TO MOVE A NATION

The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy

by

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"I believe in an America that is on the march—an America respected by all nations, friends and foes alike—an America that is moving, choosing, doing, dreaming. . . ."

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

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To Eleanor, especially, but also to
Hoyt, Amy, Ashby, and even Sarah—
none of whom ever had a chance to ask
what they could do for their country,
but were very quickly told.

and that too much emphasis on counterguerrilla measures would impair the ability of the South Vietnamese Army to meet a conventional assault like the attack on South Korea by the ten or more regular North Vietnamese divisions. No one thought that General Lemnitzer himself had leaked the story. But it was clear that it was an accurate reflection of his views as well as those of the other chiefs.

VIETNAM: 1954–60

The specific point of guerrilla attack was South Vietnam, and the peculiar circumstances of Vietnam inevitably shaped the policy response to that attack.* Soon after the Geneva agreements of 1954 divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, the Emperor Bao Dai appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as Premier. The Ngos were an ancient mandarin family who had served the Emperor of Annam at Hué from the sixteenth century. The family was converted to Catholicism sometime in the seventeenth century, and in the 1870s over one hundred of its members were massacred by an anti-Catholic mob. Diem's father, who escaped, also served the Emperor, rising eventually to be the chief mandarin at the court. Diem himself was an extraordinarily devout Catholic, a celibate, perhaps even a religious mystic. And he was also a patriot. He passed the mandarin examinations and rose rapidly in the career of public service until the French appointed him, at the age of thirty-two, Minister of the Interior under the new Emperor, Bao Dai. But the French reneged on their promise of reforms, and Diem resigned in protest. It was this act of resignation that established him as an anti-French nationalist, and he maintained the reputation by steadfastly refusing to accept further appointments. He spent the next twenty years living obscurely in Vietnam or in exile—some of this with the Maryknoll fathers in the United States—but his reputation as a nationalist and a patriot continued to grow. By the time of the Geneva agreements of 1954, he was one of the few Vietnamese public figures who were free of any taint of being either pro-French or pro-Communist. (As a province chief, he had broken up an early Communist network, and the Communists had murdered his revered older brother, Ngo Dinh Khoi.) He was the logical choice for the premiership.

The problems that Diem faced as the Premier of half of a war-torn country were overwhelming. Destruction was everywhere, and the economy was in chaos. The people were war-weary and discouraged, and there was the additional burden of almost a million Catholic refugees who had fled to the south. The Communists, on the other hand, had left behind a network of agents, guerrilla cadres, and caches of arms when they had gone north. Two powerful religious sects, the Cao Dai and the

* Maps of Vietnam and Southeast Asia can be found on p. 92 and pp. 276–77.

Hoa Hao, maintained private armies that were in semirevolt, and Saigon and its Chinese-populated twin, Cholon, were dominated by still another private army, belonging to a gangster sect, the Binh Xuyen. Diem had some support from the Americans—mainly from Edward Lansdale, an Air Force colonel on loan to CIA. Lansdale was an imaginative, controversial officer who had helped Magsaysay defeat the Communist Hukbalahap guerrillas in the Philippines and who became the model for the sympathetic "Colonel Hillendale" in the novel *The Ugly American.* But Diem had little help from anyone else except his own family. For Vietnam itself was terribly short of trained men of any kind, and most of those who were trained were discredited by their past service to the French. And what authority Diem had was diluted by the power still held by the Emperor, Bao Dai. No one who knew the situation in Vietnam gave Diem more than a very slight chance of coming out alive, much less of bringing the country under his control.

But somehow he did it. There was a lull in outside pressure that gave him an opportunity, for the Chinese Communists were in the "Bandung" phase following the Korean War. For the time being they were pursuing a peace offensive based on the *panch shila*—a peace offensive of which the Geneva agreements of 1954 were, in fact, one result. Diem took full advantage of the lull, and in a series of battles interspersed with political maneuverings he succeeded in breaking the power of the sects, disarming their troops or incorporating them into the regular Vietnamese forces. By the fall of 1955, he was able to hold a referendum unseating Bao Dai as Emperor and establishing himself as President and Chief of State.

Thus by 1956, the political opposition had been eliminated and Saigon's authority had been established over the provincial capitals and —apparently at least—over the countryside as well. The internal threat was seemingly in hand, and the external threat from the north was on the way to being met—by a new, 150,000-man army that an American Military Assistance Advisory Group was training and equipping to meet conventional war as the Americans had known it in Korea.

The Geneva accords had called for elections leading to the unification of North and South Vietnam in 1956, but Diem announced that he would have none of it. Pointing out that South Vietnam had never signed the Geneva agreements, Diem went on to say that, since the Communists would not permit free electioneering in the north, he would not permit free elections in the south. And the United States concurred.

In the years immediately following 1954, Diem accomplished much good for his country. The refugees were settled, many on new lands. Agriculture was vastly improved—rice production almost doubled, rubber production increased by a fifth, new fiber crops like kenaf were introduced, and pig production was so greatly increased that it became a

foreign exchange earner second only to rice and rubber. And many of these improvements were directly attributable to a land reform program instituted by President Diem. It was far from perfect, but it still had considerable success.

With American help, Diem's government made a beginning on a health and sanitation program for the villages, and substantial progress on a program to eradicate malaria. Education made even greater strides. The number of elementary school students doubled; the number of secondary-school students trebled; and the number of university students quadrupled.

At first Diem was popular. But by 1957, his popularity had begun to wane. Increasingly, his regime became more dictatorial, and he ruled more and more by decree. His greatest mistake, many of his advisers thought, was in abolishing elections for village headmen and municipal councils in 1956 in favor of direct appointments. Village elections had been an ancient and traditional part of Vietnamese life, and this act did more than anything else to convince the Vietnamese that Diem was "antidemocratic." The great influence of the northerners in his regime was also resented. So was the predominance of Catholics. But what was resented even more was the influence of the Ngo family and Diem's brothers—Archbishop Thuc; Ngo Dinh Can, who ruled central Vietnam with an iron hand and feudal methods from Hué; and most especially the arrogant and supercilious Ngo Dinh Nhu and his acid-tongued, flamboyant, man-hating, termagant of a wife, the beautiful but vicious Madame Nhu. Diem, however, behaved like a mandarin. The more criticism there was of his regime and family, the more he bore down on the opposition, moving more and more toward a police state and more and more toward policies of repression in denying any form of political activity or expression.

In February of 1957, an attempt was made to assassinate Diem, and from that time on reports and rumors of coup-plotting became an endemic part of life in Saigon. In November of 1960, there was a major coup attempt by the elite parachutists—which revealed that disaffection had spread beyond politicians and intellectuals to government officials and military officers, the very center of the anti-Communist elements of society on which the struggle against the Communist guerrillas depended. Diem continued in power, but only at the cost of continued repression and the debilitating practice of appointing generals and other officers not on the basis of ability but of personal loyalty.

THE GUERRILLA WAR BEGINS

It was in November 1957, following the Soviet Sputnik success, that Mao proclaimed that the "East Wind prevails over the West Wind" and so heralded the shift from the "Bandung" policy of peaceful co-

existence back to a hard line. In South Vietnam incidents of guerrilla terrorism and assassination began to mount. By 1958, for example, as many as twenty-five village officials were assassinated in a single month. And then, sometime in 1958, trained cadres began coming over the old Ho Chi Minh trails, officers and noncommissioned recruited from among the ninety thousand Communist sympathizers who had gone north in 1954. These cadres had since been trained as guerrilla leaders and political agitators and were now being sent back to their own villages and districts to make contact with the agents left behind and to organize and recruit. They carried radios, code books, medical supplies, their own arms, and certain specialized arms and equipment such as machine guns and booby traps. A major attack was being launched. It was indirect, but still it was aggression—through the guerrilla tactics and techniques of "internal war."

There was some problem on the part of Western military men in recognizing that there was a threat. General Samuel L. Myers, deputy chief of the American military mission in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as late as April 1959, for example, said that the guerrillas in South Vietnam had been "gradually nibbled away until they ceased to be a major menace to the Government." But if any doubt remained, it was dispelled in May of 1959, when the Communist Party of North Vietnam called for the unification of Vietnam through all "appropriate means" and a few months later publicly assumed responsibility for the "liberation" of the south. In 1960, Ho Chi Minh, speaking to the Communist Party Congress, emphasized the need to "step up the national democratic people's revolution of the south," and in December 1960 the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was duly formed.

KENNEDY'S FIRST MOVE

By 1961, when President Kennedy came to office, Vietnam was approaching a crisis. The Viet Cong had increased their strength to about five thousand regular guerrillas, and they more or less controlled a considerable portion of the countryside. Lansdale, by now a General, had just returned from a secret trip to Vietnam ordered by the previous administration and his report shocked President Kennedy when he saw it.

The new President all but decided to send Lansdale himself as the new American Ambassador, but the suggestion raised a storm in the Pentagon, where Lansdale was viewed as an officer who through his service with CIA had become too "political." Since there was, of course, a certain amount of truth in the charge, McNamara was persuaded and Lansdale was put aside.[1]

Elbridge Durbrow, the incumbent ambassador, however, clearly had to be relieved. He had been required to bear so many messages of

disapproval from the United States that he had not been welcome at the presidential palace in Saigon for several months. Following the November 1960 coup attempt, things had gotten even worse, since Diem believed, wrongly, that Durbrow had known of the plans for the coup in advance but had not warned the regime. In the end, President Kennedy chose Frederick E. Nolting, a career foreign service officer from an old Virginia family. Nolting was a big, soft-spoken man who was so comfortable to be with that almost everyone used his nickname, Fritz. He was ideal for the job of restoring good relations with Diem and attempting to influence him toward concessions that would bring his regime wider support from within Vietnam and make it politically easier for the United States to give him the aid he requested.

President Kennedy grumbled occasionally about the United States being "overcommitted" in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, but he could not go back on the commitments already made. He might avoid a qualitative change in the United States involvement—for example, raising our commitment to the level of a war like that in Korea. But he could not refuse to give more of the same kind of assistance that had been given in the past so long as the recipients could use it effectively. Or at least he could not refuse to give more of the same kind of assistance without disrupting the whole balance of power and fabric of the security structure of the region, where so many countries had based their policy on continued American involvement.

VICE-PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S TOUR

A set of recommendations prepared during the previous administration to increase the number of American advisers in Vietnam and to step up the economic and military aid programs was approved in April. Then, in May, the President sent Vice-President Johnson on a tour of the Far East to reassure our allies in Asia about the intentions of the new administration. The Vice-President found Diem "remote from the people" and "surrounded by persons less admirable than he"—but he felt it necessary to hail him publicly as the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia." But more important, the Vice-President recommended a fundamental decision to "move forward promptly with a major effort to help these countries defend themselves." Time was running out, he felt, and the United States had to "pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a 'Fortress America' concept" or go ahead with a full, forward strategy.

Both Johnson and Nolting urged reforms on Diem, and he reluctantly agreed to move in that direction. The United States then sent an economic mission to Vietnam under Eugene Staley, and it came back with a detailed plan for managing and developing the economy and for determining the nature and role of American aid.

THE TAYLOR-ROSTOW MISSION

But the Viet Cong made still more gains. By this time intelligence was estimating that the full-time, regular guerrilla troops numbered about twelve thousand men. With these and their several thousand more irregulars, the Viet Cong were able to bring together several different guerrilla bands at one time, totaling as many as a thousand men for a single attack. The pace of the guerrilla war had also intensified, and both government and Viet Cong casualties were running between seven hundred and twelve hundred a month. In a dramatic demonstration of what they could do when they chose to, the Viet Cong on September 18, 1961, overran a provincial capital over fifty-five miles from Saigon. They beheaded the province chief, loaded up the arms and ammunition they had captured, and departed before a relief force arrived. President Diem was convinced that the Communists intended to try to cut the country in half, isolating Hué from Saigon, and that they might well succeed if he did not get help quickly. He requested an increase of aid from the United States, and on October 11, 1961, President Kennedy announced that he was sending General Maxwell Taylor and a small team of advisers from the different agencies and departments to see how the United States might assist further.

Taylor was accompanied by Walt W. Rostow, then McGeorge Bundy's deputy on the White House staff, but there was no one of anywhere near comparable rank from the State Department. Secretary Rusk had recently acceded to pressure from below to try to get the chairmanship of the Vietnam Task Force returned to the State Department, and had been successful. But he did not want the State Department to play a prominent role in the upcoming decisions on Vietnam. For he regarded Vietnam as essentially a military problem even though a number of his colleagues in the State Department disagreed.

In any event, it was on the military aspects that the Taylor mission focused. General Lansdale, for example, was a member of the mission, and his experience with the political undercurrents in Vietnam was probably greater than any other American's, as were his sources of information. But much to his disgust, he was put to work estimating the costs and number of men required to "seal off" the 250-mile borders of jungle and mountains through which the infiltrators came—a question that he thought itself revealed a misunderstanding of guerrilla warfare. Lansdale did in fact see Diem and Nhu while he was in Vietnam, and he noted that some of the disturbing signs that he had noticed on his January trip were aggravated. Diem's unwillingness to delegate authority to anyone but Nhu was having its consequences in overwork for themselves and inefficiency in the operation of the government. Both were

defensive and increasingly isolated. Diem seemed especially cut off, since he apparently got his information only through Nhu.

Even Rostow, on whom the main burden of making the political assessment fell, was preoccupied with the problem of the infiltration routes. His argument was that these routes of access made the situation different from the guerrilla terrorism that had been defeated in Malaya and the Philippines. He noted that the guerrillas in Greece had been beaten only after the Yugoslavs closed the border, and he argued that unless a way could be found to close the Vietnamese border political reforms would do nothing but buy a little time. This view, in fact, was a basic premise in Rostow's thinking. In a major speech analyzing the Communist use of guerrilla warfare and its relationship to the modernization process in developing countries, delivered that spring of 1961 at the Fort Bragg Special Forces School, Rostow had called the "sending of men and arms across international boundaries and the direction of guerrilla war from outside a sovereign nation" a new form of aggression. He had also warned that "this is a fact which the whole international community must confront and whose consequent responsibilities it must accept. Without such international action those against whom aggression is mounted will be driven inevitably to seek out and engage the ultimate source of the aggression they confront." This of course was an argument for bombing North Vietnam, a course of action for which Rostow was a responsible advocate on this and subsequent occasions.

The final report contained three sets of recommendations. The first was in effect a series of demands for political, governmental, and administrative reforms by the Diem government. The second set of recommendations was that the United States should provide the sinews of material aid and the technical advisers required for a broadly conceived counterguerrilla program—including economic measures; village-level civic, social, and political action. The United States would also furnish arms and equipment for self-defense corps and the specialized equipment, helicopters and so on, to free the Vietnamese military from static defense and to give them the mobility to seek out the guerrillas in their own territory. The program would include helicopter pilots, mechanics, and other highly trained technicians who would operate the equipment while training Vietnamese to take over. In addition, the Taylor report also recommended the sending of some special Air Force squadrons—with the code name "Farmgate"—of slow-flying, propeller-driven B-26s and T-28s. These were Air Force units especially designed and put together for the purposes of small-scale, guerrilla warfare.

With the exception of "Farmgate," these first two of the three sets of recommendations in the Taylor report were merely more of the same kind of assistance that had been given in the past—even fifteen thousand advisers, the level reached in 1963, in a nation of fourteen million people is still support for what would continue to be a Vietnamese struggle. But the third set of recommendations was for a qualitative change in the nature of the United States commitment—for the Taylor report also proposed the introduction into Vietnam of over ten thousand regular American ground troops, initially, and accepting the possibility that as many as six full divisions might eventually be required. The mission of these American troops—revealing the continued focus in General Taylor's mind on the possibility of a conventional, Korea-type attack—would be to hold the ring against invasion from the north by regular North Vietnamese divisions and to man the northern borders against infiltrators, while the South Vietnamese dealt with the guerrillas in the rear.

Thus what General Taylor was advocating was essentially the same large-scale American commitment that Vice-President Johnson had recommended. But this did not accord with President Kennedy's own analysis of the nature of what was happening in Southeast Asia. He had read deeply after his tour of the area in 1951, and his comments on the Indochina crisis when he returned had revealed his conviction that if Communism were to be defeated in Asia it could be done only by the force of nationalism. "Without the support of the native population," he said, "there is no hope of success in any of the countries of Southeast Asia." To try to oppose Communist advances "apart from and in defiance of innately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure."

There were few alternatives to the Taylor-Johnson policy that was offered. None of the factors that seemed to make it possible to neutralize Laos existed so far as South Vietnam was concerned. In Laos, all the different factions, including the Communists, seemed to want peace and to be left alone. But the Communist North Vietnamese were clearly determined to try the "internal war" technique as an instrument for gaining control over the south. Both the Soviet Union and Communist China seemed willing at least to put Laos aside for the time being, but Communist China was clearly determined to support the North Vietnamese effort in the south and openly downgraded the risk that the action would provoke the United States into retaliating by an attack on either North Vietnam or mainland China. In Laos, finally, there was a major political figure on whom a policy of neutralization could be based, a figure whose advocacy of neutrality over the years had made him its symbol, a figure who had a measure of popular appeal in the country. But there was no Souvanna Phouma in either North or South Vietnam.

There was one imaginative proposal—a notion put foward by Chester Bowles to enlarge the area of neutrality far beyond both Laos and Vietnam, to include Burma, Thailand, Malaya, in fact the whole of Southeast Asia. So far as I know, President Kennedy did not make any specific comment on this suggestion, but my sense of his attitude is that he accepted the concept as a farseeing expression of the ultimate goal for

Southeast Asia toward which we should work, but that its time had not yet come. I think he would have said that our policy should lead toward the goal of a neutral Southeast Asia and avoid getting United States prestige so thoroughly pinned to "victory" in Vietnam as to preclude that goal, but that until Communist ambitions had been blunted against the realities of native resistance from within Southeast Asia we could not do much more than continue to support that resistance.

The President's decision, at any rate, was along these lines. He approved of the effort to bring about reforms in the Diem government by persuasion and of the step-up in military and economic aid and the increase of American advisers, technicians, and helicopter pilots, including the "Farmgate" B-26s and T-28s with their pilots and mechanics. But he did not approve the commitment of American ground troops.

In an interesting example of one type of gambit in the politics of Washington policy-making, the President avoided a direct "no" to the proposal for introducing troops to Vietnam. He merely let the decision slide, at the same time ordering the government to set in motion all the preparatory steps for introducing troops.

For their part, Diem and Nhu again reacted in typically mandarin fashion. They resented the American insistance on the need for reform and reacted with a flurry of anti-American stories in Vietnam's controlled press and sharp treatment of American officials in Saigon. But over the following months, Diem and Nhu responded to Nolting's tactful reminders by making some quiet changes—not by any means everything the United States requested, but changes at least in the direction of reform.

THE SEARCH FOR A STRATEGIC CONCEPT

In Washington in the meantime, the search for a strategic concept to meet the "subterranean" technique of guerrilla warfare had been continuing. Rostow's speech at Fort Bragg had analyzed the relationship between guerrilla warfare and the "modernization process" taking place in the nations toward which the Communists were directing their attack. Rostow saw the modernization process as true revolution, containing its own dynamics. Like all revolutions, modernization was disturbing, upsetting the old ways and producing the vulnerabilities of transition on which the Communists could prey. The Communists, Rostow pointed out, were the "scavengers of the modernization process."

Rostow's conclusion was that the best way to win a guerrilla war was to prevent it from happening, and his analysis of the strains of modernization led to valuable insights of how this could be done in the villages and countryside of the emerging nations.

His conclusion was that the task for the United States was not only to hasten the process of modernization, to get a country past the vulnerable period of transition, but also to protect its independence during that vulnerable period. And it was the difficulty of this task of protection at the period of greatest vulnerability that led Rostow to the conclusion that it might be necessary to "seek out and engage the ultimate source of aggression." The vulnerabilities of a nation in transition were so many and the task of defeating guerrilla terrorism so great that he saw no other alternative. He was particularly impressed by the fact that historically—in Malaya, the Philippines, and other places where guerrilla terrorism had been defeated—it had taken ten to twenty soldiers to each guerrilla.

Other pioneering work was going on in the Pentagon, in CIA, in the Agency for International Development, and particularly at Fort Bragg. In the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, we set to work analyzing the political questions involved, and I began to mull and ponder over my personal experiences as an OSS guerrilla leader operating behind the Japanese lines in the neighboring terrain of Burma.

Our analysis was delivered as a speech in August and then released.[2] One section analyzed the military aspects of guerrilla warfare in terms of the need for popular support. The danger of large-scale military operations was that their very destructiveness would alienate the people. What is more, the argument ran, regular forces, although essential for the task of deterring conventional aggression, were unsuited by both training and equipment for the task of fighting guerrillas. Regular forces were road-bound, unwieldy, and cumbersome, inevitably telegraphing their movements to the elusive guerrilla. Drawing on our historical experience as a young nation in Indian fighting, on the jungle experience of the Philippine Insurrection at the turn of the century, and on OSS experience in World War II, we argued that the way to fight the guerrilla was to adopt the tactics of the guerrilla. Small bands should be spotted at intervals throughout the area to be pacified. Using guerrilla tactics, they would harass and ambush, while central reserves would be used to reinforce and to ambush on escape trails leading from the point of contact. As the guerrillas in an area were slowly worn down, government control could be extended and the people given the means to protect themselves. And when the area was cleared and secured, the security forces could move on to the next.

The other part of our analysis of guerrilla warfare focused on the political aspects of the problem. Having stressed the vital importance of gaining popular support, our analysis went on to argue that "it would be mistaken to think that guerrillas cannot thrive where governments are popular and where modernization, economic development, and re-