THE PATH TO VIET-NAM

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Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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You have asked me to speak this morning on the topic "The Path to Viet-Nam: A Lesson in Involvement." I welcome this opportunity to review the whole history of United States actions with respect to Viet-Nam—speaking personally as to the period up to 1961, during which I had no policy responsibility, and of course necessarily more officially for the period since January of 1961.

Quite apart from the enormous present importance of South Viet-Nam and our actions there, I have often reflected—as one who was tempted to become a professional historian—that the story of Viet-Nam, of Southeast Asia, and of American policy there forms an extraordinarily broad case history involving almost all the major problems that have affected the world as a whole in the past 25 years. For the strands of the Viet-Nam history include the characteristics of French colonial control compared to colonial control elsewhere; the end of the colonial period; the interrelation and competition of nationalism and communism; our relation to the Soviet Union and Communist China and their relationships with each other; our relation to the European colonial power, France; and—at least since 1954—the relation of Viet-Nam to the wider question of national independence and self-determination in Southeast Asia and indeed throughout Asia.

The Viet-Nam story is above all a product of Vietnamese aspirations and decisions. In the early period French decisions were crucial. But I am sure you want me to focus on the American policy role, how and why we became involved, and how we reached the present position. This should not be a purely historical discussion, of course, and I know that you have natural and valid concerns that focus particularly on the decisions of the last 2 years and on the decisions that confront us now and in the future. So I shall touch briefly on these, fully expecting that your questions will be quite largely in this area.

For our mutual convenience in analysis, I have tried to isolate 10 major American decisions going back to 1945. It is not for me to defend, or necessarily to justify, policy decisions taken before 1961, but it is essential to examine them if one is to understand the present position.

Decisions During French Colonial Era

Our first decisions affecting Viet-Nam were in 1945. President Roosevelt deeply believed that French colonial control in Indochina should not be restored, and this attitude led us in the closing months of the war against militarist Japan to adopt what the French have always considered an obstructive attitude toward their return. Separately, we briefly gave modest assistance to Ho Chi Minh as an asset against the Japanese. This story, like so much else in the whole record, is best told in Robert Shaplen's thoughtful "The Lost Revolution."

Second, when the French had returned, we stood aside. In the critical year 1946, and over the next 3 or 4 years, the French first made the Fontainebleau agreement and then broke it, so
that major conflict started. It has often been argued, by Shaplen among others, that we could have exerted greater pressure, perhaps even effective pressure, on the French to go through with the Fontainebleau agreement and to set Viet-Nam on the path to early independence. The failure to exert such pressure may thus be construed as a negative policy decision on our part.

I myself am skeptical that we could conceivably have affected the unfortunate course that the French followed in this period. If it is argued that our overwhelming Marshall Plan aid to France should have given us leverage, then it must be pointed out at the same time that the Marshall Plan became operative only early in 1948 and that by then the die was largely cast. Moreover, I doubt very much if the proud and bruised French nation would have responded even if we had tried to act to end the colonial era, as we did to a major extent with the Dutch in Indonesia.

In a very real sense, the tragedy of Viet-Nam derives from the fall of France in 1940 and all the understandable emotions aroused by that event among French leaders, including notably De Gaulle himself. Restored control in Indochina was a badge, however mistaken, for a France that meant to be once again a world power. Although it may be argued that we should at least have tried, I doubt if this deep French attitude could have been shaken by anything we did or said and least of all by anything said or done in connection with the wise and right policy of helping France to get back on her feet.

The third period of American decision began in 1950, just before our involvement in the defense of Korea against Soviet-inspired aggression. The Communists had just taken control in China and entered into the 1950 alliance with the Soviet Union. Communism did then appear to our policymakers as something approaching a monolith, and we came to see the French stand in Indochina as part of a global attempt to repel Communist military adventures. In essence, we acted on two lines of policy between 1950 and 1954: on the one hand, economic and growing military assistance to the French; on the other hand, steady urging that the French proceed rapidly to grant real independence to Indochina, both for its own sake and as the best means of preventing Communist control.

Here it has been argued that we did too much assisting or at least too little urging. I find myself sympathetic to this point of view, as indeed it was expressed at the time by such wise men as Edmund Gullion, who served in Viet-Nam and much later became our distinguished Ambassador in the Congo from 1961 to 1963.

Yet, again I am not sure whether a different United States policy in this period could have brought about the desired result of a France first successfully waging a costly and bloody war to defend Viet-Nam and then granting it independence. Again, French attitudes and actions had deep roots in the still shaky situation of France and in the combination of a valid concern for the Communist threat and a desire to maintain a major French presence and hold in Indochina. Even if the French had acted wisely in every respect in this period, they might have been able to achieve nothing more than a division of the country into Communist and non-Communist areas. The vital difference might have been that valid non-Communist nationalism in Viet-Nam would have had a chance to stand on its feet and develop respected leaders before 1954; and if this had happened the whole later story might have unfolded in a very different way.

As it was, the spring of 1954 brought French defeat, in spirit if not in military terms, and left non-Communist nationalism in Viet-Nam almost bankrupt.

The Period of the Geneva Conference

The period of the Geneva Conference is the fourth period of American decision. That is a complex story, well told from a relatively detached viewpoint by Anthony Eden, now Lord Avon, in his memoirs.

We played a critical backstage role at Geneva. We maintained the possibility of military intervention, which, many observers at the time believe, played a crucial part in inducing the Soviets and the Communist Chinese alike to urge Hanoi to settle for a temporary division of Viet-Nam at the 17th parallel and for an independent Cambodia and Laos. And we began to lay the groundwork for SEATO, as part of the effort to show strength and to convince Communist China that it would not have a free hand in Southeast Asia.

Yet we were unwilling to participate fully
in the framing of the Geneva accords, apparently because our policymakers did not wish to associate themselves in any way with a loss of territory to Communist control. So the Geneva accords were framed largely between Hanoi, Communist China, and the Soviet Union on the one side and the French, who were under the urgent time pressure of their domestic politics, on the other. In the end we confined ourselves to saying two things:

(a) That we would view any aggression in violation of the accords with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security.

(b) That we took the same position on the reunification of Viet-Nam that we took in other "nations now divided against their will"—meaning, then and now, Germany and Korea—and that we would continue to seek unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations. In effect, we thus interpreted the election provision as providing for a free determination by the people of Viet-Nam as to whether they wished reunification and in that sense endorsed it consistent with the similar positions we had taken in Germany and Korea.

All sorts of things could be said about our decisions in that period. Some are of the view that we should have taken military action and tried to nail down at least a clear military division of Viet-Nam, or even to defeat Ho; I myself think that by the spring of 1954 that course would have been untenable.

It may also be argued—and I do not know the contemporary factors—that, involved as we already were by preceding decisions, we should have participated forthrightly in the making of the accords and lent our weight to them from the outset, declaring right then that we meant to stand—with the French if possible, but alone if necessary—in supporting non-Communist nationalism in South Viet-Nam. We would then have acted as we had done for non-Communist nationalism in Korea, although without its being necessary or desirable for us to put continuing forces on the ground as we had to do in the face of the conventional threat to Korea.

At any rate, in July 1954 a new national entity came into being in South Viet-Nam with what appeared at the time to be extraordinarily small chances of survival. At the very end, the French, with a degree of American pressure, installed the staunchly nationalist Diem as Prime Minister, hardly thinking that he would survive and looking rather to a short period in which the French could exit with some semblance of grace and let nature take its course.

**Treaty Commitments in Southeast Asia**

The fifth set of American decisions came in this setting and indeed overlapped the period of the Geneva Conference. The first aspect of these decisions was our leading role in the formation of the SEATO treaty, signed at Manila in September of 1954 and ratified by our Senate in February 1955 by a vote of 82 to 1. In the SEATO treaty South Viet-Nam and its territory were specifically included as a “protocol state”; and the signatories specifically accepted the obligation, if asked by the Government of South Viet-Nam, to take action in response to armed attack against South Viet-Nam and to consult on appropriate measures if South Viet-Nam were subjected to subversive actions. The Geneva accords had, of course, already expressly forbidden aggressive acts from either half of Viet-Nam against the other half, but there had been no obligation for action by the Geneva participating nations. SEATO created a new and serious obligation extending to South Viet-Nam and aimed more widely at the security of the Southeast Asian signatories and the successor states of Indochina.

The second aspect of our decisions at this period was an evolving one. In late 1954 President Eisenhower committed us to furnish economic support for the new regime, in which Diem was already showing himself tougher and more able than anyone had supposed possible. And in early 1955, without any formal statement, we began to take over the job of military assistance to South Viet-Nam, acting within the numerical and equipment limitations stated in the Geneva accords for foreign military aid.

In short, in the 1954-55 period we moved

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*For text, see American Foreign Policy, 1950-1955. Basic Documents, vol. 1. Department of State publication 6446, p. 750.

*For background, see Bulletin of Aug. 2, 1954, p. 182.

*For text of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty and protocol, see ibid., Sept. 20, 1954, p. 203.

*For text of President Eisenhower's letter, see ibid., Nov. 15, 1954, p. 73.
...into a major supporting role and undertook a major treaty commitment involving South Vietnam.

These decisions, I repeat, are not mine to defend. In the mood of the period, still deeply affected by a not unjustified view of monolithic communism, they were accepted with very wide support in the United States, as the vote and the debate in the Senate abundantly proved. And the Senate documents prove conclusively that there was full understanding of the grave implications of the SEATO obligations, particularly as they related to aggression by means of armed attack.

The important point about these decisions—and a point fervently debated within the administration at the time, according to many participants—is that they reflected a policy not merely toward Viet-Nam but toward the whole of Southeast Asia. In essence, the underlying basic issue was felt, and I think rightly, to be whether the United States should involve itself much more directly in the security of Southeast Asia and the preservation of the largely new nations that had come into being there since World War II.

There could not be the kind of clear-cut policy for Southeast Asia that had by then evolved in Northeast Asia, where we had entered into mutual security treaties individually with Japan, Korea, and the Republic of China. Some of the Southeast Asian countries wished no association with an outside power; others—Malaya, Singapore, and the northern areas of Borneo, which were not then independent—continued to rely on the British and the Commonwealth. So the directly affected area in which policy could operate comprised only Thailand, the Philippines, and the non-Communist successor states of Indochina—South Viet-Nam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Yet it was felt at the time that unless the United States participated in a major way in preserving the independence and security of these nations, they would be subject to progressive pressures by the parallel efforts of North Viet-Nam and Communist China.

The judgment that this threat of aggression was real and valid was the first basis of the policy adopted. Two other judgments that lay behind the policy were:

(a) That a successful takeover by North Viet-Nam or Communist China of any of the directly affected nations would not only be serious in itself but would drastically weaken and in a short time destroy the capacity of the other nations of Southeast Asia, whatever their international postures, to maintain their own independence.

(b) That while we ourselves had no wish for a special position in Southeast Asia, the transfer of the area, or large parts of it, to Communist control achieved by subversion and aggression would mean a major addition to the power status of hostile and aggressive Communist Chinese and North Vietnamese regimes. It was believed that such a situation would not only doom the peoples of the area to conditions of domination and virtual servitude over an indefinite period but would create the very kind of aggressive domination of much of Asia that we had already fought the militarist leaders of Japan to prevent. It was widely and deeply believed that such a situation was profoundly contrary to our national interests.

But there was still a third supporting judgment that, like the others, ran through the calculations of the period. This was that the largely new nations of Southeast Asia were in fact valid national entities and that while their progress might be halting and imperfect both politically and economically, this progress was worth backing. To put it another way, there was a constructive vision of the kind of Southeast Asia that could evolve and a sense that this constructive purpose was worth pursuing as a matter of our own ideals, as a matter of our national interest, and as a realistic hope of the possibilities of progress if external aggression and subversion could be held at bay.

These I believe to have been the bedrock reasons for the position we took in Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia at this time. They were overlaid by what may appear to have been emotional factors in our attitude toward communism in China and Asia. But the degree of support that this major policy undertaking received at the time went far beyond those who held these emotions. And this is why I for one believe that the bedrock reasons I have given were the true and decisive ones.

So the United States became deeply involved in the security of Southeast Asia and, wherever it was welcomed, in the effort to achieve economic progress as well. And the undertaking to support South Viet-Nam economically and militarily and through the protocol to the SEATO treaty must be seen as a part of the wide

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view that the choice was between fairly deep involvement in Southeast Asia or standing aside in the face of an estimate that to do so would cause Communist Chinese and North Vietnamese power and domination to flow throughout the area.

The Issue of Free Elections

The unfolding of this policy between 1954 and 1961 is a tangled and difficult story. Mistakes, even serious mistakes, were undoubtedly made then and later. Some of these, many believe, were in our economic and particularly in our military assistance policies in Viet-Nam: and it has been argued—to me persuasively—that we should have at least tried harder to counter the growing authoritarian trends of the Diem regime in the political sphere.

What was not a mistake, but the logical corollary of the basic policy, was the handling of the provision in the Geneva accords that called for free elections in 1956. It has been argued that this provision, which was certainly badly drafted, called for a single nationwide election, with reunification assumed. Our interpretation—that what was meant was in effect a plebiscite as to whether reunification was desired—has strong support in reason and the recollections of Geneva participants. What cannot be disputed is that the determination was to be free; the word appears three times in the article of the accords.

Much hindsight nonsense has been written about what took place in 1956 on this issue and if any of you are planning a thesis subject: I commend to you the examination of the contemporary sources and discussion. You will, I think, find clear confirmation that by 1956 two propositions were accepted: first, that South Viet-Nam, contrary to most expectations in 1954, was standing on its own feet and had demonstrated that the makings of a valid non-Communist nationalism existed there: and, second, that North Viet-Nam—which had gone through a period of harsh repression in 1955 and 1956 in which Bernard Fall estimates that nearly 50,000 political opponents were killed outright—would not conceivably have permitted any supervision or any determination that could remotely have been called free.

In the face of these facts, Diem refused to go through with the elections, and we supported him in that refusal. Incidentally, I am told that we urged that he put the monkey on Hanoi's back and force them to refuse supervision or free conditions—as they would surely have done. Diem proudly rejected this advice, which did not change what would have happened but did leave the elements of a propaganda argument that still rages. It is, I repeat, hindsight nonsense, and I would only quote two contemporary statements—one by the then junior Senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, the other by Professor Hans Morgenthau.

Kennedy categorically rejected "an election obviously stacked and subverted in advance, urged upon us by those who have already broken their own pledges under the agreement they now seek to enforce."

And Morgenthau referred to the tremendous change between 1954 and 1956 and the "miracle" of what had been accomplished in South Viet-Nam. He went on to say that the conditions for free elections did not exist in either North or South Viet-Nam and concluded:

Actually, the provision for free elections which would solve ultimately the problem of Viet-Nam was a device to hide the incompatibility of the Communist and Western positions, neither of which can admit the domination of all of Viet Nam by the other side. It was a device to disguise the fact that the line of military demarcation was bound to be a line of political division as well.

Unfortunately, the promise of South Viet-Nam in 1956 was not realized in the next 5 years. In the face of Diem's policies, discontent grew—much as it grew in the same period in Korea under Rhee. As in Korea, that discontent might well have led to an internal revolution in a more or less traditional Asian manner. This is not what happened. Despite all that romantics like [Jean] Lacouture may say, what happened was that Hanoi moved in, from at least 1959 onward (Bernard Fall would say from 1957), and provided a cutting edge of direction, trained men from the North, and supplies that transformed internal discontent into a massive subversive effort guided and supported from the outside in crucial ways.

The realistic view, then and later, has been well summarized by Roger Hilsman in his recent book (with which, incidentally, I have serious factual differences on the period after 1963). Hilsman puts it thus (page 471 of his book): 6

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6 To Move a Nation (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1967).
Vietnam, in truth, was in the midst of two struggles, not one. The guerrilla warfare was not a spontaneous revolution, as Communist propaganda would have it, but a contrived, deliberate campaign directed and managed from Hanoi. But Vietnam was also in the throes of a true revolution, a social and nationalistic revolution very much akin to the "new nationalisms" that pervaded both the Congo crisis and Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia. Even while the struggle went on against the Viet Cong, power was in the process of passing from the French-educated mandarin class to representatives of the new nationalism, the Buddhists, the students, and the "young Turks" in the military.

Continued Engagement in Southeast Asia

This, then, was the situation as it confronted the Kennedy administration in January of 1961. All this is history. Reasonable men can and do differ about what was done. But those who believe that serious mistakes were made, or even that the basic policy was wrong, cannot escape the fact that by 1961 we were, as a practical matter, deeply engaged in Southeast Asia and specifically in the preservation of the independence of South Viet-Nam.

President Kennedy came to office with a subversive effort against South Viet-Nam well under way and with the situation in Laos deteriorating rapidly. And for a time the decisions on Laos overshadowed Viet-Nam, although of course the two were always intimately related.

In Laos, President Kennedy in the spring of 1961 rejected the idea of strong military action in favor of seeking a settlement that would install a neutralist government under Souvanna Phouma, a solution uniquely appropriate to Laos. Under Governor [W. Averell] Harriman's astute handling, the negotiations finally led to the Geneva accords of 1954 for Laos; and the process—a point not adequately noticed—led the United States to a more explicit and affirmative endorsement of the Geneva accords of 1954, a position we have since consistently maintained as the best basis for peace in Viet-Nam.

In Viet-Nam, the situation at first appeared less critical, and the initial actions of the Kennedy administration were confined to an increase in our military aid and a small increase of a few hundred men in our military training personnel, a breach—it may be argued—to this extent of the limits of the Geneva accords but fully justified in response to the scale of North Vietnamese violation of the basic noninterference provisions.

Although the details somewhat obscured the broad pattern, I think any fair historian of the future must conclude that as early as the spring of 1961 President Kennedy had in effect taken a seventh United States policy decision: that we would continue to be deeply engaged in Southeast Asia, in South Viet-Nam, and under new ground rules, in Laos as well.

This was not—despite the hindsight strawman recently erected by Professor [John Kenneth] Galbraith—because President Kennedy believed at all in a monolithic communism. Professor Galbraith forgets a good deal, and notably the Vienna meeting of June 1961 in which President Kennedy set out deliberately to work with the Soviet Union for the Laos settlement—even as at the very same time he dispatched Vice President Johnson to visit Viet-Nam and Thailand and in effect to reaffirm our courses of action there. The total pattern of United States policy toward Communist countries under both President Johnson and President Kennedy belies the Galbraith thesis.

No, neither President Kennedy nor any senior policymaker, then or later, believed the Soviet Union was still united with Communist China and North Viet-Nam in a single sweeping Communist threat to the world. But President Kennedy did believe two other things that had, and still have, a vital bearing on our policy.

First, he believed that a weakening in our basic resolve to help in Southeast Asia would tend to encourage separate Soviet pressures in other areas.

James Reston has stated, on the basis of contemporary conversations with the President, that this concern specifically related to Khrushchev's aggressive designs on Berlin, which were pushed hard all through 1961 and not laid to rest till after the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. At any rate, President Kennedy clearly did believe that failure to keep the high degree of commitment we had in Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia had a bearing on the validity of our commitments elsewhere. As Theodore Sorensen has summarized it (page 651 of Kennedy): "... this nation's commitment (in South Viet-Nam) in January, 1961 ... was not one that President Kennedy felt he could abandon without undesirable consequences throughout Asia and the world."

Secondly, President Kennedy believed that the Communist Chinese were a major threat
to dominate Southeast Asia and specifically that a United States "withdrawal in the case of Viet-
Nam and in the case of Thailand might mean a collapse in the entire area." 9 Indeed, President 
Kennedy in one statement expressly supported the "domino theory." 9

My own view, based on participation and subsequent discussion with others, is that the underlying view of the relation between Viet-
Nam and the threat to Southeast Asia was clear and strongly believed throughout the top levels of the Kennedy administration. We knew, as we have always known, that the action against South Viet-Nam reflected deeply held ambitions by Hanoi to unify Viet-Nam under Communist control and that Hanoi needed and wanted only Chinese aid to this end and wished to be its own master. And we knew, as again we always have, that North Viet-Nam would resist any Communist Chinese trespassing on areas it controlled. But these two propositions were not then, as they are not now, inconsistent with the belief that the aggressive ambitions of Communist China and North Viet-Nam—largely North Vietnamese in old Indochina, overlapping in Thailand, Chinese in the rest of Southeast Asia—would surely feed on each other. In the eyes of the rest of Southeast Asia, certainly, they were part of a common and parallel threat.

So, in effect, the policy of 1954-61 was re-affirmed in the early months of 1961 by the Kennedy administration. Let me say right here I do not mean to make this a personal analysis of President Kennedy nor to imply any view whatever as to what he might or might not have done had he lived beyond November of 1963. But some untrue things have been said about the 1961 period, and I believe the record totally supports the account of policy, and the reasons for it, that I have given.

**Stemming the North Vietnamese Threat**

We then come to the eighth period of decision—the fall of 1961. By then, the "guerrilla aggression" (Hilsman's phrase) had assumed truly serious proportions, and morale in South Viet-Nam had been shaken. It seemed highly doubtful that without major additional United States actions the North Vietnamese threat could be stemmed.

President Kennedy took the decision to raise the ante, through a system of advisers, pilots, and supporting military personnel that rose gradually to the level of 25,000 in the next 3 years.

I do not think it is appropriate for me to go into the detail of the discussions that accompanied this decision. Fairly full, but still incomplete, accounts have been given in various of the books on the period. What can be seen, without going into such detail, is that the course of action that was chosen considered and rejected, at least for the time being, the direct introduction of ground combat troops or the bombing of North Viet-Nam, although there was no doubt even then—as Hilsman again makes clear—that the bombing of North Viet-Nam could have been sustained under any reasonable legal view in the face of what North Viet-Nam was doing. Rather, the course of action which was adopted rightly stressed that the South Vietnamese role must remain crucial and primary.

In effect, it was decided that the United States would take those additional actions that appeared clearly required to meet the situation, not knowing for sure whether these actions would in fact prove to be adequate, trying—despite the obvious and always recognized effect of momentum and inertia—not to cross the bridge of still further action, and hoping strongly that what was being undertaken would prove sufficient.

**Political Change in South Viet-Nam**

This was the policy followed from early 1962 right up to February of 1965. Within this period, however, political deterioration in South Viet-Nam compelled, in the fall of 1963, decisions that I think must be counted as the ninth critical point of United States policymaking. It was decided at that time that while the United States would do everything necessary to support the war, it would no longer adhere to its posture of all-out support of the Diem regime unless that regime made sweeping changes in its method of operation. The record of this period has been described by Robert Shaplen and now by Hilsman. Undoubtedly, our new posture contributed to the overthrow of Diem in November 1963.

I do not myself think that we could in the

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9 A reply by President Kennedy during his press conference on June 14, 1962.
10 For transcript of an NBC interview with President Kennedy on Sept. 9, 1963, see BULLETIN of Sept. 30, 1963, p. 409.
end have done otherwise, but the important historical point is that our actions tended to deepen our involvement in South Viet-Nam and our commitment to the evolution of non-Communist nationalism, always foreseen to be difficult, that would follow the overthrow of Diem.

Unfortunately, the fall of Diem, while it had overwhelming popular support in South Viet-Nam, failed to produce an effective new government. For a year and a half South Viet-Nam wallowed in political confusion; and power finally passed, with the agreement of civilian political leaders, to the Thiệu-Ky military-led government of June 1965.

This political confusion was disheartening, but it was not surprising. For South Viet-Nam had never been trained by the French to govern itself, and above all, it was faced with steadily rising North Vietnamese and Viet Cong terrorist and military action. Intensification of that action began almost at once after the overthrow of Diem and demonstrated—if it needed demonstrating—that the struggle was not over Diem, despite Communist claims and honest liberal qualms, but was an attempt to destroy non-Communist nationalism of any sort in South Viet-Nam.

In early 1964 President Johnson expressly reaffirmed all the essential elements of the Kennedy administration policies publicly through every action and through firm internal directives. It is simply not true to say that there was any change in policy in this period toward greater military emphasis, much less major new military actions. Further actions were not excluded—as they had not been in 1954 or 1961—but President Johnson's firm object right up to February 1965 was to make the policy adopted in late 1961 work if it could possibly be done, including the fullest possible emphasis on pacification and the whole political and civilian aspect.

The summer of 1964 did bring a new phase, though not a change in policy. The situation was continuing to decline, and North Viet-Nam may have been emboldened by the trend. Certainly, infiltration was rising steadily and, as we now know more clearly, began to include substantial numbers of native North Vietnamese. But, more dramatically, American naval ships on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin were attacked, and there were two responding United States attacks on North Vietnamese naval bases.

This led President Johnson to seek, and the Congress to approve overwhelmingly on August 7, 1964, a resolution—drafted in collaboration with congressional leaders—that not only approved such retaliatory attacks but added that:

The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Consistent with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

U.S. Decisions Based on Overall View

So things stood through the election period. But as 1964 drew to a close, the situation was moving steadily downward in every respect, both military and political. A review of policy was undertaken, analyzing three basic choices: to continue the existing policy with every improvement that could be devised within its limits; to take new and major military measures, while adhering to the same basic objectives that had been followed all along; or to move toward withdrawal.

From late November onward, these choices were intensively examined, even as the military threat grew, the political confusion in Saigon deepened, and all the indicators recorded increasingly shaky morale and confidence not only in South Viet-Nam but throughout the deeply concerned countries of Southeast Asia. By late January, it was the clear judgment of all those concerned with policy and familiar with the situation that the first choice was rapidly becoming no choice at all—and not, to use the phrase of one commentator, a “constructive alternative.” To “muddle through” (that commentator's phrase) was almost certainly to muddle out and to accept that South Viet-Nam would be turned over to Communist control achieved through externally backed subversion and aggression.

This was a straight practical judgment. It ran against the grain of every desire of the President and his advisers. But I myself am sure it was a right judgment—accepted at the time by most sophisticated observers and, in the light of reflective examination, now accepted, I be-

10 Public Law 88-408; for text, see Bulletin of Aug. 24, 1964, p. 268.
lieve, by virtually everyone who knows the situation at all at first hand.

There were, in short, only two choices: to move toward withdrawal or to do a lot more, both for its military impact and, at the outset, to prevent a collapse of South Vietnamese morale and will to continue.

And as the deliberations continued within the administration, the matter was brought to a head by a series of sharp attacks on American installations in particular. These attacks were serious in themselves, but above all, they confirmed the overall analysis that North Viet-Nam was supremely confident and was moving for the kill. And as they thus moved, it seemed clear that they would in fact succeed and perhaps in a matter of months.

Let me pause here to clear up another current historical inaccuracy. The basis for the successive decisions—in February to start bombing; in March to introduce small numbers of combat forces; and in July to move to major United States combat forces—was as I have stated it. It depended on an overall view of the situation and on an overall view that what had been going on for years was for all practical purposes aggression—and indeed this term dates from late 1961 or early 1962 in the statements of senior administration spokesmen.

But there is a separate point whether, as has sometimes been asserted, it was the United States alone which unilaterally changed the character of the war in the direction of a conventional conflict. It is alleged that Hanoi was adhering to a tacit agreement that, so long as we did not bomb North Viet-Nam, Hanoi would not send in its regulars, at least in units.

Multiple and conclusive evidence which became available from the spring of 1965 onward seems to me to refute these contentions. As has been repeatedly made public over the past 2 years, we know that one North Vietnamese regiment entered South Viet-Nam by December 1964, and we know that several other regiments entered in the spring of 1965 on timetables of infiltration that can only have reflected command decisions taken in Hanoi prior to the beginning of the bombing.

From the standpoint of the basis for the United States to move toward withdrawal or to do a lot more, both for its military impact and, at the outset, to prevent a collapse of South Vietnamese morale and will to continue.

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Let me pause here to clear up another current historical inaccuracy. The basis for the successive decisions—in February to start bombing; in March to introduce small numbers of combat forces; and in July to move to major United States combat forces—was as I have stated it. It depended on an overall view of the situation and on an overall view that what had been going on for years was for all practical purposes aggression—and indeed this term dates from late 1961 or early 1962 in the statements of senior administration spokesmen.

But there is a separate point whether, as has sometimes been asserted, it was the United States alone which unilaterally changed the character of the war in the direction of a conventional conflict. It is alleged that Hanoi was adhering to a tacit agreement that, so long as we did not bomb North Viet-Nam, Hanoi would not send in its regulars, at least in units.

Multiple and conclusive evidence which became available from the spring of 1965 onward seems to me to refute these contentions. As has been repeatedly made public over the past 2 years, we know that one North Vietnamese regiment entered South Viet-Nam by December 1964, and we know that several other regiments entered in the spring of 1965 on timetables of infiltration that can only have reflected command decisions taken in Hanoi prior to the beginning of the bombing.

From the standpoint of the basis for U.S. decisions, this evidence simply reinforces the February picture that Hanoi was moving for the kill. Native North Vietnamese, alone or in regular units, were in themselves no more and no less aggressive than the earlier native South Vietnamese who had gone north and become North Vietnamese nationals. The point is that Hanoi, as we suspected then and later proved, had taken major steps to raise the level of the war before the bombing began.

As to any tacit agreement, these facts alone seem to disprove that there ever was one. Moreover, students of North Vietnamese behavior, and especially of the recent major captured North Vietnamese documents, would in any event find such an allegation hard to credit. Is it not far more reasonable to conclude that Hanoi preferred to conceal its hand but was prepared at all times to put in whatever was necessary to bring about military victory—and that the regular units were simply a part of that policy, introduced after they had run out of native southerners and wanted to maintain and step up the pressure?

But this historical point is less important than the fundamental elements of the situation as it stood at the time. On the one hand, all of what I have earlier described as the bedrock elements still remained: a strong Chinese Communist and North Vietnamese threat to Southeast Asia, a crucial link between the defense of South Viet-Nam and the realization of that threat, and the validity of non-Communist nationalism, whatever its imperfections, in South Viet-Nam and in the other nations of Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the wider implications for our commitments elsewhere appeared no less valid than they had ever been. Viet-Nam still constituted a major, perhaps even a decisive, test case of whether the Communist strategy of "wars of national liberation" or "people's wars" could be met and countered even in the extraordinarily difficult circumstances of South Viet-Nam. Then as now, it has been, I think, rightly judged that a success for Hanoi in South Viet-Nam could only encourage the use of this technique by Hanoi, and over time by the Communist Chinese, and might well have the effect of drawing the Soviets into competition with Peking and Hanoi and away from the otherwise promising trends that have developed in Soviet policy in the past 10 years.

Finally, it was judged from the outset that stronger action by us in Viet-Nam would not operate to bring the Soviet Union and Communist China closer together and that the possibility of major Chinese Communist intervention could be kept to a minimum so long as we made it clear at all times, both by word and deed, that our objective was confined solely to freeing South Viet-Nam from external inter-
ference and that we did not threaten Communist China but rather looked to the ultimate hope of what the Manila Declaration,10 of last fall, called "reconciliation and peace throughout Asia."

On the other hand, it was recognized from the outset that the taking of these new major military measures involved heavy costs and hazards. The South Vietnamese still had to play the crucial role in military security and, above all, in political and economic development and stability. A greater American role was bound to complicate South Vietnamese evolution. It was bound to increase the scale of the war and to cost significantly in lives and very heavily in resources. Even though the casualties and damage of the war remain far below what was suffered in Korea, war is never anything but ugly and brutal.

The balance was struck, after the most careful deliberation, in favor of the course that has since been followed. The key elements in the policy were stated in President Johnson's Baltimore speech of April 1965,12 and the major combat-force commitment was explained in the President's statement of July 28, 1965.13 These have been the cornerstones of policy, and they have been elaborated and explained repeatedly and at length by all senior administration spokesmen.

Cornerstones of U.S. Policy

In essence:

(a) Our objective remained solely that of protecting the independence of South Vietnam from external interference and force. We declined, and still decline, to threaten the regime in North Vietnam itself or the territory and regime of Communist China.

(b) We indicated in April of 1965 that we were prepared for discussions or negotiations without condition, and we have relentlessly pursued our own efforts to enter into meaningful discussions as well as following up on a host of peace initiatives by others. Unfortunately, Hanoi has clung firmly to the objective of insuring a Communist takeover of South Vietnam and has refused to enter into any fruitful discussions. Indeed, Hanoi has rejected any discussions whatever—initially unless its basic objective was accepted in advance through the so-called "third point," more recently unless we agreed to a complete cessation of the bombing without any responsive action on their part. Hanoi's philosophy toward negotiation has now become authoritatively available, particularly in the section on "fighting while negotiating" in the captured remarks of one of the North Vietnamese leaders, Comrade Vinh.

(c) We continued to place every possible emphasis on the crucial nonmilitary aspects of the conflict, greatly strengthening our own contribution to the essentially South Vietnamese task of restoring stability and control in the countryside and working for the welfare of the people.

(d) Militarily, our actions were directed to proving to North Vietnam that its effort to take over the South by military force must fail and to extending and enlarging the areas in which the vital business of bringing real security and peace to the countryside could go forward with all the strength we could hope to give it. The total effort in the South remained primary, even as the bombing of military targets in the North was carried on—initially to demonstrate resolve but always and basically to make Hanoi's infiltration far more difficult and costly and to prevent levels of new men and equipment that could only, in the arithmetic of guerrilla warfare, multiply many times over, for each addition from North Vietnam, the requirement for forces in the South.

(e) We encouraged the South Vietnamese in their own resolve to move to a constitutional basis of government, a process set underway formally by Prime Minister Ky in January of 1966 and followed since that time in the face of all the difficulties and dangers of attempting to create such a basis in a country without political experience and ravaged by terrorism and by guerrilla and conventional military action.

(f) We encouraged the South Vietnamese at the same time to proceed on the track that has now become reconciliation, the holding out to members of the Viet Cong of the possibility of reentering the political life of their country under peaceful conditions. In essence, we seek and would accept a fair determination of the will of the people of South Vietnam along the lines well summarized by Ambassador Goldberg's Chicago speech of May 12, 1967.14

10 For text, see ibid., Nov. 14, 1966, p. 734.
11 For text, see ibid., Apr. 26, 1965, p. 686.
12 For text, see ibid., Aug. 16, 1965, p. 284.
13 For text, see ibid., June 5, 1967, p. 898.
These were the South Vietnamese aspects of our policy. But then, as previously, the policy was seen in the wider context of the future of Southeast Asia. So it was that President Johnson lent our strong support in April of 1965 to the development of regional cooperation and of economic projects created through Asian initiative. By this vital element in our policy, we made clear again that our underlying objective was to do what we could to assist in the constructive task of bringing about a Southeast Asia of cooperative and independent nations, whatever their international postures might be.

We had a security job to do in Viet-Nam and were joined over time by five other area nations in supplying military forces to do that job. And we are assisting Thailand against a concerted Chinese Communist and North Vietnamese effort at external subversion, an effort begun—to keep the record straight—as early as 1962 and clearly and definitively by December 1964, before our major decisions in Viet-Nam. Our SEATO and ANZUS undertakings remain firm.

But we looked beyond these, and we must still look beyond these, to the whole question of the future of Southeast Asia and to the role that we can play in assisting the nations of the area to consolidate their national independence and to improve the welfare of their people.

This, then, is a barebones account of "The Path to Viet-Nam." Even within its own terms, it may omit what others would include. And, long as it may seem, it is still incomplete in two respects that it would take far too much time to cover.

First, it is plainly inadequate to focus solely on our policies toward Viet-Nam or even toward Southeast Asia as a whole. Those policies are intimately related to the rest of Asia; to the implications of Asian developments for other areas and, in the last analysis, for our own national security; and to our central world purpose—the creation of an international order of independent states.

Secondly, I have tried to isolate what I consider to have been the major policy decisions. Obviously, policy is not just a matter of single decisions, however fully considered. A vast number of lesser policy decisions have accompanied these basic ones, and the way in which a basic policy is carried out in the end affects its substance. I have not tried to cover, for example, decisions on the balance of effort within South Viet-Nam, decisions on particular negotiating proposals, decisions on the pace and nature of the bombing of North Viet-Nam, or the subtle and difficult problem, over the years, of United States influence toward political progress in the South. I know full well that these are areas in which many of you undoubtedly hold strong views. I welcome discussion of them.

"The Lesson in Involvement"

What, then, is "the lesson in involvement"?

—Is it that we have been trapped into a difficult situation by a series of lesser decisions taken with no clear view of their implications?
—Is it that we should never have become engaged in Southeast Asia?
—Is it that we should never have attempted to support South Viet-Nam?
—Is it that, having supported South Viet-Nam in certain respects (including a treaty) and having become deeply engaged in Southeast Asia, we should nonetheless have decided—or should now decide—to limit the actions we take or even to withdraw entirely?

The first question seems to me both separate and difficult. At some point in the history I have recited we became committed, deliberately and by formal constitutional process, to the support of the freedom of South Viet-Nam from external interference. That commitment included a strong treaty obligation, and that is a clear part of the story. But what is perhaps more to the point is that great powers must face two central points:

(a) As Irving Kristol has pointed out in his recent article in Foreign Affairs, the very definition of a great power is that not only its actions but the cases in which it declines to act have major consequences. At every stage in the Viet-Nam story, it has seemed clear to the leaders of this country that not to act would have the gravest effects. This is the way that successive choices have appeared to four successive Presidents.

(b) The second point that a great power cannot escape is that its actions in themselves affect the stakes. When great powers commit themselves, by treaty and by a total course of conduct extending over many years, an element of reliance comes into being, both within the area and within other areas in which commitments have also been undertaken.

Yet, all this being said, I do not think one
can conclude that because we said or did a, we must necessarily say or do b—in an old phrase of Bismarck's. So I, for one, do not believe that the "lesson in involvement" is that we are the prisoners of history.

Rather, I think we should be focusing on the second, third, and fourth questions I have listed above.

These are big questions, and if I have tried to do anything today it is to stress that the matter has really been looked at for at least the last 13 years in this kind of larger framework. The policies followed today are, as they must be, the policies of this administration. No one can say whether another administration would have done the same. What can be said is that the underlying viewpoint and analysis of factors have been largely similar throughout the last 13 years, if not longer.

This does not prove, of course, that this analysis has been correct. The United States has no divine dispensation from error, and the most that your leaders at any time can do is to exert the best human judgment and moral sense of which they are capable. I, for one, am convinced that this has been done at all stages.

In essence, the question is not capable of geometric proof. Like all policy, it is a judgment. Our bet with history has been that Southeast Asia matters, that the independence of South Viet-Nam critically affects Southeast Asia, and that non-Communist nationalism in Southeast Asia and in Viet-Nam has in it the seeds of a peaceful, progressive, and stable area that can take its place in a world at peace.

**Independence of Southeast Asia**

Other factors enter in, as I have tried to summarize, and despite their variations from time to time remain of major general importance. But it is primarily from the standpoint of Southeast Asia that I would like to close my remarks today. How do the bets I have described look today?

Southeast Asia surely matters more than ever. A region which may have held as few as 30 million inhabitants in 1800—and which is carried under the heading of "peripheral areas" in some textbooks on East Asia—now holds more than 250 million people, more than Latin America and almost as much as the population of Western Europe. The resources of this area are large, and its people, while not yet capable of the kind of dramatic progress we have seen in the northern parts of Asia, have great talent, intelligence, and industry. Its geographical location, while it should not be in the path of great-power collisions, is crucial for trade routes and in other respects.

From the standpoint of our own security and the kind of world in which we wish to live, I believe we must continue to be deeply concerned to do what we can to keep Southeast Asia from falling under external domination and aggression that would contribute to such domination. And I believe also that we have a wider concern in doing what we can, and as we are wanted, to assist sound programs on an individual country or regional basis and to improve the welfare of the peoples of the area. And I do not think that you can do the latter unless the former is achieved.

The second part of our bet is that the independence of South Viet-Nam critically affects Southeast Asia. South Viet-Nam and its 15 million people are important in themselves, but they assume an additional importance if the judgment is accepted that a success for aggression there would drastically weaken the situation in Southeast Asia and indeed beyond. That judgment cannot be defended solely by reference to the dynamics of major aggressive powers and their prospective victims in the past. I myself believe that those parallels have validity, but the question is always what Justice Holmes called "concrete cases." In this concrete case I think the underlying judgment has been valid and remains valid today.

None of us can say categorically that the Communist Chinese would in due course move—if opportunity offered—to dominate wide areas of Southeast Asia through pressure and subversion. But that is what the Chinese and their maps say, and their Communist doctrine appears to add vital additional emphasis. It is what they are doing in Thailand today and, through local Communist allies, in Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore. And it is what they would like to do in Indonesia again.

Surely Adlai Stevenson was right that the threat of Communist China is not so fanciful that it should not serve as a valid assumption of policy. And we can be more categorical that Hanoi intends to dominate at least the successor states of Indochina and would move rapidly to this end if it were to get practical control of South Viet-Nam.
Perhaps the hardest point for some to grasp is the psychological impact of a development such as the fall of South Viet-Nam in this setting. As to Hanoi and Peking, judgment and past experience point to the conclusion that it would greatly encourage them to push further. As to the threatened nations, the view of their leaders is a matter of record. All over Southeast Asia, whatever the posture of the individual nation, the great body of responsible opinion—and I invite you to check this against any firsthand account—accepts the judgment stated only the other day by the independent and nonaligned Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew: "I feel the fate of Asia—South and Southeast Asia—will be decided in the next few years by what happens out in Viet-Nam."

I could multiply that quotation 10 times over in public statements and 10 times more in private statements. As Drew Middleton of the New York Times reported last June after a trip in the area:

Despite some misgivings, non-Communist leaders from Tokyo to Tehran largely support United States policies in South and Southeast Asia.

This does not mean that every nation accepts our choice of military actions. Some would have us do more, some less. But it does lead to the clear conclusion that our own view accords with the deep sense in Southeast Asia, and indeed elsewhere in Asia, that the struggle in South Viet-Nam is crucial to the independence and continued ability to work for its people of each and every nation for a wide area.

Lastly, there is the question whether a new Southeast Asia is in fact being built and can be developed. On this point, surely the developments of the last 5 years, and particularly the last 2 years, have been vastly encouraging. Where Indonesia in 1965 was drifting rapidly to Communist control and practical alinement with Peking, it now stands on a staunchly nationalist basis, abandoning the threat to its neighbors seeking to work out the chaotic economic problems left by Sukarno—with the multilateral help of ourselves and others. Regional cooperation within Southeast Asia, and among Asian nations as a whole, has taken great and historic strides. And it is the widely accepted view in the area—which I share—that these developments would have been far less likely if we had not acted as we did in 1965 and if Communist force had thus taken over in South Viet-Nam.

So all over Southeast Asia there is today a sense of confidence—to which Drew Middleton again testified from his trip. Time has been bought and used. But that confidence is not solid or secure for the future. It would surely be disrupted if we were, in President Johnson's words, to permit a Communist takeover in South Viet-Nam either through withdrawal or "under the cloak of a meaningless agreement." If, on the contrary, we proceed on our present course—with measured military actions and with every possible nonmilitary measure and searching always for an avenue to peace—the prospects for a peaceful and secure Southeast Asia now appear brighter than they have been at any time since the nations of the area were established on an independent basis.

In short, I think the stakes are very grave indeed. The costs are large, and it is clear that we must steel our national capacity and resolve to continue in a tough struggle and still do those things that we must do to meet our problems at home. I find it impossible to believe that we do not have the national capacity and resolve to do both.
