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 LeMoultier 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 attacks on 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 Diinh Diem as Premier. The Ngo were an ancient mandarins family who had served the Emperor of Annam at Hue 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 mandarins 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 Mau-Thanh 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 in any sense of the term of being either pro-French or pro-Communist. (As a provincial chief, he had broken up an early Communist network, and the Communists had murdered his revered older brother, Ngo Diinh Khon.) He was the logical choice for the premiership.

The problems that Diem faced as the Premier of half of a war-ravaged country were overwhelming. Destruction was everywhere, and the economy was in chaos. The people were war-weary and demoralized, 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 their 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

In 1954, Diem took full control of the government, and the Vietnam Institute for Economic and Social Research was established. The institute was responsible for conducting research on economic and social issues in Vietnam. It was funded by the United States government and worked closely with the South Vietnamese government to provide economic development plans and strategies. The institute's work was crucial in shaping the economic policies of the South Vietnamese government, and it played a significant role in the development of the country during the post-war period. 
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 advisors 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 “antisemocratic.” 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 Hue; and most especially the arrogant and supercilious Ngo Dinh Nhu and his Asiatic, 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 ever-present part of life in Saigon. In November of 1960, there was a major coup attempt by the elite parachutists—which revealed that defection 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 on the basis of ability but of personal loyalty.

THE GUERILLA WAR BEGINS

It was in November 1957, following the Soviet Spytihn 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-
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, regretfully, 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 Hanoi 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 ascended 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 cost and number of men required to "seal off" the 250-mile borders of jolly 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 signals 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 them- selves 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 until 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 counter guerrilla 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 "Fangurite"—of slow-slaying, 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 "Fangurite," 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 peo-
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 mendacious fashion. They presented the American insistence on the need for reforms 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 Nolling'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 unceasing. 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, culminating in its own dynamics. Like all revolutions, modernization was disintegrating the old ways and producing the vulnerabilities of transition in 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 village and countryside of the emerging nations.