WILLIAM P. BUNDY
1087 Great Road Princeton, N. J. 08540

July 3, 1986

E. William Johnson
Chief Archivist, J.F.K. Library
Columbia Point, Boston MA 02125

Dear Mr. Johnson:--

I feel very badly not to have acted sooner on your letter of August 20, 1985, nearly a year ago. In that letter you discussed a manuscript I had done on the Vietnam decisions, and asked me to send you a copy for reproducingand use at the Library. I regret to say that I mislaid the letter and never acted on it through a long winter in which I was preoccupied with more immediate situations in South Africa and the Philippines, the former for teaching purposes at Princeton.

At any rate, the delay was not all loss, for in the meantime I have found three additional chapters to the original manuscript. It now comprises a total of 33 chapters, although a few of these are only in outline. This I am now sending to you by separate cover, at the book rate.

I have also been informed, recently, that the LBJ Library in Austin would like to have a copy on tap. Thus, I would be grateful if after you have made a copy for your use, you could send on the present copy to them for reproduction and eventual return to me. This would close all the most important circuits, as the Historical Office at the Department of State has had a copy for the past year, and I am sending them the just-unearthed addtional chapters 31-33 today.

I remain somewhat concerned that readers might take the manuscript as my final thoughts. Since I did it in 1969-72 there has been much additional scholarship, and I myself have done a lot of thinking. Already I find authors slightly misusing the MS -- notably George Kahin in his latest book. Thus, while I do not insist on checking quotes before any use in a publication, please put a note on the MS indicating that it is not my final word, and has not been revised since it was written in 1969-72, and thus in the interest of historical accuracy users would be well advised to check with me before citing it, certainly on any controversial point.

Sincerely,

Wm. P. Bundy

PROCESSING NOTE

Several pages in this manuscript were either missing or misnumbered when it was received by the Johnson and Kennedy Libraries. The attached inventory lists those pages and the page counts for each chapter of the manuscript.

REGINA GREENWELL
Senior Archivist

September 20, 1994

William P. Bundy
Vietnam Manuscript

(A)

Ch 1 - outline only - 9 pp. (3/18/72)
Ch 2 - 1946-60 in VN - not even outline
Ch. 3 - OK - 44 pp. (3/18/72)
Ch. 4 - OK - 54 pp. (p. 53 missing) (3/18/72)
Ch. 5 - OK - 31 pp. (pp. 29-30 misnumbered, no pages missing) (3/18/72)
Ch. 6 - Outline Only - 7 pp. (3/18/72)
Ch. 7 - Outline Only - 7 pp. (3/18/72)
Ch. 8 - OK - 29 pp. (3/18/72)
Ch. 9 - OK - 32 pp. (3/18/72)
Ch. 10 - OK - 11 pp. (undated)
Ch. 11 - Asia in 63-64 - not even outline
Ch. 12 - OK - 44pp. (undated)
Ch. 13 - OK - 38 pp. (undated)
Ch. 14 - OK - 50pp (undated)
Ch. 14A - OK - 40 pp (undated)
Ch. 15 - OK - 23 pp (undated)
Ch. 15A - Outline - 4 pp (undated)
Ch. 16 - OK less one section - 42 pp. (undated) (Alt: 11/18/71)
Ch. 17 - OK - 28 pp. (undated)
Ch. 18 - OK - 38 pp. (undated)
Ch. 19 - OK - 26 pp. (9/10/71)
Ch. 20 - OK - 27 pp. (9/13/71)

VIETNAM MANUSCRIPT (B)

CH. 21 - OK - 20 pp. (9/20/71)
CH. 22 - OK - 28 pp. (9/27/71)
CH. 22B - OK - 40 pp. (10/5/71)
CH. 23 - OK - 38 pp. (10/27/71)
CH. 24 - OK - 29 pp. (10/29/71)
CH. 25 - OK - 27 pp. (11/8/71)
CH. 26 - OK - 29 pp. (11/15/71)
CH. 27 - OK - 33 pp. (11/22/71)
CH. 28 - OK - 33 pp. (12/14/71)
CH. 29 - OUTLINE ONLY - 2 pp. (12/3/71) (MEDIA LONG + EARLY 65)
CH. 30 - OK - 33 pp. (12/9/71)
CH. 31 - OK - 34 pp. (1/4/72)
CH. 32 - OK - 40 pp. (1/14/72)
CH. 33 - OK - 38 pp. (2/10/72)

3)

SUPPLEMENT SENT TO STATE/JFK/LBJ IN 1986 OR 1987

Part III Description

Title of collection Papers of William P. Bundy Accession number 86-75

This is an unpublished manuscript written by William P. Bundy during the 1969-1972 period concerning the Vietnam War decisions. The following are chapter titles:

Chapter 1: The 1964-65 Turning Point
Chapter 2: [not done]
Chapter 3: The First Kennedy Decisions in East Asia: Compromise in Laos, Firmness in Vietnam
Chapter 4: The Crisis of the Fall of 1961
Chapter 5: The Circuits Close in the Indochina Area (January through July 1962)
Chapter 6: Continuity and Change in American Policy in East Asia, 1961-62 (Outline only)
Chapter 7: China and the Soviet Union in East Asia as Seen from Washington, 1961-63
Chapter 8: Disillusionment in Laos, Hope in Vietnam (August 1962 - May 1963)
Chapter 9: The Decline and Fall of Diem (May to Nov. 1963)
Chapter 10: Retrospective: A Road Deepended and Another Not Taken
Chapter 11: [not done]
Chapter 12: The First Six Months of the Johnson Administration (Nov. 22, 1963 - May 16, 1964)
Chapter 13: To the Brink and Back: May and June of 1964
Chapter 14: The Tonkin Gulf Incidents and the Congressional Resolution
Chapter 15: The Grandeur and the Misery of Apparent Success
Chapter 16: East Asia in the Fall of 1964
Chapter 17: The October Prelude
Chapter 18: November: The First Phase
Chapter 19: Half a Decision
Chapter 20: Collapse and Indecision
Chapter 21: East Asia and the Great Powers in Early 1965
Chapter 22: Maneuvering and Teetering
Chapter 22B: The Pleiku Attack and the Shaping of a New Course
Chapter 23: Competing Pressures and the Baltimore Speech
Chapter 24: Negotiations: Word and Deed, Public and Private
Chapter 25: Shoring Up Proves Not Enough
Chapter 26: The June-July Policy Debate: The Framework and the Issues
Chapter 27: Action Proposals and the Making of the Basic Decision
Chapter 28: Three Areas For Judgment: The Communist Powers, Asia, the World
Chapter 29: Congressional and Public Opinion, June-July 1965
Chapter 30: Changes and Chances: The Action Decision of July 28
Chapter 31: Following On
Chapter 32: Dark Days for China
Chapter 33: Deciding the Conduct of the War

June 1972

If you ever want Dan Davidson to read the manuscript in toto, this set would be for him.

* He has had, and has made hand-written notes on Chapters 1 through 12, as written prior to May 1972. He has returned Chapters 1 through 12, of which The Introduction and Chapters 2, 9A, 10, and 12 are in the BMM notebook. (We have the original and three copies of the manuscript through Chapter 13; the original and four copies of Chapter 14 on.)

In this set, Chapters 1 through 9 would be replacement or revision of what Dan has already seen, and made notes on.

Chapters 31, 32, and 33 would be in addition to what he has seen.

In Chapter 4, page 53 is missing.

In Chapter 5, page 28 is missing.

B.

* Filed in separate red-binder notebook, labeled "Early Chapters with Davidson Hand-Written Comment."

EH 1
3/18/72

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Part I: The Decisions of 1961-65

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1: The 1964-65 Turning Point

The entry in my desk engagement book for Tuesday, November 3, 1964, is laconic: "9:30--Topic A." On that morning, John McNaughton and I--Assistant Secretaries of Defense and State respectively--met privately to carry out orders we had been given the previous night. With the help of a newly formed working group, ~~our mandate was~~ WE WERE to examine American interests and objectives in the conflict raging in South Vietnam, to assess the situation there and wherever in the world it impinged, to set forth the major alternatives of "options" for action, and to argue the pros and cons of each. We were to drop all else and take the time necessary for tapping the foreign policy resources of government, reporting in 2-3 weeks, UNLESS AN EARLIER EMERGENCY CAME ALONG.

It was Election Day, and the voters of the United States were about to retain Lyndon B. Johnson, as President now in his own right, by a triumphant (61.7?) of the vote over Senator Barry Goldwater. I recall voting on the way to work, the first time this was possible for citizens of the District of Columbia in a Presidential election. As citizen and Democrat, it seemed to me crucial that the country reject decisively what Goldwater represented both at home and abroad. One felt that this would be the result and was glad--and relieved that an emotional campaign was over.

The task at hand was something else again. Since mid-September an air of unreality had pervaded all the circles of government responsible for foreign policy. Those of us who were "political," as I was, and even many in the career service, felt that for these seven weeks, in this year, the election came first; for example, I recall discussion on how the information services could convey to audiences abroad that a 40% vote for the loser, a strong showing in many democratic nations, was in America total rejection and defeat. This campaign, more than any other one could recall, had seemed a crusade, and it was against the backdrop of that feeling that one accepted the fact that it was not preparing the American people for the reality of their problem in Vietnam.

To anyone in Government--indeed, as I now find, to anyone who read the New York Times with care--that reality was becoming dark indeed. A shaky military government in Saigon was giving way to a totally raw and new civilian one, as the military situation and the balance of control in the countryside steadily moved in favor of the Viet Cong. Ever since early 1964, "deterioration" had been the consensus word (as it had been the view of able newsmen since mid-1963). Now the consensus was moving toward "possible early collapse"--and doubt whether the US would act.

So October of 1964 was a dramatic month, in a sequence of many such, in Vietnam itself. It was especially dramatic in the wider world. As Lyndon Johnson was on his way to victory in the United

States, Sir Alec Home was losing to Harold Wilson and the Labor Party in Britain on (date), the Chinese were having their first successful nuclear test on the (date), and--the only truly surprising event--on the (date) Nikita Khrushchev was displaced as top man in the Soviet Union in favor of a group led by Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin.

Ordinarily, the wheels of American government start at once to turn, with a mixture of frenzy and ponderousness, to grind up such a string of events into new hypotheses and possibilities, in the Asian sphere as elsewhere. Would the obvious gain in Chinese prestige be reflected in stronger policies? Might the new men in Moscow resume Soviet interest in Asia? What of Sino-Soviet relations, which had for some months been at an intense level of polemic centered on Khrushchev himself? Would Wilson change British policy in Asia, especially the British military defense of Malaysia against Indonesia?

Minds did go to work on these questions, and a few agonized over Vietnam. As we shall see later, Under Secretary of State George Ball and others of us wrote down our thoughts on Vietnam and showed them to each other, but it was largely an emotional safety valve, not a serious effort to generate action. The policy machine was out of operation for any but the most immediate purposes, till after November 3rd. To the very end of the campaign, as the coy "Topic A" of my diary entry suggests, any talk of a change of course was in obsessive secrecy. By instinct, not (GIVEN) order, one sought to prevent speculation of new thinking and of possible changes before the President

could come to grips with them. For the same reason, Ambassador Adlai Stevenson at the United Nations had told Secretary-General U Thant that he was confident the American government would not respond during the election period to suggestions for direct negotiation Thant had conveyed orally to Stevenson in September. Again, we shall come back to this, which was then unknown to me and to many others.*

Did the North Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi sense this election "freeze"? In my view they must have, for on November ~~first~~ 1st the Viet Cong broke the pattern of military action within South Vietnam with a vengeance by attacking the airfield at Bien Hoa, (10) miles from Saigon itself, and destroying or damaging a total of (x) aircraft, the bulk of them American B-57 bombers which had been moved there in August as a warning of possible stronger American action to come. If the Viet Cong were on their own in some attacks, it seemed beyond question that this one could only have come from the top in Hanoi. It hit the most embarrassing target at the most embarrassing time and with the most embarrassing results.** More to the point than any "embarrassment," it was on sober analysis a deliberate attempt, not only to inflict maximum damage, but to signal to South Vietnamese and Americans alike that they were losing. An American response, as in the Tonkin Gulf

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*Check this. U T sometimes.

**Use contemporary comment.

incidents of August, would be disruptive on election eve. A failure to respond could be equally damaging to morale and confidence in Saigon.

President Johnson ~~had~~ made his decision quickly on Sunday--not to react--on the unanimous advice of his civilian advisors in Washington. It was not a political decision as any of us* saw it. He might have gained votes in some quarters, as he surely had in August, and hardly with compensating losses in others. It was not politics but statesmanship to recognize that the outcome of the election could be clouded and obscured, that the same might well be true of any signal in Vietnam itself, and that this could not be a time for major decisions. Bien Hoa, important as it was, bore no resemblance to Pearl Harbor.

So the attack of November first was not the "turning point" that gives a title to this chapter and an attempt at structure to the whole of this Part I. Rather, Bien Hoa was simply the dramatic event that caused the President on the Monday to order a basic policy review, a few days sooner than he otherwise must have done in any case. The true turning point was that process of policy review and thought, which with intervening events and interim decisions went on from November ~~31st~~ 3d to early March of 1965. In a swift-flowing Rubicon, American policy was uncertain and at the mercy of the current for much

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*Unless otherwise indicated, "we" and "us" refer hereafter to the close-knit circle of civilian advisors.

of this time. In the end it landed at the far shore instead of coming back.

This is not to say, of course, that this or any other period of decision concerning Vietnam was "the" turning point. In the long sequence of events since 1945, now so much dissected and analyzed, the year 1954 bulks at least as large, and 1961 and 1963 only less important. How America got to the 1964-65 Rubicon is a crucial part of the story, and will be told in following chapters. The focus, for this book, is the decade of the Sixties in Vietnam and East Asia, and in that focus the four months at the turn of 1964-65 were pivotal.

Moreover, within that period, there was ~~for me~~ a still more specific moment when it seemed to me that the decision had effectively been made. Every man who participates in a major decision, in government or any other organization, is likely to recall with some precision when his own mind became firm and clear on what should be done, and why. He may also have a strong impression as to when his seniors became firm. And it is conceivable that he can place the time and identify the crucial factors for the man with ultimate responsibility at the top.

I do not claim the third of these for a moment. In the American system, the President alone decides for the Executive Branch; only he can, or should, try to say when his mind was made up and how. So far as any of his subordinates could tell, it was within this critical period that Lyndon Johnson made his major decision to act, and it was in heavy reliance on his senior policy advisors. I leave it at that.

But, through a single incident, I think I can speak both of my own inner convictions and of the recorded views of others. Although the full story comes later, the incident can be briefly described out of sequence.

It came in the November policy review, late in the month and after arguments had been threshed out on a host of major points. In particular, disagreement had come to focus on the consequences in East Asia of alternatives that lay in oversimplified terms between acting in Vietnam (with what all agreed were uncertain prospects for a successful outcome) and not acting there. On the one hand, the strongest possible picture of damage in Asia through inaction had been drawn by a colleague on the Working Group; others had argued that the harm would be mild and bearable.

As chief draftsman, I had tried to compromise the two views, taking the harsh view up to a point, then letting it trail off into uncertainty whether serious immediate effects would cumulate and spread. It did not seem good enough, to me or to others. Granted that one could not prove the "harsh" picture, could one make the milder "limited damage" one plausible--near or above a 50% chance, say?

I sat down to try, on a weekend as I recall. The result was long and much rewritten, relying on no theory but on as many facts and as precisely stated subordinate judgments as could be turned up by the whole process. It was as strong a brief for a mild view as I knew how to write, and honest ~~in~~ FROM a mind ~~that~~ truly ~~was~~ not made up.

On the Monday, I talked it over with one or two colleagues and finally sent it to two men, the Secretaries of State and Defanse. They were to be together that (Tuesday) afternoon for a meeting, without the President, on the whole of the Working Group report. Now their reaction would probably be decisive for the advice the President would get. ~~The~~ Differing estimates of Asian consequences had become the CORE ~~conversations~~ of opposed arguments of policy.

Secretary McNamara came early, and was alone with Secretary Rusk when they sent for me. It was not a long meeting, nor was much said--they had had some time together before. Now the verdict was clear and succinct: "It won't wash." I argued only briefly, for the day of reflection had brought me to the same conclusion in my inner mind and heart. And the summary of the meeting that, I believe, followed at once records the outcome: "It was the consensus that the [harsh view] was more tenable" (get exact quote).* It was written into the paper as it went to the President, and the story unfolded from there.

To me, that moment was critical, and the argument over East Asian consequences decisive. This was true in the crucial months from November 1964 to March of 1965. It was true, as well, in the summer of 1965, when the decision was made to go beyond limited bombing of North Vietnam, and to commit what became a military force of more than 500,000 Americans to the conflict within South Vietnam. And it had been true

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*BM: Minutes of 11/24/64 meeting.

in 1954 and 1961, when President Eisenhower first established, and President Kennedy reaffirmed, a policy of deep American concern for the independence of the nations of Southeast Asia.

Thus, the story of American involvement in Vietnam cannot be told simply in terms of that country, or even of Indochina. At every stage in the road, the men who together "made" American policy were thinking in the broader terms of Asia, and only in these terms is it possible to understand the story.

In the summer of 1965, as the decision to commit major American military forces was being made, a distinguished Frenchman, Andre Malraux, visited Peking and talked, among others, with Foreign Minister Chen-yi. ~~Chou En-lai~~ Why, ~~Chou~~ Chen-yi asked, were the Americans acting as they were in Vietnam? Malraux replied, simply and rightly, "In their view, the whole of their ~~Because their whole~~ policy in Asia is at stake."*

What was that policy? How had it developed before 1954? How had it extended in that year to Southeast Asia? And what point had it reached by 1961, when John F. Kennedy became President? These are the questions addressed in the preliminary chapters that follow.

*Malraux, Anti-Memoirs (English Translation, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 352.

Chapter 2 - not done - would be a quick history up on 1954.

Chapter 3: The First Kennedy Decisions in East Asia: Compromise in Laos, Firmness in Vietnam

a. The opening months of any new American Administration are a counterpoint between new ideas and inherited lines of policy, between new men for whom existing policy is suspect and career men in whom it has become ingrained, between new ways of doing business and the old. Having participated in three of these transitions--1953, 1961, and 1969--I am convinced that the counterpoint is inevitably sharp and friction-laden, at least where the change is from one party to another. (The 1963 transition from Kennedy to Johnson was, of course, entirely different, with exactly the opposite central motif--how little, not how much was being altered.) Even where the eventual lines of policy differ little from what has gone before, the new President and his men are bound to stress novel elements and to claim credit for a change of course. "Vietnamization" under President Nixon, like the Alliance for Progress under Kennedy, was a catchy label for a line of policy already set under way by the outgoing Administration.

In the sphere of men, post-1945 American tradition has come to call for a very heavy replacement, not only at the top of the key Departments (OF STATE AND DEFENSE) but down to Assistant Secretary level in many instances, and overwhelmingly in positions that have a direct ~~bearing on~~ ROLE WITH the public or the Congress. Unlike the British system or the Japanese, where

"political" men are literally a handful in the (TWO) departments concerned with foreign affairs, the American change brings in a minimum of (10? Dulles) and may go as high as (25?--Kennedy) (IN EACH.) Finally, in the sphere of procedure, the system of Presidential supremacy means, quite simply, that each President will determine for himself how he takes advice on foreign or domestic questions. The requirements of the National Security Act of 1947 are superficially explicit, providing for a National Security Council and a Director of Central Intelligence with estimating responsibilities; yet there could not be the slightest doubt that the President may constitutionally ignore or neglect both. In the three change-of-party transitions since foreign policy became major business, no successor has thought well enough of the procedures of the outgoing Administration to give them a continuing flavor of accepted custom such as the procedures of the British Cabinet have acquired. Rather, the opposite has happened and a certain partisan flavor has emerged: Republicans find Democratic notions of procedure slipshod and unsystematic, and Democrats find Republicans hidebound bureaucrats prone to bury serious issues of policy and execution under meaningless compromise or the vast and self-serving detail of "Progress Reports."

b. The latter was the strongest of the Kennedy reactions and hence the sharpest of its changes. At a stroke, the National Security Council was changed from a formal hierarchy of committees submitting major policy papers and systematic reports on execution, to an ad hoc

structure of "Task Forces" designed to thrash out the issues and then for the most part to disappear. Their papers were important vehicles for thought and disagreement but not for agreed recommendation--so that the President's decisions ~~would be~~ WERE written afresh and in his own terms. It was, like all changes in style, to have a deep effect on substance; the excessive generalization of the Eisenhower era gave way to excessive individuality of policy. This would have happened in any case, given Kennedy's pragmatic temperament and approach. It was accentuated by the appointment of the equally pragmatic McGeorge Bundy as Special Assistant, and above all by the multiple crisis situations that faced the new Administration the moment it started to operate. How could men be expected to think of architecture when fires raged all over the house--in Berlin, the Congo, Cuba, and Laos? There was no chance to draw back and take stock before moving. All four clamored for attention in the blizzards of the latter half of January, and with the problems of settling in and getting control of the machinery pre-empted virtually all the time of the key men.

The stamp was destined to last. "Crisis management" became a trademark of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. Overall policy was seldom assessed in priority terms at top levels, the rationale for lines of policy was not always explicit within the Executive Branch, and the presentation of foreign policy to the Congress and the public tended to become a creative exercise in itself, often done with the greatest brilliance but not always founded (as for example Truman's and Acheson's speeches had been) on a hard rock of agreed and thought-through policy.

c. Procedures changed, and so of course did men. From personal background and lifelong interest, John Kennedy had a strong feeling of familiarity with foreign policy. It was not, as with many Americans including a high proportion of senior members of the Congress, alien in feeling, a little distant and suspect. He was at home in it, more so perhaps than he was in the inner workings of Capitol Hill. Over the years he had written much on foreign affairs, and travelled to most parts of the world.

Yet for all this his background remained somewhat episodic. He had drawn much from reading and from meeting men abroad, but little from Americans in or out of the career services. None of the oracles of his own Party in matters of foreign policy--Acheson and Nitze on the "hard" side of the Democratic Advisory Committee, Bowles and Stevenson in the "liberal" tendency--were his close friends. Nor had he been guided by the likes of Fulbright or Mansfield on the Hill. Rather his combination of positions bore his own individual stamp--downright "liberal" on Algeria for example, ready to take a campaign flyer on the offshore islands, but much nearer the "hard" position on military posture and the need for power.

In the flurry of the campaign, he had not focussed on actual programs or men. Candidates almost never do: the only one in recent times who was truly ready for the starting gun was Thomas E. Dewey, and he lost. When Kennedy got the final victorious returns in Hyannisport, he knew a lot of people he was <u>not</u> going to have as

Secretary of State. He did not know whom he would have there, or in the Pentagon, or in the White House staff, or how he would orchestrate the three. In the event the three key men were chosen in entirely different ways--Dean Rusk through senior advice by Dean Acheson and Robert Lovett, Robert McNamara through a wide talent search, and Bundy through Harvard ties. None had been close to him or to each other; indeed Bundy's going to the White House rather than State was largely because his past dealings with Rusk had not been especially friendly.

These choices were "neutral" in policy terms, as befitted a President who meant to run foreign policy with a close hand and who was inclined against general theories of policy as well. The common thread was that all three were both instinctive and reasoned believers in a full and active foreign policy for the United States; if one had checked back, as I don't recall any reporter doing, he would have found all three strongly interventionist in 1939-41--and all three likewise activist liberals on the domestic front, although from occupational positions that were often associated with conservatism.

So much in general terms. In terms of policy toward East Asia, little could properly have been read into the choices. McNamara had taken no positions, while Rusk and Bundy had been as firm in defending postwar Democratic handling of the "loss" of China as they had been in supporting the Korean War. None had been associated with the 1954-56 Dulles extension of American policy and commitment in East Asia, and the only recent activity of any of the three in the

area had been Rusk's role in setting up the IRRI for rice research, in the Philippines.

d. The fact was that Kennedy himself had no really strong or set views on East Asia as he assumed office. Over the years he had expressed himself on Indochina (skeptical of intervention in 1954 but strong on the relation of Vietnam to Southeast Asia, then a full supporter of Diem by 1956), on China (a major threat, but also not to be met by military force, rather by eventual accommodation), and in the tactical offshore islands gambit during the campaign. It really did not amount to much; and he had no regular staff man on Asia at any time, including the campaign. (Sulzberger on Bowles as the idea man for the offshore islands gambit.)

Too, he had no personal oracle on East Asia--a man or men to whom he turned as he did to Acheson, John J. McCloy, and Lovett on Europe, to Adolf Berle on Latin America, to Bowles on India. The nearest to an exception was Edwin Reischauer of Harvard, whom Kennedy had not known before, but to whom he became in time greatly attracted. From the time Reischauer arrived in Tokyo as Ambassador, American policy toward Japan was to follow his advice on great things and small. But Reischauer, although he had written eloquently on American policy toward Asia as a whole,* was apparently never closely consulted on the wide sphere. He always spoke from the standpoint of how other things

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*Cite 195 (?) book.

looked from Japan, and his influence beyond Japanese matters was minimal at any time.

Nor did the new President have any career men concerned with the Far East whom he had known directly or indirectly--as he had, for example, a high indirect opinion of Charles E. Bohlen on European matters (and early asked him to stay as an advisor rather than go to France as Ambassador). Like many Americans and certainly most Democrats, he thought that many of the old Asian hands had been dealt with harshly and unjustly by Dulles--and in the course of time the few survivors of that period were once more brought back into Asian work. But there was no oracle among these, and especially no alumnus of Southeast Asian service to whom he could turn for advice. The store of "experts" on Laos and Vietnam was, indeed, thin and centered in the Pentagon and CIA--with Edward G. Lansdale by far the most visible man.*

In this vacuum of outside senior men, personal staff, or trusted career men, it was natural that JFK left the staffing of Asian affairs to Rusk and Bowles. Both agreed very early not to keep Parsons as Assistant Secretary, and it was Rusk's choice to bring back Alexis Johnson (his former deputy from Korea days) as what became, in effect, senior advisor on Asian matters; there may have been a thought of Johnson as Assistant Secretary, but Rusk wanted him at the higher

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*Footnote on Edmund Gullion--assigned to the Congo, a mark of the depth of the Congo crisis and also of Kennedy's high priority for African matters generally.

position of Deputy Under Secretary--and the two together probably made the first choice for Assistant Secretary, Walter McConaughy. Both Johnson and McConaughy had been active in Asian matters throughout the Robertson period, and indeed Johnson had been particularly closely identified with the set of policy in this period.*

A slightly newer but still firm note was struck in the appointments of Ambassadors to Thailand and South Vietnam. Kenneth Young was an outside appointment and a liberal akin to Bowles; he was also a State and Defense alumnus of 1952-56 policy in Indochina. Frederick Nolting came from distinguished NATO service, totally inexperienced in Asia but by temperament and belief a "firm line" man on any view. Insofar as staffing choices bespoke a policy, JFK's choices meant continuity rather than drastic change in Asia.

Because the choices came only gradually, and the new men were not in place before May, the supporting cast during the critical months till then was shifting and not of much weight, in the State Department at least. The crisis in Laos, in particular, was played from the top--and perhaps the shared experience became habit-forming. Only in May did Averell Harriman emerge as a strong man on Laos (and very much as the President's choice); thereafter he was to be at the center of American policy on Laos for the next six years, and to become from the end of 1961 to early 1963 the State Department Assistant

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*Bowles memoirs passim on his feelings. Expand.

Secretary in charge of East Asia.*

Turning briefly to the other key arms of foreign policy, the Defense Department had, of course, a wholly new civilian command. Under McNamara were Roswell Gilpatric as Deputy Secretary, Paul Nitze as Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, and myself as Nitze's "principal deputy"--and these were the four who participated in working and top-level meetings throughout 1961. None of us had any direct experience in Southeast Asia. I alone had ever been there, and that only for two very short visits to South Vietnam in 1956 and 1958 and one to Laos in 1958, as part of longer tours of Asia for background purposes. To be sure, I had been a member of the CIA's Office of National Estimates, and CIA alternate in 1952-56 on the very active NSC Planning Board of the Eisenhower era. In these posts, I had read the cables worldwide since 1951, participated in many overall evaluations and forecasts, and done a lawyer's job of seeing that the NSC papers were consistent with the best judgment of my intelligence associates and my chief, Allen Dulles. And in 1959, during the Geneva Conference of May-July concerning Berlin, as the intelligence briefing officer I had kept closely abreast of the Laos crisis of that year and, on one or two occasions--in default of any Asian hands assigned to the delegation--had accompanied Secretary Herter in meetings with his French and British counterparts on what to do. But that had been a

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*The title of this position was "Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs" until October 1966, when the area part was changed to "East Asian and Pacific Affairs." Thus, it was known within the Department as "FE: and later as "EA."

very different Laos crisis, before the advent of Phoumi Nosavan, and in 1958-59 no one had sensed crisis in Vietnam at all. During 1960, when both Laos and Vietnam became acute, I was on leave from CIA, working in the broader field of national goals at home and abroad, out of touch with my old colleagues, and hence hit just as hard and unexpectedly as others by the gravity of the two situations as it confronted us in the briefings of that snow-laden January.

Similarly, at the top levels of the Joint Chiefs of Staff there were--not surprisingly--no special Southeast Asian hands. Just below were many who held strong views on the need for action, but usually buttressed by broad argument and not first-hand experience. This was a reflection of the degree to which the brightest officers had avoided duty with the burgeoning MAAG structure of the 1950's.

In the Pentagon, the only authentic "expert" on Vietnam was Edward Lansdale, then serving as special assistant to the Deputy Secretary in charge of liaison with the CIA, in which he had formerly served. By now a Brigadier General in the Air Force, Lansdale had a legendary reputation, for his efforts with Magsaysay in the Philippines in 1951-54, and then for his later two and one-half years in South Vietnam during the critical period after the Geneva Conference of 1954.* Quite probably, his views and actions had been decisive in saving Diem's position in the spring of 1955, and his advice had

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*Cite new Lansdale book.

continued during what appeared, as much in retrospect as at the time, as the good years. I myself had met him once, in Saigon on the day he left for good in December of 1956--it had seemed the turning of a page to me and to many others.

To complete the cast of advisors, there was a strong CIA top command--Allen Dulles, Richard Bissell, several longtime Asian hands. Until the Bay of Pigs their credit from JFK downward was great on almost everything in policy councils, but in fact they were somewhat diffident on Southeast Asia in my experience. Perhaps this was awareness that the Phoumi group, heavily backed by CIA, had not turned out so well; at any rate they did not have great weight in the back-and-forth of policy on Southeast Asia before April, and rather less thereafter.

Such was the Washington set-up that tackled the formidable problems left by the Eisenhower Administration as it departed on January 20.

Laos the Top Priority

e. Of these, Laos bulked initially far larger than Vietnam. By late January, the Phoumi forces--the "government" recognized by the US since early December--were inching northward from Vientiane, in the face of the "neutralist" forces of Kong Le, now joined with Pathet Lao forces and a stiffening of North Vietnamese, all with Soviet airlift support. To encourage Phoumi, the Eisenhower Administration in its closing days--consulting briefly with Kennedy men but of course accepting full responsibility--had taken a series of small steps that added to the US effort though they stopped short of full US commitment. One was to send a small number of trainer aircraft capable of limited combat--the AT-6, or Harvard, trainer familiar in World War II to generations of Canadian fledgling pilots. A second was to raise the number of American military advisors on the ground with Phoumi's forces, in the form of the so-called "White Star" teams. And a third was the initial arming of Meo tribesmen, then, as later, eager to defend their hill areas, to the number of (5000).* The supplies for these and for Phoumi's forces generally were airlifted by the Air American organization, civilian pilots under contract to this faintly disguised CIA offshoot.

For the first month of the Kennedy Administration, the military situation was foremost. Despite some urging by the US military, no added help was given to Phoumi. Much thought was given to the possibility that Phoumi might not be able to restore effective control of the country, and it was (Hilsman) consistently urged by the JCS that the US be prepared to take direct

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*Please check

military action, sending forces to Laos if necessary. Whether this would be effective, and whether it might lead to massive Chinese intervention was discussed at length. It was the introduction of the new Administration to the family of military plans that had been drawn up both on a unilateral US basis and, since (early 1960) on a SEATO basis, for intervention in Laos against a creeping Communist threat, for action in the event of North Vietnamese conventional intervention, and for defending in the event of Chinese Communist intervention. The mere listing of these plans shows that the SEATO planners had not foreseen significant Soviet support--the case which had in fact arisen in Laos.

There was, during late January and February, also thought of diplomatic moves. The US supported the return of the International Control Commission (ICC), a significant step in American policy, since it had left Laos in 1958 at the request of the US-backed Phoumi government. And a brief effort was made by the King of Laos, on February 19, to enlist three of his neighbors--Burma, Cambodia, and Malaya--to investigate foreign intervention in Laos. By then, Poland, as the Communist member of the ICC, had completely sabotaged any chance of the Commission becoming involved. However, Burma and Cambodia speedily turned the new invitation down.

The third strand of policy was consideration of a possible political solution within Laos. Right at the outset, JFK had made clear that the US sought no Western position there, only "an independent

country not dominated by either side."* And he had in hand a strong memo of January 7, from the State Department, that even then had urged a political solution and a neutral status for Laos, free of all outside interference. As of late February, though, the thinking within the Administration was that any coalition must be confined to the right (Phoumi) and the neutralists (Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le), excluding the Pathet Lao (Souphannouvong), and, moreover, could not be headed by Souvanna Phouma. Phoumi was urged to go to the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh to talk to Souvanna Phouma, and this he did. (Z-46.) (Z 51 says March 17.)

Essentially, the first attempt of the Kennedy Administration was to put the existing "government" into a strong position, from which it might make peace with the neutralists and form a right-center coalition. It was at best a temporary policy hardly likely to succeed, a way station from all-out support for Phoumi.

In early March the situation reached crisis proportions, rapidly and dramatically. Phoumi's tentative push toward the Plaine des Jarres, the strategic hub of north-central Laos, was driven back, and on March 9 his forces were routed and the major road junction north of Vientiane on the way to Luang Prabang was taken. The picture in March was that Phoumi's forces had no morale or capacity left, and that only outside support could salvage anything.

The result was to intensify both military planning and the

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*Hilsman, p. 130.

search for political and diplomatic alternatives to a military confrontation. The military planners put forward a modified version of the now-familiar SEATO Plan 5, under which a multi-national force would cross the Mekong and occupy major centers along it. Already, the dual strategic importance of Laos was to the fore, as the front door to Thailand and the side door to South Vietnam, and the Mekong lowlands were crucial from both standpoints. Such action would be invoked by an appeal from the King of Laos, and the situation would be treated as an armed attack under the SEATO Treaty with the US responding along with other SEATO members who were prepared to do so.

The experience of the preceding two months was not calculated, however, to encourage robust hopes that such action would be easy to handle or to bring to any conclusion that could be thought successful. Thus, political planning came more to the fore.

Soviet reactions had been seen all along as crucial, and in the briefings before January 20, the Soviets had already been analyzed as unwilling to take a defeat but not disposed to see a real collision with US forces. (Z-70.) Basically, the Soviet presence in Laos was seen as due, in large part, to Sino-Soviet frictions. The Soviets were happy, of course, to make gains through any local Communist forces, but might be motivated also to keep the Chinese out of situations and in general to balance Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. This interpretation was not universal within government. It was the view at the top of the CIA, and became strongly that of

Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson in Moscow and other senior Soviet experts (Sulzberger citations.) Others, in the Pentagon and State Department alike, were thinking and operating more in a framework that the Soviet Union and Communist China were acting as a firm Bloc. The difference of view was to persist for some time. In the March crisis, the point was that the more hopeful view was tried, in the form of sending Thompson to find Khrushchev, then in Siberia, and do two things: impress on him that the US was not prepared to accept a Communist Laos, but tell him also that the US would listen to reasonable proposals for a political solution that would leave Laos truly neutral.

The British were the second key, and needed no urging. Along with the French, they had been opposed to, if not appalled by, the pro-Phoumi set of US policy in Laos throughout 1960. In the context of their wider concerns for the American relationship, they kept their thoughts quiet, but it was already clear that they had no wish to be drawn into military action through their membership in SEATO. Rather, they wished to make the fullest possible use of their second given role in the situation--that of Co-Chairman, with the Soviet Union, of the Geneva Conference of 1954. What the broad powers of the Co-Chairmen actually were was not legally clear, but any action they took together was not likely to be challenged on legal grounds.

Thompson was delayed in reaching Khrushchev, and could report only a fairly dusty answer on March ___, when he did finally see him. Taking advantage of Foreign Minister Gromyko's presence in the US,

Rusk called him to Washington on March 18 and had a long and inconclusive session. The British were by then drafting proposals for the Co-Chairmen to convene an enlarged Geneva Conference and to arrange a cease-fire as a prelude to it.*

Up to early March, the US position had been opposed to a conference or to a political solution within Laos that admitted Communists (the Pathet Lao specifically) to a new government. Under the pressure of March, and with strong initial urging from Ambassador Brown in Vientiane, the first position was reversed, and the second tacitly put to one side. There remained opposition to Souvanna as the head of a new government, but it was apparent to many, doubtless including the President, that it made little sense to envisage a three-part coalition unless the leader came from the center, which could only mean Souvanna.

At this point, W. Averell Harriman became for the first time a significant actor on the US side. Excluded from consideration as Secretary of State because of his age (68) he had been made Ambassador-at-Large--a "just what you make it" position from which he sought, as he himself put it privately, to work his way up from the ranks to the inner circle, as he had done under Roosevelt and Truman. Prior to March, he had been one who urged the change in the US objective to that of a truly neutral Laos, but he had not been directly engaged. As the March crisis developed, he was on a long "trip of opportunity,"

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*Footnote correcting Hilsman that Harriman saw Khrushchev at any stage, or the Russians till Geneva in May.

taking advantage of old connections and accumulated wisdom to get the lay of the land in many capitals and to "sell" the new Administration. (Sulzberger citation.) By March 21, this trip had brought him to New Delhi, where there happened also to be present Souvanna himself, exiled from Laos since Phoumi took Vientiane in December. Acting on his own initiative but informing Washington, Harriman made contact with Souvanna. It was the beginning of a personal relationship of trust that became a major thread in US policy in Laos over many years.

March 21 was a day of decision in many respects. At a major meeting, Rusk outlined and the President accepted a "two-track" strategy, as it was called almost at once, of inviting negotiation through a cease-fire and a conference, on the one hand, while preparing for stronger military action if at any point the negotiating track lost promise. The meeting nailed down the new US willingness for a conference and for a political solution worked out by the Lao political leaders across the board, no longer just the center and right. At the same time, with the Soviet attitude still forbidding, Kennedy looked to keeping very much alive the prospect of a scale of military confrontation that it was thought the Soviets did not want. To this end, the President decided to seek the broadest possible SEATO support, starting with the British and French, for united SEATO action if the Communist side kept pushing.

It was a strategy of moderation, rational and thought through as far as it could be. The immediate actions were to give the British the green light on their conference/cease-fire proposal (slightly

amended on American advice), to write to both MacMillan and de Gaulle asking their SEATO support, and to sweeten Harriman's contact with Souvanna by authorizing an invitation for Souvanna to visit the US.

And, on Thursday, March 23, the President explained his decisions to the American people in a dramatic televised press conference. With maps of the area of Laos behind him, he explained the issues and the wider stakes and outlined the two-pronged approach clearly, though necessarily in broader terms than the underlying detailed steps being taken. The impact was very great, and tended to emphasize more the firmness of the US and the possibility of conflict than the negotiating track. The problem of explanation was an enormous one, though, for the whole situation since October had moved gradually to the crisis stage with very little publicity and with no explanation at all from the outgoing Administration. There was nothing to build from, not even those serious consultations with the Congress that have sometimes given, at least to that segment of the American people that follow foreign affairs, warning of real trouble impending.

Perhaps the use of television was in itself part of the problem, and it is notable that, except for the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, JFK never used TV in this dramatic way again, preferring the general press conference or the written statement as less dramatic and more precise respectively. Perhaps the major difficulty was simply that the presentation was complex and addressed to too many audiences: it was educating the American people on the stakes, telling the Russians

and the doubting nations of Southeast Asia that we were firm, and at the same time holding the door open to a negotiated outcome. The message that came through was that there must be a cease-fire, a stopping of the Communist drive, and a reasonable solution providing for an independent Laos--"or else." But what could the "or else" really be?

Inevitably, the spotlight turned to the annual meeting of the SEATO Council, long scheduled to start in Bangkok the following Monday, March 27. In the intervening three days, the pace of action was feverish. The British presented their full proposal to the Soviets on March 24. On the 25th, de Gaulle responded to Kennedy's letter in a tone that could be called broadly sympathetic, but insisting that the situation be handled on a tripartite basis and not in SEATO, and categorically negative on any French military involvement under SEATO. And on Sunday, the 26th, JFK saw Prime Minister MacMillan of Britain at Key West. The discussion of Laos went in many directions to no clear end, but did somewhat soften the initial negative British reaction to SEATO contingency action.

In the circumstances, Rusk's task in Bangkok was an unenviable one. Thailand and the Philippines, represented by the formidable Thanat Khoman and the articulate Felixberto Serrano, had for months been urging strong military action in Laos, full support for Phoumi, and SEATO forces if needed. The Philippine position was perhaps never to be so strong or concerned again, but this time, and again in

May, it registered forcefully. Thai insistence and special concern for Laos were to continue throughout the period of this book. It was symptom, not cause, that Phoumi was a relative of Marshal Sarit, the Prime Minister of Thailand. Thai fears ran, first, to any development in Laos that could bring Communist power to the Mekong, and second to any sign of weakness or vacillation on the part of the US. Ever since about 1950, definitely since 1954 and SEATO, the Thai had departed from a historic policy of cautious balancing and diplomacy. The Communist threat had seemed to them so clear and implacable that they had cast their lot with the US as a reliable protecting power, becoming aligned as never before with a great power. Now the test had come, and Thanat left little doubt of his country's feeling that the US must meet it.

It was at this first meeting with Rusk that Thanat used a figure of speech Rusk never forgot: Thailand was a "golden bowl" that must be held inviolate from conflict. The implication was that if conflict did reach within Thailand on any major scale the Thai would accommodate and seek peace rather than see their country ravaged. They would be firm and uncompromising if others were backing them, but they would not stand alone against what they judged to be an over-powering threat. Perhaps Thanat spoke for others than the Thai in Southeast Asia; at any rate, the image and its significance never left Rusk's mind in later attempts to judge what would happen in Southeast Asia if Communist power came to control or dominate what

had been Indochina.

A third strong voice, surprising as it seems a decade later, came in Bangkok from Natsir Qadir, Foreign Minister of Pakistan. For a complex of motives that doubtless included, as it had since 1954, desire to get maximum US support in its local balance of power with India, Pakistan was ready to commit forces to a SEATO effort, along with the Thai and Filipinos. Under the military plans, the Thai and US contributions would have been major, and the commander would have been a Thai general. Other outside contributions would have been modest in scale, but definite armed units with specific functions.

Australia and New Zealand were not quite so clear-cut in their initial attitudes. Both had been skeptical-to-critical of US backing of Phoumi. Yet in the last analysis, the two now agreed that the offer of negotiation must be accompanied by a readiness to stand firm. In the course of the conference they supported equally both halves of the total US position, being prepared also to send forces.

Thus, American views commanded strong backing in a majority of the SEATO members--altogether six of the eight. The problem, of course, was that this was not unanimity, with the British reluctant and the French negative--quietly through Foreign Minister Couve de Murville at Bangkok, flatly in the de Gaulle reply to JFK.

Did SEATO have to be unanimous? The point had a history. When

the pact was negotiated in 1954, the Philippines urged that the SEATO Council be empowered to act by a 3/4 vote.* Then, it had been the US itself that had objected, knowing that the Congress would not accept any possibility that a vote by other nations, without American agreement, could establish a US obligation or press the US to act. Although a requirement that any action by the Council as such must be unanimous had not been written into the Treaty, it had been accepted as custom since the first Council meeting of 1955.

SEATO, thus, could not act as SEATO save unanimously. But it had never been the American view that this meant that the SEATO obligation did not continue to apply to each country, at least under the crucial Article IV, Section 1. This was the Treaty provision calling for each member to "act in accordance with its constitutional processes" in the event of "armed attack" against the members in the treaty area. In such a case, even if SEATO were not unanimous, each nation made up its mind and did whatever it decided to do, but still under its SEATO obligation. Such was the reaffirmed legal position of the State Department in the preparations for the 1961 Bangkok meeting. By contrast, it was the Department's equally clear view that Section 2 of Article IV, on meeting "aggression other than by armed attack," did require unanimity, since it provided that the members should consult

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*The council consisted of the Foreign Ministers or their deputies, who, however, met only once a year as a rule. At other times the Council sat in Bangkok, with the Ambassadors there as its "Permanent Members."

"in order to agree" on action. Since true agreement must mean unanimity, it was reasoned, Section 2 did not come into force without it, as the simple obligation to "act" under Section 1 did.

The distinction was narrow, but important. It was to affect the way the US dealt with Thailand in 1961 and 1962, including the Rusk-Thanat Communique of March 1962, and it was to affect the way the US handled the applicability of SEATO to Vietnam in the years 1961-64, before there was a factual situation clearly warranting the description of "armed attack." Specifically, in March of 1961, the US responded to probing Thai suggestions for a bilateral defense pact, by assuring the Thai orally that the SEATO obligation to meet armed attack was deemed by the US to apply to each SEATO member individually and was so accepted by the US. The substance of the public Rusk-Thanat Communique of 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.

In the stifling heat of that Bangkok meeting, all could see that this legal point did not meet the public need. In practical policy terms, whatever was said by SEATO had to be unanimous. Forcing France into dissent was a last resort, apparently not seriously considered. The problem was to get a statement that would, while backing a political solution, convey some impression of willingness to act strongly if this did not happen. With British help, an American draft was finally worked out and accepted by all, saying that in the event of failure, "members of SEATO are prepared, within the terms of

the Treaty, to take whatever action may be appropriate in the circumstances." (Z-25) Couve for the French must have found legal and translation loopholes to explain to de Gaulle his agreement even to this, while to those inclined to act strongly it said something they could interpret that way. To detached observers, the limited meaning and content were clear, and it was widely commented that Bangkok was a turning point in revealing the weakness of SEATO. In fact, British reluctance and French negativism had been registered before, and the rift would have been the same, merely less visible, without the meeting. That it came out pretty openly did, of course, very much increase the concern of the Asian members. Their leaders felt that SEATO had failed its crucial test, and made clear their belief that new demonstrations of US will were needed if the stability of the area was to be maintained.

Even as SEATO met, however, some light began to show on the diplomatic track. Gromyko saw JFK on the 27th of March and the tone of the talk was distinctly more forthcoming. On (April 4?), the Russians formally accepted the idea of a conference, but not that of a prior cease-fire. (Hilsman, 133)

So matters hung through the first three weeks of April, while the attention of JFK and his senior advisors turned wholly to Cuba. With an American-backed force of (1100) Cuban exiles ready to go and unable to remain longer in its Guatemala staging area, JFK had to decide whether to see the force disbanded, to let it act and give it

overt US military support, or to let it act without such support. He chose the last, or middle, course, and the result was the disaster of the Bay of Pigs. The exile force landed on April 17 and was wiped out or rounded up by the afternoon of April 18.

To those mature at the time, the impact of this event needs no recalling, though nature has ways of dulling unbearable pain. To those not then mature, it may be hard to reconstruct the mood of that week and for a long time thereafter. In history, the Bay of Pigs tends to be treated as the evil prelude to the good events of October 1962 concerning Cuba. At the time, all was black. Publicly and in an unforgettable private session of the National Secruity Council on the Saturday of the week, JFK took responsibility gallantly, and of course rightly. The country rallied in sympathy, and within the Administration a sober and constructive review was set under way, with only the small-minded seeking individual scapegoats for what had plainly been a major failure of judgment all along the line. One immediate result was to shake, for good, what had been an almost ebullient confidence within the new Administration. Closely related was a second: never thereafter would civilian leaders and advisors accept military and professional judgments without exploring them so fully as to make them, in effect, their own.

These were the effects at home. Abroad, friend and foe alike reacted sharply, to a depth that only deeds and the course of events could redress. American prestige was hurt, in practical and to some

extent in moral terms, and the wisdom of a promising new American Administration was seen as dubious indeed.

~~One dwells on~~ This setting ~~because it~~ inevitably bore on the decisions taken in the ensuing weeks concerning Laos, Vietnam, and Asian confidence generally. The Bay of Pigs was a significant element in the felt need to show where the US stood. It was also a large orange light of caution on getting involved in Laos.

By April 19, the situation in Laos had already become ominous, with the Communist side pressing down both toward Vientiane and toward Thakhek at the bend of the Mekong. To show US resolve, the proposal had been made on the 14th that US advisors in Laos, then in civilian clothes under the cover label of the Program Evaluation Office, should put on their uniforms, be labelled a full-scale MAAG, or Military Assistance Advisory Group, and work with tactical battalions. This was approved on the (19th), but predictably had little effect. On the 24th, the British and Soviets formally called for a conference and for a cease-fire to take effect May 3, before the conference convened on _____. But still the Communist side in Laos kept advancing apparently seeking to establish a position of total military dominance that would in turn affect the political outcome of the conference.

In the President's absence from April (25) to May 1, a series of confused and indecisive meetings took place in Washington. Harriman had by then headed for Laos, and joined with General Lemnitzer, the

JCS Chairman, in a cable from Saigon (?) urging the deployment of a division-sized US force to Thailand as a demonstration. Others in the military urged that operations be undertaken in Laos itself, with a strong overtone that nuclear weapons should be authorized at a fairly early point if the going got too rough. To this, civilians in both the State Department and Pentagon were opposed. Perhaps the fairest judgment was that later stated by JFK: " . . . all the generals and other people disagreed about this. You don't know whom to believe and whom to disbelieve."* The week certainly brought home to all, again as JFK was later to say, that "it is far more difficult [than in Europe over Berlin] to face the problem of fighting a war in Southeast Asia."** It also underscored the lack of an agreed overall military strategy for the use of conventional forces, which had by then been only slightly increased in the revised defense budget presented in April.

In a rather dramatic meeting of April 27th (chaired by LBJ in the absence of both JFK and Rusk?) a bipartisan group of Congressional leaders was briefed in detail on military possibilities. The gathering was unanimously in opposition to sending forces to Laos, but--significantly--was prepared to go along with forces being deployed in Vietnam or Thailand. The tenor of this meeting was reflected in comments by

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*Sulzberger, 936.

**Sulzberger, 812.

Senator Fulbright, reported by the Washington Post on May 1.*

On that same day, JFK returned to Washington, as the SEATO Council met (at Ambassador level) in Bangkok and SEATO maneuvers were under way off Thailand, involving 6000 US Marines.** For two days more the situation seemed explosive, but on May 3 the Pathet Lao announced a cease-fire. Even though some fighting still continued and incidents occurred right into June, the US was now prepared to go to Geneva, where the conference of 14 nations convened on May 16. Apparently Moscow's desire to ease the crisis had prevailed in Hanoi. Peking blustered, but seemed to play no part.

During his ten days in the area during the April-May crisis, Harriman had by then met a second time with Souvanna in Phnom Penh, and his favorable impression of March had been strengthened and perhaps reciprocated. Yet, as Rusk and Harriman arrived in Geneva, the outline of a possible settlement was fuzzy. The first two weeks of the Conference were a sterile wrangle, and not until JFK saw Khrushchev at Vienna on June (2) and found that their one area of agreement was Laos did hope emerge that something could be salvaged out of the mess. At least there was by then time to breathe and room to maneuver.

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*BM quotes if possible.

**These men had been at sea since late March, as one of the series of quiet but visible deployments set under way at that time as part of the "determination track."

It is a good point in the narrative to take stock of JFK's handling of this first Laos crisis, and of its significance in the development of his policies. With the possible exception of the drama of the TV presentation of March 23, praise for avoiding flamboyant threats and yet making quiet preparatory moves is deserved, likewise for the realism of seeing the hopelessness of Phoumi, sensing the possibilities of Souvanna, and focussing on the Soviet Union as the key to the other side. All in all, considering the virtually hopeless impasse that the Eisenhower Administration had left, and the many ways the situation could have been misplayed or aggravated, JFK deserves the high marks he gets in most accounts.*

But this does not mean that the US came out of the crisis well. With the grave mistakes of 1960 in Laos set on the scales, the net balance was substantially minus. The Soviet Union had been given an excuse for intervention in Southeast Asia, and with North Vietnam had made major gains there. In agreeing to a let-up in Laos, the Soviets doubtless thought the situation there would collapse in due course anyway. The North Vietnamese were persuaded to go along for reasons one can (only) guess (--) perhaps that South Vietnam, not Laos, was their primary target, perhaps simply that at this stage they were dependent on the Russians for what it took to operate in Laos. In the broader terms

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*Schlesinger, 340; Hilsman _____, and others.

of the overall threat presented by the Communist nations in Southeast Asia, it was hard to draw any consolation from these factors, which seemed to be special to Laos, and probably temporary even there.

Certainly there was no cheering at the time. It was the widespread impression at home and abroad that any new government in Laos would end up under Communist domination and that all that the US was doing was to put the best possible face on a clear defeat.* Congressional and public opinion at home generally favored the choice that had been made, with Senators Mansfield and Aiken saying typically, on May 7, that much of the problem was "our own fault."** But there was immediately visible an accompanying sense that the US must show that it would stand firm in other parts of Southeast Asia.

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*BM: samples if possible.

**BM. Citation.

Vietnam Comes on Stage

f. This was the mood as the top levels of the Kennedy Administration focussed in late April, essentially for the first time as a group, on the problem of Vietnam.

In the snows of January, Vietnam had been the "fifth crisis"--ranking after Cuba, Laos, Berlin, and the Congo. Because it was a shade less visible than the others, and because initial steps had been laid out, it did not claim top-level attention for nearly three months. In the Pentagon, McNamara and Gilpatric ~~had~~ sent Lansdale back to Vietnam for 12 days prior to the Inauguration, and they and the White House (not apparently the State Department) ~~had~~ noted his typically personal report. In succinct and earthy terms, it found that the Viet Cong had managed to establish widespread control in the major rice areas of southern South Vietnam. Lansdale conceded that his old friend, Ngo Dinh Diem, had fallen heavily under the influence of his brother Nhu and was becoming more and more narrow, ineffective, and unpopular. Nonetheless, Lansdale thought that the answer lay in getting at Diem through an American team that would work closely with all of his top men, and would influence Diem himself by making clear its basic sympathy and support. It did not take much to conclude that Lansdale hoped that he himself might be picked to head such a team, presumably as Ambassador, for the report went on in more or less scathing criticism of almost all of the Mission. Its negative imprint almost certainly registered, but its implied recommendation was put to one side. In mid-March the

choice fell on Frederick Nolting to succeed Ambassador Durbrow, who had by then visibly used up both his own strength and his credit with Diem, in four years of effort that had not often been understood, guided, or backed from Washington.*

Even earlier, Kennedy had acted promptly to approve an elaborate "Counter-Insurgency Plan" (CIP)for South Vietnam, sent in by the Mission and reflecting months of work chiefly on the military side. Its most conspicuous recommendations were that the US should back and equip an increase from 150,000 to 170,000 in the regular forces of the government, and support a major increase in the Civil Guard. Both were wanted badly by Diem, and at Durbrow's insistence US support was to be used as leverage to obtain a number of changes in Diem's way of doing business.

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*One cannot refrain from mentioning one of the most serious handicaps under which Durbrow had labored, for it affected the way the new Administration resolved, I think successfully, to do business. This was the status of the senior military man in Vietnam, General Samuel T. Williams, who had arrived in Saigon in 1956 and had been extended at Diem's personal request for another two years when his normal tour expired in the summer of 1958. In the end he remained until the summer of 1960, with close access always to Diem and by his manner, if not directly, undercutting just about all that Durbrow was trying to achieve in the period from 1958 on. It was perhaps the most grotesque, though by no means the only, example of usurpation of the Ambassador's function that came about in the late 1950's, and that contributed to the Kennedy manifesto of May 29, 1961, on the powers of the Ambassador. The case also pointed up the importance of never letting appointments be made or continued on the basis of the wishes of foreign leaders--a "rule" all governments profess, but may not always adhere to.

However straightforward from the American standpoint, these changes were bound to affect not only Diem's methods but his power structure. In particular, rather than having each major commander report, in effect, direct to the Palace, the American proposals called for a "straight line" chain of command through the military. For a ruler who had by now developed deep fears of a military coup, this was strong medicine.

It was resisted, and an impasse developed through February and March. In April Durbrow left (which may have been what Diem was waiting for, in part), and a Pentagon emissary, General Thomas Trapnell, came back with recommendations that the US sweeten the pot by increasing its support for the force increases.

Meanwhile, the Viet Cong had continued to be active within South Vietnam, and by early April, when JFK and ~~Mac Millan~~ Macmillan had a formal meeting in Washington, they spent two and one half hours on Southeast Asia, mostly on Laos but with mention in the public statement of the need "to prevent a further worsening of the situation in South Vietnam."*

In the week after the Bay of Pigs, and not by coincidence, concern became acute, triggered apparently by a memorandum within the Pentagon from Lansdale. On the basis of a formal recommendation from Deputy Secretary Gilpatric to the President, Kennedy set up a Task Force under Gilpatric himself and ordered it to report in a week. Simultaneously,

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*BM.

the idea of a trip to Asia by Vice President Johnson, already in the air, was made much more urgent and focussed on Vietnam and the SEATO member countries, where it was thought that confidence needed a lift through such a visit.

The two projects inevitably flowed together in the next two weeks, culminating in a Presidential letter to Diem of May 8, to be delivered by the Vice President on his arrival May 11. Its terms combined the old counter-insurgency plan with additional offers of aid drawn from the report of the Task Force, which had been submitted on April 28 and further refined, with State Department comments, on May 5. In essence,

~~on May 5. In essence,~~ the letter offered full support for the increases in regular forces and Civil Guard, plus (added key items), and proposed a joint team of economic experts to explore an overall program of economic reforms and strengthening to support still further increases in the effort to defeat the Viet Cong. Johnson's oral instructions went still further, and authorized him to explore whether Diem wished regular American forces or an American alliance.

The keynote of the trip, and the underlying judgments behind it, seem as clear in hindsight as they did at the time. 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.*

As the trip unfolded, it became indeed a strong earnest of American resolve. After Saigon, Johnson went in quick succession to the Philippines, Nationalist China, Thailand, India, and Pakistan, covering the whole itinerary between May 11 and 21. In the

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*One organizational aspect of the Vietnam plans is worth noting. With the State Department heavily engaged in planning for the Laos Conference, most of the drafting for Vietnam came from the amply staffed Pentagon. Only after 10 days did the State Department make its voice felt through ~~the outgoing~~ Ambassadors Nolting and Young (who ~~was to~~ accompany Johnson and then take up his post in Bangkok). They made few substantive changes, but did obtain an important change in Washington organization. A Task Force on Vietnam was to be set up, originally under Gilpatric; this was changed to State chairmanship but at a much lower level, that of the Vietnam action officer, Sterling Cottrell. Looking back to the days in 1947-60 when State had contributed dynamic executive leadership to such projects as German policy and aid to Greece and Turkey, the drop in State's executive capacity was noteworthy, and destined to become a continuing factor.

first three, reassurance was clearly the dominant note both in public and private. Over and over Johnson pledged that the US would stick by its allies. (Amplify by quotes.)

In Vietnam, Johnson made headlines by referring to Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Asia."* In private he put the President's proposals clearly to Diem, who immediately agreed to the total package of US aid and accompanying Vietnamese measures, as well as to the joint examination of economic measures. Asked by Johnson how he felt about US military forces, Diem was negative: their introduction would amount to discarding the Geneva Accords of 1954, and was not warranted short of overt aggression. (Z-14) Nor did Diem react to the more tentative suggestion of a bilateral alliance, which of course would also have been contrary to the Accords. Contrary to the implications of his public statement, Johnson saw the flaws in Diem and especially in those around him, but undoubtedly the impression of basic strength and patriotism was predominant.

In the talks in Manila, Taipei, and Bangkok the refrain was the same--deep worry over the course the US had chosen in Laos and evidence in every way of how heavily each nation depended on US firmness and continued support. In Bangkok only was there reference to specific needs, to which Johnson replied with a broad promise of $50 million in additional aid. Not only Diem but others showed themselves "allergic" to US soldiers in the area. (Z-37.)

On his return Johnson submitted a full and blunt report to JFK dated May 23, 1961. Obviously writing personally and from

deeply felt experiences, he described the anxiety he had found, thought it had been allayed for the time being by his visit, but concluded that this was the last chance for the US to show these nations it really meant to support their independence against Communist threats. Excerpts give the flavor:

-- "Leaders . . . accept that we are making the best of a bad bargain at Geneva. Their charity extends no farther."

-- "The public, or, more precisely, the political, reaction to Laos had drastically weakened the ability to maintain any strongly pro-US orientation. Neutralism in Thailand, collapse in Vietnam, anti-American election demagoguery in the Philippines were all developing prior to our visit. . . Our mission arrested the decline of confidence in the United States. It did not--in my judgment--restore any confidence already lost . . . 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 extansions of my note." *

-- " . . . Asian Communism is compromised and contained by the maintenance of free nations on the

* The metaphor is arresting. Was not the US in fact lender rather than borrower? The Vice President's language certainly showed the depth of his personal feeling of obligation to those who relied on the US.

subcontinent. Without this inhibitory influence, the island outposts--Philippines, Japan, Taiwan--have no security and the vast Pacific becomes a Red Sea."

~~2-55~~
3-40

--"There is no alternative to United States leadership in Southeast Asia . . . . SEATO is not now and probably never will be the answer because of British and French unwillingness to support decisive action."

--"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 people would not look with favor upon governments which invited or accepted the return this soon of Western troops. . . . "

--{The greatest danger} "is not the momentary threat of Communism itself, rather that danger stems from hunger, ignorance, poverty and disease."

--{We must decide whether to help or} "throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a 'Fortress America' concept." {If the latter}, "we would say to the world 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."

--{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. We must remain master in this decision."

This report is, of course, rife with suggestion as to the views and attitudes with which Lyndon Johnson was to approach the situation when he became President. As of late May 1961, it is impossible to say that the report spoke in every respect for the views of President Kennedy and his advisors. Some, perhaps most, would have put the situation and the necessary approach with more reserve and considerably less drastic estimates of the consequences of failure. But the judgment that confidence in East Asia had been badly shaken by the whole Laos affair [and, as elsewhere, by the Bay of Pigs], the resolve to help South Vietnam in any way that would be effective, the sense that the situation there affected the rest of Southeast Asia gravely--all these were universal throughout the top levels of the Administration. Hence the US during May moved a significant step forward in its involvement in South Vietnam.

Neither in my memory nor in the record available to me is there evidence of any basic argument at this point as to the nature of US interests and stakes in Vietnam or in Southeast Asia generally. It was enough that 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, whatever the subtleties of the relations among the Communist nations, 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. If terrain and political mistakes in Laos made it impossible to take a stand there, the more vital that one be demonstrated in South Vietnam. Although some have suggested that Kennedy was reluctant in this early decision (Hilsman, 420), 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 had got to be tackled." To send the Vice President on a crash trip, and to accompany him by the President's sister and brother-in-law, was not in any case the act of a man hedging his bets. ~~And~~ The evidence strongly suggests that Kennedy regarded Vietnam, at this stage at least, as a clear case where, as he put it to Khrushchev in early June at Vienna, the entry of additional nations into the communist camp would alter the existing equilibrium of power. (Schlesinger, 363-4).

g. The first phase of the Kennedy Administration can be said to have ended with the President's visit to Europe in late May and his talk with Khrushchev in Vienna. Apart from an agreement in principle to work out a political settlement in Laos, the encounter was a grim one. Berlin in particular was the subject of strong and unmistakeable threats, and the crisis there ~~was~~ BECAME by far the most serious and engrossing for the United States Government during the rest of 1961 and well into 1962, a somber backdrop for all other issues and especially those with a Communist component.

What had the four months meant for the development of American policy in East Asia? In the systematic sense, very little. The crisis of Laos and the semi-crisis of Vietnam had pre-empted the stage, and set a policy line for Southeast Asia. Out of the limelight, as we shall see in Chapter 6, a few new notes had been struck--the Reischauer appointment in Tokyo, a short visit to Washington by Sukarno of Indonesia in April. Other new worldwide policies were in the making, notably a much increased emphasis on economic development in foreign aid and a small accompanying de-emphasis on military aid. In military policy, ~~new~~ (A QUANTITATIVELY SMALL) emphasis on counter-insurgency and Special Forces had been registered by the April budget. All these had a bearing on policy in East Asia. Neither separately nor together did they add up to a systematic strategy or a discriminating evaluation of interests, objectives, and the tools available, in East Asia as a whole.*

One important thing the four months did do, and this was to set in concrete the conviction that the US ~~could count on~~ (WOULD GET SMALL HELP FROM ITS) major allies in its security efforts in Southeast Asia. The French were thenceforth counted out, at least for any action calling for force or a tough position, and the British always regarded as doubtful, (SAVE IN MALAYA AND SINGAPORE.) Whether these attitudes would have come about without the ~~great~~ souring effect of the split over Laos in 1960 is speculative. That disagreement certainly made a significant contribution, but as one assesses de Gaulle's

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*Cite Bowles.

underlying attitudes and the set of British action in the Far East over a long period of time, including 1954, the outcome was probably inevitable. The weight of responsibility in Southeast Asia had come to lie overwhelmingly--and heavily--on US shoulders.

CH. 4
9/19/72

Chapter 4: The Crisis of the Fall of 1961

a. During the summer of 1961 Laos turned very slowly for the better and South Vietnam for the worse. Both changes were slow and almost imperceptible till September. Thereafter, as negotiations in Laos picked up momentum, Vietnam became in its turn critical. The two were inter-related, as always, but in the fall Vietnam emerged as the more profound and long-term problem, ~~it had always been recognised to be~~ ~~underneath~~. By Christmas, Laos was half-resolved, while in Vietnam a whole new approach and degree of US involvement had been decided and was being put into effect. All this took place alongside crises in Berlin and the Congo that peaked in the same fall months. It was not an idle season.

b. Take Laos first. Even after Khrushchev's forthcoming statements in Vienna, violations of the cease-fire continued, and in early June the US threatened a walk-out at Geneva. Then, with some help from Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, the Lao princes representing the three factions met in Zurich and agreed that there should be a government in which all three were represented. How power and positions were to be distributed was not settled, nor who should be at the head. By this time, Harriman and others had become convinced that Souvanna was both the inevitable man and a hopeful one, fundamentally patriotic, competent, and capable of leading and enlisting others. But old habits and fear of a renewed Communist offensive led the US Government

as a whole to be slow in reducing support for Phoumi or making it clear to him, at all levels and types of contact, that he simply had to accept the three-part coalition on equitable terms. The neutralist and Pathet Lao military forces remained solidly together, with Souvanna located in Khang Khay, behind their lines in the Plaine des Jarres. In what may have been circumstances of some pressure he made a series of agreements with the North Vietnamese and Chinese. (Footnote on the roads).*

Hanoi's role and presence in Laos were expanding steadily, and the Soviet airlift on its behalf was extended during this period to points near the South Vietnamese border, notably Tchepone. Obviously, the need to keep the Pathet Lao supplied was being meshed with the development of supply lines into South Vietnam. One of the fruits was a slowly developing recognition within the USG, during this summer, that Hanoi was not only the major actor on the ground in both countries, but acting in its own right and not merely as any chosen instrument of Moscow or Peking. Though maintaining aid, the Soviets were by now clearly ready to compromise in Laos. By contrast, the slow and steady drive forward of Hanoi and the accompanying sympathy of Peking, which injected spoiling noises at every stage, were particularly evident to those negotiating in Geneva. The perceptions were slower to take root in Washington, as we shall see.

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*Please check.

By early October, when the three Princes agreed formally that Souvanna should head a coalition government, it was necessary for Washington to bite the bullet. Should the US put pressure on Phoumi to accept a truly balanced coalition even at the risk of demoralizing him and his forces, which were all that appeared to stand in the way of Communist forces pushing at will to the Mekong? All the lurking reservations on the basic Presidential decision of April-May were aroused by this issue: it was a tough choice between short-term military considerations and a long-term political imperative, for the risks ~~did~~ appeared substantial then and throughout the winter and spring of 1962. But from late October 1961 on the choice was clearly made, to run these risks for the sake of the political solution of external neutrality and internal coalition.*

Thus, when Phoumi refused in October to meet with Souvanna, it became US policy to start putting pressure on him. It was the forerunner of later and graver decisions in early 1962.**

As the internal political solution hung fire, the rest of the work at Geneva went ahead slowly. "External" elements of a settlement took shape that included the withdrawal of foreign forces and a bar to the use of Lao territory for "interference" in other countries

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*In Laos the two elements were combined, and the combination became the working definition of a "neutralist" solution as the term was understood throughout SEA. The slippery term "neutralist" is used as sparingly as possible in this book to avoid confusion; when used, this is what it means.

** CROSS STORY.

(unnamed, but of course with South Vietnam and Cambodia in mind). The most difficult issue was the charter for the ICC, on which the US and others relied heavily for detection of future evasion or violation; in the end the Communist side yielded, and accepted limitations on unanimity, in what appeared to many its only concession of substance. By December, the picture of the external terms was sufficiently clear to produce a general feeling of satisfaction in Geneva, and it was then that the US representative in charge on the spot, Ambassador (?)* William Sullivan, was moved to say that the outline could be a "template" from which wider benefits might be drawn in SEA as a whole. (NYT citations.) The job of removing Laos from the play seemed at least half-done, and the decision of the spring tentatively vindicated.

c. On the Vietnam front, there was a continuing interchange with the Diem government through the summer. (IN MAY) An American invitation to ask for more help had been clearly implied by (VICE PRESIDENT) Johnson and by the JFK letter. ~~in May.~~ Hence, it was no surprise that on June 9 Diem wrote to ask for more US forces in a training role.** An examination of the issue was added to the work of a primarily economic mission headed by Dr. Eugene Staley, which arrived in late June and reported back jointly to both JFK and Diem in late July. With the aid of active military members, the Staley Mission supported Diem's request for a further increase in his regular forces to 200,000 men, but the report also

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*BM check title, ~~and a note from Nollie~~. (Not Amb. in fact or name then)

**DID THESE GO ABOVE GENEVA LIMITS THEN?

highlighted the economic difficulties and wider need for civilian-related progress and reform. Though approved in principle by JFK, the Staley report became the subject of endless further discussions in Saigon, and in the end was wrapped up only in January 1962, as a tail to the policy discussions of late fall. Staley's team and their Vietnamese counterparts made a courageous and thoughtful attempt to look to the long term and to put economic measures for the people alongside military action, in more or less equal priorities. The report reads today as a good example of the best thinking of which the American government was capable, on the methods by which insurgency should be tackled. Its limited effectiveness or lasting effect likewise suggests how hard it may be to get acceptance by an Asian regime (perhaps any regime in a developing country) of steps that change and appear to weaken the political power base.*

Apart from this step, JFK and his top advisors were not really focussed on Vietnam. Their greatest concern was the crisis over Berlin. This involved the calling up of reserves, supplemental appropriations that for the first time seriously raised conventional force levels, a visible hemorrhage of people from East Germany to the west through Berlin, and in August the dramatic shock of the Berlin Wall--with the US both surprised and helpless to act. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union further confounded American hopes by large nuclear tests in the atmosphere. This not only breached the tacit moratorium of (period), but--another dual shock--aroused no wave of indignation,

*NEEDS MORE SPECIFICS.

notably among the non-aligned nations then gathered at Belgrade and including many that JFK had been at pains to court.

The world already seemed, then, cold and hard in mid-September, when the news broke that the Viet Cong had carried out a series of attacks of battalion scale and had succeeded in temporarily capturing one provincial capital not far from Saigon and dealing summarily with government officials there. Then, on came the brutal assassination in Saigon itself of the South Vietnamese liaison officer to the ICC.*

These developments launched the Vietnam crisis of the fall of 1961. Unlike the burst of action in the May period, this was a rolling crisis extending over three months in successive phases--analysis and initial proposals, examination on the ground, a basic new decision, and then the first and formative steps to carry out that decision. Both because of the vital importance of the steps taken and because of the elements that framed these steps, it is important to go over this period in considerable detail. In essence, whereas the period through May had been played by ear, the fall was a time for considered long-term decisions, seen and felt in that light by all those close to the problem. Also unlike the period ending in May, the Administration was by now reasonably well shaken down, with the important exception of the higher levels of the State Department. At the very top, JFK and

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*Please check. or BM, NYT Index.

his senior advisors had become accustomed to each other and toughened by the shared experience of many months, ~~much of it disappointing and frustrating, but some of it reassuring. In particular, the deep gloom after the Bay of Pigs no longer haunted the atmosphere~~.

Analysis and Initial Proposals

d. Analysis of the Vietnam situation now existed in much more substantial form than before. By September, the (INHERITED) tendency to generalize the whole of the crisis in (INDOCHINA) ~~Southeast Asia~~ as the work of unified Communist forces ~~the brutally monolithic idea~~ had been (MUCH) modified. Laos events had made a major contribution to this gradual change, and within the government the civilian intelligence agencies had had time to marshal the evidence into a coherent picture of what was going on in both Laos and Vietnam.

A word on these agencies. The key ones were several offices in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the East Asian part of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). In the Pentagon, the three military services had their own intelligence offices, but these were focussed heavily on service concerns. Service rivalries also tended to produce parochialism, tours of duty were generally short for military men in key positions, and civilian experts often felt frustrated. All in all, the military intelligence agencies had little weight when it came to any assessment in which a political

or international/strategic component was central. Later, when they were merged, or better federated, into the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), their services were useful and important in the color of reporting and for military matters, but the top policy circle of government was not affected by them in its major decision-making periods.

CIA and INR did have continuing impact. Their weight varied from period to period, as we shall see. At no time was there any semblance of the practice of the Eisenhower period of summarizing National Intelligence Estimates (NIE's) as the description of the situation in most key policy papers. The NIE's and other intelligence papers were produced as often as before, in response to a sense of urgency and need that drew on all forms of contact with policy officials. Intelligence was not an abstract ivory tower by any means. The task of planting the best available picture of information and judgment in the mind of the policy-maker called for a measure of aggressiveness, initiative, and even salesmanship, and these qualities were present in both the main intelligence shops. They registered their material through daily briefings and publications, occasional spot papers, and on broad issues through the NIE's, which were the responsibility of the Director of Central Intelligence and head of CIA but reflected the views and contributions of all intelligence agencies of any sort.* Perhaps at the apex of the structure, in terms of gravity

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*An extensive picture of the role of the "intelligence community" as seen from INR will be found in Hilsman. While naturally slanted a

and policy relevance alike, was the category of Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIE's), normally commissioned directly by some policy source in order to assess the probable impact of a specified US course of action, the consequences of doing (or not doing) some major new act.

By the fall of 1961, the intelligence picture of Vietnam and Laos was that a major Hanoi-directed Communist offensive was under way, with the forcible reunification of Vietnam under a Communist regime as its object. Historically, armed activities in the South were traced back to 1957, and on a substantial scale to late 1959. The Communist guerrilla apparatus in the South--the Viet Cong--was closely linked to the Communist Party in the North (the Lao Dong), and looked to Hanoi for political and military guidance and various forms of support. Key cadres amounting to 10-20% of estimated VC strength had come from the North, mostly through Laos.

Thus Hanoi's role was seen. The overall strategy that embraced Laos and South Vietnam, with the latter more significant, was (STILL) depicted at this stage as that of "the Communist Bloc," with Hanoi as its implementing agency. Past aid to North Vietnam from China and all the Communist countries was noted, although no positive evidence was found that military equipment in the South was manufactured by the

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little by its personal nature, the Hilsman account is generally a fair picture of what happened to intelligence, and what it contributed on certain key matters including Vietnam, during the Kennedy Administration.

"Bloc."* (U-4)

As the actor on the ground, Hanoi was thought to have considerable local tactical latitude. The major "Bloc partners," Moscow and Peking, were assumed to play key leadership roles when wider international conflict (or negotiation) seemed possible. In the case of Moscow this role was thought to involve considerable and effective restraint on Hanoi in any case that involved risk of a Soviet-American confrontation.

As to the gravity of the situation, "intelligence" pointed up both military setbacks and political weakness, and thought the outlook was for further deterioration unless major elements in the situation were changed. Decay in South Vietnam was likely to be much sharper and more rapid if the Communist side made further gains in Laos, where a Communist takeover was considered entirely possible.

Such was the underlying intelligence picture, almost certainly accepted at this stage by civilian policy makers. This was almost always true of the underlying analyses of intelligence, less so of trend judgments, least so of forecasts of the consequences of new policy.

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*On the question of the sources of VC arms, a major confusing factor--then and later--was that all over mainland East Asia there had been since World War II very large quantities of arms made in the West, mostly in the US. These had been captured or abandoned chiefly by the Chinese Nationalist forces in China, and by the French in Indochina. Turned over by the Chinese to the North Vietnamese, or by either to the VC, such arms were of course virtually impossible to trace.

The initial proposals to meet this situation were wholly military. A Southeast Asia Task Force had by now been set up, since July 1, and was under the chairmanship of Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State. It had done much to pull together small-scale additional actions in Laos and to put a close and continuing watch on both situations. More generally, a Planning Group had grown up under the aegis of the Policy Planning staff in State, and its weekly meetings were a fount of ideas on both long- and short-range problems. However, the JCS made a practice of not submitting their ideas through such interagency committees, even tentatively. Rather, they used the channel that dated back at least to the Unification Act of 1947, presenting memoranda to the Secretary of Defense, who would normally forward them to the President with his own views.*

In the first ten days of October, two ~~ideas~~ PROPOSALS came from the civilians and two from the military. From the civilian side came the idea of introducing SEATO forces to guard the border of SVN along the stretches containing the main entry points from Laos, or alternatively to cover the 17th parallel boundary with North Vietnam, then thought to be a significant entry route. The military rejected both of these as unsound, and proposed instead to carry out Plan 5, which would put

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*If this did not happen--which was rarely if ever the case in the McNamara years--the JCS had the right of direct access to the President, given by the same Act. Sometimes the two routes were supplementary.

SEATO forces into Thailand and the Mekong areas of Laos, with the clearly implied possibility that they would then be in position to secure all of southern Laos and thus to block the major infiltration route into SVN. If this were not approved (it clearly meant discarding the whole concept of negotiations in Laos), then the JCS urged a new course confined to SVN--to put the 10,000-man combat force earmarked as the initial US share of Plan 5 into the high plateau area of SVN. The concept was that from this area the forces could perform some blocking role, forestall any attempt to split the country (as had largely happened in 1953-54 by a thrust from this area almost to the coast), and free South Vietnamese forces for action against the VC in the more immediately threatened southern areas of SVN. Moreover, there was thought to be some threat that the VC would seek to set up a provisional government in this area.

~~It~~ This intensive flurry of proposals and counter-proposals came to a head at a meeting with the President on October 11. By then, the idea of sending US military units in some form was generally in the ascendant. For example, on October 10 I expressed to Secretary McNamara my judgment in the following terms:

> "For what one man's feel is worth, mine . . . is that it <u>is</u> really now or never if we are to arrest the gains being made by the Viet Cong . . . . If the Viet Cong movement "blooms" [through larger-scale attacks and a possible provisional government], it will almost certainly attract all the back-the-winner sentiment that understandably prevails in such cases. . . .

> "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 . . . 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, 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 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."

The breathless character of this memorandum speaks for itself, as (alas) does the fuzzy and erroneous mathematics: if both of ~~the~~ two cumulative events must come out right for a desired outcome, and each is a 70% chance, then the cumulative chance is only 49%! We shall see later examples of probability estimates, some expressed in numerical terms, and it is a good question whether such estimates should not always have dealt with a dual and cumulative statement of the problem. What could the US do--but then, also, would the South Vietnamese be able to take it from there? The first would, as in my memo, tend to be emphasized; the second, intellectually recognized as central, would be fudged as too difficult to judge.

I do not recall that my prognosis was argued specifically, or necessarily shared. The memorandum was not circulated beyond McNamara

and a few others; all it ~~really~~ 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.

By October 10, the press had picked up the idea that sending forces was in the wind, and it was an accurate reading. Then, as later, an obvious possible action was almost impossible to keep out of the press. Life in Washington, more than in any other capital city in the world, throws the press and working officials together in too many settings, private and official, for it to be otherwise. However silent or discreet men may be, their mood can be detected, and the resulting reports are a fact of life. This does not make them easier for a President to accept, and they may of course tend to force his hand.

At the meeting of October 11, JFK decided to take more time and get more information. He chose General Maxwell D. Taylor and Walt Rostow, both then attached to the White House staff, to make a two-week visit with a hand-picked team of men already largely familiar with Vietnam. Included were General Lansdale, Sterling Cottrell of the State Department, and many others covering specialist areas. While the announcement of this plan, made that day, and the formal terms of reference of October 13 were both broad, the sense of the October 11 meeting was that the main issue on which the President wanted light was whether to send forces. All through the winter, spring and summer, JFK had felt and displayed, both privately and in group meetings, grave misgivings at what he thought to be superficial and over-optimistic military judgments in Laos and

Vietnam. The idea of sending General Taylor, whom he trusted specially, dated back at least to the end of July.

At the same October 11 meeting, JFK authorized one limited military addition in Vietnam, and (ONE) preparatory ~~series of~~ political steps. The addition was to send for training purposes a so-called Jungle Jim squadron, one of the fruits of the Presidential emphasis since January on simple and adaptable techniques for guerrilla warfare. (The Jungle Jims were an Air Force idea, pulling together a motley collection of propeller-driven transport and light aircraft that could be operated by local-country forces on short training to fill a variety of functions.) The major preparatory step was for an objective writer, William J. Jorden in the State Department, to pull together a "White Paper" on North Vietnamese actions in the South. This was to demonstrate wholesale violation of the 1954 Accords by the other side, thus supporting whatever counter-breach of the Accords might emerge in the President's own decisions.

Examination on the Ground: The Taylor/Rostow Mission

e. Even before the arrival of the Mission in Saigon, on October 18, a new element had arisen. Extra rains at the end of the monsoon season produced floods in the Mekong Delta that were heavily damaging to villages and crops, and appeared for a time to be catastrophic. The added burden also seemed to shatter the already-strained ~~morale and~~ cohesion of South Vietnamese officials at all levels.

For (12) days, the Mission fanned out all over South Vietnam. It was of course extremely conspicuous, and its very presence increased speculation among both Americans and South Vietnamese that the US was preparing to take big new actions. Even for the man in the street, it was no distortion by the Oriental mind to wonder why so much effort was being made, if the end result was to go on as before. To Diem and his close associates, the status of Taylor and Rostow as men close to JFK was apparent. As the LBJ expedition of the spring showed the problems of the "demonstrative" visit, so this one showed those of the "major examination" visit. It would not have been in the style of the British, for example, either to upstage their local representatives in this manner or to play the matter in such a high key. As the years went by and I saw and participated in a host of such visits, I came to have grave reservations on their usefulness. But that is hindsight: at the time, to participant and Washington watcher alike, the Taylor/Rostow foray was a vigorous and positive move. These were the best brains of the new Administration, steeped in the lore of counter-insurgency and flexible military action. Surely they would find new answers that would work.

Within a week, Taylor had concluded that the crisis of morale was so serious as to call for drastic US action, and that the measures to meet the crisis must include the introduction of military units. He cabled that there was a "deep and pervasive crisis of confidence and a serious loss of national morale," and these had been "brought on by Western policy in Laos and by the continued build-up of the VC and their

recent successful attacks." Hence he developed in a series of cables the idea of a task force of about 8000 men, mostly logistic troops, to operate (INITIALLY) in a flood relief capacity ~~at the outset~~. This force would also be a military reserve on the spot, and could become an advance party for more troops ~~since~~ reassuring Diem of our firmness in a showdown. Such a force, he said, would not of course do much against the VC. Its purpose would be primarily psychological. The flood relief need was valid and pressing; to rest on it also gave a basis for flexibility, including the possibility of later withdrawal.

On his own, but after he had broached the idea to Washington, Taylor put this idea on October 24 to Diem, who reacted favorably on this occasion, in notable contrast to the (MAY DISCUSSION) ~~spring~~ with LBJ.

Through personal and "eyes only" messages to the President, Taylor (NOW) made this recommendation the centerpiece of his thinking. For security reasons, (HOWEVER,) he omitted it from the main body of his formal Report. This was put together in the Philippines, and formed a massive document, with central Conclusions on behalf of all the senior members and Annexes from many of the key staff men and specialists. It was delivered to the President and top officials on Friday, November 3, and JFK personally saw Taylor and Rostow that day.

Since the recommendation for military units was central to the debate that followed, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the pros and cons as Taylor saw them. They frame many of the key points in the argument that followed between November 3 and November 11.

The major affirmative argument was, as already stated, that no other action would be adequately convincing of US seriousness of purpose. ~~It was "essential."~~ Taylor noted that US military reserves were short and needed in Berlin, that there was a chance that tensions with the Soviet Union would be increased, and that the sending of forces would engage US prestige further and create pressures to send more later. Nonetheless, he clearly rated each of these problems or dangers low. Specifically, he thought the risks of backing into a major Asian war via SVN were not significant: China and North Vietnam would both face severe logistical difficulties in deploying major forces, their supply lines could be attacked by air, and hence there was no reason to fear a massive incursion. Moreover, the starvation situation in China (then becoming clear as a result of the disastrous harvest of 1961) should discourage China from military ventures. Finally, he thought North Vietnam was extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing, and that this could be exploited in some fashion to persuade Hanoi to lay off South Vietnam.

Such was the argument. North Vietnam's vulnerability to aerial bombing was also a feature of the formal Report. It did not recommend this step, but the covering letter did suggest strongly that it be held in reserve for use in case of later need. This part of the Report came to be identified with Walt Rostow, who shortly afterward developed the thesis of gradual pressure bombing and aired it in council and out over a long period. In November, 1961, however, the issue was not in the

foreground or proposed for decision.

Yet the full Report was far from being wholly military. By no means did it neglect the South Vietnamese political structure, its weaknesses, and what to do about them. Diem's ineffective government, lack of wide popular support, and dependence on his family and a too-narrow circle were stressed in the main Report, and forcefully amplified in the Annexes written by the State Department members of the team, Cottrell and Jorden. That Diem might not be the only possible leader was the implied view of some unnamed Embassy staff members.

The main Report took a different line--that Diem should be induced to improve and reform his methods. This was to be done through the assurance of US support and through a concept of "limited partnership" that would enlarge the role of Americans in the civilian but especially the military areas of operation, so that Americans would share in the work, worry, and recommendations for action. This concept was the second cornerstone of the Report.

Perhaps most basic of all was the third key recommendation--that the US make the decision to commit itself to do whatever was necessary to keep South Vietnam from being taken over by Communist force. It was not specified whether this commitment was to be public, or communicated privately to key Communist nations, or both.

Finally, behind the whole set of observations of the situation on the ground lay summary judgments of the importance of South Vietnam and of Southeast Asia to US policy. While the trip naturally produced

no new evidence on these wider issues, they inevitably became the fourth focus of the Washington debate that followed Taylor's return.

Twelve Days of Decision

f. The Taylor/Rostow Report was submitted on November 3, and the action cable to Saigon giving the essential decisions of the President was dispatched on the evening of November 15. In essence these decisions:

1. Rejected the sending of organized military units while approving and expanding other forms of military support that had been proposed.
2. Approved and made more exacting the concept of partnership, so that enlarged American military support ~~would~~ WAS ~~be~~ made contingent on Diem's acceptance of fairly drastic changes as well as American "partners" at many levels.
3. Rejected the idea of a new and total policy commitment, in favor of a more measured statement of support.
4. Nonetheless affirmed, within the USG, the great strategic importance of SVN, implying that stronger actions and commitments might later be undertaken if they were needed.

In the intervening twelve days these four issues had been hammered through at least three identifiable stages. Before going into the sequence of thought and debate, however, it is essential to draw back and frame the surrounding events of the fortnight.

The true center of the stage at this time was not Vietnam, but Berlin. Since the Berlin Wall in August, Khrushchev had been threatening a separate peace with East Germany and the handing over to the East Germans of control of the checkpoints for access to Berlin. This would have precipitated a truly nuclear crisis, of the dimensions of the Cuba Missile Crisis a year later, but the greater because it would (HAVE) taken place in the heartland of Europe. Understandably, the planning for this crisis and the negotiations and posture decisions to ward it off were the topmost matter for JFK and all those around him. In October and November as already noted, tension was high, and the situation called for maximum firmness and resolution.

Moreover, at this moment, the situation in the Congo vied with Vietnam for second place. (Description).

Thirdly, there was the gleam of hope in the Laos negotiations. Even though Hanoi had continued to threaten renewal of the war, the Soviet Union had limited its activity and cooperated at Geneva. To Harriman and many others, the negotiations were becoming an important touchstone of whether it was possible to work out lasting solutions with the Russians, where the interests of both super-powers were not vitally opposed. Carrying the matter to a successful settlement had thus assumed an importance extending far beyond Laos, in a basic Kennedy view that put an eventual US/USSR <u>modus vivendi</u> at the top of all his objectives. (Quote JFK inaugural.)

Moreover, the British and French were heavily involved in Laos,

one as Co-Chairman of the Conference and the other as a major party in interest and helpful intermediary both in Geneva and Vientiane. Through the Berlin crisis, the three major Western countries were drawn very closely together throughout 1961. They could ill afford renewed differences over Laos. If Phoumi continued to refuse to talk realistically about coalition, that was hard enough. If the US acted in any fashion that invited a break-up, it would be even more serious for allied unity.

And, fourth, the period of decision happened to coincide with the visit to Washington of Prime Minister Nehru of India, from November 7 through Friday, November 10. As head of the ICC, India too had a role both in the Geneva Conference and on the spot in Vietnam. Nehru had been helpful in the spring; if added steps were taken in Vietnam Indian attitudes could be of some significance. South Vietnam was extensively discussed with the Indian visitors, and while it seems doubtful that the President mentioned the Taylor force proposal as such, Nehru apparently drew on his feel of the situation to record his general opposition to American combat forces.* Apart from any advice given, a visit of such importance necessarily took much of the time and attention of JFK and his top advisors. As at many other times of decision, meetings and discussion had to be fitted around other things and could thus be foreshortened or awkward. In this case, the problem was met in part

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*Galbraith.

by holding key Vietnam meetings on successive Saturdays, and the added strain was not great. But the President participated only in the first and last meetings of the series. Such crowding is a fact of life that should be noted for the unfamiliar, or those who draw their image of "decision-making" from less complex periods of history.

Come back now to what happened. After the President's preliminary meeting with Taylor on Friday, November 3, a gathering the next day brought together, without the President, virtually all the top men in State, Defense, the JCS and CIA. Rusk was absent, on his way back from Tokyo, where he had led the American delegation in inaugural joint Cabinet meetings with Japan, and Chester Bowles was on an extended tour of Asia.* Hence the Acting Secretary was the third-in-command, George Ball, thus injected more or less by chance, and for the first time, into the thick of the Southeast Asia problem. For Defense the participants were McNamara and Gilpatric.**

The Saturday 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

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*Tidy up Bowles' role, and the non-debate on his proposals.

**Within ISA, Paul Nitze had by this time become so engaged in the Berlin and Congo crises that he did not take this one one, as he had ~~for~~ Laos in the spring. Thus, it fell to me to serve as the principal supporting officer, throughout the period of decision and in all that flowed from it. It was a lasting and personally fateful division of responsibility.

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. (Such a pledge) ~~It~~ was more than merely the undertaking or reaffirming of an alliance obligation to act, and far more than the general condition of reliance on the US or the engaging of US prestige, both of which were sometimes loosely embraced within the ~~nonembattled~~ term "commitment."

Without such a categorical commitment, the argument ran, sending any significant forces was a confused action, while with a commitment the question of forces became a relatively simple question of what was needed for practical missions. To use military forces for what were conceded to be primarily psychological purposes made not only the JCS but the civilian leaders in the Pentagon uneasy. To be sure, just this was being done on a massive scale by reserve call-ups for the Berlin crisis, but there the policy was clear. In essence, McNamara was asking as to Vietnam, as he had for a host of issues during the year, "What is our policy?"

The meeting broke up inconclusively, but having reframed the issue in an important way. That Saturday evening McNamara put me to work on a memorandum directed to his own question, and I drafted for his signature on Sunday. Eventually, after extensive discussions with the JCS and his own advisors, and with important revisions in the last part, the memorandum went forward to the President on Wednesday, November 8.

The Sunday draft led off with the judgment that "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 right down to Indonesia. The strategic implications worldwide would be extremely serious." (This was actually less flat-footed or far-reaching than the Taylor Report on these points; it was doubtless my own.) Secondly, the odds were "against, probably sharply against, preventing that fall by any measures short of the introduction of US forces on a substantial scale." As Taylor had concluded, measures short of this "will not in themselves do the job of restoring confidence and setting Diem on the way to winning his fight."

Thirdly, the proposed 8,000-man force would be a help, but "will not in itself convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow, Peiping, or Hanoi) that we mean business. . . . The response would be an intensified effort that would probably outrun the successive increments of our own effort as it developed. We would thus be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle." The only way to avoid this was to accompany any initial forces by a flat commitment to prevent "the fall of South Vietnam to Communism," nailing this down by a private warning to Hanoi that continued support of the VC would lead to "punitive retaliation" against NVN.

Obviously, if all this was to be done, we had to look to what might be needed in worst contingencies. "The struggle may be prolonged

and Hanoi and Peiping may intervene overtly." Here, drawing on earlier JCS estimates which were substantially reaffirmed that week, the draft postulated a possible maximum need of slightly over 200,000 men, or 6-8 divisions. This assumed maximum air bombing of Communist supply lines.

The draft went on that 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 coordinated set of actions. Success will depend on factors many of which are not within our control--notably the conduct of Diem himself. . . . Laos will remain a major problem. The domestic political implications of accepting the objective are also grave, although it is my own 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."

In essence, the draft took the Taylor recommendations to their logical conclusion. Whether it reflected McNamara's or my views as of that Sunday, I cannot recall. In any case, modification was not long in coming.

The conclusion of this draft had been that the President should decide affirmatively on the central issue of commitment, and on this basis accept the Taylor force proposal and be prepared to send more

forces as required. In the memo as it went to the President on the Wednesday, this crucial sentence was changed to read that those for whom the memorandum spoke, by now McNamara, the JCS, and Gilpatric, were only "inclined to recommend" the dual affirmative decision. What seemed clear in the first draft, or perhaps was made clear in order to frame the issue in starkest terms, had become on reflection a very closely balanced choice.

How this change in words came about is lost in the fog of memory, except that I do recall the steady growth of doubt all that week. Between the 6th and 8th, other factors had been registered. The British Ambassador, David Ormsby Gore, then as later a man close to the President and deeply respected by all in top policy circles, had called on Rusk to register the judgment that any sending of organized forces would run grave risk of upsetting the Laos negotiations, and that this would in the British view be very serious.

Probably more important, the sense of how much any commitment depended on South Vietnamese performance was sinking in. It was one thing to commit the US to the defense of Berliners who had shown themselves staunch in the harshest adversity. It was quite another to make a categorical commitment in a South Vietnam whose political divisions and weaknesses had now been highlighted more than ever by the Taylor Report and its Annexes. While he was still in Tokyo, Rusk had cabled his concern at committing the US to an ineffective government and divided people, and asked the State Department to work on what

might be asked of Diem. The point was surely made forcefully by him on his return the _____. To the President it needed no emphasis: on Friday the 3rd, he asked the State Department for a careful list of needed political reforms, coinciding with the Rusk idea. The President already had in mind a stiffer and more quid pro quo political program than the "first support him, then help him to reform" approach of the Report. To those most concerned about the politically frail situation, it must have occurred that the very act of explicit commitment tended to reduce American leverage for change. Reassuring the South and deterring the North called for firmness, while the need to influence the very political conditions that were contributing heavily to the problem pointed the other way, toward flexibility. It was to be a recurring dilemma, like so much else in this chapter.

And lastly, no convincing practical basis for sending military units seemed to exist. The dramatic Viet Cong successes of September had not been repeated, and even the floods that had looked so disastrous in mid-October were now receding. Their effects seemed to call only for vast economic and civilian help--not for the military engineers saving people and guarding the levees that 45-year old Americans remembered from the great pre-war Mississippi or Missouri floods. Other concepts for the task force now seemed equally fuzzy. Only psychological impact was left.

All these points doubtless entered into the somewhat tentative position that McNamara finally took in the November 8 memorandum.

In the State Department, the Laos problem and the weakness of the force proposal had led (EVEN FURTHER.) ~~in a different~~ direction. As expressed at a meeting on November 8, again without the President, the State view was to postpone any decision on sending forces, while keeping all the other elements in the Taylor program. 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.

(IF THERE ENSUED) ~~A~~ TWO MORE DAYS OF INTENSIVE ~~Hitch, extensive~~ work between the two departments of State and Defense, chiefly between Alexis Johnson and myself, (LEADING TO) a final action memorandum on behalf of both Secretaries, ~~was~~ (THEY) ~~prepared and~~ THIS WAS submitted to the President on November 11, when the climactic White House meeting was held of all the key participants.*

In essence, the memorandum called for deferring the 8000-man force or any other combat-type units, but remained affirmative on the categorical commitment. The list of additional military steps the US was prepared to take was set specifically against a list of general reforms to be put to Diem, not ~~perhaps~~ as a precise bargain, but ~~clearly~~ as what the US would expect if it were to go ahead with its program.

* Although I retain no clear memory of these days, or record of the final Saturday meeting, one can reconstruct a fairly complete picture of what happened from the documents.

As important as these key recommendations was the opening analysis of the memorandum, which reflected the prevailing judgment of the importance of South Vietnam in terms significantly stronger than my draft memorandum earlier in the week. Specifically examining the nature of United States national interests, the paper concluded that the "loss of South Vietnam" would make discussion of the importance of Southeast Asia academic, since it would be virtually certain that mainland SEA plus Indonesia would either accommodate with Communism or be formally incorporated within "the Communist Bloc." Such a development would destroy SEATO, undermine the credibility of American commitments elsewhere, and stimulate bitter domestic controversy in the US.

This definition of national interest was the most specific in any policy paper of the Kennedy Administration. It is notable in making the strongest possible link between South Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia, perhaps equally notable in that it did not reach the question of the aggregate importance of Southeast Asia. Looking back, I can only attribute the omission to the deeply felt policy assumption of this period--that the loss of significant territory and people to Communism amounted on its face to a serious adverse change in the worldwide balance of power. This was the way in which, as Schlesinger tells us, JFK had put his views to Khrushchev at Vienna in early June. I have no doubt that this sense of total world struggle continued to be foremost in his mind and in those of his advisors at

least throughout 1961. At any rate, the simple historical fact is that JFK accepted a far-reaching statement of US stakes in Vietnam, without change and without apparently seeking to examine in detail just how important Southeast Asia was.

JFK also readily accepted deferring any present decision on significant or combat-type military units. Here the arguments in the paper started with Laos--that sending American combat forces to Vietnam could upset the Geneva negotiations, and conceivably trigger resumed hostilities in Laos. By this time, as noted earlier, the idea of fighting seriously in Laos had become anathema to JFK and to almost all of his civilian advisors. Moreover, in South Vietnamese terms alone, the memorandum made a point that certainly reflected the long and soul-searching discussions that had taken place during the week: if SVN could mount a strong effort against the Viet Cong, US forces might not be needed; absent such an effort, US forces could not do the job in the midst of an apathetic or hostile population. This point, 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.

As to JFK's personal view, there were surely added reasons. As Schlesinger vividly portrays, he sensed clearly that sending military units was like taking a drink; the effect would wear off, and then one would want another.* Moreover, confronted with a maximum

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*Cite.

contingency requirement of 200,000 men, he must have been both impressed that this was not far from the Korean scale of involvement, and skeptical from the whole experience of military judgments in 1961 that it was in fact a realistic estimate.*

So far as I can tell, these were the main reasons. Certainly, the decision against Taylor's key recommendation reflected intense thought and debate. Though on its face this was merely a deferral, with strong directives to draw up further military plans, 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 humanly possible.

Thirdly, although the memorandum had urged a categorical commitment to prevent the loss of South Vietnam, JFK decided at this meeting not to do this. Exactly what was said is lost to my memory. 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. It must surely have been noted also, that the memorandum was far from clear whether the President would proclaim the new commitment or merely make an internal statement of policy. Already, Taylor's idea of making a categorical commitment through a private warning to Hanoi on bombing the North had been dropped; again, memory is vague, save to recall that the sanguine Taylor/Rostow view of North Vietnamese vulnerability ran into considerable skepticism throughout that week. Bombing was for the moment a side issue, and the modification of view largely tacit.

*Yet George Ball relates that JFK dismissed out of hand a Ball warning that within ~~three~~ five years, if we went in (WITH COMBAT FORCES,) the US would find itself with 300,000 men in South Vietnam. Reconcile with Ball and others.

Such were the major points of decision on November 11. In the nature of the policy process, it is of course possible that JFK by the middle of the week had come to a negative conclusion on organized forces, and that the memorandum of the two Secretaries reflected agreement already reached in principle. With combat forces dropped, one wonders why the recommendation for a categorical commitment persisted, in order to be rejected by JFK personally. Yet it was my distinct impression that the policy process operated honestly in the stages I have described, and not as any kind of charade to carry through what the President had in fact already decided.

The fourth element in the decision was of course the balancing of added US actions against reforms by Diem. This idea already had the President's own imprint, as well as that of Rusk. It was strongly supported in the State Department, not resisted in Defense, and thus apparently carried through without debate.

Yet it was a big change, in principle and in terms of the action responsibility it thrust on Ambassador Nolting. The Taylor/Rostow concept of "limited partnership" and quiet persuasion was totally different from the explicit balancing now envisaged, particularly with a new element, that the US expected to share heavily in decision-making. What the US was offering was by no means inconsiderable: substantial airlift, reconnaissance, naval and intelligence help, military advisors to serve with South Vietnamese units and substantially increased economic aid. It was a lot, but it was also less than Taylor had

discussed with Diem on October 24 and less than Nolting had reported that his South Vietnamese sources both expected and desired. In return for this modified set of actions, Nolting was to ask, as a fundamental requirement, that the GVN carry out a maximum mobilization of its own resources, decentralize and broaden the government, create new "wartime agencies with adequate authority," and overhaul the military establishment to provide clear lines of command and control.

It was a tall order, and a careful strategy of persuasion was necessary if it was to have a hope of attaining the desired result. In the period between JFK's decisions of November 11 and their becoming embodied in action cables to Nolting sent on November 15, these practical problems bulked large. The action cables essentially embodied the approved parts of the Rusk-McNamara memorandum, but they conveyed also a realization that the Ambassador was being asked to undertake a difficult and unexpected task. The rationale, it was explained to him, was ~~concern~~ that in the absence of drastic improvement by the South Vietnamese, progress could not be expected. Moreover, the action cables explained the negative decision on combat forces quite fully, and reemphasized that the thrust of the whole program should be to get ahead without having to resort to this. The details spelled out in these action cables reflects thought principally in the Department of State, but finally reviewed and approved by the President.

If the reader has survived this detailed account of a highly important policy process and decision, he can perhaps bear a few

comments by way of analysis. What JFK decided contains elements of compromise and even of paradox. An extremely strong statement of US national interests and stakes was nonetheless paired with refusal to undertake a new categorical commitment. In between, the action cables recognized realistically that the proposed program did commit US prestige much more heavily. Similarly, a watered-down set of military measures was paired with much stronger political pressures and demands on Diem. The decision was a middle course, and as already noted bore heavily JFK's own imprint. Why had he decided to do this much and in this gradual way, and not to do more and to do it in a more firm and dogmatic way--or not to do it at all?

The last, so far as any record or recollection available to me shows, was not considered at any point throughout the fall, or seriously urged by anyone--unless it could conceivably be implied by Ball's warning that white combat forces would go the way of the French. That a major effort had to be made, in some fashion, was a "given" in the entire policy process. To understand why this was so, one must re-create the mood of 1961 and in particular that of the late fall months under the shadow of the Berlin crisis. 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 anyone 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. Indeed, the ~~conclusion of~~ connection came straight from the experiences of the spring, when Khrushchev had turned up the screws on Berlin following American failure at the Bay of Pigs and, over the 1960-61 period, in Laos.

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.

Did JFK and his advisors think that the compromise program offered a realistic hope of achieving the desired result? On this point, the Taylor judgment had, on the face of the record, been accepted--that nothing short of combat forces would provide the necessary lift in morale. But, as the week went on, the weaknesses and future implications of such action became stronger and stronger. In the end, it seemed a lot more risky and possibly no more effective than the attempt to see what could be done by lesser actions and political pressure. Those unfamiliar with the nature of foreign policy decisions will ask whether the latter course was truly judged "hopeful." The answer is that it seemed at least as promising as what Taylor had proposed

and thus worth pursuing, ~~not as~~ NOT a "clear solution," ~~but as~~ (IT WAS) the "least bad" approach to a problem that had no clear solution.

What, then, of domestic political considerations? I have summarized a passage from the memorandum of November 11 that specifically cites this factor, that collapse in South Vietnam would set off sharp domestic controversy. This argued forcefully against doing nothing and was a clear part of the assessment of stakes. The other reference to politics, in the key papers I have summarized, is my own judgment that 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. These two references reflected twin historical experiences that were never out of the minds of JFK and his senior advisors. One was the outcry against the Democrats for the "loss of China," while the other was the outcry against the same Democrats for the long and inconclusive war in Korea. In terms of (THE) decision that the (KENNEDY) Administration faced in the fall of 1961, 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. It did not take a Kenneth Galbraith to remind the President, as he did on November 20, that the bright promise of this Democratic Administration could be blighted on the battlefields of Asia. 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.

In sum, my own analysis of the decisions of mid-November is that they reflected--as the action cables put it--a resolve to go as far in support of the South Vietnamese as their own behavior made possible and reasonably hopeful, but to seek to do this by gradual methods and not by dramatic action either in the form of combat forces or in the form of a categorical US commitment or warning.

Like many major decisions, this one resulted from a parallelogram of factors and considerations. If it had a single thread, I would call it"pragmatic resolve," or as one participant apparently put it, "modified commitment." (Galbraith cite.)

From Drawing Board to ANNOUNCEMENT

g. With the action cables of November 15, the focus moved to Saigon. Not seeking to appeal the terms of his orders, Nolting put the whole of the brief to Diem on November 18, and met a noncommittal reaction. In reporting this, Nolting for the first time made clear his view that it was indeed a tall order. Then and throughout, he nonetheless seemed to all in Washington to be carrying out his orders with loyalty, considerable tact and skill, and a willingness to draw on what had become a significant stock of personal confidence by Diem. None in Washington doubted his professional devotion and competence.

At this point, JFK did hear from Kenneth Galbraith, Ambassador to India. Present in Washington for the Nehru visit, Galbraith had

engaged himself, as he often did with JFK's full approval, in issues outside his own sphere. He himself recounts that at dinner on November 9 he volunteered to JFK the idea that he might go to Saigon to take a look, an offer the President accepted. Doubtless, during the week of decision Galbraith was, as always, an influence toward skepticism of defined solutions. At the end of the week he read the Taylor/Rostow Report with care, and extracted key gloomy passages in a memorandum to the President on the 13th. But his influence on the actual decisions seems to have been marginal, at most, for the die was cast on the 11th.

Galbraith then arrived in Saigon almost as Nolting got his instructions, staying four days and talking to many. He then sent the President two long and personal cables, from Bangkok and then from New Delhi, on November 20 and 21. How these cables affected JFK can only be surmised, but they certainly reflect eloquently a feeling that may have been shared by others in the group of Presidential intimates and advisors generally labelled "liberal."

The thrust of Galbraith's argument was that the struggle could not be won with an unreformed Diem, that Diem himself was incapable of reform, and that there was therefore no long-term alternative to dissociating the US from him and letting local political forces take their course. Specifically, Galbraith referred, as the only possible model he could see, to South Korea, where by this time (as we shall see in Chapter _____) a military coup had produced major improvement

and the promise of democratic evolution:

"We should not be alarmed by the Army as an alternative. It would buy time and get a fresh dynamic. It is not ideal; civilian rule is certainly more durable and more saleable to the world. But a change and a new start is of the essence," ~~Galbraith said~~.

Galbraith did not question the need to do what the US could to sustain South Vietnam. He argued rather that the course of action the President had undertaken was unwise, particularly in that it tended to put the US in a position of supporting the Diem regime come what might. Apparently, he would have preferred to try dissociation before undertaking additional measures. (This course had not been considered in the policy debate and would almost certainly have been rejected in the atmosphere of urgency which had developed in September and October--and which understandably Galbraith did not share to the same extent.) As the hand stood, Galbraith advocated carrying through the effort to get Diem to reform, but when, as he confidently foretold, this did not work, we should withdraw support from Diem personally, though not, apparently, from South Vietnam as a country.

The policy (DEDUCTION) ~~impact~~ of Galbraith's reports (WOULD) ~~were~~ have been to play the negotiations with Diem in a very uncompromising fashion. By the end of November, this was the very issue that JFK faced, for by then Diem had unmistakeably conveyed his view that the American proposal amounted to infringement of his sovereignty; he had even stirred up an anti-American campaign in the Saigon press.

In these crucial negotiations, Nolting had made general proposals for change, but had understandably never been told to present too specific a catalogue. By the end of the month, the tenor of messages from Diem's intermediaries was that measures having to do with effectiveness were less abrasive than those that dealt with broadening of the government. On the 25th Nolting suggested that this distinction be used to lower the US sights, and was given some encouragement. Matters were still hanging fire on November 27, when JFK met with his advisors and agreed that if Diem remained obdurate, Nolting should be recalled for consultation and a freeze put on any additional US actions. This tentative decision leaked, and was published by the New York Times on December 1, which would in any case have made its execution more difficult. However, events superseded it. On December 1 Nolting had a long four-hour session with Diem, and reported what he considered to be enough progress to warrant an effort to frame points of agreement with Diem's right-hand man, Defense Minister Thuan. Their joint memorandum of December 4, cabled to Washington for approval, contained general undertakings to tighten up the command and control arrangements, and a few broad points of this sort. In all respects, it fell far short of the original specifications in any of the decision papers of mid-November.

Such is the record. I do not know why JFK did not choose to press, still less to give any indication of desire to follow the Galbraith recommendation. The factors may have included the difficulty

of pulling back from the various actions that had been set under way on the US side; ships carrying helicopters were already en route to Saigon, and on November 17 and 18 all the SEATO nations had been informed of the proposed US action steps. Thus, the US was conducting its effort to bargain--to put on political pressure--with part of its hand showing and with many spectators. To carry the matter to a full showdown with Diem would thus have been hard to carry off, at best. But I suspect the President was just too impatient to bargain slowly.

Moreover, the very thrust of Galbraith's comments had been that Diem simply could not accept genuine reform. Thus, it must have appeared to many by this time that any promises Diem gave might well be illusory. The choice lay between taking what one could get or dissociating the US from Diem--a drastic step involving publicity and unforeseeable problems. The upshot was that what may appear in hindsight to have been the greatest American opportunity really to bargain with Diem was allowed to drop by the wayside. In effect, the "pressure" approach gave way to something approximating Taylor's "limited partnership," but without the commitment and warm embrace that were supposed to make such a partnership the avenue to gradual and sympathetic change. In this crucial respect, the final policy posture was neither Taylor's idea nor the design the President had approved on November 11.

The second crucial area of execution of the new policy lay in

its presentation to the Congress, the American public, and the world in general. So far as the Congress is concerned, 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.

To the public, the new policy was conveyed in a series of planned disclosures. On November 17, Rusk had a press conference indicating broadly that additional steps were being taken. On December 7, as the outgrowth of the Nolting/Thuan memorandum and the agreement of December 4, JFK wrote Diem. And on December 14, Diem replied. By agreement, the two letters were released simultaneously on December 15, and this was in fact the basic policy announcement. In the meantime, the third aspect had been the release on December 8 of the Jorden "White Paper," as a pamphlet of 53 pages, entitled "A Threat to the Peace," with appendices containing detailed evidence of North Vietnamese involvement in the effort to overthrow the government in the South.

The JFK/Diem letters reflected measured resolve by Kennedy and confident acceptance by Diem. In themselves, they were not of great significance, and it does not appear that it was felt necessary to consult the Congress concerning them. If anything, JFK's letter was verbally less emphatic than LBJ had been in May--though any observer could see that the underlying actions were more significant.

As for "A Threat to the Peace," it was a literate and reasonably

sophisticated discussion of the historical background of the situation, happily free of excessive rhetoric, yet noteworthy in that, for the first time, it laid the overwhelming blame on North Vietnam. While still speaking of "Communism" in general terms, and referring to the support of Moscow and Peiping,* the thrust of the report was to single out the North Vietnamese as principal actors with a high degree of independence in both motivation and tactics. If one sets "A Threat to the Peace" alongside the internal papers of the spring and early fall, it is reasonable to conclude from it that a very significant shift had taken place in the understanding, at least by civilian officials, of the nature of the struggle.

All in all, the spaced-out and general character of these policy announcements was as low-key as could have been devised. All that the man in the street could learn was that the US was going to take unspecified additional steps, while relying heavily on the South Vietnamese themselves to do more.

President Kennedy must have had many reasons for wishing to make the disclosure in this fashion. He did not know yet exactly how far he would in fact go in terms of action, although the immediate internal guidelines were reasonably clear. And he must have wished not to make

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*As the draft memorandum of page _____ shows, this spelling of the Chinese capital city was customary throughout all government comment in the early and mid-1960's. I have therefore adhered to it in the historical sections of this work, while using the now-customary "Peking" in essays or hindsight comment of my own. As all China experts know, "Peiping" means "northern city," Peking "northern capital." The former usage dates from the days of Nationalist control of the mainland, when Nanking was the capital.

the kind of ringing announcement that would have committed the US more than he intended and thus among other things weakened the continuing effort to persuade Diem in the direction of change. Quite possibly, his own instincts were in accord with the suggestion of the Galbraith memorandum that the US should go no further than it could help in specific association with Diem.

Moreover, President Kennedy had discovered at the time of the March statement on Laos how difficult it was to frame a public announcement that carried just the right note of firmness and moderation. In general it became his style to let actions speak for themselves--in Berlin, in the Congo, and all the other crises of the period.

But there was in addition, in the December Vietnam case, a serious foreign policy reason for soft-pedaling what the US was doing to the maximum degree possible. This reason related to the 1954 Geneva Accords and the role of the International Control Commission (ICC).

These Accords had provided that military equipment introduced into North and South Vietnam should only be in replacement of types and quantities already present. Secondly, in the case of South Vietnam, (THEY) ~~it~~ limited foreign military personnel to the numbers present at the time of the 1954 agreement.

Over the years, and despite clear and early evidence of major expansion and equipping of North Vietnamese military forces in violation of the Accords, the US had in general adhered to these

limitations. In particular, the number of US military personnel in South Vietnam stood at the beginning of October 1961 at the level of (800), justified under the Accords as (400) equating to the number of French and American specific military advisors in 1954 (1956?), and (400) comprising equipment recovery teams which had been converted to become regular members of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in 1959. While the latter must have been at the fringe of evasion or violation, careful diplomacy at the time had persuaded the Indian and Canadian members of the ICC that it was not grounds for any finding of violation. As of the beginning of October, the majority of the ICC thus considered the US to be behaving in accordance with the limitations of the 1954 Accords. One might add, parenthetically, that the number of Americans at this stage could hardly have been considered a threat to anyone.

However, the decisions of November 11 created a new situation. Clearly, the additional manpower and equipment, both, would go beyond the limits of the 1954 Accords, and a way had to be found to present this in the most persuasive light. Within the government, and it was felt to the American people as well, there was no serious issue ~~of~~ OF LEGALITY. ~~fact~~. It was the emphatic legal opinion of the State Department that the degree of breach of the Accords on the US side was wholly warranted under international law, in response to the much more drastic breaches perpetrated over the years by the North Vietnamese side. Nor was it felt that the most important non-Communist nations involved in the

matter--notably Britain, Co-Chairman of the 1954 conference, and India and Canada as ICC members--would in their heart-of-hearts have serious difficulty with the new American actions or with their supporting legal argument.

However, in the realities of foreign affairs, it is often necessary to avoid putting friendly nations on the spot. Britain had an important and continuing role as Co-Chairman, a relationship to maintain with the Soviet Union in that capacity, and a crucially important role in the Laos negotiations. India continued to adhere to a neutral or non-aligned basic policy; at this period, its international relations were in flux--becoming more fearful of China, more friendly with the Soviet Union and the US. Canada, finally, had an important tradition of honest and impartial judgment in the ICC to maintain, and--as Canadians tend to know better than Americans--an always-present wish to avoid appearing as the tail to an American kite.

All three of these important nations were informed in broad terms of what the United States proposed to do, and all three made it emphatically clear that their responses could be quietly friendly, or at least silent, if, but only if, the US refrained from spelling out in any blunt way what it was doing.

It seems natural that President Kennedy took their viewpoint seriously. He probably also had in the back of his mind the view that there were enough conflicts with the Soviet Union without a statement on Vietnam that would appear in any way to challenge them. There

was not at this time any reason to hope that Moscow could in any way exert helpful influence on North Vietnamese behavior relating to South Vietnam; on the contrary, Harriman had by this time raised the issue with the Soviet representative at Geneva, _____ Pushkin, on at least two occasions in a glancing fashion, and been told in no uncertain terms that the Soviets regarded Hanoi's actions against the South as a wholly justified action responding to the popular will and entirely separate from anything that was happening in Laos.* Coming from the INDIVIDUAL Russian who had come to symbolize willingness to work out the Laos settlement, this could hardly have been more emphatic. Nonetheless, JFK can hardly have wished to have another theater of outright formal opposition.

Hence, the reasons for the almost surreptitious presentation of the new policy to the American public were not superficial. It remains, however, to register at least a short comment on the extraordinarily restrained treatment of the matter by the press, as well as the total absence of serious comment, in December 1961 or early 1962, by members of the Congress.

In the hindsight of ten years, it is extraordinary to examine the press for this period, to find that almost no newspaper played up what was being undertaken, or probed as to what it might amount to in time. This was true of the comment surrounding the release of "A Threat to the Peace" on December 8 and surrounding the release of the exchange of letters between JFK and Diem on December 15. By then,

*CHECK WITH WAH.

the press had reported that American-manned helicopter companies were actually arriving in Saigon. Yet, there was no probing whatsoever to see exactly what might be involved. Was this in part because the period from late November through the month of December, except for rare cases when Congress is in session, is traditionally one when the Washington amplifying apparatus of the media is muted and the public preoccupied with the holiday season? Perhaps this was part of the reason. A more basic element was almost certainly the overshadowing crises that were taking place concurrently in Berlin and the Congo. Americans in general had been through a tense and trying year. Hundreds of thousands of reserves had been called up from the hearths of America to show the nation's willingness to act in the continuing Berlin crisis. In the Congo, war had threatened all through November and December. Against this backdrop, the fact that the US might be sending hundreds or even thousands of men to help in South Vietnam must have seemed small potatoes. Moreover, after the rumors in October and early November that armed units might be sent, a decision that ~~plainly~~ did not include this element had a feeling of letdown. ~~It~~ THE CONFOUNDING OF ALARMIST SPECULATION always tends to cause the information media unduly to minimize what actually has happened.

Most basically of all, the calm reception both in the public and Congress undoubtedly reflected the general belief that, if South Vietnam was indeed in trouble, it was only reasonable for the US to lend additional help. This was part of the over-all mood of the time

and is well reflected in some of the commentary one finds in the press. (Examples).

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AND TO ACTUALITY

R. Finally, the third phase in the evolution of the policy was to determine exactly what additional steps the US was going to take. Here, just as the increased political pressure in the final program had become a problem for Nolting, the reduction in the military steps left the responsible military leaders in Washington, Honolulu, and Saigon alike, very much up in the air and uncertain what was expected of rhem. Despite much talk and some action under the heading of "counterinsurgency" and more flexible techniques for guerrilla war, the operating commands responsible for Southeast Asia had continued to think heavily within the framework of the family of conventional military plans that had been prepared unilaterally by the US and in key cases further developed and refined as SEATO plans. Washington had planned out new ideas in October, but the Pacific Headquarters in Honolulu responsible for actual operating plans had done very little. At most, it had suggested or worked on adaptations of SEATO plans, under which the same forces might be sent to somewhat different places for somewhat different missions. By JFK's own choice, Taylor's mission had not included major JCS representation, and its ideas had been Taylor's own, although in the case of the flood relief force ~~initiated~~ SUGGESTED in concept by General

McGarr, the Chief of MAAG in Saigon.

Even then, so long as the idea of sending a substantial organized force was present, the concept was one with which the military could readily cope. When this was dropped, in the week of November 11, what was left was a series of specific actions that did not seem to add up to a coherent whole.

Through the negotiations with Diem, these uncertainties remained below the surface. Meanwhile, the JCS and civilians in the Department of Defense wrestled with the problem of a command structure for the new effort, coming up with proposals that would have created a "Commander of US Forces, Vietnam" who would have been largely parallel with, rather than subordinate to, the Ambassador.

At the Washington end, JFK had early raised the question of a single directing person to guide the whole US effort, on the model of what Assistant Secretary Foy Kohler was doing through a Berlin Action Committee that kept under close review both contingency plans and diplomatic action related to Berlin. However, the Vietnam situation was ~~plainly~~ different, and the fact that the detailed actions fell heavily in the military sphere was almost bound to thrust the responsibility on the Pentagon. Thus, it was McNamara who was chosen to head a group to go to Honolulu on December 18 and 19--right after the NATO meeting--to review and pull together the whole of the action program.*

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*Graff reports McNamara saying in 1965 that in a conversation with JFK in November 1961 he had volunteered to "look after" the South Vietnam situation. This may initially have been only for the first actions; it became much more.

This Honolulu meeting turned out to be of critical importance for the action program. It fell to me to arrive there on the day before, to work out the arrangements and the schedule, and to get first-hand knowledge of the issues as they appeared there. At once it was apparent that behind the usual courtesy and personal attention lay the gravest doubts as to what the new program amounted to and whether it could be made effective. The military from Saigon were talking in terms of frontal assault on VC strongholds, while there seemed to be little understanding or acceptance of the over-all program that had been hammered out in Washington, with its limitations but with its political hope of inducing change as well.

Thus, when McNamara and General Lemnitzer of the JCS arrived from Paris via Anchorage, they encountered physical conditions that represented a rise of 80° from one flight stop to the next, but emotional conditions that were almost the reverse. In a long and critical day, McNamara sensed the atmosphere and moved decisively to change it. Acting on what must have been at least broad authority from JFK, he not only nailed down the action headings included specifically in the November decisions, but dealt with several additional proposals for supporting action. The latter may well have been meant to test just what the new policy did cover: should the US expand the communications capability of the South Vietnamese, for example, or build new airfields? McNamara's answer in the great bulk of cases was affirmative; over and over again he stressed that any reasonable proposal for action

short of combat forces would receive immediate and probably favorable attention. And at the end of the meeting, he spoke briefly and forcefully on the vital importance of making the policy work. To the military officers present, and certainly to me who had seen the atmosphere of the preceding day, it was a tour de force. The policy seemed for the first time to have reality to those present.

One should not overly dramatize any particular event, and the December Honolulu conference was to be followed by others at intervals of a month or six weeks right through the spring and early summer of 1962. The pattern had been set, however, and McNamara personally had emerged--by drive and force of character as much as by any conscious designation--as the coordinator and expediter.

~~In terms of specific consequences,~~ The policy that evolved at Honolulu was, THUS to stint nothing provided that it did not involve combat forces. It was a considerably broader policy than the specific decisions of November 11, and in the end was to expand US personnel in South Vietnam far beyond the kind of figures that participants in the November policy review might have had in mind. At that time, the only strength figure commonly used was that US military advisors might amount to some 2500 men. For the ~~"~~ (ADVISOR) category, this in fact turned out to be fairly close to the result, the numbers rising to 3500 in the spring of 1962 but then levelling off at 3150 until early 1964. In the supporting units, however, whereas a small similar additional number might have been envisaged at one point (indeed the figure of 2500 was

candor might itself have implied a degree of commitment he did not wish to convey. None of these reasons was trivial or unworthy, nor is it easy to see how else it could have been done. The central fact remains that the US and its prestige became much more heavily engaged in South Vietnam, and without the country or Congress fully taking this in, much less debating it.

Chapter 5: The Circuits Close in the Indochina Area
(January through July 1962)

a. Few periods in the tangled story of the Second Indochina War are more clearly marked than the first half of 1962. At the beginning of this period, the external elements of a Laos agreement had been reached at Geneva, but the internal political negotiations were at a complete impasse in which the influence and concern of Thailand were playing a major part. In Vietnam, major decisions had been made, but their true shape and the way they would be carried out had yet to be worked out. On all three fronts the circuits closed during this period, to form a much clearer situation and picture of US policy. At the end of it, on July 23, 1962, 14 nations signed the Laos Accords at Geneva. On the same day, coincidentally, Secretary McNamara was conducting a meeting halfway across the world, in Honolulu, that reflected optimism on Vietnam and even began to plan for the day when the US could pull out. It was a period of tactical resourcefulness, and perilous moments. It ended on a note of hope.

b. Geneva versus Honolulu, Vientiane and Bangkok versus Saigon.

From the Communist side the two theaters were always surely one. On the American side, however, it is noteworthy that in these six months the hand in Laos and Thailand was almost wholly separated from the hand in South Vietnam. The first was a "political problem," the second had become for the time being an "operating" one. Thus, the

first was centered in the team of Averell Harriman in Washington, negotiator William Sullivan in Geneva, Ambassador Winthrop Brown in Vientiane, and Ambassador Kenneth Young in Bangkok; these men worked out the tactics and approach and were supported at critical points by the President and the Pentagon. In Vietnam, on the other hand, the reins fell into the energetic hands of Robert McNamara in Washington, Ambassador Nolting and a new military commander, General Paul Harkins, in Saigon, and the Honolulu headquarters of Admiral Felt. True, there was interaction at critical points, and overlap in the supporting staffs like myself. But the tendency to think of Laos matters as a "State" province and of Vietnamese matters as a "Defense" one was to last for a long time. It will deserve further reflection when a later chapter addresses the whole question of organization and effectiveness in the American Government.

For narrative purposes, at any rate, the two are separate stories, and will be told as such. The Laos/Thailand story was in this period more dramatic and full of major and visible choices. The Vietnam story essentially followed on the key decisions recounted in the last chapter. Hence it will be told first.

c. The Fleshing Out of Policy in South Vietnam

In Vietnam, the period from January to the end of July 1962 was one without much drama, and without any critical event that called for intensive Presidential consideration. In essence, the US "modified

commitment" was being worked out in practice, with important issues of scale, scope and direction, and with underlying questions of direction, evaluation, and control both in Washington and Saigon. ~~Perhaps it is well to start with these latter questions, since they arose first. They were to be of lasting significance.~~

~~Chapter 4 brought the account up through~~ The Honolulu meeting of December 1961, ~~in which McNamara brought life to the rather general listing of categories of US effort that had been the November Presidential decision. This meeting~~ made it clear that major uncertainties remained, and would require unremitting attention and quick decision if the new program was to move forward rapidly. The sense of urgency would certainly have been present in any case; it was accentuated by the strong feeling from the November review that measures short of the introduction of US military units must be made to work.

To McNamara, the only answer was to hold repeated meetings, and this was done in Honolulu in January, in March, and on July 23-24, with a Saigon visit in May. At each of these meetings, the situation was reviewed in detail, and a whole series of operating proposals presented. These would normally be decided by McNamara on the spot.

In hindsight, McNamara's primary role was probably an inevitable consequence of the fuzziness of the November decisions. Moreover, it is almost inevitable that a senior Cabinet officer of one Department will outweigh any representation from others; this aspect was compounded by the preoccupation of Harriman, in particular, with the Laos situation

throughout this period. Thus, the State Department was normally represented at a medium level, respectfully listened to but not in a position to exert great weight. AID representation was somewhat higher, but again likely to be secondary. And the same was true for all other agencies.

The Honolulu meetings were undoubtedly an extraordinarily effective instrument of decision. There was probably no other way in which the job could have been advanced so rapidly or so effectively. Yet not only did they throw the weight heavily on McNamara, they also tended to pre-empt normal State/Defense liaison and control efforts between meetings. The ISA staff, under my direction, followed the situation extremely closely and was in daily touch with its counterparts in the State Department; ~~altogether, I believe that this period was a high point in the necessary close and informal working relationships between State and Defense at all levels.~~ Yet, with Harriman's attention largely absorbed elsewhere, it is certainly the fact that the State Department did not develop the degree of operating control that it should have in a situation of this sort.

At the Saigon end, it had been decided in November, between Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara, that the title of the senior military man in Saigon should be upgraded to reflect his additional responsibilities. Although the military pressed briefly for a title that would have implied a totally separate military command, as in Korea, the final title was "Military Assistance Command, Vietnam," henceforth known as "MACV" (MAC-VEE). The exact relationship between this commander and the

Ambassador was the next and more difficult question. On the one hand, the military wished as independent a position as possible, while on the other Ambassador Nolting at one point envisaged the military commander simply as his military deputy. In the end, as a result of negotiations largely conducted between Governor Harriman for State and myself for Defense, an agreed charter was worked out that made the Ambassador supreme and responsible for basic policy matters, but that did give the military commander clear responsibility in the military sphere and major influence in all activities related to counter-insurgency. In hindsight, it seems to me that we in Defense got a little more than we should have in this agreement and that the Ambassador's top responsibility in all areas might have been more strongly underlined. But this is hindsight--the successive Ambassadors and military commanders operating under the charter tended to create their own balances of power and influence, and I suspect that in the last analysis no charter could have decided how these would work out.

The third problem was the selection of the first military commander. The choice finally fell on General Paul D. Harkins, who as ground forces commander in the Pacific was already familiar with the Vietnam problem. He appeared to have both the necessary over-all military competence and the essential qualities of personal presence and tact for diplomacy with Diem.

In the event, Nolting and Harkins turned out to be an extremely compatible team, whose viewpoints were so similar that their differences

never raised issues of precise powers one with the other.

In other respects, the Saigon Mission was unchanged at the top. The Embassy itself received only a handful of Vietnamese-speaking officers in the next three years, and undertook no significant expansion of its main functions or activities. The AID Mission and USIS did expand their staffs substantially, particularly in the rural areas--and some of the men brought in stayed for long periods and became among the most expert and knowledgeable Americans in Vietnam. Yet, while there was this significant expansion, it was hardly the total renovation, change of leadership, or major expansion in numbers that the November decisions might have implied. The civilian side of the effort was never as forcefully led, or strongly manned at all levels, as the military effort--and this was a significant defect.

So much for the men and their relationships. Turning to the substance of the effort, there was at the outset a major simmering dispute that involved both the over-all concept and the geographical areas to be attacked as a matter of priority. This centered around a program of action developed in the fall of 1961 by [Sir] Robert Thompson, a distinguished Britisher who had served at the top against the Communist insurgency in Malaya, and who had been sent by the British Government to Vietnam as an advisor to Diem.

Thompson's concept, foreshadowed in October and finally presented to Diem in November of 1961, called for a gradual "working outward" from secure areas, with the progressive development of efficient

administration, measures to help the population, and so forth. It was a slow and gradual program that stressed police-type rather than military forms of security actions, that relied on the development of permanent governing capacity, and that called above all for time and patience. In particular, Thompson presented the concept of "strategic hamlets," i.e., the setting up of barbed wire and other devices around selected hamlets so that their security was assured and the effort could work onward from there.

To General McGarr in Saigon, and to a lesser extent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, this concept seemed to minimize unduly what military effort could do, and indeed what it must do to defeat the larger battalion-sized units the Viet Cong were putting in the field. In particular, McGarr wished to strike hard at VC stronghold areas, starting with these and thus drastically weakening the VC at an early point. This was exactly the opposite of the Thompson concept, which started with the more readily secureable areas and worked outward.

At the December Honolulu meeting, McGarr presented a particular plan to hit "Zone D," a heavily forested area northwest of Saigon that had been for more than a decade a Viet Cong stronghold. With McNamara refusing to support this initiative, the American military plan in Saigon evolved toward a thrust into the provinces west of Saigon, also a strong VC area.

This project was carried out after a fashion, but in February Diem essentially chose on his own to accept the Thompson concept.

By then, as Harkins assumed command, American opinion in Saigon was more sympathetic, and there was no serious friction as the idea of "strategic hamlets" was taken up by the Diem Government. First tentatively and then with a rush under the strong hand of Ngo Dinh Nhu, by the late spring of 1962 strategic hamlets were being built at a rapid rate, and equipment was rushed from the US in support. (Hilsman cite.)

In other respects, the new American effort went forward with some imagination. The 1961 emphasis on Special Forces and counter-insurgency capabilities was not directly put to use, nor was it seriously considered (as Hilsman suggests) that the commander of the Special Forces, then Major General William P. Yarborough, should be put in over-all command in Saigon. Perhaps there was in the Army's reaction to the problem some element of the traditional distrust that any military organization tends to have for highly publicized "elite" forces. Basically, however, the task appeared to be beyond the scope even of the now expanded Special Forces. What the Army did do was to set up an intensive course for military advisors, which operated at Fort Bragg and drew substantially on the doctrine and historical lore assembled by the Special Forces School at the same post. Finally, in July of 1962, the Special Forces were given their own particular mission in Vietnam, that of advising and working with the Montagnards and other tribal groups. These elements, traditionally scorned by Vietnamese governments and by the Vietnamese people generally, were nonetheless firmly

opposed to the VC, and had an edgy semi-treaty relationship with the Diem Government. In 1961, a resourceful effort by CIA civilians had helped both to improve relations between the South Vietnamese Government and the Montagnards and to develop an embryonic military capability. As this project expanded beyond normal CIA capacity, it seemed a natural decision that the American support for these elements should pass to the Special Forces. Thereafter, this was their main focus, and involved a far-flung and exposed network of defended outposts and villages in remote areas.

These were some of the action decisions during this period. In general, the US effort expanded rapidly, so that by the end of July total US military strength was about 10,000. Of these about 3500 were in the advisory structure, another ___ in logistic and support units, principally helicopters, and _____ in air and naval units. At this stage, officers and men were carefully picked and almost wholly volunteer. One Australian observer (Denis Warner) was to describe them in glowing terms, and the tribute seemed deserved. All in all, by July it was the American feeling, widely shared in Saigon, that the US had indeed found unexpectedly effective ways of helping in a situation of internally supported insurgency of "wars of national liberation," where the other side had appeared the previous year to have all the advantages.

Politically, as well, things seemed better. True, a handful of pilots in the Air Force attempted in early February to destroy the

ruling family by a bombing attack on the Palace. Although the bombing was accurate, it missed both Diem and Nhu, and triggered no discernible follow-up action. I myself happened to arrive in Saigon on the following day, when it was already clear that Diem held the loyalty of his commanders and was in full control of the situation. It hardly deserved to be called even an attempted coup, and certainly was not to be compared with the serious thrust of November 1960.

Perhaps the ~~superficiality and~~ quick fading of the February 1962 attack led both the Embassy and Washington to estimate too lightly the underlying forces of opposition to the Diem regime.* In any case, the political situation in Saigon seemed easier throughout this period, with dissent muted and confidence steadily rising. Gone was the near-panic that had seemed to exist in the fall of 1961, and the tonic of increased US effort seemed to have helped even the trouble areas that had been identified by the Taylor Mission. Even though Diem's "reforms" were recognized as extremely limited, they seemed to be helping.

In the field, the picture seemed to be improving slowly but steadily. With helicopters in particular as a new factor, the Vietnamese armed forces seemed to operate better, and local forces defending villages scored several successes. All in all, it seemed a period of steady progress.

Indeed, by the fourth Honolulu meeting of late July, the general sense was that the right approach had been found and that if the apparent trends could be continued, success would follow, in the full

sense of the Viet Cong being reduced to insignificant and unmenacing proportions. Thus, already in that Honolulu meeting, I find in my record of follow-up actions an instruction to develop "a long-term program to keep up the necessary pipeline of first-class people, assuming that the effort will be maintained for three years. The second element of this program should be progressive measures so that the GVN can take over activities now performed by MACV. A third element should be a long-term project of necessary equipment [for the Vietnamese] with particular reference to such items as helicopter additions and attrition." The instruction is both a measure of the confidence that was then felt, and of the strong hope that the US effort would be finite in duration and could lead to a progressive handing back of responsibility to the Vietnamese.

Finally, the diplomacy of the period deserves brief mention. From the Communist standpoint, the general scope of what the US was about to do must have been clear almost at once, through reports from Washington, visible actions and preparations in Vietnam, and possibly (then as later) excellent intelligence from within the Diem Administration. Yet the quietness of the announcements from Washington gave the Communists little handle to react, at least until the public appointment of General Harkins, under his new title, on February 8. This became the signal for a strong Communist reaction, both protesting what the US was doing and proposing the convening of a renewed Geneva Conference on Vietnam to deal with the situation. The latter suggestion

came first from the National Liberation Front (NLF) by now fortified, and in expert judgment led, by the newly-formed "People's Revolutionary Party,"established in January in the South as an arm of the Communist Lao Dong Party in the North. The idea was quickly seconded from Hanoi and Peking.

To the Kennedy Administration this appeared a maneuver to put forward for South Vietnam the type of solution that was being worked out in Laos--that is, external neutrality and an internal coalition. In the case of South Vietnam, President Kennedy and his advisors thought both points incomplete or inapplicable. Neutrality could only be accepted for the South if it was also to be the rule for the North, which in practice seemed out of the question and open to the grossest forms of undetected evasion by Moscow and Peking acting as continuing allies of Hanoi. But principally, there seemed no basis in South Vietnam for any type of coalition government. Even if Diem were thrown out, there were no political figures of the center remotely like Souvanna in Laos; in every key respect, the two situations were utterly dissimilar.

The Communist effort for a conference got little attention, and was not picked up with any force by the Soviet Union. Thus, the US did not feel compelled to make a public reply. Rather, the Administration's reasoning appeared in quiet discussions with the British, in particular, who fully shared the American reservations. Perhaps most important, both the British and Americans felt that any introduction of

a new negotiating arena at this stage could only confuse and reduce the chances of success in the Laos conference itself. It was felt that if this conference succeeded, the way might indeed be open to see what could be accomplished through negotiation on Vietnam. If Hanoi meant peace, one would surely find this out most readily in the relatively less vital theater of Laos than in the central one of Vietnam.

The other diplomatic front in early 1962 concerned the ICC. As already noted, a major reason for the quiet and unfolding form of disclosure of the new American policy was to avoid putting the ICC majority nations, India and Canada, on the spot. Both were, of course, compelled to react from mid-December on. The arrival of American helicopter companies alone was a clear and explicit violation of the Accords, in that the military equipment categories frozen in 1954 had included no helicopter units of any sort.*

Hence, from December through the winter and spring there was an intensive jockeying and negotiation among the three ICC nations. Canada on the one hand stood firm throughout for factual findings that would cover what the North Vietnamese had done, what the US was now doing, and show from the sequence that the North Vietnamese violations had been prior and the cause of American ones. Poland on the other hand, sought to pillory the US and ignore what the North Vietnamese had done. The crucial nation in the middle was, as always, India, and at this

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*Citation.

stage the Indians on the spot were, to American eyes, clear-headed and objective, with support from New Delhi. The final result was a majority ICC report of June 2, 1962, which in general conformed to what the Canadians had had in mind, although with a few modifications of wording brought about by the Indians. (Citations and commentary on this Report). (Round out.)

d. Settlement in Laos, Reassurance in Thailand.

In the last week of 1961, Prince Souphanouvong of the Pathet Lao walked out of the meeting of the three princes in Vientiane. He was reacting to the refusal of the rightist Prince Boun Oum to accept the assignment to the neutralist Souvanna Phouma of the Defense and Interior portfolios in a new government. Like so much in the Laos story, the sentences read like a program note for a romantic opera. But this was deadly serious business, and all parties reacted sharply, particularly the US.

Students of "coalition" government structures, particularly the experiences of Eastern Europe after the war, will need no explanation of why these particular portfolios were the heart of the matter. Finance and domestic welfare are crucial to any modern government, and these had already been assigned to the "rightists" and the Pathet Lao respectively. Defense and Interior, however, are the centers of raw power, vital as opposed to merely crucial. No coalition of sharply opposed groups could stand if either Ministry were in hands other than

the center.

This had been Harriman's view ever since the coalition idea became the cornerstone of the proposed settlement. Prince Boun Oum knew it, Phoumi as the real rightist leader knew it. They had chosen to defy the US in part because of honest fears for Souvanna's impartiality and ability to withstand Communist pressures; in part, they continued to hope that the fighting would erupt again, the US would be forced to help them, and they would end up on top. During the summer months, the steady growth in the North Vietnamese presence had indeed led the US to send more equipment and more advisors, and in the Vietnam story of the fall of 1961 we have already seen that as late as October the JCS were still urging the old Plan 5 in Laos as their military reflex. There was a balance to be found. The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese were threatening, and if Phoumi's forces were defeated then the whole coalition balance would be destroyed in another way.

Nonetheless, by January US sympathy for Phoumi had been sharply reduced by his stubbornness of the fall, including an abortive offensive, and by a clear sense of his underlying motives. With half the settlement in hand, and distaste for military operations in Laos even more universal among civilians after the review of the fall, the USG as a whole was ready to force Phoumi into accepting the only possible basis for the internal part of a settlement.

Hence, the US briefly cut off its financial support to Phoumi in early January, and Harriman publicly announced that the US agreed with

the Russians that the two key portfolios must go to Souvanna. Still Phoumi gave no sign of yielding, and by the end of the month the situation was complicated by an outbreak of fighting in the area of Nam Tha, way in the west/northwest corner of Laos. This small village on the Mekong (?) was within the area controlled by the rightists at the time of the May 1961 cease-fire, but also a base for forays by Phoumi's forces across the 1961 line. Thus, both sides could be blamed, and the Communists surely had their own motives to weaken the right, grab territory, and humiliate Phoumi so that he would be forced to accept the coalition.

At any rate, the US refused to be drawn in, and in early February once again suspended the financial support. Fighting in the Nam Tha area did stop on February 19, but in the meantime the Thai had been aroused to the point of sending troops to the border. Thai encouragement of Phoumi now became visibly a critical factor, and on February 20 (?), when Robert Kennedy visited Bangkok on a tour of Asia, he got a vivid first-hand picture of Thai disagreement with US policy in Laos, and of underlying distrust and lack of confidence in US intentions toward Thailand. (Any RFK trip notes?) The Thai attitudes evident in 1961 had reached a new pitch of intensity.

Following on Robert Kennedy's report, the US moved promptly to see if the Thai could not both be reassured and persuaded to change their support for Phoumi's position. The Thai Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, was invited to visit Washington at once, and did so between March 1 and 5.

In the conversations of this visit, conducted by Secretary Rusk, Alexis Johnson, and Harriman, the Phoumi question was interlaced throughout with Thanat's desire for a stronger, or at least more public, assurance of US support for Thailand in a pinch. Privately, the record on this was already reasonably clear. As we have seen in Chapter ____, in March of 1961 the Thai had been assured that the US interpreted its SEATO obligation to "act" in event of "armed attack" as applying whether or not SEATO members were unanimous. Nonetheless, this private assurance had not been enough. In October Thanat had privately raised the question of changing the SEATO voting rules to provide for a 3/4 vote, or alternatively had asked if the US could make a bilateral defense treaty with Thailand. Neither of these suggestions had been taken up; both were renewed as the talks began in March.

In fact, however, the US was not ready to take either seriously. The first would have been extraordinarily difficult to arrange within SEATO and might well have broken it up, and both would probably have had grave difficulty in the Congress. So Rusk and his advisors, surely with the President's full backing and support, went back to the simple idea of stating publicly what they had already said privately, and what the State Department had always held as the US interpretation. Reluctantly, Thanat accepted.

Hence, the so-called Rusk-Thanat Communique, issued on March 6. Referring to SEATO, it "reaffirmed that this obligation of the United States does not depend on the prior agreement of all other parties to the Treaty, since its treaty obligation is individual as well as

collective." Moreover, it went on to say that the US

> . . . regards its commitments to Thailand under the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and under its bilateral and economic assistance agreements with Thailand as providing an important basis for U.S. actions to help Thailand.*

That is, the US was saying that, since it had a contingent obligation to "act" against "armed attack" on Thailand, and at least an obligation to "consult" in the event of "aggression other than by armed attack," these obligations underlay, though they did not compel, actions to help Thailand in deterring such acts and playing its own part in dealing with them.

Much controversy has subsequently swirled around this Communique, in particular whether it expanded the US obligation to Thailand without the formal consent of the Senate and, so far as written records apparently show, even without consultation with senior members of that body. On the latter point, several of the key participants do recall general talks with Senators at this time; the only record I have been able to find is a hearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House on March ____, in which the Communique was mentioned by me in testimony, without any comment or question.

Whatever the facts on Congressional consultation, the historical essence seems to be that no one, Executive, Legislative, or public, regarded the statement, which was public and explicit, as in the least

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*BM check.

surprising or unusual. It ran on page ____ of the New York Times,* was tersely noted and approved in a few editorials, and dropped from sight. For those who thought in terms of customary international law, it must have appeared self-evident that the US would take a similar view of all its multilateral Treaty obligations, such as NATO and OAS. 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. Moreover, in the language about SEATO being an important basis for assistance to Thailand, there was another obvious parallel to the NATO obligation. Assistance programs to NATO members had been a hundred times greater than anything done for Thailand, and had frequently been defended on the basis of the contingent obligation under the Treaty.

But to say that the Communique's substance was neither new nor surprising is not to say for a moment that it lacked significance. In the short term, it served the ~~immediate~~ purpose of reassuring the Thai, so that they were prepared to stop supporting Phoumi on the terms of the Laos coalition. In the longer run it deepened the US commitment to Thailand, in the sense that any reiteration of an obligation tends to lengthen its life and to encourage the firmest expectations that it is still viewed as totally operative.

The next chapter will have more to say about Thailand and US relations with it in 1961-62, for Thailand was both on the edge of

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of the war zone and a separate force in its own. But let us come back to the thread of the Laos story.

By mid-March, Sarit was pledged to support the US position, and this he did personally and face-to-face, in a meeting with Phoumi and Governor Harriman on March 24 at Nong Khay, on the Thai side of the Mekong. Arthur Dommen's vivid and persuasive account suggests that Phoumi's initially negative comments were the face-saving prelude to his intended acceptance.* Be that as it may, Harriman then intervened forcefully, Phoumi's back went up, and no agreement was reached. Harriman pressed further in Vientiane, and Sullivan went to Khang Khay in the Plaine des Jarres to assure Souvanna of US support. But the issue still hung fire.

On April 23, President Kennedy took the occasion of replying to a letter from the King of Laos, to emphasize (AGAIN) that the US supported Souvanna Phouma and his right to the two key portfolios. The King, who had succeeded his father when the latter died in the midst of the crisis of the previous year, had held himself somewhat aloof from the struggle, but had formerly been fairly close to Phoumi and was thought to have influence with him.

Moreover, in late April, when Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum went to Bangkok in an effort to rekindle Thai support, the Thai leaders made a public statement that the coalition solution should at least be given a trial period.

These actions, however, did not succeed in breaking the impasse. What did break it, finally, was a renewed and ~~realis~~ serious outbreak

*CITATION.

of fighting in the Nam Tha area. Phoumi by now had reinforced the garrison there to a total of 5,000, and was supplying it through an air strip. All this could be argued to be a reasonable defense effort in the face of Pathet Lao probes, which Phoumi's people asserted to be supported by North Vietnamese leaders and cadres. On the other hand, there remained ambiguity whether Phoumi's posture was excessive and provocative. In any event, in late April and early May, first the air strip and then Nam Tha itself came under attack, and on May 6, under considerable military pressure, Nam Tha fell.*

In Washington, whatever doubts there may have been concerning the allocation of blame for the action, its immediate consequences seemed obvious. Phoumi's forces had been routed, and Communist forces were at first thought to be advancing right to the edge of the Mekong at Ban Houei Sai. The situation was both an imminent threat to Thailand and a disaster to Phoumi of such proportions as to threaten the tripartite solution. Even for those in the USG disposed to blame Phoumi heavily, it seemed clear that the US had to act to stabilize the situation.

Accordingly, Harriman promptly urged, in high-level Washington meetings, that a major show of force be undertaken involving movement of the 7th Fleet and the introduction of a limited US force into

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*Some close observers at the time say that Phoumi's generals on the spot simply abandoned the village, under Phoumi's orders. Thus, it is argued, Phoumi was trying to create a situation in which Communist power reached the banks of the Mekong and compelled US intervention.

Thailand in position to move into Laos if required. President Kennedy withheld his decision for two days pending the return of Secretary McNamara and General Lemnitzer, who had been en route from Paris to Saigon for an inspection of the Vietnamese situation, but promptly went to Bangkok after the fall of Nam Tha. On May 12, McNamara and Lemnitzer on their return endorsed the sending of forces to Thailand, and the President made his decision that day. The Thai Government had already expressed its alarm and by clear implication urged strong action, so that the working out of a formal Thai request and of joint announcements was carried through readily.

The terms of these announcements, issued in parallel on May 15, deserve analysis. The Thai statement was considerably stronger in its denunciation of the Pathet Lao, while President Kennedy's statement emphasized the defensive nature of the US action and stressed that there was no change in American policy toward Laos. The implication was clear that US forces were there solely to restore peaceful conditions in which negotiations could proceed. (Neuchterlein 241).

Both statements ~~also~~ said that the action was in accordance with obligations under the SEATO treaty, and the Thai statement also cited specifically the Rusk/Thanat Communique of March 6. The exact relationship to the Treaty was not spelled out, nor could it well have been--since there was plainly no aggression yet against Thailand itself, nor any request for SEATO help from Laos. Rather, the reference to SEATO was in the more general sense, that there was the threat of an attack on Thailand which might invoke the Treaty, so that action was required

to prepare against this contingency. To make a maximum show of SEATO solidarity and firmness, the permanent SEATO Council was convened in Bangkok on May 16. However, it did not succeed in reaching agreement even on endorsement of the actions already taken by the US and Thailand, simply noting that they were "entirely precautionary and defensive in character." ~~Thus,~~ Insofar as any unanimity of the SEATO nations was concerned, the meeting demonstrated again that this was out of the question.

Nonetheless, the crisis did elicit a more concerned and forthcoming attitude by both Australia and New Zealand, which agreed in the next few days to send small air units of their own to Thailand. Moreover, the British were sufficiently concerned to deploy a squadron of jet fighters from Malaya to Thailand. Thus, the action assumed a multilateral character.

In fact, despite scare reports, the Communist forces did not seek to drive to the Mekong, or indeed to move appreciably south of Nam Tha. Moreover, the political aspect of the crisis was very rapidly eased. Phoumi and Boun Oum had continued their sympathy-seeking tour even after the Nam Tha attack, but got no concrete support. In the first days after May 6, their rightist colleagues in Vientiane cabled to Geneva their acceptance of Souvanna receiving the Defense and Interior portfolios, and on May ____ Phoumi himself confirmed this surrender on the vital issue.

Hence by May 25 Souvanna Phouma was back in Laos, and was able to convene a meeting of the three Princes at Khang Khay. By putting

deadline pressure on the others, he obtained a final political agreement by June 11, and the way was finally clear for an over-all total settlement at Geneva.

~~Nonetheless,~~ Throughout the period from mid-May to mid-June, the situation seemed so precarious that there was intensive high-level consideration of contingency military plans in Washington. This planning effort showed something of the concerns then felt, at first that the Communists might keep pressing, but toward the end of the four weeks aimed more at the longer-term possibilities of any type of failure of the Laos settlement. By now there was absolutely no doubt that North Vietnam was the major force on the Communist side and very tough and aggressive. Equally, it was clear that the North Vietnamese could at will upset any military balance among the Lao forces. Thirdly, North Vietnamese use of the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos had now assumed significant proportions. There was dispute as to whether the trail could be expanded to take major infusions of military equipment, with military men generally holding that it could, while State Department opinion doubted this. There seems to have been little ~~disagreement~~ DISPUTE that the already-agreed part of the draft Laos Accords, providing that Lao territory should not be used for any "interference" by one nation directed against another, would not be fully observed in any circumstances. In a memorandum to Secretary McNamara for one of the key meetings, I wrote that even if a unified neutral government in Laos was brought about, "it was never really foreseeable that the supply route to South Vietnam would be cut down."

The effort to come to grips with these factors was intense, and engaged the President at intervals, and the Secretaries of State and Defense throughout. By June 12, initial differences had been sharply narrowed, just as word was received of the final political agreement in Laos. Hence, the planning effort, which had never been shared with other nations, was put aside. It had sharpened the continuing sense of how difficult it would be to operate militarily in Laos, and it had highlighted weaknesses in the logistic and support framework in Thailand. Otherwise, it was to have no long-term impact.*

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*As often in the planning process, the military led by suggesting a total package designed to deal with all possible contingencies and with the strongest possible enemy responses. The planning result was, of course, a war with North Vietnam, in which air attacks against the North and even an amphibious landing were put forth as possibilities. The civilian leaders in the Defense Department were quickly opposed to both, however, on grounds of probable Chinese intervention and doubtful effectiveness. As the issues were refined by June 12, the only difference was whether an effort should be made to hold only the Mekong lowland area, or whether it would be necessary and wise at a very early point to push further and try to hold all of Southern Laos--thus both protecting the Mekong valley in depth and blocking the infiltration route to South Vietnam. The record makes clear that Secretary McNamara doubted that the former course would prove feasible but was all along prepared to try it and to have all planning consistent with it, while insisting that the preparations include a larger force in readiness to help at once and to push further. It was a degree of difference, as so often in any planning process, but the issue was apparently never argued orally to the President. Roger Hilsman's rather theological interpretation of the dispute goes way beyond anything reflected in the papers or in the fully recorded discussions--at most of which he was not present. As full participants in the process, neither Secretary McNamara nor any of those working with him qualify for the straw man role his account assigns to us. Among all the civilians, at least, there was a consensus, right or wrong, that any military action should be essentially defensive and designed to retain the international support the US had now earned on matters related to Laos. (Hilsman citations.)

(ELABORATE! OR DROP)

The case is simply another illustration of the way in which any

What had the May crisis proved? To the Thai, it had doubtless provided a second and more emphatic reassurance that the US would be ready to support Thailand in an emergency. The crisis of confidence since March of 1961 was substantially eased, the Thai being now more inclined to ~~believe~~ ACCEPT that Phoumi was weak and ineffectual, as Americans had urged for over a year.

Moreover, the actual deployment of American and other forces to Thailand had compelled a much more serious military assessment of Thai needs and resources. One of the fruits of the planning process, for example, was to reveal how low were the capacities of Thai railroad and transport routes, and how insufficient the depot capacity for support of any allied forces introduced on any basis. Thus in mid-June, it was decided to undertake a significant increase in US support for Thailand in these critical areas. These efforts, including pipelines, depot facilities, and airstrip improvements, went forward in the next months, and became a part of a process under which the Thai and the US worked increasingly closely.

~~In a word~~, The May crisis brought Thailand much more to the fore as an essentially threatened country and as a key part of any planning for future crises in the area.

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serious problem is likely to be attacked at top levels of the US, or perhaps any, government. The common pattern is thesis-antithesis-synthesis, with the areas of disagreement steadily narrowing. So at any rate it was in this case. We shall come to others like it, as we shall also to the less common instances where there really were profound and basic differences.

For the nations negotiating at Geneva, the total sequence of the winter was a convincing demonstration that the US was prepared to go to considerable lengths, and to take risks, in order to carry through the project of a neutralized Laos. Cooperation between the US and its two major Western allies was extraordinarily close throughout the Geneva negotiations. Thanks in very considerable part to Harriman's personal effort, the suspicion and doubt of March 1961 had given way by mid-1962 to close cooperation at all levels, and a broad common viewpoint on Laos. The British, as co-chairman in Geneva, exercised through the experienced and resourceful Malcolm MacDonald a wide-ranging and constructive influence on the discussions, and the French played a helpful role throughout, particularly through their Ambassador, Pierre-Louise Falaize, in Vientiane. Altogether, there was a feeling of mutual congratulation among the three Western allies. All could foresee that there might be difficult problems arising under the Agreements, but for the time being the atmosphere on this allied front was harmonious indeed.

As for the Soviet Union, Khrushchev could well argue that he had carried out to the full the undertaking he had made at Vienna in June of 1961. Through Pushkin, the Soviet Union played a substantial role throughout the negotiations of late 1961 on the external elements in the settlement. Indeed the real "negotiations" throughout this time were essentially between Harriman and Pushkin, with little if any business done in private sessions between American and North Vietnamese

representatives, or between Americans and the Chinese.* The North Vietnamese dealt through the Russians, or on occasion through the French; the Chinese for the most part through the British.

A point worth noting is that this (ACTIVE) Soviet role had essentially run its course by the end of 1961. Throughout the first six months of 1962, when the issue shifted to the internal political solution, the Soviet Union was a passive bystander. It did not appear, nor was it judged by Washington, to be encouraging whatever degree of military pressure Hanoi and the Pathet Lao might be applying. On the contrary, the element that was receiving direct Soviet support in Laos, the neutralist force of Kong Le, remained quiet throughout these months and observed the cease-fire in its camps in the Plaine des Jarres. Already, one might have seen that the actions of the Pathet Lao, with a growing degree of North Vietnamese direct involvement, were not responsive to Soviet influence. (YET, AS) Washington saw it, the Soviets carried through their pledge right to the final settlement in July, and if there was a sense of their diminishing influence, this did not erase the continuing hope of a useful Soviet role.

This brings up, inevitably, the question of what President Kennedy and his advisors thought the Laos settlement would achieve, and what provisions they honestly expected would be observed. So far as I can tell, these questions were not argued in great detail

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*Check Arthur Lall book.

within the government, nor pressed to any conclusion, other than a general expectation that North Vietnam would continue to send some men and supplies through Laos to SVN. Under the President's firm orders, whatever misgivings had once existed were well suppressed by July of 1962. Indeed, the events of the spring had their effect on previous "hard-liners" who had believed in Phoumi. Now there was a fairly universal consensus that the Geneva Agreements was the best outcome possible from a situation that had become difficult-to-impossible by early 1961. Even in military circles, where the possibility of fighting in Laos had again appeared during the May crisis, the belief that effective military action could be taken there without grave difficulty had declined.

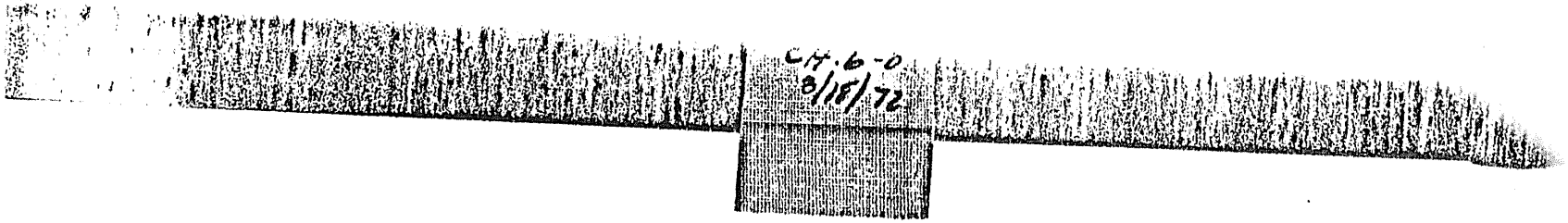
Essentially, the dominant Washington mood was less to assess the hopes and odds of Communist compliance than to join in the resolve that the settlement should be given a full and fair trial--and that nothing the US did should properly be judged responsible for upsetting it.

Was the settlement, then, considered as a serious forerunner for a wider policy of seeking a neutralized status in other parts of Southeast Asia? The implication can be found in some US statements of the period, most notably in the remarks of December 1961 by Ambassador Sullivan, speaking at the time agreement had been reached on the external parts of the settlement. His words were that the agreements were "a template for the pattern of peace which would have significance not only in Southeast Asia but in other parts of the world."*

*BH to get citation from conference report or other official source, and compare with Dommen version.

These have sometimes been interpreted as indicating serious consideration within the USG of a similar neutralization of Vietnam, to the whole of the Indochina area, or possibly even more widely in mainland Southeast Asia. The record does not support any such view, however. On the contrary, those who were most eager for the solution of neutralization-plus-coalition in Laos were at the same time thoroughly convinced that there was not a similar possibility in Vietnam. (Citations)

Thus, the Laos settlement as it was signed on July 23, 1962 was essentially a practical adjustment to a situation the Kennedy Administration had inherited. It restored Laos as a neutral buffer state, which had surely been the wise intent of the original 1954 Geneva Accords and it undid much of the damage from the unwise attempt of the Eisenhower Administration, in 1958-60, to turn Laos into an aligned nation on the anti-Communist side. All this was a very major achievement in itself, even without attaching any wider implications to American intentions as of 1962. Whether there could be such wider implications is a matter that only time could tell--just as it was recognized on all sides that only time and developments on the Vietnamese front would determine whether the Laos settlement could be maintained.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Chapter 6: Continuity and Change in American Policy in East Asia, 1961-62 (Outline Only).

a. Precis

Though Laos and Vietnam consumed most of JFK's personal attention in East Asia for the first 18 months of his Administration, much else was done and set in motion under his direction. As always, substance and style were linked; changes in procedure and rhetoric introduced important new notes in themselves. Establishing the pre-eminence of the Ambassador on the spot, new men in key spots, a new emphasis on "counter-insurgency," but at the same time on "nation building" and hence on economic aid, the courtship of neutral nations and attempts to identify generally with nationalism, de-emphasis of the ideological aspects of Communism, all these were worldwide parts of Kennedy's policies. In East Asia, they changed the tone of American policy markedly.

Yet, if one examines how the Administration saw the main problems in Asia, or how it dealt with key countries, the proportion of continuity was high. Like Eisenhower and Dulles before him, JFK treated mainland China as beyond the reach of American actions or influence for the time being, and focussed on strengthening the nations around the periphery of China. American assistance was extended wherever it was welcome, held open for neutrals, continued on past lines for the committed (some would say client) nations, with large amounts of

military equipment and training for many. Only the weapon of covert political action was shelved, or at least sharply reduced. Otherwise, the United States remained fully engaged in the problems of the nations of East Asia, collectively and wherever possible individually. Taking the main countries and areas:

In the case of Japan, the change in style amounted most nearly to an outright change in policy. Edwin Reischauer both carried out and came to symbolize abandoning the last traces of paternal dependency, and moving through an "elder brother" stage, to what it was hoped would be in time an equal partnership. Still overwhelmingly self-centered and playing little part in the wider Asia, Japan was learning to stand on its own feet again. At this stage, ~~though~~, its internal politics were shaky, its economic growth not established as it later came to be, and the focus of its dealings with the United States overwhelmingly bilateral and economic. It was a critical transition stage, whose outcome could not be seen at the time.

In Korea, a military coup under Park Chung Hee in May of 1961 ended for the time being the forms of democratic government. After a moment of disapproval, the American reaction became one of realistic acceptance, and then of working closely with the new rulers to pull the country out of impending economic chaos and general apathy. Hope grew slowly in Park's first year, and the American commitment and assistance effort went on at full scale, though with a new toughness and discrimination. As in Japan, it was a critical transition stage.

The third peripheral government of Northeast Asia, the Republic of China, presented problems of a very different sort, in the international diplomatic arena. Through 1961, JFK and Rusk had to deal with removing Nationalist Chinese objections to the admission of Mongolia to the UN, while at the same time devising new tactics to maintain Taipei's hold on the China seat there. Then, in early 1962, with the mainland in apparent distress, American policy moved to restrain Chiang from any idea of returning there by force. American aid continued: its underlying hope, increasingly, was that economic success would strengthen the hand of the pragmatists in lower positions, and wean Chiang or his successor from unrealistic ambitions outside the Formosan area. But in the process of all these difficult dealings, the JFK campaign idea of getting the Nationalists out of Quemoy and Matsu dropped by the wayside. It was tough enough just to get Chiang to behave, and the threat of withdrawing American support was never considered--doubtless for American political reasons in large part. The wider problems of Peking and Taipei had to wait, both on events and on changes in attitudes in all quarters.

In Southeast Asia, there was of course great local variation. America was hardly involved in the problems of Malaya or Singapore, or in the first steps toward the formation of Malaysia. In Burma, the advent of Ne Win as military dictator in 1962 brought an end to almost all American activity, both public and private, and ushered in a long period of Burmese withdrawal. Cambodia, another courted neutral, was skittish, eyeing Vietnam and Laos constantly.

Thailand and the Philippines, of course, were in part linked to the Laos and Vietnam situations, in part facing their own separate problems. Thailand became a favorite testing ground for the theory and practice of "counter-insurgency" and "nation building"--with mixed results. The Philippines faced a crisis of identity, the essence of which was to dissociate from the United States and find themselves as true Asians; in practice, this urge tended to draw them toward the rising star of Sukarno in Indonesia.

It was with Indonesia, as to a lesser degree with Japan, that the change in American style under Kennedy amounted to a change of policy. At first, Sukarno was courted as a bellwether neutral, in general terms; this alone merely accented the policy of propitiation followed by Eisenhower after the failure of the American-backed outer islands revolt of 1957-58. In early 1962, however, Sukarno's campaign to get West New Guinea (or West Irian) forced JFK to a decision. Under the constant pressure of Indonesian resort to force, the United States once again, as in 1949, put strong pressure on the Dutch to yield, and through Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker played a key mediating role under UN auspices. The resulting agreement of August 1962 was substantially on Indonesian terms. It ended one chapter to open another, which Americans hoped would be a relaxing abroad and reform at home, by Sukarno, but which others in Southeast Asia thought would likely be another external thrust. In its role on West Irian, and its general posture toward Indonesia, America necessarily assumed a stance

in one part of Southeast Asia that appeared significantly different from those it was taking in Laos or Vietnam. It was a case of three postures for three different situations--each explicable if not inevitable, but the sum still open to strain and misunderstanding. By late 1962, far more than in late 1960, American policy was trying to adjust to forces in the area, rather than to force them into a mold of monolithic resistance to China or a Communist threat.

b. The changes of tone and style

1. The May 1961 directive on the power of Ambassadors. Resultant curbing of CIA and of MAAG chiefs. Teething problems nonetheless. Nature of the new appointments (draw on Bowles). Resuscitation of the old China hands and drawing off of the utterly rigid. McConaughy's brief and unhappy tenure as Assistant Secretary; Harriman a fresh breeze almost wholly focussed on Laos and Indonesia. Forrestal and Hilsman as other influences. State takes charge, except in Vietnam. Role of DOD, and its relation to State.

2. "Counter-insurgency" and "nation building." To many, including myself, largely big words for what OCB and the aid shop had done all along, less well. The emphasis on economic aid and development goals was profoundly important for many countries, less so in East Asia, where those most aided had special problems (Korea and Taiwan) and were already far along. CI and its special committee, under Maxwell Taylor and then Harriman, were chiefly a device for direct prodding by

RFK, then in a zealot phase tinctured only by concern for youth and a real appreciation of the likes of Sukarno and Sihanouk.

3. Such neutrals had a special impact in the Kennedy Administration, partly because they too lived by charisma, partly in a realistic spirit of taking the power that was. But, apart from individuals, the courtship of neutrals and the downgrading of ideology were part of a considered and major attempt by JFK to identify the US with nationalism and diversity. The Berkeley speech an important touchstone of this. It doubtless won not only applause but a real measure of gain for American standing in the world; the old hard-line nations, at the same time, were skeptical. In effect, JFK carried water on both shoulders through mid-1962. Only in late 1963 was he ~~being~~ faced, in Indonesia above all, with nasty choices between the new tendency of policy and the old. So far as we can tell, he meant to have them move alongside each other, shifting the emphasis gradually as events permitted.

c. The new relationship with Japan. (as summarized in precis)

d. Korea. (ditto)

e. Nationalist China. (ditto)

f. Variety and response in Southeast Asia. Malaya/Singapore/Borneo, Burma, Cambodia. Then at more length on Thailand and the Philippines.

g. Policy toward Indonesia. (as summarized in precis)

h. Coda. This might well use the RFK visit to Asia in early 1962 as reflecting all the strands in the new JFK line of policy. In one trip he expressed total determination in Vietnam, beat the Thai over the head on the Laos settlement, made a major pro-Sukarno move on West Irian, and courted youthful nationalism everywhere.

Chapter 7: China and the Soviet Union in EA as seen from Washington, 1961-63.

a. The new lines of policy that evolved in 1961 and 1962 did not include any major change in the US policy toward China. On the contrary, in 1961 the Administration deliberately decided that it must stand firm on the issue of Chinese representation at the UN, although it did persuade the GRC to forego use of the veto on the admission of Outer Mongolia. Contrary to what one might have expected from JFK's campaign speeches, nothing was said or done about the offshore islands or reducing the GRC presence there, and the main outlines of US aid to Taiwan continued unchanged.

b. At most, there was a less hostile and ideological note in US speeches, and in early 1962 a feeling out to see whether Peking wished US food to meet apparent local famine conditions on the mainland. At the very same time, the Nationalist Chinese on Taiwan were making audible noises about returning to the mainland, and the US may have been identified in Peking's mind with these, even though in fact JFK had acted in precisely the contrary direction by sending Alan Kirk as Ambassador (date) to educate Chiang on the ridiculousness of military action. At any rate, Peking did not respond to the US nibbles on food.

c. Through 1961 to the fall of 1962, US-Soviet relations in Asia revolved almost entirely around Laos. As already told in Chapter 5,

Harriman worked very closely with Pushkin in arriving at the 1962 Accords, and the belief that the Soviets could and would exert some restraining influence on Hanoi played a significant part in the final agreement. Conversely, the firm actions taken by Harriman and others to bring Phoumi to heel must have persuaded Moscow of American good faith. The final agreement of June 1962 was the culmination of the realistic choice of alternatives made in 1961; it was a high water mark in a limited degree of cooperation between the US and USSR. Whether Peking really disapproved, so that Soviet handling of Laos was a major contributor to frictions, cannot readily be said in hindsight; Hanoi was, after all, left in a position to act pretty much as it pleased in Laos, and may have told Peking that the agreements would not be permitted to hinder them.

d. In any event, whatever the two major Communist powers thought or did about Laos was, in the fall of 1962, infinitely less important than the effect of the Cuban Crisis and the Sino-Indian conflict, first on Sino-Soviet relations and second on the relative roles of each in Asia.

e. Scholars today have little doubt that Soviet actions in the Cuba missile crisis were not the subject of consultation with Peking at any time, and were interpreted by Peking as, at best, unilateral adventurism followed by craven yielding, or, at worst, a brazen attempt to settle nuclear matters at Peking's future expense. (The latter is Ulam hypothesis. It may not be at all correct, but still a good reading

of Peking's mind.) Washington had no clear reading at the time on the impact of the crisis on Sino-Soviet relations, and the Cuba settlement had no element of Chinese motivation from the US standpoint. Not until the spring of 1963 did it become worth a try to settle the nuclear test issue and develop a wholly new atmosphere with the USSR, which of course was bound to affect Sino-Soviet relations. (All through the 50's and 60's the US operated on the premise that US direct intervention in Sino-Soviet matters, or any appearance of it, would be counterproductive.) For the time being, Cuba was a clear Soviet setback, and in Asian terms this may have played a vital part in the evident decline in Soviet prestige there from 1962 right through 1964.

f. Almost coincidentally, the Sino-Indian conflict gave a very considerable lift to the Chinese both vis-a-vis the Russians generally, and most especially in terms of Asian prestige. It had its own roots, and had been simmering since at least 1959 and getting nearer all the time to the boiling point. The Indians had done their share of provocative acts, and the basic issues certainly had two sides--Ladakh fuzzy and the NEFA definitely a colonial dictat. But in the end it was the Chinese who prepared carefully for a limited war and raised the conflict to this level. Why? To tidy up access to Tibet, surely, but also to humiliate India as any sort of power competitor in the rest of Asia--and perhaps also with the hope that under pressure and defeat India would simply come apart. The last was not achieved, but the rest was, as much as they could have hoped.

g. The effect of the Sino-Indian conflict on US policy was of course dramatic, and has been vividly described by Galbraith and Hilsman. Overnight, Nehru requested military aid, and the US sent airlift shipments which lifted Indian morale greatly and may have had a little effect on Peking. We then followed up with a systematic military aid program, tailored as tightly as possible to border needs (and with controls against its going to units in the Punjab)--this was negotiated while the fighting was still on, but then continued after the cease-fire and withdrawal, first through the Nassau agreement with the British and then through the May decision on a $75 million level. In the process, the major political question was whether the occasion could be used to get a Kashmir settlement, and if so how. The effort was pushed hard from Washington, less so by Galbraith in New Delhi (who had decided India was civilized and Pakistan not); probably it could not have succeeded with a wounded and aged Nehru in charge in any event. On the military side, the extensive back-and-forth of the winter included a Galbraith-pressed proposal for an air defense guarantee by the US and Britain (finally modified with care); an interesting example of a great mind coming in his own case to the theory of commitment to deter. G. would have involved us up to the armpits, and both he and Bowles after him argued the MAP program on twin grounds of the Chinese threat and pre-empting the Soviets, as strongly as any Cold War Ambassadors of the 1950's, but to a Washington by now more skeptical of such arguments.

h. There was also a clear and visible effect on Sino-Soviet relations. From an initial posture of total detachment, which greatly offended the Indians, the Soviets felt themselves driven to offer first moral support and then outright aid to the Indians. It was the beginning of a real shift in Soviet policy in South and Southeast Asia, and a further sign of the growing sharpness of the Sino-Soviet rift.

i. As the threat of hostilities diminished, the conflict left an important residue on the thinking of the USG (and of most observers of the Asian scene). During the critical period, the sources of the conflict were somewhat oversimplified, and the degree of Indian responsibility unduly minimized. The initial verdict of "aggression with no extenuating circumstances" tended to shift to "some extenuating circumstances, but still aggression, and for motives going beyond legitimate defensive interests." (The Taylor testimony on this question of Indian provocative acts.) And, both in the Executive and in Congress, there was concern at the effect on Pakistan of the new US ties to India, MAP above all. Yet, the underlying conclusions of the Executive, shared by the Congress, were that the new programs were right and needed to meet a valid and continuing Chinese threat that was as central to peace in South Asia as the India-Pakistan friction.

More generally, the USG conclusion was <u>not</u> that China had sought military conquest in this case (even without the prospect of US intervention) <u>or</u> that China was now bent on systematic aggression around its borders, either by military means or by pressure/subversion

tactics. But it was concluded that China was thrusting to become the dominant power in the area, that it had now shown considerable cohesion and capacity for sophisticated pressure-type action, and that it had now acquired much greater prestige and inspired much greater fear all around its borders and notably in Southeast Asia. In short, the central policy conclusion was reached--in and out of government--that it was more than ever necessary to "contain" Peking as a real threat. US aid to countries around the periphery of China was right, with some hard-liners disposed to add that the Indians would have been a lot smarter to have recognized the threat long before and got off their moral high-horse of non-alignment.

One must be careful not to overstate the impact of any one event on USG thinking about Asia. The Sino-Indian conflict did not produce a dramatic shift in evaluations of any aspect. But it did produce a significant shading of difference, and a muting of the school of "liberal" Sinologists prone to maintain that China had only defensive concerns outside its borders. By early 1963, JFK's remarks about China had a new acerbity, in contrast to the gentling of his references to the Soviet Union. Rather rapidly, with him and in public opinion polls, China was becoming the greatest menace to world peace and especially to its neighbors in East Asia.

j. The Nuclear Test Treaty of August 1963 confirmed and heightened this shift. To China, this was deliberate collusion between the USSR and US. Its denunciation of both now reached new heights.

Yet, at the same time, the limitations of Soviet influence in SEA were evident in Khrushchev's refusal to discuss Laos with Harriman. The new Soviet moderation and the Cuba fiasco had been costly to Soviet prestige in Hanoi, Djakarta and Pyongyang. There Chinese influence was ascendant, and more and more the center of Asian thinking.

It was back to 1960: China thrusting, the US the assisting great power.

Chapter 8: Disillusionment in Laos, Hope in Vietnam
(August 1962 - May 1963)

a. We now return to the story in Laos and South Vietnam. Like the first seven months of 1962, the period from August 1962 to early May of 1963 is clearly marked and definable. In that span of nine months Hanoi maintained a major military presence in Laos and expanded its use of Lao territory in support of its effort in South Vietnam. Thus, key provisions of the Laos Accords were breached wholesale from the outset. In addition, the political balance of the Accords was by April 1963 sharply modified by the withdrawal of the Pathet Lao representatives from active participation in the government.

To the extent that it had been thought that the Soviet Union could influence the North Vietnamese behavior in Laos, this hope was also at an end by May of 1963. The major change in Sino-Soviet relations was vividly reflected in the Indochina theater, in a progressive ouster of Soviet influence for Chinese. The result overall was disillusionment, particularly for those top officials of the Kennedy Administration who had worked mightily to bring about the Laos settlement, and had hoped that its example might eventually extend more widely.

Concurrently, as the North Vietnamese asserted themselves in Laos, it seemed that in South Vietnam American and allied support had

turned the tide toward a steady reduction in the power of the Viet Cong and their Hanoi supporters. While some warning signals could be detected, the general feeling among Americans both in Washington and in Saigon was, by May, that major advances had been made and that it was now possible to work concretely to the reduction and eventual termination of the US advisory effort. In the whole long decade, this was perhaps the time of greatest hope.

b. Following the pattern of Chapter 5, a word further on the way that US policy and actions were handled in the inter-connecting situations of Laos and South Vietnam by this time. The Honolulu meeting of late July 1962 was the climax of Secretary McNamara's managerial effort, first in Vietnam, but then extended to Thailand, and also to Cambodia, where Prince Sihanouk requested US support for a significant force increase in June of 1962, and the US had raised its aid moderately. At that meeting, it did appear that a coherent over-all US policy had been established, clear to all the ambassadors present.

After that time, the responsibility, in Vietnam in particular, passed overwhelmingly to the men in the field. With frequent Honolulu meetings no longer absolutely required for action decisions, supervision and surveillance in Washington fell in considerable degree to the Special Group for Counter-insurgency that had been established under General Maxwell Taylor in January of 1962.* In fact, after one further

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*When Taylor moved to become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July of 1962, the chairmanship passed to Deputy Under Secretary Alexis Johnson, and then, in March of 1963, to Averell Harriman when he became Under Secretary for Political Affairs, the No. 3 position in the State Department.

Honolulu meeting on October 9, McNamara and all other senior foreign policy officers of the Administration were absorbed through the fall and early winter of 1962 in the Cuban missile crisis, the Sino-Indian War, and the Skybolt cancellation and Nassau meeting, leading on to de Gaulle's veto of British admission to the Common Market. Thus, for several months there was a lapse in high-level attention to South Vietnam. Washington came to depend even more on the evaluations and action judgments of the field, and since these seemed to indicate progress, there was little effort to dig deeply beneath the surface.

Laos remained a somewhat separate and differently handled situation. Harriman continued as the senior officer in charge in Washington. In Vientiane, Winthrop Brown was succeeded in July of 1962, just before the Accords were signed, by Leonard Unger--who had been for four years the Deputy in the Bangkok Embassy and was already thoroughly familiar with the situation. From the outset, Unger was able to establish an atmosphere of complete teamwork and cooperation that, through no fault of Ambassador Brown, had frequently been absent in Vientiane because of the conflicting views of both military and civilian agencies in Washington through the long year of negotiation and maneuver. Under Brown close political control had progressively been extended to all that the US did concerning Laos. Now there was a new team unscarred by the past and dedicated to making the Accords work.

c. <u>The failure of the Laos Agreements to knit together</u>. The first test of the Laos Accords was inevitably the observance of the

provisions for the withdrawal of foreign forces. The issue came to a head after an agreed period of 75 days for ICC teams to take up position. On the American side, 666 American military personnel and 403 Filipino supporting civilians were checked through the ICC control points, and promptly evacuated from Laos. On the Communist side only some 40 tattered "soldiers" were recorded as withdrawing. Evidently, Hanoi had elected to spurn the Accords in a flagrant manner, and to maintain a major military presence.

Faced with this situation, the US might in theory have chosen to trumpet Hanoi's violations, and to limit its own adherence to the Accords, if not to denounce them altogether. In fact, there was little disposition in any quarter to take this course. Harriman fervently argued that the US must travel an additional distance, and see that the blame in all respects lay on the Communist side, if the Accords were to fail. The President readily accepted this argument in early October.* It was symbolic that the last remnants of the American and SEATO forces sent to Thailand in May were withdrawn at this time.

One element of hope at this point was that the government had actually been formed, and all the significant portfolios filled in accordance with the Agreements of June. Even to make a public protest seemed likely to make it more difficult for Souvanna to get on with making coalition work.

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*Dommen, 240, is excellent on the reasoning. Hilsman, 151-3.

As already noted, this time the universal expectation in the USG was that the North Vietnamese would continue to use the trails through Laos to South Vietnam. It did continue to be hoped, in the State Department at least, that such use would remain "semi-covert" and at any rate at low levels. Elsewhere in the government, there was little hope that Hanoi would restrain itself, although it was believed that the trail would require only a small North Vietnamese force presence.

Thus, although legally it was a violation to leave any North Vietnamese forces at all, the realistic issue was their size. The North Vietnamese decision to maintain the bulk of its forces in Laos--an estimated 6,000 out of the peak total of 10,000 men--was ~~thus~~ a serious, if not wholly unexpected, blow to American hopes. As the fall months went on, two further negative elements emerged: the gradual withdrawal of the Soviet Union and pressure from the Pathet Lao to bring the neutralist armed forces over completely to the Communist side. All three elements bore on the situation in the Plaine des Jarres, ~~and~~ Events there built up gradually to a crisis in April 1963.

In the Plaine were two force groups, somewhat intermingled.* The Pathet Lao, now heavily laced with North Vietnamese cadres, had about 7,000 men at various points, while the Kong Le neutralists had

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*Dommen, pp. 242 ff. is a superb eyewitness account of the events of this period. Toye, an equally superb eyewitness from a different standpoint for the earlier period 1960-62, seems to be second-hand after mid-1962.

about 4500 men in the Plaine, and about 5,500 others generally to the west of it. Both groups had been supplied, from late 1960 to mid-1962, by the Soviet airlift from Hanoi and, increasingly in 1962, overland from North Vietnam. In effect, the neutralists were supplied by the Soviet Union indirectly through Hanoi as a channel, while the Pathet Lao were Hanoi's sole responsibility. In both cases, the arrangements gave Hanoi the power to cut off or divert supplies.

By early October, it had become plain that Hanoi was putting a squeeze on the delivery of routine food, fuel, and other maintenance supplies to Kong Le. Deeply imbued with the truly neutralist philosophy that Laos should not be a battleground for Communists or anti-Communists, Kong Le had kept his independence stoutly through the whole period since late 1960, when he had accepted Communist aid as a matter of sheer necessity--and always from the Soviet Union. Now the Russians were apparently cooperating with the Hanoi squeeze or at least helpless to circumvent it.*

In the circumstances, on October ____, Souvanna Phouma appealed directly to the Soviet Union and to the US, in parallel messages to the two Ambassadors. The Russians did not reply, but the US acted promptly to fill the vacuum. The civilian-manned Air America airlift, which had been kept with the government's consent after the Accords and was being used primarily for supplying refugees and Meo tribal

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*Toye, 197, is excellent on the motives.

groups, brought food and other non-military maintenance items to Kong Le.

In November, the situation took a more drastic turn. Through long contact and the infiltration of some recruits, the Pathet Lao had been conducting since 1961 a campaign to bring over to their ranks units of the Kong Le forces. Two such defecting units in late November shot down an Air America plane as it was landing. Souvanna was forced to accept this, but did arrange with the US to transfer Air America planes to the Lao government, so that the supply could go on. In December the Soviets completed their withdrawal from the picture by handing over all their Hanoi-Plaine airlift planes to the North Vietnamese.*

All through the next five months, the struggle for the allegiance of Kong Le's forces continued. It had been triggered by the Pathet Lao, almost certainly under Hanoi's direction, and was largely carried forward under the Communist-leaning neutralist Minister of Foreign Affairs, Quinim Polsena.** In mid-February, Kong Le's principal staff officer,

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*Dommen, 244.

**Hilsman, 153.

Toye, p. 190, quotes Jean Lacouture as reporting, in Le Monde in April, 1963 that Americans were politically active from November on in trying to bring Kong Le's forces to integrate with the rightists, so that the blame for the struggle cut both ways. Responsible and informed US officers DENY ~~are perfectly clear about~~ this allegation. ~~is untrue~~. A vivid "fictional" account of the neutralist plight from 1960 to mid-1964 will be found in the novel by another Frenchman, Jean Larteguy, The Bronze Drums (originally published in Paris in 1965, American translation published by in 1967.) Larteguy's account is critical of virtually all of American actions up to mid-1962, but makes no implication of American pressure or manipulation after that time.

Colonel Ketsana, was assassinated in the Plaine, and on April 1 Quinim was shot by his own neutralist bodyguard in Vientiane, in what was widely assumed to be retaliation for Ketsana's death.

This event lit the match to already-smouldering clashes in the Plaine. The defecting neutralist forces under Colonel Deuane openly attacked their former comrades, and Kong Le was slowly forced to the extreme west of the Plaine. When Souvanna on April 8 formally requested an urgent ICC investigation, Souphanouvong opposed this, and decamped to the Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay in the Plaine. It was a clear break in the tripartite facade of government, although Souvanna held the door open, refusing to fill the portfolios that Souphanouvong and his Pathet Lao colleagues had vacated.

For 2-3 weeks in April of 1963 it appeared possible that open war would again break out. The US reacted in two ways. First, in response to a duly authorized government request, the US began now to furnish outright military supplies to Kong Le's forces in their western corner of the Plaine des Jarres.* With Hanoi hostile and the Soviet flow now entirely cut off, there was no alternative if these vital PRAPS to the neutralist position were to remain in existence. Inevitably, Kong Le's forces were now working closely with the rightist FAR forces in the same area, but at this stage they preserved an independent status. Any idea of integrating the forces of all three

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*Dommen, 251, says SVP himself stayed out of it.

factions was, of course, killed completely by the events of the winter months; it had got no further than a broad agreement in principle in November.* In effect, Souvanna had been forced, both militarily and politically, to rely more on the rightists in the face of the pressure of the leftists to destroy his own position.**

The crisis appeared so serious that in (April 1963) Harriman was sent to Moscow to talk directly to the Soviet leaders. He saw Khrushchev personally, to tell him flatly that the US would not stand for a Communist takeover and to urge Soviet effective action to preserve the Accords. The readiness of the US to act was bolstered by the retention in Thailand of a small US force that had been in SEATO maneuvers. (?) Khrushchev's reply was a diatribe blaming the US and the rightists, while at the same time Pravda denounced the US for causing the tension and violating the Geneva agreements.***

By now, the Soviet Union was powerless, or unwilling, to act in any way. Indeed, after late 1962, the Polish members of the ICC (who clearly did Soviet bidding throughout the long Laos story) were obstructive to any attempt to verify the presence of North Vietnamese forces or the use of the trail. In effect, the North Vietnamese and

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*Toye, 187-8. Refer here to my talks with the French in June.

**Dommen, 257, is excellent on the feelings of Kong Le's forces and their sense of betrayal.

***Dommen, 249.

Pathet Lao barred the ICC from any effective access whatever to the areas controlled by the Pathet Lao, and thus brought about a bamboo curtain of sorts running roughly north and south along the length of Laos.*

At this stage, and with renewed vigor after the Sino-Indian War, the Indian Chairman of the ICC was generally sympathetic to serious efforts. Conversely, the Chinese by the spring of 1963 were blatantly supporting the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese in all ways. For this they were rewarded by the beginnings of a markedly pro-Chinese line from Hanoi, tying directly to the drop in Soviet influence there. Thus, Laos mirrored attitudes developed for bigger reasons among China, the USSR, the US, and India; developments there might have been read as early indications of trends that did not become evident in other theaters till later.

In sum, by the early summer of 1963, the internal political balance within Laos was in disarray. Souvanna kept trying to get the three leaders together again, and contact and sporadic nibbles continued. Preserving at least the facade and forms of a "government of national union" was terribly important to SVP himself, and in this he was fully supported by the US as well as the British, French, Indians--and Russians. Even North Vietnam and China gave lip service to the possibility of

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*Dommen, 248, is amusing on the Pole even correcting SPV once when the latter strayed to the point of laying the way open to the ICC coming to Khang Khay.

return to the full tripartite formula, but the effect of their actions was to prevent its application.

Meanwhile, the military situation had hardened into a territorial split, roughly along the lines of the May 1961 cease-fire. But there was a lurking ambiguity in the Plaine des Jarres, created by the division between Kong Le's main neutralist forces and Colonel Deuane's group, who had gone over to the Pathet Lao. With the "government" forces now comprising both rightist and neutralist elements, the Pathet Lao contested the government's right to claim all that Kong Le had held as of May 1961.

In truth, ambiguities were rife, in a situation which all hands recognized could only sort itself out in the light of the outcome in South Vietnam. The US itself had observed the Accords scrupulously in withdrawing its forces and backing Souvanna. But even in this correct posture there were some ambiguities; the use of ex-military men in handling the legal furnishing of military supplies to government forces, the continued sending of food and maintenance supplies to 11,000 Meo tribesmen whose "private army" had been deliberately left out of the Accords, and briefly in the spring of 1963 the use of Air America helicopters to ferry and supply Kong Le's beleaguered forces.*

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*Where there were ex-military men, it might be noted, they were genuinely retired from military service, not simply taken off the rolls temporarily as had been done for the PEO in 1958-61.

Each of these acts might have been argued to be a technical breach of the Accords, and there was this much to the broad Communist charges made against the US. Nonetheless, when set against the systematic and wholesale acts of the Communist side, it is a fair historical judgment, as it certainly seemed clear to Harriman and to all concerned in Washington, that the US was the supporter, not the breaker, of the substance of the Accords, and that indeed the US went to great lengths and incurred major disadvantages in the 1962-64 period (and later as well), in order to preserve the essence of the Accords for present and future use. Certainly, this was the view that Souvanna took, and the main reason why he gravitated progressively to a more sympathetic posture to the US and eventually, after mid-1964, to a high degree of cooperation. It can hardly be argued that SVP strayed for one moment from total dedication to the principle of an independent and neutralist Laos such as the Accords of 1962 had contemplated. Thus, his behavior alone serves as a major verdict on the bulk of what the US did, particularly in this critical period of 1962-63 when the Accords might have been fortified and strengthened.

What must be emphasized is (THAT) the behavior of the North Vietnamese and PL went well beyond their needs in South Vietnam. Essentially, there were, right from the signing of the Accords, two questions: whether Laos would continue to be used as a passage to South Vietnam, and whether an internal political and military balance could be preserved. The two could have been kept separate. The "corridor

imperative" would have required only continued exclusion of the ICC and the government forces, which would have been readily achievable. Neither the weak government forces, nor any US action from 1961 onward, through 1964 at least, posed any realistic threat to the corridor. Yet long before then the North Vietnamese were instrumental in putting on pressures to weaken, and take grave risk of destroying, the political and military structure of the Accords. Such pressure could only be construed as meaning that Hanoi meant to have its will in Laos whatever happened in South Vietnam, if it could possibly get away with it--and this was the way it was read in Washington and Vientiane alike. (Confirm.)

Moreover, in terms of its effect on Washington thinking, another important effort of the Laos sequence was to underline the role of Hanoi in relation to the Pathet Lao, and thus by inescapable inference in relation to the Viet Cong. In Laos, the Pathet Lao all along had seemed a weak and unimportant force in themselves. In 1960 they had played second fiddle to Kong Le, who had joined them only in necessity. What strength the PL built up in the next two years, from their headquarters in Khang Khay, seemed due to the major inputs of both supplies and men from North Vietnam. Perhaps the Lao on the government side came over time to see the Vietnamese hand in everything, and to exaggerate it on occasion.* Nonetheless, the evidence of 1961 onward was clear enough, that the North Vietnamese were the key stiffeners and leaders of the PL on all important occasions, and that the chain

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*Toye, 164-5.

of command for the PL ran basically from Hanoi and the Lao Dong Party, not to Prince SPV but rather through the tough and hard-line pair of Kaysone and Nou Hak.* The way in which Hanoi exercised control and dictated policy in Laos seemed a clear parallel to the way it was operating in South Vietnam, especially after the founding of the Communist PRP there in early 1962. It all fitted together into a pattern that was, indeed, Indochina-wide, although at this stage the Cambodian activity was muted and the channels not clear.

Perhaps there was still another factor in North Vietnamese behavior in Laos in the critical 1962-3 period. To many, and perhaps to the Chinese themselves, it had seemed likely that a neutral Laos would be in fact a part of a Chinese sphere of influence.** In 1962 the Chinese got direct permission from SVP to go ahead on roads in the north, and were doing so. However, when the North Vietnamese moved vigorously after the Accords, they tended to pre-empt the Chinese, and this may well have been part of their motive. Hanoi did act to establish itself firmly as the power effectively in control on the ground on the Communist side, and did so not only in the corridor area but to the north. ~~To the extent there was~~ THERE MAY HAVE BEEN a motive of pre-empting the

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*Warner, 246. Lartéguy, pp. _____, presents perhaps the most vivid picture of how this worked, as seen through French eyes. The characters in his account are drawn directly from the actual persons, with no composite element or dilution in those depicting SPV (_____ in the novel), Kaysone, or _____ (Names in the novel?).

**Warner, 269, puts this vividly, and cites a conversation with that shows the latter's view that Laos was, indeed, a direct neighbo China and thus bound to take it into account at all times. Warner a mentions on 270 that SPV reacted in hostile fashion to the idea of t Chinese taking over effective control in Laos.

Chinese in this, ~~this is a hindsight judgment, and was~~ (THOUGH IT WAS) not seen in this light within the USG at the time. On the contrary, the general ~~intelligence~~ AMERICAN judgment remained that Hanoi and Peking were working closely together in the Indochina area.

At any rate, by the spring of 1963 a new division in Laos had been created. By taking a basically correct position in support of the Accords of July 1962, the US had at least managed to place the onus on the North Vietnamese side for its major breaches of the corridor and withdrawal provisions and (FOR) its equally important refusal to let the tripartite political and military formula be really tried. In fact, objective observers could see readily that, as one put it,"Hanoi never let the 1962 Accords go into effect."* The American position came to seem much more appealing to SVP and others within Laos, and to the interested nations who had been sharply critical in 1960 and early 1961. This was no small gain. On the loss side, the US had been unable to devise any effective diplomatic or other step to keep Hanoi from tightening its hold in the corridor and with the PL. Just as the agreement was seen, and would surely be seen today, as the best deal possible in a bad situation, so the policy of holding to it and not trying to break off, or even to engage in fruitless denunciation of the other side, was about all that could have been done. The US had needed to undo the mistakes of the past, mistakes which had had much to do

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*Toye, ____; Schlesinger, ____.

with the PL having any local footing at all. Now the situation within Laos had been much improved. The place of Lao territory in relation to SVN had become crucial, and for practical purposes the two theaters of conflict became more and more directly linked after early 1963--as perhaps in Hanoi's thinking they had been all along.

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d. The time of hope in South Vietnam.

In South Vietnam, the story of American policy from August of 1962 to May of 1963 can be told briefly. Yet it must be recognized, at the same time, that this may have been a period of major importance in the underlying course of events there. It may well be that the EVENTS OF ~~first six months of~~ 1962 brought the Viet Cong and their supporters in Hanoi very close, not to outright defeat, but to a degree of downturn that could ~~in turn~~ have ~~undone their whole momentum and~~ forced them back to primarily political means for taking over the South. We do not know what Hanoi really thought during this period--but there have been enough flashes to suggest that for a time they were mightily discouraged. Perhaps the most striking of those flashes was that provided by the Communist correspondent, Wilfred Burchet, who has written frankly--and obviously from Hanoi's standpoint--that 1962 was "Diem's year." (cite)*

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*Please check.

Of the new elements which the US had contributed, the most important were surely much increased military mobility, primarily through the helicopter, and concrete help for the strategic hamlet concept and program, the original brainchild of Robert Thompson, but now adopted wholeheartedly by Americans at all levels. American-supplied air power and communications were also important though the use of air bombing remained very limited right through 1964.*

Even with these factors, however, the most critical element in the war remained the capacity and drive of the South Vietnamese themselves. Through its advisors, the US had in the end fallen back on the concept of "partnership," trusting that the individual influence of American military advisors and the over-all pattern of close cooperation could be used to exert an effect on Diem's political methods.

On an objective hindsight view, three crucial things happened progressively in late 1962 and early 1963. First, through new tactics and some additional weapons, the North Vietnamese found ways to limit the impact of the new South Vietnamese military assets. Secondly, the strategic hamlet program, despite its fundamental soundness, was made a weakness rather than a strength by its extension at far too rapid a pace into insecure areas. Thirdly, far from the "partnership" concept modifying the political control of the armed forces and other grave weaknesses that had made the Diem government increasingly less effective

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*SVN Air Strength.

~~it is now apparent that during this period~~ the Diem government went from bad to worse. In particular, Ngo Dinh Nhu became more and more ascendant, symbolizing with his wife the ever-tighter control of the family and its repressive practices, and personally ~~being~~ responsible for the politically motivated over-extension of the crucial strategic hamlet program.

This is what was actually happening in this period, as one looks back over it in hindsight. Some of the crucial trends were identified by critical newspaper observers at the time, at least in the sense that they were able to detect and report the cases where progress was not in fact being made, and where the government's claims were belied by what could be seen or learned by careful inquiry. These men did not get to the heart of the problem, but they did detect the symptoms of potential failure that were missed by American officials on the ground.

As one looks back on it, the problem was twofold. First, there was the question of how the US Government itself was informed, and what its officials truly believed. Secondly, there was the problem of dealing properly with the press so that a reasonably honest picture was presented.

In this 1962-63 period, both problems were in fact rendered almost impossible by the political condition of the Diem Government. Essentially, Diem and Nhu were operating a political machine, in which appointments were heavily determined by considerations of loyalty, and in some cases by the most direct family ties. The resulting apparatus

was not wholly inept: quite possibly, Diem's [COVERT] intelligence services were giving him and Nhu a reasonably accurate picture of the situation in many respects. What the [COVERT] official apparatus would not do, and by its nature could not do, was to report in any faintly honest manner what the situation really was or what was happening. As distinguished from a "closed" information network that may have been reasonably effective, Diem's "open" or "official" reporting system was by its very nature bound to convey a grossly optimistic and exaggerated picture of success and progress. And it was this "open" system on which the US advisors and their superiors depended, to a far greater degree than either senior officers in Saigon or the Washington agencies were yet aware.

Similarly, what the South Vietnamese Government wished to reveal to the press about what was going on was also drawn from its "open" reporting. No government readily reports unfavorable developments in war, and one has only to look at the record of the first World War to realize that the question of candor in wartime can be as much an Occidental as an Oriental problem. Nonetheless, it was certainly true that with its internal characteristics, its beleaguered situation, and its sensitivity to the novel frankness of American press comment, the Diem regime went to the greatest possible extremes in concealing the truth.

So much for the nature of the underlying problem so fully depicted in much vivid writing on the period, both by government officials

(Mecklin and Cooper) and by the reporters on the ground (Halberstam, Sheehan, etc.) It is a dismal story, requiring further reflection when one comes to assess the whole relationship between a beleaguered small nation and an assisting outside power (FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE.) What is perhaps most noteworthy is that at this stage of the war the problem was overwhelmingly South Vietnamese, and would have been hard to avoid even if the US had been building up a much more effective intelligence reporting mechanism. Alas, the US did not during this period make more than the most fragmentary efforts to improve its parallel reporting. The number of Vietnamese-speaking "province reporters" attached to the Embassy remained a literal handful, while the advisory system in the field likewise included almost no Vietnamese speakers. Moreover, in the right and necessary stress on establishing the advisory system on a firm footing, unquestionably a tendency was created to put diplomacy ahead of frankness, not only in efforts to suggest action but in reporting. If an American advisor contradicted his Vietnamese counterpart's account of what had happened, the discrepancy could hardly escape notice, and the advisory relationship could be prejudiced.

These were some of the factors that were central to the failure of the US Government to understand properly what was going on, and the ~~clumsy~~ related failure to deal adequately with the representatives of the press. What later came to be called the "credibility gap" had its origins in this 1962-63 period.

Turning now to the way the situation was seen in Washington, the feeling in the fall of 1962 had become one of "guarded optimism."

Internal estimates are well reflected in a public speech delivered by Roger Hilsman, then Director of the State Department's intelligence office, in September of 1962. Since it is perhaps the most comprehensive public statement available from any official, it is worth quoting at some length.

First, reflecting the now solidly established basic view of the struggle, Hilsman stressed the North Vietnamese responsibility:

> The Communists try to maintain the fiction that this is a civil war arising spontaneously from within South Vietnam. This is not true. The Communists in North Vietnam are directing this guerrilla movement. For years they have been sending in trained men to be the cadre for the Communist Viet Cong battalions. These trained men slip into South Vietnam over various overland infiltration routes that lead from North Vietnam through mountains and jungles and by junk landings along the South Vietnamese coastline. Let me make this clear: by using these infiltration routes and conducting a guerrilla war the Communists are committing aggression. The guerrilla movement in South Vietnam is directed from outside by an enemy nation. It is interference by military force in the affairs of another nation.

Second, Hilsman summarized the tactics being followed. In addition to the effort to strengthen Army and security forces and increase their mobility, he stressed the training of Montagnards to strike at the infiltration routes, noting that US Special Forces were now engaged in training for this purpose.* Above all, the key was the

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*The US effort with the Montagnards had in fact been undertaken from 1961 onward, but was transferred to the responsibility of the Special Forces in June of 1962. This and the associated posts in border and tribal areas were to become the area of Special Forces responsibility from then on.

strategic hamlet program: . . .

> When this program is completed, in addition to the protection afforded, the South Vietnamese should have a much improved structure that will permit information about the needs of the villagers to go up the ladder of government and services to meet their needs to come down. On the military side, it will provide a hedge-hog of defended villages--zones of defended villages which will act as a meat grinder when the Communist guerrillas venture into them. . . . If the Viet Cong come into the zone, they are very likely to run into a Civil Guard ambush. Even if the Viet Cong do not run into an ambush, sooner or later they will run out of food and be forced to attack a strategic village. Thus the guerrilla is forced to attack instead of being chased. The guerrilla is ambushed rather than ambushing.

Finally, Hilsman concluded:

> So far we have grounds for guarded optimism. . . . In sum, then, although the plans are just beginning to be implemented the results are encouraging. The defection rate of the Viet Cong has risen, and the recruitment rate has gone down. Just in the last two months there are areas of South Vietnam that are now safe that only last spring could not be entered without a company of armed guards. There is a long way to go. It took seven years to eliminate guerrillas in Malaya. It may take less than this in Vietnam, or it may take more, but I think we have reason to feel confident that in the end the South Vietnamese--with our help--will win.*

An October Honolulu meeting focussed heavily on a system of countryside reporting in terms of particular provinces and districts.** These, with rough measures of population in each, provided a basis

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*Hilsman cite - BM from DSB, I think.

**The number of these had grown since 1960 through progressive subdividing for the sake of more readily governable areas. In 1963 there were _____ provinces and _____ districts, in 1971, _____ and _____.

for the first time for assessing systematically what proportions of the population were under government control, what proportions under VC control, and what areas under neither. The difficulty, then, as later was twofold: to define "control" and to get objective statements from the local representatives. At this early stage, "control" was defined in crude over-all terms, and the reporting came through US military channels entirely, namely the province and district advisors, who in turn got their information largely from their Vietnamese counterparts.

Under this system, whose weaknesses were not then apparent, the judgment by the close of the year was that, of the 85% of the South Vietnamese population living in the countryside, roughly 47% were under government control, 9% under VC control, and 44% under neither.

A second major conundrum of the period was the measurement of VC strength and casualties. Full-time VC strength was by this time estimated at roughly 25,000, and this figure remained unchanged throughout the period. Yet the South Vietnamese continued to claim that they were inflicting losses that, if accurately estimated, should have drawn this figure down substantially. By the spring of 1963, the claim was 30,000 killed or removed from action![*] The answer was, in part, that the VC were able to recruit substantially--in itself an indication that they were still strong. Moreover, it seemed clear that the 25,000 failed to take into account the true VC strength, so that by the end

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[*]Schlesinger, ____.

of the period it was increasingly accepted that the VC included a very substantial element of what might be called "local forces"--that is, elements that stayed in place on a part-time basis, assisting when the tide of action flowed into their area. By the spring of 1963, the estimate of these "guerrillas" was 100,000. The combined total of 125,000 Viet Cong military forces was surely much nearer to the actual threat. With these forces, of course, the VC retained throughout the inestimable ~~guerrillas'~~ (OF THE GUERRILLA. THEY COULD STRIKE) advantages ~~for being able to strike~~ wherever they chose, and HAD ~~of having~~ no fixed point to defend, for their few headquarters and base areas were, then as later, placed in the most difficult possible terrain, the biggest being right up against the Cambodian border.

These were the difficulties in judgment that were increasingly felt by late 1962. While Hilsman's "guarded optimism" remained the keynote of the period, President Kennedy himself expressed his own judgment frankly at a news conference of December 12, 1962. At this time he said:

> "Well, we are putting in a major effort in Vietnam. As you know, we have about 10 or 11 times as many men there as we had a year ago. We've had a number of casualties. We put in an awful lot of equipment. We are going ahead with the strategic hamlet proposal. In some phases, the military program has been quite successful. There is great difficulty, however, in fighting a guerrilla war. You need 10 to 1 or 11 to 1, especially in terrain as difficult as South Vietnam. So 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 lighter."*

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*Cite. (BM.)

This was a sober and realistic judgment, in line with the year-end assessment of State Department intelligence, for one. Nonetheless, the [view] in the Saigon Mission was already becoming significantly more optimistic, and perhaps becoming affected by a human tendency to see progress and the prospect of eventual success in major actions to which one has given great effort.

As Chester Cooper vividly describes, the most striking action that brought out these latent contradictions of view was the military encounter in the village of Ap Bac, not far from Saigon, on January 2, 1963.* A substantial and well-equipped South Vietnamese force, from what was supposed to be a crack division, had a major VC force surrounded--and allowed it to escape through what appeared to be gross ineptitude and negligence.

The failure could not be concealed. The question in Washington was whether it was an isolated instance, or reflected deeper failures and a question about the whole trend of the war. After a flurry of concern, it seemed in the late winter and spring that it had been the former. Quite possibly, Diem and Nhu had reacted to the episode by putting on the kind of pressure that resulted in an even greater inflation in the optimism of reports from official South Vietnamese sources. On the other hand, many who had been skeptical at times in the past, notably Robert Thompson himself, were persuaded by the spring

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*Cooper cite (WPB).

of 1963 that genuine progress was being made. Others remained unpersuaded, and I vividly recall one in particular, an Australian advisor named Colonel Serong, who had become convinced the strategic hamlet program was grossly over-extended into insecure areas of the Delta, and who pressed his case strongly enough to get a hearing before the Special Group on Counter-insurgency in Washington in April of 1963.

Whom to believe in these contrasting and conflicting views? The Washington intelligence community in April took a balanced view. It judged the situation to be improving, but found no persuasive indications that the Communists had been grievously hurt. Despite progress, the situation remained fragile, decisive campaigns had yet to be fought, and for the long term it was simply not possible to project the future course of the war with any confidence.

Yet this was not the dominant note of the Honolulu action conference that convened under McNamara on May 6, 1963--the first since the previous October. On this occasion, General Harkins and his staff, together with Ambassador Nolting and the representatives of all the key Saigon agencies, presented a picture that was significantly more optimistic. The Saigon Mission did not really claim that the Communists were on the run, or that it could be predicted when the VC threat could be reduced to proportions the South Vietnamese government could handle. Yet the thrust of the May meeting was that the US contribution had been a great success, and that it had indeed set the South Vietnamese on

the way to handling the problem for themselves.

Thus, promptly on his return from Honolulu, McNamara set in motion an intensive planning process for the reduction of the US presence in South Vietnam. The job fell to me and to my office, and with the full cooperation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff a schedule was produced in the latter part of May and early June, providing for progressive withdrawals and a target date, the end of 1965, for total removal of American advisors.

Against this backdrop, President Kennedy gave an important press conference comment of May 22. He was asked about a statement by Ngo Dinh Nhu to the effect that the US ought to withdraw some or all of its troops from Vietnam. Although the Saigon Embassy had already assessed Nhu's statement as an outburst of pique rather than a serious proposal, the President took the occasion to say:

> "Yes, I hope we could--we would withdraw the troops, any number of troops, any time the government of South Vietnam would suggest it. The day after it was suggested, we would have some troops on their way home. That is number one.
>
> "Number two is: we are hopeful that the situation in South Vietnam would permit some withdrawal in any case by the end of the year, though we can't possibly make that judgment at the present time. There is still a long, hard struggle to go. We have seen what happened in Laos [referring to the April attacks by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese] which must inevitably have its effect upon South Vietnam, so that I couldn't say that today the situation is such that we could look for a brightening in the skies that would permit us to withdraw troops or begin to by the end of this year. But I would say, if requested to, we will do it immediately. As of today, we would hope we could begin to perhaps do it at the end of the year, but we couldn't make any final judgment at all until we see the course of the struggle in the next few months."*

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*Cite.

Kenneth O'Donnell, then an inner member of Kennedy's staff, has written that the President told him and Senator Mansfield at some time in May of 1963 that he expected to get the US out of Vietnam after the 1964 elections. In assessing this account one is inclined, as often in history, to apply the principle of Occam's razor: the simplest explanation is probably the right one, when, as here, the materials for a simple explanation are present. The O'Donnell interpretation, that President Kennedy intended to withdraw come what might, seems to me to run into grave difficulty WITH THE EVIDENCE, even in the spring of 1963. We shall see in Chapter 9 how President Kennedy dealt with the choices that confronted him by September of 1963. But even in this spring period—and in fact in response to a question concerning Senator Mansfield's report on Vietnam and Southeast Asia (referred to earlier in Chapter 7), Kennedy had said on March _____ in reference to Southeast Asia:

> ". . . unless you want to withdraw from the field and decide that it is in the national interest to permit key areas to collapse, I would think that it would be impossible to substantially change [our programs] particularly as we are in a very intensive struggle in those areas. So I think we ought to judge the economic burden [these programs place] 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."*

This press conference comment was not, of course, a definitive statement of the President's views on American national interests in

*BM GET CITE.

South Vietnam and Southeast Asia.. But its strength and scope must nonetheless stand out as difficult to reconcile with the suggestion that two months later he had in mind leaving South Vietnam "to collapse." What I at least must conclude is that the simple explanation is the right one--that the President did indeed look forward to being able to reduce and withdraw the US presence in Vietnam, that this was the result of the optimistic judgments and atmosphere of the period, and that in conversations with Senator Mansfield and O'Donnell he exercised the human and political privilege of presenting these plans in an independent and more categorical light than was his true intent.

At any rate, it is solid historical record that the judgment in the Executive Branch in May of 1963 was distinctly optimistic, by far the most so of any time in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. This fact in itself sets the stage for the tragic unfolding that took place between May and November of 1963.

Chapter 9: The Decline and Fall of Diem
(May to November 1963)

Precis

a. The summer of 1963 was a time of great success for the foreign policy of the Kennedy Administration. As the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis had appeared to indicate an end to major Soviet pressures, so the signing of the Test Ban Treaty in August of 1963 seemed to mark a high point in the possibilities of agreement, and possibly a turning point in the whole US/Soviet relationship. This certainly was the feeling of the time, not only in Washington but widely at home and abroad, and much credit for the changed atmosphere was properly given to President Kennedy himself. At American University in June, he had given as thoughtful and forthcoming a statement of American foreign policy as any since 1950, and this had appeared to have impact in Moscow.

At the same time, rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union had its negative sides for both. In the case of the US, French resentment of the Test Ban Treaty undoubtedly played a contributing part in General de Gaulle's subsequent efforts to cut the US down to size, with new emphasis on doing so in East Asia. The visible evidence of this was in de Gaulle's neutralization proposals of late August 1963. On the Russian side, the Test Ban Treaty greatly widened

and deepened the Sino-Soviet split, and in effect made it an outright breach. To be sure, the Chinese split with the Russians had all along been a matter of degree (as had the French disagreement with the US). Nonetheless, August 1963 was a major landmark in both trends.

Thus, on the wider picture of world power relationships, the period was tremendously important. Independently, the US had at just this time to adjust its Vietnam policy to ~~the~~ internal political crisis in South Vietnam. A new and major American decision was in the end made in the course of September and October, ~~but~~ for South Vietnamese reasons, not wider Soviet, Chinese, or French ones. The US did not act as it did in South Vietnam because it thought it had a freer hand there or in East Asia generally, or because it was setting out to face down the Chinese and force an East Asian settlement. Rather, the decision in South Vietnam followed the ~~simple~~ policy laid down in 1961--to do all within reason so that South Vietnam should not be taken over by external force.

~~Similarly,~~ Whereas the successive Vietnam decisions of 1961 had been handled in the shadow of apparently graver crises elsewhere, this was no longer the case in the summer or fall of 1963. True, the Moscow negotiations required careful preparation, immediate decisions over the short and intense period of negotiation, and then a massive and well-handled pulling together of the Executive Branch, notably the JCS, for the successful presentation of the Treaty to the Congress. This and the normal business of government was, as always, arduous and

time-consuming. But it was not of the same order as the crisis over Berlin had been in 1961, for example.

Thus, particularly after mid-August, the senior levels of the US Government from the President down were more preoccupied with Vietnam than at any previous time. An agonizing struggle over what to do about the Diem regime was conducted, as it were, with the full orchestra of government, and under the kleig lights of intense publicity. Infinitely more than in 1961, the late 1963 crisis dramatized the Vietnam situation and brought it home to the American people.

Within government, moreover, the "operating" aspects of the Vietnam situation, which had been dominant from December of 1961 to May of 1963, yielded over this period to the obvious "political" nature of the problem of disaffection with Diem. Thus, it was natural that the State Department should be more actively engaged, (WITH ~~particularly in light of the~~ strong views held by Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman. With the stronger State Department role came, from mid-August through mid-September at any rate, by far the gravest split in government agencies of any period in the whole Vietnam conflict. More than other equally critical episodes, this story cannot be told without getting deeply into personal viewpoints.

Finally, in early October, the President set a clear American policy—to dissociate from Diem and thus put pressure on him. There was a chance he might reform, a greater chance, accepted with eyes open, that the new American posture would encourage a coup. It was the

latter that happened.

The Early Stages

b. The triggering event for the crisis took place on May 8, 1963, in the streets of Hue, the traditional capital of Annam and for a time of all Vietnam. Located in the central area of Vietnam and the northern part of post-1954 South Vietnam, Hue and central Vietnam were the administrative preserve of Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, who governed the area to some extent separately from the rest of South Vietnam, although in close collaboration with Diem and under the latter's command. Can stood in Hue as the embodiment and symbol of authority and of the Ngo Dinh family. Moreover, ~~with~~ a fourth brother, Archbishop (Ngo Dinh) Thuc, also normally resident in Hue, ~~is~~ embodied in particular the family's Catholic faith--in a community where Vietnamese Buddhism was especially strong, highly organized, and articulate.

What happened in May 1963 was so simple as to seem almost planned. A traditional Catholic celebration on May ____ was allowed to proceed with the full encouragement of the local authorities and with the flying of Catholic banners, notwithstanding a well-established law providing that only the national flag could be displayed in this fashion. Then, on May 8, when the Buddhists turned out to celebrate the birthday of the Buddha himself, the law was suddenly invoked to call for the suppression of their banners. Feelings snapped, a crowd charged the police, the police fired--killing _____ and wounding _____ others.

In the underlying politics of South Vietnam, no issue could have been more inflammatory, or more calculated to arouse a wide reaction. Buddhist-Catholic antagonisms rested in part on purely religious differences. Much more important, they (REFLECTED) the whole structure and base of the Diem regime, starting with its disproportionate reliance on Catholics as senior officials, extending to the bias that had given Catholics preferred positions and educational opportunities for generations under the French, and thus arriving in the end at the broadest kind of social division. Buddhist protest in modern Vietnam was not new, and there were French "old hands" to remark that it had happened before. This time the roots of protest were deeper and more widespread than was at first realized.

Through May and early June, Buddhist groups pressed a series of demands on the government, to which Diem and Nhu responded, although in what appeared a very limited fashion. In these three weeks, the situation did not seem grave enough to prevent Ambassador Nolting from proceeding with his plans to take a month's leave in the Mediterranean, before coming back to complete his tour of duty by September. His deputy, William Trueheart, thus became Charge d'Affaires.

By early June, however, the depth of the Buddhist grievances was evident, and Trueheart on instructions took a very strong line with Diem. American journalists in Saigon were now writing articles extremely critical of the Diem regime and favorable to the Buddhist side. These in turn had the visible effect of stiffening Diem and Nhu, and tending

further to polarize the situation.

On June (11), a well-known Buddhist bonze resorted to a time-honored Buddhist protest action, dousing himself with gasoline and then permitting himself to be burned to death in the main square of Saigon. The episode was a shocking one, and received intense worldwide publicity. This it might have done in any case, but it was assisted by the astute consciousness of the power of the press that had developed among some of the Buddhist leaders.

Momentarily, the effect appeared to be salutary, for on June 16 the Diem regime made a 5-point agreement with the Buddhist leaders. Almost at once, however, flaws developed, and by early July the atmosphere was becoming steadily more bitter on both sides.

Through May and June, neither Trueheart in Saigon nor President Kennedy in Washington considered a basic change in the US posture toward Diem. Others such as Hilsman had apparently given thought to the question as far back as March (cite Keyes Beech), and the question was clearly implicit in the tone of press comment from Saigon. But it was not yet to the fore as the President focussed on the question of a successor to Nolting. On June 27, he announced the appointment of Henry Cabot Lodge, Republican vice-presidential candidate in 1960, and before that United States Senator and Ambassador to the United Nations.

According to those who were consulted in the process of selection, the President's choice reflected primarily his confidence in Lodge's

integrity, patriotism, and basic loyalty to any Administration he might serve. Apparently, the hint that Lodge might be available had arisen from the fact that in 1962 he had worked on Vietnam while at the Pentagon on active duty as a reserve officer and then in 1963 had requested duty in Vietnam itself (Hilsman, 478). He and the President were old political adversaries, in 1952 when Kennedy had nosed out Lodge for a Senate seat from Massachusetts and again in 1960. Whatever he thought of Lodge as an opponent, the President had emerged from these encounters with high respect for him as a man devoted to his country. In stature and capacity, he would surely be the man in charge in Saigon.*

Into the bargain, it must ~~of course~~ have been obvious that the enlisting of a prominent Republican from the moderate wing of that Party could be an immense political help if the handling of Vietnam became an issue in the campaign of the fall of 1964. Up to this point, Vietnam had not been a partisan or divisive issue, and the political atmosphere was hardly comparable to the embattled summer of 1940 before the Second World War, when President Roosevelt had reached out to progressive Republicans by appointing Henry L. Stimson and Frank Knox to his Cabinet. But there must have been some desire to forestall a political fight over Vietnam in 1964, and for this the Lodge appointment was admirably suited.

Yet the choice was not, it may be noted, at all suited to any

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*Hilsman, _____, stresses this to a degree that implies JFK was dissatisfied with Nolting's methods. Of this I have no evidence.

plan to withdraw and let South Vietnam go. Lodge felt strongly that the US must pull South Vietnam through at almost any cost, and had been a full and vocal supporter of American policy there since 1954.

By early July, South Vietnam had become a major subject in White House discussions between the President and his senior State Department and White House advisors. Unfortunately, through most such political discussions of the early summer, the Defense Department, the JCS, and CIA were not involved, or truly aware of how acute the crisis seemed to Harriman, Hilsman, and by this time the President and Lodge. In at least one meeting of early July, the possibility that there might be a spontaneous coup was raised, although there was no voice at this stage in favor of an active US role in ousting Diem. The upshot was that Nolting, having returned from his leave, was sent back to Saigon with instructions to use his full personal credit and persuasive powers to get Diem to make major concessions to the Buddhists and take realistic measures to overcome their hostility.

Returning to Saigon on July (11), Nolting in a series of meetings put across this view, but with only limited action by Diem as a result. Unfortunately, Nolting also made a public comment that he had personally never seen evidence of religious persecution in South Vietnam. Whether or not "persecution" was the right word to describe the subtle complex of class distinction and discrimination that did exist, the statement identified him in South Vietnamese eyes with the government, and weakened his capacity to persuade. (Hilsman, 480).

As July went on, the same error was being committed in the opposite direction in Washington. Senior State Department officials made no bones of their intensively negative views toward Diem, in terms that could easily be taken to foreshadow an American policy to unseat him. The press and private reports from Washington must have carried this news to an already suspicious Nhu and Diem in Saigon, along with the implication that Lodge would be coming as Ambassador in order to carry out the new policy.*

August Explosion

c. Such was the situation on the American side as August began. The atmosphere was bitter and intense in Saigon. In the course of his farewell calls, Nolting did manage to extract a promise from Diem that he would publicly repudiate Madame Nhu's incendiary denunciations of the Buddhists.** With this in hand, the outgoing Ambassador departed on August 15 still feeling that the crisis should work itself out. On his way home, Nolting stopped in Honolulu to confer with Lodge, before he arrived in Saigon on August 22.

At this precise point, the Saigon Government acted again. On the night of August 21-22, Army units invaded the main pagodas of Saigon

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*Citations if possible.

**Footnote: Hilsman, 481, says there were also assurances there would be no crackdown. This was not expressly stated, but was certainly implicit.

arresting and injuring large numbers of bonzes and others present, and inflicting much physical damage. It was an act well calculated to destroy any hope of reconciliation with the Buddhists, and the timing suggested strongly that it was designed to present the Americans in general, and Lodge in particular, with a fait accompli. Diem and Nhu meant to rule, by any degree of force necessary, and nothing would move them.*

Within the American Government, the reaction was initially one of shock and outrage. An early broadcast by the Voice of America conveyed the impression that the raid on the pagodas had been the work of the regular army. However, suspicion soon hardened into certainty that the invading forces had been those of one Colonel Tung, which were Special Forces designed for (COMBAT) work but actually used for local security. Tung's men came under the direct orders of Nhu, and (alas) were supported directly by both US Military Assistance funds and CIA. Their use was insult added to injury.

Almost at once on his arrival in Saigon, Lodge cabled Washington in a tone of outrage, suggesting that the situation had become impossible, and that the only recourse was to get rid of the Nhus in some fashion.

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*It was at this point that the Buddhist bonze, Thic Tri Quang, took refuge in the American Embassy. The decision to keep him there, in effect granting political asylum, was based on the belief that he would simply be killed if released. Nonetheless, similar considerations might apply in many such cases over the years in American Embassies abroad. Unquestionably, this particular decision smacked in itself of an abnormal posture and arguably of political interference.

Specifically, he reported that officers in the regular Army, particularly outraged at the attempt to identify the Army as the instigator of the pagoda raids, had approached an American contact and asked what the American reaction would be if they served an ultimatum on Diem to get rid of the Nhus, with the implication that if Diem refused to comply, they would then execute a coup to take over the government. Lodge asked for instructions on a reply to this sounding.

On the evening of Saturday, August 24, a cable went from Washington that analyzed a host of possible contingencies, but that essentially was a green light to Lodge to work with any promising group of Army generals to promote the elimination of the Nhus and to take over the government, if required. The cable reflected the strongly-held views of Harriman and Hilsman in particular. It (was) checked fully with George Ball, and then by phone with the President, who was at his summer home in Hyannisport, Massachusetts, for the weekend. There was, and remains today, dispute as to whether Acting Secretary Gilpatric in Defense or General Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were fully consulted.*

By Monday, the 26th, when McNamara and Rusk returned to Washington, feeling was intense and divided. The President met with his senior advisors virtually every day of that week, for a series of discussions centered on the question of displacing the Nhus or Diem. The exchanges

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*Hilsman, 483-494, is a full treatment of this cable, as seen through his eyes.

with Lodge were constant, and by the end of the week Lodge had concluded that the group of generals was neither sufficiently strong nor sufficiently cohesive to attempt any action. Accordingly, on August 31 he was given instructions to back off. The idea of a coup was put on one side, and the consensus of a high-level meeting on that Saturday, chaired in the President's absence by Vice President Johnson, was that the US must continue to support Vietnam until the war was successfully concluded, and that the US would not sponsor a coup.* WHAT (ELSE) / 70 DO ABOUT DIEM WAS LEFT ~~[illegible]~~ UNDECIDED.

September Resolution

d. In the first two weeks of September, the debate continued to rage back and forth in Washington, while in Saigon the Diem regime invaded the universities and schools and arrested large numbers of students, including the sons of many prominent members of the government itself.

Early in this period it was decided to send senior staff experts from Washington to examine the situation, and the choice fell on Marine Major General Victor Krulak of the Joint Staff, and Joseph Mendenhall of the State Department. Both flew to Saigon, and spent four days getting appraisals and impressions from a wide variety of sources, Krulak mostly from military men in the field, Mendenhall from civilians in the cities. Naturally enough, when the two men returned, their

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*Cite Kaltenberg, RFK.

reports conveyed diametrically opposed impressions--Krulak's that the political crisis was a flash in the pan and that all was going well in the countryside with little impact, and Mendenhall's that the crisis went to the roots of the Diem regime's capacity to survive, to govern effectively, and to take on any kind of struggle against the Viet Cong. A meeting of September 10, at which the two men reported and others fresh from Saigon joined in, was a low point in the Kennedy Administration, and broke up in total disagreement and ~~on a note of some~~ acrimony.

In the meantime, President Kennedy had expressed himself on the crisis at much greater length than might otherwise have been the case, through the accident that he was the inaugural guest for both NBC and CBS in their initiation of news broadcasts on a novel and broader format. First with Walter Cronkite of CBS and then with Messrs. Huntley and Brinkley of NBC, the President responded at great length to questions on the subject of Vietnam.

With Cronkite, on September 2, the President was extremely critical of the "repressions against the Buddhists," suggested changes in policy and "perhaps in personnel," and concluded that if the government did not make these changes the chances of winning the war would not be very good. He said:

> "Our best judgment is that he [Diem] can't be successful on this basis. We hope that he comes to see that, but in the final analysis, it is the people and the government itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear, but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. . . . this is a very important struggle even though it is far away."

And with Huntley and Brinkley, on September 9, the President confessed frankly to the "ambivalence" of "wanting to protect the area against Communists" and at the same time having "to deal with the government there." The note he struck was the need for patience and persistence. In addition, the President was more specific in this interview than at any other time in his Administration on the nature of the stakes and US national interest in Vietnam. The following exchange took place:

> "Mr. Brinkley: Mr. President, have you had any reason to doubt this so-called 'domino theory,' that if South Viet-Nam falls, the rest of southeast Asia will go behind it?"
>
> "The President: No, I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Viet-Nam 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."

And, slightly later:

> "We can't make the world over, but we can influence the world. The fact of the matter is that with the assistance of the United States, SEATO, southeast Asia and indeed all of Asia has been maintained independent against a powerful force, the Chinese Communists. What I am concerned about is that Americans will get impatient and say because

they don't like the government in Saigon, that we should withdraw. That only makes it easy for the Communists. I think we should stay. We should use our influence in as effective a way as we can, but we should not withdraw." *

* ~~Salinger~~

Taken together, these two revealing news conferences show clearly the way the President's mind was working during the crisis. So far as I can learn from others present in the discussions of these two weeks, what the President said in public mirrored almost exactly the argument raging within his Administration. The flat-footed rejection of withdrawal as a possible US course seems from the record to be totally in accord with the views of all his principal advisors. Only at one meeting, and then only peripherally, was a question raised whether--if Diem was hopeless and yet the alternatives equally unpromising--there was any real hope in continuing. The suggestion appears to have been quickly dismissed, and does not recur on the available record right through September and October.

In the same way, the record shows no thought given in this period to negotiation, either with Hanoi or, if Diem was ousted, between a new Saigon government and non-Communist elements in the NLF. In a wider sphere, General de Gaulle had chosen the last week in August to launch the idea of a "neutralization" of all of Indochina and eventually of all Southeast Asia. Whether the General was moved to act at that precise moment by the political turmoil in Saigon seems doubtful. Probably his motives were broader, tinged with resentment of the Nuclear Test Ban

RH-PP CITATION. ALSO WPB TO CHECK SALINGER.

Treaty but aimed to lay the foundation for a new French role in Southeast Asia. In any event, it seemed to all Americans in government that North Vietnam would never accept or live by neutrality. Hence, the proposal was one-sided at best, and at worst a mere cover for North Vietnamese control in Indochina and for the extension of Chinese influence or control elsewhere in the area. In the Cronkite interview of September 2, (WAS ASKED ABOUT THE DEGAULLE STATEMENT. HE) President Kennedy expressed himself in a tone of polite exasperation, concluding that the US would go on meeting its responsibilities even with no help from France:

> "It doesn't do any good to say 'Well, why don't we all just go home and leave the world to those who are our enemies.'"*

Thus, the President and his advisors saw themselves facing immensely difficult problems of practical judgment, in the focus of South Vietnam alone. Was the Diem regime, as it stood, on a hopeless course? Could the Nhus conceivably be removed? Could Diem somehow be persuaded through quiet US pressures to make basic changes for the better? If not, should the US tacitly or specifically make clear its support for a change of government?

All these questions were completely up in the air by September 15. Even "fact-finding" had been no help, and the confusion was total--compounded by this time by "leaks" from within the government concerning

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*Cite Newhouse book.

**Kennedy Public Papers, _____.

particularly differences of view on the August 24 cable. In the press, the battle lines were being drawn with a vengeance, between the "Dump Diem" sentiments of Harriman and Hilsman in particular, and the opposed views of the JCS and CIA. Such stories were, alas, all too well founded. The need was acute and dual: to determine what the policy should be, and in the process to pull the government together behind it.

In the struggle, Secretaries Rusk and McNamara had preserved a high degree of detachment and objectivity. The President now determined that McNamara should head a broad team, to go to Saigon and to bring back both findings and a policy for his approval. Because of the critical military role, General Taylor was named to accompany McNamara, and an ostensible military focus was thus given to the visit to provide at least a faint screen of its true purpose. Nonetheless, the New York Times and others readily sensed that the essential purpose was political.*

At this point, I personally became much more deeply involved. It chanced that I was abroad from mid-August through mid-September, for three weeks of vacation (the only one (OF THAT LENGTH) in eight years of appointive service in government) and a week of visiting military assistance programs in Europe. Thus, I was in the a~~lmost minute~~ (SMALL) category of those who had not become emotionally involved in the intense personal differences of the previous month. McNamara asked me to be his chief of staff on the mission, to work with him in the selection of the team,

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*Cooper.

and to take the lead in framing a group report. In the end, other key members of the team included William H. Sullivan from the State Department, then serving as Governor Harriman's assistant; Michael Forrestal of the White House staff; and William Colby of CIA.* Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and Colonel Sidney Berry of McNamara's personal staff, were other important members.

The McNamara-Taylor mission, as it was called, was perhaps the most intense (ten) days of work in my whole experience. It is easy to caricature the effectiveness of such visiting operations, and it was my later experience that visits of 2-3 days were far too superficial to be of any use at all--and could be badly misleading. The visit of September 1963 was, however, different and left indelible impressions. In my own case, I became aware for the first time of how immensely diverse the war was in itself--how different from one province to another, and above all how dependent on local leadership and teamwork. In particular, the low state of affairs in several provinces, notably Long An near Saigon, was evident. I was left, as I think McNamara was, with a lasting skepticism of the ability of any man, however honest, to interpret accurately what was going on. It was just too diffuse, and too much that was critical took place below the surface.

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*Colby was a CIA veteran of many years, a graduate of the Columbia Law School, and a highly sophisticated and practical man. He was later to serve with distinction in the pacification program, as deputy to Robert Komer from 1967 to the fall of 1968, and in charge of it from that time until _____.

Nonetheless, the US military family under General Harkins were honestly convinced that the war was going well, and their judgment could not lightly be rejected. Nor certainly in a week could one come confidently to an opposite conclusion.*

Far more critical, however, was the judgment of the political situation. Here the legwork fell principally to the civilian members of the team, and an impressive array of reports was compiled by Sullivan, Forrestal, and Colby. In addition, McNamara found time between field trips to hold two crucial conversations, which in my judgment were decisive in forming his final opinion. His two sources, concealed under pseudonyms at the time and in my surviving notes, were a very senior South Vietnamese government official and a distinguished foreign observer of European nationality. Both had been strong and loyal supporters of Diem; both had concluded that he and the Nhus no longer commanded adequate support to govern effectively. In particular, both underscored that the extremely small group of trained men in South Vietnam had become so drastically alienated in the previous two months that there was simply no hope that Diem could hold together a reasonable administration.

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, Trueheart, and most (but not all) of the Embassy staff. This

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*Here refute Hilsman that differences of view on how the war was going had anything to do with differences in strategy.

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 conclusion. What Diem and Nhu were doing was not merely repugnant, but seemed calculated to end in chaos.

Hence, the McNamara group arrived at a series of concrete recommendations designed to dissociate the US from Diem and to put substantial pressure on him. Already in early September, Lodge had been directed not to go ahead on economic aid negotiations for 1964, and to withhold further import authorizations under the so-called Commodity Import Program (CIP).* This decision was now to be explained quietly to the South Vietnamese as a deliberate action by the Executive Branch, not simply a reflection of the Congressional sentiment which had by this time suspended consideration of further economic assistance appropriations for South Vietnam.

In addition, and also as a matter of policy, the US should suspend final approval of two pending AID loans for a waterworks and electric power project. Most important of all, Ambassador Lodge was to inform Diem that US support for Colonel Tung's forces would be cut off unless

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*Under this program, the US financed the import of necessary goods, which were then sold by the government. The result was to generate piaster support for the South Vietnamese defense budget, while the goods served to soak up inflationary pressures. The time lag from negotiation to shipment and arrival was ~~of course~~ such that the program tended to develop a stockpile and pipeline, ~~such that~~ THUS a lag in negotiation had no immediate practical effect, FOR A MONTH OR TWO AT LEAST.

these were promptly assigned to regular military control and sent to the field.

Finally, the US Mission in Saigon should in general take a purely "correct"posture, with the Ambassador in particular leaving any initiative to Diem.

This was a limited course of pressures, which in the eyes of McNamara's group might be maintained for a period of 2-4 months without seriously affecting the war effort. During this time the US should keep the situation under close review.

Necessarily, the final McNamara report addressed itself specifically to the question of a possible coup. The group rejected active US sponsorship of a coup, but equally recognized that the tenor of its recommendations was anything but a path of "reconciliation" with Diem. The policy of "selective pressures" inevitably let stand the existing impression that the US would not be adverse to a change of government. Yet, after the experience with the generals in August, a spontaneous coup was thought unlikely, at least for some time.

As to the effect of a change of regime, if it came, the group concluded, all too prophetically, that there was only a 50-50 chance that a replacement regime would be better. Only the military could effectively take power, and it was entirely possible that a military regime would tend to become as authoritarian and corrupt as the Diem regime. Yet, the tenor of the report conveys, this was still a better prospect than what appeared likely under Diem and the Nhus as they

were operating.

Overwhelmingly, the basis of these crucial political judgments was the repression of the Diem regime and its loss of elite support, both in the military and civilian circles. As to countryside reaction, the group was not able to discern clearly what the impact of the Buddhist-student political crisis really was. "Politics" in South Vietnam seemed, then as later, largely confined to the cities and to a small percentage of the population.

In trying to weigh the merits of the Diem regime versus a replacement, nothing hinged on either the degree of anti-Communist sentiment or the desire to carry on the war. Both Diem and any likely military successors appeared alike in these respects; the only area of doubt concerned Nhu, who had in early September floated reports that he was negotiating in some fashion directly with North Vietnam. These had not been taken seriously in either Saigon or Washington before the McNamara visit. The judgment was shared by his group after the investigations, and the reports were regarded merely as an indicator of the degree of irrational behavior of which Nhu might personally be capable. In brief, none of the possible contestants for power in Saigon seemed likely to call off the war or seek peace on North Vietnamese terms.

The above summary covers the high points of a political discussion that occupied more than half of the bulky 10,000-word report that Secretary McNamara conveyed to the President immediately upon his return in the early morning of October 2. In the 27-hour flight across

the Pacific from Saigon, he had slept no more than six hours, and I only two. The report of the group was worked and re-worked, on the express understanding that it should reflect the views of all the members except as specifically noted. The intensive drafting process was an unforgettable experience--in hindsight, it was also a very poor way to conduct the top business of the US Government. Neither draftsmanship nor judgment is likely to be at its best under such working conditions. The haste reflected the almost desperate urgency at which the President sought to resolve the policy issues and the differences in his Administration.

In the process of review across the Pacific, little time was spent on the military sections. In effect, the picture presented by the report, while mixed, was optimistic concerning the northern and central areas of South Vietnam, but the reverse about the Delta. All through the Saigon briefings and in the field, the question at the top of McNamara's mind had been the testing of the hypothesis dating from May: Could the US look forward to a reduction in its advisory presence, and to the withdrawal of at least the bulk of its military advisors by the end of 1965? The insistence on this question shows the degree to which the planning of May had ~~taken root, and~~ survived intervening events.

Despite the mixed nature of the specific elements in the final report, the answer to this question was a qualified affirmative. Even though the Viet Cong effort had not been seriously reduced in the

aggregate, and the VC remained capable of offensive action, it seemed that the government was both extending its control and expanding its military capacity. The combined trends were thought to mean that the insurgency could be reduced to proportions manageable by South Vietnamese national security forces, without US military forces, by the end of 1965. It was in this sense that McNamara and Taylor concluded that "the US part of the task" could be completed by that date. It was not, strictly speaking, a prediction of "victory" by that time, but only that the US role would no longer be needed. Indeed, the report also noted the importance of getting US advisors out as quickly as possible, since their retention beyond the time they were really needed would impair the independence and development of initiative on the part of the South Vietnamese. McNamara and Taylor concluded that the first installment of the plans set up in the spring, calling for the withdrawal of 1,000 US advisory personnel by the end of 1963, could be carried out.

Thus ran essential elements of the military judgment.

In the report itself, they were further qualified by the specific assumption that the political situation did not reach the point of significantly impeding the military effort. On this point, the political sections of the report had concluded that the political crisis was not doing so, but had equally noted that it could well do so in the future.

Decision

e. On McNamara's return, he met at once with President Kennedy, and it must have been decided at that first meeting both that the recommendations should be approved and that a public statement was required that very afternoon of Wednesday, October 2. In the spurious and dangerous clarity of mind that afflicts the traveler over such distances, the draft release was argued back and forth during the day. In the late afternoon the President met with all his senior advisors and formally approved the report. The public result was a White House release stating McNamara's and Taylor's judgment that

> " . . . the major part of the US military task can be completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of US training personnel."

To this was joined a somber statement that the political situation in South Vietnam "remains deeply serious" and that continued repressive actions could affect the military situation in the future.*

This October 2 statement was to become a landmark example of the optimism of the government and of Secretary McNamara personally. My recollection is as full as I can make it on how the situation came to be so judged, and above all so stated. Within the McNamara group, this portion of the report had been treated substantially as a military matter, in which the decisive voice should be that of those who had

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*Cite text (BM).

focussed entirely on military aspects during the visit. In essence, all the members of the group would probably have agreed with the general judgment of trends, if it could have been assumed that the political situation would right itself. Yet the thrust of the political section of the report was that such a righting was unlikely, and that on the contrary there was a very serious prospect that an unreformed Diem would bring on chaos or an unpredictable change of regime.

In short, as I look at the report and release today, there is a clear internal inconsistency that I myself missed in the flight across the Pacific, that the immediate readers of the report in Washington did not see or perhaps feel confident enough to highlight, and that simply got through in the stress and pressure of the time. If the medical profession needs examples of the effect on judgment of long flights across twelve hours of time zones, or of the workings of the mind immediately after such trips, I would myself offer the military conclusion of the McNamara-Taylor report of October 2, and above all the press release resulting from it, as a first exhibit. The words of the release on the military situation were extraordinarily unwise--and extraordinarily haunting for the future.*

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*Cooper, 216, tells a story of the release suggesting that by the end of that afternoon not only he but McGeorge Bundy and I had developed reservations on the "end of 1965" sentence. I have no recollection of either episode or attitude, but my notes do make clear that the sentence was regarded as settled all through the day, after the meeting between McNamara and the President in the morning.

This being said, McNamara and his group did accomplish the major tasks President Kennedy had given them. They brought back a coherent policy for dealing with Diem, and they pulled the government together. The measured program of political pressures won instant support from those who had been anti-Diem, while the somber picture of the political situation went far to persuade those of contrary mind that Diem really was in desperately bad shape. The report was not a spurious compromise, and the course of action seemed to all--as indeed it does to me in hindsight--the least bad of what had by then become desperate alternatives.

I dwell at this length on the McNamara-Taylor report because it was in fact decisive for the way the American Government conducted itself in the final phases of the political crisis. It has been said by some that the McNamara expedition was purely a device by President Kennedy to bring around those who did not agree with the idea of dissociating the US from Diem. This most emphatically was not my impression at the time. On the contrary, McNamara spoke to the group in the strongest possible terms about the need for objectivity and for independent expressions by each member. Had the group, or even any substantial minority of it, concluded that we could somehow "muddle through" with Diem, President Kennedy himself would probably have been favorably inclined. For practical purposes, the fundamental policy was made during the McNamara-Taylor visit.

What President Kennedy himself thought as he gave the signal to go further into the rapids can only be guessed: my hunch is that he

was skeptical, and acting in the spirit of a good poker player who sees little chance of winning with what he has, and hence draws new cards--not with hope, or exultation, but simply as a practical better bet.

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And Denouement

f. In fact, military elements in Saigon were very much nearer to a coup than the McNamara-Taylor report had judged. The report had underestimated both the effect of Lodge's earlier actions and, quite possibly, the impact of the McNamara group's own behavior and inquiries. These, together with the somber tone of the White House press statement of October 2, must have suggested that the US would not only not oppose a change in government, but actually desired one.

Still, the McNamara group supposed (ON THE BASIS OF THE AUGUST EXPERIENCE) that the generals were fragmented and deterred by Diem's and Nhu's security measures. In fact, they were pulling themselves together rapidly. This became apparent as early as October 5, when the channel of contact that had been opened up in August was renewed on the initiative of the generals. In response to this initial inquiry, Washington directed that a message be sent back through the same channel, saying simply that the US would support any South Vietnamese government that could govern effectively and that would continue the struggle against the VC. The meaning was clear.

Yet neither then, nor at any other time, did any US representative, of any agency, explicitly urge a coup, or participate directly or indirectly in the planning of such action. Whatever one may say of the US posture in the period, this was not a case where the CIA or any separate agency of the US instigated or assisted the overthrow of an existing government. What the US did was done as a matter of conscious and deliberate basic posture, not specific covert action.

From then until about October 22, the contacts were sporadic and inconclusive. In Washington an inter-agency group deliberated intensively as to whether the CIP cutoff could be maintained beyond about two months, and what steps could be taken if by then Diem had shown no signs of change. In these days, ~~however,~~ the US not only carried through the further cutoff of funding support for Colonel Tung's Special Forces, but took the important symbolic action of withdrawing the CIA chief in Saigon, John Richardson. This was no personal reflection on Richardson, who had throughout carried out missions and orders as he had been instructed. He had, however, become a symbol of past US close association with Nhu, and his departure was inevitably taken to mean that the US change of posture went deep. ~~indeed~~. If the light to the generals had been orange on October 2, it must have seemed green by October 20.

The last ten days of October were hectic and confused in both Saigon and Washington. Plot and counter-plot were taking place in Saigon and being identified with substantial accuracy to Washington. There was no time to think of the wider implications of a coup or

what should be done to make it turn the basic situation for the better. The overwhelming preoccupation was whether a coup attempt might produce a terrible bloodbath and an immediate denouement for the whole effort to support the independence of South Vietnam. This question was debated back and forth with Lodge, in an atmosphere made more difficult by the clear personal reservations of General Harkins, concerning even the degree of encouragement to a coup that had been given to the generals.

On October 29, the Saigon contacts revealed that the generals expected to move within the next few days. In response to pointed inquiries arising from Washington's bloodbath fears, the generals ~~did~~ indicated their confidence that they would hold a decisive balance of force in the Saigon area. To the very last they declined to disclose their detailed plans, or to indicate exact timing, BY DAY OR HOUR.

In these last days of October, the situation was further complicated by Diem's inviting Lodge, on October 27, to go with him to the secluded resort of Dalat, for the weekend of November 2-3. It was the first break in the total absence of communication between the two for many weeks, and obviously meant that Diem wished to offer something by way of change or accommodation to the points Lodge had made forcefully to him in September. If there had been a clear indication of what the offer would be, perhaps it could still have affected the situation. But it was nebulous, and in any event the planning of the generals had passed beyond the point where Lodge could ask them to

delay and take grave risks of betrayal and death.

The twin events did cause Lodge to postpone plans for a quick visit to Washington. He was at his post in Saigon on November 1, and accompanied the Pacific Commander, Admiral Felt, when he paid a long call on Diem concluding at 1 in the afternoon. As Felt was boarding his plane at the airport, the Vietnamese generals informed a senior member of Harkins' staff that they were acting.

The story of the coup has been told often and vividly. Through the last-minute switch of General Ton That Dinh, commander of the corps area that included Saigon, the generals did indeed have local superiority--as well as the key individual on whom Nhu had counted for a counter-coup. The palace was quickly surrounded, and Diem and Nhu escaped from it during the night. By the early morning of November 2, the result was clear, and popular rejoicing swept the streets of Saigon.

Then came the (KILLING) ~~death~~ of Diem and Nhu, picked up at a hideout in the Cholon section of Saigon and shot while riding in the truck that was taking them to coup headquarters. To this day, the ultimate responsibility for the killings remains obscure. The Major in charge of the truck was himself slain in mysterious circumstances early in 1964, so that it has never been possible to probe whether, as the coup generals at once put out, it was his personal act of vengeance for some special wrong. At any rate, the generals did disavow the act, while President Kennedy at once deplored it with obvious feeling. All through the US contacts with the generals, and

in all American deliberations, it had been stressed that any coup should avoid this particular act if it was humanly possible to do so. It was a dark and unnecessary blot on the whole coup action.

So an era ended. For the moment Ambassador Lodge was a hero in Saigon. His role in creating a climate for the overthrow of Diem had been fully noted, and perhaps in many quarters exaggerated into a direct and positive participation in the coup. What he and the US had in fact done has been fully described in this chapter. Deliberately and with a weighing of all factors, the US had indeed incurred a heavy responsibility in the political affairs of South Vietnam.

The events of the fall of 1963 cast a shadow backward: should the US have dissociated itself from Diem sooner, in 1961, or in 1960, or in 1959 even? Might the crisis from May of 1963 onward have been handled more quietly and effectively so that a changed Diem emerged? These hindsight speculations are one way the mind is bound to move. In the other direction, forward from November of 1963, the shadow of Diem's fall was a deepening of the whole US role and commitment in South Vietnam.

Charles 10 + 11 are only in outline - our low
Asia looked at the start of 1964 - Indonesia, Chinese