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THESIS

**COLD WAR AGENCY: THE UNITED STATES AND THE
FAILURE OF THE DIEM EXPERIMENT**

by

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March 2017

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DIEM EXPERIMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The efforts of the Bush administration in the early 2000s to establish democratic regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq reflect an American foreign policy tradition that began at the end of World War II. The pairing of national security interests with the success of foreign regimes (and, specifically, regimes headed by charismatic “strong men”) was a common feature of Cold War–era foreign policy employed by every presidential administration from Harry S. Truman through Ronald Reagan. The U.S. support for President Ngo Dinh Diem of the Republic of Vietnam was a notable failure within this tradition. America’s disillusionment with Diem, and its subsequent complicity in his overthrow and murder, marked the beginning of its direct military involvement in Vietnam. Two-and-a-half million U.S. troops would eventually serve in Vietnam in a failed effort to prevent the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from uniting the country under a communist regime. Examination of the U.S. partnership with Diem during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations illuminates factors that led to its demise and may help to prevent their future repetition.

This thesis argues that both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations focused their aid programs on military security at the expense of political and economic reform, thus failing to address the political inequities that ultimately led to Diem’s demise. American military aid, calculated to support Diem, ultimately provided the foundation for the military coup that overthrew him. This thesis argues that the Diem experiment shows, first, that military security cannot be a substitute for political stability, and second, that limited-liability commitments—like the one to Diem—may prove more politically consequential than they first appear, once they start to unravel.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIP	Commercial Import Program
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MAAG	U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group
MACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MSUG	Michigan State University Group
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NLF	National Liberation Front
NRM	National Revolutionary Movement
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
TERM	Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission
VWP	Vietnam Workers' Party

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I. INTRODUCTION

The efforts of the Bush administration in the early 2000s to establish democratic regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq reflect an American foreign policy tradition that began at the end of World War II. The pairing of national security interests with the success of foreign regimes (and, specifically, regimes headed by charismatic “strong men”) was a common feature of Cold War–era foreign policy employed by every presidential administration from Harry S. Truman through Ronald Reagan. The U.S. support for President Ngo Dinh Diem of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was a notable failure within this tradition. America’s disillusionment with Diem, and its subsequent complicity in his overthrow and murder, marked the beginning of its direct military involvement in Vietnam. Two-and-a-half million U.S. troops would eventually serve in Vietnam in a failed effort to prevent the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from uniting the country under a communist regime. Examination of the U.S. partnership with Diem during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations illuminates factors that led to its demise and may help to prevent their future repetition.

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis researches the Cold War partnership between the United States and Ngo Dinh Diem of Vietnam with the aim of explaining its evolution and eventual collapse. Specifically, how and why did the U.S. assessment of Diem’s leadership change so much that U.S. policy in Vietnam shifted from wholehearted support of Diem under President Dwight D. Eisenhower to conspiring with South Vietnamese generals to bring about a coup under President John F. Kennedy? In four chapters covering a time period beginning with the close of World War II and ending with the November 1963 coup that deposed Diem, this thesis answers the following questions to develop a deeper understanding of the U.S.-Diem partnership: What was the strategic value of Vietnam to the United States, how did that value change over time, and how did that value affect the U.S. assessment of Diem? Did the U.S. perception of Diem change, or did Diem’s leadership performance change? More specifically, did Diem start the partnership with

the United States by complying with Western norms of democratic leadership, only later developing into an autocratic tyrant; or was Diem's leadership consistent for the duration of his near decade in power, so that the initial U.S. assessment of Diem altered as time progressed?

B. IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The decision to align U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia with the success of the Diem regime was not the first or last time in the history of U.S. foreign policy that support of a foreign regime defined the means of achieving national interests, and the pairing of U.S. security interests with the success of foreign regimes remains a feature of U.S. foreign policy. Similar policies pursued by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq beginning in the early 2000s yielded two wars that have lasted for longer than a decade, resulted in the deaths of thousands of U.S. service members, cost the United States trillions of dollars, and at the time this thesis was written, have yet to facilitate the formation of stable, democratic governments in Kabul and Baghdad.¹ The U.S. partnership with Diem also proved a failed policy, having commenced unilateral American involvement in Vietnam that plagued five presidential administrations, called for the deployment of two-and-a-half million U.S. troops, cost the United States hundreds of billions of dollars, and ultimately failed to prevent the DRV from uniting the country under a communist regime.² Examining the formation of U.S. policy in Vietnam after World War II, how the Eisenhower administration's assessment of Diem resulted in wholehearted U.S. support for his regime, and how the Kennedy administration's assessment of Diem initially led to continued U.S. support but ultimately led to the November 1963 coup may illuminate the factors that contributed to the failure of the partnership and prevent their future repetition.

¹ Catherine Lutz, "U.S. and Coalition Casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Costs of War*, The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, last modified 21 February 2013, 1, <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2013/USandCoalition.pdf>; Neta C. Crawford, "U.S. Budgetary Costs of Wars through 2016: \$4.70 Trillion and Counting," *Costs of War*, The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, last modified September 2016, 7, <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/Costs%20of%20War%20through%202016%20FINAL%20final%20v2.pdf>.

² Stephen Dagget, *Costs of Major U.S. Wars* (CRS Report No. RS22926) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 26 June 2010), 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22926.pdf>.

C. HYPOTHESIS

This thesis argues that both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations focused their aid programs to South Vietnam on military security at the expense of political and economic reform, thus failing to address the political inequities that undermined Diem's regime and his credibility as a leader. American military aid, calculated to support Diem, ultimately provided the foundation for the military coup that overthrew him. This thesis also argues that the Diem experiment shows, first, that military security cannot substitute for political stability, and second, that limited-liability commitments—like the one to Diem—may prove more politically consequential than they first appear, once they start to unravel.

D. METHODS AND SOURCES

The research for this thesis was conducted as a historical analysis based primarily on the extensive secondary literature available on the subject, using primary sources to further illuminate specific arguments. The first chapter consists of a chronological examination of events that pertain to the formation of U.S. policy in Vietnam beginning with the end of World War II and continuing through the Geneva Conference of 1954. The subsequent three chapters examine evidence from the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations pertaining to Diem's leadership ability, the U.S. assessment of Diem's leadership ability, and how those assessments informed U.S. policy formation.

E. LITERATURE REVIEW

The organization of this literature review reflects the chapter sequence of the thesis. The first chapter examines the development of U.S. foreign policy toward Indochina following the close of World War II through the 1954 Geneva Conference, establishing the context within which the Eisenhower administration made its initial assessment of Diem as a potential ally in the effort to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. William J. Duiker explains that U.S. foreign policy toward Southeast Asia during the immediate post-war years was shaped by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's belief that a regional power vacuum, due in part to European colonialism, had established the conditions for war in the Pacific. Roosevelt's solution called for the

end of colonialism which, in the case of Indochina, would be facilitated by a transitional international trusteeship. This policy also supported U.S. interests by establishing independent international markets that would support American capitalism.³ David L. Anderson and Gary R. Hess concur, explaining that Roosevelt's initial plan for Indochina was decolonization enabled by a temporary international trusteeship.⁴

With Roosevelt's death and the post-war collapse of cooperation with the Soviet Union, U.S. alarm at apparent Soviet expansionism—above all in Europe—took precedence over U.S. decolonization policy. George C. Herring asserts Eastern Europe was the immediate battlefield of U.S. efforts to contain communism, deprioritizing policy concerns in Southeast Asia. He argues that the Truman administration valued French support in Eastern Europe against the Soviets significantly more than the guarantee of self-determination in Indochina, instigating a policy shift toward a U.S. commitment not to obstruct the restoration of French colonial interests. U.S. policy continued to evolve during the late 1940s as U.S. officials determined that nationalist sentiment in Indochina was aligned with Ho Chi Minh, indicating that Indochinese self-determination would likely result in the spread of communism to Southeast Asia. This was anathema to the Truman administration and prompted U.S. policy to shift in support of French colonialism.⁵ George McTurnan Kahin agrees, contending that concern with sustaining France as an anti-Soviet ally in Europe dominated U.S. policy in Vietnam.⁶ Duiker offers that U.S. officials may have believed they were continuing Roosevelt's Southeast Asian policy, modified for prevailing circumstances. Whether or not U.S. foreign policy reflected the late president's intentions, U.S. policy in Indochina became dominated by

³ William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), Kindle edition, 31–32.

⁴ David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 16; Gary R. Hess, *The United States' Emergence as a Southeast Asian Power, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 81–82.

⁵ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 10–14.

⁶ George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 3–6.

national security concerns in Europe and the requirement of French support to address those concerns.⁷

The Eisenhower administration reaffirmed the containment of communism as the principal U.S. foreign policy concern while increasing the relative strategic priority of Southeast Asia. John Lewis Gaddis explains that the belief that the Soviet Union would pursue an aggressive foreign policy was central to Eisenhower's New Look policy, the administration's national security strategy. While nuclear deterrence was the outstanding feature of the New Look, it also called for reliance on allies to contain communism in foreign regions, translating into U.S. support of the French in their war against the Vietminh.⁸ Anderson shows that Eisenhower illustrated the specific importance of Indochina with the Domino Theory, explaining that the fall of Indochina would signal the first stage of the rapid spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia.⁹ It is within this context that the United States approached the Geneva Conference in 1954.

The first chapter concludes by discussing the conduct of the U.S. delegation at the Geneva Conference, the point at which the Eisenhower administration reshaped its Indochina policy and created the framework within which it would pursue a partnership with Diem. The literature is fairly uniform in describing how security interests shaped U.S. conduct during and after the Geneva Conference. Frederik Logevall, Robert D. Schulzinger, and Herring all explain that the United States was apprehensive that the conference would facilitate a compromise between the French and Vietminh tantamount to communist victory, a likelihood increased by the disaster at Dienbienphu. Logevall further contends that the administration's fear of appearing to be communist appeasers restricted the United States from formally participating due to the presence of the Chinese

⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 47–51.

⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Revised and Expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 127–38.

⁹ David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–61* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 17.

delegation.¹⁰ Anderson asserts that while simultaneously pursuing allied military support for the French throughout the conference, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles coopted the British and French delegations to negotiate for a set of principles that would facilitate U.S. strategy initiatives following the conference. The Soviet and Chinese delegations also impacted the conference's outcome, pressuring the Vietminh to accept compromise that fell short of Vietnamese expectations and showing the Vietminh that partnership with the Soviet Union or China would coincide with the displacement of their desires by big power politics. The accords of the 1954 Geneva Conference enabled the United States to unilaterally pursue nation-building in South Vietnam to prevent the dominos from falling in Southeast Asia.¹¹

The second chapter examines the relationship between the United States and Diem from the end of the Geneva Conference through the intensification of anti-Diem resistance in late 1959, a period that begins with the United States' decision to wholeheartedly support Diem in the spring of 1955. Anderson describes the early U.S. assessment of Diem as contentious, with policymaker opinions of Diem's leadership ability ranging widely from severe reservation to enthusiastic endorsement. The argument centered on Diem's ability to unite and lead the fractious political environment of Saigon following the Geneva Conference. Diem ultimately secured unilateral U.S. support after successfully routing Binh Xuyen forces in the April 1955 Battle of Saigon, demonstrating sufficient leadership ability around which, according to the Eisenhower administration, U.S. aid and advice could facilitate the building of a non-communist nation.¹² Edward Miller and Seth Jacobs offer similar arguments, asserting that Diem's success during the Battle of Saigon exhibited sufficient evidence to Eisenhower and Dulles of Diem's ability

¹⁰ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 46; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), 554–59; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 71–77.

¹¹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 41–45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 109–13.

to consolidate power, warranting continued support to achieve U.S. strategic objectives in the region.¹³

Duiker explains that, following the decision to back Diem, the Eisenhower administration supported the regime with the hopes of facilitating the development of a self-sustaining, noncommunist outpost in Southeast Asia, in the meantime achieving at least the temporary prevention of communism's spread throughout the region while other Southeast Asian allied governments strengthened.¹⁴ Anderson concurs, and further explains that as U.S. policymakers directed aid and advice to the government of what had become the RVN, Diem ignored the urgings of his U.S. patrons and pursued an autocratic, personalist governance policy to consolidate his power and effect political stability. Diem's conduct created two opposing camps among U.S. policymakers, the first represented primarily by State Department officials who believed Diem's autocratic leadership conflicted with U.S. strategic objectives, and the second camp represented by Defense Department officials who believed Diem's leadership was a secondary concern to the demand for military security in the young country that, once achieved, would enable the development of a noncommunist government regardless of the specific local leadership. The Eisenhower administration focused on military aid that aligned with the Defense Department's perspective, containing communism in Vietnam while focusing on more pressing strategic concerns both within the region and globally.¹⁵

The third chapter covers the period from 1959 through early 1963, examining the development of anti-Diem resistance in Vietnam, Diem's response to that resistance, and the evolution of the Kennedy administration's Vietnam policy. Ellen J. Hammer and David Kaiser argue that Diem's harsh and autocratic response to the communist insurgency and other noncommunist opponents diminished his ability to unify Vietnam

¹³ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 210–16; *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 77–80.

¹⁴ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 243–48.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 170–73; *Vietnam War*, 30–36; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 68–80.

and created the conditions that precipitated his demise.¹⁶ During the same period, the Kennedy administration took office, representing an approach to foreign policy termed “Flexible Response” that maintained containment of communism as the chief U.S. strategic interest. A pillar of Kennedy’s approach was maintaining U.S. commitments to foreign allies to prevent a crisis of confidence in the international system, a requirement that became amplified in Vietnam due to unfavorable events concerning communism globally, specifically in Laos, Cuba, and Berlin.¹⁷ During this period, Diem’s policies for countering resistance from communist insurgents and competing nationalist proved ineffective, and the Kennedy administration began to reevaluate Diem’s contribution to the achievement of U.S. foreign policy objectives in Vietnam.¹⁸

The final chapter discusses the events and decisions in 1963 leading to the November 1963 coup that deposed Diem. Anderson shows that the battle of Ap Bac and the Buddhist Crisis represented the outcomes of Diem’s failed policies, prompting Kennedy administration officials to conclude that the Vietnamese president was no longer the indispensable keystone of U.S. anticommunism strategy in Vietnam.¹⁹ Miller further explains the failed U.S.-Vietnamese counterinsurgency strategy combined with Diem’s persistent intransigence toward U.S. advice created the context within which U.S. policymakers simultaneously delivered ultimatums to the Diem regime while signaling to opposition groups within Saigon—specifically Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) generals—that the United States would not interfere with coup attempts.²⁰ Duiker offers a similar argument, asserting that by 1963, Diem had proven unable to generate the political support in Vietnam required to resist a communist takeover in the South.²¹ Hammer shows that Diem’s actions had also lost him the support of the

¹⁶ David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000); Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 70–77.

¹⁷ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 230–40.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Vietnam War*, 36–40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38–40.

²⁰ Miller, *Misalliance*, 279–318.

²¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 303–8.

American public, making it impossible for U.S. policymakers to maintain the status quo in Vietnam.²² By 1963, it was clear military aid to the Diem regime was failing to achieve the strategic objective of developing an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam as a garrison of anticommunism in Southeast Asia, compelling the Kennedy administration to conclude that an effective policy required Diem's removal.

²² Hammer, *Death in November*, 169–219.

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II. THE UNITED STATES AND VIETNAM, 1945–1954

This chapter examines the evolution of U.S. foreign policy concerning Indochina beginning with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the end of World War II through the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the end of the First Indochina War at the Geneva Conference of 1954, ultimately resulting in U.S. support of Premier Ngo Dinh Diem. Roosevelt's initial policy called for Indochina to be placed under the control of an international trusteeship following World War II, which he meant to facilitate a transition to Indochinese self-determination. Resistance from the French and British, combined with dissent within his own administration, led Roosevelt to soften his position and provide the path for France's return to Indochina without opposition from the United States. President Harry S. Truman continued Roosevelt's policy of noninterference, but the rise of the Cold War and the perceived advance of the communist threat compelled the administration to commence a U.S. military and economic aid program supporting the French and the South Vietnamese in their war against the Vietminh. Finally, the Eisenhower administration's Indochina policy through early 1954 consisted of attempts to bolster French resolve to prevent a communist victory in Indochina. When that policy failed and the French and Vietminh approached a compromise in Geneva, the Eisenhower administration prepared to unilaterally support the South Vietnamese government of Bao Dai led by Diem, thereby preventing Hanoi from unifying the country under communist rule.

A. ROOSEVELT AND INTERNATIONAL TRUSTEESHIP

The Roosevelt administration's initial evaluation of Indochina's relevance to U.S. strategic interests reflected economic concerns involving the wider region of Southeast Asia. During the 1930s, trade development between the United States and Southeast Asia yielded the region as the primary provider of tin and crude rubber for U.S. industry, materials the Roosevelt administration recognized as critical to the Allied war effort. The U.S. freezing of Japanese assets in response to their invasion of Indochina in the summer of 1941 illustrates the administration's strategic valuation of the area, showing that the

preservation of access to crucial industrial materials justified the escalation of conflict with Japan.²³ Over the course of World War II, improvements in industrial technology gradually reduced the demand for Southeast Asian tin and rubber, previously among the most valuable commodities produced in Asia. The decreased demand reduced the strategic value of Southeast Asia in the Allied war effort, a diminution apparent in the interwar shift of Allied strategy in the Pacific from expelling the Japanese from the Southeast Asian mainland to the island-hopping campaign targeting the Japanese homeland. Though the Southeast Asian mainland was no longer among the primary focuses of U.S. war planners, Roosevelt retained a policy for the region following Allied victory that he believed would help to prevent a third world war.²⁴ The president believed that the instability caused by failed colonial systems during the pre-war period had been an important factor leading to the outbreak of conflict. Therefore, following the war, Roosevelt planned to place former colonial holdings under international trusteeship that would facilitate a transition to self-determination, removing a major source of international instability.²⁵

As World War II came to a close, Roosevelt's policy began to shift. The British and French, both intent on reasserting colonial control in their former territories, vehemently opposed Roosevelt's proposed international trusteeships. Roosevelt's plan was also contested within his administration. The State Department's Office of European Affairs argued that insisting on an international trusteeship for Indochina would threaten post-war cooperation between the United States and France, while the Office of Far Eastern Affairs agreed with the president, countering that the United States should support nationalist movements in the colonial world. The agreements reached at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 stated that colonial holdings would only be placed under international trusteeship with voluntarily acquiescence by the colonial power, reflecting a softening of Roosevelt's position in favor of the State Department's Europeanists.²⁶

²³ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 8–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

²⁵ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 46–48.

²⁶ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 23–24; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 62–66.

B. TRUMAN AND CONTAINMENT POLICY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

When President Truman took the oath of office following Roosevelt's death in April 1945, U.S. policy concerning Indochina remained fervently debated within the State Department. This debate occurred against the backdrop of Allied cooperation deteriorating into a competition for international influence between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies led by the United States, ultimately resulting in the development of U.S. containment policy aimed at halting the global spread of communism.²⁷ Through 1946, however, the administration viewed mainland Southeast Asia as peripheral to the main battleground of containment policy in Western Europe, a policy articulated in George Kennan's influential "long telegram."²⁸ The priority of U.S. policy concerns in Western Europe underscored the position of the State Department's Office of European Affairs, which continued to argue that the United States should not interfere with French efforts to reestablish colonial rule in Indochina, so as to avoid compromising French cooperation in Western Europe. The Office of Far Eastern Affairs maintained their opposing argument, but now asserted that the French repeatedly exhibited a failure to institute reforms leading to Indochinese self-determination and that continued support of the French would undermine the Asian perception of the United States, leaving a regional leadership void that could be filled by communism.²⁹ Through the end of the 1946, the U.S. policy toward Indochina reflected a compromise of these diverging arguments. The Truman administration chose not to oppose the French return to Indochina while simultaneously attempting, through multiple diplomatic communications, to encourage the French government to pursue a dialogue with the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and provide a path to self-determination for the Vietnamese.³⁰

By the time war broke out between the French and the Vietminh at the end of 1946, U.S. policy had shifted to reflect Indochina's increasing role in the global

²⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 52–53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25–27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26–27, 46–47.

containment of communism. General George C. Marshall, having recently accepted the appointment to Secretary of State, forwarded a letter to the U.S. embassy in Paris in February 1947 that concisely summarized the dilemma that characterized the United States' Indochina policy. While articulating that U.S. policy of noninterference in French objectives in Indochina remained unchanged, Marshall expressed frustration with the French policymakers' failure to abandon its "dangerous, outmoded colonial outlook" in Indochina and provide for a meaningful form of Vietnamese self-determination.³¹ Marshall also conceded, however, that Ho Chi Minh's ties to Moscow as a devoted communist compromised his nationalist credentials, and that an independent Vietnamese government under Ho would represent a Soviet victory. The secretary of state admittedly offered no solution beyond encouraging French flexibility in continued negotiations with the Vietminh. The United States still saw the optimal solution to the Indochina problem as the creation of an independent, noncommunist state within the French Union, but U.S. policy offered no path to this solution other than continued encouragement of the French to achieve it.³²

While the U.S. policy concerning Indochina remained conflicted, the French pursued an alternative political solution to compromise with the DRV. The French conducted negotiations concerning a future Vietnamese state with Bao Dai, the former emperor who abdicated his throne in August 1945, transferring sovereignty to Ho Chi Minh's DRV. Living among other absentee Vietnamese nationalists in Hong Kong, Bao Dai represented an ideal alternative to the DRV for the French. These negotiations resulted in the March 1949 signing of the Elysée Accords, a treaty that provided for the eventual inclusion of an independent Vietnamese state—led by Bao Dai—within the French Union.³³ U.S. policymakers had serious doubts that the Elysée Accords would lead to the strong, independent, noncommunist state for which they hoped. The treaty contained few specific details concerning the means or timeline of establishing the proposed Vietnamese state. Furthermore, it appeared the Bao Dai regime was destined to

³¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 55.

³² *Ibid.*, 55–56.

³³ *Ibid.*, 56, 65–68.

become little more than a French puppet government, as Bao Dai and his compatriots in Hong Kong had no apparent nationalist support within Vietnam.³⁴ Dean Acheson, Marshall's successor as secretary of state, articulated the U.S. response to the Elysée Accords in a May 1949 message to U.S. diplomats in Saigon. Acheson echoed Marshall's earlier assertion that any Vietnamese government that included the Vietminh would ultimately lead to a communist victory, and therefore the U.S. policy of supporting French efforts in Indochina while pressuring them to provide for Vietnamese self-determination should be continued. In the Bao Dai government, however, Acheson perceived similarities with the failed Chiang Kai-shek regime, and he stated that the Truman administration could not support a government incapable of capturing nationalist support and destined to fail.³⁵ The United States would "wait and see" if the Bao Dai government exhibited the qualities of an effective government that would warrant U.S. recognition and support.³⁶

Events external to Southeast Asia led the Truman administration to solidify an official U.S. policy concerning Indochina. Senator Joseph McCarthy's "red scare" had made hardline anticommunism a powerful force in Washington.³⁷ This coincided with the communist victory over Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist regime in China.³⁸ Finally, many within the Truman administration believed that Bao Dai's government, absent French support, would fall to the Vietminh.³⁹ These developments led to Truman's April 1950 approval of the report to the National Security Council (NSC)-64, which stated that the United States would prevent the spread of communism in Indochina, thereby preventing its spread throughout the entire Southeast Asian region.⁴⁰ Within one month, Truman authorized the commencement of U.S. support for the Bao Dai regime through the Mutual Defense Assistance Program, a platform of economic and military assistance

³⁴ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 60–61; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 210–13.

³⁵ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 70–71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 93–94.

facilitated by the French colonial government. Following the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, the Truman administration reiterated its evaluation of Indochina as a frontline in the containment of communism and increased the U.S. military aid program.⁴¹ Fearing that Bao Dai's government would fall to the Vietminh without French support, Truman continued to furnish military and economic support of the French and South Vietnamese through the remainder of his term in office, passing to Eisenhower a U.S. commitment to forcibly resist the spread of communism in Indochina.

C. EISENHOWER'S NEW LOOK AND THE DOMINO THEORY

As an ardent Cold Warrior, Eisenhower took the oath of office in January 1953 committed to the continuation of containment policy started by the Truman administration. The president and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, believed that driven by the insecurity of coexistence with free nations, the Soviet Union would continue to exhibit an aggressive posture aimed at communism's global expansion.⁴² Eisenhower articulated this idea in a November 1953 news conference: "Let me say something: anyone who doesn't recognize that the great struggle of our time is an ideological one, that is, a system of regimentation and of virtual-slavery as against the concept of freedom on which our government is founded, then they are not looking this question squarely in the face."⁴³ The U.S. focus on the global communist threat in a zero-sum international system would persist under the Eisenhower administration.

Eisenhower conceived a different approach to containment policy, however, and one of his departures from the Truman administration's foreign policy concerned the costs associated with the means of containing communism, which he wished to contain, to the extent possible. Eisenhower ran for president on a platform that included reducing the defense budget, and his administration was always on the look-out for cost-effective sources of strategic leverage (of which nuclear weapons became the prime example). He

⁴¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 96–98.

⁴² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 127–30, 135–38.

⁴³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference: November 11, 1953," The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed 23 February 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9760&st=&st1=>.

also considered economic strength and military strength as interdependent concepts, implying imbalance in either direction as precursor to the loss of both. Within this framework, Eisenhower believed the immense defense spending associated with the Truman Doctrine threatened to displace U.S. economic stability and progress, simultaneously eliminating the basis of superior U.S. military strength and the foundation of the American way of life. Furthermore, he believed that conflict with the Soviet Union would be a protracted endeavor.⁴⁴

Eisenhower's perception of the Soviet threat also informed his opinions regarding economic strength. He articulated this point in a radio address on May 19, 1953: "It has been coldly calculated by the Soviet leaders, for by their military threat they have hoped to force upon America and the free world an unbearable security burden leading to economic disaster. They have plainly said that free people cannot preserve their way of life and at the same time provide enormous military establishments."⁴⁵ Eisenhower's national security strategy demanded achievement of Truman's ends with significantly less costly means.

In the summer of 1953, Eisenhower initiated Operation Solarium at the National War College, charging its participants with incorporating the administration's initiatives into national security policy recommendations. The product of Operation Solarium formed the basis of NSC-162/2 and would become known as Eisenhower's New Look policy. The report offered methods of pursuing containment aimed at "regaining the initiative" in the Cold War while simultaneously reducing investment of national treasure in the same endeavor.⁴⁶ Specifically, the document outlined the basic aim of U.S. national security policy as meeting "the Soviet threat to U.S. policy" while not "seriously weakening the U.S. economy or undermining [American] fundamental values and

⁴⁴ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 130–34; Douglas Kinnard, *President Eisenhower and Strategy Management: A Study in Defense Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 8–10.

⁴⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Radio Address to the American People on the National Security and Its Costs: May 19, 1953," The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed 23 February 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9854&st=&st1=>.

⁴⁶ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 143–44, 149, 152, 155.

institutions.”⁴⁷ One method, and perhaps the most infamous prescription of the New Look due to the rhetoric dispensed by Dulles, was deterrence based on the threatened employment of nuclear weapons. Additional recommendations included an emphasis on the deterring power of alliances, calling for their continued fiscal support and reliance on allied ground forces in local engagements; overt propaganda campaigns designed to discredit individual Soviet leaders, the various communist parties, and the communist ideology; covert operations targeting the Soviet Union, the Sino-Soviet relationship, and governments throughout the Soviet bloc; and a diplomatic stance receptive to negotiations with the Soviet Union (though expectations Soviet leadership would approach the United States were extremely low).⁴⁸

Southeast Asia provided the most immediate test of the administration’s New Look policy. At a news conference on April 7, 1954, Eisenhower articulated the strategic significance of Indochina using the now-famous domino analogy while also intimating how containment would be pursued within the framework of the New Look policy. Discussing the likely impact of the loss of Indochina to communism, he explained that the free world would no longer have access to the valuable resources of the region and that millions of people would be claimed by “the Communist dictatorship,” emphasizing the administration’s belief that communist countries comprised a centrally controlled empire of the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Eisenhower proceeded to explain the implication of communism’s victory in Indochina with the “falling domino principle,” asserting it would be the “beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”⁵⁰ To Eisenhower, the fall of Indochina meant the eventual submission of free regimes throughout Southeast Asia, advancing the communist threat further into East Asia and as

⁴⁷ James S. Lay, Jr., “Note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on Basic National Security Policy, 30 October 1953,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: National Security Affairs* 2, no. 1, ed. William Z. Slany, Lisle A. Rose, and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984), 578, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v02p1>.

⁴⁸ Lay, “Note by the Executive Secretary,” 591–95.

⁴⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “The President’s News Conference: April 7, 1954,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed 23 February 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=10202&st=&st1=>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

far south as Australia and New Zealand. This description of Indochina's importance reiterated the administration's perception of the region as integral to the worldwide battle against communism, which he had advanced in his first State of the Union Address.⁵¹ Answering further questions, Eisenhower alluded to the nature of the administration's intended strategy within the framework of the New Look policy. He referred to the Indochina conflict as "the kind of thing that must not be handled by one nation trying to act alone," requiring a "concert of opinion" and a unified commitment to an allied response.⁵²

D. THE NEW LOOK IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE GENEVA CONFERENCE

The New Look initially took form in Indochina as the continuation of U.S. aid to the French in support of their war with the Vietminh. The administration told the French that further aid was conditional on the development of a more aggressive strategy, and Eisenhower sent the U.S. embassy in France a list of his ideal French candidates for command in Indochina. Though the president decided to take a tougher stance with the French, Paris still retained bargaining power. The administration understood that French cooperation was crucial to the ongoing U.S. attempt to form a European Defense Community as a counter to the Soviet threat on the continent. The new French commander assigned to Indochina in May 1953—General Henri Navarre—was not among Eisenhower's desired choices, but his selection nevertheless communicated a shift to the more offensive outlook desired by the Americans. The Navarre Plan called for immediate small-scale missions against guerrilla forces and, following the rainy season, conventional operations to counter the Vietminh.⁵³ Admiral Arthur W. Radford and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) endorsed the plan as viable, though they asserted its success was conditional upon French ability and motivation to carry it through. The Joint Chiefs' timidity was based on reports from the Military Assistance Advisory Group commander in Indochina, General John W. O'Daniel. Though ultimately recommending to proceed

⁵¹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 17.

⁵² Eisenhower, "President's News Conference: April 7, 1954."

⁵³ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 22–23; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 138–40.

with the plan, the Chiefs communicated reservations inspired by French inaction. In an August 1953 memorandum to Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, the JCS reported that there were “no plans for a general fall offensive beyond limited objective operations to keep the enemy off balance” and that efforts to implement Navarre’s strategy had not proceeded “beyond the planning stages.”⁵⁴ The United States received similar warnings concerning the Navarre Plan through diplomatic channels. In a July 1953 meeting at the U.S. embassy in Paris, Minister of National Defense Rene Pleven stated the domestic pressure for French extraction from the war in Indochina made Navarre’s plan “out of the question” and that “it would be difficult to maintain existing effort.”⁵⁵ Prime Minister Joseph Laniel offered a similarly bleak assessment, stating that “Navarre was optimistic, but he wanted resources which could not be given [to] him.”⁵⁶

At the beginning of 1954, the administration began a reassessment of its strategic approach in Southeast Asia. France’s faltering motivation inspired Eisenhower to establish a multidepartment committee charged with forming a new plan for Indochina aimed at stimulating French efforts. The committee recommendations called for increased aid to the French, formation of a multinational defense organization to promote the security of noncommunist states in Southeast Asia, and, if needed, consideration of direct U.S. military involvement, all of which coincided with the New Look policy.⁵⁷ Around the same time, Dulles attended a conference in Berlin with French, British, and Soviet representatives to discuss, among other concerns, the conflict in Indochina. Domestic political pressures forced the French to pursue the possibility of negotiated settlement with the Vietminh, an outcome contrary to U.S. strategic interests but one that

⁵⁴ Arthur Radford, “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Indochina* 13, no. 1, ed. John P. Glennon and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 746, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v13p1>.

⁵⁵ Theodore C. Achilles, “Telegram from the Chargé in France (Achilles) to the Department of State,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Indochina* 13, no. 1, ed. John P. Glennon and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 643, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v13p1>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 644.

⁵⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 152–54.

Dulles nevertheless felt constrained from overtly opposing.⁵⁸ In a February 1954 telegram to Eisenhower, Dulles reported the delegation was working to prevent a conference on Indochina, but warned that his effort “carries moral obligation to continue to sustain military effort,” meaning that a successful blocking effort followed by failure to continue aid would create a French political backlash capable of undermining U.S. strategic initiatives in both Europe and Southeast Asia.⁵⁹ Eventually, the meeting in Berlin produced the decision to pursue a negotiated settlement in Geneva.

The development that finally forced a U.S. strategic reevaluation was the siege and ultimate capitulation at Dienbienphu. In November 1953, Navarre directed the capture of a Vietminh outpost there to disrupt communist supply lines into Laos and fortify the defense of the royal capital, Luang Prabang. The outpost became the target of a massive Vietminh offensive aimed at bolstering the communist bargaining position in Geneva and breaking French resolve. General Paul Ely’s March 1954 visit to Washington illustrated the urgency triggered by Dienbienphu, prompting urgent discussion within the administration regarding U.S. courses of action.⁶⁰ The perception of pending tragedy was illustrated in a telephone conversation between Dulles and Radford, both men conceding that “we must have a policy of our own even if France falls down. We could lose Europe, Asia, and Africa all at once if we don’t watch out.”⁶¹ The discussions yielded Eisenhower’s required preconditions for the commitment of U.S. forces to Indochina that guided American efforts leading to the Geneva Conference. The commitment of U.S. troops was contingent upon continued French involvement, unified action including Asian allies, and guaranteed independence of the associated states of Indochina to negate

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 24–25.

⁵⁹ John Foster Dulles, “Telegram from the Secretary of State to the President,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Indochina* 13, no. 1, ed. John P. Glennon and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 1025, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v13p1>.

⁶⁰ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 26; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 145; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 71.

⁶¹ Phyllis D. Bernau, “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Indochina* 13, no. 1, ed. John P. Glennon and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 1151, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v13p1>.

charges of colonialism. These conditions would not be met prior to the Geneva Conference, given British and French reluctance to disrupt the cooperation leading to Geneva and French refusal to completely negate its influence in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.⁶²

The U.S. delegation arrived in Geneva apprehensive the conference would facilitate a compromise between the French and Vietminh tantamount to communist victory, a likelihood increased by the disaster at Dienbienphu.⁶³ Fearful of being a party to compromise with communists, Dulles sent specific codes of conduct to the U.S. delegation. These restricted the delegation's role to that of representatives of an "interested nation" assisting the conference to arrive at an agreement respecting the sovereignty of the region's free nations—specifically preventing their incorporation "into the Communist bloc of imperialistic dictatorship"—and charging the delegation to recommend U.S. withdrawal if the pending agreements conflicted with this policy.⁶⁴ The United States continued to pursue a unified military response, and the Lanier government revisited the possibility during negotiations, but French unwillingness to satisfy Eisenhower's preconditions for U.S. involvement and their introduction of additional terms unacceptable to the United States revealed Lanier's approach as a ploy to sway negotiations in France's favor.

The accession of the Mendez-France government further diminished the likelihood of military action. Dulles sought to promote a new policy of U.S.-led regional defense by coopting British and French support for a set of principles that would facilitate U.S. strategy initiatives following the conference. The Soviet and Chinese delegations also impacted the conference's outcome, pressuring the Vietminh to accept compromise below expectations to enable Soviet Union maneuvering to avoid the proposed European Defense Community and to allow Chinese focus on pressing domestic concerns. The

⁶² Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 32.

⁶³ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 46.

⁶⁴ John Foster Dulles, "Telegram from the Secretary of State to the United States Delegation," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: The Geneva Conference* 16, ed. John P. Glennon, Allen H. Kitchens, and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1981), 778–79, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=header&id=FRUS.FRUS195254v16>.

administration ultimately refused to endorse the Geneva accords, while recognizing that the agreements represented an opportunity to limit the damage done by communist success.⁶⁵ In a July 1954 press release, Dulles asserted the task was to keep the communist victory north of the 17th parallel in Vietnam from spreading throughout the region.⁶⁶ Dulles had expanded on this point in a meeting of the National Security Council the previous day, suggesting the funding previously directed to France should be used to bolster the free states of Southeast Asia to hold the “dike against communism.” Eisenhower agreed, directing members of the council who did not share this opinion to “stay away from Capitol Hill.”⁶⁷ The conditions were set for direct U.S. support of the government of South Vietnam.

E. CONCLUSION

Examination of U.S. Indochina policy spanning the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower administrations up to the 1954 Geneva Conference demonstrates that global security concerns drove U.S. policy decisions. This is not to imply that U.S. policymakers were ignorant of circumstances in Indochina. Many members of each administration, including the presidents themselves, offered observations on Indochina that—in hindsight—reveal insightful assessments of Indochina’s domestic political environment. The impact of U.S. Indochina policy on the global security environment, however, consistently superseded those concerns.

For the Roosevelt administration, the global security concern was their conviction that the pre-war colonial system had significantly contributed to the international instability that led to World War II. Their initial post-war policy reflected this concern, calling for international trusteeships to oversee the transition of former colonial holdings into independent, self-determined nations. Strong British and French resistance to this

⁶⁵ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 41–45; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 47–49.

⁶⁶ John Foster Dulles, “Statement: Geneva Negotiations,” John Foster Dulles Papers, Princeton University Library, accessed 26 February 2016, <http://findingaids.princeton.edu/MC016/c9959>.

⁶⁷ Everett S. Gleason, “Memorandum of Discussion at the 207th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, July 22, 1954,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Indochina* 13, no. 2, ed. John P. Glennon and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 1869–70, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v13p2>.

plan forced the administration to comparatively evaluate Allied cooperation in the post-war reconstruction of the Western European security environment and their anticolonial policy. The agreements at Yalta show that the Roosevelt administration valued Allied cooperation higher than the elimination of colonialism, and the United States did not obstruct France's return to Indochina.

The Truman administration, faced the rise of the Cold War, reevaluated U.S. Indochina policy. Initially, this led to continued U.S. pressure on the French to provide the Vietnamese a path to self-determination as a means of establishing an independent state capable of resisting the spread of communism. As the rise of hardline anticommunism in Washington coincided with the communist victory in China and the North Korean invasion of South Korea, Ho Chi Minh's communist credentials made compromise with the DRV and the Vietminh impossible. Though the majority opinion in Washington was that Bao Dai had little chance of capturing the nationalist support enjoyed by Ho Chi Minh, and that his government would not survive absent French support, the administration accepted that U.S. aid to the French and South Vietnamese to support their war against the Vietminh as the only viable policy option.

The Eisenhower administration concurred with Truman's assessment that preventing a communist victory was a paramount U.S. global security concern. During the early years of Eisenhower's term, this translated into the continuation of Truman's policy of providing military and economic aid to the French and Vietnamese. As the French lost the will to continue the war and approached compromise with the Vietminh at Geneva in 1954, U.S. policymakers prepared to institute an aid program directly to the South Vietnamese government. This meant establishing a bilateral relationship with Bao Dai's newly appointed prime minister, Premier Ngo Dinh Diem.

III. WHOLEHEARTED SUPPORT OF NGO DINH DIEM

At a U.S. State Dinner welcoming President Ngo Dinh Diem of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), Eisenhower hailed the Vietnamese leader as “an inspirational leader in his own country” who “by his courage, his fortitude, and his statesmanship...has become an example for people everywhere who hate tyranny and love freedom.”⁶⁸ The wholehearted U.S. support of Diem expressed in this toast was anything but certain in 1954, and the U.S. partnership with Diem through the 1950s was fraught with doubt over his ability to build a strong, anticommunist nation south of the 17th parallel. This chapter discusses the development of U.S. policy concerning Vietnam and the U.S.-Diem partnership following the Geneva Conference of 1954 through the end of 1958. The first section examines how the Eisenhower administration decided to move for Diem’s replacement in the spring of 1955, a policy that was abandoned after Diem successfully defeated Binh Xuyen forces in Saigon, exhibiting the strong leadership Washington believed was required to prevent the spread of communism through the region. The second section examines how the U.S.-Diem partnership approached the national reunification election, the Bao Dai referendum, and the creation of the RVN to illustrate the nature of the partnership and how the Eisenhower administration evaluated Diem’s leadership. The final section evaluates the U.S. and Diem approaches to nation-building to show that, despite the increasing doubt among U.S. officials concerning Diem’s style of governance, the Eisenhower administration determined that he possessed the requisite leadership ability to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

A. THE UNITED STATES AND NGO DINH DIEM, 1954–1955

During the Geneva Conference, the political environment in Saigon began a momentous shift with the installation of Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister. Just prior to taking the oath of office, Diem had returned to Vietnam after three years spent abroad in Japan and the United States. During this time, he met future ardent Diem-supporters

⁶⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Toasts of the President and President Diem of Viet-Nam,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed 16 January 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=11032&st=&st1=>.

Senator Mike Mansfield, Senator John F. Kennedy, and Professor Wesley Fishel. While he was overseas, the Ngo brothers worked to develop a domestic political environment in Vietnam favorable to Diem's return. Ngo Dinh Luyen, a former classmate of Bao Dai, pursued Diem's initiatives in Europe and eventually served as his principle correspondent with the absentee emperor. Ngo Dinh Can nurtured political support in Vietnam's central regions, the junior ranks of the Vietnamese National Army officer corps, and the Saigon bureaucracy. Ngo Dinh Nhu engaged in numerous political ventures, chief among which was the formation of the Can Lao political party to build unified nationalist support for Diem.⁶⁹

The Ngo brothers exploited popular frustration with Bao Dai's stalled efforts to achieve independence and pushed for a Unity Congress in September 1953. Though Nhu maneuvered to disassociate the Ngo brothers from its outcomes to prevent alienation from Bao Dai, the congress produced severe criticism of the monarch. Intending to create an opportunity to reassert his domestic support, Bao Dai called a National Congress in October 1953 that had the opposite effect, solidifying an expression of national dissatisfaction with the emperor's independence program and identifying Diem as a favorable candidate for the premiership. The Ngo brothers' efforts paid off in May 1953 when Bao Dai asked Diem to take the position. The role of the United States in his selection appears limited to Bao Dai's assumption that Diem would be able to deliver American aid, a requirement the emperor believed imminent following the French defeat at Dienbienphu.⁷⁰

Following the Geneva Conference, which marked the French abandonment of its colonial position in Southeast Asia, U.S. policy in the region shifted toward building a stable, noncommunist state in Vietnam south of the 17th parallel. U.S. officials also began evaluating whether the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem coincided with this objective. Initial perceptions of Diem and the likelihood he could lead his countrymen to the creation of a strong state were divided among U.S. planners, and also between French and American diplomats. Put off by Diem's strong anti-colonialist stance, the French

⁶⁹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 51–55; Miller, *Misalliance*, 42–43, 46–47, 50–52.

⁷⁰ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 51–55; Miller, *Misalliance*, 42–43, 46–47, 50–52.

purportedly undertook efforts to undermine his government as soon as he took office. Some U.S. operatives in the region, like Colonel Edward G. Lansdale and Fishel, believed Diem the appropriate facilitator of U.S. interests in Vietnam. Others were less convinced, perhaps most significantly Ambassador Donald R. Heath.⁷¹

The Diem debate centered on Diem's ability to create a unified and effective government in the fractious political environment of South Vietnam. Diem's main rivals for power and influence in Saigon were the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious groups, the Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate that had purchased control of the municipal police force from Bao Dai, and the Vietnamese National Army officer corps led by General Nguyen Van Hinh.⁷² Just a month after Diem took office, Heath warned the premier that "his government was in [an] extremely parlous situation" and "to come to terms with [the] sects without further delay."⁷³ Diem's handling of the sects did not coincide with U.S. recommendations, culminating in a standoff between Diem and Hinh in September 1954 that, in Heath's mind, confirmed doubts concerning Diem's leadership ability. Heath wrote to Dulles justifying his previous favorable assessments of Diem while arguing that Diem's conflict with Hinh had lost him the "prestige and confidence of the literate, articulate sections of the Vietnamese community," and that no one in the embassy believed he could succeed.⁷⁴ In late October 1954, Eisenhower enacted a crash aid program aimed at stabilizing the situation in Saigon that, while not explicitly representing a commitment to Diem, signaled a further shift in U.S. policy by channeling aid directly to the South Vietnamese government instead of through the French.⁷⁵

Eisenhower's program included a new presidential representative in Saigon charged with implementing U.S. aid to effect political stability, General J. Lawton

⁷¹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 67–68, 75–76.

⁷² Miller, *Misalliance*, 91–93.

⁷³ Donald R. Heath, "Telegram from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Heath) to the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Indochina* 13, no. 2, ed. John P. Glennon and Neal H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 1986, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195254v13p2>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2152.

⁷⁵ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 85–87.

Collins. The envoy's assessment of Diem initiated the debate in Washington that ultimately secured Diem as America's man in South Vietnam, setting the course that determined U.S. commitment to the region for next three decades. Collins's initial assessments were favorable, given Diem's apparent openness to U.S. reform recommendations and signs of increased domestic political support. After months of unsuccessful attempts to guide Diem to stabilize South Vietnam's political environment by broadening his government, Collins's opinion shifted, and he informed Dulles that Diem lacked "the capacity to achieve the necessary unity of purpose and action from his people which is essential to prevent South Vietnam from falling under Communist control." He further asserted Diem was not "indispensable" to realizing U.S. strategic interests in Vietnam.⁷⁶ Diem still had influential American support, however, and both Eisenhower and Dulles feared that attempts to remove Diem would dislodge the congressional support being championed by Mansfield. Collins's argument eventually prevailed, however, during a National Security Council (NSC) meeting on April 28, 1955, and Dulles sent telegrams to the U.S. embassies in Paris and Saigon outlining a plan for Diem's replacement. Dulles immediately blocked the telegrams, however, as developments in Saigon fatefully altered Washington's assessment of Diem's future.⁷⁷

On the same day as the NSC meeting, the Vietnamese National Army successfully routed Binh Xuyen forces in Saigon, causing Dulles to send the blocking telegrams to leave U.S. policy unchanged until the situation in Saigon became clear. When it became apparent that Diem had successfully eliminated the Binh Xuyen, his supporters in Washington retrenched their positions and began lobbying the State Department in support of the victorious prime minister. Mansfield released a statement declaring that Diem remained the only viable nationalist leader with whom the United States could advance its interests in the region, an opinion that Diem's other supporters in Congress endorsed. Similar support came from within the administration, as both

⁷⁶ J. Lawton Collins, "Telegram from the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Vietnam 1*, ed. John P. Glennon, Edward C. Keefer, and David W. Mabon (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 219-20, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195557v01>.

⁷⁷ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 109-13; Miller, *Misalliance*, 119-23.

O'Daniel and Young cabled to Washington arguing that a change in Saigon's leadership would result in further turmoil and that the United States should support Diem.⁷⁸ Eisenhower and Dulles were convinced, and Diem became America's man in South Vietnam. In a series of meetings with French Premier Edgar Faure in May 1955, Dulles articulated the U.S. position that Diem was the only viable nationalist leader in South Vietnam. He also expressed a justification for Diem's style of governance that became a recurrent theme of U.S. support for his regime, explaining that Western-style democracy may not be applicable in Asia, and that Diem exhibited the strong leadership required to prevent the spread of communism. At a minimum, the United States needed a strong, anticommunist leader in South Vietnam around whom U.S. military aid could prevent a DRV victory. Beginning in May 1955, the Eisenhower administration believed that strong leader was Ngo Dinh Diem.⁷⁹

B. NATIONAL ELECTIONS, THE BAO DAI REFERENDUM, AND THE CREATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

The first issue that both tested the new alliance and illustrated the tone that would characterize the relationship between U.S. officials and Diem was the national reunification election mandated by the Geneva Accords. The Geneva signatories urged U.S. officials and Diem to begin consultations that would lead to a 1956 reunification vote. Both British and French officials communicated their fear that a failure to hold the elections would cause the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the communist regime that had gained power north of the 17th parallel, to restart an armed conflict.⁸⁰ Diem was strongly opposed to the elections, declaring that his government was not a signatory of the Geneva Accords or beholden to its articles. He also believed that engaging in a dialogue with Hanoi would represent his government's recognition of the DRV's legitimacy, a position he consistently refused beginning the day he took office.⁸¹ The United States supported Diem's position, though not for the same reasons as the

⁷⁸ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 109–14; Miller, *Misalliance*, 119–23.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 115–18.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁸¹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 125; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 214–15.

prime minister. With the rise of the Cold War, democratic institutions became a primary U.S. political tool for countering Soviet influence. Chief among these tools was free national elections, as had been recently demonstrated in Germany. The situation in Vietnam was unique, however, as U.S. officials believed that Diem lacked the domestic political support to win the election, and even if he had the support, that the DRV would manipulate the election process in the north to ensure a communist victory. So instead of pushing for the election, U.S. State Department officials urged Diem to seize the initiative by calling for an election dialogue with the communists while demanding transparency safeguards so stringent that the DRV would refuse. From the U.S. perspective, Diem would be able to avoid the election without incurring criticism from the Geneva signatories.⁸² Despite U.S. urging, Diem still refused to engage with the DRV, citing his earlier argument that his government was not bound to the terms of the Geneva Accords.⁸³

The election debate coincided with an East-West summit conference in July 1955. U.S. fear that Diem's intransigence on the election issue would undermine U.S. efforts to build international support for his regime was ignited when India called for the chairmen of the 1954 Geneva Conference—Great Britain and the Soviet Union—to demand that Diem commence preparations for a reunification election. Following India's request, the United States, Great Britain, and France intensified efforts to convince Diem to hold election talks so that they could avoid conflict over the issue with the Soviet Union. Diem finally relented, releasing a statement that Saigon supported both the idea of free elections and the reunification of Vietnam. He also reiterated in the same statement that his government was not bound by the Geneva Accords. In a lucky turn of events for the United States, the Soviet representatives at the East-West summit conference did not earnestly pursue the Vietnamese election issue, and the only outcome pertinent to Saigon was a letter from Great Britain and France to Diem urging that he publically express a genuine intent to hold free elections.⁸⁴ Diem responded to the letter in October 1955

⁸² Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 124–25; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 213–14.

⁸³ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 125.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 125–27.

reiterating his previously argued position, and the election discussion deadlines defined by the Geneva Accords expired. China and the Soviet Union objected to Diem's failure to carry out the election talks and, in a November 1955 meeting, declared to U.S., British, and French officials that something had to be done to resolve the issue. The United States convinced Great Britain and France to take the position that elections were desirable, but that talks could only be held upon DRV acceptance of strict transparency conditions.⁸⁵ This was the final international discussion on the election issue, and the Geneva deadline passed without an election. Diem had exhibited a stubborn resistance to U.S. advice, creating diplomatic challenges for the United States in its relations with its British and French allies as well as the Soviet Union. The U.S. support of Diem didn't falter, however, as the need for the regime's success as a barricade against the DRV outweighed disappointment with Diem's conviction to stick with his instincts. The election issue illustrated the achievement U.S. goals by way of means defined by Diem. This relationship—U.S. goals achieved by Diem-defined means—became a recurring characteristic of the alliance.

Following the election issue, Diem immediately pursued another objective that again demonstrated the nature of the Washington-Saigon alliance. Diem assessed Bao Dai as a symbol of French interference in Vietnam and as the center of plots aimed to undermine the prime minister's authority, so he moved to replace the emperor as head of state. Diem communicated his intention to hold a referendum allowing the Vietnamese people to choose between Bao Dai and Diem as head of state during a September 1955 meeting with the newly appointed U.S. ambassador, Frederick Reinhardt. After the referendum, Diem explained, his government would produce a new constitution.⁸⁶ Reinhardt cautioned Diem that moving ahead with a referendum and producing a constitution without first holding a popular election for a general assembly was contrary to democratic principles and would inspire doubt concerning Diem's popular mandate to rule. The ambassador advised that Diem should instead move to create a popularly elected general assembly that could then address the Bao Dai issue and create a new

⁸⁵ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 125–27; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 215–17.

⁸⁶ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 127–28. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 219.

constitution.⁸⁷ Reinhardt's assessment was not universally shared in the State Department. The director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, Kenneth Young, contended that the Western conception of the appropriate balance between executive authority and popular mandate may not be applicable to Saigon, and that Diem should be afforded the space to determine what balance was right for Vietnam.⁸⁸ Dulles articulated the administration's position as a balance of the two arguments, calling for eventual democratic reforms but prioritizing the immediate need for a powerful executive to ensure political stability in South Vietnam.⁸⁹

The U.S. position on the proposed referendum ultimately proved irrelevant to Diem. Without notifying any U.S. official, Diem held the referendum on October 25, 1955, winning just over 98.2 percent of the vote.⁹⁰ Prior to the referendum, Diem's brother Nhu had orchestrated a propaganda campaign in support of the prime minister, and campaigning in support of Bao Dai was strictly forbidden.⁹¹ Even the method of voting helped to ensure a Diem victory. Voters were required to tear a piece of paper featuring the images of both Bao Dai and Diem in half, placing their selection in a ballot box and discarding the other image on the floor in full view of pro-government personnel.⁹² These methods resulted in the overwhelming victory that included Diem earning 200,000 more votes from the Saigon district than there were registered voters.⁹³ An embassy report to Washington following the referendum described how the campaigning and voting processes conflicted with democratic norms and that the outcome did not accurately capture the level of domestic support for Diem.⁹⁴

Diem exhibited a similar disregard for democratic norms during the March 1956 national assembly elections. Though pro-regime candidates did face opposition while

⁸⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 219.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Miller, *Misalliance*, 141.

⁹¹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 128–29.

⁹² Miller, *Misalliance*, 141.

⁹³ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 128–29.

⁹⁴ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 220.

campaigning, each campaign was reviewed by government electoral committees, and the Diem regime disqualified any candidate suspected of rebellious activity.⁹⁵ Diem's political party, the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM), and other pro-Diem candidates won 109 of the 123 seats, ensuring regime control of the National Assembly.⁹⁶ By October 1956, the National Assembly promulgated a new constitution that created the RVN and clearly established the presidency as the most powerful office in government. Article 3, for example, gave the president authority to establish law by decree in between assembly sessions and declare states of emergency that would suspend the rule of law.⁹⁷ The U.S. Embassy had made constitutional experts available to the Diem regime. They urged the president to institutionalize democratic norms with a clear separation of powers among the branches of government; but as with the referendum, U.S. advice had little impact on Diem's actions.⁹⁸

Diem's policies and actions concerning the reunification vote, the Bao Dai referendum, the election of the National Assembly, and the drafting of the RVN constitution inspired concern in the minds of many U.S. officials. Ambassador Reinhardt assessed Diem's government as increasingly autocratic, and he also observed that U.S. advice was having little influence on the new president of the RVN. Despite official concern with Diem's autocratic style, the Eisenhower administration had what it most desired in southern Vietnam—a strong, anticommunist leader around whom U.S. support could build a nation capable of resisting communism. Though Diem's moves to consolidate power had not adhered to democratic norms, the administration viewed the president as a burgeoning success. The official rationalization of Diem's autocratic behavior was the Western-style democracy may not be applicable to the Asian region, and that the strong leadership exhibited by Diem was more important than the immediate establishment of truly representative government.

⁹⁵ Miller, *Misalliance*, 144–45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147–48.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 146–47.

C. NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM, 1956–1958

The friction between Diem and his U.S. advisers exhibited throughout the formation of the RVN was similarly apparent in each government's approach to nation-building in the late 1950s. The two main areas that further revealed conflict between Diem and U.S. officials were land reform and security. Despite a robust U.S. aid and advisement program facilitated by the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), the U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG), the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), and various additional specialists made available by the State Department, Diem pursued a nation-building program of his own design.

The United States viewed land reform as the means by which Diem could spur economic growth in the RVN while establishing a broad base of domestic political support for the young regime. When Collins analyzed the political situation in 1954, he observed that the majority of the rural population consisted of poor farmers working on lands rented at exploitive rates to a small number of absentee landlords, and he urged Diem to quickly institute a program of land reform similar to the U.S. programs that were successfully implemented in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan.⁹⁹ In June 1955, USOM land reform specialist Wolf Ladejinsky met with Diem and expressed the same concern as Collins, but Ladejinsky reported to USOM that Diem showed little concern for the issues discussed during the meeting.¹⁰⁰ Diem appeared to relent to U.S. pressure when he issued Ordinance 57 in January 1956, an executive order instructing land reform that reflected aspects of the U.S. programs implemented elsewhere in the region. Despite initial optimism among State Department officials, the executive order did little to implement real reform. A U.S. study conducted in the late 1960s revealed that while the government had expropriated a large amount of land from absentee landlords, less than half of it was redistributed to poor farming families, and only about 100,000 out of millions of poor farming families actually profited from the ordinance.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 221; Miller, *Misalliance*, 159.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, *Misalliance*, 158.

¹⁰¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 221; Miller, *Misalliance*, 159–60.

Diem took a different view of land reform than had been articulated by Ladejinsky and other U.S. officials. First, while he agreed that the holdings of the most wealthy land owners had to be broken up, Diem asserted that seizing the holdings of smaller land owners would destroy the RVN's rural middle class. Second, he believed overpopulation and the underutilization of land were more important issues than land ownership reform. Diem's solution was instead to pursue multiple resettlement programs. Diem believed resettlement would solve the overpopulation problem while expanding and diversifying the RVN's agricultural sector. Additionally, Diem believed resettlements along the porous borders of Laos and Cambodia would increase security against potential communist incursions. Finally, Diem saw the resettlement programs as the means of instilling the ideals of individual and communal self-reliance being espoused by his regime.¹⁰² These programs resulted in the resettlement of thousands of poor farmers who were forced by government personnel to work on public development programs for no pay. Many officials both within the regime and in the State Department saw little difference between Diem's programs and the earlier forced labor programs of the French and Japanese. One iteration of Diem's resettlement campaign did promise land ownership to the participating farmers, but the awarding of ownership was contingent on the completion of years of farming for the community.¹⁰³

U.S. officials criticized the authoritarian nature of Diem's resettlement programs and attempted to convince the president that he was undermining the security and political goals he was trying to achieve among the rural population. Yet even when USOM suspended aid for the Land Development program in 1958, Diem continued his version of land reform. The total amount of U.S. aid did not change, and Saigon diverted aid from other areas to continue their resettlement programs.¹⁰⁴ Though Diem's programs significantly contributed to the rural discontent that served as the basis of communist

¹⁰² Miller, *Misalliance*, 161–63.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 174–76.

insurgency from mid-1959 onward, U.S. officials continued to justify Diem's behavior by arguing that Western notions of governance may not be applicable in Asia.¹⁰⁵

The increasing American doubt in Diem's ability inspired by his failing resettlement programs had little impact on the Eisenhower administration's support of Saigon, however, as the majority of U.S. aid and advice remained focused on building the RVN's military and internal security apparatus. One area where Diem and U.S. representatives did agree was the need to expand the RVN's military so that it would be able to resist the military capability of the DRV. The funding for U.S. military aid flowed primarily from the Commercial Import Program (CIP) and was administered by the U.S. MAAG mission.¹⁰⁶ Though the State Department initially resisted increasing the size of the U.S. military mission in South Vietnam for fear such action would be internationally perceived as contradicting the Geneva Accords, the United States instituted the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM) in 1956. TERM was designed as a program to account for the U.S. equipment that had been given to the withdrawing French troops, but it also provided U.S. military personnel to conduct training of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Additionally, the United States had agreed with France in 1954 to limit the size of the ARVN to 100,000, but at Diem's urging at the end of 1955, the Eisenhower administration agreed to raise the limit to 150,000 to compensate for the withdrawal of French troops.¹⁰⁷ As U.S. international aid budgets contracted at the end of the 1950s, the majority of U.S. aid to the RVN remained directed to the military.¹⁰⁸

Where Diem and the United States did not agree was the method of dealing with the communist operatives that remained south of the 17th parallel. State Department officials believed that a program of true land reform would generate economic satisfaction among the RVN's rural population that would translate into political support for the regime in Saigon. Therefore, the U.S. argument implied, the communist message

¹⁰⁵ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 232.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 221–22.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 222–23.

¹⁰⁸ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 164–69.

would have little appeal among the population, and internal security would be achieved.¹⁰⁹ Diem disagreed, however, believing that in addition to his resettlement programs, a campaign of strict policing and intimidation would more effectively route any threat of communist subversion.¹¹⁰ Diem established the Special Commissariat for Civic Action in March 1955, a government agency charged with training teams of government loyalists to go into villages and identify communists and communist sympathizers. Four months later, Diem launched the Denounce Communists Campaign, a pro-government indoctrination program combined with the violent targeting of suspected communists.¹¹¹ These programs produced Diem's desired outcome, as government murders and arrests reduced Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) in South Vietnam from 60,000 in 1954 to just under 5,000 by mid-1959.¹¹² But just as with the resettlement programs, Diem's efforts instilled fear and discontent among the RVN population, creating the conditions that would be exploited by communist insurgents at the end of 1959.¹¹³

The doubt among some U.S. policymakers concerning Diem's record of governance in the late 1950s was best captured in the reports of Elbridge Durbrow, Reinhardt's successor as U.S. ambassador in Saigon. At the end of 1957, Durbrow reported to Washington that Diem's authoritarian style of governance was eliminating domestic support for his regime, that he was exclusively focused on military development at the expense of economic development, and that he was increasingly resistant to U.S. advice.¹¹⁴ Not all U.S. officials agreed with Durbrow, though. The director of MAAG, General Samuel T. Williams, argued that the primary challenge facing Saigon was military in nature, and that U.S. criticism of Diem's domestic policies only undermined MAAG's efforts.¹¹⁵ Something upon which both Diem's U.S. supporters and detractors

¹⁰⁹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 230–31.

¹¹⁰ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 167.

¹¹¹ Miller, *Misalliance*, 195.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 198.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 198–99.

¹¹⁴ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 231.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

agreed was that no alternative to Diem existed in Saigon. In Diem, Washington had a strong, nationalist, anti-communist leader around whom U.S. military aid could prevent the spread of communism throughout the region. Using NSC reports, David Anderson summarized the Eisenhower administration's Vietnam policy throughout the late 1950s as working toward the development of a free, noncommunist nation in South Vietnam that would eventually reunify the entire country by way of free elections. Until then, the United States would aid in the defense of free Vietnam while working to undermine the influence of communist operatives in South Vietnam. At the very least, U.S. military aid would be used to prevent a DRV victory while the United States worked to strengthen the other free nations of Southeast Asia.¹¹⁶ Though many U.S. officials were concerned by Diem's intransigence toward U.S. advice and his increasingly authoritarian government, he was a nationalist, he was anticommunist, and he had exhibited enough cunning to remain in power. For the Eisenhower administration, that was enough to warrant continued U.S. support of Saigon.

D. CONCLUSION

From 1954–1958, Diem exhibited a style of governance that inspired concern and doubt among many U.S. officials. Diem's regime had become increasingly authoritarian, and he appeared to be disproportionately focused on internal security at the expense of economic development. His government lacked a meaningful base of domestic political support, and his brutal campaign of intimidation and repression aimed at communist operatives in the south was creating an environment of fear and distrust among the rural population.

Not all U.S. policymakers concurred with the negative assessment of Diem's government in the late 1950s. The counterargument was that criticism of Diem's conduct domestically was misplaced given conditions in Asia, and that his emphasis on security was justified by the threat from the North. This view was supported by the argument that Western-style democratic institutions may not be applicable in Asia, and the firm

¹¹⁶ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 151.

leadership exhibited by Diem was exactly what was required to employ U.S. military aid to prevent the spread of communism throughout the region.

The Eisenhower administration ultimately adopted this second argument—that Diem’s strongman leadership was exactly what the RVN needed. The administration consistently stated that a free, Western-style democracy was their ultimate goal for Vietnam, but it also conceded that the development of Vietnamese democratic institutions may require years. In the short term, the minimal U.S. objective was to prevent the spread of communism through South Vietnam long enough to strengthen the rest of the region. The Eisenhower administration’s evaluation of Diem was that, during the 1950s, he consistently exhibited the strength and cunning to remain in power and achieve that minimal goal. With continued U.S. military aid, Diem was achieving U.S. strategic objectives.

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IV. DIEM FIGHTS: COUNTERINSURGENCY IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1959–1963

In a letter to President Ngo Dinh Diem celebrating the sixth anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) dated October 26, 1961, President John F. Kennedy wrote that “America is well aware of the increased intensity which in recent months has marked the war against your people, and of the expanding scale and frequency of communist attacks” and that “the United States is determined to help Vietnam preserve its independence, protect its people against communist assassins, and build a better life through economic growth.”¹¹⁷ At the time the letter was written, the president was awaiting the return of General Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy’s military adviser who was in Saigon attempting to determine why combined U.S. and RVN efforts to defeat the communist insurgency over the previous months were failing. The letter conveys the American determination to fight communism in South Vietnam, but translating that determination into a successful strategy was a major challenge for both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

This chapter discusses President Diem’s attempts to battle the communist insurgency in South Vietnam supported by the counterinsurgency programs of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations from 1959 through the beginning of 1963. The first section examines the conditions in South Vietnam bred by Diem’s nation-building programs of the late 1950s and how the Eisenhower administration reinforced the U.S. commitment to Diem, attempting to initiate a counterinsurgency program during its final months in office. The second section discusses the Kennedy administration’s preliminary evaluation of the strategic situation in South Vietnam and its initial attempt to implement a counterinsurgency program. The third section evaluates the Taylor mission and how the general’s assessment of South Vietnam shaped the U.S. aid program for South Vietnam. The fourth section illustrates how Taylor’s recommendations were implemented in a revised U.S. counterinsurgency program, and how the effectiveness of that program was

¹¹⁷ John F. Kennedy, “Letter to President Ngo Dinh Diem on the Sixth Anniversary of the Republic of Viet-Nam,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed 12 February 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8406&st=&st1=>.

evaluated by the Kennedy administration. The final section discusses the conditions stemming from the counterinsurgency program implemented by President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Diem, Senator Mike Mansfield's assessment of those conditions, and the Battle of Ap Bac.

A. THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION AND COUNTERINSURGENCY, 1959–1960

At the beginning of 1959, it appeared that President Diem's nation-building and national security programs were inspiring the civil unrest and insecurity the programs were designed to prevent. Diem's land reform projects, culminating in the failed Agrovillage Program, shared more in common with the forced labor camps of the colonial era than any modern conception of land reform. Forced relocation and unpaid labor inspired widespread anger among the rural population focused on Diem's government.¹¹⁸ Similarly, though the program had significantly reduced the number of active members in the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) in South Vietnam, the Denounce Communists Campaign facilitated the further alienation of the rural population from the Saigon regime. The Civic Action groups that initially implemented the campaign consisted largely of northerners who had fled south in 1954, and the hostility and arrogance with which they executed their duties aroused suspicion and distrust among the southern villagers. Government attempts to convince the rural population to disavow the southern communists conflicted with the widespread memory that the Vietminh were responsible for repelling the French colonialists. Finally, the campaign was brutally violent and wrought with corruption. Presidential ordinances enacted by Diem in early 1956 permitted local officials to imprison, interrogate, and execute suspected communists or communist sympathizers outside of the judicial system. Thousands of Vietnamese were imprisoned and tortured for years without trial. Corrupt local officials often exploited the ordinances for various reasons aimed at personal gain, increasing the number of noncommunists targeted by the campaign.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Miller, *Misalliance*, 180–84.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 195–99.

Diem's campaign of violence and the growing level of discontent throughout the countryside of South Vietnam caused both the southern communists and the Central Committee in Hanoi to reevaluate their strategy in the South. Though they continued to plead with Hanoi to authorize a transition to a strategy of violent resistance, by the middle of 1958, the southern communists began organizing independently to defend themselves and engage the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).¹²⁰ The southern communists—now labeled the Viet Cong, or Vietnamese Communists, by the Diem regime—also began assassinating local government officials by the hundreds.¹²¹ At the beginning of 1959, future General Secretary of the Central Committee Le Duan toured South Vietnam and determined the concerns of southern operatives to be valid, and he advocated for a return to revolutionary warfare tactics upon returning to Hanoi. The May 1959 communique released by the Central Committee was tempered by those in Hanoi who urged caution in the pursuit of military objectives, stating that the primary focus of the southern campaign would remain political subversion. The communique did, however, recognize the security predicament of the southern communists by authorizing small-scale armed operations in support of the overall political objective. Hanoi's decision to recommence an armed struggle resulted in the return to South Vietnam of 90,000 communists who had fled north in 1954, an increase in small-scale uprising throughout the RVN countryside, and the murder of thousands of RVN government and army officials throughout 1959.¹²²

U.S. officials and the Diem regime both recognized that a new strategy was required to address the sharp rise in insurgent activity, but, repeating the pattern of the previous six years, there was strong disagreement both between Washington and Saigon and within Washington concerning the form such a strategy should take. Diem wanted to increase the size of the majority Catholic and loyal Civil Guard to undertake counterinsurgency operations, and he wanted to maintain direct control of the force

¹²⁰ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 234.

¹²¹ Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 93.

¹²² Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 235–37; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 93–94.

through his Ministry of Defense.¹²³ U.S. officials disagreed with Diem's plan, suspicious that the president was being opportunistic and attempting to increase what he viewed as a loyal force to balance against the ARVN. Additionally, many in Washington thought the Civil Guard would be more appropriately employed as an internal police force, and that counterinsurgency operations should be left to the ARVN.¹²⁴

The rising insurgency also resumed the debate in Washington concerning the root of Saigon's challenges. Though there was disagreement over whether the primary threat was the insurgency or a potential conventional invasion by the DRV, the Pentagon and U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) commander General Williams viewed the deteriorating conditions in South Vietnam as a military problem, arguing for continued military aid to secure the region.¹²⁵ Ambassador Durbrow disagreed, arguing that the crisis in Saigon was political in nature. Citing intelligence that had been captured from the Viet Cong, Durbrow communicated to Washington that a majority of the rural population was alienated from the Diem regime, and that the only development program that Diem seemed serious about was increasing the size and strength of his military. Embassy economic statistics also revealed that the RVN's economy was excessively dependent on the U.S. government, with more than 70 percent of foreign trade consisting of U.S. aid.¹²⁶

Despite Durbrow's concerns, the Eisenhower administration continued to hold to its view that Diem was a credible nationalist, an anticommunist, and that there were no viable alternative leaders in Saigon. The administration began drafting an insurgency plan that focused on military problems while instructing the embassy to continue efforts to urge Diem to broaden the political base of his administration and institute economic and military reforms.¹²⁷ Diem remained obstinate, however, refusing to institute reforms or broaden participation in what was increasingly becoming a familial dictatorship. The

¹²³ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 238.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 238–39.

¹²⁶ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 177; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 239–40.

¹²⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 240–41.

blatant corruption aimed at maintaining regime control of the national assembly exhibited in the August 1960 election was further evidence that Diem was unconcerned with liberalizing his government.¹²⁸ The political environment continued to deteriorate in Saigon through the summer and fall of 1960. Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs J. Graham Parsons summarized the circumstances he observed during an October 1960 visit to Saigon as “the eleventh hour.”¹²⁹

On November 10, 1960, ARVN paratroopers led by Colonel Vuong Van Dong stormed the presidential palace in a poorly coordinated and ultimately unsuccessful attempted coup. Though the paratroopers successfully isolated Diem and demanded a promise for reforms in return for the president’s release, loyal ARVN forces entered the capital and ended the coup on November 12.¹³⁰ The attempted coup did not inspire Diem to reform its government, but it did cause a major strain in U.S.-RVN relations. During the coup, Durbrow had remained neutral, refusing Diem’s request to deploy U.S. Marines and—with Washington’s consent—attempted to facilitate a compromise with the paratroopers that would somehow include Diem in a new government. Durbrow’s decision not to immediately support him enraged Diem and made him suspicious of the U.S. embassy’s commitment to his government.¹³¹ The coup also restarted the strategy debate between the State Department and the Pentagon concerning the U.S. commitment to Diem and the nature of the problems that were undermining the war effort. The debate was deferred while the Eisenhower administration spent its final months in office focused on the deteriorating situation in Laos and prepared to turn over to the newly elected Kennedy administration.¹³²

Through its last day in office, the Eisenhower administration maintained the policy that Ngo Dinh Diem was the only viable leader around whom to build a noncommunist nation in South Vietnam, and thus to prevent the dominos from falling

¹²⁸ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 182.

¹²⁹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 242.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 242–43.

¹³¹ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 192–93; Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 243.

¹³² Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 243.

throughout Southeast Asia. The U.S. aid program had been predominately military in nature, and Diem's refusal to accede to American advice to reform his government and institute economic reforms was received by the administration with patience as a culturally appropriate style of governance. By the early days of 1961, that policy had helped to produce a politically unstable RVN. Southern Vietnamese communists, now united with noncommunist, antigovernment nationalists under the banner of the National Liberation Front (NLF), exploited those conditions to wage a robust and expanding insurgency. Though the Eisenhower administration had begun to address the need for a counterinsurgency program, it passed to its successor an incomplete strategy and a Diem regime highly distrustful of U.S. intentions in South Vietnam.

B. THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH TO COUNTERINSURGENCY

The Kennedy administration entered the White House with a theory of containment that differed from Eisenhower's in terms of means, but maintained the primacy of South Vietnam's survival in the achievement of U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia. The Kennedy administration's containment strategy, known as "Flexible Response," aimed to establish the U.S. ability to respond to a Soviet threat in any region of the globe without risking nuclear war.¹³³ This strategy was shaped in part by Kennedy's belief that Third World revolutionary conflicts were a frontline of the Cold War, a conviction reinforced by Premier Nikita Khrushchev's January 1961 promise of Soviet support for "wars of national liberation."¹³⁴ Within this context, South Vietnam still represented the domino that, if left to fall, would lead to the loss of the entire Southeast Asian region to the communist bloc. Though he did believe that the United States was overextended in its Southeast Asian commitments, Kennedy also believed that failure to see those commitments through would send a disastrous signal of U.S. weakness to its allies elsewhere in the world.¹³⁵

¹³³ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 251.

¹³⁴ William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 59.

¹³⁵ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 251; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 211.

Immediately following his inauguration, Kennedy received a dire appraisal of the situation in South Vietnam from Brigadier General Lansdale. Having just returned from a tour of Saigon, Lansdale reported that recent Viet Cong victories in the regions around Saigon and popular discontent with the Diem regime were evidence that both governments needed to adopt an immediate change in strategy to avoid a communist victory. In his assessment, Lansdale made it clear that Diem remained the only capable leader in Saigon. Furthermore, he asserted that after his conduct during the November 1960 coup, Durbrow no longer enjoyed Diem's trust and should be replaced as ambassador.¹³⁶ The administration also received a draft counterinsurgency plan from the U.S. embassy reflecting Diem's request to increase the ARVN by 20,000 and increase funding for a MAAG-led training program for the Civil Guard.¹³⁷ Following a meeting with his advisers on January 28, 1961, Kennedy authorized the requested increase in ARVN size and the MAAG training program for the Civil Guard. The president also directed the formation of an interagency task force to advise the administration and the embassy on the implementation of a more complete counterinsurgency program. Finally, Kennedy designated Frederick Nolting as Durbrow's replacement as U.S. Ambassador to the RVN. The meeting did not involve debate concerning Diem's viability as an ally in South Vietnam, indicating the administration's concurrence with Lansdale's assessment that Diem remained the only option in Saigon.¹³⁸

While the administration switched its focus away from Vietnam to the deterioration of the Royal Lao government and the possibility of a communist Pathet Lao victory in Laos, the newly established Vietnam interagency task force set to developing a more comprehensive counterinsurgency and aid program for South Vietnam. The main conflict within the task force reflected the same debate that had characterized discussions of South Vietnam—whether the primary challenge to the Saigon regime was political in nature. Some officials in Washington, like Special Counsel to the President Theodore C. Sorenson, believed that the key to a successful counterinsurgency program was political

¹³⁶ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 249; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 66–67.

¹³⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 249.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 250–52.

reform. Diem had inspired some hope within the administration in early February 1961 when he announced plans to reform his government and delegate authority to the local level, but that hope quickly vanished as Diem refused to expand government authority beyond the inner circle of his family.¹³⁹ Prior to being relieved by Nolting, Durbrow recommended to Washington that future aid should be made contingent upon Diem's assurance to reform his government and implement the U.S. counterinsurgency program.¹⁴⁰ Military leaders like MAAG chief General Lionel C. McGarr and Lansdale asserted that the primary threat to the Saigon regime was a security problem that needed to be immediately addressed with military aid, and that political reforms would be meaningless absent a secure environment.¹⁴¹ The task force report submitted to the president in April 1961 reflected the emphasis on the military nature of the problem, calling for an increase in the MAAG mission to support training of the 20,000 additional ARVN troops for counterinsurgency operations and U.S. financial support of the entire Civil Guard. On May 11, 1961, Kennedy approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM)-52, which approved the MAAG increase and financial support of the Civil Guard. It also directed further study of possible future increases in ARVN size and instructed Nolting to commence discussions with Diem concerning a possible defense treaty.¹⁴² The Kennedy administration's first official policy on Vietnam emphasized the military nature of the problem, recognized Diem as a viable ally, and reaffirmed Eisenhower's evaluation of Vietnam as critical to U.S. strategic interests.

Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson traveled to Saigon in May 1961 to deliver a letter of presidential support to Diem that outlined the U.S. counterinsurgency program. The letter also urged the president to adopt a program of economic and political reform. Diem welcomed the news of increased military support, but he resisted the reform by asserting he would pursue reforms that were suitable for his country. He also stated the RVN had no interest in entering into a defense treaty with the United States. Upon

¹³⁹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 252–53.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 254–55.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 258–59.

returning to Washington, Johnson reported to Kennedy that the dire economic conditions of South Vietnam, and not communism, were the main threat to Diem's regime.¹⁴³

Shortly after Johnson's departure, Diem submitted a request to Washington for an increase to the ARVN of 30,000 troops.¹⁴⁴ Diem's request coincided with a deteriorating situation in Laos in favor of the communists, and administration officials began to fear that communist infiltration of South Vietnam through Laos would increase.¹⁴⁵ Diem's request and the Laos situation inspired the Kennedy administration to reevaluate the U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam task force's evaluation revisited the debate concerning the military versus political nature of Saigon's challenges and if military aid should be exploited to force Diem to institute reforms lest he lose U.S. support. The task force's conclusions reflected the conventional wisdom of the past few years: the United States must prevent further communist victory in Southeast Asia by strengthening its allies, the DRV was the primary threat, and the United States should be prepared to intervene militarily in the event of a conventional invasion by the DRV.¹⁴⁶ A second presidential letter to Diem in August 1961 conveyed a commitment to dealing with the problem militarily, informing the president that Kennedy had authorized the additional increase in ARVN troops. That same month, the administration released NSAM-65, which, while conceding that security was pointless absent a meaningful reform program, underscored that the primary aim of the U.S. aid program was national security. The proposal of using of military aid to force Diem to institute reforms was rejected.¹⁴⁷

C. THE TAYLOR MISSION

As the summer of 1961 came to a close, the Kennedy administration began receiving worrying reports of increased infiltration of communist personnel and supplies into Southern Vietnam. Diem expressed similar concern, and following successful raids carried out by the NLF in September 1961 within miles of Saigon, the president reversed

¹⁴³ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 261; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 73–74.

¹⁴⁴ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 261.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 264–65.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 261–63.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 263–64.

position and submitted a request to Washington for a bilateral defense treaty. The administration delayed responding to the request as it received reports from Saigon of widespread discontent with the Diem regime.¹⁴⁸ Desiring a clearer picture of the situation in South Vietnam, Kennedy ordered a delegation led by General Maxwell Taylor on a fact-finding mission to Saigon in October 1961. Taylor's initial report transmitted from Saigon painted a grim picture. He reported that the South Vietnamese had no confidence in Diem's government or in the U.S. commitment to the country's survival, and that the communists were exploiting the situation and nearing a victory by subversion. In interviews with multiple government and ARVN officials, Taylor repeatedly heard evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with the Diem regime and the president's refusal to reform his government or institute meaningful economic or social reforms. General Duong Van Minh, commander of the ARVN Field Command, told Taylor that Diem's religious partiality in favor of Catholics and his attempts to control the population through inept local officials had lost him the support of the entire South Vietnamese population.¹⁴⁹

Taylor returned to Washington in early November 1961 and delivered his final report to the president. Viewing the crisis in South Vietnam as a security problem, Taylor's recommendations were mostly military in nature. His report suggested that additional presidential letters of support be sent to Diem along with a joint resolution of support from Congress that communicated a commitment to preventing a communist victory in South Vietnam. It also recommended that the administration publicize the communist infiltration of the south and seek condemnation of the DRV by the United Nations for violating the 1954 Geneva Accords. Taylor called for the provision of additional air, naval, and logistics units to the RVN along with an 8,000-man contingent of U.S. troops. Taylor explained that the troops would aid in disaster relief efforts following a recent severe flood of the Mekong Delta region and, more importantly, serve as a show of good faith to the Diem regime. Reflecting the Kennedy administration's view that the communist insurgency in South Vietnam was a part of the global campaign

¹⁴⁸ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 265.

¹⁴⁹ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 103; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 107–9.

being waged from the Soviet Union, Taylor suggested urging Moscow to exert its influence over Hanoi to end the armed resistance. Finally, Taylor recommend that a more aggressive stance be taken with Diem to compel the president to reform the RVN government to include a broader base of political participation.¹⁵⁰ Kennedy did not react to any of the recommendations with the exception of communicating that he was absolutely opposed to the direct involvement of U.S. troops, and he referred Taylor's report to his advisers for further study.¹⁵¹

The debate over the Taylor report centered on the issue of U.S. troop involvement. Secretary of State Dean Rusk supported a majority of Taylor's proposals, especially the suggestion to communicate U.S. determination in Southeast Asia to Moscow. He assessed that the direct involvement of U.S. troops was too large a commitment to investment in the Diem regime, given the precariousness of the Diem regime and the possibility that such a move could provoke a Soviet or Chinese military response.¹⁵² Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, articulating an opinion shared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, took an opposing view. Not only did he support each of Taylor's recommendations including the deployment of U.S. troops, McNamara believed that the proposed contingent size was insufficient to address the RVN's national security deficiencies and advised the president to consider 8,000 troops the first step in a much larger deployment.¹⁵³

The final draft of a joint memo from the Departments of Defense and State on the issue was submitted for the president's consideration on November 11, 1961. The memo conveyed the logic of Eisenhower's domino theory, adding that the loss of South Vietnam to the DRV would lead not only to Southeast Asia's assimilation into the communist bloc but to the erosion of allies' trust in the United States throughout the world. It was imperative, therefore, for the United States to commit to ensuring the continued independence of the RVN, even if to do so would require the deployment of

¹⁵⁰ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 105–7.

¹⁵¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 272.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

U.S. forces. The memo recognized the weakness of the Diem regime, but it also pointed out that the primary challenge in South Vietnam was defeating the communist insurgency to establish a stable national security.¹⁵⁴ The debate among Kennedy's foreign policy advisers never addressed the argument concerning whether it was insufficient military aid or Diem's refusal to adequately address the political challenges plaguing his nation that was at the root of the crisis in Saigon, and the final memo continued the Kennedy policy that South Vietnam was a security problem that called for a military solution. Also, despite reports of Diem's ineffective and failing government having played a large role in motivating the president to send a fact-finding mission to Saigon, and that Taylor had returned with reports that Diem's domestic support was nearly nonexistent, the majority of the U.S. foreign policy staff appears to have accepted that increased security would help to rectify Diem's deficiencies.¹⁵⁵ The administration was certainly not blind to Diem's weaknesses, and some leading officials in the State Department were vocal in opposition to recommendations for an increased commitment to the Diem regime.¹⁵⁶ The final memo, however, reflected the assessment that Diem remained the appropriate focal point for a U.S. military aid program.

The Kennedy administration's final opinions concerning the Taylor report were reflected in NSAM-111 issued on November 22, 1961. The president endorsed each of Taylor's recommendations with the exception of those that called for the direct commitment of U.S. troops and a public declaration of U.S. commitment to preventing the fall of South Vietnam to communism. Kennedy agreed with Rusk's assessment concerning the commitment of U.S. troops, adding that there would be no Congressional support for such an endeavor. He did, however, approve further study to prepare for the potential deployment of U.S. troops to South Vietnam in the future.¹⁵⁷ With the structure of the U.S. military aid program to the RVN in place, the Kennedy administration turned to planning its implementation through a revised counterinsurgency campaign.

¹⁵⁴ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 111–13.

¹⁵⁵ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 276.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 113–14.

D. REVISION OF U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Following the Kennedy administration's endorsement of the new U.S. military aid program to South Vietnam, Nolting met with Diem to discuss the details of the policy. Nolting communicated that the United States expected to be consulted in the determination of any RVN military, political, and economic policy that concerned national security. He also explained that the availability of future aid would be contingent upon the cooperation of the Diem regime in the broadening of its government. While Diem initially appeared receptive to the demands, Nolting later learned from a member of Diem's staff that the president feared the shift in policy was precursor to a U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam.¹⁵⁸ On November 22, 1961, the U.S. embassy presented Diem with a series of recommended reforms to broaden his government, the substance of which was nearly identical to the suggestions forwarded to Diem by General Collins in 1954. They included broadening Diem's cabinet to include opposition politicians, the easing of strict censorship laws to appease Saigon's intelligentsia, and a number of economic reforms to win the support of the rural population. Diem expressed outrage at the suggestions, telling Nolting that this attempt at U.S. interference smacked of colonialism and that such reforms were unsuitable for Vietnamese society. Furthermore, Diem reemphasized his conviction that the true source of his regime's instability was the insecurity caused by the communist insurgents, and that addressing the security issue was the priority of his government. In the early days of the new U.S. aid program in South Vietnam, the U.S. embassy was engaged in the same exact argument with the Diem regime that had beset the Eisenhower administration in 1954.¹⁵⁹

While the embassy in Saigon continued to urge Diem to broaden his government, officials in Washington debated the new counterinsurgency strategy. Over the objections of State Department officials who believed that the establishment of a new military command in Vietnam would signal too large a focus on security to Diem, the Kennedy administration commissioned the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)

¹⁵⁸ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 277–78.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

in January 1962 to execute the counterinsurgency campaign.¹⁶⁰ A few months earlier, MAAG officials had developed a three-phased plan that called for clearing communist-held areas with conventional forces, shifting responsibility for the cleared area's security to the Civil Guard, and ultimately transferring control to civilian government officials who would institute economic reform programs under the protection of the Self-Defense Corps.¹⁶¹ During his tour of Saigon, General Taylor had discussed the plan with Diem, but the president was resistant, declaring his government already had a strategy in place.¹⁶² That plan was the design of Robert G. K. Thompson, a British adviser that had briefed the Pentagon on the details of his counterinsurgency operation before traveling to Saigon in November 1960. Contrary to the MAAG plan, Thompson's strategy called for the gradual reclamation of the countryside through the construction of strategic hamlets with a strong emphasis on the Self-Defense Corps, who would train the rural population to defend themselves.¹⁶³ The Pentagon criticized the plan for underemphasizing conventional military operations, and the State Department was concerned the reliance on the Self-Defense Corps inappropriately afforded Diem direct control of the operations.¹⁶⁴ The plan had support in the White House, however, and the final plan approved by the Kennedy administration and authorized by Diem on March 19, 1962 was a revision of Thompson's original strategy. It centered on a strategic hamlet construction program in South Vietnam's rural regions supported by U.S. aid, materials, and advice.¹⁶⁵

Though the two governments had agreed upon a counterinsurgency strategy, the visions of implementation varied greatly between Washington and Saigon. At the end of March 1962, Diem installed his brother Nhu as the chief of the program, now called Operation Sunrise. While U.S. officials urged him to pursue a gradual program to prove the strategic hamlet concept, Nhu began the widespread construction of hamlets

¹⁶⁰ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 279.

¹⁶¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 279; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 168.

¹⁶² Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 279.

¹⁶³ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 279–80; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 167–68.

¹⁶⁴ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 280.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

throughout the country.¹⁶⁶ The Kennedy administration attempted to monitor the program through provincial survey teams, but Diem restricted the scope of their reporting to military matters and denied access to local government officials, limiting their access to the ministry officials in Saigon. Even with restricted monitoring capability, officials at the U.S. embassy and MACV began to see indications that Diem and Nhu were replicating the errors of the failed Agrovillage Program by forcibly relocating the rural population, providing insufficient supplies to build the hamlets, and demanding that the population build the hamlets without compensation because, according to Diem, “the peasants had plenty of time on their hands and needed no pay.”¹⁶⁷ Notwithstanding these worrying developments, the administration began to evaluate Operation Sunrise as a success. Returning from a visit to Saigon in May 1962, McNamara was enthusiastic about the strategic hamlet program.¹⁶⁸ Administration officials had also soundly rejected the option of attempting to replicate the Laotian negotiated settlement in South Vietnam, citing the Pentagon’s optimistic statistical evaluation of Operation Sunrise’s effectiveness.¹⁶⁹ Kennedy even directed McNamara to develop a plan to beginning withdrawing U.S. military advisers from South Vietnam.¹⁷⁰ The Kennedy administration believed it had finally found the path to achieving its strategic goals in South Vietnam.

E. THE MANSFIELD TRIP AND THE BATTLE OF AP BAC

By the end of 1962, administration officials began to doubt the hopeful assessment of South Vietnam being espoused by McNamara and the Pentagon. Apparently, the information transmitted from Saigon did not represent a truthful assessment of Operation Sunrise. For example, during McNamara’s visit to Saigon in May 1962, MACV chief General Paul Haskins had changed a map for the secretary’s intelligence briefing to significantly understate the extent of Viet Cong control of the

¹⁶⁶ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 283.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 288–89.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 290.

countryside.¹⁷¹ The U.S. mission in Hue described the program in the central regions of South Vietnam as “pure façade,” reporting that Ngo Dinh Canh, whom Nhu had charged with implementing Operation Sunrise in the region, spent more time expanding his personal militia than erecting strategic hamlets. The mission also reported that the forced labor appeared to be inspiring nearly one-third of the hamlet’s new residents to support the Viet Cong.¹⁷² The embassy in Saigon also communicated to Washington that optimistic assessments of the operation were false, the situation favored the Viet Cong, and the source of the operation’s failure was the estrangement of the rural population by the policies of Diem and Nhu.

In November 1962, Kennedy requested that Senator Mike Mansfield lead a senatorial delegation to South Vietnam in an effort to evaluate the true progress of Operation Sunrise and the political environment in Saigon. When he returned to Washington in December, Mansfield submitted a troubling report to the president and Congress. He assessed that despite years of intensive American aid, the situation in South Vietnam was much worse than in 1954. A former stalwart defender of Diem in Congress, Mansfield now believed that he was incapable of facilitating U.S. interests in the region, and in his old age was passing power to his brother, Nhu. If Operation Sunrise continued to fail, Mansfield argued, the only way to save South Vietnam would be with a large-scale commitment of U.S. troops. He concluded by suggesting that unless the position in South Vietnam was critical to U.S. strategic interests, the administration should consider pursuing a policy of neutralization for the entire Southeast Asia region. Though the president was initially shocked and angered by the report, he ultimately concurred with Mansfield’s assessment.¹⁷³

Shortly after Mansfield’s trip, the United States received additional evidence challenging the effectiveness of its military aid program at the Battle of Ap Bac. On January 2, 1963, the ARVN learned the location of a contingent of Viet Cong insurgents at a series of hamlets in the Dinh Tuong province from intercepted radio transmissions. A

¹⁷¹ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 171.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁷³ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 291.

force consisting of an ARVN battalion, two Civil Guard battalions, and a company of ARVN armored personnel carriers led by General Huynh Van Cao and advised by U.S. Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann attacked the hamlets in an attempt to clear the insurgents. The Viet Cong contingent of 300 men was well prepared for a defense, shooting down a total of five U.S. helicopters carrying ARVN troops. The aggressive and disciplined Viet Cong firepower halted the ARVN advance, and the armored personnel carriers refused to advance and rescue the survivors from the downed helicopters. With the ARVN paralyzed and unwilling to fight, the Viet Cong fighters escaped during the night, suffering 18 casualties compared to the ARVN's 80 along with three U.S. advisers.¹⁷⁴ The Kennedy administration now had evidence that not only was the U.S. counterinsurgency failing to produce positive results, but that the conventional military buildup that had been occurring in South Vietnam for nearly eight years was similarly failing to achieve its objective.

F. CONCLUSION

Examination of U.S. foreign policy in South Vietnam from 1959 through the beginning of 1963 reveals three similarities between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations' strategies for containing communism in Southeast Asia: the evaluation of the strategic importance of South Vietnam, the framing of the situation as a military problem, and the suitability of the Diem regime as the focal point of U.S. containment policy.

Though Eisenhower's New Look and Kennedy's Flexible Response represented different and sometimes conflicting approaches to containment policy, the application of both strategies to Southeast Asia resulted in similar programs in South Vietnam. Both administrations assessed South Vietnam as a frontline in the Cold War and equated its potential loss as a crisis in terms of Eisenhower's domino theory. Both presidents were also adamantly opposed to sending U.S. troops to South Vietnam, believing the appropriate course of action to be the application of U.S. military aid and advice to strengthen the RVN as a bulwark against communism.

¹⁷⁴ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 180–82.

Eisenhower and Kennedy understood South Vietnam's primary challenge as a national security problem that required a military solution. Both administrations also had high-level officials that voiced their disagreement with that assessment. Ambassador Durbrow communicated to both Eisenhower and Kennedy that he believed the root of the problem was the Saigon regime, and that a program of military aid was wasted effort without meaningful political, economic, and social reforms from Diem. Officials at the embassy time and again reported that Diem's autocratic style of leadership was alienating the South Vietnamese population and that his government enjoyed little to no domestic support. Still, the final aid programs approved by the White House from 1959 through 1962 emphasized the primacy of defeating the insurgency militarily. Each version of the program did direct the embassy to continue urging Diem to broaden his government and institute economic reforms to win over the rural population, but the president remained intransigent. Though Kennedy eventually authorized Ambassador Nolting to use U.S. military aid as bargaining chip to compel reforms from Diem, the president never yielded, and funds and equipment flowed uninterrupted from Washington to Saigon.

Finally, whenever the debate arose concerning whether or not Diem was the appropriate leader around whom to center U.S. policy, the same argument ended the discussion: he was anticommunist, he was a nationalist, he was independent, and there was no viable alternative in Saigon. His apparent weaknesses were not enough to alter the administrations' strategic evaluation of South Vietnam, so despite his refusal to accede to U.S. advice and his conviction to form the RVN in his own image, Diem and his government enjoyed the continued support of the United States from 1959 through the end of 1962. In the early days of 1963, however, both Senator Mansfield's dire assessment of South Vietnam and the disastrous performance of the ARVN troops at Ap Bac signaled the beginning of the end of the Diem experiment.

V. THE FAILURE OF THE DIEM EXPERIMENT

During a televised interview with Walter Cronkite on September 2, 1963, President John F. Kennedy shared his analysis of the U.S.-Republic of Vietnam (RVN) war effort against the Viet Cong, stating that the “[United States is] prepared to continue to assist [the RVN], but I don’t think that the war can be won unless the people support the effort and, in my opinion, in the last 2 months, the government has gotten out of touch with the people.”¹⁷⁵ When asked if he thought the RVN still had an opportunity to reform, gain domestic support, and defeat the communists, the president answered in the affirmative, stating that “with changes in policy and perhaps with personnel I think it can. If it doesn’t make those changes, I think the chances of winning it would not be very good.”¹⁷⁶ During 1963, the Kennedy administration began to conclude that the failures of the Diem regime were undermining the military campaign against the Viet Cong. This assessment did not translate directly into support for a coup, however, as the administration struggled to evaluate viable successors to Diem in Saigon and the potential for a coup’s success. The complex and volatile nature of Saigon’s political environment in 1963 made the United States ambivalent about a coup, an ambivalence that persisted even after the Kennedy administration signaled support to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) generals who ultimately deposed Diem.

This chapter evaluates the erosion of the U.S.-RVN partnership during 1963, which resulted in the Kennedy administration’s assent to an ARVN coup. The first section illustrates how differences between Washington’s and Saigon’s evaluations of the Diem regime’s effectiveness and the main challenges facing the government following the Mansfield trip and the Battle of Ap Bac led to the deterioration of U.S.-RVN relations during the early months of 1963. The second and third sections discuss the Buddhist Crisis and how Diem’s violent crackdown on South Vietnamese Buddhists led the Kennedy administration to support ARVN coup plans for August 1963. The fourth

¹⁷⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Transcript of Broadcast with Walter Cronkite Inaugurating a CBS Television News Program,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed 5 March 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9388&st=&st1=> .

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

section examines the period following the ARVN generals' postponement of the August coup plans and the Kennedy administration's return to a strongly divided debate concerning U.S. support of Diem. The final section illustrates how, just as the Kennedy administration decided to pursue a policy not to encourage a coup, the ARVN generals informed the embassy that a coup was imminent, beginning the series of events that led to Diem's removal and assassination on November 2, 1963.

A. DECLINE OF THE U.S.–RVN PARTNERSHIP, JANUARY–MAY 1963

Despite the negative tone of Mansfield's report and the poor performance of the ARVN at Ap Bac, the Kennedy administration remained sharply divided over U.S. policy in South Vietnam during the early months of 1963. Roger Hilsman, the director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, returned from a trip to Saigon in January with the assessment that discontent with the Diem regime was escalating both among the population and within the senior levels of government.¹⁷⁷ Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles wrote to the president in March arguing that the United States should signal its receptiveness to "alternative leadership" in Saigon if Diem did not implement reforms.¹⁷⁸ Other administration officials remained resistant to adopting a policy of regime change, citing a lack of viable replacements for Diem. In an April visit to Washington, British counterinsurgency specialist Robert G. K. Thompson told administration officials that removal of Diem would ensure a communist victory within months.¹⁷⁹ Officials wary of regime change also cited U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) reports that war efforts against the Viet Cong in the countryside were showing promising improvement. Those assessments were supported by an April National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that also optimistically evaluated the war effort.¹⁸⁰ Despite the rising tension in Saigon, the administration concluded that the

¹⁷⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 293.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

challenges posed by the Diem regime were tolerable given the continued success of the military operation against the Viet Cong.¹⁸¹

In Saigon, Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu did not concur with the negative U.S. assessment of the ARVN's performance at Ap Bac. In the final months of 1962, both Diem and Nhu began to believe that the battle for South Vietnam's countryside was moving steadily in the government's favor. They also believed that 1963 would bring a final Viet Cong effort to displace the regime, and they assessed the Battle of Ap Bac as the beginning of that effort. Nhu conceded that mistakes had been made at Ap Bac, but he also argued that the ARVN would use the lessons of the battle to ensure the future defeat of the Viet Cong. Pro-regime newspapers in Saigon even published headlines that claimed the ARVN had prevailed at Ap Bac.¹⁸² For Diem and Nhu, defeat of the insurgency was prelude to their larger plans for combating communism in 1963. They believed the North Vietnamese population would be inspired to replicate the supposedly successful Strategic Hamlet Program in the North, repelling the communists from the countryside and facilitating Vietnam's reunification under Saigon's leadership.¹⁸³ The brothers also intended to expand their military campaign to target the communists in Laos.¹⁸⁴ Where U.S. officials found reason for cautious optimism regarding the counterinsurgency campaign, combined with grave concern regarding the government in Saigon, the Ngo brothers found evidence that the realization of their vision of Vietnam's reunification was imminent.

High confidence in the effectiveness of their policies shaped the reactions of both Diem and Nhu to the publication of the Mansfield report. Assuming that the Mansfield report signaled an impending change in U.S. policy away from supporting the regime, both Diem and Nhu began to push for a U.S. withdrawal that coincided with their plans.¹⁸⁵ During 1962, the number of civilians working at the U.S. Operations Mission

¹⁸¹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 293.

¹⁸² Miller, *Misalliance*, 251–52.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

(USOM) had doubled and the number of military advisers working a MACV had increased tenfold. The brothers compared the large U.S. mission to French colonialists, accusing the United States of attempting to make South Vietnam a protectorate and calling for a reduction in the mission's size.¹⁸⁶ Nhu made these complaints public in a May 1963 *Washington Post* interview in which he claimed half of the U.S. advisers in South Vietnam were not required.¹⁸⁷ Diem and Nhu also moved to limit both the type of aid that South Vietnam accepted from the United States and the U.S. role in determining how that aid should be employed. Specifically, Diem informed Ambassador Nolting that U.S. aid would no longer flow through the Provincial Rehabilitation Committees. These three-member panels, which consisted of a Vietnamese province chief and representatives from MACV and USOM, enabled U.S. advisers to play a large role in shaping the counterinsurgency campaign.¹⁸⁸

Washington's reaction to Nhu's interview and Diem's proposed aid limitations was fervently negative. Some within the administration saw the *Washington Post* interview as proof that Nhu was unequivocally anti-American.¹⁸⁹ Rufus Phillips, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative working in Saigon as a counterinsurgency adviser, asserted in a memo that removal of U.S. influence in the counterinsurgency campaign by eliminating the Provincial Rehabilitation Committees would ensure a Viet Cong victory.¹⁹⁰ Tensions between the United States and the RVN were higher than ever, and the U.S. embassy in Saigon feared the partnership was nearing a "breaking point."¹⁹¹

The Ngo brothers apparently did not expect such a strong, negative response from the Kennedy administration, and they quickly moved to ease the tension in the U.S.-RVN partnership. Nhu claimed to have been misrepresented by the authors of the *Washington*

¹⁸⁶ Miller, *Misalliance*, 253.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

Post interview, withdrawing his demand for a reduction in size of the U.S. mission.¹⁹² On May 17, Diem and Nolting announced that the two governments had reaffirmed their commitment to the combined counterinsurgency effort.¹⁹³ Though a break in the partnership had been avoided, by the spring of 1963, the U.S.-RVN relationship was at a low point, and the differences between Washington and Saigon concerning the U.S. role in South Vietnam remained unsettled.¹⁹⁴ It is against this backdrop of deteriorating relations that the Buddhist Crisis occurred.

B. THE BUDDHIST CRISIS

The Buddhist Crisis began at a demonstration outside of a Hue radio station on May 8, 1963, but it was the result of growing tensions between Saigon and the Buddhist community of South Vietnam that began in the early days of the Diem regime. Not only concerned with preserving their religious freedoms, South Vietnamese Buddhists had their own conceptions of Vietnamese nationalism and the role that Buddhism could play in Vietnamese culture. They viewed the Diem regime's nation-building campaign—specifically, the land reform developments built with forced labor and designed to espouse self-reliance—as a thinly veiled attempt to impose Catholic values on the majority Buddhist population of South Vietnam.¹⁹⁵ Diem had surprised his critics, however, by adopting a conciliatory stance toward the Buddhists as he formed his government, appointing several Buddhists to his cabinet and to senior positions within the ARVN corps of generals. He also authorized and funded a new place of Buddhist worship in Saigon, the Xa Loi pagoda.¹⁹⁶

Though Diem attempted to coopt the Buddhist community into the RVN with conciliatory policies, he was often undermined by the other Catholics within his government. The RVN bureaucracy consisted primarily of Catholics, many of whom treated their Buddhist compatriots with bigotry and prejudice. This treatment confirmed

¹⁹² Miller, *Misalliance*, 259.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 262–63.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

the fears of many Buddhists that Saigon was intent on imposing Catholic values throughout the country.¹⁹⁷ Chief among those undermining Diem's efforts with the Buddhist community was his older brother, the Archbishop of Hue, Ngo Dinh Thuc. Upon his appointment to Archbishop, Thuc announced his intentions to transform the central region of South Vietnam into a bastion of Catholic faith, and he and his followers were soon accused by Buddhist leaders of forcing non-Catholics in the region to convert.¹⁹⁸ It was at an anniversary celebration of Thuc's promotion to bishop that the specific events leading to the May 8 demonstration began.

Early in his administration, Diem attempted to promote the primacy of the state by ordering that, when flown, religious flags must be accompanied by a larger RVN flag, but both Buddhists and Catholics often ignored this provision.¹⁹⁹ On May 6, Vietnamese Catholics in Hue and throughout the central region blatantly ignored the order, draping the cities in Catholic flags to celebrate the anniversary of Thuc's promotion.²⁰⁰ The next day, in response to the brazen disregard for the flag law led by his brother, Diem banned the use of religious flags of any faith denomination within South Vietnam. The ban coincided with the May 8 observance of Wesak Day, the annual celebration of Buddha that is often accompanied by the extensive use of religious flags. Regardless of his intention, Diem signaled a pro-Catholic inclination of the Saigon regime hours before one of the Buddhists' most important religious celebrations. The ban added a spirit of antigovernment protest to the planned celebratory events, culminating in the demonstration at the Hue radio station.²⁰¹

On the evening of May 8, 1963, a large crowd of Buddhists assembled around the radio station in Hue to listen to a Wesak Day broadcast celebrating Buddha that was scheduled to begin at eight o'clock. The broadcast did not begin as scheduled, however, because the station manager refused to play the tape brought by the Buddhist leaders that

¹⁹⁷ Miller, *Misalliance*, 263–64.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 266–67.

included antigovernment sentiments. The celebratory gathering quickly became an anti-regime protest, and police and ARVN forces were dispatched to the station. Soon after the government security forces arrived and began attempting to control the crowd, a large explosion followed by a burst of gunshots caused chaos, and nine protestors were killed. The government forces blamed communist operatives, but numerous witnesses claimed that the government forces had initiated the violence. The killings at Hue triggered the beginning of a nation-wide Buddhist protest against the Diem regime.²⁰²

Immediately following the demonstration at Hue, Buddhist leaders drafted the “Manifesto of the Vietnamese Buddhist Faithful,” a series of demands calling for equal treatment of Catholics and Buddhists within the RVN.²⁰³ Though he had come to suspect that the Viet Cong were responsible for the violence at Hue, Diem agreed to resolve the Buddhists’ complaints through dialogue, believing that negotiations would be the quickest way to ease tensions in South Vietnam and would simultaneously provide the government an opportunity to weaken the Buddhist resistance movement by focusing on the disagreements among its leaders. Over the next month, government officials met with a committee of Buddhist leaders to discuss their demands. On June 6, Diem and the Buddhist leadership declared that negotiations were nearly complete and that an equitable resolution should be expected soon.²⁰⁴ Despite Diem’s apparent commitment to negotiations, the settlement was quickly derailed by members of his own inner circle. Two days after Diem’s announcement, the Woman’s Solidarity Group—a pro-government organization under the direction of Nhu’s wife, Madame Nhu—issued a resolution that characterized the Buddhist leadership as antigovernment agitators and criticized the government for being unduly compliant in the negotiations.²⁰⁵ The effect of the group’s resolution was amplified by Ngo Dinh Nhu, who ensured that it was widely distributed among the newspapers in Saigon.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Miller, *Misalliance*, 260–61.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 268–69.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

The resolution of the Woman's Solidarity Group and Diem's failure to condemn it convinced the Buddhist leadership that the government had no intention of honoring the negotiations. On June 10, the Buddhist leadership decided to pursue another track to achieving their demands, accepting an offer from the monk Thich Quang Duc to burn himself to death during an anti-regime demonstration in Saigon scheduled for the next morning. To maximize the effect of the monk's sacrifice, the Buddhist leaders urged members of the foreign press to attend the demonstration. The next morning, Quang Duc silently burned to death in downtown Saigon among thousands of unsuspecting demonstrators, protected by monks who laid across the streets to prevent the arrival of fire trucks.²⁰⁷ The image of the self-immolation was captured by American journalist Malcom Browne, the only member of the foreign press who heeded the Buddhist leadership's urging and attended the demonstration. Browne bypassed government censorship in Saigon by sending the film to Manila with Chester Bowles, a State Department official so committed to freedom of the press that he consented to transporting the film without demanding to know what the pictures would reveal.²⁰⁸ The publication of the photographs of Quang Duc's death caused outrage in the United States and South Vietnam, and tensions were further raised by Madame Nhu's public offer to provide the fuel for "bonze barbeques."²⁰⁹ Though he expressed regret for Quang Duc's death following the demonstration and reaffirmed his commitment to a negotiated resolution, Diem began to view the Buddhist movement as a communist-motivated threat to his regime.²¹⁰ The Buddhist leadership had also lost any remaining faith in the government's actual commitment to negotiations.²¹¹

The heightened tensions in Saigon following Quang Duc's self-immolation sparked debate within the Kennedy administration regarding a potential coup. During a series of meetings in early July, Diem's supporters argued that he was justified in his

²⁰⁷ Miller, *Misalliance*, 270–71.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

²⁰⁹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 295.

²¹⁰ Miller, *Misalliance*, 272–73.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

suspicion of the Buddhist movement due to the presence of “an activist element” among its ranks.²¹² Ambassador Nolting also argued that U.S. support of the Diem regime should continue because, despite the present crisis, the military campaign against the Viet Cong was proceeding well. Diem’s detractors at the State Department argued that the United States should be open to alternative leadership in Saigon, an opinion reinforced by a recently published NIE that asserted that the Diem regime’s continued failure to appease the Buddhists created a high probability for a coup.²¹³ During the same period in Saigon, CIA operative Lucien Conein was approached by General Tran Van Don at the embassy’s annual Fourth of July celebration. Don, claiming to represent nearly all of the ARVN generals, informed Conein that a plan for a coup was in place and would likely occur within two weeks, and he requested to know if the United States was open to a coup.²¹⁴ Don’s request further fueled the debate in Washington, and for weeks, the Kennedy administration remained undecided.²¹⁵

During the remaining weeks of July, civil unrest sparked by anti-regime protests continued to grow, and clashes between Buddhist protestors and government security forces became increasingly frequent. The Buddhist leadership began to fear that the Diem regime would move to violently quell the protests, appealing to an unreceptive Nolting to dispatch U.S. troops to protect Saigon’s pagodas.²¹⁶ Nhu’s pro-regime newspaper, the *Times of Viet Nam*, fueled the environment of fear in Saigon, publishing rumors of government plans to attack the pagodas. Diem also added to the fear, publically declaring his suspicion that the Buddhist leadership had been coopted by the Viet Cong. Tensions continued to grow, and in early August, four additional monks publically burned themselves to death in anti-Diem protest.²¹⁷ Concerned by the events and rumors, Nolting requested a meeting with Diem on August 12. Nolting left the meeting confident

²¹² Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 296.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Miller, *Misalliance*, 285.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 285

²¹⁶ Ibid., 274.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 275.

in his support of Diem, having just heard from the president that he had no intention of inflicting violence on the Buddhist protestors.²¹⁸

On August 18, demonstrations erupted throughout South Vietnam, and a crowd of 17,000 demonstrators amassed at Saigon's Xa Lai pagoda for an anti-government protest. In addition to fomenting anti-regime sentiment, the Buddhist leaders promised to organize similarly massive protests to coincide with the arrival of the new U.S. ambassador to the RVN, Henry Cabot Lodge.²¹⁹ Two days later, the Diem regime contradicted its promise to Nolting and launched a violent crackdown on the Buddhist movement at pagodas across South Vietnam. Diem declared martial law, and government security forces raided pagodas throughout the country. Though Diem blamed his decision to declare martial law on a supposed claim by ARVN generals that communist forces were massing near Saigon, the crackdown was carried out by ARVN Special Forces and police forces, both of which were outside the ARVN chain of command and reported directly to the regime.²²⁰ Though no Buddhists were killed, thousands were arrested and later tortured. Diem's decision to renege on his promise to Nolting confirmed the fears of the Buddhists in South Vietnam and provided evidence to anti-Diem officials within the administration that it was time to push for a coup.²²¹

C. THE HILSMAN CABLE: DECISION FOR A COUP

Following the August 1963 pagoda raids, the anti-Diem officials of the Kennedy administration orchestrated a change in U.S. policy, signaling to the ARVN conspirators in Saigon a favorable disposition toward a coup. One of the most ardent coup supporters within the administration was Roger Hilsman, a State Department official who had recently been promoted to Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Hilsman concluded that the pagoda raids were evidence that Diem and Nhu were pursuing policies that would result in the collapse of the entire U.S. strategy in Southeast

²¹⁸ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 297.

²¹⁹ Miller, *Misalliance*, 275.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 275–76.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 279.

Asia. With the help of National Security Council (NSC) staffer Michael Forrestal, Hilsman drafted a memo to the newly appointed Ambassador Lodge on Saturday, August 24. The memo instructed Lodge to demand that Diem remove Nhu from his government, and if he resisted, to indicate to the ARVN leadership that the United States favored a coup and was ready to recognize and aid a new government in Saigon. With Dean Rusk out of the city for the weekend, the senior State Department official in Washington was Assistant Secretary of State George Ball, an administration official who had consistently argued in favor of removing Diem. Hilsman brought the memo to Ball for review on the ninth hole of the Chevy Chase Country Club. Ball agreed with the memo's contents, and he telephoned the president, who was also out of town for the weekend at his family home in Cape Cod. Kennedy told Ball that if Rusk and the leadership at the Department of Defense consented to the memo, then it had his approval.²²²

The State Department transmitted Hilsman's cable to Lodge on the evening of August 24. Lodge responded immediately, arguing that instead of approaching Diem and Nhu with demands that would hint at the pending coup, he should approach the ARVN generals and let them decide what to do with the Ngo brothers.²²³ Lodge then instructed Conein to meet with the ARVN's top general, Tran Thien Khiem, and inform him that the United States now favored a coup and was prepared to recognize and aid a new government if the coup succeeded. Khiem informed the embassy that coup plans were in place and would likely be executed within a week.²²⁴

A meeting at the White House the following Monday, August 26, revealed that the debate concerning Diem's fate was far from resolved. It also revealed that Hilsman may have exploited his superiors' absences over the weekend to effect a change in the U.S. policy for South Vietnam. Rusk, McNamara, and Taylor all expressed frustration at the unusual way the memo had been cleared through the president, and they each disagreed with the ultimatum to Diem and the absence of a specified length of time to

²²² Miller, *Misalliance*, 290–91.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 297.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

allow him to reform.²²⁵ Kennedy himself expressed frustration with the unusual manner in which the memo had been briefed, and he ended the meeting saying that the subject required further review.²²⁶ During the following week, administration officials met to debate the Hilsman memo. The argument mainly concerned whether or not Diem should be afforded more time to remove Nhu and reform his government. When Lodge discovered that the debate concerning a coup had restarted in Washington, he cabled to the State Department that it was too late, and that it was impossible to reverse course from a coup. The president ultimately decided not to alter the orders in Hilsman's memo, and he directed the commander of MACV, General Paul D. Harkins, to confer with the ARVN generals over the coup details.²²⁷

While U.S. officials were shifting policy in favor of regime change, Nhu had learned of the impending coup and maneuvered to unnerve the ARVN generals. Nhu summoned the generals to a meeting, where he shared a fabricated story that he had discovered a plot conceived by CIA operatives to overthrow the government, and that he had recently obtained assurances from Lodge that the embassy would address the problem and publically back the regime. Shortly after the meeting, they were further unsettled when General Ton That Dinh held a news conference to declare that he was behind the pagoda raids, and that the ARVN generals unanimously agreed that the raids were necessary to preserve the RVN's internal security. Diem had recently appointed Dinh the military governor of Saigon, and his cooperation was crucial to the success of a coup. The combination of Dinh's signal that he supported the Ngos, and Nhu's attempt to frighten the generals, was enough to cause the coup leaders to postpone their plans. Khiem and General Le Van Kim met with Harkins on August 31 to inform the MACV commander that the coup plans remained in place, but that they would be postponed. During their conversation, the ARVN generals cited Nhu's close relationship with the

²²⁵ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 297; Miller, *Misalliance*, 291–92.

²²⁶ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 297–98; Miller, *Misalliance*, 291–92.

²²⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 298; Miller, *Misalliance*, 293.

CIA and Washington's public support for the Diem regime as reasons to question the U.S. commitment to a coup.²²⁸

D. INDECISION AND THE MCNAMARA-TAYLOR MISSION

With coup plans indefinitely postponed while the ARVN generals awaited concrete commitment from the United States, the Kennedy administration returned to debating its South Vietnam policy. A series of White House meetings at the end of August exhibited the sharp division among administration officials over whether or not the United States should encourage Diem's removal. Reports from Saigon indicated that Diem was continuing to lose support among Saigon's elite, but Nolting countered by arguing that Diem enjoyed better support in the countryside and that his campaign against the Viet Cong was succeeding. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson repeated the oft-cited argument that there did not appear to be a viable alternative to Diem in Saigon, and he agreed with Rusk's contention that regardless of what happened in Saigon, the United States could not withdraw from South Vietnam until the communists were defeated. In addition to recognizing these issues, Kennedy became more concerned with the possibility of a coup attempt failing than whether or not Diem should be replaced. The president chose to defer a decision until a clearer picture of the situation was received from the embassy in Saigon.²²⁹

The coups issue was readdressed at a September 6 meeting of the National Security Council. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy articulated the problem facing the administration: if a Viet Cong victory was inevitable, then the United States should completely withdraw from South Vietnam; if the Viet Cong could be defeated, but to do so would require Diem's replacement, then the United States should clearly signal to the ARVN generals that it supported a coup. The meeting ended when those present felt they were unable to answer the attorney general's questions, and another fact-finding mission was dispatched to Saigon. That evening, General Victor Krulak and State Department

²²⁸ Miller, *Misalliance*, 293-94.

²²⁹ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 298-99.

official Joseph Mendenhall departed Washington bound for Saigon in an attempt to clarify the situation.²³⁰

On September 10, Krulak and Mendenhall presented a report that further deepened the difference of opinion among the NSC officials. Krulak conveyed reports from MACV officials throughout the countryside who claimed that the campaign against the Viet Cong was proving successful, while Mendenhall reported that anti-regime sentiment in Saigon was continuing to increase. The debate remained relatively fixed between Defense Department officials who believed Diem should be retained and State Department officials who argued that unless Diem was replaced, the war would be lost. Lodge wrote from Saigon in support of the State Department's argument, recommending that the United States end its aid program to the Diem regime.²³¹ Senior officials met again on September 11 to discuss Lodge's recommendation, but the meeting ended with no decision after Rusk recalled the relationship between the withdrawal of U.S. aid to Chinese nationalists and the subsequent communist victory.²³² Six days later, administration officials met again to discuss Lodge's recommendations. At the conclusion of the meeting, Kennedy decided that a cable should be sent to the embassy directing Lodge to pressure Diem to remove Nhu from his government, and that if he refused, to stop all U.S. aid to the RVN. Kennedy also ordered yet another fact-finding mission to Saigon to help clarify the situation, this time led by McNamara and Taylor.²³³ Lodge quickly responded that he was being ordered to repeat a policy that had consistently failed, and that ending U.S. aid would have little impact on Diem and a large, negative impact on South Vietnam's economy.²³⁴

The situation McNamara and Taylor discovered in South Vietnam was decidedly more negative than they anticipated. CIA station chief John Richardson disclosed that Diem's security forces regularly kidnapped and tortured regime opponents throughout

²³⁰ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 299.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*, 299–300.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 300.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

Saigon, and various military advisers reported that MACV's assessment of the anticommunist campaign was inaccurate and not going well.²³⁵ Diem's own vice president, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, concurred with the negative assessment of the military campaign and declared there to be "not more than 20 to 30 properly defended hamlets in the whole country."²³⁶

Despite these findings, the report they delivered to Kennedy upon their return to Washington asserted that MACV's assessment was accurate and that the war against the communists was proving so successful that the United States should prepare to begin troop withdrawals before the end of the year. Though the report conceded that the political environment in Saigon was increasingly unstable, it also argued that there were no viable plans in place for a coup. The report recommended that while the United States should remain open to possible alternative leadership, the embassy should no longer conspire against Diem. The report also recommended that the Commercial Important Program (CIP), the principle facilitator of U.S. aid to the RVN, should be ended immediately to pressure Diem to reform.²³⁷ Kennedy concurred with the report, and the McNamara-Taylor mission recommendations were incorporated into National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM)-263. The State Department directed Lodge to cease conspiring against the Diem regime, but to also secretly work to identify viable alternatives.²³⁸

E. THE COUP

While the Kennedy administration was debating the details of NSAM-263, the ARVN generals approached the embassy to discuss the possibility of a coup, sharing the details of multiple scenarios with the CIA station that included the removal and assassination of Diem and Nhu.²³⁹ Lodge responded to the cable containing his new instructions from NSAM-263 with news of this development, urging the Kennedy

²³⁵ Miller, *Misalliance*, 300-1.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 300.

²³⁷ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 301; Miller, *Misalliance*, 301.

²³⁸ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 301-2.

²³⁹ Miller, *Misalliance*, 311.

administration to offer clear U.S. support for a coup.²⁴⁰ Lodge was also motivated by recent indications that, contrary to MACV's claims, the war in the countryside appeared to be turning in favor of the Viet Cong.²⁴¹

While he waited for a response from Washington, Lodge began implementing his new instructions. He immediately instituted restrictions on the CIP and ended the U.S. funding of the ARVN Special Forces, the regime-controlled wing of the military that had executed the pagoda raids. In an attempt to amplify the signal sent to the presidential palace by the aid cuts, Lodge ceased requesting audiences with Diem.²⁴² Lodge had also maneuvered to create the conditions in Saigon that would signal a strong U.S. commitment to the ARVN generals' coup plans. Following the generals complaints in August that Nhu enjoyed too close a relationship with the CIA station in Saigon, Lodge directed Richardson to stop meeting with the president's brother. In early October, Lodge arranged Richardson's departure from South Vietnam through an article in the *Washington Daily News* that identified him as the Saigon station chief, resulting in his recall to Langley. With Nhu's CIA contact out of the country, Lodge believed he had signaled an earnest U.S. commitment to the ARVN generals.²⁴³

On October 9, the White House responded to Lodge's request in an "eyes only" cable informing him that while the United States did not want any direct role in a coup, the Kennedy administration would not prevent one and was prepared to aid and recognize a successor government.²⁴⁴ Lodge relayed this information to the ARVN generals, and on October 28, General Don notified the embassy that the coup, which would be entirely a Vietnamese operation, would occur within days. Lodge reported the news to the White House, declaring that absent informing the regime, the United States had no way of impacting Diem's fate.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 301.

²⁴¹ Miller, *Misalliance*, 313.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 312–13.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 313.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁴⁵ Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 302.

On the morning of November 1, 1963, Lodge accompanied the visiting commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Felt, to a meeting with Diem. During the meeting, Diem revealed no indications that he suspected the impending coup, and he even urged Lodge to inform Kennedy that he intended to reform his government in his own time while arguing against removing Nhu from the government.²⁴⁶ Later that day, ARVN troops entered the city, and the coup was under way. Diem requested the aid of U.S. troops from the embassy, but Lodge encouraged the president to surrender to the generals. In the early hours of November 2, Diem and Nhu escaped the presidential palace to Cholon, where they were seized and assassinated by ARVN troops later that day.²⁴⁷

F. CONCLUSION

During 1963, the Kennedy administration reversed its South Vietnam policy from support of the Diem government to an openness to Vietnamese-led regime change. Examination of U.S. foreign policy during the period reveals that the Kennedy administration's evaluation of South Vietnam's relative importance within U.S. containment policy and the primary threat facing the RVN were the same as they had been in the earlier days of 1961. Examination of the period also reveals that Diem continued to exhibit the exclusive, authoritarian style of governance that characterized his new government in 1954. The change in circumstances that compelled the shift in U.S. policy was, first, the perception among U.S. policymakers that Diem's policies and actions were beginning to undermine the military campaign against the Viet Cong, and second, the simultaneous emergence of viable coup leadership in the ARVN generals.

During 1963, the Kennedy administration's evaluation of the primary threat to South Vietnam and South Vietnam's importance to the application of containment policy to Southeast Asia remained unchanged. Through the final days of the Kennedy presidency, administration officials remained convinced that preventing a communist victory in South Vietnam was critical to preventing the loss of the entire region to the

²⁴⁶ Miller, *Misalliance*, 317–18.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 319–24.

communist bloc. They also understood South Vietnam as a national security problem that required a military solution. The primary threat to the RVN was the Viet Cong insurgency, and as long as the military campaign against the Viet Cong proceeded successfully, the Kennedy administration concluded that support of the Diem regime coincided with U.S. strategic interests.

During the same period, Diem continued to exhibit the authoritarian leadership that consistently defined his government during his near decade in power. His violent repression of the Buddhist movement was the result of a similar policy formation process that produced his violent moves to consolidate power in the spring of 1955. Prior to May 1963, U.S. foreign policy had been tolerant of Diem's method of leadership, concluding that even though his policies conflicted with Western governance norms, his leadership proved effective enough to unite Saigon and facilitate a military campaign against the Viet Cong. Furthermore, an argument frequently presented at White House meetings during both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations was that discontent with Diem's leadership was inconsequential—no viable alternative leadership existed in Saigon.

After the Buddhist Crisis, the circumstances that informed Washington's evaluation of Diem changed in two major ways. First, the violent repression of Buddhists and the resulting deterioration of domestic and international support for the Diem regime revealed that Diem's policies were undermining the military campaign against the Viet Cong, an assessment reinforced by later revelations that the military successes touted by Saigon and MACV were inaccurate. Second, the coalition of ARVN generals who planned and executed the coup represented a potential alternative leadership in Saigon around whom the United States could center its containment policy. Though the coup was entirely a Vietnamese operation, and the United States would have had to deal with the fallout whatever the outcome, the Kennedy's greenlight to the generals was a clear indication of the administration's assessment that the Diem experiment had failed, and that the positive impact his removal would have on U.S. strategic interests was worth the risk of a failed coup or failed governance of the RVN by the ARVN generals.

VI. CONCLUSION

The strategic value of South Vietnam to U.S. national security interests was the same to the Eisenhower administration in the days leading to the Geneva Conference of 1954 as it was to the Kennedy administration in late 1963. Both presidents articulated the importance of South Vietnam to U.S. interests in similar terms, asserting that the reunification of Vietnam under the leadership of Hanoi would lead to the loss of the entire Southeast Asian region to communism. This policy accepted the premise that the DRV was executing a small part of a global assault on the Western world that was led by Moscow and Beijing, a belief among U.S. officials that was enflamed in early 1961 when Khrushchev declared that the Soviet Union would support wars of national liberation. This policy also implied that abandoning the partnership with Saigon was not an option for either administration. During the 1950s and 1960s, the containment of communism was the principle U.S. foreign policy concern, and hardline anticommunism was the zeitgeist of American politics. For either president to risk facilitating a communist victory by completely withdrawing support from South Vietnam would likely have earned them the label of a communist appeaser and made reelection a near impossibility. Within this environment, both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations enacted programs of U.S. support and advice for South Vietnam, never considering complete withdrawal as an option. Up until mid-1963, both administrations concluded that implementation of these programs required a direct partnership with the Diem regime.

Another factor that remained consistent from 1954-1963 was Diem's style of governance. From the early days of his partnership with the United States, Diem showed that he would disregard U.S. advice if it did not coincide with his assessment of the best course of action. Diem often resisted U.S. guidance, including those times when he was counseled by J. Lawton Collins regarding the formation of his government, by Donald R. Heath concerning his handling of the sects in Saigon, by Frederick Reinhardt concerning the Bao Dai referendum, by Elbridge Durbrow with respect to Diem's nation building program, and by Frederick Nolting regarding the Buddhist Crisis. Each ambassador, along with countless U.S. officials, urged governmental reforms designed to broaden the

base of domestic support for Diem's regime, a problem about which Americans always seem to have felt well-versed. At every stage of the U.S.-Diem partnership, up to and including his final day in power, Diem chose to pursue his own vision for Vietnam, building a government in Saigon that was autocratic, exclusive, and reflective of his Catholic chauvinism. Pursuit of this vision did not allow for opposition to his government, which was often dealt with violently.

The final factor among those that remained consistent through both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations was the debate concerning the primary threat to South Vietnam's survival. This debate generally divided each administration into two opposing camps. One camp consisted largely (though not exclusively) of State Department officials who asserted that Diem and his policies were the primary threat to South Vietnam. They argued that Diem's refusal to broaden his government by opening his cabinet to opposition members and holding truly fair elections lost him the support of Saigon's political elite both within and outside the government. They argued that Diem's various land reform projects, which were ineffective, costly, and reliant upon the forced labor of South Vietnam's rural population, had lost him any chance of support among the rural population while simultaneously providing a base of support for the Viet Cong. Finally, they argued that Diem's apparent favoritism toward Catholics had lost him the support of the majority Buddhist population. This anti-Diem camp concluded that absent Diem's removal, the entire U.S. containment strategy for Southeast Asia was doomed to fail.

The second camp—whose argument both administrations ultimately embraced as policy—asserted that the primary threat to South Vietnam was the military of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Hanoi-directed insurgency. To this camp, which consisted largely of Defense Department officials, South Vietnam faced a national security problem that called for a military solution. Saigon needed to increase its capacity to counter the threat of invasion from the North while establishing internal security. According to this argument, concern with Diem's style of governance was superfluous and distracted the administration from the problem at hand. Eisenhower administration officials even argued that Diem's authoritarianism was culturally

appropriate, and both administrations agreed that despite Diem's shortcomings, he possessed the traits required to keep Saigon united and capable of executing a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Most importantly, he was staunchly anticommunist, and there were no viable leadership alternatives in Saigon. Both administrations' aid programs reflected this argument, vastly expanding the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and supporting Diem's efforts to achieve internal security.

Two developments in mid-1963 changed the Kennedy administration's assessment of the situation in South Vietnam and ultimately resulted in U.S. support for a coup. The first development was the emergence of alternative leadership in Saigon in the form of the ARVN generals. The generals' approaches to the embassy always took the form of notification, rather than consultation. They would inform U.S. officials that a Vietnamese plan to replace Diem was in place and ask what position the United States would take toward an alternative government in Saigon. Thus the United States was never put in a position of conspiring directly against its own client. At the same time, however, it took no steps to prevent such plans from being made in the first place. Diem was of course broadly aware of dissatisfaction within the officer corps, and he did not need the United States to inform him of it.

The second development was the increasing belief among Kennedy administration officials that Diem's leadership, culminating with his handling of the Buddhist Crisis, was undermining the U.S.-Republic of Vietnam (RVN) counterinsurgency campaign. Following the violent crackdown on the Buddhists in August 1963, Diem appeared less and less capable of uniting the fractious political environment of Saigon. Combined, these two developments resulted in the Kennedy administration's assessment that a coup would create conditions more favorable to the achievement of U.S. security interests in Southeast Asia than a continued partnership with the Diem regime.

The Kennedy administration's decision to end the Diem experiment did not, however, coincide with a reevaluation of the major problem facing South Vietnam and the source of that problem. The Americans ultimately gave the greenlight to the generals because they had concluded that the Diem regime was undermining the

counterinsurgency operation. The military threat of the insurgency was still the primary problem, and Diem's inability to unite his country was distracting the partnership from addressing that problem. There was no discussion about the possibility that nearly 10 years of ineffective Diem regime policies had resulted in the alienation of the rural population from the central government, creating a base of support throughout the countryside for the communist insurgency. There was no discussion concerning the relationship between Diem's harsh treatment of opposition leaders and the marginalization of Saigon's political and military elite. Finally, there was no discussion regarding how the military focus of the U.S. aid program to South Vietnam ignored the political inequities at the root of Diem's problems while simultaneously establishing the military capability employed to depose him.

The failure of the Diem experiment shows that military security cannot act as a substitute for the political stability achieved by legitimate government. When choosing to approach the situation in South Vietnam as a military problem, both Eisenhower and Kennedy concluded that the political problems in Saigon would resolve themselves once the military had established a secure environment. The numerous failed policies of the Diem regime were judged to have alienated the majority of the country, creating the conditions that rendered the achievement of such a secure environment impossible. By sustaining the Diem regime with military aid, the United States facilitated the further division of South Vietnamese society until the U.S.-RVN partnership was no longer viable with Diem in power.

The failure of the Diem experiment also shows that limited-liability partnerships, once they begin to fail, may pose significantly more political risk than initially appreciated. The U.S.-RVN partnership conceived by the Eisenhower administration and continued by the Kennedy administration was designed to achieve U.S. security objectives at minimal risk and cost to the United States. Diem, however, proved not to be the nationalist, anticommunist leader that Eisenhower and Kennedy had hoped would unite South Vietnam. By the time the Kennedy administration concluded that support of Diem no longer served U.S. strategic interests, the United States had facilitated the survival of his regime for nine years. Each of those years included public affirmations of

the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam's survival that coincided with the growing commitment of U.S. manpower and treasure, greatly increasing the political risk associated with the partnership. The U.S.-RVN partnership that hinged on Diem's success resulted in a war that lasted for 30 years, involved the direct engagement of U.S. troops, and cost the United States hundreds of billions of dollars. Most significantly, the entire partnership proved an ineffective policy, ultimately failing to prevent the reunification of Vietnam under a communist regime.

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