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THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE DURING THE ADMINISTRATION
OF PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON

NOVEMBER 1963 - JANUARY 1969

VOLUME I

ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY

[Chapter VIII]

PART VII

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VIII. VIET-NAM

A. INTRODUCTION

Viet-Nam was the center of US Asian policy throughout the Johnson Administration. Our commitment there brought to focus our general aim of seeking a stable, free world. The role of the Department of State in implementing the Administration's aims in this area is set forth below.

1. The Situation in November 1963

November 1, 1963, saw the culmination of a long period of rising political tension in South Viet-Nam. On that date the majority of the South Vietnamese military forces joined in a coup which overthrew the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, who had led the infant nation first as its Prime Minister and then as President since Viet-Nam was

partitioned in 1954. The political opposition to Diem in the summer of 1963 had been organized and led by a group of militant Buddhists who took umbrage at Diem's apparent favoritism toward his Catholic co-religionists. An incident in Hue in May of 1963 centering on the issue of whether the Buddhists would be allowed to display their flag on Buddha's birthday was the spark which ignited the struggle. As the confrontation progressed, the anti-Diem movement began to attract many who were disgruntled with Diem's authoritarian rule and who felt that a more broadly-based regime was needed if popular support for the effort against the communist-led insurgency was to be maintained.

As the intense political struggle developed during the summer and fall of 1963 there was growing concern that it would have an adverse effect on the conduct of counter-insurgency operations. The November 1 coup produced a temporarily electrifying effect on most of the population, but the euphoria quickly wore off as it became apparent that the generals who overthrew the old regime had no experience

in governing and very little notion of how to go about setting up an effective new government.

In the immediate wake of the coup the US Government had determined that its commitment to support the South Vietnamese still stood and we had given our pledge to the new government headed by General Duong Van Minh to continue our economic and military assistance. Our objective, as before, was to help South Viet-Nam acquire the necessary political, economic and military strength to enable it to deal with the insurgency with its own human resources. Our most pressing problem as the Johnson Administration took office was to assist the new regime in organizing itself for the staggering tasks of rebuilding a firm political foundation and regaining the initiative on the battlefield.

2. The Johnson Administration's View of the Nature of Our Commitment in Viet-Nam

President Johnson reconfirmed our commitment to Viet-Nam in his remarks before a Joint Session of Congress on November 27, 1963 in the following words:

Under John Kennedy's leadership, this nation has demonstrated that it has the courage to seek peace, and it has the fortitude to risk war. We have proved that we are a good and reliable friend to those who seek peace and freedom. We have shown that we can also be a formidable foe to those who reject the paths of peace and those who seek to impose upon us or our allies the yoke of tyranny.

This nation will keep its commitments from South Viet-Nam to West Berlin. We will be unceasing in the search for peace; resourceful in our pursuit of areas of agreement even with those with whom we differ; and generous and loyal to those who join with us in common cause....

In the larger context of Viet-Nam and the peace of the world, the Johnson Administration's view was that the defense of Viet-Nam was vital to the security of Southeast Asia which in turn was important to the maintenance of a durable peace throughout the world. Administration spokesmen articulated this point on many occasions. It was also a view which President Johnson shared with his predecessors, as noted by Secretary Rusk in a speech on May 24, 1966:

In the discussion of our commitment in Southeast Asia three different aspects are sometimes confused: why we made it, how we made it, and the means of fulfilling it.

The why was a determination that the peace and security of that area are extremely important to the security of the United States. That determination was made first, before the Korean War, by President Truman, on the basis of protracted analysis in the highest councils of government. The problem was re-examined at least twice during his Administration and at intervals thereafter. And the main conclusion was always the same. It was based upon the natural resources and the strategic importance of the area, on the number of nations and peoples involved -- more than 200 million -- as well as on the relationship of Southeast Asia to the world situation as a whole and to the prospects for a durable peace.

As for our specific objectives in Viet-Nam these were perhaps most succinctly summarized by President Johnson at a press conference on July 18, 1966, in which he said:

...our objectives remain what they have been:

--to guarantee that infiltration, subversion, and terror mounted and infiltrated from North Viet-Nam cannot swallow and conquer South Viet-Nam;

--to permit the people of South Viet-Nam to select their own government and to build a way of life which conforms to their own traditions and desires....

We are not fighting to remain in South Viet-Nam; not to hold bases there, not to control the affairs of that people.

We are there to defeat aggression -- to permit a young nation to develop its own destiny -- to help its people to rebuild and create a modern nation even before the guns go silent.

....to these limited objectives we are fully committed.

Although the US purposes remained the same throughout the Johnson years, there were watershed points of time when the thrust of our effort changed markedly. The chief watersheds came in 1965. With the advent of the relatively stable and effective Thieu-Ky government in the summer of 1965, we began to shift the focus of our political effort from regaining governmental stability to encouraging the Vietnamese to move ahead toward more representative government. On the military side, we continued to limit our activities to helping the Vietnamese help themselves until early 1965, when it became clear that the South Vietnamese would not be able to cope with the steadily increasing North Vietnamese military commitment

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unless the United States were to engage its military forces directly in operations against the enemy. At the same time when the Johnson Administration was pursuing its political and military objectives in Viet-Nam, it was also engaged in an increasing effort to explore the possibility of reaching an honorable settlement through diplomatic negotiations. The following account of developments in our Viet-Nam policy deals principally with these three major themes and particularly with the Department of State's involvement in the efforts.