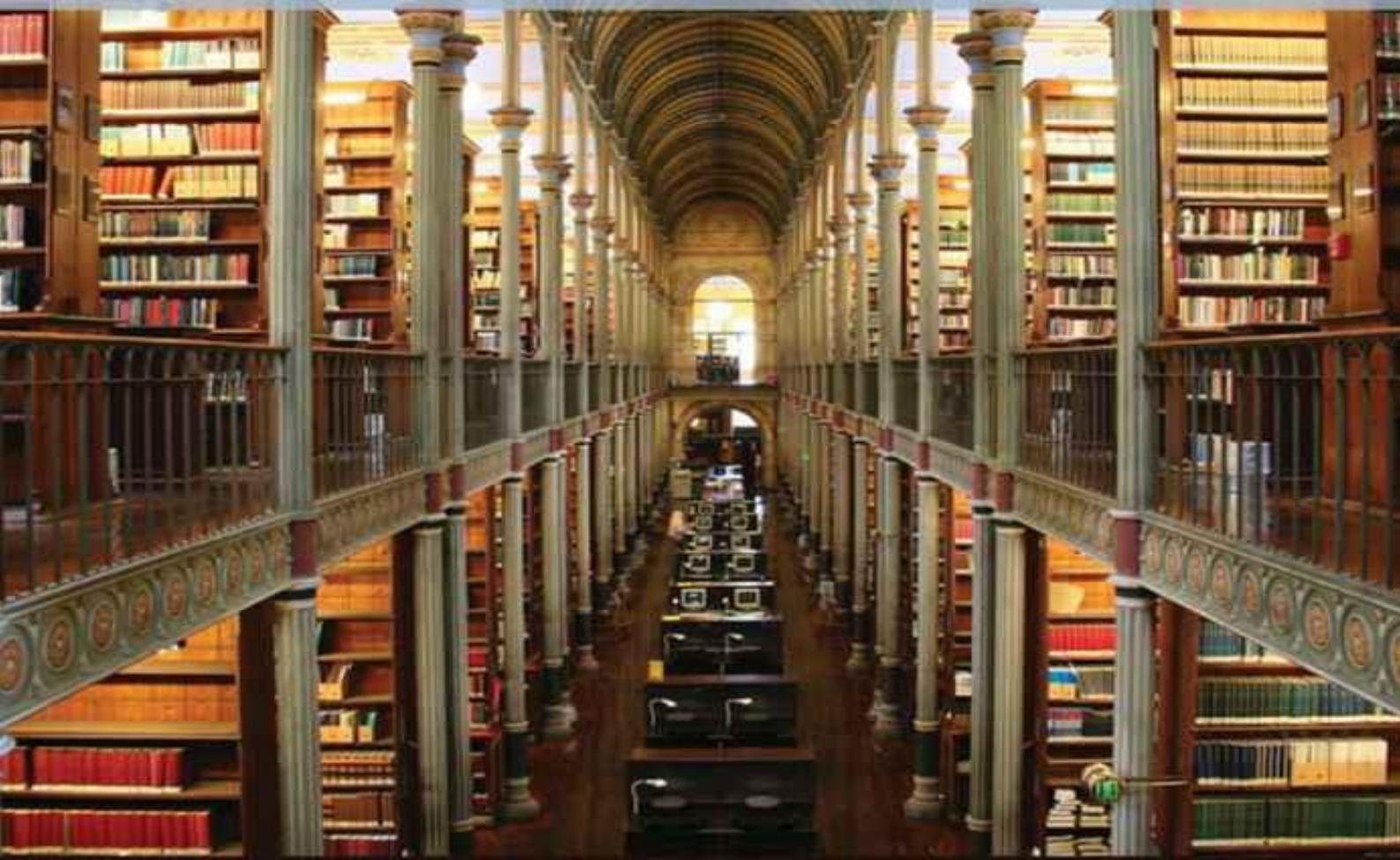


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Guenter Lewy

America in Vietnam

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Guenter Lewy

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Preface

This book began as an effort to find answers to some of the factual uncertainties and moral ambiguities created by the war in Vietnam. It was completed some five years later amid reports of new human tragedy in the making—uncounted hapless refugees drowning on the high seas and thousands of others seeking a new home in a world all too indifferent to their suffering.

The desirability of bringing to bear more light, rather than heat, on the discussion of the American involvement in Vietnam has been apparent for a long time, but somewhat paradoxically serious interest in this emotionladen subject appears to have declined just as reliable information on events in Indochina is finally becoming available. Under provisions of Executive Orders 10501 and 10814 promulgated by President Eisenhower, and Executive Order 11652, issued by President Nixon on March 1972, the secretaries of the military services have discretionary authority to permit qualified researchers from outside the executive department access to classified defense information.* Whether out of unacquaintance with this provision of the law or for lack of interest in a subject many Americans would prefer to forget, no scholar until now has availed himself of this rich, and indeed indispensable, source.

This book is the first work dealing with the Vietnam war which, in addition to standard sources makes use of the classified records of the U.S. Army, Air Force and Marine Corps—after-action reports of military operations, field reports and staff studies of the pacification effort and the Phoenix program, intelligence reports, investigations of war crimes, and the like. As one would expect, the picture that emerges is novel and occasionally startling in both fact and significance.

The first six chapters seek to provide a reliable empirical record of American actions in Vietnam and, in the process, to clear away the cobwebs of mythology that inhibit the correct understanding of what went on—and what went wrong—in Vietnam. In the interest of a treatment in depth, the scope of this study has been limited to Vietnam proper. The complex story of the growing involvement of Laos and Cambodia in the Indochina conflict requires a separate, detailed account and is therefore touched upon here only insofar as it relates most directly to developments in Vietnam.

It is among actions taken—or not taken—by the U.S. and its allies *in Vietnam* that the explanation for the course of events and the final outcome of the war has to be found. Back in 1962 President Kennedy is supposed to have called the infiltration of communist cadres from the North a built-in excuse for failure in the South. In the same way, the collapse of the South Vietnamese army in the face of still another large-scale invasion from the North, preceded by drastic cuts in aid to South Vietnam imposed by the U.S. Congress after the Paris Agreement of 1973, has tempted both the last leaders of South Vietnam and most of the U.S. military to avoid facing the fundamental reasons for this defeat. The South Vietnamese, and indeed American soldiers earlier, it is argued, could have won the war had they not been frustrated by political constraints in the U.S. and the collapse of the home front. There is no denying that the reductions in U.S. aid did weaken South Vietnam's ability to resist the well-equipped northern divisions, and war-weariness and antiwar sentiment in America were widespread. However, the nonachievement of U.S. goals in Vietnam had other and deeper causes, prominently including a failure to understand the political and social dynamics of a revolutionary war. To ignore these basic causes in favor of a facile stab-in-the-back legend will give rise to more illusions and prevent the learning of the necessary and correct lessons of the Vietnam debacle.

To a large number of Americans the Vietnam war represents not only a political mistake and a national defeat but also a major moral failure. The catalog of evils with which the United States burdened includes the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the assassination and torture of political adversaries, the terror-bombing of North Vietnam, duplicity about it all in high places and much else. For many younger people, in particular, America in Vietnam stands as the epitome of evil in the modern world; this view of the American role in Vietnam has contributed significantly to the impairment of national pride and self-confidence that has beset this country since the fall of Vietnam.

It is the reasoned conclusion of this study, developed especially in chapters 7–11, that the sense of guilt created by the Vietnam war in the minds of many Americans is not warranted and that the charges of *officially condoned* illegal and grossly immoral conduct are without substance. Indeed a detailed examination of battle field practices reveals that the loss of civilian life in Vietnam was less great than in World War II and Korea and that concern with minimizing the ravages of war was strong. To measure and compare the devastation and loss of human life caused by different wars would be objectionable to those who repudiate all resort to military force as an instrument of foreign policy and may be construed as callousness. Yet as long as wars do take place at all it remains a moral duty to seek to reduce the agony caused by war, and the fulfillment of this obligation should not be disdained. I hope that this book may help demonstrate that moral convictions are not the exclusive possession of persons in conscience opposed to war, and that those who in certain circumstances accept the necessity and ethical justification of armed conflict also do care about human suffering.

The Vietnam experience was always more complex than ideologues on either side could allow. The reality of the Vietnam war was composed of myriad events; the intricacy and variety of the scene were such that visiting “hawks” and “doves” could each observe, investigate and leave, assured of the wisdom of the view each held upon arrival. Like pieces in a kaleidoscope, the “facts” of the Vietnam war could, and still can, be put together in a multitude of configurations which in turn lead to different political and moral judgments and conclusions. I make no claim to have overcome all of the difficulties which confront the search for “the truth” about Vietnam. I do assert that the previously untapped sources at my disposal have enabled me to clarify some of the most important, hitherto contested, issues of the war, and that my major findings are supported by evidence which stands up under critical scrutiny. Sections of the epilogue, I should acknowledge, dealing with such questions as whether the U.S. could have won in Vietnam, are necessarily in large measure speculative. That part of the book will have to be judged by different criteria, and I shall not be displeased if future events were to prove my reflections to have been unduly pessimistic—especially my observations concerning the political impact of the Vietnam disaster at home and abroad.

One of the by-products of the Vietnam war and the Watergate events has been the creation of a major credibility gap regarding official sources and a general distrust of facts and figures issued by the American government. At the same time, the most implausible and unsubstantiated allegations are often believed if in line with the conventional wisdom—widely held views and prejudices. Some of these allegations have been repeated and reprinted so many times as to supply, as it were, their own confirmation and verification. It is symptomatic of the ideological fervor which has characterized much writing on the Vietnam war that many authors have accepted as fact those portions of the *Pentagon Papers*, the Defense Department’s history of the Vietnam conflict, which served the particular axe they were grinding but have rejected as tainted and unreliable documents from the same source which they deemed inconvenient and out of line with their political views.

In this book I have relied upon standard methods of historical inquiry such as cross-checking sources and testing for consistency, and I am satisfied that the evidence derived from the offici-

documents utilized is reliable. Not meant for public consumption, many of these documents are highly critical of various aspects of U.S. actions in Vietnam, a fact which enhances both their credibility and usefulness. Reports by American military and civilian officials in the countryside provide an important supplement and corrective to the command histories and after-combat reports of American military units. The most valuable of these original sources are the monthly and end-of-tour reports by province and district advisers and the findings of special teams of trouble-shooters, called the Pacification Studies Group, which operated outside the regular chain of command and therefore were unaffected by the prevailing pressures to report progress and success. Other important sources are recorded interviews with high-ranking communist defectors and captured documents as well as the investigative reports and transcripts of courts-martial involving war crimes. The adversary process and the interplay of prosecution and defense here provides unusual insights into the reality of the war. Specific problems of reliability, as for example the notorious exaggeration of enemy body count, are discussed in the appropriate chapters below.

New sources will undoubtedly become available in the future which will throw additional light on this topic. But the Vietnam war is too important a subject and the national trauma too deep to allow the postponement of a searching and disinterested study until the last archives everywhere have been opened. Mythology, half-truth and falsehood concerning events in Vietnam abound and, unless corrected, will enter the textbooks for the miseducation of our children. Moreover, waiting carries its own price tag. The writer loses familiarity with the spirit of the times he is describing; as some of the recent works on World War II demonstrate, the passage of time does not necessarily deepen and improve perspective. More importantly, crucial participants die and memories fade. Hence analysts in the future will have to be content with the written record, which is never complete or conclusive. Within any governmental bureaucracy, civilian or military, many memoranda, cables, directives and rules are drafted and issued to safeguard careers or for public consumption or for the eyes of the historian. It is therefore important to supplement and check the formal record through interviews with key decision-makers. In this study I have benefited greatly from discussions with several major and numerous lower-ranking participants in the events I am describing. Their number is far too large to permit listing them by name; many of them preferred to talk not for attribution. Interviews with Vietnamese refugees now in the United States have further helped clarify significant details.

I agree with the saying, attributed to Disraeli, that there are lies, damned lies and statistics; but the statistical data adduced here are merely one type of evidence. No major conclusion of this study depends on the accuracy of any particular set of figures. On the other hand, treated with the necessary circumspection and correctly interpreted, these statistical data are often highly illuminating. General readers, interested in the overall picture, can safely skip my tables, just as they can ignore my notes which generally contain only citations of sources. Scholars interested in the archival location of particular documents should consult the Note on Military Records at the back of the book.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the persons and organizations which have aided me in the preparation of this work. A grant from the research council of the University of Massachusetts/Amherst helped make possible several months of archival research in Washington, D.C. A Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship, awarded for the academic year 1976-77, provided the leisure to work through the large quantity of documentary materials obtained there and actually write the book.

I am appreciative of the cooperation of various bureaus and officials in the Departments of State and Defense; the Agency for International Development; the Offices of the Judge Advocates General of the military services; the staff of the Judge Advocate General's School at Charlottesville, Virginia;

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Many of those named or referred to anonymously in the preceding paragraphs have read the final draft of this book; so did my friends Abraham Ascher, Peter Berger, Stanley Elkins, Robert Gesser, William V. O'Brien, Stanley Rothman and David H. Scott. I thank them all for their thoughtful and constructive criticism. Needless to say, none of the above individuals, organizations and agencies are responsible for the opinions and conclusions reached here, which remain for better or for worse my own responsibility.

A final word of gratitude is due my wife, as always an indispensable source of encouragement and wise counsel.

Northampton, Mass.

December 1977

G.

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The Roots of Involvement

Assistance to the French

The decision of the Truman administration in early 1950 to provide financial aid to the French military effort in Indochina was taken against the background of the fall of Nationalist China and the arrival of Communist Chinese troops on the Indochina border in December 1949. The Ho Chi Minh regime had just been recognized as the government of Vietnam by the Soviet Union and Communist China. Mao's government provided sanctuary, training and heavy arms to the Viet Minh (Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam) which, despite the trappings of a mere nationalist movement, was increasingly evolving into a party openly committed by organization and ideology to the communist sphere. On 6 March 1950 the U.S. secretary of defense informed the president: "The choice confronting the United States is to support the legal government in Indochina or to face the extension of Communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and possibly west-ward. . ."¹

American assistance was accompanied by pressure upon the French to complete the independence of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, since January 1950 part of the French Union. American policy makers were fully aware that only the complete decolonization of Indochina would lead to the establishment of a stable noncommunist force in the areas adjacent to Communist China. But American leverage was weak. The French were sensitive over what they regarded as American interference in their internal affairs and they suspected the U.S. of seeking to supplant them economically and politically, in Indochina. Moreover, America was anxious to obtain French support for the creation of a European Defense Community (EDC). The U.S. was seriously concerned about the Soviet threat to a Western Europe made destitute by World War II—through overt aggression or internal subversion by Communist parties steadily gaining in strength. EDC therefore had high priority in American planning and this led to reluctance to antagonize the French over the issue of Indochina. France, consequently, could ignore American proddings to grant meaningful authority to the formally independent Government of Vietnam (GVN), headed by the emperor Bao Dai.

The outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950 confirmed the U.S. in its view that the issues in Vietnam were far greater than those of a mere colonial war and that French resistance to the Chinese-supported Viet Minh was a crucial link in the containment of communism. Given the extensive influence exerted by the Soviet Union over other communist nations, it was natural for the U.S. to see the attempt of the communist Ho Chi Minh regime to expel the French from Indochina as part of communist worldwide aggressive designs. Accused by Senator Joseph McCarthy of being soft on communism, the Truman administration did not want the loss of Indochina to be added to the charge that it had caused the "loss" of China. On 27 June 1950 President Truman announced that the U.S., following the call of the UN Security Council, was sending troops to the aid of the attacked South Koreans. "The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond

the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war." The Seventh Fleet was ordered to protect Formosa, and U.S. forces in the Philippines were strengthened. have similarly directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indo China and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces."²

The Indochinese and Korean theaters of war were now interdependent battlefields, for in each case China was the major source of support for the communist armies involved in the fighting. Help for the French could weaken Communist China's ability to assist the North Koreans. U.S. military supplies began to arrive in Saigon and a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was established to administer the support program. As Ho Chi Minh's forces grew in strength and the French efforts lagged, American aid was stepped up. U.S. assistance, which began with the modest sum of \$1 million in 1950, in fiscal year 1954 reached \$1.063 billion, at which time it accounted for 78 percent of the French war burden.³

The increase in American aid was accompanied by an escalation in explanatory rhetoric and in the importance attributed to a noncommunist Indochina. A statement of policy, approved by President Truman and the National Security Council (NSC) on 25 June 1952, asserted that "the loss of any of the countries of Southeast Asia to Communist control as a consequence of overt or covert Chinese Communist aggression would have critical psychological, political and economic consequences." A loss of Southeast Asia and the Middle East would probably follow. "Such widespread alignment would endanger the stability and security of Europe. Communist control of all of Southeast Asia would render the U.S. position in the Pacific offshore islands precarious and would seriously jeopardize fundamental U.S. security interests in the Far East." The area also was the principal world source of natural rubber and tin. Its loss could result in economic and political pressures on Japan that would make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to communism. It was therefore, imperative to prevent a Viet Minh victory in Indochina. The French were to be assured that the U.S. regarded the successful French military effort there "as essential to the security of the free world, not only in the Far East but in the Middle East and Europe as well."⁴

No serious discussion or questioning appears to have taken place of the importance of Southeast Asia to American security interests, of the correctness of the dire predictions regarding the consequences of the loss of the area, of the probability of success in the military struggle, or of the costs of winning the war in Indochina. It was recognized, as an NSC staff study in February 1952 pointed out, that "in the long run, the security of Indochina against communism will depend upon the development of native governments able to command the support of the masses of the people and national armed forces capable of relieving the French of the major burden of maintaining internal security."⁵ But just as during the subsequent direct American involvement and the failure of successive Vietnamese governments to heed U.S. proddings for social and economic reforms, the refusal of the French to move aggressively in the direction of full independence for Indochina did not lead to any diminution of American assistance. The authors of the *Pentagon Papers*, the Defense Department history of the Vietnam conflict, comment correctly: "The U.S. became virtually a prisoner of its own policy. Containment of communism, concern for the French in relation to the postwar Europe of NATO, EDC, and the Soviet threat in the West, . . . all compelled the U.S. to continue aid." The overriding fear seemed to be that in the event of too much American pressure the French would pull out of Indochina and put before the U.S. the extremely undesirable choice of either abandoning Indochina or dispatching American ground forces.⁶

The Eisenhower administration, which came into office in January 1953, inherited this policy and saw no reason to modify it. The idea of a communist monolith that threatened the noncommunist world and had to be contained still had considerable plausibility and commanded wide adherence. Communist forces won control over Indochina or any substantial part thereof, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles declared before the Overseas Press Club on 29 March 1954, "they would surely resume the same pattern of aggression against other free people in the area." Southeast Asia, the rice bowl of the Far East and an area of great strategic value, was of transcendent importance to the entire free world and its loss had to be prevented.⁸ In his press conference on 7 April 1954, President Eisenhower compared the effects of the loss of Indochina upon the rest of Southeast Asia to that of falling dominoes: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly." Asia had already lost some 450 million of its people to communism, "and we simply can't afford greater losses."⁹

Meanwhile time was running out for the French, and the government in Paris was under mounting domestic pressure to end the bloodletting, which showed no sign of a successful conclusion. At the meeting of the Big Four foreign ministers in Berlin in February 1954 the French succeeded in having the Indochina problem placed on the agenda of an upcoming international conference at Geneva which was to discuss a settlement of the Korean War. In anticipation of this conference the Viet Minh launched a major effort to turn the tide of battle in their favor. On 13 March forces under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap began an assault upon the French fortress of Dien Bien Phu where General Henri Navarre had concentrated 10,000 of his men. Navarre had hoped that French superior firepower would enable him to smash such an attack and score a decisive victory. Instead, the Viet Minh, greatly helped by a substantial increase in Chinese aid, including artillery and radar, showed themselves the stronger by far and by early April the fortress was in serious danger of falling.¹⁰ A proposal by Admiral Arthur W. Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), to launch a massive American air strike for the relief of the besieged garrison was opposed by eight congressional leaders who were consulted on 3 April. The next day President Eisenhower, unwilling to intervene militarily without the support of Great Britain and congressional approval, rejected the proposed strike.¹¹ Attempts on the part of Secretary of State Dulles to obtain British and French commitments for a program of collective military action failed, and on 7 May 1954 Dien Bien Phu fell. The French military effort in Indochina, for all practical purposes, had collapsed.

The 1954 Geneva Conference

The discussion of the Indochina problem at the Geneva Conference began on 8 May. Buoyed by their victory at Dien Bien Phu, spokesmen for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) demanded the withdrawal of all foreign troops and immediate free elections. But the Russians and Chinese Communists convinced Ho Chi Minh to settle for the partition of Vietnam along the 17th parallel and elections after two years. The two senior communist powers were courting the new nations of Asia and Africa with the slogan of peaceful coexistence and support for their anticolonial aspirations. There was fear that a continuation of the war would bring in the United States after all and establish it as a military power on the Asian continent. The possibility of a deal between Mendès-France and Molotov to trade off France's rejection of the EDC for Russian intervention in support of a compromise

Indochina can also not be excluded.¹²

The final outcome of the 1954 Geneva Conference has been the subject of much misunderstanding. The so-called Geneva accords in fact comprised six unilateral declarations, three cease-fire agreements, an unsigned final declaration, and the minutes of the last plenary session on 21 July. Only the cease-fire agreements, signed by the respective military commands, can be considered formal binding accords. The language of most of the documents was ambiguous and reflected the absence of consensus at the conference. Calls to “observe the Geneva accords,” often heard in later years, thus were necessarily devoid of concrete meaning.

The failure of the South Vietnamese government, since 16 June 1954 headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, to accept national elections in 1956 as provided by the final declaration of the Geneva Conference has been held a justification of North Vietnam’s support for the insurgency in the South. Once “it became clear that the election provision would not be carried out recourse to coercion by Hanoi was both predictable and permissible. . . ”¹³ Two other students of the subject argue similarly that “when the military struggle for power ends on the agreed condition that the competition will be transferred to the political plane, the side that violates the agreed condition cannot legitimately expect that the military struggle will not be resumed.”¹⁴ But was there such an “agreed condition?”

The “Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference on the Problem of Restoring Peace in Indochina” noted that “the essential purpose of the Agreement relating to Viet Nam is to settle military questions with a view to ending hostilities and that the military demarcation line is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.” Free general elections by secret ballot, supervised by an international commission, were to be held in July 1956 in order to bring about a final political settlement. Meanwhile everyone was to be allowed to decide freely in which zone he wished to live.¹⁵ And yet there are strong indications that nobody at the conference took the idea of an early unification through free elections seriously. Why have a massive exchange of population if the two zones were to be unified within 700 days or so? Why was the machinery for settling future disagreements on the implementation of this agreement so haphazard? “The provision for free elections which would solve ultimately the problem of Vietnam,” wrote Professor Hans J. Morgenthau in 1956, “was a device to hide the incompatibility of the Communist and Western positions, neither of which can admit the domination of all of Vietnam by the other side. It was a device to disguise the fact that the line of military demarcation was bound to be a line of political division as well. In one word, what happened in Germany and Korea in the years immediately following 1945 has happened in Vietnam in the years following 1954.”¹⁶

The likelihood that the provision for a political settlement in Vietnam through free elections in 1956 was indeed a hastily improvised afterthought to help save face for the Viet Minh is strengthened by the fact that the final declaration remained unsigned and was not even adopted by a formal vote. Five of the nine delegations present at the final session failed unreservedly to commit their governments to its terms. Laos, Cambodia and the DRV did not expressly associate themselves with the declaration. The South Vietnamese delegate filed a protest against the armistice agreement which he asked to have incorporated in the final declaration. South Vietnam specifically objected to the date of the elections and reserved “to itself complete freedom of action to guarantee the sacred right of the Vietnamese people to territorial unity, national independence and freedom.”¹⁷ Undersecretary of State Walter B. Smith stated that the U.S. government “is not prepared to join in a declaration by the Conference such as is submitted.” The American representative insisted that elections to be free and fair had to be supervised by the United Nations. “With respect to the statement made by the

representative of the State of Viet-Nam, the United States reiterates its traditional position that peoples are entitled to determine their own future and that it will not join in an arrangement which would hinder this.”¹⁸

In the absence of either written or verbal consent by *all* of the nine participants, the most judicious study of the Geneva Conference of 1954 concludes, the final declaration created no *collective* conference obligation, and unless *all* the participating states consented to its terms and bound themselves thereto according to the procedures required by their respective constitutions, “the operative terms of the declaration were not binding upon *all* of the participants of the Geneva Conference.”¹⁹ Under certain circumstances, oral agreements may create obligations under international law. Here, however, both South Vietnam and the U.S. had stated their opposition in uncertain terms. Neither of them, therefore, could be considered bound by the provisions for elections in 1956.

In order to refute this rather obvious conclusion it has been suggested that South Vietnam at the time of the Geneva Conference was not yet a sovereign state and therefore remained bound by the obligations assumed by France on its behalf. Article 27 of the Vietnam armistice agreement stated that “the signatories of the present Agreement and their successors in their functions shall be responsible for ensuring the observance and enforcement of the provisions thereof.”²⁰ But the armistice agreement contained no prescriptive provisions for elections in 1956, and there is no suggestion in the record of the Geneva Conference that in accepting the final declaration France sought to bind South Vietnam. Quite the contrary, on 14 May French foreign minister Georges Bidault stated at the fourth plenary session that France considered the Government of Vietnam, recognized by 35 states, “fully and solely competent to commit Viet Nam.”²¹ Moreover, there is no agreement in international law on the extent to which a newly independent state must be regarded as bound by political obligations accepted prior to full independence by the state responsible for the conduct of its foreign relations.²² Thus, whatever the degree of sovereignty possessed by the government of South Vietnam in July 1954, the refusal of the Diem government to hold elections cannot be said to have violated international law. Still less can this refusal be held a justification for the North’s employment of force against the South.

Origins of the Insurgency

By July 1955, the end of the time period prescribed for a change of residence, about one million persons had left the communist regime in the North in order to settle in the South, while about 80,000 to 100,000 Viet Minh troops and supporters had gone north. Many of the regrouped Viet Minh had contracted local marriages in order to establish family connections in the South. After further training in the North, these men were subsequently sent back as leaders of the southern insurgency. The Communists also left behind several thousand of their best cadres as well as a large number of weapons caches. Five years later these units were to become the nucleus of the developing Liberation Army, as it was to be called. According to documents captured later and the testimony of a high ranking defector, the Communists never expected the elections to take place and from early on prepared for a strategy of armed struggle to reunify the country.²³

In its statement to the final session of the Geneva Conference the U.S. had declared that America would refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb the accords, but that it “would view an

renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern and as serious threatening international peace and security.”²⁴ Still anxious to achieve “united action” against Communist expansion and subversion in Southeast Asia, Dulles in September 1954 succeeded in getting seven nations—Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines—to subscribe to the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty which established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The declared purpose of the SEATO treaty was to help the parties “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack and prevent and counter subversive activities directed from without against their territorial integrity and political stability” or against “any other state or territory” specifically designated and asking for assistance. A protocol attached to the treaty, also signed on 8 September 1954, extended the protection to Cambodia, Laos and “the free territory of the state of Vietnam.”²⁵

The SEATO treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate on 1 February 1955 by a vote of 82–1. The Committee on Foreign Relations, in recommending approval, noted: “Since the end of World War II the threat to the free world has come more often in the form of indirect subversion than in direct aggression, and freedom lost by subversion may be as difficult to retrieve as that lost by force.” However, the SEATO treaty, unlike that establishing NATO, did not require an automatic response to armed attack, i.e. military action without further consideration by Congress, and instead called for each signatory “to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.”²⁷ It therefore would appear that despite some ambiguous claims made from time to time by the Johnson administration, the subsequent U.S. military intervention in Vietnam conformed to the spirit and purpose of the SEATO treaty but was not part of a legal obligation required by it.²⁸

From the beginning of SEATO, most of the signatories of this treaty had little sense of urgency about its implementation. The French, especially, were less than enthusiastic about military action against North Vietnam. Moreover, France was not prepared to allow South Vietnam the right to leave the French Union as Premier Diem demanded. The U.S., on the other hand, insisted upon an immediate transformation of French policy in order to win the active loyalty of the people of South Vietnam. By May 1955 France to all intents and purposes was out of Vietnam and the U.S. had assumed responsibility for large-scale economic and military aid to Diem, in particular the creation and training of a strong South Vietnamese army. American assistance, Eisenhower wrote Diem on 1 October 1954, would be given “to assist the Government of Viet-Nam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means. The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Viet-Nam in undertaking needed reforms.”²⁹ Diem was happy with this show of support, but, secure in the knowledge that he was regarded by the U.S. as the only alternative to a communist South Vietnam, he was slow in implementing the American call for political and economic reforms. Eisenhower’s failure to spell out what would happen in the event of nonperformance, at a time when American commitment was as yet limited, laid the groundwork for the trap in which the U.S. would eventually find itself. Warnings by the JCS in November 1954 that without a stable civilian government in control and without a willingness by the Vietnamese themselves to resist communism “no amount of external pressure and assistance can long delay complete Communism victory in South Vietnam”³⁰ were ignored by civilian policy-makers.

By the fall of 1955 the unexpected had happened and Diem had succeeded in consolidating his regime. He had disarmed the private armies threatening his government, the refugees from the North were being settled, agricultural production was greatly increased and South Vietnam had achieved

modicum of stability. Sen. Mike Mansfield, returning from a visit to South Vietnam, reported that Diem breathed an air of self-confidence and authority. "And with good reason, for he had taken what was a lost cause of freedom and breathed new life into it."³¹ In June 1956 Sen. John F. Kennedy outlined "America's stake in Vietnam" in a speech before the American Friends of Vietnam, a speech which expressed views shared then by a broad spectrum of American political opinion, including the Eisenhower administration, liberals like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the socialist Norman Thomas.

Vietnam, declared Kennedy, "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." But, Kennedy maintained, Vietnam was important to America for other reasons as well:

Secondly, Vietnam represents a proving ground for democracy in Asia. However we may choose to ignore or deprecate it, the rising prestige and influence of Communist China in Asia are unchallengeable facts. Vietnam represents the alternative to Communist dictatorship. If the 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.

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. . . . 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.

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. . . . 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 in security in any new outbreak of trouble.³²

Senator Kennedy called upon the U.S. to oppose the elections provided for by the 1954 Geneva agreement. "Neither the United States nor Free Vietnam was a party to that agreement—and neither the United States nor Free Vietnam is ever going to be a party to an election obviously stacked and subverted in advance, urged upon us by those who have already broken their own pledges under the agreement they now seek to enforce." He also urged more economic and military aid to President Diem, whose government had taken "the first vital steps toward true democracy. Where once colonialism and Communism struggled for supremacy, a free and independent republic has been proclaimed, recognized by over 40 countries of the Free World."³³

Kennedy's rhetoric not only exaggerated the importance of Vietnam to the U.S. but also glossed over serious flaws in Diem's "democracy." As time went on, Diem's dictatorial tendencies were to

jeopardize the ability of South Vietnam to develop a strong national community with sufficient cohesion to withstand communist military pressure.

Ngo Dinh Diem was a man well known for his competence and integrity; he was free of the taint of being pro-French, and with American help in the years following 1954 Diem accomplished much good for his country. “When one saw the chaos in other ex-colonial areas of Asia and Africa and the high-handed corruption and inefficient standards of government in much of Latin America,” a former American official has written, “South Vietnam and its leader Ngo Dinh Diem looked very good in comparison.”³⁴ In the face of vast obstacles, wrote David Halberstam, “Diem acted forthrightly and courageously in the early years of his government.”³⁵ Diem’s regime appeared well on the way toward creating the kind of new nation that was well worth U.S. support—in terms of America’s democratic ideals as well as American national interests in a highly unstable Southeast Asia.

And yet Diem’s arbitrary and authoritarian methods, including wholesale suppression of newspapers critical of his regime, gradually alienated important segments of the urban population. At the same time, Diem lost ground in the countryside by replacing elected village chiefs and councils with his own appointees, who were unresponsive to the interests of the peasantry and often corrupt. A program of land reform, begun in 1956 with American support and advice, three years later was virtually inoperative. By that time, only 10 percent of the tenant farmers had received any land at all, and for many of them the reform meant merely that they had to pay for land the Viet Minh had distributed to them earlier from the holdings of absentee owners.³⁶ So long as the government of South Vietnam was neither popular nor efficient, writes one well-informed scholar, “it seemed obvious that the Viet Minh would fill that vacuum.”³⁷

The Viet Minh, defending the interests of the peasants and basking in the glory of having defeated the French, not only were popular and in effective control of large parts of the South, but they also had a highly efficient organization ready to take advantage of the democratic liberties proclaimed in the final declaration of the Geneva Conference. “There is no doubt,” argues Joseph Buttinger, a historian very critical of Diem, “that the strength of the Communists and their determination to unify the country under Ho Chi Minh justified temporary dictatorial measures against them if democracy was to have a chance in the South. . . . Only thus could the people have been offered the choice between Communism and the better government that the anti-Communist West expected Diem to create.” After describing the lack of freedom of the press and speech in South Vietnam in early 1955, Morgenthau went on to say: “Considering the enormity of the task which confronts Diem, it would be ill-advised to be squeamish about some of the methods he used.”³⁹ But such dictatorial measures, if to be justifiable, had to be temporary, limited to the communist apparatus, and accompanied by policies that would rally the population behind the new regime. Instead, Diem’s heavy hand fell upon all political elements not fully backing his regime, and many of the tens of thousands arrested were innocent of any subversive activity or design. At the same time, as noted above, the Diem government failed to respond to the social grievances of the peasantry and thus deprived itself of any kind of mass support.

The massive campaign of forceful suppression against the Viet Minh carried out by the Diem regime in 1956–57 has been cited as the real cause of the southern insurgency. According to this thesis, argued in the 1960s by Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers in France and George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis in the U.S., “the people were literally driven by Diem to take up arms in self-defense.”⁴⁰ Eventually, in 1960, Southerners opposed to Diem formed the National Liberation Front (NLF), which “gave political articulation and leadership to the widespread reaction against the

harshness and heavy-handedness of Diem's government. It gained drive under the stimulus of Southern Vietminh veterans who felt betrayed by the Geneva Conference and abandoned by Hanoi. Insurrectionary activity against the Saigon government began in the South under Southern leadership not as a consequence of any dictate from Hanoi, but contrary to Hanoi's injunctions.”⁴¹

Evidence available today—based on captured documents and the testimony of defectors familiar with internal party directives—contradicts almost all of this thesis. It is correct that the repressiveness of the Diem regime in the years 1956–59 created pressure for armed action in the South, but the rest of the argument is false. The decision to begin the armed struggle in the South was made by the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' (*Lao Dong*) party (VWP), the communist party of Vietnam, Hanoi in 1959. ‘The view that a coordinated policy of armed activity was initiated in the South by a militant group outside the Party, or by a militant southern faction breaking with the national leadership,’ writes the well-informed Jeffrey Race, a critic of the subsequent American intervention, “is not supported by historical evidence—except that planted by the Party. . . .” Two defectors separately interviewed by him, Race relates, “found very amusing several quotations from Western publications espousing this view. They both commented humorously that the Party had apparently been more successful than was expected in concealing its role.”⁴² The NLF, the evidence clearly shows, was formed at the instigation of the party in Hanoi; it was established as a typical communist front organization to hide the direction of the insurgency by the Communists. “The Central Committee,” one defector stated, “could hardly permit the International Control Commission to say that there was an invasion from the North, so it was necessary to have some name . . . to clothe the forces with some political organization.”⁴³

Why did the party wait until 1959 before launching the armed phase of the revolution? First, in the years immediately following the Geneva Conference the Communists in the North had severe problems with their own “counterrevolutionaries.” In 1955–56 perhaps as many as 50,000 were executed in connection with the land reform law of 1953 and at least twice as many were arrested and sent to forced labor camps.⁴⁴ A North Vietnamese exile puts the number of victims at one-half million.⁴⁵ These domestic difficulties dictated a policy of waiting. Ho Chi Minh told the Fatherland Front Congress in 1955 that “the North is the foundation, the root of our people’s struggle. . . . Only when the foundation is firm, does the house stand firm.”⁴⁶

Secondly, the Central Committee felt that the revolutionary situation in the South was not yet “ripe,” the masses had not yet become convinced that armed struggle was really necessary. During the years 1956–59 the party contributed to the development of a revolutionary situation by assassinating the most effective local administrators, schoolteachers, medical personnel and social workers who tried to improve the lives of the peasants. This program of systematic terror, known as “the extermination of traitors,” predictably goaded the Diem regime into stepping up its clumsily pursued and often brutal antiterrorist campaign, creating an air of capricious lawlessness. “But the more the people were terrorized,” recalls a prominent defector, “the more they reacted in opposition, yet the more they reacted, the more violently they were terrorized. Continue this until the situation is truly ripe, and it will explode . . . we had to make the people suffer, suffer until they could no longer endure it. Only then would they carry out the party’s armed policy. That is why the Party waited until we did.”⁴⁷

As a result of Diem’s anticommunist campaign, by late 1958 the party apparatus in the South had incurred severe losses, but the revolutionary potential was increasing. The southern branch of the party increasingly now demanded a change in policy. The decision to form armed units throughout the

South in order to smash the GVN was made by the Fifteenth Conference of the Central Committee meeting in Hanoi in January 1959, though the new policy directive was not issued until May 1959. July 1959 saw the beginning of large-scale infiltration of armed cadres trained to raise and lead insurgent forces; it is estimated that during 1959–60 some 4,000 Southerners who had gone north in 1954 returned to South Vietnam.⁴⁹ In January 1960 General Giap declared that “the North has become a large rear echelon of our army. The North is the revolutionary base for the whole country.”⁵⁰

The commitment of the DRV to support the southern insurgency was made public at the Third Congress of the VWP, which convened in Hanoi in September 1960. According to Secretary-General Le Duan, the party faced the task of promoting the socialist construction in the North, making it “an ever more solid base for the struggle for national reunification,” as well as the task of liberating “the South from the atrocious rule of the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen.” To this end, the congress resolved that “to ensure the complete success of the revolutionary struggle in south Vietnam, one people there must strive to . . . bring into being a broad National United Front directed against the U.S. and Diem and based upon the worker-peasant alliance.”⁵¹ The formation of the NLF was reported by the news media in Saigon in December 1960.

The 10-point program of the NLF borrowed extensively from Le Duan’s speech at the third party congress, but otherwise North Vietnam made great efforts to show its noninvolvement in the formation of the NLF, probably at least in part to deny the U.S. the excuse to expand the war to North Vietnam. Not until the end of January 1961 did Radio Hanoi announce that various forces opposed to the fascist Diem regime on 20 December 1960 had formed the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam and had issued a manifesto and program. Also designed to conceal the party’s role in the revolutionary movement in the South was a “Declaration of the Veterans of the Resistance,” issued in March 1960, which called for armed struggle against Diem and the formation of a government of national union. As defectors told Jeffrey Race, the declaration “was simply the product of a meeting called in accord with Central Committee policy, with the dual purpose of arousing internal support for the new phase of the revolution and of misleading public opinion about the true leadership of the revolution.”⁵²

The NLF as well as the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) established on 15 February 1961 undoubtedly included non-Communists opposed to Diem’s autocratic rule; however all key positions were in the hands of party members. For tactical reasons NLF spokesmen occasionally took positions that differed slightly from the Hanoi line; from time to time there also may have developed tension between what in effect was Hanoi’s field command in the South and its parent headquarters in the North.⁵³ But the ultimate control of the NLF by the VWP was never in doubt. “Although welcoming support from all quarters,” agree Kahin and Lewis, “from its inception the organization seems to have been dominated by the communists.”⁵⁴ Despite an elaborate worldwide propaganda effort designed to demonstrate that the NLF was an independent and indigenous southern political entity with a policy of its own, the fact of control by Hanoi was eventually accepted by most knowledgeable observers. The impotence of the NLF was revealed after the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 when all important positions in the temporary administration of the South and later in the government of the united Vietnam were given to Northerners. In August 1976 Jean Lacouture finally conceded that he had overestimated the autonomy of the NLF which, he now acknowledged, was “piloted, directed and inspired by the political bureau of the Lao Dong Party, whose chief was and remains in Hanoi.”⁵⁵

The same tactical considerations which dictated the formation of the NLF led to the establishment of the People’s Revolutionary party (PRP) in January 1962, allegedly an independent organization

without ties to the VWP in the North. In point of fact, the PRP was simply the southern branch of the VWP, set up to constitute the “vanguard” of the NLF and to overcome the ideological isolation of communist cadres in the South. For the rural population in South Vietnam all these maneuvers meant nothing new. As one defector told Jeffrey Race: “The formation of the People’s Revolutionary Party had no significance to the peasantry. They live in intimate contact with the Party and thus were aware that it was still the communists. The People’s Revolutionary Party was useful only in dealing with citizens, people, intellectuals, and foreigners.”⁵⁶

The Period of “Sink or Swim with Diem”

By the time John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency on 20 January 1961, the situation in Vietnam had deteriorated considerably; the Vietnamese Communists or Viet Cong (VC) for short, as the Americans began to call them, dominated large sections of the country. Diem talked about the need for social and political reforms, but at the same time argued that these measures could be carried out only after the communist threat had been destroyed. In practice this meant that while the VC increased their strength in the countryside by redistributing wealth and status, as well as through the use of terror, the government relied for its survival on force alone.

A manifesto issued by 18 old-time political figures in April 1960, known as the “Caravelle Manifesto,” urged Diem to “guarantee minimum civil rights” so that the people of South Vietnam would appreciate the value of liberty. “It is only at that time that the people will make all the necessary efforts and sacrifices to defend that liberty and democracy.”⁵⁷ But Diem, increasingly isolated and turning inward, rejected this counsel and after an attempted military coup in November 1960 most of the signers of the manifesto were jailed. Personal loyalty to Diem, rather than ability, became the criterion for promotion in the army. As a precaution against the formation of cliques in the armed forces, troop commanders were rotated constantly. Cautious generals, fearful of casualties, conducted operations in areas where the VC were known not to be. Frustrated by a ubiquitous enemy, the troops often behaved brutally toward prisoners and the rural population.

Kennedy’s belief in the importance of Indochina and Southeast Asia to the free world went back as far as 1954. His conviction that the U.S had to stand by its commitment to the area was reinforced by Nikita Khrushchev’s speech on 6 January 1961, promising support to “wars of national liberation” in the developing world, including Vietnam, and by the Russian leader’s bellicose threats to renew the blockade of Berlin made during his meeting with Kennedy in Vienna in June 1961. After the failure of the American-backed invasion of Cuba in April 1961, the prestige of the U.S. seemed seriously eroded. The need to make American power credible thus was seen as urgent. Moreover, a demonstration of American resolve in the one place where there existed an open communist challenge to declared American interests, i.e. Southeast Asia, would prove the new president’s toughness not only to the Russians and Chinese but also to conservative critics at home. Charges that the Truman administration had given away China by holding back aid to Chiang Kai-shek were still fresh in everyone’s memory.

In April 1961 the new administration established an interagency Vietnam task force; a counterinsurgency plan prepared by the Eisenhower administration now became the basis for a series of recommended actions to be taken by both the U.S. and GVN. The recommendations of the task force were strongly influenced by one of its members, the CIA operative Col. Edward Lansdale, who

had had great success in helping President Ramon Magsaysay of the Philippines defeat a communist insurgency in that country. The prevention of communist domination, the report argued, required the creation of "a viable and increasingly democratic society in South Vietnam. . . ." ⁵⁸ The president's response to this report also reflected Lansdale's strongly held view that Diem was the only effective leader in South Vietnam and should be won over to American ways of thinking through persuasion and trust rather than pressure. To be sure, in return for the dispatch of about 100 additional American military advisers, who were to help train another 20,000 men for the GVN armed forces,⁵⁹ Diem was to make reforms in his chain of command and reorganize his intelligence capacity. But then as later Diem knew how to stall on the implementation of reforms recommended to him by the Americans while U.S. aid continued to flow.

The weakness of the American leverage was primarily the result of America's strong commitment to the defense of Vietnam. In order to deter Hanoi's drive against the South and to reassure the leaders of Southeast Asia, the U.S. repeatedly stated that America was determined to help South Vietnam preserve its independence and would not allow the country to be taken over by the Communists. But while these shows of resolve had little if any effect on the Communists, they did indicate to Diem that there was no danger of the U.S. suddenly abandoning South Vietnam and that he could therefore safely spurn American demands for reform. The only effective way of putting pressure on Diem would have been to threaten him with a withdrawal of U.S. support, but in view of the often-proclaimed vital importance of Southeast Asia to the West and America's commitment to the defense of the area as well as to Diem's leadership role, this threat was just not credible and therefore was never invoked.

All through the summer of 1961 Kennedy temporized. There was talk of sending American combat troops to Southeast Asia, if the situation deteriorated, but no firm decisions were made. In line with the importance attached by the president to counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare, a group of Special Forces personnel were sent to Vietnam to train their Vietnamese counterparts.⁶⁰ In October Kennedy sent his military adviser, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, on a fact-finding tour to Vietnam. Taylor returned to Washington on 3 November and, among other measures, proposed the dispatch of a military task force of 6,000–8,000 men in order to raise South Vietnamese morale and demonstrate the seriousness of U.S. intent to resist a communist take-over. The introduction of this force was to be related to flood relief; it was to consist of engineering and logistical units. The military advisor's effort, Taylor recommended, should be shifted "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."⁶¹

A joint memorandum by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara dated 11 November 1961, supported Taylor's recommendation that the U.S. commit itself to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to communism:

The basic means for accomplishing this objective must be to put the Government of South Vietnam into a position to win its own war against the guerrillas. We must insist that the 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 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-

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