

Part II: America's Deepening Commitment—1954-64

The Geneva Conference of 1954 produced a solution to the military conflict in Indochina, but did not resolve the political status of Vietnam. Hostilities halted and French forces regrouped below the 17th parallel. Within two years, they withdrew completely from Vietnam. Above the 17th parallel, in what would become known as North Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh held undisputed power. Below the 17th parallel, the Republic of Vietnam, the former French protectorate, was led by Ngo Dinh Diem, an anti-communist Roman Catholic. Bao Dai appointed him prime minister in June 1954.

The accords signed at Geneva also called for Vietnam-wide elections to be held within two years for the purpose of achieving political unification. While the United States was clearly displeased with the apparent partial communist victory and refused to sign any formal declaration after the conference, Washington did pledge to respect the settlement and “view with grave concern any renewal of aggression in the area.” As the French withdrew from South Vietnam, their presence was replaced by the arrival of U.S. economic aid and military advisers.

Why was Diem viewed favorably in Washington?

Washington viewed Ngo Dinh Diem as the only alternative to communist control over all of Vietnam. With strong anti-communist and anti-French credentials, Diem also had the backing of the small but powerful Roman Catholic minority in South Vietnam. Many of these Catholics had fled from the north after the settlement and fiercely opposed any accommodation with the communists.

With the backing of his American advisers, Diem rejected in July 1955 the provisions of the Geneva Accords that called for Vietnam-wide elections within two years. Washington believed that the popularity of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh would guarantee a commu-

nist victory. Shortly thereafter, Diem defeated Bao Dai in a South Vietnamese referendum, receiving 98 percent of the vote. Diem's refusal to participate in Vietnam-wide elections by the June 1956 deadline brought no protests from either the Soviet Union or China. In fact, the Soviets proposed in 1957 that both Vietnams be admitted to the United Nations. Although it rejected this proposal, the United States continued to implement its plan to transform South Vietnam into a strong, independent, anti-communist nation which would block any further communist expansion into Southeast Asia.

How did the United States support Diem's regime?

By early 1960, the United States had sent more than \$1 billion in economic and military aid to support Diem's regime. In addition to the aid, nearly one thousand U.S. military personnel were stationed in Vietnam to serve as advisers to the Diem government and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Diem's increasingly dictatorial governing style triggered several failed coup attempts and heightened violence in the countryside. By the late 1950s, remnants of Vietminh units (now called Vietcong) in South Vietnam had begun to attack local government officials. The Vietcong campaign was supported by the National Liberation Front, a collection of groups formed in December 1960 with North Vietnam's encouragement to oppose Diem's rule. During 1961, more than four thousand government officials, mostly lower ranking village chiefs, were assassinated.

Ironically, the first Asian crisis to confront President John F. Kennedy when he took office in January 1961 was not in Vietnam, but in neighboring Laos, where a complicated civil war was raging. Britain and the Soviet Union, the co-sponsors of the 1954 Geneva Conference, organized another conference in Geneva in 1961 to resolve the Laotian situation. The negotiations resulted in an agreement to re-

spect Laos' neutrality. In contrast to the U.S. position in 1954, the Kennedy administration supported the outcome of the conference in 1961. At the same time, Kennedy had no intention of backing down from the U.S. commitment to an independent, anti-communist South Vietnam. In fact, a high-level U.S. mission headed by General Maxwell Taylor, soon to be appointed Kennedy's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Walt Rostow, a top State Department official, went to Vietnam in October 1961 to evaluate the situation and to make recommendations for stemming the communist advance.

“...The question was how to change a losing game and begin to win, not how to call it off.”

—General Maxwell Taylor

The Taylor-Rostow report reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. “If Vietnam goes,” the report argued, “it will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible to hold Southeast Asia.” General Taylor recommended the introduction of eight thousand U.S. combat troops initially. To avoid drawing too much attention to the move, he proposed that the stated purpose of their mission be flood relief. Taylor also dismissed concerns about North Vietnam's response to this action.

“North Vietnam is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing.... There is no case for fearing a mass onslaught of Communist manpower into South Vietnam and its neighboring states, particularly if our air power is allowed a free hand against logistical targets.”

—General Maxwell Taylor

In addition, Taylor recommended increased logistical support for the ARVN, the introduction of U.S. helicopters, and increased covert operations in Laos and North Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Pentagon military planners saw Taylor's pro-

posal as inadequate. Instead they advocated the deployment of up to two hundred thousand U.S. combat troops.

“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.... 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 [Beijing], 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. The other side can be convinced we mean business only if we accompany the initial force introduction by a clear commitment... We can assume that the maximum U.S. forces required on the ground in Southeast Asia will not exceed six divisions, or about 205,000 men.”

—Department of Defense Report,
November 1961

What was Kennedy's compromise approach?

President Kennedy compromised and adopted an approach that fell between Taylor's and the Defense Department's recommendations. The United States sent helicopters, beefed up the aid package, and dramatically increased the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam. From the end of 1961 to the end of 1962, the number of U.S. personnel rose from more than three thousand to more than eleven thousand. These advisers, who accompanied ARVN units into battle, soon began to suffer casualties. In 1961, eleven were killed

in combat; in 1962 thirty-one were killed; and in 1963 seventy-eight Americans died in the Vietnam War. The president made no strong public commitment to the war to the American people, and the Pentagon's estimate that as many as 200,000 troops would be needed was kept secret.

On the battlefield, the performance of the ARVN, guided by U.S. advisers and armed with new equipment, was mixed. Moreover, the Pentagon's "strategic hamlet program," which was designed to prevent the Vietcong from circulating freely among peasants in the countryside, was not generally successful. Nonetheless, the United States issued optimistic statements in mid-1963. "Victory in three years," predicted one. "There is a new feeling of confidence that victory is possible," said another. Kennedy himself declared, "We don't see the end of the tunnel, but I must say I don't think it is darker than it was a year ago, and in some ways [it is] lighter."

Not all U.S. decision-makers agreed with Kennedy's assessment. Mike Mansfield, the majority leader in the Senate, toured Southeast Asia in late 1962 and advised Kennedy that the United States should re-evaluate its commitment and involvement in South Vietnam.

"It is their country, their future that is 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 that was formerly occupied by the French."

—Senator Mike Mansfield

Mansfield and other critics of the war effort worried particularly about growing political opposition to Diem's rule in South Vietnam. During the spring of 1963, for example, thousands of Buddhists led by militant monks in the northern city of Hue began protesting what they perceived as discrimination practiced against them by Diem and his predominantly Roman Catholic government.

In response, government troops fired at the peaceful demonstrators, killing nine people. The Diem government ignored U.S. advice to seek reconciliation and instead insisted that the Vietcong were manipulating the Buddhists. In June 1963, the Buddhist protest hit the front pages of American newspapers when an elderly monk drenched himself with gasoline in a busy Saigon intersection and, with the assistance of other monks and nuns, burned himself to death. A written message the monk left behind requested that the Diem government respect all religions and show charity and compassion in its dealings with the Buddhists. Again the Diem government blamed the incident on the Vietcong, and more fiery suicides followed.

Why did President Kennedy appoint Henry Cabot Lodge as the new ambassador to Vietnam?

The frustration of the Kennedy administration with Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who headed the regime's secret police, led to the appointment in June 1963 of Henry Cabot Lodge as the new U.S. ambassador to Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. Lodge, a Republican from Massachusetts, was Kennedy's choice to direct the tough new American line in Saigon. No longer would the United States "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem," as American observers had remarked. Instead, Diem would be told to reform his government and build popular support for the war against the communists—or else.

The choice of a prominent Republican for the sensitive post revealed Kennedy's desire to maintain bipartisan support for U.S. involvement. By the time Ambassador Lodge arrived in Saigon in August 1963, the situation seemed beyond hope. U.S. officials were talking about the need to replace Diem and his clique. Lodge was instructed to tell ARVN generals dissatisfied with Diem that the United States would condone a coup against the government, so long as the anti-communist struggle continued. On November 2, 1963, Diem and his brother were overthrown in a military coup and assassinated. President Ken-



Karl Hubenthal in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner.

nedy himself would be dead from the bullets of an assassin within three weeks.

Why did President Johnson find himself drawn deeply into the problems in Vietnam?

Before Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, Lyndon Johnson had not played a major role as vice president in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. Although he went to South Vietnam in May 1961 and hailed Diem as “the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia,” Johnson had not been part of the inner circle of decision-makers who had shaped the growing U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

Rather, Johnson was a master of domestic politics. Majority leader of the Senate for many years, Johnson as president wished to focus his efforts on an ambitious agenda to create a “Great Society” at home. His idol was Franklin D. Roosevelt, the domestic reformer, not Franklin D. Roosevelt, the world leader. Inheriting most of Kennedy’s foreign policy advisers, including Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Assistant

Secretary of State William Bundy, and top State Department planner Walt Rostow, Johnson quickly found himself drawn deeply into the worsening crisis in Vietnam.

The fact that a military government replaced Diem in Saigon did not bring the anticipated turnaround in the war effort. A series of power struggles within the South Vietnamese military leadership to determine who would exercise real power in the government complicated the situation.

Meanwhile, the number of U.S. military advisers grew to more than sixteen thousand by the end of 1963 and would surpass twenty-three thousand by the end of the next year. Frustrated by the hit-and-run tactics of the Vietcong in South Vietnam, many American military leaders were convinced that only heavy bombing of North Vietnam could stop the communists. Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay argued that “we are swatting flies when we should be going after the manure pile!”

For his part, Johnson was most concerned about winning election in the fall of 1964 to a full four-year term as president. As he reportedly told his military advisers at a White House Christmas party in December 1963, “just let me get elected, and then you can have your war.”

But Johnson was unable to turn his attention away from Vietnam for long. North Vietnam continued its support for the insurgency in the south, and matched the gradual escalation of U.S. involvement. During 1964, an estimated ten thousand North Vietnamese troops infiltrated the south. Although the communist forces in the south were still overwhelmingly South Vietnamese, these regular units from the north and the supplies that they brought gave the insurgents increased capability for large-scale actions. At the same time, the United States was spending more than \$2 million a day in Vietnam and several Americans a week on average were being killed in battle. In March 1964, Secretary of Defense McNamara, returning from his second trip to Vietnam in four months, reported that:

“The situation has unquestionably been growing worse, at least since September [1963].... In terms of government control of the countryside about 40 percent of the territory is now under Viet Cong control or predominant influence.... Large groups of the population are now showing signs of apathy and indifference.... The ARVN and paramilitary desertion rates, and particularly the latter, are high and increasing.”

—Robert S. McNamara

As had become the pattern, leaders recommended increased aid in the form of more military equipment. In addition, U.S. leaders told the Saigon government that “we are prepared to furnish assistance and support to South Vietnam for as long as it takes to bring the insurgency under control.”