreign aid, the space program, and education.¹⁴¹

On July 18, Rostow and Taylor met with U. Alexis Johnson to discuss the "inter-connection between various elements of policy in Southeast Asia. . . ."¹⁴² Among the topics considered were the urgent need for creating and funding a program for Northeast Thailand; the need for "clearing out the Pathet Lao pocket at Tchepone," on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and "the difficulties of doing it while the ceasefire still operated in Laos"; the need for developing a "common feeling among the Vietnamese, the Cambodians, and the Thais . . . in relation to the possibility of mounting a local effort to protect that area from guerrilla warfare and subversion." (The memorandum of conversation on the meeting added: "It was agreed that, while the job might not be impossible, important political and psychological obstacles would have to be overcome. The crucial long-term need for such an association of effort was emphasized.")

At this meeting, held three years before the U.S. retaliated against North Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, "The possibility of using evidence of North Viet-Nam aggression as a foundation for more aggressive limited military action against North Viet-Nam" was also discussed. U. Alexis Johnson agreed, on behalf of State, to "collect and examine the persuasiveness of the evidence of North Viet-Nam aggression against South Viet-Nam," as well as

¹⁴¹Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961.

¹⁴²Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers, Memorandum of Conversation, July 18, 1961.

to examine "the best diplomatic forum or series of forums in which the issue might be raised."¹⁴³

A part of the planning process included contingency planning for information programs on Vietnam, both internationally and in the United States itself, to be used in conjunction with military action, and one of the more interesting documents of the period is a plan for a "Contingency Information Program" in the United States, prepared by a member of the Public Affairs staff of the State Department for the Vietnam Task Force, describing the means by which the public and Congress could be persuaded to support military action.¹⁴⁴ "Before we could use force or publicly announce our decision to use force," the paper said, "American public opinion would have to be conditioned to support such action. The Congress would also have to be fully informed and convinced of the necessity for such action." This, according to the paper, would be accomplished by the following means:

a. *Perspectives.* The Task Force should float perspective articles through selected newspaper columns such as those of Messrs. Alsop, Drummond, Childs, Reston, etc. While these would reach one audience, a broader exposition for a different audience should be made through Sunday newspaper supplements such as the American Weekly, Parade, the *New York Times Magazine* and, if time permits, through the *Saturday Evening Post* and movie newsreels which have a claimed audience of 40 million weekly.

It might be profitable for later exploitation to place some profile articles on Gen. Maxwell Taylor as an expert on limited warfare.

b. *Consultations.* The Senate, or some of its key members, should be taken into the confidence of the Executive early in the process and they should be told why alternative courses of action are unacceptable. We should induce some senators to make public speeches on the seriousness of the situation, etc.

c. *Backgrounders.* Following publication of the perspectives, the Task Force should analyze public reaction to them and assess any weak points in the argumentation which may have been revealed by public reaction. From this analysis and assessment, material might be prepared for backgrounders to be given by top level officials, among whom might be Messrs. Bowles, Johnson, McConaughy, Bohlen, Nitze and General Taylor.

d. *Press conferences, etc.* If by this time public opinion has not begun to call for positive action, we should begin to withdraw to a fall-back position; we should prepare now the terrain to which we might be obliged to withdraw.

¹⁴³This resulted in the State Department's "White Paper" on Vietnam prepared by William J. Jorden, which was issued in Dec. 1961. (See p. 103 below.) The Vietnam Task Force was already preparing a number of papers for the White House on other aspects of the possible use of U.S. military forces in Southeast Asia in accordance with a task force directive issued earlier in the summer, which was supplemented on June 24, 1961, by a memorandum entitled "Regional Action to Protect Vietnam," setting forth the steps to be taken under a SEATO Plan 5 operation.

¹⁴⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Country File. This document is not dated, but it appears to have been prepared during July 1961, and is filed accordingly.

If, on the other hand, public opinion has become more receptive, high level officials should move into the open with public statements on the choices facing us. From this point onward in the information program, the sequence of events should, ideally, move very rapidly.

The Secretary, Senators Fulbright, Mansfield, Humphrey or Javits might take a public supporting position and Gen. Taylor could state his views. The means would be television interview programs, press conferences and—again if time permits—newsreels.

e. *Spot News*. At this point, our Asian allies might request token deployment of American combat troops to help them in the defense of Southeast Asia against external aggression.

f. *Fireside telecast*. Very quickly after the Asians request combat help, President Kennedy should, in a telecast to the nation, announce that action has been taken. He should also explain the reasoning behind his decision and the unacceptable nature of the alternatives, and the fact that [it] is defensive, not aggressive action. He should stress that we shall cross no borders uninvited.

As for the messages to be sent to the public by these means, the paper recommended that the public and Congress be told about the history of Communist aggression and subversion in Vietnam, as well as the consequences of Communist control of Laos, and that "The 'domino theory' should be fully explained."

In general; the aim should be to (i) give our Asian allies full credit for the efforts, social and economic as well as military, that they have made; (ii) show the peril to our own defenses; and (iii) indicate that subversion in Southeast Asia is a Communist export, not an indigenous product. Finally, we should develop the theme that the Communist propaganda campaigns have often struck Berlin like a gong to distract our attention from the actual exercise of force in Asia, but that we do not intend to be diverted.

As the planning process continued, Robert Komer sent Rostow a memorandum on July 20 entitled "Are We Pushing Hard Enough in South Vietnam?"¹⁴⁵ He proposed, as was being recommended by the Staley group, a "crash" program for Vietnam:

... While it may simply be too early to tell, we do not yet have things turned around in Vietnam. In part this reflects one of the real problems for any government—how to get adequate follow-through. We whack up a big exercise on a crash problem, take some strong initiatives, and then the agencies tend to slip back toward business as usual with only the White House providing much of a prod.

But more important, there are some strong political reasons for stepping up the momentum in South Vietnam. I believe it very important that this government have a major anti-Communist victory to its credit in the six months before the Berlin crisis is likely to get really hot. Few things would be better calculated to show Moscow and Peiping that we mean business

¹⁴⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. (misspellings and emphasis in original)

than an obvious (if not yet definitive) turnaround in Vietnam. Moreover, here the odds are still in our favor, which makes Vietnam a better place than Laos to achieve the desired result.

Such a victory is also indispensable to the process of reassuring our Far East allies, most of whom have been led by Laos to wonder whether we have the moxie to protect them any longer.

What should we do? How about the President directing that all wraps are off in the counter-guerilla operations, etc. in South Vietnam? We will fund and pay for any crash measures, however wasteful, which will produce quick results. We will do anything needed in sending arms and ammunition, providing MAAG advisers, and in associated social and economic operations designed to win back the countryside. The objective—to achieve before the end of the year a major defeat of the Viet Cong.

The important thing would be a change in operational philosophy. Instead of haggling with Diem over who should finance what proportion of the effort, *we would regard this as a wartime situation in which the sky's the limit.* The only caveat would be that outlays must be related to the counter-guerilla campaign. Hence, we would not give Diem a blank check on economic development or on building up the regular army for defense of the 17th parallel as McGarr would have us do.

Komer added that while such a program would cost more, the cost of not acting could be higher in the long-run. He emphasized, moreover, that "Simultaneously, we must put the blocks to Diem on finally doing the necessary to regain popular support," and suggested that the U.S. might be able to use the proposed program as a "lever" for that purpose.

Komer's conclusion was as follows:

What do we lose if such an initiative fails? Are we any worse off than before? Our prestige may have become a little more heavily engaged but what else? And the risk involved if we fail to prevent the Viet Cong threat from developing into a full-fledged civil war is clearly overriding. After Laos, and with Berlin on the horizon, we cannot afford to go less than all-out in cleaning up South Vietnam.

Kennedy is Skeptical of Proposed Military Action

President Kennedy doubtless shared the feeling of Komer and other advisers that there was an important linkage between the posture of the U.S. in Southeast Asia and relations with the Russians, especially with respect to Berlin. He probably also agreed with Rostow's contention that the administration could use the Communist threat in Southeast Asia, among other things, to increase U.S. public and congressional support for a military build-up, as well as for promoting foreign aid and other legislation which the White House considered important. But Kennedy was reluctant to move as fast or as far as some of his advisers recommended. At a meeting on July 28, 1961 with all of the key participants in the planning process (including Rusk, U. Alexis Johnson, Ball, Taylor, Rostow), Kennedy made it clear that he was skeptical about military plans for Laos, and that he wanted more information before

approving a counterinsurgency plan for using U.S. forces in Southeast Asia.

In advance of the meeting, the State Department's newly-established Southeast Asia Task Force, under the direction of John Steeves, had prepared a brief report for Kennedy on a proposed course of action in Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁶ According to the report, the "consensus" of the task force was that "It is essential to our policy interests in Asia, and indeed globally, to ensure the security of Southeast Asia against further communist advancement. . . . The loss of Southeast Asia to the free world would be highly inimical to our future strategy and interest." The group had also concluded that "We should make the basic decision now to resist this encroachment by appropriate military means, if necessary, with or without unanimous SEATO support."

The task force took the position that North Vietnam was "the immediate focal point of the threat to the peninsula and whatever action is taken should bear on this objective if both Laos and Viet-Nam are to be secured and the approaches to the rest of the peninsula blocked."

Among its recommendations, the task force proposed that the U.S. insist on having an effective International Control Commission for Laos as the "minimum price" for U.S. military withdrawal. In addition, the U.S. should "keep a steady rein" on the royalist government of Laos to keep it from agreeing to a coalition government that could be controlled by the Communists.

With respect to Vietnam, the task force recommended that the Staley plan be approved. In addition, "In carrying out our programs based in Viet-Nam covert action be conducted to interdict North Vietnamese pressure on South Viet-Nam and if these contacts do not prove successful, eventually give covert indication that the continuation of DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] aggressive policy towards Laos and Viet-Nam may result in direct retaliatory action against her."

Finally, the report recommended that because SEATO Plan 5 did not envisage action against North Vietnam, the U.S. should develop a military plan based on the possibility of such action, with or without other SEATO countries.

On July 27, Taylor and Rostow sent Kennedy a memo in which they listed the issues which would be presented at the meeting the following day.¹⁴⁷ The choices for the U.S., they said, were "to disengage from the area as gracefully as possible; to find as soon as possible a convenient political pretext and attack with American military force the regional source of aggression in Hanoi; or to build as much indigenous military, political and economic strength as we can in the area, in order to contain the thrust from Hanoi while preparing to intervene with U.S. military force if the Chinese Communists come in or the situation otherwise gets out of hand." They said they assumed that the latter course was what Kennedy preferred, but that it would be helpful for him to indicate his posi-

¹⁴⁶The report, which is not dated, is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, July 1961.

¹⁴⁷Same location.

tion and to have a discussion of the situation and the options available.

At the meeting which then took place with the President on July 28, U. Alexis Johnson began the discussion of the Southeast Asia Task Force report by stating that the Communists did not appear to want a neutral Laos; that "they are very confident about the current military situation and see no reason for concessions." The U.S., therefore, needed to "introduce a new element which will change their estimate of the situation." This new element would be a plan to "take and hold" the southern part of Laos with troops from Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and the U.S., if the minimum U.S. condition for a negotiated settlement (a strong ICC) was not accepted in Geneva. Furthermore, Johnson said, continuing his discussion of the task force report, if the Viet Minh then intervened substantially in Laos and/or Vietnam, the U.S. should consider using air and naval forces in direct attacks on North Vietnam. As he explained some years later, Johnson thought that the U.S. needed to inhibit the North Vietnamese from using the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos to supply Communists forces in South Vietnam. He argued that if there was to be a negotiated settlement, its inspection provisions must have "teeth." "Laos was really the key to Vietnam" Johnson said, and our failure in 1962 to dislodge the Pathet Lao from Tchepone [the strategic town on the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh trail] eventually acted to seal the fate of Vietnam."¹⁴⁸ At the same time, Johnson recognized that his hope for a settlement with stronger inspections provisions was probably "futile." As to whether the direct use of U.S. forces in Laos would have been effective in preventing the North Vietnamese from using the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he concludes: "We probably lacked the means to do this; certainly we lacked the will."¹⁴⁹

As the meeting on July 18, 1961 continued, President Kennedy asked several questions about details of the plan, and from the responses it was clear that such details had not been developed. Moreover, "It was not clear how great an effect action against Haiphong or Hanoi would have on Northern Viet-Nam, nor whether it would be easy to hold what had been taken in a single attack. Similarly, no careful plan has yet been developed for an operation to take and hold Southern Laos."¹⁵⁰

Kennedy expressed "the need for realism and accuracy" in plans for military action in Laos. "He had observed in earlier military plans with respect to Laos that optimistic estimates were invariably proven false in the event. He was not persuaded that the airfields and the existing situation in Southern Laos would permit any real operation to save that part of the country, and he emphasized the reluctance of the American people and of many distinguished military leaders to see any direct involvement of U.S. troops in that part of the world." He said he was very reluctant to make a decision to use U.S. forces in Laos, and in order to find out more about the situation he would like for General Taylor to go to

¹⁴⁸Letter to CRS from U. Alexis Johnson, July 31, 1984.

¹⁴⁹U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power*, p. 326.

¹⁵⁰From the July 31, 1961, "Memorandum of Discussion on Southeast Asia," July 28, 1961, prepared by McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961.

Vietnam on a study mission. Meanwhile, he wanted to pursue the Laos negotiations. He also agreed to accept the Staley recommendations, but did not want to be committed in advance to specific levels of funding.

After the meeting, Rostow, with Taylor's concurrence, sent a memorandum to Kennedy on August 4 in which he attempted to state his and Taylor's understanding of Kennedy's position:¹⁵¹

As we understand your position: You would wish to see every avenue of diplomacy exhausted before we accept the necessity for either positioning U.S. forces on the Southeast Asian mainland or fighting there; you would wish to see the possibilities of economic assistance fully exploited to strengthen the Southeast Asian position; you would wish to see indigenous forces used to the maximum if fighting should occur; and that, should we have to fight, we should use air and sea power to the maximum and engage minimum U.S. forces on the Southeast Asian mainland.

The memo went on to reiterate the proposals of the task force for developing a contingency plan for controlling southern Laos, and, if necessary, "... attacks from the air—also, possibly, from the sea—in the Haiphong-Hanoi area." "This graduated pressure," the memo added, "could take the form of air strikes against the land lines of communications and supply centers, and sea interdiction of logistical traffic along the east coast of Viet-Nam. It could also include a naval blockade in the Gulf of Tonkin to isolate the Port of Haiphong."

Moreover, the memo stated, the contingency plan should include possible U.S. action against China if the Chinese Communists intervened in Indochina.

Meanwhile, Taylor had sent his own proposal to U. Alexis Johnson on July 31, in which he suggested a meeting of the leaders of Vietnam, Thailand and Laos "to consider ways of making common cause against the infiltration into Laos," and sending reconnaissance groups from SEATO Plan 5 forces to military installations in Thailand and Laos to check on military needs prior to implementing any contingency plans. "Word of these happenings," he added, "would get around."

As planning for possible military action in Southeast Asia continued, the President asked Rostow and Taylor on August 7 to advise him on the means for bringing to the attention of "world public opinion" the actions of North Vietnam, both in Laos and in South Vietnam. He added, "I agree with you that ground work has to be

¹⁵¹Same location. In a memorandum to Rostow, on Aug. 14, 1961, "Strategy for Southeast Asia," Robert Johnson questioned the military and political feasibility of Rostow's proposal for action against North Vietnam, but concluded, "... to use the current cliché, I think that this is the point where we are going to have to bite the bullet. If we are going to save Southern Laos and a strip along the Mekong, it seems to me that we have to face the possibility that a substantial U.S. manpower contribution may be required." He said he thought the U.S. should seek a "de facto partition of Laos by a sub-limited war approach" involving increased covert activity, but that in so doing "we must take such initial action with a full awareness of, and commitment to, the possibility that we may have to move from sub-limited war to limited war and that a substantial commitment of U.S. forces in Southern Laos may be necessary." Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers.

laid or otherwise any military action we might take against Northern Vietnam will seem like aggression on our part.”¹⁵²

On August 10, the JCS presented to Kennedy their plan for Southeast Asia. There are no records available as to what the plan contained or as to the discussion of it with the President, but there is the record of a meeting on August 12 which included Taylor and Rostow from the White House, Johnson and Steeves from the State Department, and Lemnitzer and others from the JCS (but no Department of Defense civilians, which is an indication of the fact that the discussions had not attained the level of a full-scale policy process), to continue the August 10 discussion of the JCS proposal. There was apparently no civilians in attendance from the Defense Department, which is an indication that the discussions on Southeast Asia which had been initiated by the White House staff had not attained the level of a full-scale policy process. At this meeting it was agreed that a “comprehensive area plan” was needed to provide for military action in the event of a possible partition of Laos. Participants in the meeting further agreed that in the case of the first contingency, “a visible, stepped-up invasion from the North,” SEATO Plan 5 should be invoked. “Hanoi would have been warned in advance that invasion would bring SEATO forces and air attacks on targets in North Vietnam.” In the second contingency, that of increased infiltration and pressure on areas controlled by the pro-western forces, SEATO forces should be given greater support, including as many as 2,000 more military advisers for Laotian forces, mostly from the U.S.¹⁵³

On August 14, Taylor drafted a memorandum for Kennedy to send to Rusk commenting on both the August 10 JCS briefing and the August 12 meeting of State and the JCS.¹⁵⁴ The memo indicated approval of the proposed area plan to defend the “flanks”—Vietnam and Thailand—from Communist infiltration and attack through cooperative military efforts of Vietnam, Thailand and Laos, but took the position that U.S. military participation was the “minimum” required to get these three countries to cooperate. It noted, moreover, that even if such a cooperative plan were feasible, “it will require very considerable effort to develop the political framework to support it.”

Rostow left for vacation while the “comprehensive area plan” was being developed, but before leaving he sent Kennedy a memorandum on August 17 in which he explained what the area plan would probably include, and offered his own suggestions as to how to proceed.¹⁵⁵ “I suspect your planners,” he said, “will tell you this: to hold the present line and to mop up behind it nothing will suffice very much short of the introduction of forces (or the firm commitment to introduce forces) into Southeast Asia from outside the mainland on the scale of the SEATO Plan 5 if to overcome the

¹⁵²Kennedy Library, POF Staff Memos File. For Rostow’s reply see his memorandum to the President on Aug. 11, 1961, “Southeast Asia,” NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961.

¹⁵³Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961, Memorandum for Record, Aug. 12, 1961.

¹⁵⁴Same location. The files do not indicate whether or not the memo was sent to Rusk by Kennedy.

¹⁵⁵Same location.

three fundamental weaknesses we face: Diem's preoccupations; Sarit's uncertainties; and Phoumi's incompetence." (Sarit Thanarat was then in power in Thailand, and Phoumi Nosavan was in command of the non-Communist government in Laos.) Because of these weaknesses, and the difficulty of intervening from outside, Rostow felt that a negotiated settlement of the Laotian conflict was essential. But he again argued that in order to get the Communists to agree to a reasonable settlement the U.S. and the other SEATO powers had to convince them that they would make a "substantial" military commitment if the Communists refused to agree. He proposed to the President a plan to demonstrate American determination in the event the Communists decided to stall and to try to take more territory in South Laos, which would also avoid, at least initially, the deployment of U.S. forces to Laos. To do this he suggested that the U.S. establish a SEATO military headquarters in Thailand, staffed by an American commander and supporting personnel, to develop contingency plans with Sarit and Diem for the deployment of a SEATO combat force. Then, with or without the participation of the British and French, the U.S. should develop contingency plans for such an action with other SEATO powers.

Rostow said, "This kind of revival of SEATO appears, then, the only way I can perceive of salvaging Averell [Harriman] in Geneva [negotiating on Laos] and laying the basis for holding the area for the long pull without excessive U.S. commitment on the mainland. But it takes a bold U.S. commitment in principle—very soon indeed."

"This is a hard decision," he said, "for our troubles with the British and French in SEATO have permitted us a bit of the luxury of the drunk at the bar who cries 'Let me at 'em', while making sure he is firmly held by his pals.

"On the other hand, to go this route is, in fact, to recognize commitments we already have upon us—but to act on them positively. Surely we are hooked in Viet-Nam; surely we shall honor our bilateral assurances to Sarit, as well as our SEATO commitment; and—I suspect—despite everything it implies, we shall fight for Laos if the other side pushes too far its advantages on the ground."

Rostow added, "Your decision here is not easy. It involves making an uncertain commitment in cold blood. It is not unlike Truman's commitment on Greece and Turkey in March 1947; for, in truth, Southeast Asia is in as uncertain shape as Southeast Europe at that time. But—like Truman's commitment—it has the potentiality of rallying the forces in the area, mobilizing the will and strength sufficient to fend off the Communist threat, and minimizing the chance that U.S. troops will have to fight in a situation which has further deteriorated."

The next day (August 18), Rostow sent a memo to Robert Kennedy in which he said, "I deeply believe that the way to save Southeast Asia and to minimize the chance of deep U.S. military involvement there is for the President to make a bold decision very soon."¹⁵⁶ (By this he meant before the end of the rainy season in Laos, which would occur by early October.)

¹⁵⁶ Same location.

On August 22, 1961, Taylor sent a memorandum to U. Alexis Johnson recommending that certain interim steps be taken while final U.S. plans for Southeast Asia were being completed, and that these be assigned to appropriate U.S. agencies for implementation. These steps would include political discussions with Thailand, Laos and Vietnam to determine their willingness to establish a common front against the Communists, as well as "the price which the United States might be obliged to pay for effective collaboration"; establishing, as Rostow had suggested, a SEATO headquarters and staff in Thailand; and increasing the numbers of foreign advisers with Laotian troops. The major question, Taylor said, was the amount of U.S. and other SEATO force commitments. "It presently appears that we must be willing to make some commitment at the outset in order to assure Sarit's support."¹⁵⁷

On August 24, a top-level meeting of those working on Southeast Asia plans was held in Rusk's office. A draft of a proposed plan prepared by the Southeast Asia Task Force (drafted primarily in State) was the subject of the discussion. According to a report of the meeting, the proposal, which generally reflected Rostow's ideas, was vigorously attacked by McNamara and Harriman, joined by Rusk, who saw it as inconsistent with, if not antagonistic to, the President's plan for a negotiated settlement in Laos. Despite efforts by Taylor and Steeves to defend the plan, it was thoroughly repudiated, leaving the subordinates on the task force without any support for their positions from their agency heads.¹⁵⁸

After this debacle, the State Department drafted a modified proposal for Kennedy which stressed the negotiation of a settlement for Laos, and suggested courses of action in the event these negotiations were successful or not, with proposals for military and other action in the latter case.¹⁵⁹

On August 29, 1961, Kennedy met with his advisers to consider the revised proposal. The memorandum from Rusk asked that he decide on these points:

1. Authorization immediately to undertake talks with our SEATO allies both bilaterally and with the SEATO Council representatives in Bangkok, and also with South Vietnam, as appropriate, in which we would explore their receptivity to:

- (a) enlarging the concept of SEATO Plan 5 so that if the Communists renew their offensive and the decision is made to implement Plan 5 the objective would be the expulsion of Communist forces from all of Southern Laos and the Mekong River line, including the Luang Prabang area. The establishment of such an objective would be conditional upon the willingness of Thailand and South Vietnam, and to a lesser extent possibly some other SEATO countries such as the Philippines, Pakistan, Australia and New Zealand, to commit additional forces to Plan 5.

- (b) in the event neither a peaceful settlement is achieved nor has there been a sufficient renewal of the offensive by

¹⁵⁷Same location.

¹⁵⁸Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy from Robert H. Johnson, Aug. 25, 1961, same location.

¹⁵⁹Memorandum for the President, Aug. 29, 1961, same location, with attached "Plan for Southeast Asia," "sanitized"—the government term used to refer to material deleted for security reasons when a document is declassified—and made public in 1978.

the Communists to justify consideration of implementing SEATO Plan 5, the carrying out of a SEATO exercise in Thailand about October 10 employing ground combat troops, supported by tactical air units and, on completion of the exercise, leaving behind in Thailand a SEATO command and communications "shell" prepared on a contingency basis to expedite the implementation of SEATO Plan 5.

(c) undertaking additional rotational training of SEATO combat units in Thailand.

(d) introducing into Thailand a SEATO River Patrol along the line of the Mekong, and

(e) declaring at an appropriate time a SEATO charter yellow or charter blue condition [stages of military alerts].

2. Immediately increasing our mobile training teams in Laos and seeking Thai agreement to supplying an equal number of Thais for the same purpose.

3. Immediately increasing by 2,000 the number of Meos being supported so as to bring the total up to the level of 11,000.

4. Authorizing photo reconnaissance——¹⁶⁰ over all of Laos. (This has for the most part been suspended during the cease-fire.)

5. As soon as the details are worked out with ICA and Congressional action has been taken on the aid bill, a letter from you to Sarit offering a \$150,000,000 line of credit.

Kennedy approved most of the proposed actions, including SEATO discussions (but not the actual steps suggested in States' memo, 1. [b] through 1. [e]), as well as the increase in mobile training (bringing U.S. advisers in Laos to a total of 500), the increase in CIA assistance to Meos tribesmen, and photo reconnaissance of Laos "by Thai or other sanitized aircraft."¹⁶¹

Several days later the State Department gave the White House a new memorandum on steps to take in Laos if the Communists resumed military activity and if the U.S. did not intervene militarily. As summarized by Robert Johnson for Rostow, "The objective of the proposed actions . . . is not to clean out, sanitize or seal off the Mekong and South Laos areas, but rather, through harrassment, to prevent the Communists from obtaining a secure base area from which to launch attacks on Thailand and Vietnam." "It seems to me," Johnson added, "that we should be preparing for the kinds of actions suggested on an urgent basis."¹⁶²

As outlined by State (either in the same paper described by Johnson or a later and similar one), the U.S. would, among other things, continue its various forms of covert assistance to Laotian forces;

¹⁶⁰When this document was sanitized by the Department of State the missing portion of this sentence in item 4 was stricken.

¹⁶¹NSAM 80, Aug. 29, 1961, PP, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 247-248. As will be noted, all or most of the sanitized words in the State Department proposal of the same date appear to have been included in this printing of NSAM 80.

The President apparently did not approve State's proposal that Sarit, as an inducement for and in recognition of his cooperation, be given an open line of credit of \$150 million. For a memorandum from the Bureau of the Budget on Aug. 30, 1961, criticizing this proposal see Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961.

¹⁶²Johnson memo to Rostow, Sept. 12, 1961, same location.

consider sending a combat battalion to Vietnam and another to Thailand for training purposes, as well as to establish the presence of U.S. troops, and deploy an engineering battalion to Vietnam and another to Thailand. All of these moves would be made unilaterally by the U.S. without the involvement of other SEATO countries.¹⁶³

A JCS survey team under direction of Brig. Gen. William H. Craig, which had just returned from a trip to Laos and Vietnam, recommended on September 15, 1961, that SEATO Plan 5 should be activated immediately in order to forestall action by the Communists when the rainy season ended in early October. The team also recommended that the U.S. "get tough with Phoumi" to improve the Laotian military performance, and that the U.S. be prepared to support Phoumi's forces with tactical air operations if hostilities resumed. "The future of the US in Southeast Asia is at stake. It may be too late unless we act now one way or another."¹⁶⁴

In a memo to Kennedy on September 26, 1961, however, Taylor confirmed the President's earlier concern about the potential logistical problems involved in military action by ground forces in Laos. Taylor reported that "The more we study the Southeast Asia problem the more we are convinced of the critical importance of logistic factors. A study of the logistic problem from the point of view of the Communists and ourselves indicated that it sets an upper limit to the possibility of escalation of military action. . . . Without much work on the logistical facilities, we should not introduce and support many more troops in Laos and Thailand than those contemplated in SEATO 5."¹⁶⁵

A meeting with the President on October 5, 1961 to discuss Southeast Asia, for which Rostow, Taylor and U. Alexis Johnson had been organizing papers from the several departments concerned, was postponed. Instead, the President met with Harriman, who was returning to Geneva, to discuss the next moves the U.S. would make in the Laos negotiations, especially the possibility of getting the Russians to agree that continued infiltration by the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam would be a breach of the broad U.S.-U.S.S.R. understanding being developed at Geneva, and what the responsibility of the Russians might be toward enforcing such an understanding on infiltration. Harriman apparently was also authorized at this point to explore with the Russians "ways and means whereby relations between North and South Viet-Nam could be stabilized."¹⁶⁶

The Taylor-Rostow Trip is Scheduled

On October 11, the President held the meeting with his advisers to discuss Southeast Asia which had been postponed from October 5. By this time the situation in Laos was fairly stable, and negotiations were continuing in Geneva. In Vietnam, however, the situation was becoming more serious, and it was apparent that further

¹⁶³Same location. The paper "Limited Holding Actions (Southeast Asia)," was dated sometime between Sept. 20 and 30, 1961, but the exact day cannot be discerned from the copy in the file. The final version of this paper, "Southeast Asia," Oct. 3, 1961, is in the same file.

¹⁶⁴Same location.

¹⁶⁵Same location.

¹⁶⁶"Draft Instructions for Ambassador Harriman," Oct. 1961, same location.

action might be needed. As Rostow stated in a memo to Kennedy on October 5:¹⁶⁷

The contingency plan for an overt resumption of the offensive in Laos is in tolerably good shape; but it is now agreed that it is more likely that the other side will concentrate on doing Diem in than on capturing the Mekong Valley during this fighting season.

As for Viet-Nam, it is agreed that we must move quite radically to avoid perhaps slow but total defeat. The sense of this town is that, with Southern Laos open, Diem simply cannot cope.

Rostow's own proposal was that the U.S. should tell the Russians "the destruction of Diem via infiltration could not and would not be accepted," and that Harriman should emphasize this point in the Geneva talks. Secondly, the U.S. should seek U.N. agreement on a United Nations inspection mission in Southern Laos. This would have the advantage, he said, of causing the Communists to reduce their activity in the area of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as well as bringing the U.N. into the Southeast Asia situation, a move which Rostow said he thought was "essential in the long run." Thirdly, he proposed deploying a 25,000-man SEATO border patrol force in Vietnam. Among other things, this would have the advantage of bolstering Diem and giving the U.S. more leverage on military matters, restraining a North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam, and strengthening U.S. bargaining power with the Russians by making the withdrawal of such a U.S. force a "bargaining counter in a Vietnamese settlement." Above all, "The presence of a SEATO force in South Viet-Nam would make it clear . . . that the attempt to destroy the South Vietnamese government by force could not be carried forward to a conclusion without risking an escalation of the fight. This would not merely threaten Hanoi with air and naval action, but would threaten Soviet or Chinese Communist involvement. And this I doubt Moscow wants."

In conclusion, Rostow repeated his recommendation that Taylor and Lansdale be sent to Vietnam for a review of the situation, and said, "For us the gut issue as I see it is this: We are deeply committed in Viet-Nam; if the situation deteriorates, we will have to go in; the situation is, in fact, actively deteriorating; if we go in now, the costs—human and otherwise—are likely to be less than if we wait."

As policymakers in the executive branch, without any apparent knowledge of or participation in such proceedings on the part of Congress, continued to discuss what action should be taken in view of the increasing threat to Vietnam, the JCS was asked for its reaction to Rostow's proposal for a SEATO border patrol force. It replied on October 9 that this proposal was not feasible. Instead, the JCS again recommended the implementation of SEATO Plan 5 in a "concentrated effort" in Laos which would also have the effect of protecting the Vietnamese border as well as giving "concrete evidence of US determination to stand firm against further communist advances world-wide."¹⁶⁸ ". . . lacking an acceptable political

¹⁶⁷Same location.

¹⁶⁸For JCS objections to Rostow's proposal, see *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 297-298.

settlement prior to the resumption of overt hostilities," the JCS said, "there is no feasible military alternative of lesser magnitude which will prevent the loss of Laos, South Vietnam and ultimately Southeast Asia."

If SEATO Plan 5 deployments caused escalation, the JCS added, there would have to be additional mobilization in the U.S. in order to maintain U.S. strategic reserves, adding, "... we cannot afford to be preoccupied with Berlin to the extent that we close our eyes to the situation in Southeast Asia, which is more critical from a military viewpoint." "It is not a question of the desirability of having two limited war situations going at the same time. The fact of the matter is that we may be faced with such a contingency."¹⁶⁹

According to the plan suggested by the JCS on October 9, the SEATO force would be stationed in South Vietnam near the Lao-tian border in the vicinity of Pleiku for the purpose of controlling the central highlands, the key area for defending Laos and South Vietnam. There would be 22,800 men, of whom approximately 9,600 would be ground combat troops, including 5,000 from the U.S. (Of the total force, 13,200 would be from the U.S.) A U.S. brigade would also be stationed in Thailand. "Our military posture," the JCS stated, "is such that the employment of the SEATO forces would not adversely affect our capability to conduct planned operations in Europe relating to Berlin."

The JCS plan called for offensive action by the SEATO force against Communist threats to the border of South Vietnam or to the force itself, and retaliation against North Vietnam for any overt military intervention in South Vietnam or Laos.

If North Vietnam were to "overtly intervene," the SEATO force would need to be increased to more than 200,000, including an increase in U.S. forces to 129,000 from the original 13,200. If the Chinese intervened, 278,000 SEATO troops would be needed, and consideration would have to be given "whether to attack selected targets in North China with conventional weapons and whether to initiate use of nuclear weapons against targets in direct support of Chinese operations in Laos."¹⁷⁰

As preparations for a meeting with the President on October 11 continued, William P. Bundy, then Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, sent a memorandum on October 10 to McNamara in which he, too, advocated an "early and hard-hitting" military operation in Vietnam by a SEATO force.¹⁷¹

For what one man's feel is worth, mine—based on very close touch with Indochina in the 1954 war and civil war afterwards till Diem took hold—is that it *is* really now or never if we are to arrest the gains being made by the Viet Cong. . . . An early and hard-hitting operation has a good chance (70% would be my guess) of *arresting* things and giving Diem a chance to do better and clean up. Even if we follow up hard, on the lines the JCS are working out after yesterday's meeting, however, the chances are not much better that we will in fact be able to *clean up* the situation. It *all* depends on Diem's effectiveness,

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

¹⁷⁰For the JCS plan, see *ibid.*, pp. 300-311.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 312. (emphases in original)

which is very problematical. The 30% chance is that we would wind up like the French in 1954; white men can't win this kind of fight.

On a 70-30 basis, I would myself favor going in. But if we let, say, a month go by before we move, the odds will slide (both short-term shock effect and long-term chance) down to 60-40, 50-50, and so on. Laos under a Souvanna Phouma deal is more likely than not to go sour, and will more and more make things difficult in South Viet-Nam, which again underscores the element of time.

Bundy commented later on this memo, with its "breathless character." "I do not recall," he said, "that my prognosis was argued specifically, or necessarily shared. The memorandum was not circulated beyond McNamara and a few others; all it does in history is to express a mood that was widely shared, that we had to act fast and hard if we were to act at all. Also that it was not an open-and-shut decision."¹⁷²

For the October 11 meeting with the President the principal document was a paper of October 10, 1961, drafted by U. Alexis Johnson, which combined the ideas of Taylor, Rostow and the Southeast Asia Task Force with the military proposals of the JCS.

This paper, "Concept for Intervention in Viet-Nam," proposed the use of SEATO (primarily U.S.) forces "to arrest and hopefully to reverse the deteriorating situation" in Vietnam, while at the same time having a favorable effect on the Laos negotiations."¹⁷³ Deployment of SEATO forces, however, "cannot be taken without accepting as our real and ultimate objective the defeat of the Viet Cong, and making Viet-Nam secure in the hands of an anti-Communist government."

Initially these forces, which would be stationed at Pleiku, would consist of 11,000 ground combat forces, which would be supported by 11,800 air, naval, and other forces, bringing the total to 22,800. To "clean up the Viet Cong threat" in South Vietnam, however, as many as 40,000 might be needed. This number would increase if the North Vietnamese intervened in force in South Vietnam, and would increase further if the Chinese intervened. There might ultimately be a requirement for as many as four divisions, plus supporting forces, from the U.S.-based reserve forces, and this might necessitate "a step-up in the present mobilization, possibly of major proportions."

The paper pointed out that the ultimate force requirements would depend "above all on whether the effort leads to much more and better fighting by Diem's forces. They alone can win in the end."

The "rules of engagement" for these forces would allow them to do battle with any Communist forces "encountered in any reasonable proximity to the border or threatening the SEATO forces." In addition, they could engage in "hot pursuit" into Laos and possibly into Cambodia if necessary.

¹⁷²Bundy MS., ch. 4, pp. 12A, 13.

¹⁷³Johnson's paper, including two "supplemental notes," was declassified, with some sanitation, in 1982, and is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

The paper advocated prompt action in deploying these SEATO forces before a Laos settlement could be reached, because of the fact that with a settlement "it would be much more difficult to find a political base upon which to execute this plan."

The "pros" and "cons" of the proposed action were presented. Among the "cons" was: "The plan itself would not itself solve the underlying problem of ridding SVN of communist guerrillas." Also, "It breaks the Geneva Accords and puts responsibility on the U.S. for rationalizing the action before the U.N. and the world." Furthermore, there would be the "risk of being regarded as interlopers a la the French. . . ." In addition, the Communists might react by a "change of tactics back to small-scale operations [which] might leave this force in a stagnant position."

Among the "pros" was that such a move could strengthen the Vietnamese as well as U.S. influence with the Vietnamese and the U.S. bargaining position with the Russians. Moreover, "If we go into South Viet-Nam now with SEATO, the costs would be much less than if we wait and go in later, or lose SVN."

In connection with this paper, Ambassador Nolting had reported on October 1 that Diem had asked for a bilateral defense treaty with the U.S. Diem was said to be concerned that the situation in Laos would become more serious, and that the effectiveness of the proposed deployment of SEATO forces would be reduced by British and French resistance to getting involved. According to Nolting, "changing U.S. policy in Laos, especially SEATO decision to use force if necessary to protect SVN and Thailand, would relieve pressure for bilateral treaty."¹⁷⁴ (On October 13, Nolting reported that Minister Nguyen Dinh Thuan had requested, on behalf of Diem, U.S. combat forces in lieu of a defense treaty.)¹⁷⁵

At the meeting on October 11, President Kennedy decided to send General Taylor, accompanied by Rostow, Lansdale, William J. Jorden (Department of State) and Cottrell, to Vietnam to review the political and military feasibility of deploying U.S. forces, either a larger group as proposed by the Johnson memo, or a smaller group with "a more limited objective than dealing with the Viet Cong; in other words, such a small force would probably go in at Tourane and possibly another southern port principally for the purpose of establishing a U.S. 'presence' in Vietnam." The group was also asked to review other alternatives to the use of U.S. forces, such as more economic and military aid.

In addition, Kennedy approved certain specific actions recommended in the Johnson paper, including sending the Air Force's "Jungle Jim" Squadron (12 planes especially equipped for counter-insurgency warfare); initiating attacks against Communist installations at Tchepone, using U.S. advisers if necessary; preparing publication of the white paper on Vietnam, and developing plans for presenting the Vietnam case to the U.N.. Other unspecified actions were approved.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 649.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 651-652.

¹⁷⁶NSAM 104, Oct. 13, 1961, in *ibid.*, DOD ed., book 11, p. 328. (There is no available summary of the meeting.) The NSAM did not reveal the instruction to the Taylor group concerning the review of the use of U.S. forces. This was provided by a memorandum from Roswell Gilpatric summarizing the meeting, which is reprinted on pp. 322-323.

With respect to the decision to use the "Jungle Jim" Squadron, there is this additional information in the Air Force history of the Vietnam war:¹⁷⁷

On October 11, 1961, President Kennedy authorized the sending of a U.S. Air Force unit to South Vietnam. The following day, a detachment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, code-named "Farm Gate," flew to South Vietnam. Stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base just north of Saigon, the 4400th CCTS flew combat modified T-28 fighter-bomber trainers, SC-47s, and B-26s, redesignated "Reconnaissance Bombers" (RB-26s) in deference to the 1954 Geneva Conventions prohibition against the introduction of bombers into Indochina. On December 16, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara authorized participation in combat operations, provided a Vietnamese crewmember was aboard the strike aircraft.

In order to conceal the purpose of the Taylor trip, in part to prevent premature speculation about the question of using U.S. forces, Kennedy said in the NSC meeting that he was going to announce it as an "economic survey." He apparently decided not to do so, but on October 14 the *New York Times* ran a story to that effect, stating, among other things, that military leaders, as well as General Taylor, were reluctant to use U.S. forces, and that local forces assisted by the U.S. would be used instead. As the *Pentagon Papers* says, "this was simply untrue." Kennedy was not pleased about Diem's request for troops, as well as about news stories that troops would be sent, and had decided to plant the version contained in the *New York Times*. That story, as the *Pentagon Papers* adds, "... had the desired effect. Speculation about combat troops almost disappeared from news stories, and Diem never again raised the question of combat troops: the initiative from now on came from Taylor and Nolting, and their recommendations were very closely held."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁸ PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 82.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEW U.S. COMMITMENT: "LIMITED PARTNERS"

General Taylor and his party left for Vietnam on October 17, 1961, stopping at Honolulu to confer with Adm. Harry D. Felt, the U.S. Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC). Felt recommended against deploying U.S. forces in Vietnam "until we have exhausted other means for helping Diem." He was concerned that the use of U.S. forces would raise the colonialist issue, spur the Communists into greater action, and eventually involve U.S. troops in extended combat. He agreed, however, that the U.S. had to play a stronger role in Vietnam, and thought that SEATO forces might eventually be required in Laos to prevent infiltration of South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹

After arriving in Vietnam on October 18, the group spent about 10 days reviewing the situation and conferring with Diem and his associates, and then stopped briefly in Thailand before returning to Washington on November 2.²

Taylor said later that he and his party were in Vietnam, ". . . at a time when the situation was the darkest since the early days of 1954."³ He added:

Vietcong strength had increased from an estimated 10,000 in January 1961 to 17,000 in October; they were clearly on the move in the delta, in the highlands, and along the plain on the north central coast. The South Vietnamese were watching with dismay the situation in Laos and the negotiations in Geneva, which convinced them that there would soon be a Communist-dominated government in Vientiane. The worst flood in dec-

¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, CINCPAC to Washington, Oct. 20, 1961. Subsequently, however, Admiral Felt agreed with the proposal made by Taylor to send U.S. military units to Vietnam under the guise of helping with flood relief. CINCPAC to Washington, Oct. 24, 1961, same location.

²In connection with the Taylor group's visit to Thailand, the U.S. Ambassador, Kenneth T. Young, a respected Foreign Service officer who had worked on Southeast Asia for many years both in Defense and in State, gave Taylor a memorandum outlining his views on the situation. Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961. "Defensibility of Southeast Asia and United States Commitments," Oct. 27, 1961, "I believe denial of Southeast Asia to Viet Cong, Chinese or Russian control," he said, "is indispensable for United States interests and purposes in the whole world. . . . Southeast Asia is the critical bottleneck stopping Sino-Soviet territorial and ideological expansion—territorial in Asia, ideological in the whole world. Southeast Asia is something like the hub of a wheel; lose the hub and the wheel collapses. And Laos, plus South Vietnam, is the cotter-pin holding the hub. If we let Laos-South Vietnam go, the Viet Cong and Chinese Communists will soon dominate all of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. The United States will be forced off the mainland of Asia, Australia will be surrounded and actually flanked, while India and Japan will be permanently separated. All of this is what the Communists are trying to do in Asia. Their success there will intensify their impact in Africa and South America."

Young outlined a strategy to defend Southeast Asia against "Communist small-scale, rural aggression," which he said was the heart of the problem. A central feature of this proposal was establishment of an "American Southeast Asian Unified Command" (under CINCPAC) in Thailand, with small U.S. combat teams in southeast Thailand, Vietnam and Laos to "reverse the trend of doubt, discouragement and despair in Southeast Asia."

³Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 228.

ades was ravaging the Mekong delta, destroying crops and livestock and rendering hundreds of thousands homeless. . . . In the wake of this series of profoundly depressing events, it was no exaggeration to say that the entire country was suffering from a collapse of national morale—an obvious fact which made a strong impression on the members of our mission. In subsequent weeks as we meditated on what the United States could or should do in South Vietnam, the thought was always with us that we needed something visible which could be done quickly to offset the oppressive feeling of hopelessness which seemed to permeate all ranks of Vietnamese society.

Whether or not this assessment of the state of affairs was accurate—and one might wonder how well-equipped Taylor and his associates were to make such sweeping psychological and social judgments about a culture with which (with the possible exception of Lansdale) they were almost totally unfamiliar—they apparently believed that it was accurate, and acted accordingly. They proposed in their report to President Kennedy that the U.S. take “vigorous action” to assist South Vietnam:⁴

From all quarters in Southeast Asia the message on Vietnam is the same; vigorous American action is needed to buy time for Vietnam to mobilize and organize its real assets; but the time for such a turn around has nearly run out. And if Vietnam goes, it will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible to hold Southeast Asia. What will be lost is not merely a crucial piece of real estate, but the faith that the U.S. has the will and the capacity to deal with the Communist offensive in that area.

Two things were needed, the report said: first, a military commitment to demonstrate U.S. resolve, and, second, an “insertion” of Americans into military and government operations in Vietnam in order to “show them how the job might be done. . . .” By this “shift in the American relation to the Vietnamese effort from advice to limited partnership,” the report stated, “. . . Vietnamese performance in every domain can be substantially improved if Americans are prepared to work side by side with the Vietnamese on the key problems.”

The proposal for “inserting” Americans as governmental advisers came from Lansdale, who called it “U.S. political-psychological-military-economic encadrement in Vietnam. . . .” in which highly selected Americans, acting as “collaborators,” would provide “operational guidance” at key decision points in the top of the Vietnam-

⁴The Taylor report (including its tabular material), often referred to as the Taylor-Rostow report, has been largely declassified and is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. The report itself is 25 pages long. Attached are eight appendices of reports from each of the functional areas to which Taylor made assignments. These were as follows:

1. Political-Social, Sterling Cottrell and William Jorden
2. Military, General William H. Craig
3. Political Warfare, W. W. Rostow
4. Unconventional Warfare, General Edward Lansdale
5. Covert Activities, Joseph Smith of the CIA;
6. MAAG and Military Aid, Rear Adm. Luther C. Heinz
7. Economic Aid, James W. Howe
8. Research and Development, Dr. George W. Rathjens and Mr. William H. Godel

For ease of reference, the *Pentagon Papers*, which contains excerpts from the report, is cited herein as the source for most of the quoted material.

ese government.⁵ "It will take Americans who are willing to stake all on the outcome, who know their tasks, and who can act with great understanding in collaboration with the Vietnamese." "I believe that one year of devoted duty by such Americans," Lansdale said, "would spark a complete psychological change in Vietnam's situation, give the Vietnamese the hope of winning and take the initiative away from the Communists. . . ." Without this "spark," Lansdale added, the Vietnamese were going to "lose their country." With such direct American help he thought that "much of the present Vietnamese bickering and hesitancy would disappear as a new sense of direction is given them."

Lansdale's position was that "Vietnam is dangerously far down the road to a Communist takeover, against the will of its people. . . . Mistrust, jealousy, and the shock of Communist savagery have contributed to making a none-too-certain government bureaucracy even more unsure of itself. Pride and self-protection still cover this unsureness, but the cover is wearing thin."

"It is time that we in the free world got angry about what is happening in Vietnam and about what is happening elsewhere in Southeast Asia. With our anger, there should come a deep commitment to stop the Communists in their tracks and hit back hard."

If the U.S. encadrement plan could be used effectively, he added, ". . . we will have found the means of meeting similar Communist threats elsewhere . . . this fuller U.S. role in helping free nations remain free will give a new spark to freedom throughout the world."

In order to provide the necessary sense of national purpose and administrative flexibility under which to conduct such a program, Lansdale said, "The U.S. needs to declare a 'sub-limited' war on the Communists in Vietnam and then to wage it successfully. Since such an action is not envisioned by our Constitution, a way of so doing must be found which is consistent with our heritage. The most natural declaration would be a proclamation by the President, which would state U.S. objectives and clearly outline the principles of human liberty involved. The U.S. Congress would vote support of these objectives and principles. Implementing action would then be carried out by Executive Order."

Although Lansdale felt that the encadrement of U.S. advisers had become necessary, he was not critical of Diem. This was not the case with William Jorden, however. In his report to Taylor on the political situation, Jorden took the position that "Pressures for political and administrative change in South Viet Nam have reached the explosion point. Without some badly needed reforms, it is unlikely that any program of assistance to that country can be fully effective."⁶ "The arguments in favor of change, almost any change," he added, "are impressive." Indeed, "If change does not come in an orderly way, it will almost certainly come through forceful means carried out by an alliance of political and military elements."

⁵These quotations from Lansdale are from a memorandum he sent to Taylor during the trip, entitled "Unconventional Warfare," and a subsequent and longer memorandum to Taylor entitled, "Vietnam," which was included as part of the unconventional warfare appendix of Taylor's report. Both, undated, are located with the Taylor report in the Kennedy Library.

⁶"The Political Situation in South Viet Nam," Oct. 30, 1961, included in the Taylor report.

In this situation, Jorden said, U.S. options ranged from doing nothing to engineering a coup. He rejected both extremes, saying that a coup "... is not something we do well. It has little to recommend itself." His recommendation was that the U.S. should avoid identification with Diem, and should support changes which would lead to necessary reforms:

The situation provides an opportunity for the United States to stand once again for change in this part of the world, to press for measures that are both efficient and more democratic. We must identify ourselves with the people of Viet Nam and with their aspirations, not with a man or an administration. We must do what we can to help release the tremendous energy, ability and idealism that exist in Viet Nam. We must suggest, not demand; we must advise not dictate; but we must not hesitate to stand for the things that we and the Vietnamese know to be worthwhile and just in the conduct of political affairs.

If the new U.S. program resulting from the Taylor mission's recommendations did not produce the necessary improvement in the Vietnamese government, however, Jorden said that the U.S. would then have to consider "backing changes that would reduce sharply the role of the President [Diem] and would alter his status to that of figurehead and symbol."

In his report for Taylor, Sterling Cottrell was less sanguine about the possibility of achieving changes in Diem's government.⁷ "Diem," he said, "like Sukarno, Rhee, and Chiang is cast in the mold of an oriental despot, and cannot be 'brought around' by threats, or insistence on adoption of purely Western concepts. . . . Diem, having been subject to military coups, cannot be expected to delegate concentrated authority to the military. . . . Diem is not a planner, in the Western sense. . . . Diem is not a good administrator, in the Western sense." Cottrell's conclusion was that "Given the virtual impossibility of changing perceptibly the basic weaknesses of Ngo Dinh Diem, and in view of our past unsuccessful efforts to reform the GVN from the top down, we should now direct our major efforts from the bottom up, and supply all effective kinds of military and economic aid." But Cottrell was opposed to a U.S. commitment to Vietnam in the form of a mutual security pact: "Since it is an open question whether the GVN can succeed even with U.S. assistance, it would be a mistake for the U.S. to commit itself irrevocably to the defeat of the Communists in SVN."

In his report to Kennedy, Taylor said that he and his associates had considered but rejected "the removal" of Diem because "it would be dangerous for us to engineer a coup under present tense circumstances," and because they believed that Diem's administrative weaknesses could be overcome "... by bringing about a series of *de facto* administrative changes via persuasion at high levels; collaboration with Diem's aides who want improved administration; and by a U.S. operating presence at many working levels,

⁷"Viet-Nam," Oct. 27, 1961, included in the Taylor report.

using the U.S. presence . . . for forcing the Vietnamese to get their house in order in one area after another.”⁸

A few weeks earlier, a suggestion for handling Diem had been made by Frank C. Child, formerly a member of the Michigan State University group in Vietnam. In a memorandum of October 5, 1961, which was sent to Carl Kaysen of the NSC staff, who in turn gave it to staff member Robert Johnson, Child said that Diem “can only postpone defeat . . . he cannot win.” “Projecting the present-trend,” he added, “South Viet Nam will surely fall to the Viet Cong in 12-18 months. . . .” There was an alternative, he said, after referring to the abortive but poorly led coup of 1960: “There are intelligent and able men in Viet Nam who could provide effective leadership and even capture the imagination of the population. A military *coup*—or an assassin’s bullet—are the only means by which this leadership will ever be exercised.”⁹

On October 31 Johnson replied to Kaysen:

. . . the analysis is generally sound. The prescription is one which the Government is unlikely to adopt. We are going to make at least one more effort to do the job with Diem. It has been the policy of this Administration to let up somewhat on continuous haggling with him over reforms. I believe—or perhaps it would be better to say hope—that we will now condition our military intervention (if it occurs) on real performance on a whole series of reforms designed primarily to make the governmental operations—including military operations—more efficient.

With respect to the military aspect of the Taylor group’s proposal for having Americans work side by side with the Vietnamese, the report stated, “To execute this program of limited partnership requires a change in the charter, the spirit, and the organization of the MAAG in South Vietnam. It must be shifted from an advisory group to something nearer—but not quite—an operational headquarters in a theater of war. . . . The U.S. should become a limited partner in the war, avoiding formalized advice on the one hand, trying to run the war, on the other.”¹⁰

In proposing that the U.S. make a military commitment (6,000-8,000 troops, some logistical and some combat, to be sent initially under the guise of assisting with recovery from the flood), Taylor and his group took the position that the U.S. effort to defend Vietnam could not succeed without such a move. They said they accepted the fact that if this first contingent was not adequate, it would be difficult to resist the argument that additional troops would be needed, and with each increase the prestige of the U.S. would become more involved and Communist retaliatory moves more likely. Moreover, if U.S. forces were used to protect (close) the frontier and “clean-up” the insurgency in South Vietnam, “. . . there is no limit to our possible commitment (unless we attack the source in Hanoi.)” Despite these risks, the Taylor group, based on unani-

⁸For specific suggestions for the assignment of U.S. advisers, see the excerpts from the report in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 652-654.

⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. On Child’s typescript someone crossed through the words “—or an assassin’s bullet—are” and added the word “is” after the word “coup.” See also Child’s article “Vietnam—The Eleventh Hour,” *New Republic* (December 1961).

¹⁰*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 653.

mous agreement among U.S. personnel in Vietnam, as well as among Vietnamese officials, concluded that such a military commitment was necessary.¹¹

In this connection, a section of the report proposed and written by W. W. Rostow posed the question of how the U.S. could effectively combat the insurgency in South Vietnam, and elsewhere, and raised the possibility of ultimately striking at North Vietnam.¹²

It is my judgment and that of my colleagues that the United States must decide how it will cope with Khrushchev's "wars of liberation" which are really para-wars of guerrilla aggression. This is a new and dangerous Communist technique which bypasses our traditional political and military responses. While the final answer lies beyond the scope of this report, it is clear to me that the time may come in our relations to Southeast Asia when we must declare our intention to attack the source of guerrilla aggression in North Vietnam and impose on the Hanoi Government a price for participating in the current war which is commensurate with the damage being inflicted on its neighbors to the south.

Sterling Cottrell was even more specific. "If the combined U.S.-GVN efforts are insufficient to reverse the trend," he said, "we should then move to the 'Rostow Plan' of applying graduated punitive measures on the DRV with weapons of our choosing."¹³

With respect to covert action, Smith of the CIA, who had been responsible for studying this aspect of the situation, recommended to Taylor that the U.S. should apply in Vietnam the doctrine learned from experience in the Philippines and in Greece:¹⁴

This doctrine generally concerns itself with three kinds of measures that are needed to extinguish classical Maoist guerrilla tactics such as those employed in Vietnam. These three basic measures are:

1. The establishment of a tough, mobile striking force in sufficient numbers to meet the guerrillas on their own terms and defeat them in the jungles or mountains where they thrive. This force, wherever possible, should take advantage of the technological advantages we possess and thus be equipped with the capacity for vertical envelopment by parachute, helicopter, or fixed wing aircraft. The

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 90-91. In his report to Taylor, General Craig, the U.S. military representative on the mission, took the position that the proposed introduction of U.S. forces into South Vietnam (which he referred to as SEATO Plan 7), while helping the South Vietnamese, "would not contribute substantially to the over-all problem of SE Asia. . . ." (Tab D of the Taylor report.) From the military standpoint, he said, ". . . any concept for the defense of SE Asia which does not include Laos or substantial parts of it is militarily unsound." The preferred way of defending Southeast Asia, he said, was to implement SEATO Plan 5 in Laos. This would also have the advantage of cutting off infiltration into Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and was therefore "the method of saving SVN by intervention offering the greatest chance of success. . . ."

¹²*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 98.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 96. (This was called by some, "Rostow Plan 6.") Taylor and his group proposed the 8,000-10,000 man force as a token unit to provide an American presence, to provide security in the area they were stationed, and to act as an advance party if additional forces were sent subsequently. Some years later Taylor was asked about the decision to recommend such a limited commitment. He replied, "Had I known what the future held the better course would have been to introduce a strong American combat force right then, and see whether that wouldn't deter the enemy when they saw that indeed the United States was ready to fight for this place if necessary." Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁴"Covert Annex," included in the Taylor report.

primary mission of this force should be to harrass the enemy, his lines of communication and his bases of supply, and to prevent the enemy from fighting "set piece" engagements.

2. The sympathy of the populace among which the communist guerrillas exist must be denied to the communists and won to the side of free forces. This involves a whole variety of programs in the political, psychological, economic realm, basic to which is the friendliest possible relationship between the free forces and the civilian populace.

3. To the maximum extent feasible and possible, the fight must be taken to the enemy. The enemy must be given cause for concern for his own home area and thus restricted in his capability to provide for the needs of his guerrilla movement in another area.

Most of the specific covert action proposals in the appendices of the Taylor report are still classified, but one suggested by Lansdale, which was never implemented, was to use Chinese Nationalist soldiers to provide "human defoliation" in Zone D north of Saigon which was generally controlled by the Communists:

The timber in this jungle contains valuable hardwoods. If the timber concession was let to Chinese Nationalists, say a commercial firm which was composed of veterans who volunteered for the task, the "fire-break" plan of sectioning Zone D might be carried out at minimal cost, with a politically-acceptable introduction of Chinese Nationalists, and with definite benefit to both the welfare and morale of Chinese veterans in Taiwan. A small Vietnamese unit could be attached to such an outfit, as "protection" to give proper commercial coloration to the venture. However, the Chinats should be sufficiently armed for self-protection, which would include patrolling in the vicinity of the lumber operation. The Vietnamese unit could forward intelligence reports from this operation, as well as furnish coordination when larger Viet Cong units were used and the Vietnamese Armed Forces were needed for the strike at the enemy.

Lansdale also mentioned (this, too, was not implemented) that consideration was being given to having "... a group of about 2,000 [Nationalist Chinese] veterans, ages 35-40, to come into Vietnam as Vietnamese, being 'sheep-dipped' in Cholon [the Chinese suburb of Saigon] and given Vietnamese names. They will train village Self Defense Corps in handling weapons, patrol action, and intelligence reporting."¹⁵

Washington Debates the Taylor Report

Upon returning to Washington on November 2, 1961, Taylor submitted the group's report to the President. On November 4, Taylor met with the members of the NSC, and on November 5 with the President, to discuss the report.

¹⁵These proposals are included in Lansdale's memorandum for Taylor, "Vietnam," cited above.

This is William Bundy's account of the November 4 meeting chaired by Ball:¹⁶

The Saturday [November 4, 1961] discussion was long and pointed. Almost at once there was dissatisfaction with the half-in, half-out, nature of the "flood relief task force," and a consensus of disbelief that once thus engaged the US could easily decide to pull the force out. McNamara in particular argued that the gut issue was whether to make a "Berlin-type" US commitment. By this phrase he and others meant a categorical pledge to use every US resource to prevent a result [communist victory]. . . .

Without such a categorical commitment, the argument ran, sending any significant forces was a confused action, while with a commitment the question of forces becomes a relatively simple question of what was needed for practical missions. To use military force for what were conceded to be primarily psychological purposes made not only the JCS but the civilian leaders in the Pentagon uneasy.

In these and subsequent discussions leading up to final decisions on November 15, the major issue continued to be that of U.S. military involvement. This was intertwined with the problem of Diem's leadership, however, and whether, if the U.S. got involved, there would be a Vietnamese government worth fighting for. In this connection, in preparation for another White House meeting on November 7, Washington cabled Ambassador Nolting on November 4, requesting his views on the possibility of getting Diem to accept, as a *quid pro quo* for U.S. agreement to a "joint effort," a plan for delegating authority in order to make the Vietnamese Government more efficient.¹⁷ The cable stated, "Feeling is strong that major changes will be required if joint effort is to be successful in that US cannot be asked further to engage its prestige and forces while machinery of Diem government remains inadequate and thus full capabilities South Vietnamese forces and population not be realized."

The cable proposed several changes, the principal one being that a National Emergency Council should be established (based on Diem's declaration of a national emergency in October, just prior to Taylor's arrival), headed by a key figure ("if possible Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho"), with Nguyen Dinh Thuan as Secretary, through which all business to and from Diem and the departments of the government would be transacted, with Diem's brother Nhu as the go-between.

Moreover, "a mature hard-headed" American would participate in all decisions of the Council, and coordinate with the U.S. Government.

Nolting replied on November 7 that Diem would probably agree to the establishment of such a council, but probably only if it were chaired by Nhu. Concerning the proposal for an American to participate in council decisions, Nolting said he did not think Diem would agree. "This step would, I think, be interpreted by him and by most Vietnamese as handing over Govt of SVN to US."¹⁸

¹⁶Bundy MS., ch. 4, pp. 22-23. Notes of the meeting are still classified.

¹⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 545, Nov. 4, 1961.

¹⁸Saigon to Washington 608, Nov. 7, 1961, same location.

During debate on the Taylor report various approaches were proposed by the various participants. Defense supported Taylor's recommendations, but preferred a larger force, while most policymakers in State (Washington, not Saigon or Bangkok) preferred new and stronger programs to exact a better performance from Diem, and deployment of U.S. forces only if these failed.

In both Defense and State there was concern about the consequences of Taylor's proposal to send only a small force to Vietnam in connection with flood relief. As NSC staff member Robert Johnson told McGeorge Bundy on October 31, "many in Washington are convinced that the longer the forces remained in Viet-Nam, the more they would come under attack and the more they would become involved in combat." This, he said, led to the conclusion that "If we do not intend to be forced out of SEA [Southeast Asia] altogether, there is real doubt as to whether, once we committed forces, we could withdraw them until reasonable security had been restored in Viet Nam." Thus, Johnson said, ". . . in making a decision on the Taylor proposal we need to face and to decide in principle the question of whether we are prepared, if necessary, to step up very considerably our military commitment in Viet Nam. If we commit 6-8,000 troops and then pull them out when the going got rough we will be finished in Viet Nam and probably in all of Southeast Asia."

Johnson reported that the Vietnam Task Force had developed an alternative to Taylor's plan, under which only 1500 U.S. troops, part combat and part logistical, would be sent to the flood zone. They would be assigned to work only on flood relief, and although prepared to defend themselves, they would withdraw if attacked. Meanwhile, the U.S. would make the commitment of additional troops contingent on Vietnam's performance, as well as making a decision, should such troops be sent, to move to a full-scale SEATO operation.¹⁹

Robert Johnson's own position on the Taylor group's proposals was one of general concurrence. While he thought there should be agreement in principle to commit combat forces if necessary, he did not believe they should be sent at that time. Concerning the proposal for attacking Hanoi, he told Rostow that he shared "some of Bill Bundy's doubts as to whether we will, in fact, be able to convince the neutrals of the justice and our allies of the wisdom of such a course. . . ." ²⁰

By November 14 (six days later), however, Johnson had apparently agreed to the proposed deployment of some U.S. troops to Vietnam. In a memorandum to Rostow he said:²¹

I fear that we are losing a strategic moment for the introduction of U.S. troops units. The world has been made aware of the crisis in Viet Nam as a result of the Taylor mission. Both the [Communist] Bloc and the Free World are going to look upon the *actions* we take now as the key to our future actions no matter what we may *say*. A plate glass window on the 17th

¹⁹Same location.

²⁰Johnson memo to W. W. Rostow, Nov. 8, 1961, same location. Three months earlier Johnson had taken the position that U.S. forces might have to be sent to Laos. See fn. 151, p. 61.

²¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File.

parallel or a flood relief task force could make a great political difference not only in Viet Nam, but in the whole area. Such intervention later might have much less political effect and may have to be on a much larger scale to have military effect. In any event, in the interim uncertainty as to our intentions will grow.

Johnson was also concerned about "the relationship between our actions and the diplomatic noise we make." He thought it would be a mistake to tell other nations, especially the Soviet Union, that the U.S. intended to defend Vietnam before deciding to do so. "I myself think," he said, "that we ought to *decide* now the key question of whether we are prepared to introduce combat troops if necessary even if we are not going to introduce them now. That is obviously the ultimate test of whether we are prepared to prevent the fall of Viet Nam."

If troops were not sent, Johnson added, the U.S. should make clear its intention to defend South Vietnam, either by agreeing to the request of the South Vietnamese for a bilateral defense agreement, or by an announcement that the U.S. considered its SEATO obligations binding regardless of the position of other SEATO countries.²²

NSC staff member Robert Komer again urged military intervention, and on October 31 he sent a memo to McGeorge Bundy making the argument "why over-reacting, if anything, is best at this point":²³

Though no admirer of domino theory, I doubt if our position in SEA could survive "loss" of S. Vietnam on top of that of Laos. Moreover, could Administration afford yet another defeat, domestically?

Perhaps there are alternatives to sending US troops which would have fair chance of doing the job. But I doubt it. And if the alternatives fail, we still face the question of sending troops—at a later and less satisfactory time.

The case for acting now is that in the long run it is likely to be the most economical. True, we may end up with something approaching another Korea, but I think the best way of avoiding this is to move fast now before the war spreads to the extent that a Korean type commitment is required.

Sending troops now would also lead to much recrimination and some risks of escalation, *but both risks and recriminations would be much greater, say, a year from now* when the whole situation is a lot more heated up.

Admittedly, intervention alone does not solve our problem—but at least it buys us time to do so. . . .

. . . I'm no happier than anyone about getting involved in another squalid, secondary theatre in Asia. But we'll end up doing so sooner or later anyway because we won't be willing to accept another defeat. If so, the real question is not whether but how soon and how much!

²²This interpretation which was subsequently stated in the so-called Rusk-Thanat agreement of March 1962, had been first raised in March 1961. See fn. 102, p. 114.

²³Kennedy Library, NSF Regional Security File, Southeast Asia General, 1961, "The Risks in Southeast Asia." (emphasis in original)

Komer added, however, "If we move in, we must exact in turn from Diem a whole series of iron-clad commitments."

Harriman, Bowles, as well as John Kenneth Galbraith (a Harvard economist, then U.S. Ambassador to India) and Abram J. Chayes (a member of the Harvard law school faculty, and at the time serving as the Legal Adviser of the State Department), proposed variations of an alternative plan. To avoid military intervention, as well as a long-term U.S. commitment to Vietnam, they recommended the neutralization of Vietnam along the lines of the agreement being negotiated for Laos. In memoranda for the President, Harriman, as well as Galbraith and Chayes, also argued that the U.S. should seek to impress upon Diem, in the strongest possible terms, that, as Harriman said, "we mean business about internal reform."²⁴ This, they said, would require a very strong Ambassador, who could make these demands stick. Galbraith and Chayes suggested Harriman, David E. Lilienthal or George C. McGhee.

In an earlier personal letter on October 17 to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of Kennedy's assistants, Harriman had expressed the hope that the Taylor group would pay particular attention to the political situation in Vietnam. "I am afraid that some feel that military action will cure political difficulties. Our experience with Chiang Kai-Shek may not be quite applicable, although it has some similarity. Against the value of the introduction of American troops to strengthen morale, there is certain adverse political reaction, particularly when a country has just emerged from colonial rule."

In another communication on October 13, Harriman said he recognized, however, that "we may be sitting on a powder keg which may blow up." And he added a sentence of considerable interest in retrospect, given the key part he played in the U.S. role in the coup against Diem two years later: "This might not necessarily be disastrous if set off by constructive forces."²⁵

Although the relevant documents on this subject are not yet available, there is some evidence that the President took seriously the proposal of Harriman, Galbraith and Chayes. He discussed it with Harriman and Galbraith, and then on November 7 with Galbraith, Rusk, and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was in Washington on an official visit. However, while he may have been attracted to the idea of avoiding a long-term commitment, as well as military intervention, the President ended up rejecting neutralization as an alternative.

In a later interview, Chayes commented on the lack of support for the proposal in the State Department.²⁶

... it didn't fly partly because we didn't have enough people for it. Bowles was at that time on his way out. He was not a powerful figure. I think Harlan Cleveland [Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs] was identified with it, also. We had all of the non-power in the Department, and so it just never flew. We talked to the Secretary

²⁴Harriman's memorandum of Nov. 11, 1961, is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, and the Galbraith-Chayes memorandum of Nov. 3 is in POF Country File, Vietnam General. For Bowles' position see *Promises to Keep*, pp. 408-409.

²⁵The communications of Oct. 13 and 17 are in the Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam General Security, 1961.

²⁶CRS Interview with Abram Chayes, Oct. 13, 1978.

about it, but it was simply regarded as not within the realm of possibility.

In some ways the most interesting paper during this period, in terms of the range of possibilities being considered and their likely outcomes, was a memorandum prepared only in draft by William Bundy, entitled "Reflections on the Possible Outcomes of US Intervention in South Vietnam."²⁷ This, said Bundy, was "the range of possible outcomes":

"Good" Scenarios

Scenario A: Diem takes heart and also takes the measures needed to improve efficiency, with only the 8000 man force and US specialist help. Hanoi heeds our warning and lays low, so that control is reasserted in South Vietnam. (Laos is a big question mark here and in other Scenarios.)

Scenario B: The struggle continues to go against Diem, and his own efforts at improvement are feeble. Thus, the US moves into the driver's seat and *eventually brings the situation* under control, using forces on the *scale of 25,000-75,000*. Hanoi and Peiping do not intervene directly, and we do not attack Hanoi.

Scenario C: As the struggle becomes prolonged, the US strikes at Hanoi (or Hanoi and Peiping intervene overtly). The U.S. wins the resulting conflict, i.e. obtains at least a restoration of the status quo, after inflicting such punishment on Hanoi and/or Peiping that further aggressive moves are forestalled for a long time to come.

"Bad" Scenarios

Scenario X: The US decides not to put in the 8000 men, or later forces, and Diem is gradually overcome.

Scenario Y: The US puts in the 8000 men, but when Diem fails to improve his performance pulls out and lets him be overcome.

Scenario Z: Moscow comes to the aid of Hanoi and Peiping, supplying all necessary equipment (including a limited supply of air-deliverable nuclear weapons to retaliate in kind against US use) so that the outcome is a stalemate in which great destruction is wreaked on the whole area.

* * * * *

Of these, only A is truly a good outcome from all long-term standpoints—it stiffens us generally vis-à-vis the Bloc, holds the area (save perhaps Laos), does not discomfit us unduly in the neutral world, excellent for domestic US will and drive. Only trouble is—it's unlikely! *However*, it is still so much better than any other that it is worth accepting some added degree of difficulty in achieving B and C to give A every chance to happen.

The choice between B and C is a hard one. Despite all our warnings and Jorden Reports, our case of aggression against Hanoi will not convince neutrals of its accuracy and justice, or major allies of its wisdom and practicality.

²⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Second Draft, Nov. 7, 1961. (asterisks and emphases in original)

On the other hand, B is a road that has almost no end in sight. The US is poorly cast as a permanent protecting power, but the local capabilities would be so low at the end of such a struggle that we would almost have to assume that role. There is a very considerable chance that under continuing US protection, South Vietnam and the area as a whole would become a wasting asset and an eyesore that would greatly hamper all our relations worldwide. On the whole, the short-term onus attached to C may be preferable. However, as we play the hand toward C (especially if we use Moscow as the channel to Hanoi) we may well raise the chances of Moscow acting to bring on Z.

On the "bad" side, X and Z are clearly nightmares. Though X means loss of the area for a long time to come, it is probably better in the long run than Z. The chances of the Soviets acting to bring about Z do not appear great in the short run, but we must certainly try to keep those chances low (e.g., by making our dealings with Moscow private).

Y is also a nightmare. It loses the area. Moreover, vis-à-vis the Bloc it would be worse than X, since they would take it as an almost final proof that we would not stand up. It might have some compensating gains in the neutral world, at least in the short run. But on the whole it seems the worst possible outcome.

The basic strategic issues are:

- a. How long to give A a chance?
- b. Whether B is preferable to the weighted odds of C vs. Z?

On November 2, 1961, President Kennedy also received a memorandum from Senator Mansfield urging him not to send combat forces to Vietnam:²⁸

The sending of American armed forces to Viet Nam may be the wrong way and probably would be, in present circumstances. In the first place, we would be engaged without the support of significant allies. Our troops would be engaged by third-string communist forces (North Vietnamese). Then, they could very well become engaged against the second-string—the Chinese Communists, who might be drawn into the fray and could outmatch us and our Asian allies many times in manpower. If American combat units land in Viet Nam, it is conceivable that the Chinese Communists would do the same. With shorter lines of communication and transportation, with much more manpower available, South Viet Nam, on that basis, could become a quicksand for us. Where does an involvement of this kind end even if we can bring it to a successful conclusion? In the environs of Saigon? At the 17th parallel? At Hanoi? At Canton? At Peking? Any involvement on the mainland of Asia would seem to me to weaken our military capability in Berlin and Germany and, again, leave the Russians uncommitted.

²⁸Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "The Vietnamese and Southeast Asia Situation."

It appears to me that the presence of American combat troops in South Viet Nam could be misinterpreted in the minds of millions of Southeast Asians and could well be considered as a revival of colonial force. Moreover, we must be extremely wary of any seemingly simple solution that would have Asian SEATO nations do the intervening at our behest to avoid this appearance. If we give them the go-ahead, then there is every likelihood that we shall have to follow militarily or if we do not, we will suffer disastrous repercussions throughout all of Asia and we will indeed become the laughing stock of the world.

While Viet Nam is very important, we cannot hope to substitute armed power for the kind of political and economic social changes that offer the best resistance to communism. If the necessary reforms have not been forthcoming over the past seven years to stop communist subversion and rebellion, then I do not see how American combat troops can do it today. I would wholeheartedly favor, if necessary and feasible, a substantial increase of American military and economic aid to Viet Nam, but leave the responsibility of carrying the physical burden of meeting communist infiltration, subversion, and attack on the shoulders of the South Vietnamese, whose country it is and whose future is their chief responsibility.

Mansfield added that if U.S. combat forces were sent to Vietnam, this "... might provide that bare minimum of effectiveness which would permit a solution of the guerrilla problem in South Viet Nam or prevent further encroachment southward—assuming of course that the Chinese Communists, let alone the Russians, do not become involved. Even then, we will have achieved a 'victory' whose fruits, if we could conserve them, will cost us billions of dollars in military and aid expenditures over the years into the future."

As an alternative, and in order to minimize U.S. involvement, Mansfield recommended larger and more effective economic and political programs by which to increase popular support for the Diem government and democratic participation in politics at all levels. Among these recommendations, which he said he had first made in a memorandum to Kennedy on September 20, 1961, Mansfield advocated "a dramatic and sincere effort to enlist Vietnamese intellectuals in all aspects of the government's activities, primarily by the lifting of the shroud of fear which hangs over political life in Saigon and by acceptance of a genuine opposition in the National Assembly."²⁹ He also proposed "A campaign by Diem and his officials to develop close personal ties with the people by a continuous [Lyndon] Johnson-like shirt-sleeve campaign from one end of the country to the other."

Here, once again, is an example of the tendency to apply American values and practices to Vietnam. Although Mansfield had more training and experience in Asian cultural and political traditions than most Members of Congress and many U.S. officials dealing with Vietnam, his basic frame of reference was his own cultural

²⁹The Kennedy Library staff reports that it cannot find the Sept. 20 memorandum from Mansfield.

and political training and experience. Thus, he apparently assumed that an American-style political campaign technique would produce similar results in Vietnam.

On November 8, as the debate on the Taylor report continued, the Defense Department circulated its draft of a memorandum to the President signed by McNamara, Gilpatric and the JCS. They endorsed Taylor's recommendations, but advocated a much clearer and stronger U.S. commitment to the defense of Vietnam. Such a commitment, they also argued, should be supported by whatever military action might be necessary, and the announcement of the commitment should be accompanied by a warning through diplomatic channels to the North Vietnamese to desist or risk punitive actions. This is the text of that important memorandum:³⁰

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

The basic issue framed by the Taylor Report is whether the U.S. shall:

- a. Commit itself to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism, and
- b. Support this commitment by necessary immediate military actions and preparations for possible later actions.

The Joint Chiefs, Mr. Gilpatric, and I have reached the following conclusions:

1. The fall of South Vietnam to Communism would lead to the fairly rapid extension of Communist control, or complete accommodation to Communism, in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia and in Indonesia. The strategic implications worldwide, particularly in the Orient, would be extremely serious.

2. The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing that fall by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale. We accept General Taylor's judgment that the various measures proposed by him short of this are useful but will not in themselves do the job of restoring confidence and setting Diem on the way to winning his fight.

3. The introduction of a U.S. force of the magnitude of an initial 8,000 men in a flood relief context will be of great help to Diem. However, it will not convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow, Peiping, or Hanoi) that we mean business. Moreover, it probably will not tip the scales decisively. We would be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle.

4. The other side can be convinced we mean business only if we accompany the initial force introduction by a clear commitment to the full objective stated above, accompanied by a warning through some channel to Hanoi that continued support of the Viet Cong

³⁰PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 108-109.

will lead to punitive retaliation against North Vietnam.

5. If we act in this way, the ultimate possible extent of our military commitment must be faced. The struggle may be prolonged and Hanoi and Peiping may intervene overtly. In view of the logistic difficulties faced by the other side, I believe we can assume that the maximum U.S. forces required on the ground in Southeast Asia will not exceed 6 divisions, or about 205,000 men (CINCPAC Plan 32-59, Phase IV). Our military posture is, or with the addition of more National Guard or regular Army divisions, can be made, adequate to furnish these forces without serious interference with our present Berlin plans.

6. To accept the stated objective is of course a most serious decision. Military force is not the only element of what must be a most carefully co-ordinated set of actions. Success will depend on factors many of which are not within our control—notably the conduct of Diem himself and other leaders in the area. Laos will remain a major problem. The domestic political implications of accepting the objective are also grave, although it is our feeling that the country will respond better to a firm initial position than to courses of action that lead us in only gradually, and that in the meantime are sure to involve casualties. The over-all effect on Moscow and Peiping will need careful weighing and may well be mixed; however, permitting South Vietnam to fall can only strengthen and encourage them greatly.

7. In sum:

a. We do not believe major units of U.S. forces should be introduced in South Vietnam unless we are willing to make an affirmative decision on the issue stated at the start of this memorandum.

b. We are inclined to recommend that we do commit the U.S. to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and that we support this commitment by the necessary military actions.

c. If such a commitment is agreed upon, we support the recommendations of General Taylor as the first steps toward its fulfillment.

The McNamara-Gilpatric-JCS memorandum had been drafted by William Bundy, who says that his first draft of November 5 "took the Taylor recommendations to their logical conclusion." Before the memo was sent to the President on November 8, however, Bundy says that the words "inclined to recommend" (in 7. b.) were added because of the "... steady growth of doubt all that week." "... the sense of how much any commitment depended on South Vietnamese performance was sinking in," he adds. "It was one thing to commit the US to the defense of Berliners who had shown themselves staunch in the hardest adversity. It was quite another to make a categorical commitment in a South Vietnam whose polit-

ical divisions and weaknesses had now been highlighted more than ever by the Taylor Report and its Annexes."³¹

Although the Defense Department and the JCS had reached common agreement on a position, the State Department was more divided. State's representatives on the trip, Cottrell and Jorden, concurred with the recommendations of the Taylor group, but Secretary of State Rusk had some serious reservations, and he cabled from Tokyo on November 1 that "... special attention should be given to critical question whether Diem is prepared take necessary measures to give us something worth supporting. If Diem unwilling trust military commanders to get job done and take steps to consolidate non-communist elements into serious national effort, difficult to see how handful American troops can have decisive influence. While attaching greatest possible importance to security in SEA, I would be reluctant to see U.S. make major additional commitment American prestige to a losing horse."³²

George Ball, Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, who was to replace Chester Bowles as the Under Secretary of State a few weeks later, had even more serious reservations about the proposed use of U.S. troops. Ball, a New York international lawyer, who had been associated with the French on legal matters during the last years of French military operations in Indochina, thought that the U.S. would suffer a fate similar to that of France if it became militarily involved in Vietnam: "... I knew something about Indochina," he said in a later interview,³³ "and the people around me, really, had very little background. This is one of the observations that I would make out of our whole Vietnam experience, the tragedy of the fact that people who were making decisions really had so little historical acquaintance with earlier situations that could have cast considerable light on this. I used to sit in meetings with the President, and McNamara would be holding forth and I would say, 'Well, Bob, look, I've heard all of that before; the kill ratios, the cost effectiveness aspects of various operations, the body counts. The French had exactly the same statistics and they lost.'"

Ball discussed the Taylor recommendations with McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, who argued that the commitment should be made even if it should ultimately require, as Ball predicted, a large U.S. troop commitment. Ball also made his case with the President:³⁴

I told Kennedy at that time that if we went down that road, we would have 300,000 men in the jungles and paddies in five years' time and that it was an impossible terrain, both politically and militarily, and that the last thing in the world we ought to do is get involved in this. But he said, "Well, George, I always thought you were one of the brighter guys in town, but I think you're crazier than hell. It isn't going to happen."³⁵

³¹Bundy MS., ch. 4, pp. 25-26.

³²PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 105. See also George Ball's comment in his memoirs, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), p. 368.

³³CRS Interview with George Ball, Sept. 30, 1980.

³⁴*Ibid.* See also George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 366.

³⁵In another interview Ball stated that Kennedy probably meant that he would not let it happen, but, Ball added, "I will only remind you that at the time he was killed we had 16,500

At about this same time Kennedy met with John J. McCloy, a senior U.S. business leader with extensive U.S. Government experience, who told the President that he should consider very carefully making a commitment to Vietnam of the kind recommended by Taylor because once the U.S. became involved it would be very difficult to withdraw. According to a report of that meeting, "Kennedy stated that he had very few, if any options. . . . McCloy thought President Kennedy felt he could do this [increase U.S. involvement] without making an irretrievable commitment."³⁶

There were also warnings in a Special National Intelligence Estimate prepared on November 5, 1961.³⁷ According to the *Pentagon Papers* summary of this prophetic SNIE, which reviewed the probable responses of the Communists to increasing levels of U.S. military action, "The gist of the SNIE was that North Vietnamese would respond to an increased U.S. commitment with an offsetting increase in infiltrated support for the Viet Cong. . . . On the prospects for bombing the North, the SNIE implies that threats to bomb would not cause Hanoi to stop its support for the Viet Cong, and that actual attacks on the North would bring a strong response from Moscow and Peiping, who would regard the defense of North Vietnam against such an attack as imperative."³⁸

Action on the Taylor Report

On November 8, the day McNamara sent the DOD-JCS memorandum to Kennedy, there was another top-level meeting without the President, at which the State Department took the position that the decision to send forces should be postponed, but that all of the other Taylor recommendations should be accepted. According to William Bundy's account of the meeting, "On the issue of committing the US to prevent the fall of South Vietnam, the discussion that day was inconclusive. On the one hand, it was thought that a posture of total firmness, communicated privately to Hanoi and with the implicit threat of bombing of the North, might cause a drop in Communist external support for the VC. On the other hand, it was strongly argued by George Ball that to make a commitment and yet stop short of immediate major units was the worst of both worlds."³⁹

On November 11, 1961, in order to give the President an interdepartmental policy paper which he could accept and on which he could act, Rusk and McNamara sent a joint memorandum to Kennedy (drafted by William Bundy and U. Alexis Johnson) incorporating the findings and recommendations of the Taylor mission and the McNamara-Gilpatrick-JCS memorandum, including the recommendation for a greatly increased MAAAG. Based on the discussions

men in Vietnam and there were two or three thousand more ready to go over. So that certainly the escalation was proceeding fairly rapidly at that point." Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, p. 78.

³⁶Cited by Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979), p. 77, fn. 35.

³⁷For excerpts of this SNIE, which is still classified, see *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 107. The text of an SNIE on the same subject prepared on Oct. 10, 1961, is in *ibid.*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 313-321.

³⁸*Ibid.*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 107-108.

³⁹Bundy MS., ch. 4, p. 28.

of previous days, they did not recommend, however, that U.S. combat forces be sent in the initial phase of the proposed plan.⁴⁰

"The loss of South Viet-Nam to Communism," they said, in describing U.S. interests in defending Vietnam, "would not only destroy SEATO but would undermine the credibility of American commitments elsewhere. Further, loss of South Viet-Nam would stimulate bitter domestic controversies in the United States and would be seized upon by extreme elements to divide the country and harass the Administration." They described the U.S. objective as follows:

The United States should commit itself to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Viet-Nam to Communism. The basic means for accomplishing this objective must be to put the Government of South Viet-Nam into a position to win its own war against the guerrillas. We must insist that that Government itself take the measures necessary for that purpose in exchange for large-scale United States assistance in the military, economic and political fields. At the same time we must recognize that it will probably not be possible for the GVN to win this war as long as the flow of men and supplies from North Viet-Nam continues unchecked and the guerrillas enjoy a safe sanctuary in the neighboring territory.

We should be prepared to introduce United States combat forces if that should become necessary for success. Dependent upon the circumstances, it may also be necessary for United States forces to strike at the source of the aggression in North Viet-Nam.

With respect to putting the Government of South Vietnam "into a position to win its own war against the guerrillas," Rusk and McNamara endorsed the recommendations of Taylor's group for a series of actions to help strengthen Vietnamese military and governmental activities. Most of these would involve the participation of U.S. military or civilian personnel in the administration of those programs, including a recommendation to "Provide individual administrators and advisers for insertion into the Governmental machinery of South Viet-Nam in types and numbers to be agreed upon by the two Governments."

With respect to U.S. forces, the memorandum differentiated between "(A) Units of modest size required for the direct support of South Viet-Nameese military effort, such as communications, helicopter and other forms of airlift, reconnaissance aircraft, naval patrols, intelligence units, etc.," which should be sent "as speedily as possible," and "(B) larger organized units with actual or potential direct military missions . . . [which] pose a more serious problem in that they are much more significant from the point of view of domestic and international political factors and greatly increase the probabilities of Communist bloc escalation." Moreover, the use of forces in category (B) ". . . involves a certain dilemma: if there is a strong South-Vietnamese effort, they may not be needed; if there is not such an effort, United States forces could not accomplish their mission in the midst of an apathetic or hostile popula-

⁴⁰The text of the memorandum is in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 110-116.

tion." ("This point," William Bundy says, "hammered out in oral arguments I well recall, bore heavily on the recommendation to defer decision, and planted itself deeply in the minds of all those who had participated in the policy process during the week.")⁴¹

Rusk and McNamara recommended that to prepare for possible deployment of U.S. forces the Department of Defense should make plans for the use of troops for one or more of these purposes:

(a) Use of a significant number of United States forces to signify United States determination to defend South Viet-Nam and to boost South Viet-Nam morale.

(b) Use of substantial United States forces to assist in suppressing Viet Cong insurgency short of engaging in detailed counter-guerrilla operations but including relevant operations in North Viet-Nam.

(c) Use of United States forces to deal with the situation if there is organized Communist military intervention.

In their discussion of the question of using larger units of U.S. forces in Vietnam, Rusk and McNamara made one very important point which reflected Kennedy's own position, as well as Harri-man's: "It must be understood that the introduction of American combat forces into Viet-Nam prior to a Laotian settlement would run a considerable risk of stimulating a Communist break of the cease fire and a resumption of hostilities in Laos." They added this highly significant comment, which in itself might have been considered adequate justification for delaying the decision to send larger units of U.S. forces: "After a Laotian settlement, the introduction of United States forces into Viet-Nam could serve to stabilize the position both in Viet-Nam and in Laos by registering our determination to see to it that the Laotian settlement was as far as the United States would be willing to see Communist influence in Southeast Asia develop."

This paper was then discussed by the President with Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, and General Lemnitzer, at a meeting that same day (November 11, 1961). The President went into the meeting armed with a set of eight questions prepared for him by the White House staff which raised such issues as whether the program proposed by Rusk and McNamara would be effective without the 8,000-10,000 military force recommended by Taylor, how the U.S. would explain to Diem its reasons for not sending these troops, under what circumstances the U.S. would consider sending such troops, whether the offer of assistance was to be contingent on reforms, and whether the commitment should be "a public act or an internal policy decision of the U.S. Government."⁴²

According to William Bundy's account of the meeting (the only one available), Kennedy agreed with the recommendation of Rusk and McNamara not to send U.S. forces at that time: "... the thrust of the President's thinking was clear—sending organized forces was a step so grave that it should be avoided if this was hu-

⁴¹Bundy MS, ch. 4, p. 30.

⁴²Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam General Security, 1961. Attached to this is the Rusk-McNamara memorandum which had been transmitted that morning by U. Alexis Johnson to McGeorge Bundy "for discussion with the President at the noon meeting today." The text of that memorandum and of the memorandum as printed in the *Pentagon Papers* is identical.

manly possible." Bundy adds that although the Rusk-McNamara memorandum had recommended a "... categorical commitment to prevent the loss of South Vietnam, JFK decided at this meeting not to do this. . . . As I recall the sense of the discussion, there was a distinct switch to support George Ball's argument that a flat commitment without combat forces was the worst of both worlds."⁴³

Following the meeting of November 11, the President met again with Rusk and McNamara on November 14.⁴⁴ Prior to the meeting he received a memorandum from Rostow urging that he approve a program of action in Vietnam which would demonstrate U.S. decisiveness and resolve and thereby strengthen the hand of the United States in any subsequent negotiations.⁴⁵ Rostow said, "It is universally agreed that the objective of the proposed exercise in Viet-Nam is to induce the Communists to cease infiltration, return to the Geneva Accord, while assisting South Viet-Nam in reducing the force of some 16,000 guerrillas now operating in the country. This track unquestionably will require extensive talks with the Bloc countries and, at some stage, probably formal negotiations." He argued, however, that the U.S. should put deeds before words; if it did not, the Communists would use the negotiations as a pretext behind which to continue to "dismantle" South Viet-Nam, and there would also be a "... major crisis of nerve in Viet-Nam and throughout Southeast Asia. The image of U.S. unwillingness to confront Communism—induced by the Laos performance—will be regarded as definitively confirmed. There will be real panic and disarray."

"In Viet-Nam," Rostow said, "the gut issue is not whether Diem is or is not a good ruler. . . . The gut issue is whether we shall continue to accept the systematic infiltration of men from outside and

⁴³Bundy MS, ch. 4, p. 31. In several memoirs and other sources on the period it has been argued that because the NSAM directing the implementation of the President's decision of Nov. 15 did not include the statement of the U.S. objective contained in the Rusk-McNamara memorandum, the President was thereby refraining from endorsing that objective. Although the NSAM did not contain any rhetorical commitment to the defense of South Vietnam, General Taylor explained that Kennedy probably saw no need for such a statement in the NSAM since the commitment had been made in the NSAM of May 11. According to Taylor, "President Kennedy never indicated any opposition of which I was aware to the thesis that we must be prepared to go all the way if we took this first step—one of the prime lessons of the Bay of Pigs." *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 248. This interpretation is further confirmed by the State Department's Nov. 15 cable to Ambassador Nolting explaining the President's decision, which makes it clear that although the decision on troops was being postponed, partly to avoid interfering with the Laos negotiations, and partly in order to try other methods first, combat forces would be sent if necessary. The text of the cable is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 400-405.

Rostow himself wrote that "As Kennedy rose from the cabinet table, having indicated the elements in the Taylor report he finally approved, he remarked: 'If this doesn't work perhaps we'll have to try Walt's Plan Six'; that is, direct attack on North Vietnam. He acted, in short, in precisely the spirit of Taylor's and my paraphrase of his view as of August 4: he took the minimum steps he judged necessary to stabilize the situation, leaving its resolution for the longer future, but quite conscious that harder decisions might lie ahead." *The Diffusion of Power*, p. 278.

John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 246, adds this explanation: "The full Taylor-Rostow recommendations, he [Kennedy] thought, would have constituted too abrupt an escalation of pressure; he preferred, instead, a more gradual approach, involving an increase of American economic and military aid to Saigon, together with the introduction of U.S. 'advisers.' Nothing in this procedure precluded the dispatch of ground troops at a later date if that should become necessary. . . . Kennedy's actions reflected doubts only about the appropriate level of response necessary to demonstrate American resolve, not about the importance of making that demonstration in the first place."

⁴⁴At this writing, there are no available notes on this meeting.

⁴⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

the operations from outside of a guerrilla war against him which has built up from 2,000 to 16,000 effectives in two years. The whole world is asking a simple question: what will the U.S. do about it?"

Rostow said he was aware of the possibilities of escalation and of war, but experience had demonstrated that war could be best avoided by strong, decisive action. "The Korean War," he added, "arose from the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea and the opening it appeared to offer the Communists. In other cases where we have acted strongly on our side of the line we have come home free: Northern Iran; Greece; the Berlin blockade; Lebanon-Jordan; Quemoy-Matsu. In Laos, the alerting and loading of the Seventh Fleet induced a cease-fire."

"If we act indecisively now," Rostow said, "I fear we shall produce excessive fears on our side and excessive hopes on the other side; and then we shall have to over-react to correct a disintegrating situation worse than the present. In those circumstances there would, indeed, be a danger of war. As in Korea we would have first tempted the enemy by an apparent weakness and then double-crossed him. It is that circumstance I would wish to see us avoid."

Therefore, I suggest that we make the moves we believe required to stabilize the situation and to buy time in South Viet-Nam; and then by imaginative communication and diplomacy—addressed to all elements in the Bloc as well as the Free World—we bring maximum pressure on Hanoi to call off the invasion of South Viet-Nam now under way. Such communication should begin the day we publish the Jordan [*sic*] Report—or the day before.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, President Kennedy appears to have dictated, on November 14, the following memorandum to Rusk and McNamara:⁴⁷

I think we should get our ducks in a row for tomorrow morning's meeting. I believe we should make more precise our requests for action. In the papers which I have seen our requests have been of a general nature.

1. I would like to have you consider the proposals made by Governor Harriman. I am wondering if he should return, perhaps on Friday to discuss the matter further with [Georgi] Pushkin [Deputy Foreign Minister of the U.S.S.R.].

2. In the meantime what action should be taken toward South Viet Nam pending the arrival of Harriman.

⁴⁶On November 13, Galbraith sent the President a memorandum on "Neglected Parts of General Taylor's Report on South Vietnam," in which he said he had just finished reading the entire report. ("I am advised," he added, "that few others have done so.") He thought the President should pay particular attention to certain comments about problems with Diem's government and the performance of Vietnamese Armed Forces, arising, in part, because of problems in the government. That same day Rostow sent a memo to the President replying to Galbraith. He agreed that there were problems, but said that Galbraith had ignored other aspects, and he added: "There is simply no doubt whatsoever that the problem in South Vietnam is tough. South Vietnam could be lost. On the other hand, the situation is better than it was when we accepted the responsibility of Greece in 1947; better than the Philippines and Malaya at their worst; better than South Vietnam itself in 1954-55. If Ken [Galbraith] is advocating that we disengage promptly from Vietnam and let Southeast Asia go, I think he should say so. In my view South Vietnam is not yet lost and one of the crucial variables is that we go forward with a clear-eyed view of our assets as well as an equally tough-minded view of our liabilities and problems." Both memos are in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country file, Vietnam.

⁴⁷ Same location.

3. I would like a letter to be written to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference to call a meeting of the conference to consider immediately South Viet Nam as a breach of the accord. As we will be breaching the Geneva accords ourselves it is important that we lay the groundwork. The Jordan [sic] report will do some of this. Has anyone examined the political implications in their efforts.

4. Should I address a statement today to Krushchev [sic] concerning South Viet Nam stating how dangerous we thought the situation was.

5. If we are going to send a military man as a Commanding Officer at the four star level for South Viet Nam, perhaps we could name a younger general and give him a star or do you know someone who already has the stars who can handle the situation.

6. I gather you felt that we should have a general military command set up. We want to make sure that someone like George McGee, [sic] heads it, in fact, it might be well to send McGee.

7. I would like to have someone look into what we did in Greece. How much money and men were involved. How much money was used for guerrilla warfare? Should we have not done it at the company level rather than at the battalion level? It is proposed by the military that we should operate from the battalion level or even below this.

Are we prepared to send in hundreds and hundreds of men and dozens and dozens of ships? If we would just show up with 4 or 5 ships this will not do much good. Or am I misinformed?

I think there should be a group specially trained for guerrilla warfare. I understand that the guns that have been used have been too heavy. Would carbines be better? Wonder if someone could make sure we are moving ahead to improve this.

Perhaps we should issue some sort of a statement on what we propose to do. Our actions should be positive rather than negative. As I said on Saturday concerning Laos—we took actions which made no difference at all. Our actions should be substantial otherwise we will give the wrong impression.

8. We should watch Laos very carefully for any fighting that might break out again even though we decide not to intervene.

This memorandum may not have been sent, but the file copy contains a notation from McGeorge Bundy that it was used by the President, together with one page of Rostow's memo of November 14 in which he emphasized the need to stand firm, as the President's talking paper in the November 14 meeting with Rusk and McNamara.

Kennedy Makes a New Commitment to Defend Vietnam

The NSC met again on November 15, 1961, to consider the draft of a National Security Action Memorandum based on the Rusk-

McNamara memorandum of November 11.⁴⁸ The draft was almost identical to the Rusk-McNamara draft recommendations except for omission of the language about a U.S. commitment to Vietnam. Included was language from the memorandum concerning the use of U.S. troops for achieving one or more of three stated purposes.

On the day of the meeting, Kennedy received a memorandum from McGeorge Bundy in which Bundy, in response to the President's specific request, stated his own views on what the U.S. should do about Vietnam:⁴⁹

A. *We should now agree to send about one division when needed for military action inside South Vietnam.*

1. I believe we should commit *limited* U.S. combat units, if necessary for *military* purposes (not for morale), to help save South Vietnam. A victory here would produce great effects all over the world. A defeat would hurt, but not much more than a loss of South Vietnam with the levels of U.S. help now committed or planned.

2. I believe our willingness to make this commitment, *if necessary*, should be clearly understood, by us and by Diem, before we begin the actions now planned. I think without that decision the whole program will be half-hearted. *With* this decision I believe the odds are almost even that the commitment will not have to be carried out. This conclusion is, I believe, the inner conviction of your Vice President, your Secretaries of State and Defense, and the two heads of your special mission, and that is why I am troubled by your most natural desire to act on other items now, without taking the troop decision. Whatever the reason, this has now become a sort of touchstone of our will.

3. I believe the actions now planned, *plus* the basic decision to put in limited combat troops if necessary, are all that is currently wanted. I would not put in a division for morale purposes. I'd put it in later, to fight if need be. After all, Admiral Felt himself recommended, on balance, against combat troops less than a month ago. It will be time enough to put them in when our new Commander says what he would do with them.

4. The use of force up to a total of 20-25,000, *inside* Vietnam, is not on the same footing as the large forces that might become necessary if the Vietminh move to direct invasion. I would *not* make the larger decision on a war against North Vietnam today.

B. *We can manage the political consequences of this line of action.*

5. I believe South Vietnam stands, internally and externally, on a footing wholly different from Laos. Laos was

⁴⁸For the text of the draft NSAM see Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

⁴⁹Same location. In the memorandum, McGeorge Bundy said he agreed with Rusk and McNamara that a new U.S. military man should be put in charge of U.S. efforts in Vietnam in place of General McGarr, and that Ambassador Nolting "should be judged as his complement, not as your head man in South Vietnam." Bundy, however, preferred to have George McGhee replace Nolting, as he stated in another memorandum to the President on Nov. 15, "Notes for Talk with Secretary Rusk—Nov. 15," same location.

Mr. Rusk suggested that firmness in Viet Nam in the manner and form of that in Berlin might achieve desired results in Viet Nam without resort to combat. The President disagreed with the suggestion on the basis that the issue was clearly defined in Berlin and opposing forces identified whereas in Viet Nam the issue is vague and action is by guerrillas, sometimes in a phantom-like fashion. Mr. McNamara expressed an opinion that action would become clear if U.S. forces were involved since this power would be applied against sources of Viet Cong power including those in North Viet Nam. The President observed that it was not clear to him just where these U.S. forces would base their operations other than from aircraft carriers which seemed to him to be quite vulnerable. General Lemnitzer confirmed that carriers would be involved to a considerable degree and stated that Taiwan and the Philippines would also become principal bases of action.

With regard to sources of power in North Viet Nam, Mr. Rusk cited Hanoi as the most important center in North Viet Nam and it would be hit. However, he considered it more a political target than a military one and under these circumstances such an attack would "raise serious question." He expressed the hope that any plan of action in North Viet Nam would strike first of all any Viet Cong airlift into South Viet Nam in order to avoid the establishment of a procedure of supply similar to that which the Soviets have conducted for so long with impunity in Laos.

Mr. [McGeorge] Bundy raised the question as to whether or not U.S. action in Viet Nam would not render the Laotian settlement more difficult. Mr. Rusk said that it would to a certain degree but qualified his statement with the caveat that the difficulties could be controlled somewhat by the manner in which actions in Viet Nam are initiated.

The President returned the discussion to the point of what will be done next in Viet Nam rather than whether or not the U.S. would become involved. [the following one-half page of notes has been deleted]

General Taylor said that although the tone of some of the papers and of the discussion at the meeting was somewhat pessimistic, he was optimistic about what could be done. He said he envisioned two phases: "(1) the revival of Viet Nam morale, and (2) initiation of the guerrilla suppression program."

McNamara "cautioned that the program was in fact complex and that in all probability U.S. troops, planes and resources would have to be supplied in additional quantities at a later date." The President asked McNamara if he would recommend taking action even if SEATO did not exist, and McNamara replied that he would. The President asked for the justification for U.S. military action in Vietnam, and General Lemnitzer replied that otherwise "... the world would be divided in the area of Southeast Asia on the sea, in the air and in communications. . . . Communist conquest would deal a severe blow to freedom and extend Communism to a great portion of the world." The President asked how he could justify the proposed course of action in Vietnam while not acting against

Cuba. Lemnitzer replied that the JCS still believed that the U.S. "should go into Cuba."

As the meeting ended, Kennedy repeated his concern about having the support of other countries, as well as that of Congress and the American public. He said he did not think that even the Democrats in Congress were fully convinced that the U.S. should become further involved in Vietnam.

The President's decision to approve the revised Taylor-Rostow plan, and to make a new U.S. commitment to Vietnam, was based to an important extent on perceptions of the world situation, especially the need for the U.S. to stand up to the Communists. This is William Bundy's analysis:⁵¹

When JFK later told James Reston that he would never have made the Vietnam decisions of the fall of 1961 unless he had been moved by their relevance to Berlin, he was expressing a connection never stated in the formal papers but present in the train of thought of every participant. It was not that everyone believed that Communist actions in Vietnam emanated from a monolith; rather, it was that the US itself seemed the single crucial sustaining power against multiple Communist threats. If the US seemed weak and faltering in Asia, it would be thought likely to falter in Europe. . . . Thus, Berlin and what it represented was surely the major unseen force that was thought to compel a generally firm decision. But the strategic arguments derived from the Asian context alone, had, I am sure, great weight and acceptance as well. They were not subjected to detailed criticism or reassessment, but they were believed. Altogether, the US had to act, in the universal judgment and feeling of all.

Bundy adds that if the November 15 decision "had a single thread, I would call it 'pragmatic resolve.'"⁵²

Bundy's explanation of the U.S. domestic political considerations involved in the decision is also helpful in understanding that dimension of the policymaking process: ". . . a collapse in South Vietnam would set off sharp domestic controversy," he said. "This argued forcefully against doing nothing and was a clear part of the assessment of stakes." "[Moreover] . . . a hard and firm approach might be more politically acceptable than a gradual and long-drawn out one that ended up 'mired down.' Here surely was an indication that the domestic politics of 'gradualism' were distinctly negative."

According to Bundy, the twin specters of China and Korea were also "never out of the minds of JFK and his senior advisors . . . both political visions could be conjured up and were, I am sure, as much in the background of the policy circle's thinking as Berlin was at the surface." He adds, "In essence, the underlying arguments of domestic politics cancelled out. The Administration could be damned if it failed in Vietnam without trying; equally, it could be damned if it tried and got bogged down."⁵³

⁵¹Bundy MS., ch. 4, pp. 34-35.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

After the NSC meeting on the morning of November 15, the President met that afternoon with Rusk. Final agreement was reached on a cable which was sent that evening to Ambassador Nolting informing him of the decision on the Taylor-Rostow report, and directing him to discuss the subject with Diem.

On November 22, 1961, NSAM 111 was issued. It consisted of the direction given Nolting about the components of the new U.S. plan, and the steps the U.S. expected the South Vietnamese to take, but it contained no reference to U.S. forces.⁵⁴

The November 15 cable to Nolting, most of which was taken verbatim from the Rusk-McNamara memorandum of November 11 and the draft NSAM, stated that "President Kennedy, after conferring with General Taylor and carefully considering his report, has decided that the Government of the United States is prepared to join the Government of Viet-Nam in a sharply increased joint effort to avoid a further deterioration in the situation in South Viet-Nam and eventually to contain and eliminate the threat to its independence."⁵⁵ For its part in this joint effort, the cable said, the U.S. would immediately increase its military, economic, and other forms of assistance to South Vietnam, including additional military personnel (category "A"—military forces as proposed by the Rusk-McNamara memorandum of November 11), as well as providing personnel for assisting the South Vietnamese in administering their government.⁵⁶ For their part, the South Vietnamese would be expected to mobilize their "entire resources" in support of the war. "(This would include," the cable added, "a decentralization and broadening of the Government so as to realize the full potential of all non-Communist elements in the country willing to contribute to the common struggle.)" The South Vietnamese would also be expected to improve the organization and offensive capability of their army.

With respect to U.S. forces, the cable stated that Nolting should point out to Diem that the increased number of Americans who would be assigned for "operational duties" under the new plan would increase greatly the ability of the South Vietnamese to win the war. "You can also tell him," the cable added, "that the missions being undertaken by our forces, under present circumstances, are more suitable for white foreign troops than garrison duty or missions involving the seeking out of Viet Cong personnel submersed in the Viet-Nam population."

Nolting was also directed to tell Diem that the new joint plan would involve "a much closer relationship than the present one of acting in an advisory capacity only. We would expect to share in

⁵⁴The text of NSAM 111 is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 419-421. On Nov. 30, 1961, in NSAM 115, Kennedy also authorized the use of U.S. planes and personnel for the first defoliant operation in Vietnam, code named "Operation Ranch Hand." (Originally, it was to have been called "Operation Hades.") See *ibid.*, p. 425. For a detailed study see William A. Buckingham, Jr., *Operation Ranch Hand: The Air Force and Herbicides in Southeast Asia, 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1982).

⁵⁵For the text of the cable, Washington to Saigon 619, Nov. 15, 1961, see *PP*, DOD ed., vol. 11, pp. 400-405.

⁵⁶During the several weeks after Taylor's mission, there was another proposal for which there was strong support, namely, that Lansdale be named to head the *encadrement* of American advisers and to become the chief U.S. participant in the affairs of the Vietnamese Government. This was abandoned after opposition, primarily from the State Department, similar to that which had developed in the spring of 1961 to an earlier version of the same proposal.

the decision-making process in the political, economic and military fields as they affected the security situation." Moreover, the U.S. contribution to the new plan would depend heavily on the cooperation of the South Vietnamese, and expressly on Diem's willingness to make genuine reforms, and to broaden the base of his government in such a way as to convince American and world opinion that the U.S. was not supporting an "unpopular or ineffective regime."

With the cable, Nolting was given the draft of a letter which Diem could use in writing to President Kennedy to accept the U.S. offer. The cable expressed the hope, however, that Diem's letter would not be a verbatim copy of the draft.

Thus, by the President's decision of November 15 the groundwork was laid for far greater U.S. involvement and for further "Americanization" of the war. The wheels may also have been set in motion for the 1963 coup against Diem. Various participants in the policymaking process, as well as knowledgeable observers from outside the government, were speculating even as early as the fall of 1961 that if the "performance" of Diem continued to be unsatisfactory, and the situation in Vietnam did not improve, the U.S. would have to play an active role in installing new leadership. One of these was Harriman. Another was Galbraith, who was asked by Kennedy to stop by Vietnam on his way back to India and to advise him on the situation. Galbraith did so, and reiterated his feeling that U.S. forces were not needed, and that ". . . it is those of us who have worked in the political vineyard and who have committed our hearts most strongly to the political fortunes of the New Frontier who worry most about its bright promise being sunk under the rice fields."⁵⁷ The problem, he said, was Diem, and if the U.S. was not able to get greater satisfaction—"performance" rather than continued "promises"—"the only solution must be to drop Diem." This would be neither difficult nor dangerous, he added:

. . . a nod from the United States would be influential. At the earliest moment that it becomes evident that Diem will not and cannot implement in any real way the reforms Washington has requested we should make it quietly clear that we are withdrawing our support from him as an individual. His day would then I believe be over. While no one can promise a safe transition we are now married to failure.

Although these November 1961 Presidential decisions committed the United States to a new role in Vietnam, and to an open-ended utilization of U.S. military and civilian personnel, and despite the fact that in making such decisions the President was involving the United States in a situation in which, as his advisers had said, more drastic action by the United States might subsequently be required to meet its objectives, there appears to have been little if any consultation with Congress. Congress was not in session at the time the decision was being made, but most of the elected leaders as well as committee chairmen and ranking members could have been reached if it had been deemed necessary or desirable to seek their advice. But it was apparently not considered necessary to do

⁵⁷For his cable, see *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 410-418.

so. Under the new Act for International Development of 1961,⁵⁸ the general authority for using U.S. assistance and personnel in aiding other countries, which had been first approved by Congress in 1949, was reenacted, thereby giving the President *carte blanche* authority to send more men and equipment to Vietnam and to expand the role of U.S. personnel. (The law still restricted them to a noncombatant role, however.) There was also sufficient money for this purpose in the new 1961 foreign aid appropriations bill (especially considering the broad transfer authority, which also had been reenacted), and in the Defense appropriations bill from which funds were used for the cost of the military advisory group. In addition, the 1960 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with Vietnam, which had been approved by Congress, gave authority to the U.S. to furnish matériel and services, and the right to station military personnel in Vietnam.

As to whether consultation with Congress about this new and potentially vast U.S. commitment was desirable, there seems to have been little thought given by the administration to taking such action, and it is even doubtful how many Members of Congress were personally informed (much less consulted) by the administration that such a decision was being or had been made. William Bundy says only, "... the record is sparse, but it appears that the general outlines of the program were conveyed to Congressional leaders orally in the latter part of November; this was done in low key and with little apparent comment one way or the other."⁵⁹

Congress had certainly been alerted to the situation through public sources, however, and could have obtained information about the November 15 decisions if it had seen the need for such information and chosen to make the necessary inquiries.⁶⁰

In addition to Mansfield's memos to Kennedy, however, there had been some informal communications during this period between some key Members of Congress and persons in the executive branch involved in Vietnam policymaking. One such contact resulted from a trip to Vietnam during the time of the Taylor group's visit by Senator Stuart Symington (D/Mo.), the newly-appointed chairman of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Foreign Relations Committee (and formerly Secretary of the Air Force under Truman). Symington, who was also on the Armed Services Committee, sent Kennedy a personal, handwritten note from Saigon on October 21, 1961, in which he said he had talked to Taylor and Rostow as well as U.S. and Vietnamese officials in Saigon, and, "It seems to me we ought to try to hold this place. Otherwise this part of the world is sure to go down the drain." He added, "If you so decide, it will be my privilege to support your position to the best of my ability."⁶¹

⁵⁸Public Law 87-195.

⁵⁹Bundy MS., ch. 4, p. 42.

⁶⁰See Fairlie, "We Knew What We Were Doing When We Went Into Vietnam." As Fairlie says, there had been numerous stories in the press about Taylor's trip and recommendations, as well as an article in the *New York Times* on Nov. 17, 1961, reporting on the White House meeting on Nov. 15 and on what the President had decided.

⁶¹Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam General. On Nov. 10, after returning from his trip, Symington sent Kennedy a memorandum outlining his views, in which he expressed concern about the declining prestige of the U.S., and, among other things, the need to stand

While he was in Vietnam, Symington paid a call on Diem, where he, like other Senators in earlier years, helped the State Department make its case on an important policy question. This concerned the Vietnamese request for a mutual defense treaty with the U.S., which the White House was resisting. Nolting said in his cable reporting on the Diem-Symington meeting:⁶²

Senator Symington (at my prior request) took line aimed at discretely discouraging Diem from pursuing idea of bilateral treaty at this time, principally by emphasizing delays and complications involved in Senate action on matter of this kind. . . . Reporting officer's distinct impression that Senator Symington's handling of this question cooled considerably the previous interest of Diem and Nhu in a bilateral treaty.

Symington and Diem also discussed the question of U.S. combat forces, and Symington took the same position that Mansfield and Aiken had taken earlier in the year, namely, that a decision to send U.S. forces was within the discretion of the President. (According to the cable, Symington added: "without referring it to Congress.") He also told Diem that once such a force was committed, "no responsible member of Congress would rise to ask that we back down."

Symington, who later became a strong opponent of the war, made another interesting observation. He said that Congress did not like to be asked to "reaffirm" the President's power to use the armed forces before the President makes a decision to do so. Presumably he was basing this statement on the reluctance of Members of Congress to go on record in favor of the use of U.S. forces, preferring to let the President suffer whatever political consequences might attend such a decision.

The New "Limited Partnership"

When Diem was told what the U.S. expected from him, and was informed that the U.S. would participate in the making of decisions of the Vietnamese Government, he reacted very adversely. According to Nolting, Diem said that "Viet Nam did not want to be a protectorate."⁶³ In Washington, Diem's renewed intransigence, as this reaction was generally perceived to be, produced a hardening of attitudes, especially in the State Department, where discussion of finding a successor for Diem was revived briefly, and consideration was also given to recalling Nolting for consultation in order to indicate U.S. disapproval.⁶⁴ It was apparent, however, that there was no satisfactory replacement, and by December 4 Nolting had succeeded in getting Diem to consent to most of the conditions requested by the U.S. Washington also softened its terms. Rather than re-

firm in Berlin and Vietnam. "Whether it be Saigon, or Berlin, or some other place," he said, "I do not believe this nation can afford to bend further. . . ." With respect to Vietnam, which he said "we are losing," and which would then result in the loss of Laos and Cambodia—"both already far gone"—as well as Thailand and Burma, he advocated the prompt establishment of a policy based on "whatever is necessary" to hold Vietnam.

Similar support for U.S. policy was voiced by a group from the House Foreign Affairs Committee that visited Vietnam in the Fall of 1961. See *Report of the Special Study Mission to the Far East, South Asia, and the Middle East*, Committee Print, 87th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1962).

⁶²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington A-145, Nov. 2, 1961.

⁶³Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 678, Nov. 18, 1961.

⁶⁴Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 248.

quiring participation in decisionmaking, U.S. policymakers were content, as a cable to Nolting on November 27, (following a meeting that day with the President), had stated, to have a partnership "so close that one party will not take decisions or actions affecting the other without full and frank prior consultation."⁶⁵

In late 1961 and early 1962, the U.S. completed preparations for its new role in Vietnam by issuing (December 8, 1961), a State Department "White Paper" on North Vietnamese aggression against the south by which to justify U.S. abrogation of the Geneva Accords, and, based on this, the White House then responded favorably to a letter from Diem requesting assistance.

The two-part white paper, *A Threat to Peace: North Vietnam's Efforts to Conquer South Vietnam*,⁶⁶ drafted by William Jorden of State's Policy Planning Staff, which had been in preparation for several months, argued that, contrary to the Geneva Accords, North Vietnam was directing and supporting the insurgency in the south, and that North Vietnam's goal was to exercise Communist control over all of Vietnam. For this reason, under the doctrine of "collective self-defense," South Vietnam had the right to ask for outside assistance. Accordingly, on December 14, 1961, in response to Diem's letter asking for such assistance, Kennedy replied that because of Communist violations of the Geneva Accords the U.S. was prepared to help South Vietnam.⁶⁷

Having completed the formalities, the U.S. immediately began implementing the new partnership. McNamara held conferences in Honolulu in December 1961 and again in January 1962 at which basic decisions were made about the military aspects of the program. (At the meeting in January, General McGarr told McNamara that two divisions of the South Vietnamese Army would be able to "clean out" the guerrillas in War Zone D, an area northeast of Saigon that was heavily infiltrated by the Communists. One of McNamara's aides is said to have passed him a note reading, "This man is insane.")⁶⁸ One of these decisions, pursuant to Taylor's recommendations, was to strengthen the U.S. military command structure in Vietnam by replacing the MAAG with a Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), a move that was made in February 1962 as Gen. Paul D. Harkins took over from McGarr.

As a result of these decisions, U.S. personnel and equipment began pouring into Vietnam. "Within weeks," George Ball said in his memoirs, "we had sent almost seventeen hundred men to Vietnam and more were to follow. That meant that the balloon was going up, and although it was not climbing as rapidly as some of my more belligerent colleagues would have liked, I had no doubt it was headed for the stratosphere."⁶⁹

Perhaps more important at that point, however, were the steps being taken to activate programs through which the insurgency

⁶⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 693, Nov. 27, 1961.

⁶⁶Department of State, Publication No. 7308, Far Eastern Series 110 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1961).

⁶⁷Diem's and Kennedy's letters were printed in the *Department of State Bulletin*, Jan. 1, 1962, pp. 13-14. For a State Department cable on the draft letter for Diem to send to Kennedy, see Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 635, Nov. 17, 1961. The draft presented to Diem is not yet available.

⁶⁸Henry L. Trewhitt, *McNamara* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 193.

⁶⁹Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 369.

could be controlled and the country stabilized without having to resort to large-scale U.S. military involvement. Having decided against sending at that time any large body of U.S. combat forces, Kennedy and many of his associates wanted to find ways by which to defeat the "war of national liberation" without having to rely primarily on conventional military action.

Within the doctrinal framework of counterinsurgency, which the administration had already accepted as its response to wars of national liberation, what methods might be applicable to the situation in Vietnam? The answer had already been suggested by the CIA, which had been experimenting for about a year with a program to help villages defend themselves (with training provided by U.S. Special Forces) while at the same time improving their living conditions. William E. Colby, then the CIA Station Chief in Saigon, who originated the program, called it the "'Citizens' [or 'Civilian'] Irregular Defense Groups," a term he used "to clarify to the U.S. Special Forces units that implemented it, under CIA's over-all control, that it was a citizen's and not a military operation, that its objective was defense rather than offense, and that it should be kept irregular to meet the different needs of the different communities in which it was being carried out."⁷⁰

Colby had also sold Diem and Nhu on the idea, and in the fall of 1961, with encouragement from the CIA, Diem invited a British group, the "British Advisory Mission," six men with experience in the successful campaign against the Communists in Malaya, to recommend a counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam. This group, led by Robert K. G. Thompson, recommended to Diem a plan for helping villages defend themselves (with protection also from regular military forces) and thus gain confidence in their security, while also helping them to improve their living conditions.⁷¹ The result, Thompson's group said, would be better security, greater confidence, better intelligence about the Communists, leading to "more kills." Thus, they added, "Protection, confidence, intelligence and kills would be a constantly expanding circuit."

"The overall aim of any counter insurgency plan," the group stated, "must be to win the people. The killing of communist terrorists will follow automatically from that. If the main emphasis is placed mainly on killing terrorists there is a grave risk that more communists will be created than are killed. Winning the people must, therefore, be kept in the forefront of the minds of every single person, whether military or civilian, who is engaged in anti-terrorist operations."

The "Strategic Hamlet Plan," as this was called, was to function as follows:⁷²

The underlying concept of the [strategic hamlet] program was an abrupt break with the actual strategy of the GVN as

⁷⁰*Honorable Men*, p. 169. The 400-man U.S. Special Forces group sent to Vietnam by Kennedy in May of 1961 was assigned to this project. Approximately 65,000 Montagnard soldiers were being supported in the strategic Highland Plateau adjacent to Laos. Although Colby emphasized their self-defense role, they were also active offensively in that area.

⁷¹The text of the plan presented to Diem by the Thompson group is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 11, pp. 347-358. See also Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Duncanson was a member of the Thompson team.

⁷²Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, p. 104.

well as with the proposals of the MAAG. Instead of emphasizing elimination of the armed bands of the VC by military means, the program attempted to go directly to the heart of the insurgency's strength, its ability to gain the willing or unwilling support of the rural population, which it was then able to organize to provide intelligence, food, money, and recruits for armed units. As was repeated endlessly in public explanations of the plan, the purpose was to dry up the sea of friendly peasantry in which swam the VC "fish."

Diem and Nhu generally approved Thompson's proposals, which were also supported by the CIA, and began implementing the strategic hamlet plan. Ambassador Nolting, pleased that the Vietnamese were taking the initiative to combat the Communists in rural areas, was also very supportive, and with his leadership the other components of the U.S. mission followed suit. The U.S. foreign aid mission (USOM) created an Office of Rural Development, the key figure in which was Rufus Phillips, a former member of Lansdale's 1954 team, who returned to Vietnam in 1962. The MAAG also set up a special office for that purpose, despite the continuing opposition of U.S. military leaders to schemes for shifting from conventional military operations to counterinsurgency warfare. The MAAG had opposed the efforts of the Michigan State University team in the 1950s to organize local police forces as a way of controlling the insurgency, and viewed the Thompson proposals in much the same light. As JCS Chief Lemnitzer wrote to Taylor on October 18, 1961, in urging Taylor to prevent Thompson's ideas from becoming officially approved, "... in recent months the insurgency in South Vietnam has developed far beyond the capacity of police controls."⁷³

One seasoned observer, formerly a participant in CIA counterinsurgency programs in Vietnam and Laos, made this cogent comment about the effects of the dichotomy produced by these differences in perspective:⁷⁴

... The military, despite concessions—no doubt sincere—to the importance of winning the population, was quite unshakably wedded to the idea that priority must go to destroying the enemy's armed force, and doing it by the familiar means of concentrating manpower and firepower at the right time and place.

Translating these doctrinal differences into the realities of the day, they meant that instead of one program to defeat the insurgency there were in fact two: strategic hamlets and all that went with them on the one hand, and the military effort to corner and destroy the VC main forces on the other. Except in such set-piece operations as Sunrise [the first major Strategic Hamlet project], which were preceded by military sweeps, seldom was there any real coordination and common planning between the two efforts. Nevertheless, the military persisted,

⁷³PP, DOD ed., book 11, p. 325.

⁷⁴Blaufarb, p. 119. The military became more cooperative in implementing the strategic hamlet plan, after responsibility for arming and training local self-defense forces was transferred from the CIA to the military beginning in late 1961 and ending in late 1963, ("Operation Switchback"), pursuant to the recommendations of the Bay of Pigs (Cuban Study Group) report that larger military operations should be run by the military rather than the CIA.



"As recommended in the Taylor Report, in sum, we need more 'working level friends and advisers'—Americans with technical competence, imagination, and human sympathy, and with the willingness and ability to live and work in the villages."

Hilsman's report presented a "strategic concept" for such action, the "first principle" of which was, "*The problem presented by the Viet Cong is a political and not a military problem—or, more accurately, it is a problem in civic action.*" The second principle was to provide security to villagers, and for this purpose he proposed a plan involving strategic villages of the kind suggested by Thompson. (Hilsman said that in the areas most exposed to the Communists, there should be "defended villages," with more military protection.)

Lansdale relates a conversation with McNamara which illustrates also the difficulty some officials were having in applying managerial concepts and techniques to the less-measurable "human element" in the war.⁷⁷

. . . I remember when he was trying to computerize the war and he called me in one day. He had a long list of entries for a computer, including the body count type of stuff, enemy casualties. He had written them out in a hard-lead pencil, I remember, on graph paper. And I said, "Your list is incomplete. You've left out the most important factor of all." He said, "What is it?" I said, "Well, it's the human factor. You can put it down as the X factor." So, he wrote down in pencil, "X factor." He said, "What does it consist of?" I said, "What the people out on the battlefield really feel; which side they want to see win and which side they're for at the moment. That's the only way you're going to ever have this war decided." And he said, "Tell me how to put it in?" I said, "I don't think any Americans out there at the moment can report this to you." He said, "Oh, well," and he got out an eraser to erase it. I said, "No, leave it there." Then I took about a week trying to figure how you get answers on that, which I did finally. They later used the ideas for the hamlet evaluation system. Mine was a way to get our troops to report when they went in villages, whether the people, the kids, were smiling or present—a whole bunch of facts—a very complicated type of evaluation. But at the time I was pleading with McNamara not to codify a war and then believe what the figures were telling him. I said, "You're going to fool yourself if you get all of these figures added up because they won't tell you how we're doing in this war."

When asked what McNamara's response was, Lansdale said, "He asked me to please not bother him anymore. He used to say, 'Thank you, I've got something else to do now.' No, I could never talk to him. . . ."

Are U.S. Advisers Engaged in Combat?

In order to maintain a "low profile" for the new U.S. program in Vietnam, both for domestic and international reasons, the Kennedy

⁷⁷CRS Interview with Edward G. Lansdale, Nov. 19, 1982.

administration tightened controls on the access of U.S. and other news media to potentially controversial aspects of the new program, especially the U.S. military role. On November 28, 1961, the U.S. mission in Saigon was told by Washington: "Do not give other than routine cooperation to correspondents on coverage current military activities in Vietnam. No comment at all on classified activities."⁷⁸

Unlike the earlier situation in the middle 1950s, when the few U.S. journalists in Vietnam were generally supportive of the official U.S. position, in 1961-62 there were several journalists, notably Neil Sheehan of United Press International, Homer Bigart and later David Halberstam of the *New York Times* (who replaced Bigart in August 1962), Malcolm W. Browne of the Associated Press, François Sully of *Newsweek*, and Charles Mohr of *Time Magazine*, whose independent, aggressive reporting soon became a thorn in the flesh of the U.S. and Vietnamese Governments. (The Vietnamese, tried to expel Bigart and Sully in March of 1962, but withdrew the order. Sully, a French citizen, was expelled in September of that year despite strong protests from the other journalists and U.S. media representatives. Shortly afterwards, James Robinson, NBC's Southeast Asia correspondent, was also expelled.)⁷⁹

Shortly after the new U.S. program got underway, questions began to be raised about the role of U.S. military advisers, based on press reports that these advisers were engaging in combat, a fact well-known to some key Members of Congress, especially on the Armed Services Committees. In an executive session of the Foreign Relations Committee on January 12, 1962, Ambassador Nolting was asked whether the U.S. was at war in Vietnam, and whether Americans were killing and being killed. Nolting said that one U.S. adviser had been killed, but that "as of now" U.S. advisers were not engaged in combat.⁸⁰

President Kennedy was asked a similar question on January 15: "Mr. President, are American troops in combat in Viet-Nam?" He answered in one word: "No."⁸¹

Both Nolting and the President were attempting to conceal the fact that U.S. advisers were engaging in combat. Indeed, on January 13, 1962, two days before the President made his statement, the first U.S. air combat support mission in the FARM GATE series was flown to support a Vietnamese unit under attack, and by the end of January, FARM GATE crews had flown 229 combat sorties.⁸²

⁷⁸Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 698, Nov. 28, 1961.

⁷⁹See John Mecklin, *Mission in Torment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 129-140. Sheehan and Halberstam subsequently were given a Pulitzer Prize for their reporting. They and Browne received the first Louis J. Lyons award from the Nieman Fellows of Harvard University for reporting "the truth as they saw it in the Vietnam conflict . . . without yielding to unrelenting pressure."

⁸⁰U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, Jan. 12, 1962. The transcripts of executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have been printed, as of this writing, through 1961. All future references in this study to executive sessions of the committee are to unpublished transcripts, most of which are still classified. All references used herein contain the date and names of major witnesses, and quotations are used by authority of the committee.

⁸¹*Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1962, p. 17.

⁸²Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia*, 1961-1975, p. 37.

One of the reasons for wanting to conceal the combat role of U.S. military personnel was to avoid acknowledging that the U.S. was violating the Geneva Accords, in part because the U.S. was charging the Communists with violations, but also because new accords for Laos were then being negotiated.

During February, "Kennedy refused to admit that American troops were in combat, but his answers and statements became increasingly hard to believe. . . ."⁸³ On February 14, the *New York Times* stated in an editorial that the U.S. Government should not attempt to conceal the facts about American military involvement in Vietnam, and the possibility of an eventual major conflict. On that same day the paper carried a column by James Reston, who said, ". . . the United States is now involved in an undeclared war in South Vietnam."

Later that day, Kennedy was asked at his news conference whether he was being candid about Vietnam with Congress and the public. He replied by referring to the numerous meetings which he and other officials of the administration had held with Members of Congress."⁸⁴

The next day, February 15, Majority Leader Mansfield gave a speech in the Senate replying to criticism that Congress and the public had not been kept informed about Vietnam. Citing the statistics about the number of meetings on Vietnam in which Members of Congress had been involved, he declared, ". . . it borders on the irresponsible to suggest that Congress had not been well informed on this situation for many years." He added, however, that it was important to respect the "line of demarcation" between the responsibilities of the President and the Congress. "It is the President's responsibility to act," he said. "It is ours to advise as we are able in our individual and collective wisdom, and, to the extent that it is constitutionally required, to consent."⁸⁵

The two items from the February 14 *New York Times* caused considerable consternation in the administration, and pressure was exerted on the paper to modify its position. For one thing, Averell Harriman called Reston the next day (February 15) to suggest to him that he had not included facts that Harriman said he had given to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 13.⁸⁶ According to Harriman's notes of the conversation, which he sent to the White House, Reston said he thought Harriman's criticism was "right." Harriman suggested that Reston pass the information on to the editorial staff.

Harriman also said that he had talked to Reston the night before at a private dinner party, ". . . pointing out that there were conflicting publicity pressures which had to be balanced—not only American opinion, but international opinion, including ICC [the International Control Commission for Indochina, established by the

⁸³Fairlie, "We Knew What We Were Doing When We Went Into Vietnam," p. 20.

⁸⁴*Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1962, p. 136. He was also asked whether the U.S. had sent combat troops to Vietnam, and he replied, ". . . we have not sent combat troops in the generally understood sense of the word."

⁸⁵CR, vol. 107, p. 2326.

⁸⁶The unpublished transcript of this public hearing on Harriman's nomination as Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East is in the papers of the Committee on Foreign Relations in the National Archives, Record Group 46 (hereafter cited as RG).

Geneva Accords] and Co-Chairmen [the USSR and Britain, co-chairmen in Geneva and on a continuing basis thereafter], SVN and communist bloc—balancing them was not easy, particularly as the American correspondents' despatches plus photographs of recent helicopter flights had made the situation look like a US war, rather than a Vietnamese conflict which we were assisting."⁸⁷

On February 20, 1962, Harriman testified in an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Laos and Vietnam, and was questioned by Senator Wayne Morse (D/Ore.) who said he had ". . . grave doubts as to the constitutionality of the President's course of action in South Vietnam."⁸⁸ Harriman replied that it was the North Vietnamese who had breached the Geneva Accords, and that he agreed with Kennedy that U.S. security was very much at stake in Vietnam, as well as with the decision not to send U.S. ground combat forces.⁸⁹

Morse also said, as he had said in the January 12 meeting with Nolting, that a major war in Vietnam, in which "ships start coming back to the West Coast with flag-draped coffins of American boys," would seriously divide the American people. Senator Albert A. Gore (D/Tenn.) expressed concern about a statement made by Attorney General Robert Kennedy in Saigon on February 18, when Kennedy said, "We are going to win in Viet-Nam. We will remain here until we do win."⁹⁰ Gore said he was "uneasy about the public commitments which seem to be with us with respect to the presence of and the purposes for U.S. military personnel in Vietnam."

In the same hearing, Fulbright twice asked whether there was any alternative to Diem. Harriman's reply is interesting, particularly considering the central role he was to play in 1963 in the U.S. decision to sanction the coup against Diem. He told Fulbright, "He is the head of the government, and I would not have thought that it was a proper function of the U.S. to attempt to make or break governments."

⁸⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation." In the same file, there is a letter from Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, to McGeorge Bundy, Apr. 7, 1962, saying that, in response to Kennedy's concern, he had contacted the person in charge of the news at NBC/TV to ask NBC to withhold further use of a 2 minute segment of film used on NBC's nightly nationwide news program in which South Vietnamese soldiers were shown administering "rough treatment" to Communist prisoners. NBC agreed to keep the film "on the shelf."

⁸⁸U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, Feb. 20, 1962.

⁸⁹After the hearing Morse asked the State Department for answers to sixteen questions on Vietnam. In its reply on Mar. 16, 1962, which is still classified in part, State gave both classified and unclassified answers, depending on the question. One of the unclassified answers concerned the President's authority for activities of U.S. military advisers, in response to Morse's question about the provisions of the Constitution or treaty or statute under which Kennedy derived the right to order U.S. military personnel to engage in activities supporting military operations of the South Vietnamese. State cited the Foreign Assistance Act and the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, but gave as the primary authority the President's powers as Commander in Chief, as well as his foreign relations power as interpreted by the Curtiss-Wright decision. *United States v. Curtiss Wright Export Corp.*, 299 U.S. 304(1936).

Morse also asked whether it would be appropriate under the Constitution for the President to submit to Congress a resolution on Vietnam comparable to the Formosa Resolution and the Middle East Resolution. State replied that the President had the power under the Constitution to do what he was doing in Vietnam, but that it was desirable for Congress to understand and support these actions. Traditionally, the reply stated, this had been done by consultation, which had been extensive in the case of Vietnam.

⁹⁰*New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1962.

As a result of the questions being raised about the role of U.S. advisers, as well as other aspects of the new U.S. program, Kennedy ordered tighter restrictions on U.S. mission cooperation with reporters. In a cable (1006) on February 21, 1962,⁹¹ that became rather notorious when a congressional committee conducted a hearing in May 1963 on the question of restrictions on press coverage in Vietnam,⁹² the State Department told Nolting, "in absence of rigid censorship, US interests best be protected through policy of maximum feasible cooperation, guidance and appeal to good faith of correspondents," but he was also told that in order to avoid "harmful press repercussions on both domestic and international scene" he should seek to guide the press in ways that would minimize harmful reporting. Among the suggestions made by Washington were that "Correspondents should not be taken on missions whose nature such that undesirable dispatches would be highly probable," and that, "It [is] not repeat not in our interest . . . to have stories indicating that Americans are leading and directing combat missions against the Viet Cong." Moreover, "Sensational press stories about children or civilians who become unfortunate victims of military operations are clearly inimicable to national interest."

The cable also stressed that cooperation between the U.S. and the South Vietnamese Government was essential, and that "frivolous, thoughtless criticism of GVN makes cooperation difficult achieve." "We cannot avoid all criticism of Diem," it said. "No effort should be made to 'forbid' such articles. Believe, however, that if newsmen feel we are cooperating they will be more receptive to explanation that we are in a vicious struggle where support of South Vietnamese is crucial and that articles that tear down Diem only make our task more difficult."

The cable concluded with the following "for consideration and private use at Ambassador's discretion":

It should be possible for Ambassador and/or military to exact from responsible correspondents voluntary undertakings to avoid emphasis in dispatches of sensitive matters, to check doubtful facts with US Government authorities on scene. Seriousness of need for this may be duly impressed on responsible correspondents to extent that, in interests of national security and their own professional needs, they can be persuaded to adopt self-policing machinery. Can be reminded that in World War II American press voluntarily accepted broad and effective censorship. In type struggle now going on in Viet-Nam such self-restraint by press no less important. Important to impress on newsmen that at best this is long term struggle in which most important developments may be least sensational

⁹¹Cable 1006 was declassified in 1983 after a mandatory review request from CRS, and is available in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, General.

⁹²In its report on Oct. 1, 1963, (H. Rept. 88-797), the House Government Operations Committee (Foreign Operations and Government Information Subcommittee) concluded: "The restrictive U.S. press policy in Vietnam . . . unquestionably contributed to the lack of information about conditions in Vietnam which created an international crisis. Instead of hiding the facts from the American public, the State Department should have done everything possible to expose the true situation to full view."

and in which "decisive battles" are most unlikely, therefore stories imply sensational "combat" each day are misleading.

The President's Press Secretary, Pierre Salinger, said that the cable was intended to improve relations with the press, but he added that the Kennedy administration "was not anxious to admit the existence of a real war in Southeast Asia," partly because "their government was now going to be engaged in activities which were in clear violation of the Geneva Conference of 1954." He said that the President was "particularly sensitive" about press stories on the combat role of U.S. advisers. "It was my view at the time that we should be prepared to take the good stories with the bad in Vietnam, but the President pushed hard for us to tighten the rules there under which correspondents would observe field operations in person."⁹³

According to John Mecklin, Public Affairs Officer for the U.S. mission to Vietnam from 1962-64 (formerly with *Time* Magazine, and a reporter in Vietnam 1953-55), Cable 1006, while recognizing the right of reporters to cover the war, "... was otherwise little more than codification of the errors the Mission was already committing." "The Mission persisted," he added, "in the practice of excessive classification, under the secret fraternity doctrine of the State Department cable No. 1006, to a degree that denied newsmen access to whole segments of U.S. operations in Vietnam."⁹⁴

The "root of the problem," Mecklin said, "was the fact that much of what the newsmen took to be lies was exactly what the Mission genuinely believed, and was reporting to Washington. Events were going to prove that the Mission itself was unaware of how badly the war was going, operating in a world of illusion. Our feud with the newsmen was an angry symptom of bureaucratic sickness." "We were stuck hopelessly," he said, "with what amounted to an all-or-nothing policy, which might not work. Yet it *had* to work, like a Catholic marriage or a parachute. The state of mind in both Washington and Saigon tended to close out reason. The policy of support for Diem became an article of faith, and dissent became reprehensible."⁹⁵

Laos Again Becomes a Problem

While increasing its assistance to Vietnam, the U.S. continued its efforts to neutralize Laos. A neutrality agreement had been reached in Geneva during the fall of 1961, but it was to become effective only after a coalition government had been formed by the Laotians and after that new government had declared the country's neutrality. General Phoumi, supported by various persons and groups in the U.S. State Department, the CIA, and the American military who were opposed to the position being developed by Hariman for the President, resisted the establishment of such a government. Finally, at the end of January 1962, the U.S. temporarily

⁹³Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), pp. 394, 398. In Oct. 1963, when Arthur Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, visited Kennedy at the White House, the President suggested that David Halberstam be transferred to another post. The suggestion was rebuffed by Sulzberger. See David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 268.

⁹⁴Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*, pp. 111, 115.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 100, 105.

suspended monthly cash assistance payments to Phoumi's government as a way of forcing him to cooperate. He still refused.

In late February, the situation became more critical as Phoumi's forces in Nam Tha, a town near the Chinese border, which had been reinforced in response to a buildup of Pathet Lao forces in the area, came under attack by the Communists. Policymakers in Washington were concerned that the Pathet Lao might be planning another Dien Bien Phu, and that if Phoumi's forces were defeated at Nam Tha, the tentative agreement reached in Geneva might collapse, and the Communists might be in a position to take all of Laos.

The available record is very sketchy as to what alternatives were considered at this stage, but apparently the administration again began discussing the possibility of U.S. military intervention. As one step in this consideration, the President met on February 21, 1962, with Vice President Johnson and congressional leaders to discuss the situation.⁹⁶ One participant in that meeting, Senator Mansfield, took the position that if the administration was going to use U.S. forces, "... that they had better tell the whole truth to the American people, realize that this would be worse than Korea, would cost a great deal more and very likely bring us into conflict with the Communist Chinese. I said that I thought it was the worst possible move we could make." Mansfield added, "I think that the congressional leadership were in full accord with my views, and I have an idea that the President was too although he didn't say anything."⁹⁷

At that meeting Senator Russell apparently took a similar position, arguing that the Laotians were not willing to fight, and that the U.S. should, if necessary, seek to block Communist expansion southward from Laos by stationing forces in Thailand. He was supported by Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (D/Minn.), (the newly-elected Democratic whip of the Senate).⁹⁸

The situation in Laos was also discussed during testimony by Harriman before an executive session of the Foreign Relations Committee on February 20, 1962.⁹⁹ Harriman described for the committee the agreement for the neutralization of Laos, but said, interestingly enough, that he had no confidence that North Vietnam would comply with those arrangements, including the provision that Laos would not be used for access to any other country (which was intended to apply specifically to the Ho Chi Minh Trail). A good deal of the discussion that followed dealt with Vietnam, but Senator Lausche repeated his contention that Souvanna

⁹⁶These Members of Congress were present at the Feb. 21 meeting: from the Senate, Democrats Mike Mansfield, Richard Russell, J. William Fulbright, Hubert Humphrey, George A. Smathers (Fla.) and Republicans Everett Dirksen, Leverett Saltonstall, Thomas H. Kuchel (Calif.), Bourke Hickenlooper, Alexander Wiley; from the House, Speaker John W. McCormack (Mass.) and Democrats Carl Albert, Hale Boggs (La.), Carl Vinson, Thomas Morgan, and Francis E. Walter (Pa.) and Republicans Charles Halleck, Leslie Arends, Robert B. Chipfield (Ill.), Charles B. Hoeven (Iowa), and John W. Byrnes (Wis.)

⁹⁷Kennedy Library, Oral History Interview with Mike Mansfield, June 23, 1964, p. 25.

⁹⁸These comments are based on notes in the Russell Papers at the University of Georgia, Intra-office Communication Series, Memoranda File. In these papers there is also this note by Russell: "I advised Pres. Secty State-Defense and his advisors in Jan. or Feb. '61 to get out of Laos entirely while we could still save face."

⁹⁹U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, Feb. 20, 1962.

Phouma was too closely connected to the Communists to be acceptable as the Prime Minister, and that a coalition government would lead to Communist control.¹⁰⁰ Harriman responded by saying that in Laos the U.S. had only three choices: to let the country be over-run by the Communists; to support the Phoumi government, which might require U.S. troops; or to work out a peaceful settlement. Vietnam, he said, was different. There the U.S. could help people who were willing to fight for themselves.

The situation in Laos during February also caused concern in Thailand, and toward the end of the month the U.S. responded by inviting the Thai Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, to Washington for discussions. One outcome of this was the so-called Rusk-Thanat Agreement, by which Rusk announced that the U.S. considered Thailand's independence and integrity "vital" to the national interests of the United States, and would honor its pledge to defend Thailand under the SEATO Treaty even if no other SEATO nations were willing to act.¹⁰¹ This interpretation of SEATO, which was the first public assertion by the United States that the U.S. could act unilaterally under the treaty, even if other members were not willing to act, was subsequently given by the executive branch as a legal justification for U.S. unilateral action in Vietnam.¹⁰²

Rusk said later: "Before we joined in the Rusk-Thanat communiqué, we talked to a number of senators who agreed that that was what the Treaty itself said."¹⁰³

According to Kenneth T. Young, then the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, "Bangkok and Washington were able in March 1962 to negotiate a significant interpretation of the SEATO Treaty which finessed Thailand's vigorous drive to modify the treaty in ways which the United States could not have accepted without creating serious constitutional difficulties." This interpretation of the right of unilateral action, he said, "amounts to a *de facto* bilateral defense alliance within the constitutional framework of the United States."¹⁰⁴

On February 27, 1962, Harriman and Abram Chayes, the State Department's Legal Adviser, met in executive session with the Foreign Relations Committee to explain the concerns of Thailand, and the interpretation of SEATO which was to be announced in the communiqué on the Rusk-Thanat agreement. According to Harriman, the Thais wanted to be assured that if they were attacked by

¹⁰⁰Similar comments were made by several members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, especially Walter H. Judd (R/Minn.) and Clement J. Zablocki (D/Wis.), during hearings on the foreign aid bill in March. Judd called it a "retreat, retreat, retreat" policy. See U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Assistance Act of 1962*, Hearings, 87th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1962), pp. 654-655, 699.

¹⁰¹For the text see *Department of State Bulletin*, Mar. 26, 1962.

¹⁰²According to William Bundy, the Thais were informed orally in March of 1961 that the U.S. was prepared to take such unilateral action under this interpretation of SEATO and of U.S. responsibilities under SEATO. "The substance of the Rusk-Thanat Communiqué a year later was thus conveyed privately at this time, and so far as the record shows with no particular thought that it was novel or a new departure." Bundy MS., ch. 3, p. 23. Bundy contends (ch. 5, p. 18), that such an interpretation was not and is not a novel interpretation of U.S. responsibilities under a multilateral treaty. "In no such case, surely, would the US, then or at any other time, accept the dissent or 'veto' of any single member as meaning that the American obligation ceased." See also U. Alexis Johnson with Jeff Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power*, p. 305.

¹⁰³Letter to CRS from Dean Rusk, Oct. 22, 1984.

¹⁰⁴Quoted by Russell Fifield, *Americans in Southeast Asia: The Roots of Commitment* (New York: Crowell, 1973), p. 266, from an unpublished manuscript of Young's.

the Communists there would not have to be unanimous action on the part of SEATO in order for the U.S. to come to their defense.

Senator Gore asked Harriman why the proposed communiqué, if it constituted a commitment, was not being sent to the Senate for approval as a treaty. Harriman replied, "... the legal opinion is that there is no need to consult with this Committee. ..." The communiqué, he said, would merely be stating publicly the interpretation of the treaty as presented to the committee by Dulles, and as explained previously to the Thais.¹⁰⁵

In early May 1962, (a coalition government still had not been established), attacks on Nam Tha increased, and there were rumors that a nearby town had been overrun. This sent Phoumi's forces into headlong retreat southward until they crossed the Mekong River into sanctuary in Thailand. The leader of the U.S. Special Forces team advising the Laotians at Nam Tha is said to have told his headquarters: "The morale of my battalion is substantially better than in our last engagement. The last time, they dropped their weapons and ran. This time, they took their weapons with them."¹⁰⁶

Although the seriousness of the Nam Tha defeat was probably overestimated by the Kennedy administration, there was an immediate reaction in Washington. Hilsman and Harriman argued that the U.S. had to respond with military moves that would convince the Communists that the United States would go to war, if necessary, to defend Laos, as well as reassuring the Thais of the U.S. commitment. At the same time, they said, the U.S. did not want to give Phoumi the impression that it was pulling away from our support for a coalition government. The JCS were again opposed to intervening unless adequate force was authorized to accomplish the objectives. They proposed that support for Phoumi be increased, and that there be a naval show of force.

In a meeting with his advisers on May 10, Kennedy agreed to send a naval task force from the Seventh Fleet toward the Gulf of Siam, the South China Sea, as proposed by the JCS. Hilsman's reaction to this at the time was that "the military [had] started going soft on us again, you know every time they beat their chests until it comes time to do some fighting and then they start backing down just like they did in Laos last spring. . . ." "... the President is boxed' [in]. Because of the military softness he has 'only decided half of what is necessary to be effective in really deterring the Communists. And that is he hasn't decided enough to deter the Communists but he had decided more than enough [sic] to get into all sorts of political trouble.'"¹⁰⁷

By the time another meeting was held on the following day (May 11, 1962), Kennedy had received Eisenhower's support for taking

¹⁰⁵U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, Feb. 27, 1962.

¹⁰⁶Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 174.

¹⁰⁷These and following quotations are from "When Do I Have Time to Think?" John F. Kennedy, Roger Hilsman, and the Laotian Crisis of 1962," by Stephen E. Pelz, *Diplomatic History*, 3 (Spring 1979), pp. 215-230, based on notes dictated by Hilsman on May 11, 1962, and made public in 1979 by Hilsman and the Kennedy Library. For Hilsman's discussion of the contents of the memo which he and Harriman prepared, as well as his published description of the debate over Laos, see *To Move A Nation*, pp. 143 ff. In the Summer 1979 issue of *Diplomatic History*, pp. 345-348, he also commented on Pelz' article, followed by a reply from Pelz.

military action in Laos and, feeling less threatened politically, he approved stronger measures which came much closer to meeting the position taken by Harriman and Hilsman. In addition to sending a unit from the Seventh Fleet, he agreed to send approximately 5,000 U.S. troops to Thailand for deployment on the Mekong River border with Laos. According to Hilsman, Kennedy, in contrast to his attitude in May 1961, "was thinking much more about intervening this time. . . ." He had even asked Hilsman to prepare a memorandum on the Formosa and Middle East Resolutions, apparently with the thought of possibly sending a resolution to Congress to approve intervention in Laos.

It was also clear that Rusk and McNamara were more inclined than previously to consider more forceful measures. Rusk, according to Hilsman, proposed putting U.S. forces into North Vietnam (although Hilsman added that Rusk did not take a "strong stand.") McNamara recommended that the U.S. establish a command for all of Southeast Asia under General Harkins.

On May 12, after "barely going through the formality of asking the Thais to 'request' U.S. assistance under the SEATO Treaty,"¹⁰⁸ Kennedy ordered the military steps which he had decided to take. On May 15, only hours before the announcement was made to the press, Congress was brought into the picture when the President met with the Vice President and congressional leaders, some of whom had been informed over the weekend by telephone after the decision was made on Saturday. Secretary of State Rusk met separately with the Foreign Relations Committee.

According to a press report, Kennedy's meeting with the leadership was "more in the way of a briefing them than in asking their approval of his Administration's action."¹⁰⁹

In his meeting with the Foreign Relations Committee, Rusk said that the action had been taken to reassure Thailand, and to have U.S. forces in position to implement, if necessary, the SEATO Treaty.¹¹⁰ (It was not, he said, an action taken under the treaty.)

Senator Morse said he was concerned about sending U.S. forces into Laos to help the Laotians when they seemed so unwilling to fight for their country. Rusk replied that this was not an issue, but that if the Geneva talks collapsed it might become an issue. Morse said he intended to support "my government," but that the public would oppose U.S. military intervention if it was predominately a unilateral American effort. He reported that Senator A. Willis Robertson of Virginia, a conservative Democrat, had called him the day before to tell him of his concern about sending U.S. forces into Laos.

Rusk agreed that the prospects of sending U.S. troops into Laos, given the limiting factors of geography and cultural characteristics, was a "most unpromising prospect," and that rather than doing this the U.S. probably would "meet the situation on the coast in

¹⁰⁸Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 730. This decision was not promulgated by a NSAM.

¹⁰⁹*Washington Post*, May 16, 1962. Members of Congress attending the White House meeting were, from the Senate, Democrats Mansfield, Russell, and Humphrey, and Republicans Dirksen, Saltonstall, Kuchel and Wiley; and from the House, Speaker McCormack and Democrats Albert, Boggs, and Vinson and Republicans Halleck, Arends, and Chiperfield.

¹¹⁰U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, May 15, 1962.

some way, and specifically in North Vietnam," using air and sea power.

Senator Aiken then asked if Hanoi was the base of the "Russian supply operation" and Rusk answered "yes." Senator Aiken further asked whether, "if we become involved," our involvement would be limited to "strictly conventional weapons." Rusk replied that there could be no guarantee that this would be the case.

Senators Russell B. Long (D/La.), Symington and John J. Sparkman (D/Ala.) told Rusk that if the U.S. was going to get militarily involved on any substantial scale there should be action by Congress, possibly in the form of a resolution. They all agreed that it had been a mistake for the U.S. to become involved in the Korean war without such action. "... this silence-gives-consent business does not work too good," Long said, "when the thing starts going poorly."

After the May 12 decision and the dispatch of military forces, the debate over Laos continued in the administration. It was reported to be serious, and at times heated, as deep cleavages developed between the "all or nothing" view of the JCS, supported by others, including W. W. Rostow, and the Harriman-Hilsman preference for limited military action. Finally, according to Hilsman, those who favored more limited action were able to get agreement on action by the President on May 29, 1962 directing the development of contingency plans for military action in Laos, under which Thai forces, with U.S. assistance, would seek to take and hold a province on the Mekong River in the western part of Laos, while Thai, Vietnamese or U.S. forces would recapture and hold the "panhandle" in the Southern part of Laos.¹¹¹

As a result of several factors, including the effects of U.S. military movements (although there is no indication that the Communists intended to wage a major offensive after Phoumi's troops fled Nam Tha), agreement was reached early in June 1962 on a coalition government, and on July 23 the Geneva Agreement (or Accords) on Laos ("Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos") was signed.

On July 13, Rusk, accompanied by Chayes, met with the Foreign Relations Committee in an executive session to discuss the Laos neutrality agreement.¹¹² He said that it would be signed by the President as an executive agreement, and that it required no action by Congress except to help pay for the costs of the control commission. Senator Morse asked why it had not been sent to the Senate as a treaty, and Rusk replied that it was not being sent because it was primarily a declaration of policy. Morse asked whether there were any new commitments to use force, and Chayes replied that it was not a "formal guarantee agreement" by which the U.S. would be obligated to act.

In a later interview Chayes was asked about the relation of Congress to the 1962 Geneva agreement. He replied:¹¹³

¹¹¹NSAM 157, in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 672-673.

¹¹²U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, July 13, 1962.

¹¹³CRS Interview with Abram Chayes, Oct. 13, 1978.

. . . we didn't choose to treat it as a treaty. Our view then was somewhat different than the views that are now advanced, especially by Congress, about the treaty power. Our views then were that the President as Commander in Chief is entitled to make agreements of this country without submitting them to Congress because they, in effect, were agreements about how the President would exercise his powers as Commander in Chief. But we've come a long way since 1962 and I think the development is such that you wouldn't regard it as that kind of an agreement.

I am confident that Harriman briefed congressional people from time to time on the Laotian settlement. But Congress was a very different animal, too. I mean, congressmen didn't want to get into these things. In fact, in a way, they'd just as soon not be briefed. They didn't want to have responsibility for these things, and if you briefed them they weren't probing or questioning. They wanted to keep their freedom of action, freedom to criticize when it was all over if they wanted to, but it was a very different atmosphere at that time. They were prepared to cede, in effect, presidential jurisdiction.

A similar observation about Congress' role with respect to the Geneva agreement, as well as the May 12, 1962 decision to dispatch U.S. forces, was made by William Bundy in an interview:¹¹⁴

I was recurrently appearing before interested congressional committees at this time, and I recall no serious questioning of the move [sending troops] as a matter of policy or of the President's authority to make such a move. What consultation there may have been, I do not know. But it's indicative of a period so different from today, that this kind of thing could take place. They weren't sent into combat; they were sent clearly for a sort of demonstrative purpose. It was the kind of deployment that would almost certainly be questioned sharply in today's atmosphere, but at the time I'd be quite confident, based on my more or less recurrent contacts with the Hill, it was not questioned at all. I think that the same goes for the Laos peace agreement. I don't recall that it had to be submitted for approval by the Senate.

Michael Forrestal, who replaced Rostow as McGeorge Bundy's deputy for the Far East in January 1962 (at that point Robert Johnson also moved with Rostow to the State Department's Policy Planning Staff) and was the primary White House staff liaison with Harriman on the final stages of the Geneva negotiations on Laos, also said in an interview that "no consideration" was given to submitting the Geneva agreement to the Senate for approval, and that there was "no demand" from the Senate that this be done:¹¹⁵

I think at that time the view was, assuming that the President had the right . . . to send economic and minor military assistance to a country that asks for it, that since he had that right he also had the right to pull out and that he didn't have to negotiate a treaty to do that. . . . So the issue of the Con-

¹¹⁴CRS Interview with William Bundy, Aug. 3, 1978.

¹¹⁵CRS Interview with Michael Forrestal, Oct. 16, 1978.

gress really didn't come up. And I can't remember a single person suggesting that [Senate approval].

Forrestal said that during the spring of 1962 he met with key Members of Congress, including Fulbright, Mansfield, Russell and John Stennis (D/Miss.), and Thomas E. Morgan (D/Pa.) and Clement J. Zablocki (D/Wis.) in the House, to keep them informed about the progress of the Geneva negotiations, but that with the exception of Mansfield none of them showed much interest in the matter. (Stennis, he said, was concerned about the effects of a Laos settlement on the rest of Southeast Asia, and on U.S. international prestige.) "My sense," Forrestal said, "is that they didn't want to hear much about it. . . . I think they felt that it was a messy subject. It wasn't going to be useful to them politically. They'd just rather have the administration handle it and not get involved." Forrestal added that in the case of the committee chairmen themselves (Fulbright, Russell, Morgan), they did not seem to want to have their committees involved, and did not suggest that the subject be brought before the committees. ". . . not until the very end were there even any hearings of any sort on the subject, and certainly no public ones." This was his explanation:

I think it's because at that time there seemed to be in Congress, among the leadership at any rate, a real disinclination to get into Executive foreign affairs, the foreign affairs conducted by the Executive, partly because so much information was classified; people's lives were involved overseas, and they didn't want to be burdened with the responsibility of knowledge. And even if they did have the knowledge, they probably felt, although none of them ever told me this, "What am I going to do about it? I know something, maybe, but I can't make a speech about it because it's all terribly secret. My constituents aren't really interested in this any way. . . . They hardly know where Laos is." We didn't have enough men over there to pose a political problem, with casualties and that sort of thing, so at that time it just didn't seem to be something they wanted to get involved in.

Congress accepted the 1962 Laos settlement with little open dissent, partly because of deference to the Executive, but primarily because few Members wanted to see the U.S. become more actively involved, especially militarily, in Laos. At the same time, many if not most Members were privately if not publicly skeptical that the settlement had "settled" anything, and there was considerable concern, especially among those who favored a strong stand by the U.S. in Southeast Asia, that it would work in the Communists' favor.¹¹⁶

Should Vietnam Also Become Neutral?

During the first several months of 1962, while efforts continued to bring about the neutralization of Laos, a few of Kennedy's associates and advisers again raised the possibility of making Vietnam neutral as well. They were not convinced that the new "limited

¹¹⁶For an example of these views see the private letters to Rusk and Harriman from Representative Melvin R. Laird (R./Wis.) on July 24 and Aug. 23, 1962, and their replies, printed subsequently in *CR*, vol. 110, pp. 12257-12258.

partnership" was workable, or that the U.S. could find a solution to the Vietnam problem, and they wanted, above all, to avoid the large-scale use of force as the ultimate answer. One of these was Ambassador Galbraith, who broached the possibility of a neutral Vietnam with Kennedy in early April 1962, during a trip to Washington. Kennedy, according to Galbraith, "was immediately interested," and asked him to talk to Harriman and McNamara and to give him something in writing. Both Harriman and McNamara, especially Harriman, were "warmly sympathetic," and on April 4 Galbraith gave Kennedy a memorandum on the subject which he said also reflected Harriman's ideas.¹¹⁷ In it he warned the President of the perils of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, asserting that our "growing military commitment . . . could expand step by step into a major, long-drawn out and decisive military involvement." This, together with support of an ineffectual government and political leader, he said, posed the danger that the U.S. would ". . . replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French did."

Galbraith reiterated his opposition to the use of U.S. troops or advisers in combat: "We should resist all steps which commit American troops to combat action and impress upon all concerned the importance of keeping American forces out of actual combat commitment." He also urged that the U.S. remain in the background in the case of the strategic hamlet program and the defoliation program, where the presence of an outside power might be resented, and where the U.S. might suffer from identification with unpopular activities. ("Americans in their various roles," he said, "should be as invisible as the situation permits.")¹¹⁸

Galbraith urged Kennedy to seek a political solution to the Vietnam problem, to reduce commitments to the Diem government, and to seek diplomatic support both for the establishment of a more viable non-Communist government and for efforts to bring an end to the insurgency, accompanied by U.S. withdrawal.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, replying to a request for comment on the Galbraith memo, said that his suggestions would have the effect of putting the U.S. "in a position of initiating negotiations with the communists to seek disengagement from what is by now a well-known commitment to take a forthright stand against Communism in Southeast Asia." "Any reversal of U.S. policy," they added, "could have disastrous effects, not only upon our relationship with South Vietnam, but with the rest of our Asian and other allies as well."¹¹⁹

No action appears to have been taken on Galbraith's suggestion, but a short while later, toward the end of the Geneva Conference on Laos (the dates are not clear), Harriman was authorized by Kennedy himself to meet privately with North Vietnamese delegates to the Conference for the purpose of exploring possibilities of negotiations on Vietnam, including the possibility of a conference on neutralization of Vietnam similar to the one on Laos. Harriman, accompanied by his deputy, William Sullivan, went to the hotel suite

¹¹⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 477.

¹¹⁸ From the text in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 670-671.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 671-672.

of the Burmese delegation to the Conference, where they met with the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Ung Van Khiem, and one of his aides. The meeting was fruitless, Sullivan said later. "We got absolutely nowhere. We hit a stone wall."¹²⁰

Harriman's position, which Sullivan said the President shared, was that "... once you get the Laotian settlement that you might be able to expand it into a larger area of understanding, and, particularly if you got the Soviets to recognize that it united their interests as well as ours to try to neutralize the whole Indochina area, that otherwise it might fall prey to the Chinese, and that we might be able to build therefore on the Laos settlement as something which would move toward a larger settlement in the whole Indochina area. . . . At least he [Kennedy] was constantly looking for opportunities to see if we could expand from the Laos agreement, but at the same time feeling more confident about his military posture in Vietnam once Laos had been tidied up [i.e., that Vietnam was a more suitable place to take a stand]."¹²¹

The failure of this attempt to probe the possible interests of the North Vietnamese in negotiations strengthened the resolve of Kennedy and his associates to prosecute the campaign against the Communists in Vietnam.¹²² Some of them, including Rusk and U. Alexis Johnson, who had not favored the idea in the first place, were confirmed in their opinion that it was a mistake to seek such a solution, or to consider, at that stage, U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. This position was supported by the reports coming in from Vietnam about improvements in the situation resulting from increased U.S. assistance. Many policymakers seemed to believe, and were telling Congress and the public, that they were optimistic.

John Newhouse, who was dealing with Vietnam for the Foreign Relations Committee, reported to Fulbright on February 23, 1962 on a long conversation he had held with the State Department desk officer for Vietnam, Chalmers Wood, who was also on the Vietnam Task Force in which Wood said that developments in Vietnam were encouraging. Newhouse concluded that if this evaluation was correct, "... it would seem very unlikely that the question of American combat forces need arise. What will be required of us is patience, because the process of eliminating the influence and presence of these hard core Viet Cong cadres will probably take years, five years some say. It will be difficult, but the actual fighting can presumably be left to the GVN forces, whose competence is expected to increase steadily."¹²³

On March 16, 1962, McNamara testified before the House Appropriations Committee on the foreign aid appropriations bill, and said he was "optimistic" about the prospects in Vietnam. He main-

¹²⁰Kennedy Library, Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan, Aug. 5, 1970, p. 32; CRS Interview with William Sullivan, July 31, 1980.

¹²¹Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan, p. 34.

¹²²Following another trip to Southeast Asia in May 1962, Chester Bowles again urged Kennedy to seek a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam conflict. Kennedy and Rusk both expressed interest, but FE, Bowles said (he was referring to Harriman), was opposed, and a trip which he was to make to explore the idea was finally called off. See *Promises to Keep*, pp. 410-414. In the spring of 1963, Bowles made one last effort to persuade Kennedy to seek a negotiated settlement and to avoid a major U.S. military commitment to Vietnam. There was no response to his memorandum to the President.

¹²³University of Arkansas, Fulbright Papers, series 48.

tained that the U.S. would attain its objectives, and suggested that the end was in sight: "I would say definitely we are approaching it from the point of view of trying to clean it up and terminating subversion, covert aggression, and combat operations. . . ." (He also took the position that U.S. forces might be detrimental: ". . . to introduce white forces—U.S. forces—in large numbers there today, while it might have an initial favorable military impact would almost certainly lead to adverse political and in the long run adverse military operations.")¹²⁴

The administration was also waging at least a limited campaign to persuade the public that the new U.S. program in Vietnam was both necessary and effective, and that a negotiated settlement in Laos was the wisest course of action under the circumstances.

Harriman himself, while working behind the scenes to explore possible negotiations, publicly defended the new Vietnam program, and on May 27, 1962, the *New York Times Magazine* published an article by him on "What We Are Doing in Southeast Asia," in which he explained U.S. policy toward both Laos and Vietnam.

George Ball, another skeptic behind closed doors, gave a rousing defense and justification for the U.S. role in Vietnam in a speech on April 30, 1962, before the Detroit Economic Club. He said, in part:

If the Vietnamese people were to lose the struggle to maintain a free and independent nation, it would be a loss of tragic significance to the security of Free World interests in the whole of Asia and the South Pacific.

And more than that, if the United States were to neglect its solemn commitments to the Vietnamese people, the consequences would not be limited even to those areas—they would be world-wide. For the Free World's security cannot be given away piecemeal; it is not divisible. When the going gets rough we cannot observe those commitments that are easy or near at hand and disregard the others.

What we do or fail to do in Viet-Nam will be felt both by our antagonists and our friends. Any United States retreat in one area of struggle inevitably encourages Communist adventures in another. How we act in Viet-Nam will have its impact on Communist actions in Europe, in Africa and in Latin America. Far from easing tensions, our unwillingness to meet our commitments in one tension area will simply encourage the Communists to bestir trouble in another.

Asserting that the struggle against the Communists in Vietnam would "definitely" be won, Ball said, "This is a task that we must stay with until it is concluded. But we should have no illusions. It will not be concluded quickly. It took eight years in Malaya.

"What we can expect in Vietnam is the long, slow arduous execution of a process. Results will not be apparent over night. For the

¹²⁴U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Foreign Operations Appropriations for 1963*, 87th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1962), p. 370. The quotation on U.S. forces was deleted from the printed text of the hearing by the Defense Department, but appears in a reprint of that part of the testimony in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 173. After a visit to Vietnam in May 1963, McNamara said privately that it would take 6 years to defeat the Communists, according to Maxwell Taylor, then Chairman of the JCS. *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 251.

operation is, of necessity, the patient winning back of a land to freedom, village by village."

According to Ball, "The United States has *no* combat units in Viet-Nam. We are not fighting the war, as some reports have suggested. We are *not* running the war, as the Communists have tried assiduously to argue."

The morning after Ball's speech, the *New York Herald Tribune* carried an article by its renowned reporter, Marguerite Higgins, in which she wrote that "American retreat or withdrawal from South Viet-Nam is unthinkable, according to Mr. Ball. The American commitment, moreover, is irrevocable." Ball immediately sent a memo to McGeorge Bundy asserting that the Higgins interpretation was not correct, and that his speech was intended to emphasize the limited nature of the U.S. involvement. He quoted passages from the speech, including those above, to buttress his point.

McGeorge Bundy sent Ball's memo and a copy of the speech to the President with a cover note saying, "I think George defends himself fairly against Maggie Higgins, but I also think that the speech has a tone and content that we would not have cleared, simply from the point of view of maintaining a chance of political settlement. From the way George has been telephoning to explain this speech, I doubt there will be another one without clearance over here."¹²⁵

Messages contrary to the official optimism of Washington were being received, however, not only from U.S. and other media correspondents in the field, but from other informed persons who were concerned about the situation, and who were becoming increasingly alarmed about the trends they saw developing. One of these was Wesley R. Fishel, (former adviser to Diem and head of the Michigan State University group in Vietnam in the 1950s), who had just come back from a month's visit to Vietnam. He was very depressed over what he had found. (It will be recalled that the Michigan State University contract in Vietnam had just been finally terminated by Diem, allegedly because of articles in the U.S. press and periodicals by former members of the MSU team which were considered to be critical of the Diem government.) Fishel reported his findings to John A. Hannah, president of Michigan State, who sent them to President Kennedy with a covering letter in which he explained that although Michigan State regretted the termination of the contract, the purpose of his letter was to call Kennedy's attention to Fishel's views.¹²⁶

In his report to Hannah, Fishel said, among other things:

For the first time in seven and one-half years I have become a pessimist about the fate of South Vietnam. In the two and

¹²⁵Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam General, 1962. The speech was not published in the *Department of State Bulletin*, probably because of the reaction it received, and Ball does not mention it in his memoirs. The quotes above are from the *New York Times*, May 1, 1962.

¹²⁶Fishel's letter of Feb. 17, 1962, Hannah's of Feb. 26, and an acknowledgement from McGeorge Bundy on Mar. 26, are in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. In his letter to Kennedy, Hannah, who had served as an Assistant Secretary of Defense under Eisenhower, made this interesting observation about the MSU contract: "We recognized at the beginning that we were involving ourselves in some activities that were hardly appropriate for a university to be concerned with, but because it seemed to be in the United States' national interest, and because our cooperation was requested by Mr. [Harold E.] Stassen and others near the center of the Eisenhower Administration, we agreed to do what we were asked to do."

one-half years since my last visit to that country there has been a most profound and distressing deterioration there, politically, socially, and psychologically. Economically, though some progress is still being made the gains of the past few years are in many cases being reversed. . . . Militarily, the recent influx of thousands of American officers and men, and dozens of helicopters, etc., is starting to make a distinct change in the situation already, turning what was a minus into a plus. I would hesitate to predict, however, that the plus will remain that for long, for I find it hard to believe that the Chinese and Viet Cong will allow this challenge to go unmet. Indeed, my travels to the high plateau, the center, and the Mekong delta last month have left me with the impression that a Viet Cong offensive is very likely in the next few weeks. By that I don't mean a major invasion out of the north, but rather a heavily intensified terrorization program that may spread even to the cities, with the intent of panicking the population and weakening the Diem government's hold still more.

Politically and psychologically things are at a low ebb. The commendable programs which were begun a few years ago have been allowed in many instances to lose their momentum by reason largely of a failure on the part of the Central Government to follow through on initial decisions and acts. The hopes and aspirations of 1954 and 1955 have been allowed to die, and a miasma of apathy pervades the atmosphere. I talked more than casually with 118 people during my four weeks in Vietnam. Almost all are people I have known for many years. None of them is politically part of the "opposition." At least two thirds of them were still Diem's strong adherents in 1959. Yet today, only three or four of these men and women supports the government with discernible enthusiasm. Then too, there is much popular fear: fear that "the Viet Cong are coming," and that the government is not going to be able to move to meet the Communist threat swiftly enough to save many people from being hurt or killed.

"Unless Vietnam experiences a major and favorable psychological shock within the next few months, I doubt seriously whether it will survive," Fishel added, "notwithstanding our efforts and our money and our men. The bright spots which were so clearly visible two and even one year ago are now fading into insignificance because the regime still has failed to mobilize the hearts and loyalties of the people."

Optimism Leads to a Plan for Reduction of the U.S. Role

Despite reports to the contrary, policymakers in Saigon and Washington continued to believe that the situation in Vietnam was improving. In a report on June 18, 1962 to Assistant Secretary of State Harriman, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) discussed specific actions being taken along with a brief critique of each, and ended with a "Summary Assessment."¹²⁷ With

¹²⁷The text is in *PP*, DOD ed., book 12, pp. 469-480.

respect to developments in the "military-security sector," the paper stated:

It is too early to say that the Viet Cong guerrilla-terrorist onslaught is being checked, but it can be said that it is now meeting more effective resistance and having to cope with increased aggressiveness by the Vietnamese military and security forces. Nonetheless, the Viet Cong continue to increase their armed strength and capability and, on balance, to erode government authority in the countryside.

There had not been as much improvement, Hilsman's report said, in other areas, and "... while there are encouraging signs of popular support for the government, there has been no major break-through in identifying the people with the struggle against the Viet Cong."

We conclude that:

1. there is no evidence to support certain allegations of substantial deterioration in the political and military situations in Vietnam;

2. on the contrary, there is evidence of heartening progress in bolstering the fighting effectiveness of the military and security forces;

3. however, there is still much to be done in strengthening the overall capacity of the Vietnamese Government to pursue its total counterinsurgency effort, not only in the military-security sector but particularly in the political-administrative sector;

4. a judgment on ultimate success in the campaign against the Communist "war of national liberation" in Vietnam is premature; but

5. We do think that the chances are good, provided there is continuing progress by the Vietnamese Government along the lines of its present strategy.

Operating on the assumption that U.S. efforts to assist the Vietnamese would continue to succeed, and, therefore, that the U.S. could and should begin to consider a plan for reducing its commitments and role in future years, McNamara, after consultation with the President, directed the military to begin such planning. At a meeting in Honolulu on July 23, 1962, the day the Laos agreement was concluded, he said that by fiscal year 1968 (beginning July 1, 1967), U.S. personnel should be reduced from the expected peak of 12,000 in 1963-64 to 1,500 (consisting only of MAAG headquarters staff), and U.S. military assistance funds from \$180 million to \$40.8 million.¹²⁸

The optimism that generally prevailed at the time was further strengthened by reports at the Honolulu meeting that there had been "tremendous progress in South Vietnam." McNamara asked General Harkins how long it would take "before the VC could be expected to be eliminated as a significant force," and Harkins replied that it would take about a year from the time Vietnamese

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 160. The *Pentagon Papers* analyst notes (p. 161) that one of the reasons for the plan was to counteract bureaucratic pressures for increased involvement in Vietnam. "What Secretary McNamara did was to force all theater justifications for force build-up into tension with long-term phase-down plans."

forces were "fully operational and began to press the VC in all areas."¹²⁹ McNamara responded that it would be more prudent to assume that three years would be required. He then noted, as the *Pentagon Papers* states, that "... it might be difficult to retain public support for U.S. operations in Vietnam indefinitely. Political pressures would build up as losses continued. Therefore, he concluded, planning must be undertaken now and a program devised to phase out U.S. military involvement."¹³⁰

Congress Accepts the New U.S. Program

Although McNamara correctly perceived the potential problem of maintaining public support for the U.S. program in Vietnam, as later events so clearly demonstrated, there were very few signs of public or congressional disagreement or discontent with the expanding U.S. role. During the hearings and debates in Congress in the spring and early summer of 1962 on the foreign aid authorization and appropriations bills, through which funds were provided for the new program (except for military advisers, who were paid from Defense Department funds), there were only scattered questions or comments about Vietnam and about the new program, and in the end Congress voted overwhelmingly for providing the authorization and the money requested by the Executive.

If anything, Congress was impatient to get on with the job. In public hearings of the House Foreign Affairs Committee some of the members were skeptical about the claims of the executive branch that U.S. advisers were not engaged in combat, and it was obvious from their comments that there was considerable support for having advisers serve as combatants. As Representative J. L. Pilcher (D/Ga.), a member of the Far East Subcommittee, said, "I am in favor of it. That is a hot war. . . . It is not a cold war. When you send those boys over there, they are going to shoot back."

Representative Zablocki, chairman of the Far East Subcommittee, referring to the training mission of U.S. advisers, said, "If we want to win against the enemy we will have to use them pretty soon." He added that he thought the American public was "prepared to assent" to this.¹³¹

The new U.S. program in Vietnam was, in fact, endorsed by some Members of Congress who had previously been uncertain about the role of the United States. Notable were the comments of Senators Humphrey and Morse on October 10, 1962, praising the administration's efforts to develop counterinsurgency programs, and to improve the capability of the U.S. to engage effectively in counter guerrilla warfare against the Communists.¹³² Humphrey said that in Vietnam "... in recent months, the tide may well have turned for the forces of freedom against the Communist guerrillas of the north. . . . A number of striking successes have been achieved." He called for more effective programs and better weapons and supplies to "put out these brush fires" in Vietnam and in other less developed countries facing Communist guerrilla warfare.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹³¹*Foreign Assistance Act of 1962*, pp. 252, 123.

¹³²*CR*, vol. 108, pp. 22957-22961.

Morse, while critical of the unilateral burden being carried by the U.S. in Southeast Asia, agreed strongly with Humphrey, saying, "Unfortunately, a good many of the soldiers of freedom have not been in a position where they could successfully combat guerrilla warfare. Therefore, we must place ourselves in a strengthened position, so that the Communist world will know that we can meet them on every front—Cuba, Berlin, southeast Asia, Africa. We must let them know that wherever they wish to attack freedom, we will stand firm and protect freedom."

William Bundy, a principal executive branch witness on the military assistance portion of the 1962 foreign aid legislation, says of the phenomenon of congressional acceptance of the new Kennedy program:¹³³

... it is very striking to me in retrospect that I recall no significant expression of disagreement with that [the new U.S. program]. "How were we doing?" ... they would want to get your latest evaluation ... all of that. But there was no tendency to say, "Isn't this a very risky enterprise? Should we be in this deep?"

Why, besides its general agreement with U.S. policy in Vietnam, was Congress so accepting? In 1962, as in earlier years, it is clear that Congress was still playing its role as the "silent partner" of the Executive in foreign policy, based on the post World War II consensual pattern of executive-legislative relationships that still prevailed. For example, in a major speech on Vietnam on June 3, 1962, Senator Mansfield reiterated his belief that the determination of foreign policy is in the hands of the President. Referring to the recent U.S. troop deployment to Thailand, as well as the new U.S. military advisory role in Vietnam, he said, "Both steps represent a deepening of an already very deep involvement on the Southeast Asia mainland. In this, as in all cases of foreign policy and military command, the responsibility for the direction of the Nation's course rests with the President."¹³⁴ Although he suggested the need to reevaluate U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia, he seemed to assume that Congress' role was primarily that of a forum for public discussion of the issue.

At the time, Senator Fulbright held even stronger views about the role of the President. In an article in 1961 on "American Foreign Policy in the 20th Century under an 18th Century Constitution,"¹³⁵ which his critics later quoted with delight, Fulbright took the position that "... for the existing requirements of American foreign policy we have hobbled the President by too niggardly a grant of power." "The overriding problem of inadequate Presidential authority in foreign affairs," Fulbright added, "derives ... from the 'checks and balances' of Congressional authority in foreign relations." Fulbright questioned "... whether in the face of the harsh necessities of the 1960's we can afford the luxury of 18th century procedures of measured deliberation. It is highly unlikely that we can successfully execute a long-range program for the

¹³³CRS Interview with William Bundy, Aug. 3, 1978.

¹³⁴From the text of Mansfield's speech at Michigan State University on June 3, 1962, reprinted in *CR*, vol. 108, pp. 10048-10050.

¹³⁵*Cornell Law Quarterly*, 47 (Fall 1961), pp. 1-13.

taming, or containing, of today's aggressive and revolutionary forces by continuing to leave vast and vital decision-making powers in the hands of a decentralized, independent-minded and largely parochial-minded body of legislators. . . . I submit that the price of democratic survival in a world of aggressive totalitarianism is to give up some of the democratic luxuries of the past. We should do so with no illusions as to the reasons for its necessity. It is distasteful and dangerous to vest the executive with powers unchecked and unbalanced. My question is whether we have any choice but to do so."¹³⁶

Mansfield and Fulbright's views were not atypical. They reflected the general attitude of most Members of Congress at that point in U.S. history. It is not surprising, therefore, that Congress should have asked so few questions during 1962 about the new U.S. role and program in Vietnam.

An additional and very important reason for Congress' acceptance of the new U.S. program in Vietnam was the somewhat hidden nature of that program. This factor, as was mentioned earlier, tended to maximize the role of the Executive and to minimize the role of Congress. As Carl Marcy, who was chief of staff of the Foreign Relations Committee during that period, said about the role of Congress, and specifically that of the Committee, in relation to Vietnam in 1962:¹³⁷ "I think it is fair to say that the committee did not pay much attention. The war was being waged by the executive branch. Committee members didn't feel that they were in a good position to criticize the professional, whether it be a professional in the military or whether it be a professional in clandestine activities of various kinds."

Moreover, during at least the first 6-9 months of 1962 the new U.S. program in Vietnam appeared, on the surface, at least, to be succeeding, and most Members of Congress were content, especially in an election year, to give it a chance to succeed. This was particularly true of the Democrats, who then controlled both the House and the Senate, and were not inclined to raise unnecessary questions about Kennedy's foreign policy. The Republicans were in a better position to do so, but they, too, were generally assentive.

There was also support in Congress for the new U.S. program in Vietnam among those Members—Humphrey being an example—who generally supported the kind of internationalist, interventionist foreign policy being conducted by the administration, and who were influenced by the prevailing intellectual and political fashion represented by the Special Group (CI).

Once again it is also important to note that at that stage Vietnam was a comparatively minor foreign policy problem, and therefore less salient for Congress than other foreign and domestic problems. For the first six months of 1962 Laos was a more compelling

¹³⁶Years later, Fulbright commented, "The imperial presidency, in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, seems to have fallen as fast as it rose. . . . I am not inclined, however, to revive my formulation of 1961, calling for a more generous grant of presidential power over foreign relations. A new, more generally serviceable formulation seems required, one that will take account of the essential congressional role in the authorization of military and major political commitments, and in advising broad policy directions, while leaving to the executive the necessary flexibility to conduct policy within the broad parameters approved by the legislature." J. William Fulbright, "The Legislator as Educator," *Foreign Affairs*, 57 (Spring 1979), p. 726.

¹³⁷CRS Interview with Carl Marcy, Feb. 13, 1979.

issue, and for at least the last three months the Cuban "missile crisis," together with continuing problems in Berlin, eclipsed every other issue.

The Cuba and Berlin Resolutions: Immediate Precedents for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Concern over both Cuba and Berlin prompted Congress to pass resolutions in the fall of 1962 supporting military action, if necessary, by the President at his own discretion, both of which, especially the Cuba Resolution, served as precedents and justification for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. In both cases, moreover, Congress seemed to be as insistent as the Executive that such action should be taken to demonstrate the "unified national will" to resist Communist aggression.

The Cuba Resolution,¹³⁸ which was enacted by Congress on September 26, 1962, stated the determination of the United States: "to prevent by whatever means may be necessary, including the use of arms, the Marxist-Leninist regime in Cuba from extending, by force or the threat of force, its aggressive or subversive activities to any part of this hemisphere," and "to prevent in Cuba the creation or use of an externally supported military capability endangering the security of the United States. . . ."¹³⁹

By passing this resolution, which had no time limit, and which accepted and affirmed—but did not authorize—the use of the armed forces, if necessary, Congress gave its advance, open-ended approval to any decision by the President to use any or all of the armed forces of the United States to meet the perceived threat. By so doing, it implicitly accepted the President's own assertion of his constitutional right to undertake military action against Communism in Cuba without needing any action by or approval from Congress. In a speech on September 13, Kennedy had stated that "As President and Commander in Chief, I have full authority now to take such action."

Unlike previous resolutions (Formosa, Middle East), there was almost no debate in committee or on the floor with respect to the legal and constitutional aspects of the Cuba Resolution. The House Foreign Affairs Committee report made no reference to this subject, and the joint report of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees¹⁴⁰ brushed aside any possible questions by asserting that ". . . constitutional arguments over the relative powers of the President and the Congress respecting the use of American Armed Forces . . . have their place in American public life; but it is important in the current instance that they not obscure what the joint committee is convinced is the essential unity of purpose, not only of the Congress, but of the President and the American people as well." The joint committee voted unanimously to report the bill favorably to the Senate, where it was passed in one day with no significant debate. The vote was 86-1, with Senator Winston L. Prouty (R/Vt.) the only dissenter. He said

¹³⁸Public Law 87-733.

¹³⁹For a good synopsis of the background and congressional consideration of the Cuba Resolution see the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* for 1962, pp. 331-340 (hereafter cited as *CQ*).

¹⁴⁰S. Rept. 87-2111.

it was not strong enough. (Likewise, only a handful of Republicans, who felt as Prouty did, opposed the measure in a 384-7 House vote.) Silent were all those who had spoken up in 1955 and in 1957, when similar resolutions were being enacted, about their concerns for protecting Congress' war power. Conspicuously silent was Senator Wayne Morse, who, coincidentally or not, was running for reelection. He voted for the resolution, saying that he was doing so because it did not delegate the constitutional war-making power of Congress to the President.

The Berlin Resolution,¹⁴¹ passed by Congress on October 10, 1962, declared the determination of the U.S. "to prevent by whatever means may be necessary, including the force of arms," any violation by the Communists of Allied rights in Berlin, and the commitment of the U.S. to help the people of Berlin maintain their freedom. It, too, was open-ended and time-unlimited, and took the position that the President could use at his discretion, and without further action by Congress (unless required by the need for increasing U.S. military forces), any or all of the armed forces of the United States to meet the stated objectives of our policy. Unlike the Cuba Resolution, however, it was a "sense of Congress" resolution, which did not require the President's signature and did not have the force of law. It did not, therefore, have the legal and constitutional significance of the Cuba Resolution, nor, for that reason, was it as important and direct a precedent for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

In the case of the Cuba Resolution, as in the case of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the domestic political situation was a key factor in Congress's action. The Cuban situation was a salient issue in the congressional campaign in 1962, and in 1964 the question of Presidential restraint in war making became a salient issue in the Presidential and, to some extent, congressional campaigns.¹⁴²

Warnings

By the end of 1962, the "Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam" (CPSVN), as the plan ordered by McNamara at the July Honolulu Conference was called, had been developed, and was being cleared at the various levels of command. There was much less optimism about the situation in Vietnam, however, than there had been in July.

On December 3, 1962, Hilsman sent Rusk and Kennedy a long memo¹⁴³ on the prospects in Vietnam. Its general conclusion was that very little progress was being made, and that "Elimination, even significant reduction, of the Communist insurgency will almost certainly require several years." The Communists, the paper reported, were stronger than ever, and "The sharp increase of the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam and the events of recent months in Laos apparently have not weakened Communist resolve to take over South Vietnam." Asserting that although the role of the U.S. may have caused the Communists to modify their

¹⁴¹H. Con. Res. 87-570.

¹⁴²See the *CQ Almanac*, as well as the relevant literature on the Cuban "missile crisis," for information on how the Cuban issue was being handled politically in the 1962 election by both the Democrats and the Republicans.

¹⁴³*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 690 ff.

tactics and their timetable, the paper added that the Viet Cong had not been weakened, and that they "... probably continue to look primarily to the long run in South Vietnam and to remain confident of eventual victory."

On the strategic hamlet program, the paper was optimistic, while stating that it was too early to evaluate the program. It was critical, however, of tactical bombing and crop destruction from defoliation, saying that these "... may well contribute to the development of militant opposition among the peasants and positive identification with the Viet Cong."

The Hilsman report also noted that, with increasing dissatisfaction among the populace, there was the possibility of a coup against Diem. If one occurred, the paper said, the role of the U.S. should be to avert a serious power struggle that could adversely affect the war effort, and to assist coup leaders in advance of the coup in avoiding precipitous action, and after the coup in establishing a new government.

Kennedy also received a disturbing first-hand report from Mansfield, who had visited Vietnam during late November and early December 1962. Others on the trip were Senators Claiborne Pell (D/R.I.), J. Caleb Boggs (D/Del.), and Benjamin A. Smith (D/Mass.).

David Halberstam, then in Vietnam with the *New York Times*, recounted his experience with Mansfield:¹⁴⁴

Mike came through Saigon in the fall of 1962 and he wanted to have lunch with a group of us reporters, myself, Neil Sheehan, [UPI], Peter Arnett [AP], and possibly Mel Browne [Malcolm Browne, also AP]. If you wanted to get a non-official, non-embassy briefing in Saigon in those days, there was only one place—American reporters. . . . Mike already had his doubts, and, of course, by then we were all very, very discouraged and pessimistic and we had become the enemies of the mission and of the regime. . . . What we were saying was hardly that critical. We were quite pessimistic, but in terms of what was to come later, we were reasonably mild. So Mike had lunch with us and it lasted for five hours. I remember going on and on and on. . . . What was clear was that Mike Mansfield was really listening. He wanted to know.

Halberstam also recounted an incident at the airport the following day when Mansfield refused to make a parting statement written by the U.S. mission, (the mission acted "with incredible arrogance and stupidity" according to Halberstam),¹⁴⁵ and instead made his own, less optimistic statement.

Ambassador Nolting later said that he thought Mansfield was influenced by U.S. journalists, and that it was "a great mistake on the part of anyone who is as influential as Mansfield to come out there and sort of knock the legs from under U.S. policy, which ought to have been supported by the leader of the Senate." Nolting said that he went to see Diem after Mansfield left, and told Diem:

"Mr. President, I'm awfully sorry. Something must have gone wrong here. I don't know what it was but those were rather discouraging remarks." And Diem said, "I have been a

¹⁴⁴CRS Interview with David Halberstam, Jan. 9, 1979.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*

friend of Senator Mansfield and he has been so good to me for so many years that I'm not going to let that stand in the way of our friendship," or something to that effect. But he was shocked. He couldn't believe it. What impelled Mansfield to do this I've never understood.

According to Nolting, press accounts of Mansfield's report on his trip, and specifically his comments about Diem's leadership, were "the first nails in Diem's coffin."¹⁴⁶

When the Mansfield party returned to Washington in mid-December 1962, Mansfield sent a private, confidential report on the trip to the President on December 18. In it, Mansfield, who noted that it was his first visit to Vietnam in seven years, summed up his conclusions by saying, "... it would be well to face the fact that we are once again at the beginning of the beginning." The "political structure in Saigon," he said, "is, today, far more dependent on us for its existence than it was five years ago. If Vietnam is the cork in the Southeast Asia bottle then American aid is more than ever the cork in the Vietnamese bottle."

Mansfield said he was told by both Vietnamese and U.S. officials in Saigon that the new program would solve the problem in a year or two. "Having heard optimistic predictions of this kind, with the introduction of other 'new concepts,' beginning with French General [Henry Eugène] Navarre in Hanoi in 1953, certain reservations seem to me to be in order." Among these he included estimates of Viet Minh casualties, and the success of the strategic hamlet program.

Concerning the strategic hamlets, Mansfield said that an "... immense job of social engineering, dependent on great outlays of aid on our part for many years and a most responsive, alert and enlightened leadership in the government of Vietnam" would be required before the plan could succeed in winning over the rural populace.

Mansfield expressed his continued confidence in Diem, but warned of the growing power of Nhu and "the great danger of unbridled power," which might prevent realization of the goal of the program to bring a new spirit of leadership and self-sacrifice to Vietnam.

Mansfield also expressed continued confidence in Kennedy's Vietnam program, which he said could be successful if the factors in the situation did not change drastically, and if there was adequate Vietnamese and American effort to make the program succeed.

The alternative, Mansfield said, was large-scale U.S. military intervention, which he vigorously opposed:

... it is difficult to conceive of alternatives, with the possible exception of a truly massive commitment of American military personnel and other resources—in short going to war fully ourselves against the guerrillas—and the establishment of some form of new colonial rule in south Vietnam. That is an alternative which I most emphatically do not recommend. On the contrary, it seems to me most essential that we make crys-

¹⁴⁶CRS Interview with Frederick Nolting, Dec. 7, 1978.

tal clear to the Vietnamese government and to our own people that while we will go to great lengths to help, the primary responsibility rests with the Vietnamese. Our role is and must remain secondary in present circumstances. It is their country, their future which is most at stake, not ours.

To ignore that reality will not only be immensely costly in terms of American lives and resources but it may also draw us inexorably into some variation of the unenviable position in Vietnam which was formerly occupied by the French. We are not, of course, at that point at this time. But the great increase in American military commitment this year has tended to point us in that general direction and we may well begin to slide rapidly toward it if any of the present remedies begin to falter in practice.

In conclusion, Mansfield returned to the theme of the speech he had made the previous June, in which he had questioned the value of the years of U.S. effort and expenditure of funds in Southeast Asia, and suggested a possible new approach based on greater reliance on diplomacy and on collective action. If it was essential for the U.S. to maintain a "quasi-permanent position of power on the Asian mainland," he told Kennedy, then there was no choice but to take the steps required. "But if on the other hand it is, at best, only desirable rather than essential that a position of power be maintained on the mainland, then other courses are indicated. We would, then, properly view such improvement as may be obtained by the new approach in Vietnam primarily in terms of what it might contribute to strengthening our diplomatic hand in the Southeast Asia region. And we would use that hand as vigorously as possible and in every way possible not to deepen our costly involvement but to lighten it."¹⁴⁷

After sending the report to Kennedy, Mansfield went to Palm Beach, Florida, on December 26, 1962, where he spent two hours going over the report with the President while sailing on Lake Worth. Kennedy, he said, had read the report ". . . in great detail and . . . questioned me minutely. He had a tremendous grasp of the situation."¹⁴⁸

According to Halberstam,¹⁴⁹ "Kennedy had summoned Mansfield to his yacht, the *Honey Fitz*, where there was a party going on, and when the President read the report his face grew redder and redder as his anger mounted. Finally he turned to Mansfield, just about the closest friend he had in the Senate, and snapped, 'Do you expect me to take this at face value?' Mansfield answered, 'You asked me to go there.' Kennedy looked at him again, icily now, and said, 'Well, I'll read it again!'"

Kennedy told Kenneth P. O'Donnell, one of his closest aides, "I got angry with Mike for disagreeing with our policy so completely,

¹⁴⁷Mansfield's private report to President Kennedy, Dec. 18, 1962, together with another such report which he made to President Johnson on Dec. 17, 1965, was eventually made public in Apr. 1973 in Senate Document 93-11. The public version of the report of the Mansfield group, *Viet Nam and Southeast Asia*, which is generally similar to his private report, was issued by the Foreign Relations Committee as a committee print in early 1963.

¹⁴⁸Kennedy Library, Oral History Interview with Senator Mansfield, June 3, 1964, p. 24.

¹⁴⁹*The Best and the Brightest*, p. 208.

and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him."¹⁵⁰

In addition to the Mansfield group, three other Senators visited Vietnam late in 1962, Frank Church (D/Idaho), a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, Gale W. McGee (D/Wyo.), and Frank E. Moss (D/Utah). They reported that although the strategic hamlet program was working, the "vital ingredient"—"allegiance of the population to the present Government and their universal desire to win this struggle"—was lacking. The group concluded that despite the lack of progress, ". . . the alternatives to holding to our position there, both in the economic and military realms, are few indeed. The outlook must preclude either quick or decisive gains in the year ahead. A protracted struggle, at best, can be the only realistic forecast."¹⁵¹

The Hilsman-Forrestal Report

As the year (1962) ended, Kennedy sent Hilsman and Forrestal to Vietnam for a review of the situation. Both men were committed to the U.S. program, and their conviction that it could succeed apparently was strengthened as a result of the trip.¹⁵²

In their report to the President, they said, among other things:¹⁵³ "The war in South Vietnam is clearly going better than it was a year ago. . . . The Viet Cong . . . are being hurt. . . . We are probably winning, but certainly more slowly than we had hoped. At the rate it is now going the war will last longer than we would like, cost more in terms of both lives and money than we anticipated, and prolong the period in which a sudden and dramatic event could upset the gains already made." The Communists, they reported, "continue to be aggressive and are extremely effective." Moreover, the strength of their regular forces had increased despite the fact that there was almost no infiltration from outside. ". . . it is ominous," the report stated, "that in the face of greatly increased government pressure and U.S. support the Viet Cong can still field 23,000 regular forces and 100,000 militia, supported by unknown thousands of sympathizers . . . the conclusion seems inescapable that the Viet Cong could continue the war effort at the present level, or perhaps increase it, even if the infiltration routes were completely closed."

The continuing success of the Communists in the countryside, said Hilsman and Forrestal, raised the "basic question of the whole war"—what is the attitude of the villagers?

No one really knows, for example, how many of the 20,000 "Viet Cong" killed last year were only innocent, or at least persuadable villagers, whether the Strategic Hamlet program is providing enough government services to counteract the sac-

¹⁵⁰Kenneth P. O'Donnell, and David F. Powers, *"Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye"* (New York: Pocket Book ed., 1973), p. 15.

¹⁵¹Senate Document 88-12, Mar. 15, 1963.

¹⁵²In a memorandum to Kennedy on Sept. 18, 1962, Forrestal said, "While we cannot yet sit back in the confidence that the job is well in hand, nevertheless it does appear that we have finally developed a series of techniques which, if properly applied, do seem to produce results." Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. But he and Hilsman were also concerned about the slow progress being made in implementing the program, especially on the part of Diem.

¹⁵³PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 717-725. For Hilsman's account see *To Move a Nation*, pp. 453-476.

rifices it requires, or how the mute mass of the villagers react to the charges against Diem of dictatorship and nepotism. At the very least, the figures on Viet Cong strength imply a continuing flow of recruits and supplies from these same villages and indicate that a substantial proportion of the population is still cooperating with the enemy, although it is impossible to tell how much of this cooperation stems from fear and how much from conviction. Thus on the vital question of villagers' attitudes, the net impression is one of some encouragement at the progress in building strategic hamlets and the number that resist when attacked, but encouragement overlaid by a shadow of uneasiness.

The report added, however, that the "basic strategic concept" on which the strategic hamlet program was founded—"not simply to kill Viet Cong, but to win the people"—was still sound, but needed to be better implemented. The U.S., they said, should press the Diem government to do more, and they cited specific weaknesses that needed remedying.

Forrestal and Hilsman concluded their report with several comments about the press, a subject that Kennedy had asked them to give particular attention. Concerning coverage of Diem, they said, "The American press representatives are bitter and will seize on anything that goes wrong and blow it up as much as possible." They advocated a "systematic campaign to get more of the facts into the press and T.V." to counteract the "pessimistic (and factually inaccurate) picture conveyed in the press."

In an "Eyes Only" (for the President only) secret annex to the report, they made two additional points.¹⁵⁴ First, they suggested the need for a person to replace Nolting and to coordinate the entire U.S. effort. Second, they recommended that the U.S. should use "the leverage we have to persuade Diem to adopt policies which we espouse." "In domestic politics," they added, "we have virtually no contact with meaningful opposition elements and we have made no attempt to maintain a U.S. position independent of Diem." "We should push harder," they said, "for a gradual liberalization of the authoritarian political structure and for the other programs discussed in the body of our report."

According to Hilsman, he and Forrestal had decided on the way to Vietnam that the "central judgment" of their report would be the question as to whether "the potential existed in South Vietnam to carry out the kind of tightly disciplined, precisely co-ordinated political, social, and military program that would be needed to defeat the guerrillas"; in other words, whether Diem could succeed or should be replaced. Their conclusion was a forecast of what lay ahead: "No matter how one twisted and turned the problem. . .," Hilsman said, "it always came back to Ngo Dinh Diem."¹⁵⁵

These conclusions were strengthened by the poor performance of Vietnamese forces at the battle of Ap Bac, which occurred during their trip. At Ap Bac, Vietnamese Army units, Hilsman said, suffered a "stunning defeat," which, he added, seemed to confirm the judgments of some U.S. advisers and journalists about the "ineffi-

¹⁵⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, declassified in 1982.

¹⁵⁵*To Move a Nation*, pp. 459, 460.

ciency, bad leadership, and lack of aggressiveness of the Government forces. . . ." (Once again, the official Vietnamese and U.S. position was that it had been a victory.)¹⁵⁶

"And thus," wrote Bernard Fall, in a fitting comment on the situation as 1962 came to an end, "the Second Indochina War goes on—from action to counteraction; from new devices which fail (such as 'defoliation' of forests and fields with chemicals) to older devices which work (small river craft and sea-going junk forces); from Vietnamese and French casualties in 1946-54 to Vietnamese and American casualties as of 1962. In South Viet-Nam, the West is still battling an ideology with technology, and the successful end of that Revolutionary War is neither near nor is its outcome certain."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶For Hilsman's comments, see *ibid.*, pp. 447-449. See also Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, pp. 147 ff.

¹⁵⁷Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 2d rev. ed., (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1962), p. 350.

CHAPTER 3

SOWING THE WIND: THE FALL OF NGO DINH DIEM

By the end of 1962, there were about 11,500 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam compared to about 3,000 at the beginning of that year, and their role, as well as the numbers and role of other U.S. personnel, had expanded sharply. Yet, as the CIA had correctly predicted in November 1961 during debate on the Taylor-Rostow report, there also seems to have been an equal or greater increase in Communist forces and activity.

President Kennedy, who had received very little solace from Mansfield or from Forrestal and Hilsman, had reason to wonder whether the new U.S.-Vietnamese partnership was succeeding or could succeed, or whether he had committed the United States to a course of ever-ascending increases in men and money leading only to higher levels of stalemate. Yet the alternatives, reducing the commitment or withdrawing from Vietnam, were considered unacceptable. Kennedy said in a news conference on March 6, 1963:¹

I don't see how we are going to be able, unless we are going to pull out of Southeast Asia and turn it over to the Communists . . . to reduce very much our economic programs and military programs in South Viet-Nam, in Cambodia, in Thailand.

I think that unless you want to withdraw from the field and decide that it is in the national interest to permit that area to collapse, I would think that it would be impossible to substantially change it particularly, as we are in a very intensive struggle in those areas.

So I think we ought to judge the economic burden it places upon us as opposed to having the Communists control all of Southeast Asia with the inevitable effect that this would have on the security of India and, therefore, really begin to run perhaps all the way toward the Middle East. So I think that while we would all like to lighten the burden, I don't see any real prospect of the burden being lightened for the U.S. in South-

¹*Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1963, pp. 243-244.

According to both Senator Mansfield and the President's assistant, Kenneth O'Donnell, some time in the spring of 1963, after a congressional leadership meeting at the White House at which Mansfield again criticized U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, Kennedy told Mansfield that he had changed his mind, and wanted to start withdrawing troops at the end of 1963. Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, p. 81. "But he said he couldn't withdraw all U.S. forces until after he was reelected. Otherwise there would be a 'wild conservative outcry' in the election campaign." According to O'Donnell, the President told him after Mansfield had left: "In 1965, I'll become one of the most unpopular Presidents in history. I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected. So we had better make damned sure that I am reelected." *"Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye,"* p. 16.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk, among others, has questioned this story, and says that, in his judgment, Kennedy "did not reach any such conclusion in 1962 or 1963." *Many Reasons Why*, p. 82.

east Asia in the next year if we are going to do the job and meet what I think are very clear national needs.

Faced with this dilemma, the President, according to Forrestal, "More or less beginning then . . . began to take an interest in Vietnam. He began to get worried about it. It was a reaction of extreme nervousness—this thing is getting out of hand, and what am I going to do about it?"²

Forrestal was asked what Kennedy did after receiving the Forrestal-Hilsman report in January 1963:³

The thing that bothered him most about the report was that we were fighting a war, or helping Diem fight a war, with massive military means in a situation which was essentially a civil war—an elephant trying to kill a fly sort of thing. We were killing lots of other people at the same time we were trying to kill Viet Cong. So, the first thing he did was to try to get control of the kind of military operations that we were assisting the Vietnamese in undertaking, search-and-destroy, and great waves of battalions and regiments running all over the countryside pillaging and burning, doing all the things that soldiers do, which we thought had tended to make the political situation in Vietnam very much worse than it was, or should be. So his first reaction was to try—and he more or less succeeded—to cut back on the heavy military activity of the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]—the use of napalm, the use of herbicides, the use of too many mines. And that was very difficult to do because our Army supported all those activities, and thought they were necessary and militarily justified.

In late January, Kennedy also received a report from the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Earle C. Wheeler, on a trip he and others on a JCS team had just completed to Vietnam. Wheeler and his group were favorably impressed with the progress being made, but they, too, noted the increased strength of the Communists. The report concluded that unless there was increased pressure from the Communists, the present program could succeed in controlling the insurgency. ". . . we are winning slowly on the present thrust," the report said, and there is "no compelling reason to change."⁴ "At the same time," the report added, "it is not realistic to ignore the fact that we have not given Ho Chi Minh any evidence that we are prepared to call him to account for helping to keep the insurgency in South Vietnam alive, and that we should do something to make the North Vietnamese bleed." Rather than direct U.S. attacks on North Vietnam, or the "minor intelligence and sabotage forays which lie within the competence of the Central Intelligence Agency," the group recommended that South Vietnamese military units, trained by U.S. military advisers, should engage in a "powerful military endeavor" of "sabotage, destruction, propaganda, and subversive missions against North Vietnam."

The report was also critical of the coverage of the war by the American press, and recommended a series of "sponsored visits to

² CRS Interview with Michael Forrestal, Oct. 16, 1978.

³*Ibid.*

⁴The report ("Report of Visit by Joint Chiefs of Staff Team to South Vietnam, January 1963") was declassified in 1984, and is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

Vietnam by mature and responsible news correspondents and executives."

On February 1, President Kennedy met with Wheeler, McNamara, Taylor, and CIA Director John A. McCone to discuss the report. According to a memorandum from Forrestal to the President on February 4, "The meeting with General Wheeler on Friday was a complete waste of your time, for which I apologize. It was intended to provide you an opportunity to initiate action on some of the problems in South Vietnam described in the Eyes Only Annex to Hilsman's and my report. The rosy euphoria generated by General Wheeler's report made this device unworkable."⁵

Forrestal suggested that Harriman and he begin a "quiet campaign" to get action on this series of steps:

1. to get General Harkins a direct line of communication to the JCS, or, alternatively and less desirably, to persuade CINCPAC to delegate more responsibility to Saigon;
2. to look for a replacement for Fritz Nolting when his 2-year term is up in April;
3. to encourage our civilian and military people in Saigon to put across more forcefully to the GVN U.S. views on fighting the war and on foreign policy;
4. to develop gradually a more independent posture for the U.S. in South Vietnam and very carefully to dissociate ourselves from those policies and practices of the GVN of which we disapprove with good reason;
5. to stimulate Defense to examine more carefully whether our Special Forces camps and the strategic hamlets are getting effective close air support when they are attacked;
6. to make a rapid and vigorous effort to improve press relations in Saigon, even at some cost to our relationships with the Diem Government;
7. [sanitized]
8. to get the field to consider whether we are supporting too many paramilitary organizations and overlooking some of the specific needs, such as a police force for movement control.

It should also be noted in passing that General Wheeler's optimism in early 1963 was apparently shared by most Members of Congress. In two executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 1963 in which Secretary of State Rusk testified on the general state of the world, Vietnam and Southeast Asia were scarcely mentioned.

Growing Doubts about Diem

Even though Kennedy may have begun to worry more about the conduct of the war, the problem, as Hilsman and Forrestal had reported, was not the kind of war being waged; the problem was Diem. This feeling was widely shared among top White House and State Department officials, especially Forrestal, Hilsman, Harriman and Under Secretary Ball (in March 1963 Hilsman became Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East and Harriman became Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs) as well as by some

⁵Same location.

elements of the CIA, including many in the CIA Station in Saigon. On the other side were McNamara and the military, including Maxwell Taylor (then Chairman of the JCS) and General Harkins, Chief of the MAAG in Vietnam, General Lansdale, Ambassador Nolting, John McCone and the CIA Station chief in Saigon, John H. Richardson, as well as William Colby, (who had preceded Richardson as station chief, and was then chief of the CIA's Far East Division in the Directorate of Plans (which conducts the CIA's covert operations). They tended to believe that the U.S. could and should work with Diem, and that the principal emphasis should be on prosecuting the war against the Communists.

A similar view was held by Robert K. G. Thompson, the British adviser to Diem, whose counterinsurgency expertise, as was mentioned earlier, was widely respected by the Americans. In March 1963, Thompson visited CINCPAC while on a brief trip to the United States, and gave the officers of the Pacific Command a very glowing report on Diem and on the progress being made in Vietnam. According to the CINCPAC report to Washington, Thompson said, "One year ago we were neither winning nor losing in RVN. Now we definitely are winning."⁶ He said the strategic hamlet program was going "much better in the last six months than he had ever expected." Moreover, the Government of South Vietnam was "stronger and more widely supported." A "coup attempt is remote," he added, but he was concerned about maintaining momentum and continuity, and said that "government throughout RVN would come to complete stop if Diem was eliminated."

The "greatest danger in RVN now," Thompson said, "is trying to do too much too rapidly. . . ."

Thompson suggested that at the end of the year, "if things go right," the U.S. should withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel from Vietnam. He recommended that the U.S. ". . . make big production out of this and publicize widely. This would show (1) RVN is winning; (2) take steam out of anti-Diemists; and (3) dramatically illustrate honesty of U.S. intentions." Whether or not this idea originated with Thompson, it was the plan subsequently carried out, at least on paper, by the Kennedy administration.

During April-June 1963, a series of events occurred in Vietnam that strengthened the Harriman-Hilsman-Forrestal position that Diem was "the problem," and led directly to the coup against Diem the following November.

Before examining these events it is important to note the broader framework within which U.S. policy was being made. From the beginning of Diem's rule in 1954, many U.S. policymakers had assumed that, under certain circumstances, the United States had not only the right but the responsibility to bring about a change of government in Vietnam. This assumption also prevailed with respect to relations with the government of some other countries in the world where U.S. interests were found to require such action, and in keeping with this philosophy the United States arranged and supported coups in 1954 in both Iran and Guatemala in which the putative leaders of those governments were replaced by leaders

⁶CINCPAC to Washington, Mar. 26, 1963, same location.

of U.S. choosing. (There were other similar but less successful efforts, including one in Cambodia and another in Indonesia.) One such plan, code-named Operation MONGOOSE, in which, after creating unrest in Cuba, the U.S. would seek to have the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, removed from power directly or indirectly by one method or another, was underway, in fact, during the coup against Diem.⁷

Moreover, such action on the part of the U.S. Government had gained favor outside the government, primarily among those who supported U.S. intervention in the political affairs of other countries. These included persons of various political persuasions, but on the whole the support for such intervention appears to have come principally from individuals who tended to prefer political rather than military means, and who were strongly reformist in their political thinking. One of these was John Kenneth Galbraith, a professor at Harvard University then serving as U.S. Ambassador to India, who had advised Kennedy that if the Vietnamese failed to perform adequately under the new limited partnership, "the only solution would be to drop Diem." Another was Hans Morgenthau, a noted University of Chicago political scientist with access and influence in Washington, (who, it will be recalled, had been among those in the middle 1950s who had praised Diem's accomplishments in a speech at a meeting of the American Friends of Vietnam, while warning Diem himself that he should liberalize his attitude toward political opposition), who had decided that Diem was a liability. Morgenthau took the position that the U.S. was becoming overly involved in supporting regimes in countries like Vietnam "whose political weakness compels us in the end to commit ourselves militarily beyond what our national interest would require."⁸ If the U.S. persisted in supporting Diem, he said, "... we are likely to be drawn ever more deeply into a Korean-type war, fought under political and military conditions much more unfavorable than those that prevailed in Korea and in the world a decade ago. Such a war cannot be won quickly, if it can be won at all, and may well last, like its Greek and Malayan counterparts, 5 or 10 years, perhaps only to end again in a stalemate, as did the Korean war." Such a war, Morgenthau warned, "... would certainly have a profound impact upon the political health of the Nation. McCarthyism and the change in the political complexion of the Nation which the elections of 1952 brought about resulted directly from the frustrations of the Korean War. The

⁷In the case of Vietnam, according to one account, "As early as 1957 some American government officials were talking about getting rid of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam." Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 126.

Powers also states (p. 127): "Later in the 1960s, a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Robert Murphy [a retired senior Foreign Service officer], asked why the CIA didn't kill Ho Chi Minh, since he was giving us so much trouble. . . . CIA officers responded with . . . what good would it do? Ho's successor might be even worse. How were you going to kill Ho Chi Minh secretly? You might be able to fool the *New York Times*, Robert Murphy was told, but how were you going to deceive the Vietnamese? They'd know what happened, they'd know who did it, and they'd probably be in a position and mood to retaliate. There is a tacit truce between nations on such matters: once you start killing them, they start killing you. The CIA simply does not have the assets to kill secretly a well-guarded figure like Ho Chi Minh in a security-conscious state like North Vietnam."

⁸Hans J. Morgenthau, "Vietnam - Another Korea?" *Commentary*, 33 (May 1962), pp. 369-374.

American people are bound to be at least as deeply affected by the frustrations of a Vietnamese War."

The alternative, Morgenthau said, was "the subordination of our military commitments to, and thus their limitation by, our political objectives in South Vietnam. These objectives must be defined as the restoration of a viable political order, which constitutes the only effective defense against Communist subversion." According to Morgenthau,

It is obvious that such a political order can be established only through American intervention. It would be infantile to argue against such a policy on the ground that it is intervention; for if we had not intervened consistently since 1954 in the affairs of South Vietnam, Mr. Diem would not be its President today and South Vietnam itself would not exist. The choices before us are not between intervention and nonintervention, but between an intervention which serves our political interests and thereby limits our military commitments, and an intervention which supports to the bitter end the powers that be, even if their policies, by being counterproductive, jeopardize the interests of the United States.

The U.S., Morgenthau said, should "find a general" to replace Diem, and to establish a viable political order. "The idea that there is no alternative to Diem," he said, "is in the nature of a self-fulfilling prophecy. There appears to be no alternative to Diem only because we have placed all our bets on him."

Shortly after Morgenthau's views were published, a prominent American journalist, Theodore White, who had just returned from a trip to Asia, sent a personal letter to Kennedy in which he made a similar recommendation. Praising the negotiated settlement for Laos, White said:⁹

But this South Vietnam thing is a real bastard to solve—either we have to let the younger military officers knock off Diem in a coup and take our chances on a military regime (as in Pakistan or South Korea); or else we have to give it up. To commit troops there is unwise—for the problem is political and doctrinal (in the long-range intellectual sense); until a government in South Viet-Nam comes about that inspires its people to die against Communism, as Communism inspires men to die against others, our troops can do no good.

Many of Diem's former supporters had also become disillusioned, and were actively promoting a change of leadership in South Vietnam. These included a large part of the membership of the American Friends of Vietnam, as well as most of those formerly associated with the Michigan State University project.

Joseph Buttinger, one of the organizers and principal leaders of the American Friends of Vietnam, had become disillusioned with Diem, and, beginning in 1960, worked for his removal. By 1962, he was, in his own words, a "determined opponent" of Diem.¹⁰ In co-

⁹Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam General, 1962.

¹⁰Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: The Unforgettable Tragedy* (New York: Horizon Press, 1977), p. 50. Buttinger adds: "Two facts, however, prevented me from experiencing great satisfaction over the fall of Diem. I did not believe that his replacement by a military government offered much chance for the adoption of the policy of radical reforms I knew was called for; and I was deeply disturbed by the politically unnecessary and despicable murder of Diem and his brother Nhu."

operation with an exiled former official of Diem's government, he wrote a proclamation for clandestine distribution in South Vietnam which called on the people to help overthrow Diem. In June 1963, Buttinger convened a conference of American and Vietnamese social scientists to discuss the situation, and afterwards, at their behest, he prepared a memorandum, distributed in Washington, on the reasons why, in order for the war to be won, Diem had to be replaced. After the Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States resigned in protest in August 1963, Buttinger worked with him to convince the American public of the case against Diem.

One of the Michigan State group, Frank Child, as was noted earlier, said that the situation in Vietnam was critical; that new leadership was required; and that "A military *coup*—or an assassin's bullet—are the only means by which this leadership will ever be exercised." ¹¹

Wesley Fishel, who had been one of his close friends and advisers in the 1950s, was deeply discouraged about Diem's failure to "mobilize the hearts and loyalties of the people."

In Congress itself, where support for Diem had been a very important element in the U.S. commitment to Diem, Mansfield was very disillusioned by 1963. Morse put the Morgenthau article (quoted above) in the *Congressional Record*. Church, who was to play a supporting role in September 1963 in the power play mounted against Diem by the Kennedy administration, had returned from his trip to Vietnam feeling that the war was being lost because of the lack of Vietnamese public support for the government.

Fulbright, although silent on the subject, had indicated on several occasions in executive sessions of the Foreign Relations Committee that he was not opposed to U.S. efforts to bring about a change of leadership in Vietnam. Prior to the coup against Diem he had also received, probably in the spring of 1963, a memorandum from John Newhouse of the Foreign Relations Committee staff quoting from a letter from Stanley Karnow, a veteran Far East reporter, in which Karnow stated that the U.S. had its hands tied behind its back as long as Diem was in power. Karnow said, however, that the U.S. should not take the lead in overthrowing Diem; that the Vietnamese themselves would do so. ¹²

Thus, by the spring of 1963, Diem's political support in Washington and among influentials in the U.S. had declined drastically, especially among Kennedy's own supporters. This, together with the lack of progress being made on the military front in Vietnam, provided the ingredients for the decision to "drop Diem," which was made during the period between May and August 1963, following numerous discussions of the matter during the spring and early summer in meetings of the Special Group (CI). ¹³

Beginning in May 1963, and continuing during the summer, the case for withdrawing support from Diem was further strengthened as a result of the "Buddhist crisis," in which, following Buddhist demonstrations against the Diem government, including self-immolation,

¹¹See p. 76.

¹²University of Arkansas, Fulbright Papers, series 48, undated memorandum from Newhouse to Fulbright.

¹³Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*, p. 163.

lation by several monks, the government responded with what may have been or appeared to be excessive force.¹⁴ These events, which were widely televised in the United States, created a sense of public revulsion, and policymakers in Washington became concerned that this reaction would have the effect of reducing American public support for the role of the U.S. in Vietnam.

The U.S. Decides to Act

On June 11, the first self-immolation of a Buddhist monk (*bonze*) occurred, and the U.S. warned Diem that unless the situation improved, the U.S. would have to dissociate itself from his treatment of the Buddhists.

There was also a sharp reaction from the American public to the burning of the Buddhist monk. Influential newspapers and leaders criticized the Diem government,¹⁵ and a group of prominent New York clergymen, calling themselves the Ministers Vietnam Committee, organized a protest against U.S. policy, citing the following points:

1. Our country's military aid to those who denied him [the Buddhist monk] religious freedom.
2. The immoral spraying of parts of South Vietnam with crop-destroying chemicals and the herding of many of its people into concentration camps called "strategic hamlets."
3. The loss of American lives and billions of dollars to bolster a regime universally regarded as unjust, undemocratic, and unstable.
4. The fiction that this is "fighting for freedom."

The group, led by Dr. Donald Szantho Harrington, pastor of the Community Church of New York, a large unitarian universalist congregation, as well as vice chairman (later chairman) of the Liberal Party in the State of New York, placed an ad in the *New York Times* urging public support for the protest, and on August 15, 1963, sent President Kennedy a letter and a petition signed by 15,000 clergymen from around the country endorsing the four-point protest statement.¹⁶

This was one of the earliest protests against U.S. policy in Vietnam, and it attracted considerable support. According to Dr. Harrington, there were about 18,000 replies to the advertisement, and enough money was raised to cover the cost of both the first advertisement and another in the *New York Times* on September 15 in which the protest statement was repeated.¹⁷

Soon after the issuance of the protest, Dr. Harrington, Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, and Robert Jones, the executive sec-

¹⁴The Buddhist uprisings are discussed in a number of the books dealing with Vietnam. See especially Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*; Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*; Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

¹⁵See, for example, the *New York Times*, June 17, 1963, which said that if Diem "... cannot genuinely represent a majority then he is not the man to be President."

¹⁶Twelve of the country's foremost clergymen signed the protest, including Henry Emerson Fosdick, Reinhold Niebuhr, James A. Pike, and Ralph W. Sockman.

¹⁷Letter to CRS, Aug. 21, 1964. The money for the first advertisement had been advanced by a New York businessman, Daniel J. Bernstein, who, before his death in 1970, was one of the principal financial supporters of antiwar activities, primarily those of religious and business groups. Other antiwar activities of an informational or educational nature were supported by the Daniel J. Bernstein Foundation, known as the DJB Foundation.

retary of the Unitarian Universalist Washington office, organized the first picketing of the White House on the Vietnam question. In addition, Harrington's Liberal Party became the first political group to oppose the war.

Prior to the burning of the monk, the U.S. mission in Saigon had prepared a contingency plan for dealing with Diem in the event that the situation became more critical, and on May 23, 1963, Nolt-ing submitted the plan to Washington for approval. On June 14, the State Department replied in a cable from Hilsman drafted by Chalmers Wood of the Vietnam Task Force, and cleared by Harri-man, suggesting that in implementing this plan the U.S. mission consider Diem's Vice President, Nguyen Ngoc Tho as a replacement for Diem; that ". . . while there is no change in US policy of supporting Diem, we want Tho to know that in event situation arises due to internal political circumstances (in which US would play . . . no part) where Diem definitively unable act as President and only in this situation we would want to back Tho as constitutional successor. . . ." The cable added, "we would assume he would need military support," but it did not explain what was meant by "military support."¹⁸

"In view precarious situation," the cable continued, "it would seem worthwhile to run risk delivering such message now assuming Tho would not likely consider it in his interest to inform anyone else. We would have to tell Tho that if word leaked we would flatly deny." If the mission thought it advisable, the cable said, it might be preferable to tell Diem himself about the plan for succession.

As will be seen, it was indeed Nguyen Ngoc Tho, under the general authority of the military junta, who succeeded Diem as the civilian leader of Vietnam after the coup.

The cable also contained a second suggested action, which was deleted when the document was declassified in 1982. Judging by a reply from Saigon on June 16, this deleted recommendation had to do with the importance of maintaining contact with opposition leaders in the Diem government, especially those who might be involved in a coup.¹⁹ In its comment on this suggestion the U.S. mission said: ". . . There are no bars whatsoever on contacts and we are receiving just now a surfeit of coup talk and antiregime comment. It is to be expected in such circumstances that one is never in contact with the people (if any) who really mean business, but we have all the lines out that we know how to put out and have had for some days. However, everyone is as usual under strict instructions . . . not to encourage coup talk and to meet any that arises with firm statement of US support for GVN."

As for Washington's suggestion about telling Tho or Diem about the plan for supporting Tho in the event Diem were no longer able to continue as President, the mission replied that the situation was more stable as a result of an agreement just concluded between the government and the Buddhists, and that it would not be wise to take such action at that time. "Our best move at this juncture . . .

¹⁸ Kennedy Library, NSF Country file, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 1219, June 14, 1963, same location.

¹⁹ Saigon to Washington 1195, June 16, 1963, same location.

is to press Diem directly and indirectly to accept Buddhist crisis as blessing in disguise and to use agreement reached as a stepping stone to concessions to other groups (before they demand them). The whole operation would be keyed to building up popular support for regime prior to August parliamentary elections and importantly also to making sure that paper undertakings to Buddhists are carried out in full measure."

The U.S. mission was dubious about the chances for such a plan, however, as the cable admitted. "This scheme will doubtless be regarded as naive by anyone who knows this country (and it is certainly the longest of shots)." But the mission thought it should be given a "fair try." If Diem was "in a mood to freeze up, rather than move forward," the cable added, then "his days are numbered," and at that point the suggested approach should be made to Vice President Tho.

By July 1, 1963, the situation had not improved, and policymakers in Washington were once again concerned about a potential "crisis." At a meeting that morning, Ball, Harriman, Hilsman and Forrestal decided that they should notify McGeorge Bundy, who was with the President on a trip to Rome, of their appraisal of the situation. "We all believe," the ensuing White House cable stated, "one more burning Bonze will cause domestic U.S. reaction which will require strong public statement despite danger that this might precipitate coup in Saigon. Demarche to Diem insisting on removal of Nhu and wife to post outside SVN before such statement becomes necessary under consideration."²⁰

Upon returning to Washington, Kennedy met with these advisers on the fourth of July.²¹ They reported that the U.S. had put "extremely heavy pressure" on Diem, who had agreed to make a speech saying he would meet with Buddhist leaders. He was told that if he did not make the speech, and if the demonstrations resumed, the U.S. would be forced to take a public stand against his policy toward the Buddhists.

Hilsman told Kennedy, "Our estimate was that no matter what Diem did there will be coup attempts over the next four months." He said that there was general agreement, however, that "the chances of chaos in the wake of a coup are considerably less than they were a year ago." Hilsman added that Nolting thought a civil war would ensue if Diem were killed in a coup, but he said he disagreed with Nolting, feeling that in such an event a civil war was possible but not likely.

Forrestal reported Gen. Victor H. Krulak's (JCS Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency) view that even if there were chaos in Saigon, the Vietnamese Armed Forces would continue military actions against the Communists.

The group discussed the possibility of "getting rid of the Nhus," but the "combined judgment" was that this was not possible.

On that same day, Lucien Conein, the veteran CIA agent in Saigon, was contacted by General Tran Van Don, Acting Chief of Staff of Vietnamese Armed Forces, about the possibility of a military coup against Diem. Conein reported, and Washington was so

²⁰Same location.

²¹*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 727-728.

informed, that General Don, his brother-in-law, General Le Van Kim, General Tran Thieh Khiem (Army Chief of Staff), and General Duong Van "Big" Minh, who had been a strong ally of Diem in 1954-55, had agreed on the necessity for a coup.²² A week later, a CIA cable from Saigon said that if a coup occurred, the new government "might be initially less effective against the Viet Cong but, given continued support from the U.S., could provide reasonably effective leadership for the government and the war effort."²³

The next day (July 5) Ball met with Ambassador Nolting, who was in Washington for a few days, and during the conversation he asked Nolting what would happen if there were a "change of government" in Vietnam. Nolting said, "... if a revolution occurred in Vietnam which grew out of the Buddhist situation, the country would be split between feuding factions and the Americans would have to withdraw, and the country might be lost to the Communists." As to the question of how much pressure the United States could bring to bear, Nolting said that Diem's government would fall if the U.S. were to repudiate it on the Buddhist question.²⁴

On July 9, Nolting testified on Vietnam in an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.²⁵ He said that the war was going well despite the Buddhist disturbances, and he defended the Diem government against charges of ruthlessness. Committee members seemed concerned about the situation, but only Senator Symington took a position on what should be done. He repeated earlier statements he had made publicly that the U.S. should either use greater military force to bring the conflict to an end (he preferred action directly against the north), or American forces should be withdrawn.²⁶

On July 10, a Special National Intelligence Estimate on "The Situation in South Vietnam"²⁷ concluded that Diem and Nhu would resist further U.S. pressure, and that their inaction on the Buddhist "crisis" could then lead to a "better than even" chance of a coup or assassination.

On August 5, another *bonze* was burned, followed by another on August 16, as tension increased in Saigon.

On August 12, however, just before leaving Vietnam, Nolting talked to Diem, and reported to Washington that Diem had assured him that he would be conciliatory toward the Buddhists in order to satisfy world public opinion, even though he considered them sub-

²²Conein's "After-Action Report," Nov. 1, 1963, cited by *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*. An Interim Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, November 20, 1975, (S. Rept. 94-465), 94th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print Off., 1975), p. 218 (hereafter cited as Senate Report on Assassination Plots).

Don was the principal contact with the CIA. Minh was the leader of the group, and became the head of the military government which replaced Diem. Gen. Ton That Dinh, the III Corps commander in Saigon, joined the group in October and participated in the coup. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, II Corps commander in Pleiku was also involved, and later overthrew the Minh government in January 1965.

²³Quoted by *U.S. News and World Report*, Oct. 10, 1963, "Untold Story of the Road to War in Vietnam," p. VN5. This special report was prepared by the magazine after three years of extensive research and interviewing.

²⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 728-729.

²⁵U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, July 9, 1963.

²⁶For Symington's position see his remarks during an appearance on "Meet the Press" on Apr. 28, 1963, reprinted in *CR*, vol. 109, pp. 17149 ff.

²⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 729-733.

versive. He also told Nolting that he would remove his brother's controversial wife, Madame Nhu (who, among other things, had been very outspoken in her defense of government actions against the Buddhists), from the country.

On August 21, while Nolting, Hilsman, and Henry Cabot Lodge, the new U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, were meeting in Honolulu prior to Lodge's arrival in Saigon the following day, word came that Buddhist pagodas had been attacked in several cities. Originally it was thought that the attacks were carried out by Vietnamese Army units, but it soon became clear that they were conducted by police and Special Forces loyal to Nhu.

At this point, the U.S. Government began to put into effect the plan it had been developing for several months. First, Harriman and Forrestal drafted a statement denouncing and dissociating the U.S. from Diem's policies toward the Buddhists. Second, the U.S. began discussing with dissident Vietnamese army officers and others the possibility of a coup. On August 23, Conein, who had been contacted in July by General Tran Van Don, as was noted above, met again with Don, who discussed alternatives to Diem but refused to reveal the generals' plans.²⁸

Also on August 23, Rufus Phillips, a CIA agent who had been one of Lansdale's associates in the middle 1950s, and had returned to Vietnam in 1962 as Assistant Director of Rural Development, was contacted by Nguyen Dinh Thuan, one of Diem's most intimate associates. In the cable to Washington reporting their conversation, Phillips said that Thuan recommended that the U.S. try to split the Nhuses off from Diem. "Under no circumstances, Thuan said, should the U.S. acquiesce in what the Nhuses had done. This would be disastrous." The U.S., Thuan added, "must not be afraid of leaving the door open to the Communists, by withdrawing support from the government as long as it contained the Nhuses." The U.S. had to be "firm." If it was, Thuan said, "the army would respond."²⁹

The August 24 Cable

Washington reacted in a cable from Hilsman to Lodge on August 24, 1963, the key part of which was as follows:³⁰

US Government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands. Diem must be given chance to rid himself of Nhu and his coterie and replace them with best military and political personalities available.

If, in spite of all of your efforts, Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.

We now believe immediate action must be taken to prevent Nhu from consolidating his position further. Therefore, unless you in consultation with Harkins perceive overriding objections you are authorized to proceed along following lines:

²⁸Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files, The memorandum, sanitized with source deleted, dated 23 Oct. 1963, is entitled: "[first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963."

²⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 324, Aug. 24, 1963.

³⁰For the cable, Washington to Saigon 243, Aug. 24, 1963, see Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

(1) First, we must press on appropriate levels of GVN following lines:

(a) USG cannot accept actions against Buddhists taken by Nhu and his collaborators under cover martial law.

(b) Prompt dramatic actions redress situation must be taken. . . .

(2) We must at same time also tell key military leaders that US would find it impossible to continue support GVN militarily and economically unless above steps are taken immediately which we recognize requires removal of Nhus from the scene. We wish give Diem reasonable opportunity to remove Nhus, but if he remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism.

The cable added that the mission should "urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary."

This cable, which marked the beginning of active U.S. support for the coup against Diem, was drafted by Hilsman, with direct roles played also by Forrestal, Harriman and Ball. (It has usually been referred to as the "green light" cable, but there is said by one key official to have been a second "green light" cable on October 27 giving final approval for the coup.) It was cleared in Washington by various deputies—Ball for the State Department, Gilpatric for the Defense Department, Krulak for the JCS, and Richard Helms for the CIA, in the absence from Washington on that Saturday of all of the principals involved, as well as the President himself. A copy of the cable was teletyped to Kennedy in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, and he cleared it after a phone conversation with Ball in which he told Ball that if Rusk (who was contacted by phone) and Gilpatric, as well as Ball himself, approved it, then it was all right with him.³¹ According to Hilsman, the President "went over the cable word by word."³²

The President had known that a proposal for such action was imminent. On August 24, prior to the drafting of the cable itself later that day, Forrestal sent Kennedy a memo for his "Week-end Reading File," as follows:³³

I attach the latest cables on the situation in Saigon. It is now quite certain that Brother Nhu is the mastermind behind the whole operation against the Buddhists and is calling the shots. This is now agreed by virtually everyone here.

Agreement is also developing that the United States cannot tolerate a result of the present difficulties in Saigon which leaves Brother Nhu in a dominating position. There is disagreement on whether Diem has any political viability left,

³¹Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, p. 91.

³²CRS Interview with Roger Hilsman, Sept. 23, 1980.

³³Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

and on whether he could even be brought to acquiesce in the removal of his brother.

Averell and Roger now agree that we must move before the situation in Saigon freezes. I am pressing them to get John McCone's endorsement of one of several courses of action which can be presented to you at the earliest opportunity.

Rusk was in New York on August 24, but according to Hilsman³⁴ he, too, was teletyped a draft, and both he and Kennedy, Hilsman says, "participated in the revisions" through "several telephone conversations." Hilsman also takes the position that Rusk added an important sentence (the final sentence in part [2] of the cable) promising direct assistance to the leaders of the coup, the "implication being," says Hilsman, "that if the generals revolted, and it wasn't immediately successful, we would attempt to supply the generals through Hue."³⁵ Rusk, for his part, denies that he added the sentence, and says that the cable was cleared by him by telephone, "but in the most guarded terms . . . I didn't have a text in front of me. It was cleared with me on the phone in rather general terms because we were on an open telephone line."³⁶ Ball agrees with Rusk's version, saying that after he talked to Kennedy he called Rusk and "paraphrased it to him, because I thought we had an open line." He said that Rusk replied that if the President approved, if Ball agreed, and if Defense agreed, then he would concur.³⁷ Hilsman contends that the telephone call occurred after Rusk had seen and revised the cable.³⁸

Gilpatric, acting for McNamara, was telephoned at his farm near Washington by Forrestal, who told him of the contents of the cable, but stated that because it had already been approved by the President it did not need his concurrence. Gilpatric acquiesced, but then called Taylor, and the two agreed that both in substance and procedure the cable was unsatisfactory.³⁹ Meanwhile, according to Hilsman,⁴⁰ Taylor's concurrence had been given to Forrestal by General Krulak, then on the staff of the Joint Chiefs (of which Taylor was Chairman), after Krulak talked to Taylor by telephone at a restaurant. (Hilsman adds, however, that Krulak gave Taylor's clearance an hour and a half before actually receiving it from Taylor.) Taylor, on the other hand, says that he first heard of the cable when called at his residence by Gilpatric, and that he then called the Pentagon for a copy which was delivered later by Krulak.⁴¹

McCone was also out of town, but his deputy, Richard Helms, agreed emphatically, saying that it was time to take the proposed action.⁴²

³⁴*To Move A Nation*, p. 488.

³⁵*Many Reasons Why*, pp. 90-91, 93.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁸David Wise, *The Politics of Lying* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 1, fn. 20.

³⁹Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 292.

⁴⁰*To Move A Nation*, p. 488.

⁴¹*Swords and Plowshares*, p. 292.

⁴²*To Move A Nation*, p. 488. As Colby notes, however, Helms' action was not a clearance as such, in view of the fact that the cable concerned a policy matter rather than intelligence *per se*. See *Honorable Men*, p. 210.

Apparently, no Member of Congress was contacted or informed about the decision to support a coup against Diem, as represented by the cable.

By Monday, August 26, severe doubts about the cable were being expressed by McNamara, McCone and Taylor. The President himself, Schlesinger said, "... felt rather angrily that he had been pressed too hard and fast. He discussed the situation with Robert Kennedy, who talked in turn with McNamara and Maxwell Taylor. The Attorney General reported back with great concern that nobody knew what was going to happen in Vietnam and that our policy had not been fully discussed, as every other major decision since the Bay of Pigs had been discussed."⁴³

According to Schlesinger, President Kennedy "... thought the August 24 cable impulsive and precipitate. 'He always said it was a major mistake on his part,' Robert Kennedy recalled the next year. '... The result is we started down a road that we never really recovered from.'" Schlesinger added that the President became, according to Robert Kennedy, "'very unhappy' with Harriman—so much so that Robert noting that Harriman 'put on about ten years during that period ... because he was so discouraged,' asked his brother 'if he couldn't rehabilitate him by just being nice to him ... because he's a very valuable figure.'"⁴⁴

Lodge replied the next day (Sunday, August 25) to Hilsman's August 24 cable. He generally agreed with the position taken in the cable, but questioned whether the U.S. should approach Diem directly with an ultimatum. This, he said, might strengthen Diem's defiance. Moreover, Diem was the one who should make amends. After receiving Lodge's cable, the State Department, after checking with others, agreed to postpone the question of talking directly to Diem.⁴⁵

On Monday, August 26, Kennedy met with his top NSC advisers. According to Hilsman (the only available account of the meeting at this writing), he wanted to know "... how everyone stood. It was not too late to back off." The group discussed the "growing disaffection in Vietnam among the non-Communist elements of society whose support was essential if the war against the Viet Cong was to be pursued successfully." "What Rusk, Ball, Harriman, Forrestal, and I feared," Hilsman said, "was not only that there would be worldwide political repercussions if the situation continued as it was but that the heart would go out of the war effort. ... McNamara, Taylor, and Krulak ... wanted to try to find a way to get Diem to return to his old position and his old policies. ... But they also agreed that in the circumstances we had to tell the generals that, although we would prefer to see Diem remain—without Nhu—if the Vietnamese decided otherwise, an interim, anti-Communist military government could expect that American support would continue."

"The consensus of the group," Hilsman said, "was that even though the present course of action was dangerous, doing nothing was even more dangerous, and the President went around the table

⁴³A *Thousand Days*, p. 991.

⁴⁴Robert Kennedy and *His Times*, p. 713.

⁴⁵*To Move A Nation*, p. 488.

one by one to make sure. The Secretary of State summed it up by saying that if we acquiesced in what had happened and the present situation in Vietnam continued, we would be on an inevitable road to disaster. The decision would then be whether to get out and let the country go to the Communists or move United States combat forces into Vietnam and take over." The question of whether to approach Diem directly remained unanswered.⁴⁶

Later that day (August 26), CIA Headquarters in Washington told the U.S. Mission to instruct Conein, and Alphonso G. Spera, also of the CIA, to discuss the coup with the generals, based on the August 24 cable, using the following points:⁴⁷

(1) Solidification of further elaboration of action aspects of present thinking and planning. What should be done?

(2) We in agreement Nhus must go.

(3) Question of retaining Diem or not up to them [generals].

(4) Bonzes and other arrestees must be released immediately and five-point agreement of 16 June be fully carried out.

(5) We will provide direct support during any interim period of breakdown of central government mechanism.

(6) We cannot be of any help during initial action of assuming power of the state. Entirely their own action, win or lose. Don't expect to be bailed out.

(7) If Nhus do not go, and if Buddhists' situation is not redressed as indicated, we would find it impossible continue military and economic support.

(8) It is hoped bloodshed can be avoided or reduced to absolute minimum.

(9) It is hoped that during process and after, developments conducted in such manner as to retain and increase the necessary relations between Vietnamese and Americans which will allow for progress of country and successful prosecution of the war.

That same day (August 26), Conein and Spera discussed these points with Generals Tran Thien Khiem, Army Chief of Staff, and Nguyen Khanh, II Corps commander in Pleiku, two of the members of the group considering a coup. Khiem said that the generals agreed with the nine points. Khanh said he was not yet ready to move, and that he was waiting for indications that Nhu was preparing an accommodation with North Vietnam.⁴⁸

On August 27, Khiem was again contacted, and told Conein that a committee of generals, headed by General Duong Van "Big" Minh, had discussed the question of a coup, and had agreed that one would occur within a week's time.⁴⁹

The NSC advisers, along with Nolting, met again with the President the next day (August 27).⁵⁰ (In advance of the meeting, Ken-

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 490-491.

⁴⁷ Director of Central Intelligence to Lodge, Aug. 26, 1963, cited in Senate Report on Assassination Plots, p. 239.

⁴⁸"[first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963," cited above.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File. Present besides the President were: the Attorney General, Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Ball, Gilpatric, Taylor, Hilsman, Nolting, Krulak, Helms, Colby, Edward R. Murrow (USIA Director), McGeorge Bundy, Forrestal, and General Marshall S. Carter, Deputy Director of the CIA.

nedy was told by Forrestal that a committee of South Vietnamese generals had been formed "for the purpose of bringing about a military coup within a week."⁵¹ Colby reported that the situation in Saigon was quiet, and the "unrest was not apparent in the countryside." He said that two generals had been interviewed by the CIA. "One general said the situation for a coup was favorable and forecast that one would take place within a week. The second general gave what was described as a jumpy answer."

The President then asked a series of questions. Among other things, he wanted to know about the effect of the civil disturbances on the war itself. Krulak replied that the effect was "slight."

In response to the President's question about why the peasants were not more disturbed about the attacks on the Buddhists, Nolting said the Buddhists were not an organized religious force, and that what happened in Saigon was of little concern to the rural population.

The President asked why Diem had not kept his promises. Nolting replied that Diem had kept his promises. "He said that there was no promise made to us which he [Diem] had not tried to keep. . . . Diem should be given an 'E' for effort. Diem is not a liar and is a man of integrity."

The President said that Hilsman had told him that Diem was not "forthright." Hilsman said he had gotten this impression from Nolting.

The President asked Nolting whether the situation between August 12, when Diem had promised conciliation, and August 21, when the pagodas were attacked, had caused Diem to change his mind, or whether Diem had lied to Nolting. Nolting replied that he thought Diem and Nhu had decided to "end the unrest once and for all and together they had moved from conciliation to the use of force."

Kennedy asked Nolting about the prospect for a coup. Nolting replied that there was not sufficient military support for a coup to be successful, but there might be if the U.S. told the Vietnamese that they had to get rid of Diem and Nhu. According to the official summary of the meeting, "Ambassador Nolting recalled that the circle had nearly been completed in a three-year period. Ambassador Durbrow had told Diem three years ago that Nhu must go. Diem refused to accept the suggestion and Durbrow was removed from Vietnam. (The President recognized the irony of this situation by smiling.)" Nolting added, ". . . we should not fight the internal political situation in Vietnam too hard. He urged that we keep our eye on fighting the Viet Cong." He said, however, "Diem must be forced to limit the authority of Nhu and get Madame Nhu out of the country. Diem would not respond if he were pushed, but he could be convinced by Ambassador Lodge that the situation must improve if we were to continue assisting Vietnam."

As the meeting ended, Rusk said that it was important to make clear to the U.S. mission that Washington was not changing the "existing directive," i.e., the August 24 cable authorizing U.S. support for a coup.

⁵¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Memorandum for the President," Aug. 27, 1963.

After the meeting, a cable was sent to Lodge and Harkins asking for their views on what the next move of the U.S. should be. They replied in a cable from Lodge on August 29, concurred in, with one exception, by Harkins, saying, "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back; the overthrow of the Diem government."⁵² The cable continued:

We must press on for many reasons. Some of these are:

(a) Explosiveness of the present situation which may well lead to riots and violence if issue of discontent of regime is not met. Out of this could come a pro-Communist or at best a neutralist set of politicians.

(b) The fact that war cannot be won with the present regime.

(c) Our own reputation for steadfastness and our unwillingness to stultify ourselves.

(d) If proposed action is suspended, I believe a body blow will be dealt to respect for us by Vietnamese Generals. Also, all those who expect U.S. to straighten out this situation will feel let down. Our help to the regime in past years inescapably gives a responsibility which we cannot avoid.

Lodge added, "I realize that this course involves a very substantial risk of losing Vietnam. It also involves some additional risk to American lives. I would never propose it if I felt there was a reasonable chance of holding Vietnam with Diem."

Harkins, Lodge said, thought that Lodge should ask Diem to "get rid of the Nhu before starting the Generals' action." Lodge disagreed: ". . . I believe that such a step has no chance of getting the desired result and would have the very serious effect of being regarded by the Generals as a sign of American indecision and delay. I believe this is a risk which we should not run. The Generals distrust us too much already. Another point is that Diem would certainly ask for time to consider such a far-reaching request. This would give the ball to Nhu."

A cable on August 28 from CIA Station Chief Richardson to McCone, supported Lodge's position:⁵³ "Situation here has reached point of no return. . . . If the Ngo family wins now, they and Vietnam will stagger on to final defeat at the hands of their own people and the VC. Should a generals' revolt occur and be put down, GVN will sharply reduce American presence in SVN. Even if they did not do so, it seems clear that American public opinion and Congress, as well as world opinion, would force withdrawal or reduction of American support for VN under the Ngo administration. . . . It is obviously preferable that the generals conduct this effort without apparent American assistance. . . . Nevertheless, we all understand that the effort must succeed and that whatever needs to be done on our part must be done."

On that same day (August 28), Conein met with Generals Minh and Khiem. Minh asked for a "token" of U.S. determination to sup-

⁵²The sanitized text of the cable, Saigon to Washington 375, Aug. 29, 1963, is in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 738-739, and a copy of the cable is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

⁵³*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 736.

port a coup in the form of a cutoff of economic aid "in order to force Nhu's hand." Conein said he did not reply specifically to this request.⁵⁴ In the weeks ahead, however, as will be seen, the U.S. decided to cut off aid to Nhu's Special Forces, thus giving the generals the token they wanted as the sign of American support for the coup.

The next day (August 29), the State Department received a cable from a Foreign Service officer, Paul Kattenburg, who had served in Vietnam during the 1950s, and at that time was director of the Vietnam Task Force under Hilsman. Kattenburg had been sent to Vietnam for a report on the situation, especially Diem's psychological state, and he cabled from Saigon that after talking with Diem, "while there is no doubt he is in full possession of his faculties, impression of growing neurosis cannot be escaped."⁵⁵

Also on that same day, incidentally, the Public Affairs Bureau (Public Opinion Studies staff) of the State Department circulated within the government its latest "American Opinion Summary," based on the accounts of the news media and statements by Members of Congress, which concluded that there was general concern in Congress and the media about the effect of continuing to support Diem. "The Diem government's 'image,' insofar as a large number of those who commented are concerned," the Summary stated, "is 'beyond repair.'" Senator Morse was quoted as saying that "the sooner the U.S. ceases its support of the Diem government the better off we shall be."⁵⁶

The White House also received a memorandum of a private conversation on the evening of August 27 between Lansdale and the former South Vietnamese ambassador to the U.S., Tran Van Chuong (who had resigned on August 22 in protest against the Diem government), and his wife, who were the parents of Madame Nhu. Both of them told Lansdale that, as he stated in his memo:⁵⁷

The U.S. must act firmly and quickly to replace both Diem and Nhu with a new government. The Vietnamese people are aroused far more than ever before, and it is too late even to save Diem as a figure-head. The people, seeing VN special forces and police with U.S. weapons and equipment, knowing that Diem can only stay in power with U.S. support, will turn against the U.S. unless there is a change in the whole top of government.

Madame Chuong, Lansdale reported, said: "You must go to Saigon fast and tell Diem and the Nhu's to leave the country now. The people hate them and they shouldn't stay for the people to kill them. They will surely be killed if they stay, and nobody at the Palace now is telling them how the people really feel. They are cut off from reality. Why do they need power after nine years of it, if the family is killed. The US told Syngman Rhee to leave. Why not Diem and Nhu?"

On the morning of August 28, there was a rather contentious NSC meeting. Ball said that the battle with the Communists would

⁵⁴"[first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963."

⁵⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 371, Aug. 29, 1963.

⁵⁶Same location.

⁵⁷Same location.

be lost if the U.S. continued to support Diem. Nolting responded that failure to support Diem would be contrary to our commitments. Ball replied that it was Diem who had broken commitments. At this point Harriman expressed very strong disagreement with Nolting, which, as Gilpatric recalls, was worse than any tongue-lashing he had ever witnessed in the presence of the President, and that, "I don't think it would have been tolerated by the President from anybody else." According to Robert Kennedy, the division among the President's advisers was so deep that "The government split in two. . . . It was the only time really, in three years, the government was broken in two in a very disturbing war [*sic*—probably should be "way"]."⁵⁸ Although the summary of this meeting is still classified, Schlesinger, who had access to a copy of the summary in the Robert Kennedy papers, says that Harriman, Ball, Hilsman, and Forrestal (quoting from the summary) "'said that the U.S. must decide now to go through to a successful overthrow.' Taylor, McNamara, McCone, Lyndon Johnson strongly opposed a coup."⁵⁹

That afternoon, in an effort to close ranks, Kennedy met with Rusk, McNamara and Taylor before meeting again with the larger group. (At the latter meeting, two of the contenders, Ball and Hilsman were not included. Rusk who had not been at the morning meeting, represented the Department of State.) Prior to the first of the two afternoon meetings, McGeorge Bundy sent Kennedy a memo suggesting who should attend. At the top of his list were Rusk, McNamara and Taylor. He then listed the Vice President, the Attorney General, (McGeorge) Bundy, Douglas Dillon and Harriman, with a question mark beside each one of this second group. Beside Harriman's name he wrote by hand, "Mike [Forrestal] thinks not." Beside the Attorney General there was the typed notation "(He and I have had a talk and he knows what is at stake and is at your disposal if you want him, and will go cruising if you do not.)"⁶⁰

At this smaller meeting, agreement apparently was reached on putting aside personal differences and reaching a common position. There is no information available as to what was discussed at the meeting that followed, but when the larger group met again the next day (August 29), Kennedy polled those present and it was agreed by all that the decision announced in the August 24 cable should stand. Accordingly, a cable was sent to Saigon stating that "Highest level meeting today . . . reaffirmed basic course." The cable authorized Harkins to inform the generals of this decision. "He should stress that the USG supports the movement to eliminate the Nhus from the government, but that before arriving at specific understandings with the Generals, General Harkins must know who are involved, resources available to them and overall plan for coup. The USG will support a coup which has good chance of succeeding but plans no direct involvement of U.S. armed forces. Harkins should state that he is prepared to establish liaison with

⁵⁸Both quotes are from Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 714.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 718.

⁶⁰Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security 1963.

the coup planners and to review plans, but will not engage directly in joint coup planning."

The cable also authorized Lodge to suspend U.S. aid to the Diem government if and when he decided this was necessary.

With respect to what the cable called the "last approach to Diem," Lodge was told that Rusk was sending him a separate cable on that subject.⁶¹

In his separate cable to Lodge, Rusk suggested further discussion of the possibility of separating Diem and the Nhus. Rusk said that, based in part on Paul Kattenburg's cable, he doubted whether Diem could be persuaded to take such an action. "Unless such a talk included a real sanction such as threatened withdrawal of our support, it is unlikely that it would be taken completely seriously by a man who may feel that we are inescapably committed to an anti-Communist Vietnam. But if a sanction were used in such a conversation, there would be a high risk that this would be taken by Diem as a sign that action against him and the Nhus was imminent and he might as a minimum move against the Generals or even take some quite fantastic action such as calling on North Vietnam for assistance in expelling the Americans."

To prevent this from happening, Rusk suggested that this sanction "... might properly await the time when others were ready to move immediately to constitute a new government," thus leaving it to the generals to make one last effort to separate Diem and the Nhus. "In any event, were the Generals to take this action it would tend to protect succeeding Vietnam administrations from the charge of being wholly American puppets subjected to whatever anti-American sentiment is inherent in so complex a situation."⁶²

Lodge replied the next day (August 30) that he did not think the U.S. could remove the Nhus by working through Diem.⁶³ "In fact Diem will oppose it. He wishes he had more Nhus, not less. The best chance of doing it is by the Generals taking over the government lock, stock and barrel. After this has been done, it can then be decided whether to put Diem back in again or go on without him. I am rather inclined to put him back, but I would not favor putting heavy pressure on the Generals if they don't want him."

Lodge added:

It is possible, as you suggested [several words deleted] for the Generals when, as and if their operation gets rolling to demand the removal of the Nhus before bringing their operation to fruition. But I am afraid they will get talked out of their operation which will then disintegrate, still leaving the Nhus in office.

If the Generals' operation does get rolling, I would not want to stop it until they were in full control. They could then get rid of the Nhus and decide whether they wanted to keep Diem.

⁶¹A copy of the cable, Washington to Saigon 272, Aug. 29, 1963, is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

⁶²PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 737-738. A copy of the cable, Washington to Saigon 279, Aug. 29, 1963, is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

⁶³PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 739-740. A copy of the cable, Saigon to Washington 383, Aug. 30, 1963, is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

It is better for them and for us for them to throw out the Nhush than for us to get involved in it.

I am sure that the best way to handle this matter is by a truly Vietnamese movement even if it puts me rather in the position of pushing a piece of spaghetti.

Lodge's cable had been preceded by discussions with Vietnamese leaders about the situation, and on the same day (August 30), he sent reports to Washington on two of these. One was with the Interim Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Truong Cong Cuu, and the other was with a prominent person whose name has been deleted from the cable reporting the conversation.⁶⁴ Cuu tried to reassure Lodge that measures were being taken by the Diem government to improve relations with the U.S., but he told Lodge "Please cease the efforts of your CIA to make us a nation of 'boys'"; and he asked him to stop the recruitment of spies "that we may be allowed to develop in our own way in dignity," adding "... the French tried to manipulate the Vietnamese people in this way and that is the reason why he had never been able to work with them."

Lodge reported that his other contact, a person who supported the U.S. program in Vietnam, advised against trying to remove the Nhush. The situation was improving, the informant said, and Diem, an excellent leader, needed Nhu. The war, he added, could be won by the Diem administration. As the conversation ended, he advised Lodge "First, try to calm American opinion and, second, no coups."

In addition to cabling Lodge and Harkins on August 29 to report agreement that the coup should be carried out as first ordered on August 24, President Kennedy personally sent Lodge that day the following top secret, "Eyes Only" cable marked "No Other Distribution Whatever".⁶⁵

I have approved all the messages you are receiving from others today, and I emphasize that everything in these messages has my full support.

We will do all that we can to help you conclude this operation successfully. Nevertheless, there is one point on my own constitutional responsibilities as President and Commander in Chief which I wish to state to you in this entirely private message, which is not being circulated here beyond the Secretary of State.

Until the very moment of the go signal for the opposition by the Generals, I must reserve a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions. While fully aware of your assessment of the consequences of such a reversal, I know from experience that failure is more destructive than an appearance of indecision. I would, of course, accept full responsibility for any such change as I must bear also the full responsibility for this operation and its consequences. It is for this reason that I count on you for a continuing assessment of the prospects of success and most particularly desire your candid warning if the current course begins to go sour. When we go,

⁶⁴Both cables, Saigon to Washington 380 and 384, Aug. 30, 1963 are in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

⁶⁵ Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, CAP 63465. This cable was declassified in 1980.

we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than fail. And if our national interest should require a change of mind, we must not be afraid of it.

On August 30, Lodge replied to Kennedy in a cable marked "President only, pass White House directly, no other distribution whatever".⁶⁶

1. I fully understand that you have the right and responsibility to change course at any time. Of course I will always respect that right.

2. To be successful, this operation must be essentially a Vietnamese affair with a momentum of its own. Should this happen you may not be able to control it, i.e., the "go signal" may be given by the Generals.

The Generals Hesitate, and the U.S. Regroups

Kennedy's personal cable to Lodge coincided with an apparent reluctance by the Vietnamese generals to proceed with the coup, and U.S. officials in both Washington and Saigon decided that the time was not yet ripe.

After a meeting of the NSC at the State Department on August 30, at which Secretary of State Rusk presided in the absence of the President, Rusk sent the following cable to Lodge:⁶⁷

Generals so far appear have no plan and little momentum. Further, bits and pieces of information here suggest that Diem and Nhu are moving to normalize situation and head off possibilities of being upset. Prospects of changing government by strong and concerted Vietnamese elements seem very thin on basis of any hard information we have. This raises possibility that Nhu will try to ease internal and international pressures and perhaps bring about quiet liquidation of potential opposition. Possibility therefore increasingly is that if there is to be a change, it can only be brought about by American rather than Vietnamese effort. Obviously, an abortive effort inspired by or attributed to the United States will be disastrous. Central question therefore comes to be how much reality there is in attitude expressed by generals with whom contacts have been made and their capabilities and determinations with respect to what has been said thus far. The distinction between what is desirable and what is possible is one which we may have to face in the next few days. This telegram changes none of your instructions but expresses our uneasiness at the absence of bone and muscle as seen from here.

On August 31, the U.S. mission cabled Washington that planning for the coup had stopped because of doubts among the generals that they had enough forces under their control to undertake a successful coup, as well as about the commitment of the U.S. to support the coup. At that point, as the *Pentagon Papers* states,

⁶⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. This cable was declassified in 1983 as a request of a mandatory review request by CRS. A number of other cables between Washington and Saigon during the period Aug. 28-30, 1963, remain classified.

⁶⁷Washington to Saigon 284, Aug. 30, 1963, same location.

"... the U.S. found itself . . . without a policy and with most of its bridges burned."⁶⁸

That same day, Lodge replied to Rusk's cable of August 30.⁶⁹ He noted that by then Washington had received Harkins' cable reporting that planning for the coup had stopped. "At some undeterminate date in the future," Lodge said, if "some other group with the necessary strength and lust for office comes forward, we can contemplate another effort."

Lodge said he thought Washington was "right" to instruct him to support a coup, "... not only because of the state of opinion in America and Free World but because the government of Viet-Nam have acted both as liars and criminals. But now the only attempt to change the government which would succeed would be one which the U.S. could mount itself and, of course, that is out of the question."

He suggested that the U.S. try to arrange for a go-between other than himself (he thought the coup planning and other factors had lessened his effectiveness to play such a role) to negotiate with Diem the departure from the country of Madame Nhu, as well as stripping Nhu of all functions except administration of the strategic hamlets. Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, another of Diem's brothers, should also leave the country. The position of Prime Minister would be created to be filled by Thuan. Conciliatory steps would be taken toward the Buddhists and the students.

Lodge also asked whether, to strengthen his hand, it would be possible for the U.S. House of Representatives or the House Foreign Affairs Committee to "cut out appropriations for foreign aid for Viet-Nam? Giving me chance to get GVN to agree to our points on the ground that this would facilitate restoration of the item."

On August 31, there was another meeting of the NSC group at the State Department with Rusk presiding.⁷⁰ It was, or could have been, a significant meeting, because it was the first important high-level meeting of this kind during the Kennedy administration at which doubts were expressed about continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The meeting began with comments from Rusk as to why a coup had been considered by the U.S. in the first place. He listed three factors, the first two of which were the internal and external effects of Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife on the situation in Vietnam, and the third was the pressure of U.S. public (and congressional) opinion. He said the time had come to take steps to improve the situation in Vietnam as well as to strengthen U.S. public support of Vietnam policy, but that it was unrealistic to begin by assuming that Nhu would have to be removed. McNamara said he agreed with Rusk, and urged that normal communications between the U.S. mission and Diem be resumed immediately. Hilsman then reviewed the reasons for supporting a coup.

At that point there occurred an exchange of some historical significance involving, on the one hand, Paul Kattenburg, and, on the other, Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, Nolting and Vice President John-

⁶⁸PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 240. The cable was based on a meeting on Aug. 31 between Harkins and Khiem.

⁶⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 391, Aug. 31, 1963. Parts of this cable have been sanitized.

⁷⁰PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 741-743.

son. It was, among other things, a sobering experience for anyone who might have had any thoughts about questioning the U.S. commitment. Kattenburg, who had just returned from Vietnam, commented that Lodge thought the United States would be thrown out of Vietnam in 6 months if the U.S. tried to continue working with the Diem regime. Kattenburg said he had known Diem for 10 years, and did not think that Diem would ever take the steps necessary to correct the situation. This, he said, would mean a steady deterioration in the situation, and he suggested that it would be better for the U.S. to withdraw honorably. Taylor questioned Kattenburg about what he meant by being forced out in 6 months, and Nolting disagreed with Kattenburg, but it was the response of Rusk, McNamara and Johnson that ended the argument. Rusk said that Kattenburg's comments were "largely speculative; that it would be far better for us to start on the firm basis of two things—that we will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won, and that we will not run a coup." McNamara agreed. Rusk added that he thought there was "good proof that we have been winning the war." Vice President Johnson agreed also, adding that he had "great reservations with respect to a coup, particularly so because he had never seen a genuine alternative to Diem." He said that "from both a practical and political viewpoint, it would be a disaster to pull out; that we should stop playing cops and robbers and get back to talking straight to the GVN, and that we should once again go about winning the war."

Kattenburg later commented on this experience:⁷¹

. . . I listened for about an hour or an hour and a half to this conversation before I was asked to say anything at the meeting and they looked to me absolutely hopeless, the whole group of them. There was not a single person there that knew what he was talking about. It simply looked, to me, that way. They were all great men. It was appalling to watch. I didn't have the feeling that any of them—Bobby Kennedy, Taylor, even down to my good old friend and buddy, Roger Hilsman—really knew. . . . They didn't know Vietnam. They didn't know the past. They had forgotten the history. They simply didn't understand the identification of nationalism and Communism, and the more this meeting went on, the more I sat there and I thought, "God, we're walking into a major disaster," and that's when I made what essentially was a very imprudent and also presumptuous remark, in a way. And the reaction to it was sort of what I had invited. They all just disregarded it or said it was not backed by anything.

After the meeting, the State Department sent Lodge two cables, one from Hilsman and the other from Rusk, both of which were read and approved by Kennedy.⁷² In the cable from Hilsman, Lodge was told that policymakers in Washington agreed with his proposal for a "direct effort" in Vietnam. "U.S. cannot abandon Viet-Nam and while it will support Vietnamese effort to change government that has good prospects success U.S. should not and

⁷¹CRS Interview with Paul Kattenburg, Feb. 16, 1979.

⁷²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 294 (Hilsman) and 295 (Rusk), Aug. 31, 1962.

would not mount and operate one. . . . In the meantime, our primary objective remains winning war and we concur your suggestion that we should now reopen communications with Diem." The cable continued:

As to general posture, it seems desirable to maintain both publicly and in our private talks with GVN the leverage of U.S. discontent with repression which has eroded war effort within Viet-Nam as well as support of Congress, U.S. public, and world. Impression should be, both privately and publicly, that U.S. engaged in candid and critical discussion to improve government not overthrow it. Decision on changing government is Vietnamese affair.

In your talk with Diem, our thought is you should first stress common interest in defeating Viet Cong. Then in frank but tough line point out that daily juxtaposition of continuing American casualties and massive U.S. aid with repressive measures contrary deepest American convictions will make it difficult for Executive and Congress to continue support. Common problem for U.S. and GVN in general and you and Diem in particular is to work out set of GVN policies and actions that will make possible continued U.S. support. But time is rather short. President Kennedy may well be obliged at next press conference to express U.S. disapproval of repressive measures. Should we find it impossible to reach an agreement with GVN on a program to undo the damage caused by recent GVN actions, then suspension of aid might soon be forced upon us.

Hilsman's cable concluded by stating that the President was going to comment on the situation in Vietnam in a televised interview on September 2. "While in this interview he will be as restrained as possible, if asked it will be impossible to avoid some expression of concern. This expression, however, will be mild in comparison to what may have to be said soon unless there is major improvement."

Rusk's August 31 cable to Lodge was as follows:

It seems to me that we must keep our eye fixed on the main purpose of our presence in South Viet-Nam and everyone on the U.S. side needs to review the bidding on this elementary purpose: why we are there, why are we asking our fellows to be killed and what is getting in the way of accomplishing our purpose. The actions of the GVN and the Nhus have eroded this purpose—inside Viet-Nam and internationally and they have also eroded our capacity to provide political leadership in the U.S. necessary to support the effort in Viet-Nam. To raise these questions is not merely an emotional reaction to two individuals. They involve the fundamental requirement of political leadership in Viet-Nam which is necessary to coalesce the Vietnamese people in a war effort which we can support. Diem must realize that his obligation of political leadership runs to the solidarity of his people which may require conciliatory actions which are distasteful to him personally. He must make a systematic effort to improve his international position, and a demonstration to the American people that we are not asking

Americans to be killed to support Madame Nhu's desire to barbecue bonzes.

On September 2, 1963, President Kennedy was interviewed on CBS television by Walter Cronkite. When asked a prearranged question about Vietnam by Cronkite, Kennedy gave this pre-planned response:⁷³

I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it.

Kennedy was asked by Cronkite whether "this government has time to regain the support of the people," and he replied that it did; that "with changes in policy and perhaps with personnel I think it can." He added that he did not agree with those who advocated U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. "That would be a great mistake," he said. "We . . . have to participate—we may not like it—in the defense of Asia."

Copies of Kennedy's comments during the Cronkite interview were then cabled by the State Department to Saigon and to all other relevant U.S. diplomatic missions with the notation, "They represent the U.S. Government's attitude toward the situation and should be followed as the official U.S. public position."⁷⁴

On September 6, the *New York Times* said in an editorial on Kennedy's interview: "The lessons of the present crisis are plain. One is that the anti-Communist war in South Vietnam . . . is not only, as President Kennedy declared, 'their war' but our war—a war from which we cannot retreat and which we dare not lose."

A week later, in an interview with Chet Huntley on NBC television, Kennedy repeated that the U.S. should not withdraw from Vietnam. He was also asked by Huntley whether he believed in the "domino theory." He replied: "I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontier, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists. So I believe it."⁷⁵

According to William Bundy, Kennedy's opposition to withdrawal ". . . reflected exactly what the internal record shows was being said by his senior advisers in council. Short of the most dire extremes, the U.S. simply should not think of withdrawing."⁷⁶

In early September 1963, as the U.S. Government began regrouping prior to new efforts to force Diem's hand, Lodge, who was deliberately avoiding a meeting with Diem, met for the second time with Nhu (the first meeting had been on August 27). Accompanying Lodge were the Italian Ambassador and the Papal Delegate to Vietnam. At this meeting, Nhu said that he was planning to resign and to retire to the Vietnamese countryside (Dalat), and that Madame Nhu would leave Vietnam for an extended trip. The

⁷³Public Papers of the Presidents, John F. Kennedy, 1963, p. 652.

⁷⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 306, Sept. 2, 1963.

⁷⁵Public Papers of the Presidents, John F. Kennedy, 1963, p. 659.

⁷⁶Bundy MS., ch. 10, p. 9.

Papal Delegate agreed to arrange for Archbishop Thuc to leave the country. Nhu also said that conciliatory steps would be taken toward the Buddhists, and that, as the U.S. had advocated, a Prime Minister would be appointed.⁷⁷ During the remainder of that week, the Italian Ambassador and the Papal Delegate urged Nhu to carry out these promises. One of the reasons they cited was the need to avoid a suspension of U.S. aid for Vietnam which was then being considered in the U.S. Senate. (On September 6, Nhu said again that he would resign, but that he would not leave the country. On September 7, the Papal Delegate "got Thuc out of the country," and on September 9, Madame Nhu left for Europe.⁷⁸ Nhu still had not resigned, however.)

On September 3, Kennedy met with his NSC advisers to consider new instructions for Lodge when he met again with Diem. The group discussed Lodge's meeting with Nhu on September 2 and agreed that it would be helpful if Nhu were to resign and leave Saigon, if only for Dalat. The President said he did not want to discourage Madame Nhu's trip, but that he did not want her to come to the United States, and particularly did not want her to make a speech in Washington. CIA Director McCone replied that "He believed we could handle the press in such a way that the trip would not increase Madame Nhu's prestige."⁷⁹

Several hours after the meeting, a cable was sent to Lodge stating that Nhu's promises were hopeful, but that Lodge should meet with Diem as soon as possible.⁸⁰ "Bargain with Nhu," the cable said, "would only confirm his ascendancy." Even if Nhu were in Dalat, "he could still be power behind throne."

Washington's "guidance" for Lodge in the September 3 cable was about the same as in the August 31 cables from Hilsman and Rusk:

We will continue to assert publicly and privately U.S. discontent with repression which has eroded effort toward common goal of winning war until there are concrete results in GVN policies and posture. U.S. not trying to overthrow government, but engaged in candid and critical talks to improve it. Purpose of general posture is to give you leverage with GVN; avoid false public impression U.S. tried something and now backing off; and avoid seeming to acquiesce in repression, which would put U.S. on wrong side fence with majority of people inside Viet-Nam and the world.

In a memorandum reporting on a luncheon meeting he had that day (September 3) with journalists Peter Lisagor (*Chicago Daily News*), Hugh Sidey (*Time*), and Marguerite Higgins (*New York Herald Tribune*), Hilsman said in part:⁸¹

I have been saying for several months that the U.S. would not attempt to "play God"; and the U.S. could not scurry about plotting and pulling strings on puppets in a country like Viet-Nam. The U.S. could not play God for three reasons: (1) it would undermine our efforts to build viable political systems

⁷⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 242.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Memorandum of Conversation with the President," Sept. 3, 1963, portions sanitized.

⁸⁰Washington to Saigon 317, Sept. 3, 1963, same location.

⁸¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

throughout Asia; (2) it would open a new Vietnamese Government to a charge of being a U.S. puppet and set back the war effort; and (3) the CIA did not have the skill, the aptness or the perceptiveness into Asian societies to bring it off.

All this I have been saying for months. It remains true. What has happened here is that Nhu beat up the Pagodas without the Army knowing about it. It was an attempt to tar the Army with this brush and the U.S.. The purpose was to lead the U.S. around by the nose to demonstrate to all of Vietnam that we were controllable. Faced with this action and these motives, the U.S. had to show Diem-Nhu and the Vietnamese people that the U.S. could not be made a puppet. It is true that we don't have the leverage that some think we do in calling the tune in a country we are helping, but we are not and cannot be their complete puppets. The motive behind the statement that the Army was not to blame was not an "invitation to rebellion" in exactly that sense. It did and was intended to put all concerned on notice that it was winning the war that we were concerned with and that, if the Vietnamese chose to change their government, we were not committed to Diem, the personality. It seemed to me that this was not "an invitation to rebellion."

(At the end of the last sentence, after "rebellion," Hilsman had added "if this is treason make the most of it," but he or someone else penciled out these additional words.)

At about this time, General Lansdale, even though involved in other assignments, met with Harriman to discuss the situation in Vietnam. This is his description of that conversation:⁸²

... In the late summer of '63 I had breakfast one day with Harriman. He was asking me some questions about brother Nhu and Diem, and he told me he was very surprised at my viewpoints on things, I guess they sounded unusual to him. I urged him to create a place for Nhu up at Harvard. I remember he had John Kenneth Galbraith, a Harvard economist and Ambassador to India at the time, having breakfast with us at Harriman's house. I was saying that Galbraith and Harriman should get together and put up a group at Harvard and invite Nhu over from Vietnam to be a member there. I said, "Kick him upstairs. Tell him he's an intellectual. Listen to him and give him a job there. He'd come, and Diem would let him go. And once he's away, then Diem will be a very different person and be on his own and you won't have to worry so much about him." Galbraith sort of snorted negatively. And I said, "No, Nhu is a real smart guy. He's obnoxious like most of you intellectuals—he sort of gets on my nerves a little bit." Galbraith was so negative about it that I couldn't help teasing him. But it would have been one way out for Diem and Nhu.

Harriman liked the idea. He said, "I like the way you think and I like ideas like this." I said, "Well, Diem gave his father a sort of a death-bed promise that he would take care of his youngest brother, Nhu. And we Americans have come in and

⁸²CRS Interview with Edward G. Lansdale, Nov. 19, 1982.

bluntly told him to get rid of Nhu. Well, his father's wishes mean more to him. He's a family man. Instead of that, if we had gone in and said, 'We have a real good job for Nhu and want you to help us convince him to go,' he'd do it. You know, he'd think it was good for his brother which it would be." And I said, "And Nhu is a real intellectual. He really is. He'd a deep political student. I don't agree with him on a lot of things but that doesn't say that he doesn't have a lot on the ball, because he does." But we didn't do it. . . .

Lansdale said that he could "feel that something was happening," and he went to see Roger Hilsman in the State Department. "Roger kept talking about his forthcoming trip to Australia, and I said, 'No, Harriman wants me to talk about Vietnam to you. You must be about to do something. Tell me what it is, so I'll know, and maybe I can help you, come up with some ideas for you.' And he'd keep going back to Australia. He wouldn't talk about Vietnam at all." Lansdale also saw McNamara:

I went in and saw McNamara and he must have hinted at forthcoming changes in Saigon. I remember saying, "Don't forget there's a constitution there. Keep it alive. . . . don't go monkeying around trying to overcome the will of the people to make some new idea work. . . . And don't forget there's a constitutional vice president there," and so on.

Using Congress to Reinforce the Threat

In his cable of August 30, as was noted earlier, Lodge (a former Member of the U.S. Senate until he was defeated by John F. Kennedy) had suggested the possibility of having the House or the House Foreign Affairs Committee pass an amendment to reduce or suspend U.S. aid to Vietnam unless and until Diem agreed to the changes being suggested by the United States. On September 6, he suggested it again: "I am obviously looking for leverage for my talk with Diem," he said in a cable to Harriman.⁸³ "The following is clear to me: even though Vietnamese public mind would not differentiate, a congressional cut would, in GVN mind, clearly avoid much of the odium which would attach a suspension of U.S. aid by the executive branch. If our congressional system does, in fact, give us an advantage in handling the extremely explosive issue of aid suspension, we should certainly not overlook it."

Just before he sent this cable, Lodge received Hilsman's cable of September 5, in which Hilsman reported on an executive session of the Far East Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where he had testified on the situation in Vietnam.⁸⁴ Hilsman told Lodge that the meeting "... revealed far-reaching doubts regarding not only Diem-Nhu leadership but also advisability of continued U.S. participation in Viet-Nam war."

Following the subcommittee meeting, the chairman of the subcommittee, Senator Frank Lausche, made a brief speech in the Senate, apparently drafted by or with the advice of the State Department, in which he said that he concurred with Kennedy's

⁸³Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security, 1963, Saigon to Washington 423, Sept. 6, 1963.

⁸⁴Washington to Saigon 335, Sept. 5, 1963, same location.

statement on September 2 about the need for a change of policy and possibly of personnel by the South Vietnamese, as well as Kennedy's opposition to the attacks on the Buddhists, which he called "a grave mistake of policy" on Diem's part.⁸⁵

Later that day, Senator Frank Church, also a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said that he was considering offering a resolution to suspend U.S. aid to Vietnam unless the Diem government instituted reforms. Senator Frank Carlson (R/Kans.), another member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said he would support such a move. This information was immediately cabled to Lodge by the State Department, and after a meeting of the NSC a cable was sent to Lodge directing him in talking to Diem, (which the cable urged him to do as a part of U.S. strategy), to "elaborate difficulties with U.S. public opinion and Congress using Hilsman meeting with Far East Subcommittee and statements of Lausche and Church. . . ." ⁸⁶

Lodge met with Diem on September 9, and afterwards he reported that "the greatest impact was probably made by the discussion of the grave reaction which Diem is courting in the U.S. Congress."⁸⁷

When Church told Hilsman that he was thinking of introducing the resolution, Hilsman urged him not to offer specific language "without first checking with the Executive Branch on both wording and timing. . . ." Church agreed. The administration, which may have been responsible for initiating the resolution, pursuant to Lodge's suggestion, began encouraging Church, and working closely with him to maximize the impact of the proposal on the situation in Vietnam. McGeorge Bundy is said to have called Church on behalf of the President to tell him to 'Keep it up'; that they thought that was kind of helpful pressure."⁸⁸

At a meeting of the NSC on September 10, the President raised the subject of a congressional resolution condemning Diem's actions.⁸⁹ Hilsman replied that "the problem was not to start Congress but to stop it." He discussed Church's interest in offering such a resolution, and said he thought Church would be amenable to suggestions from the administration on timing and wording. The President said ". . . we should decide whether we thought a revolution was advantageous. If we decided it was, we should then get the full support of Senators Mansfield and Dirksen. The worst possible situation would be to have a resolution put up and then defeated."

Following the NSC meeting, Hilsman went directly to Capitol Hill to talk to Church. He cautioned Church that it would not do to have a weak or contrary vote on the resolution. It had to be "near

⁸⁵CR, vol. 109, p. 16397.

⁸⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Washington to Saigon 341, Sept. 6, 1963, Vietnam; NSF Presidential Meetings File, Washington to Saigon 348, Sept. 6, 1963.

⁸⁷Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security, 1963, Unsigned report by General Krulak on "Vietnam, 6-10 September 1963."

⁸⁸CRS Interview with Church's former assistant, Bryce Nelson, Dec. 12, 1978. Bundy says he does not remember this phone call, but that it may have occurred. CRS Interview with McGeorge Bundy, Jan. 8, 1979.

⁸⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Memorandum of a Conference with the President," Sept. 10, 1963.

unanimous." Church replied that the proposed resolution had a "good prospect of getting real support."

Hilsman said he would work with Church on the language of the proposal. (At that time, Church's resolution provided for discontinuing aid to the government of South Vietnam because of its religious persecution which "offends the conscience of the American people. . . .")

In a meeting on September 11, the NSC agreed to support the Church resolution as one of a series of moves to bring new pressures to bear on Diem. The President said he thought it would be helpful, "but only if we could control the ensuing situation." There were these further comments:

Mr. [McGeorge] Bundy said we could support the introduction of the resolution and then suggest that it not be acted upon in a hurry. Secretary Rusk and Senator Mansfield shared the view that the resolution should be introduced, but that hearings on it be delayed.

The President expressed his concern that an effort would be made to attach the resolution to the aid bill. He wanted us to work with the Congressional Committees so that we would not end up with a resolution requiring that we reduce aid. The objective was a resolution merely condemning current actions of the Diem government. We must not get into a situation in which the resolution could be defeated. We should try to avoid having it tied to the aid program.

Following the NSC meeting, Church was given the go-ahead by Hilsman, and the next day, September 12, 1963, he introduced the resolution, as follows:⁹⁰

Resolved, That it is the sense of the Senate that unless the Government of South Vietnam abandons policies of repression against its own people and makes a determined and effective effort to regain their support, military and economic assistance to that Government should not be continued.

Cosponsoring the resolution were its principal cosponsor, Republican Senator Carlson, and 21 additional Senators (others joined subsequently), all but two of whom were Democrats, mostly liberals. Included among the cosponsors were some of the stalwarts among those who, in addition to Church, subsequently opposed the war: Morse, Ernest Gruening (D/Alaska), Gaylord Nelson (D/Wis.), Pell, Joseph S. Clark (D/Pa.), George S. McGovern (D/S. Dak.) and Stephen M. Young (D/Ohio).

Church's resolution had been drafted by the State Department, and, as stated in a note from a member of Hilsman's staff informing him that it been offered, "Church offered his resolution using exactly the same language as we had. No change."⁹¹

Following the introduction of the Church resolution, the State Department again cited congressional pressure as one of the arguments to be made to Diem. In the September 16 draft of instructions for Lodge, which was part of an overall action plan, he was to

⁹⁰S. Res. 88-196. For Church's statement see *CR*, vol. 109, see p. 16824.

⁹¹Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers, Note to RH from Ginny, Sept. 12, 1963, reporting phone call from State's congressional liaison office. In the same file there are several other State Department drafts of the resolution.

tell Diem that "The Executive Branch considers any effort to contest moves in Congress to restrict or terminate U.S. aid programs in Vietnam bound to be ineffective under present circumstances."⁹²

In the general plan of action prepared by State and sent to the President, Rusk, McNamara and McCone on September 16, Hilsman included this statement of "Congressional Action":⁹³

A resolution expressing the "sense of the Senate" that aid to South Vietnam be terminated unless that regime reverses its policies of repression might be useful ammunition for Ambassador Lodge, if it were passed by a substantial margin. With tacit Administration approval, the Church-Carlson resolution has good prospects for passage. In terms of general strategy on the foreign aid bill, such a resolution should be delayed until Senate passage of the aid bill. Although a case can be made for earlier approval of this resolution, what is contemplated here is not a crash program of sudden aid termination but rather a carefully phased plan which might well benefit from Senate action at a later date.

The Debate Continues

Meanwhile, policymakers in the executive branch continued debating the next phase in the ongoing effort to bring about the desired changes in Vietnam. The NSC met again on September 6.⁹⁴ During the first part of the meeting, before the arrival of the President, there was a very pointed discussion among his advisers. Rusk said, "if the situation continues to deteriorate in Vietnam, if our relations with Diem continue to deteriorate, and if U.S. domestic opinion becomes strongly anti-Diem, we will be faced with no alternative short of a massive U.S. military effort." He said that Lodge should be directed to tell Diem that the United Nations was on the verge of passing a resolution condemning the repression of the Buddhists, and that the U.S. would not be able to prevent passage of that resolution. Moreover, unless Diem acted promptly there would be a "drastic effect in the U.S. involving both reduction in economic and military assistance and strong pressure to withdraw U.S. political support of Vietnam."

Robert Kennedy asked whether the war could be won if Diem and Nhu remained in power. Rusk replied that it could not be won unless changes were made. RFK wondered whether Diem would change, and said that the U.S. should get "tough." "Ambassador Lodge has to do more than say our President is unhappy. We will have to tell Diem that he must do the things we demand or we will have to cut down our effort as forced by the U.S. public." Rusk responded that pressure should be applied in "... two or three bites. It is very serious to threaten to pull out of Vietnam. If the Viet Cong takes over in Vietnam we are in real trouble." He recommended that the first step should be a discussion between Lodge and Diem, following which the U.S. would then be in a better posi-

⁹²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Hilsman to Rusk and McNamara, "A Plan to Achieve U.S. Objectives in South Vietnam," Sept. 16, 1963.

⁹³*Ibid.*, pt. C, phase I, p. 11.

⁹⁴"Memorandum of Conference with the President," Sept. 6, 1963, cited above.

tion to know what to do, and could, if desirable, issue an "ultimatum."

McGeorge Bundy commented, "... this was not the moment of decision. When we say we can't win with Diem we are talking of a longer time period." He, too, thought they needed more information, particularly from Thuan.

Taylor observed that only three weeks earlier the U.S. believed that the war could be won with Diem, and he wondered whether recent events had changed that judgment. There apparently was no direct response to his query.

RFK asked again what the U.S. should do if it were concluded that the war could not be won with Diem. McNamara replied that this question could not be answered in Washington because of the lack of first-hand information on the state of affairs in Vietnam. Rusk agreed, and said that a reassessment was required. Taylor suggested that General Krulak should go to Vietnam to assess the "grass roots military view," and McNamara and Rusk agreed.

There was further discussion of the instructions to Lodge. Nolting argued that it would be a mistake to put too much pressure on Diem. "He asked that we not talk to Diem about sanctions, but describe to him flatly the situation as we saw it."

Rusk concluded this part of the meeting by calling the situation "stage one." He added, "There may be no stage two if we decide to pull out. If we pull out, we might tell Diem that we wish him well. Diem may be able to win the war without us, but this is unlikely."⁹⁵

At this point the President joined the group and the meeting continued. McGeorge Bundy asked about the "essential minimum of our demands." Rusk replied, "if the Nhus stay on their present course we will continue to lose ground." The President remarked, "we should ask Diem to prohibit Madame Nhu from talking."⁹⁶ Nolting said that, on balance, he thought Ngo Dinh Nhu himself would "have to go." This, he added, "would mean a loss in Vietnam but a gain with U.S. public opinion." McGeorge Bundy said that if Madame Nhu would leave, "we could live with Nhu remaining in Saigon," but he again suggested getting Thuan's opinion. (Thuan had said two weeks earlier that the war could be won only if Nhu left.)

It was agreed that a team representing the two dominant points of view, Krulak from the DOD/JCS and Joseph A. Mendenhall, Director of the Far East Planning Office under Hilsman, should make a quick trip to Vietnam to survey the situation. McNamara ordered Krulak to leave in 90 minutes. Hilsman reported later that he personally had to have the departure of the plane delayed until Mendenhall could reach the airport.⁹⁷

After the September 6 NSC meeting, a cable was sent to Lodge reporting on the meeting:⁹⁸

It is clear that as a minimum we face a major problem with world, with U.S. Congress and with American public which

⁹⁵Following this, Rusk's next sentence has been deleted.

⁹⁶An additional comment by the President at this point has been deleted.

⁹⁷*To Move A Nation*, p. 501.

⁹⁸Washington to Saigon 348, Sept. 6, 1963, cited above.

will require GVN to take actions to restore its image so that we may continue to support it. These actions included [here there are one or two words sanitized] and removal from country of Madam Nhu, releasing of bonzes, students, etc., along lines we have discussed.

What is not clear is whether these measures will suffice to restore sufficient confidence in the Diem Government within Viet-Nam to permit them to win the war.

Sense of meeting was that if the answer to this second question is that additional measures, such as departure of Nhu, are essential, and if we cannot obtain these additional measures after negotiating with Diem, then U.S. faced with question whether to apply sanctions with all their risks rather than let situation get steadily worse.

Lodge was urged to meet with Diem as soon as possible in order to explain the U.S. position, and to get his reaction to that position.

Krulak and Mendenhall were gone for four days, September 6-10. "It was a remarkable assignment" wrote John Mecklin,⁹⁹ the chief U.S. public affairs officer in Saigon, who accompanied Krulak and Mendenhall on the return trip, "to travel twenty-four thousand miles and assess a situation as complex as Vietnam and return in just four days. It was a symptom of the state the U.S. Government was in." "The *non sequitur* tone of the whole trip," he added, "was capped by the fact that the general and the FSO not only appeared to dislike each other, but also disagreed on what should be done about Vietnam. On the whole flight they spoke to each other only when it was unavoidable."

On September 10, Krulak and Mendenhall presented their findings to the President and his advisers.¹⁰⁰ This was the meeting made famous by the President's quip after hearing the reports from the two men: "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?"¹⁰¹

Mendenhall "... emphasized the breakdown of civilian government in Saigon, accompanied by civilian fear and hate of the Nhus. . . . He foresaw the possibility of a religious war or a large-scale movement to the Viet Cong."¹⁰²

Krulak, on the other hand, said that Mendenhall's report reflected the "metropolitan view," and that out in the countryside the situation was entirely different. Saigon's political problems, he said, had not interfered with military operations against the Communists. "He believed strongly that we can stagger through to win the war with Nhu remaining in control."¹⁰³

The President asked why the judgments of the two men should be so different. Hilsman responded that "it was the difference between a military and a political view."

⁹⁹Mission in Torment, pp. 206-207.

¹⁰⁰Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, Memorandum of Conference with the President, Sept. 10, 1963.

¹⁰¹Mission in Torment, p. 208.

¹⁰²The only written report made by Mendenhall was a cable, which is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, Saigon to Washington 453, Sept. 9, 1963.

¹⁰³For Krulak's complete report see "Visit to Vietnam," cited above. His general conclusions are also in PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 243-244.

Nolting, however, who presumably also represented the political view, disagreed with Mendenhall's conclusions, and said that he thought "the present government will bear the weight of our program."

Rufus Phillips, who also came back with Krulak and Mendenhall, however, said that there was a "crisis confidence in Vietnam." (His comments immediately following this statement have been deleted.)¹⁰⁴ Phillips added that the U.S. had an obligation to adopt measures that would bring about a change of government in Vietnam. He recommended that Lansdale be sent to Vietnam. Lodge, he said, agreed.

Kennedy asked Phillips what the U.S. should do. Phillips replied that the U.S. should use the aid program to apply gradual and graduated pressure on Diem and Nhu. As one aspect of this, the U.S. should suspend aid to the special forces under the command of Colonel Le Quang Tung, who was under the control of Nhu. He believed that through this and other actions the U.S. could split Nhu from Diem, adding, "If we acquiesced in the actions which Nhu had taken against us, the result would be further loss of support from others in Vietnam."

Phillips also gave a pessimistic report on the military situation, with which Krulak disagreed, arguing that this was not the view of General Harkins. At this point the "Crocodile" (Washington's nickname for Harriman), according to Halberstam's detailed account of the meeting, "... went after Krulak: Harriman said he was not surprised that Krulak was taking Harkins' side—indeed he would be upset if he did not. Harriman said that he had known Krulak for several years and had always known him to be wrong, and was sorry to say it, but he considered Krulak a damn fool."¹⁰⁵

The President then called on John Mecklin to state his views. Mecklin said that he agreed with Phillips and Mendenhall that the situation was critical and that strong action was required. He said that the policy of graduated pressure proposed by Phillips was not adequate, however. The Diem government was finished, and "The time had come for the U.S. to apply direct pressure to bring about a change of government, however distasteful." Mecklin said that this could be done without the U.S. appearing to play a direct role. Actions such as the withholding of certain types of aid would have the result of bestirring the generals to act on their own. This might create such chaos, however, that U.S. forces would have to be used to protect American lives.¹⁰⁶

Mecklin also warned that the coup could provide an opening for the Communists, and therefore that the U.S. should resolve to use U.S. forces if necessary in order to prevent that from happening.

¹⁰⁴From the official summary of the meeting, paraphrased in Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 504. Hilsman obviously had the benefit of the unexpurgated classified version of the summary when he wrote his book.

¹⁰⁵Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p. 279.

Halberstam adds that the Army major who had written a report on Long An province that Phillips had used to illustrate his position "was reprimanded, given a bad efficiency report and immediately transferred out of Long An to the least attractive post available, which happened to be a National Guard slot. The stakes were getting higher and the game was getting tougher." *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

¹⁰⁶These comments by Mecklin are from his book, *Mission in Torment*, p. 210. They have been deleted from the sanitized summary of the Sept. 10 meeting.

In a memorandum on September 10 to Edward R. Murrow, the noted radio and TV commentator who was then the director of the United States Information Agency, Mecklin (an employee of USIA) recommended using U.S. combat forces, if necessary, "both to promote unseating of the regime and against the VC, as well as a willingness to accept an engagement comparable to Korea if the Communists choose to escalate."¹⁰⁷ Expanding on these points, he said:

In the writer's judgment, conditions in Viet-Nam have deteriorated so badly that the U.S. would be drawing to a three-card straight to gamble its interests there on anything short of an ultimate willingness to use U.S. combat troops. . . .

If we are not willing to resort to U.S. forces, it is wholly possible that efforts to unseat the Ngo Dinh's would produce results that would be worse, from the U.S. viewpoint, than a negotiated "neutral" settlement. . . .

On the other hand, a decision now to use U.S. forces if necessary would give the whole U.S. effort psychological lift, producing confidence that we need not be frustrated indefinitely, giving us a sure hand that has been lacking in the past. . . . Such a new sureness in our actions, with the clear implication that the U.S. "means business," would quickly get through to the Vietnamese and to third countries and thus conceivably itself remove the need to resort to force.

Perhaps it should also be noted that the present situation in Viet-Nam is confronting the U.S. with what was certainly an inevitable showdown on the thesis that Western industrial power somehow must always be frustrated by Communist guerrilla tactics applied against a weak, underdeveloped government that refused foreign advice and reforms of the very ills that the Communist live on. There are incipient insurrections of this sort all over the underdeveloped world and the outcome in Viet-Nam will have critical bearing on U.S. capability to prevent and/or suppress them.

In the writer's opinion, furthermore, there is a very real possibility that if and as Viet-Nam is conclusively being lost to the Communists, the U.S. will be forced to use force in any case as a last resort . . . just as we did so unexpectedly in Korea. It would be vastly wise—and more effective—to make this unpalatable decision now.

In this memorandum, and in his comments at the meeting with the President, Mecklin concluded that if diplomatic pressure failed to dislodge Diem and Nhu from power, and if selective suspension of aid also failed, that the U.S. should then begin covertly planning a coup. At that point, all aid should be suspended. If this, too, failed to produce the necessary changes, the coup should be carried out. "If this also failed, or only partly succeeded, there should be plentiful excuses to bring in U.S. forces, e.g. to restore order, protect American citizens, etc. Such forces should be prepared for attack by local GVN troops, but it is more likely that they would simply act as power in being, making it possible for the U.S. to have its way by seriously presenting the Ngo Dinh's with an ulti-

¹⁰⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "A Policy for Vietnam."

matum. . . . And once U.S. forces had been introduced into Viet-Nam, it would be relatively simple—on the invitation of the new regime—to keep them on hand to help, if needed, in final destruction of the Viet Cong.”

Subsequently, Phillips, in a memorandum that Forrestal sent along to McGeorge Bundy with the comment, “. . . Phillips’ judgments of Vietnamese reactions are as good as any we have,” took issue with Mecklin’s suggestion for using U.S. troops. “Certainly,” Phillips said, “no one should rule out the possibility of the ultimate use of U.S. troops and they should be ready to protect dependents if the going gets rough before Nhu topples but the entire policy should not be hinged on this contingency. The use of U.S. troops to fight the war against the VC would, in any case, be a mistake. The Vietnamese are willing to fight and can fight. If we help give them a government worth fighting for, this single action will be worth more than any number of U.S. troops.”¹⁰⁸

As the September 10 NSC meeting continued, Rusk observed that in May and June the U.S. had estimated that the war could be won with Diem. He suggested that events in July and August should be analyzed “to decide whether the situation can be returned to that which existed last May.” Harriman’s rejoinder was that as far back as May there had been warning signs that Diem was through. McCone said that intelligence reports as recently as the middle of July did not bear out Harriman’s point, adding, “The current view of the intelligence community is not as ominous as that expressed by the civilian reporters today. The Vietnamese military officers will work with Nhu. Any aid cutoff would seriously affect the war effort.”

At this point the President adjourned the meeting, asking that by the next meeting the following day (September 11) a paper be prepared on ways of cutting U.S. funds.

At 5:45 p.m. that same day (September 10), the NSC principals met at the State Department without the President to continue the morning’s discussion.¹⁰⁹ McCone questioned whether there was an alternative to a government headed by Diem. Hilsman then described a “. . . two-prong pressure program on Diem with the aim of forcing him to change his present policies.” According to the official summary of the meeting, “He acknowledged that if we started down this path we would have to be prepared to contemplate the use of U.S. forces on the ground in Vietnam.” General Taylor commented that he was in favor of continuing to work with Diem, and the summary states that Taylor “revealed a reluctance to contemplate the use of U.S. troops in combat in Vietnam. . . .”

As the meeting concluded, McGeorge Bundy asked Hilsman to prepare two papers for the President, one on U.S. objectives, and the other on “a program of pressures against Diem with the aim of forcing him to meet our demands.”

The NSC group met again the next day (September 11) at 6 p.m. without the President¹¹⁰ and at 7 p.m. with the President. Earlier

¹⁰⁸Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, “Comments on the Necessity for an Advance Decision to Introduce U.S. Forces in Viet-Nam,” with transmittal memo of Sept. 17, 1963.

¹⁰⁹Kennedy Library, “Meeting at the State Department,” Sept. 10, 1963, NSF Presidential Meetings File. Some comments have been deleted.

¹¹⁰Records of this meeting are still classified.

that day a long cable had been received from Lodge, "Eyes Only for the Secretary of State," summarizing the situation in Vietnam.¹¹¹ It was a strong message, obviously intended to support the Harri-man-Hilsman position, and to counteract the arguments of Krulak, McNamara and Taylor. Lodge said, "... the ship of state here is slowly sinking. . . . if there are effective sanctions which we can apply, we should apply them in order to force a drastic change in government. The only sanction which I can see is the suspension of aid and therefore I recommend that the best brains in the government study precise details of suspending aid so as to do ourselves the most good and the least harm."

Lodge directly questioned the reliability of Krulak's report, saying among other things:

I do not doubt the military judgment that the war in the countryside is going well now. But, as one who has had long connection with the military, I do doubt the value of the answers which are given by young officers to direct questions by generals—or, for that matter, by ambassadors. The urge to give an optimistic and favorable answer is quite unsurmountable—and understandable. I, therefore, doubt the statement often made that the military are not affected by developments in Saigon and the cities generally.

In addition to recommending that a study be made of ways to apply effective sanctions to the Diem government, Lodge said that the U.S. should be making "renewed efforts . . . to activate by whatever positive inducements we can offer the man who would take over the government—Big Minh [General Duong Van Minh, the leader of the coup group] or whoever we might suggest. We do not want to substitute a Castro for a Batista."

At the 7:00 p.m. meeting with the President on September 11, Hilsman summarized the proposed pressure plan. McGeorge Bundy observed that the difference between Hilsman's proposal and Lodge's was that Lodge wanted to suspend all aid. According to the official notes of the meeting, McGeorge Bundy added, "It turns out that it is not easy to cut U.S. aid without stopping the war effort."¹¹² Gilpatric agreed. Rusk said that Hilsman's proposal "... did not involve really important actions, but would have an important psychological effect. He recommended that Ambassador Lodge be told to tell Diem to start acting like the President of Vietnam and get on with the war." Rusk, McNamara, McCone, and Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon all agreed that the U.S. should proceed cautiously, and should continue trying to work with Diem.

President Kennedy asked "whether deterioration has set in and whether the situation is serious." McCone replied that it was not serious, but might become serious within three months. McNamara agreed that it was not serious, and said that "we could not estimate whether the situation would become serious in three months."

¹¹¹Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, Saigon to Washington 478, Sept. 11, 1963.

¹¹²"Memorandum of Conference with the President," Sept. 11, 1963, same location.

Kennedy also read to the group from a news report of Madame Nhu's latest statement, in which she again criticized the United States. He thought there should be a reply, and added, "How could we continue to have her making anti-American comments at the same time she is one of the leaders of a government we are supporting?"

As the meeting ended, Kennedy asked Hilsman for a detailed plan of action on the proposed sanctions. He also wanted a draft of new instructions for Lodge, "including in that instruction a request that he attempt to hush up the [U.S.] press in Saigon." Meanwhile, the President said, all further decisions on aid to Vietnam should be held up temporarily.

The following day (September 12), the NSC group met again (without the President) apparently for the primary purpose of agreeing on new instructions for Lodge.¹¹³ Based on the documentation available, it would appear that the group agreed with Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, McCone and Nolting to make one last attempt to work with Diem, and approved the draft instruction to Lodge which had been personally drafted by Rusk for consideration at the meeting.¹¹⁴ In that draft Rusk tried to put the situation in perspective, and to suggest that, given the alternatives, it was important to make another effort to get Diem to act on the problems facing his administration.

The draft cable began by recognizing Lodge's difficult assignment, but added that this was not the first time the U.S. had faced such a situation "in a country whose leadership stubbornly resists measures which we consider necessary to achieve desired results."

Rusk went on to reiterate that "Our central objective remains a secure and independent South Viet-Nam even though, at some future date, it may be possible to consider a free, independent and non-communist unified country. This central objective was what brought us into South Viet-Nam and its achievement is the condition for our leaving. No one would be happier than we to leave under that circumstance." The "outer limits" of our policy, he added, "within which we must therefore operate unless the situation forces us to break through those limits," are "... that we do not get out and turn South Viet-Nam over to the Viet-Cong. . . . [and] that we do not use large-scale force to occupy the country and run it ourselves."

Rusk said that the "key question" was what had happened to change the favorable developments of the first six months of 1963. The problem, he added, appeared to be the loss of political confidence, which he attributed primarily to "the two Nhuses."

The next step should be "to concentrate on Diem himself to make him see that everything he has been working for for the past ten years is threatened with collapse and failure and that bold and far-sighted action on his part is required. . . ." What "pressures"

¹¹³It is impossible at this time to be certain of this, however, because the records of that meeting are still classified, and in the file at the Kennedy Library there is this notation concerning a one-page summary of the meeting: "Withdrawn because of high sensitivity and high national security classification and placed in special NLK (National Library Kennedy) security safe." This suggests that the discussion may have gone beyond the question of new instructions into the realm of more drastic U.S. action against Nhu, and against Diem if he did not cooperate.

¹¹⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File.

should be applied in getting Diem to act, the draft cable stated, would have to be determined by Lodge. "I am inclined," Rusk added, "to think that in the next immediate stage we should not threaten what we will not or cannot deliver and that we are not yet ready to cut off assistance which affects the war effort or which would inflict serious damage to the people as contrasted with the regime."

The draft cable concluded with this statement: "It may be that it will be impossible to succeed along this line but the alternatives are so far-reaching that the present effort seems to me to be worth the tedious and frustrating hours which will undoubtedly be required to get through to him and to get him to carry out his own full responsibility."

Development of a General Plan of Action to Enforce U.S. Demands

As the debate over U.S. policy continued, McCone dispatched a special CIA officer to make an independent evaluation of the situation, who reported in mid-September that "we had hastily expended our capability to overthrow the regime, that an aid suspension would not guarantee a constructive result, and that to prevent further political fragmentation we should adopt a "business as usual policy to buy time."¹¹⁵

Diem was also making some moves toward easing the tension in Saigon. On September 14, the government announced that martial law, imposed in August, would end, and that elections for the General Assembly, which had been originally scheduled for August but were postponed, would be rescheduled in September.

Meanwhile at the State Department, Hilsman and his associates were preparing the plan requested by the President at the September 11 meeting. On September 16 this was sent to the President and members of the NSC, and on September 17 the NSC met to consider it.¹¹⁶

This State Department plan, which became the basic action document for U.S. policy prior to the coup on November 1, had two parts or "tracks"—the "Reconciliation Track," and the "Pressures and Persuasion Track." They were not mutually exclusive. According to the cover memo from Hilsman to Rusk and McNamara, the latter track (Pressures and Persuasion Track) was "a phased program designed to persuade the GVN to take certain actions to ensure popular support necessary to win the war, including the removal of Nhu from his position of influence," whereas the former (Reconciliation Track) "proceeds from the assumption that the removal of Nhu is not feasible and attempts to develop a plan aimed at rehabilitating the GVN, even though Nhu continues in power."

Following the cover memo, there was this introductory statement to the two plans:

The overall objective in South Vietnam is to win the war against the Viet Cong. It is our judgment that the recent repressive actions of the GVN have created disaffection which will inevitably affect the war effort, unless that government

¹¹⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 246.

¹¹⁶There are copies of the State Department plan, which was opened in a sanitized form in 1981, in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

undertakes changes in both its policies and personnel that are effective and credible.

Withdrawal by the U.S. would be immediately disastrous to the war effort. On the other hand, acquiescence by the U.S. to recent GVN actions would be equally disastrous, although less immediately so. Our policy is therefore to discriminate; in the words of the President, "what helps to win the war we support. What interferes with the war effort we oppose."

Our problem is to implement this policy of persuasion coupled with pressure in such a way as to avoid triggering either civil violence or a radical move by the government of South Vietnam to make a deal with the DRV and remove the U.S. presence.

Following this introductory statement there was a 14-page statement on the Reconciliation Track, and a three-page "Checklist of Actions for GVN to Ensure Popular Support," which contained specific steps to be taken in conjunction with the Reconciliation Track. These steps included most of the reforms that the Kennedy administration had been urging Diem to adopt since the spring of 1961. The paper also suggested that U.S. efforts at reconciliation with Diem should be led by someone like Lansdale.

It was the second track, "Pressures and Persuasion," however, that was most fully articulated, because Hilsman and his associates considered that track to be more effective. Included was a paper on each of four phases of this track, together with six separate annexes.¹¹⁷ The first of these papers was on the concept of the second track "pressure plan":

The general concept is to use phased, multiple pressures to persuade Diem and Nhu (1) that the GVN should reverse its recent policies of repression effectively and credibly; (2) that the GVN should be broadened; and (3) that the Nhu's influence in the GVN should be sharply and visibly reduced.

Phase 1 concentrates on suasion by a continuation of Lodge's conversations with Diem on the problem of U.S.-GVN relations in all its ramifications.

Phase 2, 3, and 4 add increasingly pressures to the continued conversations.

We recognize the possibility that this campaign may also result in resumed coup plotting. We propose at phases 1 and 2 to give no encouragement to such activities, although we remain ready to listen to serious approaches.

Although past experience does not lead us to be hopeful that suasion alone, as in phase 1, will accomplish the desired results, it seems essential to make the attempt if only to establish a record and lay the groundwork for phase 2.

We believe that the combination of phases 1 and 2 has a good chance of achieving our objective if skillfully and forcefully implemented.

¹¹⁷The annexes were as follows:

(1) Evacuation as a Pressure Device, (2) Evacuation Plan, (3) DOD Checklist on Military Aid, (4) AID checklist on Economic Aid, (5) CIA Checklist on Covert Aid, (6) Consequences for the United States if Nhu Remains in Power. In the Kennedy Library file, annexes (5) and (6) are not included, presumably because they are still classified.

Phase 3 and 4 increase the pressures considerably, and they begin to enter into a stage at which it will become increasingly difficult to reverse ourselves. At this time, we would recommend approval of phases 1 and 2, leaving our decision on 3 and 4 until a later date. At that point, it would seem advisable to bring Ambassador Lodge back to Washington for consultation.

Phase 1 of the Pressures and Persuasion Track was quite similar to the Reconciliation Track. It was to consist primarily of new efforts by Lodge to persuade Diem to make the reforms that the U.S. considered essential.¹¹⁸ To help Lodge do so, there would be a new letter from Kennedy to Diem restating the U.S. position. (A copy of the suggested letter was included in the plan package.)

In phase 2 of this track the U.S. would selectively suspend aid to Vietnam, particularly to those projects and activities most closely controlled by Nhu, as well as general support funds in the commodity import program. The U.S. would also announce the evacuation of all American dependents from Vietnam. "These actions," the paper said, "have been so calculated as to bear minimal effect on the war effort and the conduct of counterinsurgency operations in VN. We are trying now and we will continue to try to avoid harming the little people in the villages and all those elements in VN which are continuing the fight against the VC."

In addition to these actions, of which Diem would be notified, certain additional actions would be taken without disclosure to Diem. "However, the fact that we are taking them will become apparent." These were "(A) Acquisition of substantial cash resources in piastres; (B) A series of covert actions;¹¹⁹ (C) At Lodge's discretion, the [CIA] Chief of Station might talk directly with Ngo Dinh Nhu to persuade him to depart."

The explanation of phases 3 and 4 of the Pressures and Persuasion Track is still so sensitive that the entire introductory, explanatory statement for each phase was deleted when documents on the plan were opened in 1981. From the general description given earlier, however, and from the pages of that section of the report which have been opened, it is possible to ascertain that phase 3 was to be the first of the two-stage direct involvement of the United States in precipitating a coup against Diem, and that the principal public actions contemplated in phase 3 were the complete suspension of financial support under the commodity import program and the agricultural commodities¹²⁰ program, from which the Government of Vietnam derived half of its revenue.

If phase 3 failed to produce the necessary reforms or "change of personnel," to use Kennedy's earlier phrase, phase 4 would begin with a private or public announcement that the U.S. was dissociating itself from the Diem regime. "Such an announcement would reassert U.S. desires to continue support of the Vietnamese people in their fight for freedom, and to indicate U.S. willingness to support an alternative regime—either in Saigon or elsewhere in Vietnam. Actions accompanying this announcement include: immedi-

¹¹⁸For a listing of these reforms see below.

¹¹⁹Here the document refers to annex 5, "CIA checklist on Covert Aid," which is not included in the file and is still classified.

¹²⁰The "P.L. [Public Law] 480 Program."

ate, preplanned evacuation of all nonessential U.S. personnel, turn-around of all shipping, and preparations to supply up-country military forces and strategic hamlets by direct pipeline. These actions now require the overthrow of the Diem regime by coup, or the establishment of a competing government outside of Saigon (and the attendant civil war chaos)."

This was the conclusion of the paper on phase 4:

If the U.S. correctly has estimated civil and military readiness to overthrow Diem, an alternate government should emerge with sufficient popular support to carry on the fight against the Viet Cong while coping with Diem, if he remains in the Saigon area. If the U.S. has not correctly assessed the readiness of the military to desert Diem and he, in fact, retains control of most major forces, the U.S. would face the final decision of U.S. military intervention or complete withdrawal from Viet-Nam. In this situation, U.S. military intervention to fight a former ally could serve no useful purpose, since there would not exist a sufficient popular base of support for U.S. objectives. Inherent in all Phase 4 activities is the element of extreme danger to U.S. essential personnel remaining in Viet-Nam. Casualties should be expected, particularly in the event that there is no popular abandonment of Diem.

On September 16, Hilsman sent Rusk the two draft cables to Lodge, one on each of the proposed two tracks, saying:¹²¹

... My own judgment is that the "Reconciliation Track" will not work. I think Nhu has already decided on an adventure. I think he feels that the progress already made in the war and the U.S. materiel on hand gives him freedom to launch on a course that has a minimum and a maximum goal. The minimum goal would be sharply to reduce the American presence in those key positions which have political significance in the provinces and the strategic hamlet program and to avoid any meaningful concessions that would go against his Mandarin, "personalist" vision of the future of Viet-Nam. The maximum goal, I would think, would be a deal with North Vietnam for a truce in the war, a complete removal of the U.S. presence, and a "neutralist" or "Titoist" but still separate South Viet-Nam.

On September 17, the President met with his NSC advisers to discuss the State Department's plan. The mood was one of determination. In addition to Kennedy's own public pronouncements on the need to defend Vietnam, Senator Fulbright had stated on September 15 on the CBS program "Face the Nation" that "A withdrawal of our forces at this time would . . . be unacceptable."¹²²

It was also obvious, however, that the situation in Vietnam had improved very little, and that the U.S. was faced with having to take additional steps to enforce its demands. But while there was general agreement that the pressure plan was a good working concept, the division within the NSC was as deep as ever, and the appeal for more information on the situation struck a responsive chord with most members of the Council. Thus, after tentatively

¹²¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

¹²²*New York Times*, Sept. 16, 1963.

accepting the pressure plan at the September 17 meeting, the President approved another fact-finding mission by McNamara and Taylor, and postponed final action on the plan pending their report.

After the meeting, the White House cabled Lodge that the pressure plan had been tentatively approved, and requested his comments.¹²³ "We see no good opportunity for action to remove present government in immediate future; therefore, as your most recent messages suggest, we must for the present apply such pressures as are available to secure whatever modest improvements on the scene may be possible. We think it likely that such improvements can make a difference, at least in the short run. Such a course, moreover, is consistent with more drastic effort as and when means become available, and we will be in touch on other channels on this problem."

The cable authorized Lodge to suspend U.S. aid on a selective basis when desirable. He was also urged to resume discussions with Diem: "We ourselves can see much virtue in effort to reason even with an unreasonable man when he is on a collision course."

The cable also listed the conditions which Lodge should continue to insist upon:

A. Clear the air—Diem should get everyone back to work and get them to focus on winning the war. He should be broad-minded and compassionate in his attitude toward those who have, for understandable reasons, found it difficult under recent circumstances fully to support him. A real spirit of reconciliation could work wonders on the people he leads; a punitive, harsh or autocratic attitude could only lead to further resistance.

B. Buddhists and students—Let them out and leave them unmolested. This more than anything else would demonstrate the return of a better day and the refocusing on the main job at hand, the war.

C. Press—The press should be allowed full latitude of expression. Diem will be criticized, but leniency and cooperation with the domestic and foreign press at this time would bring praise for his leadership in due course. While tendentious reporting is irritating, suppression of news leads to much more serious trouble.

D. Secret and combat police—Confine its role to operations against the VC and abandon operations against non-Communist opposition groups thereby indicating clearly that a period of reconciliation and political stability has returned.

E. Cabinet changes to inject new untainted blood, remove targets of popular discontent.

F. Elections—These should be held, should be free, and should be widely observed.

G. Assembly—Assembly should be convoked soon after the elections. The government should submit its policies to it and should receive its confidence. An assembly resolution would be most useful for external image purposes.

¹²³White House to Lodge, Sept. 17, 1963, in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 743-745.

H. Party—Can Lao party [led by Nhu] should not be covert or semi-covert but a broad association of supporters engaged in a common, winning cause. This could perhaps be best accomplished by [words missing] starting afresh. . . .

J. Rehabilitation by ARVN [Vietnamese Army] of pagodas.

K. Establishment of Ministry of Religious Affairs.

L. Liberation of passport issuances and currency restrictions enabling all to leave who wish to.

M. Acceptance of Buddhist Inquiry Mission from World Federation to report true facts of situation to world.

"Specific 'reforms,'" the cable added, "are apt to have little impact without dramatic, symbolic move which convinces Vietnamese that reforms are real. As practical matter we share your view that this can best be achieved by some visible reduction in influence of Nhush, who are symbol to disaffected of all that they dislike in GVN. This we think would require Nhush departure from Saigon and preferably Vietnam at least for extended vacation. We recognize the strong possibility that these and other pressures may not produce this result, but we are convinced that it is necessary to try."

Lodge replied on September 19 that he agreed there was "no good opportunity for action to remove present government in immediate future . . . and that we should, therefore, do whatever we can as an interim measure pending such an eventuality."¹²⁴ He said that the list of reforms in Washington's cable had already been discussed with Diem and Nhu. "They think that most of them would either involve destroying the political structure on which they rest or loss of face or both. We, therefore, could *not* realistically hope for more than lip service. Frankly, I see no opportunity at all for substantive changes." Lodge also said that he doubted whether this kind of a "public relations package" would be effective, given the situation. He said he had talked the day before with General Minh, who said that the Communists were gaining ground and the Diem government was more corrupt and repressive than ever. He had also talked to Thuan, who said he wanted to leave the country.

With respect to using selective suspension of U.S. aid as a sanction, but without causing an economic collapse or impeding the war, Lodge said that this also was being studied by the U.S. mission, but without success. "If a way to do this were to be found," he added, "it would be one of the greatest discoveries since the enactment of the Marshall Plan in 1947 because, so far as I know, the U.S. had never yet been able to control any of the very unsatisfactory governments through which we have had to work in our many very successful attempts to make these countries strong enough to stand alone. . . . to threaten them with suppression of aid might well defeat our purposes and might make a bad situation very much worse."

Lodge said that whatever sanctions were used, they should be "directly tied to a promising coup d'état and should *not* be applied without such a coup being in prospect."

¹²⁴Saigon to Washington, Sept. 19, 1963, in *ibid.*, pp. 746-748.

With respect to the "dramatic symbolic moves" suggested by Washington, Lodge said he had talked to Nhu the night before about the matter, and that Diem and Nhu "... have scant comprehension of what it is to appeal to public opinion as they have really no interest in any other opinions than their own. I have repeatedly brought up the question of Nhu's departure and have stressed that if he would just stay away until after Christmas, it might help get the [foreign aid] Appropriation Bill through. This seems like a small thing to us but to them it seems tremendous as they are quite sure that the Army would take over if he even stepped out of the country."

In conclusion, Lodge told Washington that he had no objection to seeing Diem, but that he would "rather let him sweat for a while. . . . I would much prefer to wait until I find some part of the AID program to hold up in which he is interested and then have him ask me to come and see him."

The McNamara-Taylor Mission

On September 23, Kennedy met with McNamara and Taylor just before they left.¹²⁵ Among other things, he urged them to impress upon Diem the need for reform "as a pragmatic necessity and not as a moral judgment." He said he did not think the threats to cut off aid would be effective, and that, "Since in fact only small changes were likely to be made in the immediate future, it would be better to let such adjustments speak for themselves." Because Diem undoubtedly knew of U.S. involvement with the "opposition," he said it would be best for McNamara and Taylor to stress positive accomplishments, especially since 1961, and the strength of U.S. support for Vietnam.

Taylor suggested that it would be useful to work out "... a time schedule within which we expect to get this job done and to say plainly to Diem that we were not going to be able to stay beyond such and such a time with such and such forces, and that the war must be won in this time period." (The notes of the meeting do not indicate whether the President responded to this suggestion.)

When McNamara and Taylor (others on the trip were William Bundy, William Sullivan from the State Department, and William Colby from the CIA) arrived in Saigon on September 24, Lodge, who was fully aware of the politics of the situation, began lobbying hard for his position. According to Halberstam, who witnessed the incident, Lodge, who had invited McNamara to stay with him, met McNamara at the airport, where two of the Embassy's staffers had been assigned to block General Harkins so that Lodge would be the first to greet McNamara, "... leaving an angry Harkins pushing at the human barrier, shouting, 'Please, gentlemen, please let me through to the Secretary.'"¹²⁶

After spending about a week surveying the situation in Vietnam, McNamara and Taylor met privately with Diem. McNamara told him that he thought the war was going well, and that the Communist threat could be satisfactorily met by the end of 1965 if the po-

¹²⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Memorandum for the Record, Meeting on McNamara/Taylor Mission to South Vietnam," Sept. 23, 1963.

¹²⁶*The Best and the Brightest*, p. 283.

litical situation were stabilized and reforms were carried out by the Diem government. Taylor said he agreed.¹²⁷ McNamara added that such improvements were also required for continued support from Congress and the American public. According to the official summary of the meeting, Diem spoke at length, especially about the strategic hamlets, but did not seem at all responsive to the points made by McNamara and Taylor. "His manner was one of at least outward serenity and of a man who had patiently explained a great deal and who hoped he had thus corrected a number of misapprehensions."¹²⁸

Upon their return to Washington on October 2, McNamara and Taylor immediately submitted their written report to the President, as well as reporting orally to the President that morning and to the President and the NSC that afternoon.¹²⁹ Their first conclusion was that "The military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress." They said that the timetable for final victory, ("If, by victory, we mean the reduction of the insurgency to something little more than sporadic banditry in outlying districts"), provided there was adequate political stability, was to win by the end of 1964 in all but the IV Corps (the delta), and sometime in 1965 in the IV Corps. But they also concluded that the political situation continued to be "deeply serious," and could affect the conduct of the war. U.S. pressure on Diem was required to produce change, but might make him even more uncooperative. A coup was not likely at that time, "although assassination of Diem or Nhu is always a possibility."

"The prospects that a replacement regime would be an improvement appear to be about 50-50," the report stated, adding that a new regime would probably be headed by a military officer, who would need to maintain order, and that "Such an authoritarian military regime, perhaps after an initial period of euphoria at the departure of Diem/Nhu, would be apt to entail a resumption of the repression at least of Diem, the corruption of the Vietnamese Establishment before Diem, and an emphasis on conventional military rather than social, economic and political considerations, with at least an equivalent degree of xenophobic nationalism."

Of the three alternatives—reconciliation, selective pressure, or active promotion of a coup, McNamara and Taylor said that the first would be ineffective and the third unwise. They favored the second, and recommended that the U.S. should continue to apply such selective pressures, primarily through withholding of aid funds, but that nothing should be done which would impede the war effort. "We should work with the Diem government but not support it." Although the U.S. should continue to develop relations with "an alternate leadership if and when it appears," it should not actively promote a coup at that time. "... whether or not it proves to be wise to promote a coup at a later time, we must be ready for the possibility of a spontaneous coup, and this too requires clandestine contacts on an intensive basis."

¹²⁷See *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 298-299.

¹²⁸*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 751.

¹²⁹The McNamara-Taylor report to the President is in *ibid.*, pp. 751-766. For comments on the report see *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 298-299, and *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 284-285.

On the military side, they recommended an increase in combat operations, but with emphasis on "clear and hold" rather than "terrain sweeps which have little permanent value." Strategic hamlets should be strengthened, and more hamlet militia armed. More Vietnamese should be trained to replace U.S. forces by the end of 1965.

They also recommended announcement of the plan to withdraw 1,000 U.S. troops by the end of 1963: "This action should be explained in low key as an initial step in a long-term program to replace U.S. personnel with trained Vietnamese without impairment of the war effort."

At the conclusion of the second meeting on October 2, Kennedy, as recommended by McNamara and Taylor in their report, issued the following press statement:¹³⁰

1. The security of South Viet-Nam is a major interest of the United States as of other free nations. We will adhere to our policy of working with the people and Government of South Viet-Nam to deny this country to communism and to suppress the externally stimulated and supported insurgency of the Viet Cong as promptly as possible. Effective performance in this undertaking is the central objective of our policy in South Viet-Nam.

2. The military program in South Vietnam has made progress and is sound in principle, though improvements are being energetically sought.

3. Major U.S. assistance in support of this military effort is needed only until the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it.

Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgement that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of U.S. training personnel. They reported that by the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Viet-Nam can be withdrawn.

4. The political situation in South Viet-Nam remains deeply serious. The United States has made clear its continuing opposition to any repressive actions in South Viet-Nam. While such actions have not yet significantly affected the military effort, they could do so in the future.

5. It remains the policy of the United States, in South Viet-Nam as in other parts of the world, to support the efforts of the people of that country to defeat aggression and to build a peaceful and free society.

¹³⁰*Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1963, pp. 759-760. Several changes were made in the wording suggested by McNamara and Taylor. They recommended that the statement read: "The security of South Vietnam remains vital to the United States security." As can be noted, the word "vital" was changed to "major interest." At Taylor's suggestion, (see *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 296-297), the report also recommended that the press statement contain this sentence: "We believe the U.S. part of the task can be completed by the end of 1965, the terminal date which we are taking as the time objective of our counterinsurgency programs." This, too, was revised, as can be seen.

The wisdom of announcing the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops, (which, it will be recalled, had been the objective of U.S. military planning since July of 1962) had been strenuously debated within the McNamara-Taylor mission, as well as among other top Presidential advisers. William Sullivan argued that it would be a mistake to include the statement:¹³¹

... we were each drafting a separate chapter of this report and then exchanging the chapters around. When I got Max's [Maxwell Taylor] chapter—we all had offices in the old MACV [U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] out there—I went to Bob McNamara and I said, "I just can't buy this. This is totally unrealistic. We're not going to get troops out in '65. We mustn't submit anything phony as this to the president." And Bob agreed and he went in and talked to Max, and Max agreed to scrub it. Then on the plane on the way we talked about it a bit. Max said, "Well, goddammit, we've got to make these people put their noses to the wheel—or the grindstone or whatever. If we don't give them some indication that we're going to get out sometime, they're just going to be leaning on us forever. So that's why I had it in there." I said, "Well, I can understand that. But if this becomes a matter of public record, it would be considered a phony and a fraud and an effort to mollify the American public and just not be considered honest."

The decision to announce the withdrawal of 1,000 troops was made by Kennedy in a meeting with Rusk, McNamara and Taylor. Both Bundys questioned whether the announcement should be made, but when pressed by Chester L. Cooper, a member of the NSC staff, and others after the meeting, they said they were "under orders."¹³² Sullivan called McNamara to ask "... why in hell is it back in public print again," and McNamara's reply, Sullivan said later, was "not all that convincing at the time."¹³³

William Bundy has since commented that in retrospect there was a "clear internal inconsistency" in the report, namely, the finding on the one hand that political reforms were unlikely to occur, and the conclusion on the other that withdrawal could begin. He attributes this to the pressures of time and the effects of exhaustion, but says, "The words of the release on the military situation were extraordinarily unwise and extraordinarily haunting for the future."¹³⁴

With respect to the results of the McNamara-Taylor trip, Bundy makes this informative observation:¹³⁵

In essence, McNamara, with the strong support of civilian members of his team, came to accept the judgment that had already been reached by Lodge, [William] Trueheart [Deputy Chief of Mission], and most (but not all) of the Embassy staff. This was that an unchanged Diem regime stood only a small chance of holding South Vietnam together and carrying the conflict with the Viet Cong and Hanoi to a successful conclu-

¹³¹Kennedy Library, Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan.

¹³²Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), p. 216.

¹³³Kennedy Library, Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan.

¹³⁴Bundy MS., ch. 9, p. 26.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, ch. 9, pp. 19-20.