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MANDATE TO REVOLUTION:

The Untold Story of President Kennedy's Vietnam Policies

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This paper is more than a history. It is a political analysis. It must be that because those whose traditional role in a free society is to record history as it happened to leave a record by which man can learn and improve, have abdicated their responsibility and taken to rewriting history as the government wants it written. Thus the "historians" of today would deny us the fact that President Kennedy planned, in his last months, to extricate us from the Vietnam war. The things which Kennedy said in public, statements of our national policy do not exist to current historians. As a result, the historical record is frightfully incomplete and it must often be pieced together not with solid facts but with careful analysis of what those who write history want posterity to know.

We begin with a very brief overview of the Kennedy administration intended as little more than a glimpse of the politics of John Kennedy and how they worked in the world as it existed during his time. The overview cannot begin to detail all the aspects of the Kennedy presidency, and many important facets have been left out because of their volume alone.

The simple history of our involvement in Vietnam prior to 1961 is necessary so that we may understand what happened after 1961 and know the real nature of our "commitment" and how and why those in power sought both to honor it and break away from it.

The closest attention is given to Kennedy's Vietnam policies throughout his administration, especially toward the end of his life when they underwent a revolutionary change. Here is where the historical record is shamefully incomplete, where it has been raped by the most honored of scholars and distorted by the most respected preservers of our historical records.

Less detail than I would have preferred is presented on Johnson's policies in Vietnam, although the essential outline is clear. Once we under-

stand what Kennedy was doing in Vietnam at the time of his assassination, very little need be said about what Johnson did afterwards.

OVERVIEW: FOREIGN POLICY IN THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

When John Kennedy ascended to the Presidency in 1961, the United States was at the end of a decade of the worst, most disastrous foreign policy in its history, a policy based on and controlled by the perverted and astute moral convictions of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen Dulles, head of the Central Intelligence Agency. These men sought a world in which two opposing forces existed: that of Communism, insidious and threatening, and that ^{of} "democracy" and "freedom," which was to them good and wholesome, what properly should control the world. Casting themselves in the pious role of saviours, these two men engineered a foreign policy which "committed" the United States to protecting the world against the Communist "threat" and assigned to us the right, which in the Dulles brothers' eyes must have been divine, to impose our own brand of "democracy" on the world as the only morally correct course of action.

Beginning with the U.S. involvement in World War II and further developed under the Dulles reign was a power structure like none other in history, one which saw its ultimate responsibility as controlling the world, based on a religious devotion to anti-communism and a fanatical conviction that this nation must fight what it perceives as "communist subversion" around the globe. And this power structure was the first in history which really had the potential to "control the world," even if it meant destroying it. As it grew, more did it begin to control the government, sucking up half of the national budget to feed its increasing hunger and making more and more people dependent on it for their very existence. Its most covert arm, the CIA,

became a thing unto itself, free of proper government control as it operated abroad in the field against declared national policy and infiltrated so many institutions at home that it could effectively control its controllers. In his very last words as President (and he was that almost in name only), Eisenhower recognized this power, named it, and warned against it. The "military-industrial complex," he said, combined a myriad of powerful political and economic pressures on behalf of military projects and interests and would influence national policy and policymakers in line with those interests.

Though liberal in his orientation, Kennedy came into office still embracing the basic doctrine of the cold-war which had breathed life into the military-industrial complex and on which the military-industrial complex now depended for survival and legitimation. His inaugural address was alarmist in nature and served only to fan the flames of the cold war. While it offered as least some prospect of conciliation, it held true to the contrived notion, by that time basic to our society, that the Communists were our natural enemy and must be dealt with as such.

In addition to the commitments and policies of the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy inherited one of the chief policy-makers of his predecessor, Allen Dulles. This man, in control of what he made an American secret police to watch over the world, showed his consummate devilry when he wrecked a 1960 summit between President Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Khrushchev which might have initiated a detente between the two powers. Two weeks before the summit Dulles authorized an illegal U-2 flight over Russia which managed to get shot down in the Urals. Its pilot, Gary Powers, failed to destroy his plane--as was the strict rule (a destructor mechanism is included in each U-2)--and the Russians were able to capture both the craft and Powers. Through a series of "cover stories" (government term for conscious lies in the "national interest")

the administration denied having sent an intelligence flight over Russia. When the Russians announced that they had not only the U-2 but its CIA pilot, Foster Dulles in the State Department admitted what was already obvious to the world, though he claimed "Washington" (i.e., Eisenhower) had not authorized the flight. Ike had no alternative but to accept the blame and defend himself, though his defense was interpreted as belligerent and an indication that U-2 flights over Russia would continue, as, in fact, they did. Khrushchev, enraged, demanded apologies and the summit collapsed.¹

This was not the final brainchild with which Dulles blessed the Eisenhower administration. With Vice President Richard Nixon (and his own characteristic incompetence and disregard for international law), Dulles fathered a plan to invade Cuba, the tiny island close to our shores which had turned Red under our very noses, and overthrow Castro, who would be replaced by a government formed by the CIA. Of this monstrous operation Eisenhower was but the midwife. It began at the end of his administration with his forced approval. It was dumped on Kennedy as a bastard child if there ever was one. Dulles overcame Kennedy's reluctance toward the plan by misinforming the new President and thus committing him publicly to a policy which could not be followed, which would destroy the credibility of the United States in the eyes of the world (if any credibility remained) and which could have initiated a war between the U.S. and Russia, who was committed by treaty to defend Cuba against attack.

Kennedy must be spared no blame for having allowed the CIA to continue training its army of Cuban exiles in Guatemala, and certainly his greatest mistake was to permit the ultimate invasion at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. It must be pointed out, however, that, in the midst of the invasion (April 1961) when nothing short of overt U.S. military support could have salvaged the overthrow attempt, he rejected such overt participation as the military and

CIA strongly advised. Thus came the first great rift between Kennedy and his military-CIA advisors. While he wrongly allowed them to carry out a plan calculated, it seems, to bring the United States overtly into a war with Cuba, he put a stop to their devoted insanity by refusing to take the measures which would have put us at war with Russia.²

In his account of the Kennedy administration, A Thousand Days, Arthur Schlesinger describes Kennedy's assessment of the Bay of Pigs debacle. "His first lesson was never to rely on the experts. He now saw that he would have to broaden the range of his advice...and remake every great decision in his own terms."³ Schlesinger recalls that JFK remarked, "My God, the bunch of advisors we inherited....Can you imagine being President and leaving behind someone like all those people there?"⁴ He was particularly distressed at the Joint Chiefs' assessment of the military situation that led him into approving the militarily untenable invasion (which was crushed with little effort by Castro's army). Of Allen Dulles and his top aide Richard Bissell, Kennedy was astounded that men of such purported intelligence and experience could have been so utterly wrong. "It's a hell of a way to learn things," he commented privately, "but I have learned one thing from this business--that is, we will have to deal with the CIA."⁵ In sum, says Schlesinger,

The Bay of Pigs provided Kennedy the warning and confirmed his temperamental instinct to reach deep inside State, Defense and the CIA in order to catch hold of policies before these policies made his choices for him. "Domestic policy," he used to say, "can only defeat us' foreign policy can kill us."⁶

It would be more than a year before Kennedy realized that what he learned from the Bay of Pigs was but a mild indication of the problems facing America and her position in the world. However, he did make some efforts to "deal with the CIA." First, as the Cuban invasion made obvious and necessary, Dulles had to go, though his "resignation" came after the shock of the Bay of

Pigs had some chance to diminish. Kennedy moved quietly to cut the CIA budget in 1962 and again in 1963, aiming at a 20 percent reduction by 1966. Also, for the first time in CIA history, Kennedy granted each U.S. Ambassador abroad the authority to know everything the CIA people were doing in his particular country, constituting an initial effort at bringing secret operations under policy control.⁷

One of Kennedy's greatest problems with the military-industrial complex was that the CIA had grown to have such enormous power that it was, in effect, the master of its own foreign policy, often operating directly against declared national policy. The President's directive to all ambassadors was disliked and resisted by the CIA, which thrived, in part, on its independent operation. But the issues of the first half of 1961 had already demonstrated to Kennedy "the readiness of CIA operatives in the field to go off on policies of their own." Schlesinger explains the extent of the CIA's growth:

Often the CIA station chief has been in the country longer than the ambassador, had more money at his disposal and exerted more influence. The CIA had its own political desks and military staffs; it had in effect its own foreign service, its own air force, even on occasion its own combat forces. Moreover, the CIA declined to share its clandestine intelligence operations either with the State Department in Washington or with the ambassador in the field; and, while covert political operations were cleared with State, this was sometimes done, not at the start, but after the operation had almost reached the point beyond which it could not be easily recalled...it had acquired a power which, however beneficial its exercise often might be, blocked State Department control over the conduct of foreign affairs.⁸

The CIA's willingness to make its own policy could not be better illustrated by another major crisis of the early Kennedy administration, the guerrilla war in Laos. Kennedy's policy was to support a coalition government headed by the popular Souvanna Phouma. It was a neutralist solution, the only viable alternative to the West in this underdeveloped nation of which large segments overtly supported the Communist Pathet Lao. Foster Dulles, in the

early fifties, had branded neutrality as "immoral" and set about to make of Laos a "bastion of freedom," a pro-Western military "bulwark against Communism." By 1960, the United States had poured \$300 million into Laos, a misbegotten investment since this country of pacifist Buddhists had neither the social structure nor the desire to establish a force sufficient to become a "bulwark" against anything. The growing popularity of the Pathet Lao led Souvanna, in 1957, to negotiate a coalition government which was to include both the communist forces and the right-wing Royal Laotian Army. Efforts of the American ambassador to prevent a coalition were to no avail and, in 1958, the CIA engineered a coup which removed Souvanna and installed, against State Department policy, the right-wing, pro-Western Phoumi. In 1960, Phoumi rigged the national elections and settled in for a long, U.S. financed tenure, his personal CIA contact, Jack Hazey, always at his side. When challenged with being out of step with declared policy, Hazey would snap, "I don't give a damn what they say." During the summer of 1960, Phoumi was overthrown in a bloodless coup which brought Souvanna and neutralism into power once more. The United States, while recognizing Souvanna, continued its covert support of Phoumi and his army. At the close of the Eisenhower Administration, the U.S. ended all support for Souvanna's neutralist government and sufficiently choked the leader so that he was forced to turn to the Russians for economic aid. At the same time, Phoumi seized power once more and, when Kennedy came into office, the success of the Pathet Lao in fighting Phoumi's army had presented what, in our view, was a desperate crisis. The military and CIA expectably threw their support behind Phoumi who Kennedy soon came to view as totally incompetent. The advice of the military was for the United States to go all the way or none of the way--but no limited commitment. If we were prepared to commit ground troops, they said, then we should go all out with at least 140,000 troops

equipped with tactical nuclear weapons. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff outlined for Kennedy a policy by which we would provoke escalation to the point where we could use nuclear weapons to achieve "victory." Kennedy rejected this advice and sought a cease-fire, followed by negotiations toward a coalition government. The CIA still continued its covert support of Phoumi, who balked at a neutralist settlement. Finally, in early 1962, Hasey was removed from Laos in an effort to deprive Phoumi of his source of covert U.S. support. In July of 1962, the Geneva Accords guaranteeing the neutrality of Laos were signed and in October, the U.S. withdrew the 666 military advisors assigned to Phoumi's army.⁹

The turning point in the Kennedy administration came in October 1962 with the Cuban missile crisis. U-2 flights over Cuba had developed evidence that the Russians were making covert preparations for the placement of "offensive" missiles in the small island so close to our shores; this was intolerable to the United States, who demanded immediate removal of the nuclear weapons and dismantling of the missile sites. On the means by which we should deal with the Soviets in this situation, the rift between Kennedy and the military was further widened. As with the Bay of Pigs, the military-CIA people were eager to have U.S. pilots in U.S. planes drop U.S. bombs on Cuba, arguing that our first response should be massive air strikes to wipe out the missile sites. An invasion of Cuba was also favored. All of this did Kennedy reject, for he knew that it would lead to a nuclear confrontation with the U.S.S.R. Instead, he supported a naval blockade of Cuba to prevent the shipment of more offensive weapons, while demanding withdrawal of the missiles already present.

Kennedy's handling of the crisis was brilliant, a serious departure from the sterile and militaristic tactics which characterized the United States conduct of foreign policy in the cold war. Though it looked to the country as

if JFK were being "tough" with the Russians, he was, in fact, bending over backwards to give them an out, to make it possible for them to withdraw without humiliation. He drew the naval blockade closer to Cuba's shores to delay confrontation with approaching Soviet ships. When one tanker finally met the blockade, he ordered that it be allowed to pass since it could not have contained nuclear warheads. Kennedy sharply clashed with the Navy over his policy of giving the Russians more time, but he saw to it that his will prevailed. (Finally, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles and dismantle the sites, and approved U.S. inspection by U-2 intelligence flights.¹⁰

In the settlement of the missile crisis, both leaders agreed to pursue an end to the cold war, to make new and stronger efforts in the field of disarmament. And Kennedy, it should be noted, gave Khrushchev more than he asked for in settling the crisis. The Soviet leader began by asking that, in return for withdrawing the missiles, the U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba. Kennedy promised not only that we would not invade the island, he guaranteed that we would prevent invasion, which meant that we would actually defend Cuba against any attack. Indeed in 1963, JFK did take measures to prevent the CIA controlled Cuban exiles in the United States, embittered by the Bay of Pigs, from invading their homeland.¹¹

Also, Kennedy saw to it that we comply with one of Khrushchev's demands to which we had not directly responded: that we remove our own Jupiter missile sites from Turkey and Italy. This, indeed, was one of Kennedy's frightening lessons from the missile crisis. Robert Kennedy, who had become an important cabinet member, reveals that on three occasions prior to the crisis, the President had ordered the State Department to negotiate removal of our missiles from Turkey and Italy. It was not until the crisis, when these missiles gave the Soviets a negotiating advantage, that Kennedy learned his orders had never

of the cold war to the realization that to remove the threat of nuclear war and better the lives of people all around the world, radical changes in policy would be necessary.

Thus, in 1963, policy took a new direction. Kennedy's overtures toward the soviet Union were unprecedented. Over the summer the limited test ban treaty was negotiated and, in late September was ratified by the Senate. The "hot line" established a direct link between Washington and Moscow. In October, Kennedy authorized the sale of American surplus wheat to Russia and Hungary.

Even these steps did not come easy, all being opposed in varying degrees by the military. Former top military advisers testified before the Senate against the test ban, arguing that it would be a fatal blow to our national security. Further, some of Kennedy's own military advisors opposed the ban before the Senate in secret hearings.¹⁴ ~~The~~ The interests of the military here were obvious. This treaty, considered by all only a first step toward total disarmament and further agreements, threatened the very existence of the military-industrial complex. The reduction of the threat of war, as the treaty did, meant a reduction of the need for such institutions which find their justification in the preparation for war.

In 1963, Kennedy began to prepare the public for the new direction in policy. His speech at the American University in June will stand as one of the greatest in our history. As Schlesinger notes, the effect of the speech "was to redefine the whole national attitude toward the cold war."¹⁵ It held out the possibility of sweeping changes in the relations between the United States and Russia, saying that enmities between countries did not last forever, and that "the tide of time and events will often bring surprising changes in the relations between nations." To all Americans Kennedy said, "Let us re-

examine our attitude toward the Soviet Union....No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered lacking in virtue....Let us re-examine our attitude toward the cold war...." The entire speech abandoned any remnant of cold war rhetoric.

Finally, my fellow Americans, let us examine our attitude toward peace and freedom here at home. The quality and spirit of our own society must justify and support our efforts abroad. We must show it in the dedication of our own lives...

So let us not be blind to (the) differences (between nations), but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.¹⁶

Starting in September, 1963 there were intimations of a possible detente with Cuba, and French journalist Jean Daniel became an unofficial emissary between Kennedy and Castro.¹⁷ Around this time there was a revision in our policy toward South Vietnam along the lines of disengaging ourselves from that futile foreign commitment, which Kennedy had broadened three years earlier on the strong advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Vice President, Lyndon Johnson.

One historian has summed up Kennedy's policy in 1963 as follows:

By 1963, then, Kennedy had come to much awareness that the post-war world was ending and to a determination to attempt more shifts in American foreign policy in harmony with the emerging fluidity (of the world situation). By this time, too, he had developed close personal relations with a large number of premiers and heads of state the world over. It was felt that after his re-election in 1964 he would be in an unusually strong position to give American foreign policy a new direction, that the test-ban treaty was but a foretaste of more significant measures yet to come, measures which might lead to an American-Soviet detente, eventually even to a rapprochement.¹⁸

Then, on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas, Texas. "The President's life ended in a tragic sense of incompleteness and unfulfillment," the above-quoted historian wrote.¹⁹

Vice President Johnson became the new chief executive. His interests were ideologically and financially involved with the military-industrial complex. In 1961 he was gung-ho for increased American involvement in Southeast Asia. He was generally not in agreement with Administration policies in 1963, especially those in civil rights and Vietnam.²⁰ Still basically a cold war politician, Johnson said of the wheat sale to Russia authorized by Kennedy, that it was "the worst political mistake we have made in foreign policy in this administration."²¹

Though among Johnson's first words as President were those promising continuity, it was apparent then, since supported by history, that there was little chance for a real continuation of John Kennedy's politics. It was not only that the politics of LBJ were not those of JFK, it was also the great differences in the personalities and leadership abilities of the two men. Kennedy was young, energetic, an inspiration to the nation. His popular support was great and there was something new and exciting in what he was doing. He gave the national mood a positive accent and sought to help and befriend all: For the poor and the minorities, he was a symbol of hope. Johnson lacked this. He was something from the past, and despite all his early promises, he was stale. He lacked the quality which made Kennedy a great leader. He was simply a wheeler-dealer politician from Texas with the soul of a demon.

The one area in which the most immediate and radical policy changes occurred just before Kennedy's death and in which policy was most radically revised after his death, the area which today is of obvious relevance, is Vietnam. I can confidently state that there was but one event in the past decade which made the current war in Vietnam possible: That was the assassination of President Kennedy.

BACKGROUND: THE UNITED STATES AND VIETNAM, 1949-1960

The United States began its involvement in Vietnam by giving minimal aid to none other than Ho Chi Minh during his struggle against the Japanese in World War II. In 1946, France initiated an effort to reconquer Vietnam, which it had governed as a colony from the 1860's until the second World War when the Japanese took control. Largely because the United States was anxious to gain French support in forming NATO, it contributed millions of dollars to the French campaign to restore colonial rule in the Southeast Asian country. Under Truman, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) arrived in Vietnam in July 1950, part of a program to "accelerate" aid to the French colonialists, spurred by the 1949 Communist victory in China and the increased American fear of Communism it induced. In late 1953, with American financial and military aid to the French mounting, Senator Mike Mansfield headed a study mission in Indochina and concluded that we needed to stay in Vietnam for "the containment of Communist aggression, and the welfare and security of our country."²² President Eisenhower publicly supported Mansfield's view and gave to the thinking of Foster Dulles his own title: "the falling domino principle." The official line of thought, then, was that if Vietnam were to fall to the Communists, communism would spread to neighboring countries, thus posing a major threat to the free world.

In early 1954, Dulles' "free world" was in trouble, for the Communists under their popular and crusading leader, Ho, were on the verge of total victory. In March, the French Chief of Staff visited Washington to say that unless the United States intervened, Indochina would be lost. With this, Foster Dulles set to work to get Congressional approval to use U.S. air and naval power in support of the French. Vice President Richard Nixon created a public clamor when he stated, "We must take the risk now by putting our boys

in (Vietnam)." Despite prodding by Dulles and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Eisenhower refused to make the total commitment without allies and Congressional support.²³

In the meantime, the administration, fearful of Ho Chi Minh's popularity, began looking for an anti-communist leader. Foster Dulles called to Washington Air Force Colonel Ed Lansdale, a key figure in the CIA-directed campaign against the Communist Huk guerrillas in the Philippines, who now left for Saigon with a mandate from Dulles to find a popular leader in Vietnam behind which the CIA could throw its support. Lansdale found Ngo Dinh Diem, a devout Catholic who, after serving as Premier under the Bao Dai French puppet regime in Saigon, exiled himself to the United States where he lobbied against U.S. aid to the French colonialists and warned against Communist No.²⁴

The day after the French were finally defeated at Dien Bien Phu in July 1954, the Vietnam phase of an international conference held in Geneva commenced. The resulting Geneva accords called for a cease-fire between the French and the Communists and, "pending the general elections which would bring about the unification of Vietnam," Ho would withdraw his forces to north of the 17th parallel. This "military demarcation line," which now separates North and South Vietnam, was to be considered "provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary." The accords also provided that consultations should be held between the authorities of "the two zones" beginning on July 20, 1955, leading to "general elections" which "shall be held in July 1956..."²⁵

Apparently, Foster Dulles, who participated in the Geneva conference, never envisioned the arbitrary creation of a "South" Vietnam to be temporary, as the accords provided. He decided to take the chunk of Vietnam that had been carved off and make it into a viable state, allied to the West. His puppet

head of the Saigon government, Diem, disassociated himself from the agreements at Geneva and Dulles himself "felt there might be something in this that would be worth trying to salvage, trying to sustain." By late 1954, Dulles estimated that there was a 50-50 chance of "saving" Vietnam. He constructed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and used it to put an umbrella of international support over South Vietnam as a "protocol state."²⁶ Diem immediately made a request for aid from the United States to which Eisenhower affirmatively replied on October 1, 1954. Here is how Eisenhower formalized the United States commitment in "South" Vietnam:

The purpose of this offer is to assist the Government of Vietnam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means. The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Vietnam in undertaking needed reforms. It hopes that such aid, combined with your own continuing efforts, will contribute effectively toward an independent Vietnam endowed with a strong government. Such a government would, I hope, be so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people...that it will be respected both at home and abroad and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology on your free people.²⁷

As Arthur Schlesinger points out,

It was never clear that the people were so free or the ideology so foreign as Eisenhower supposed, but this language defined the mood in Washington which began the Vietnam adventure. That mood was essentially moralistic. The commitment to South Vietnam, like the parallel attempt to make the languid country of Laos a bastion of western power, followed directly from the Dulles conception of the world as irrevocably split into two unified and hostile blocs. In such a world, the threat of Communism was indivisible and the obligation to oppose that threat remained unlimited.²⁸

Indeed, the people were not free under dictator Diem nor was Communism a "foreign ideology" to them. Dulles, blinded by his "moral" conviction, apparently never realized that although he could create a South Vietnam on paper and install his own government in the capital city, he could not reach into the minds of the masses who held Ho Chi Minh as their hero and who had no particular interests in bastions of western power. In 1955, Diem set about crushing all

political opposition in Saigon.²⁹ In the fall of that year, at Lansdale's urging, Diem agreed to hold a referendum designed to give the regime an air of popular legitimacy. The ballot offered a choice between Diem and Emperor Bao Dai, who had been exiled and discredited as a tool of the French. Diem polled 98 percent of the vote and was declared President of Vietnam.³⁰ At this time the consultations for the unification elections were to begin, but Diem insisted that his government did not sign and was "not bound in any way" by the Geneva accords. "Nothing constructive will be done," he said, as long as a "regime of oppression" was in power in the North.³¹

By 1956, some measure of political stability had been achieved in Saigon and the provincial capitals, as all opposition there had been eliminated. Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu refused to grant political freedom to opposition parties.³² When the time for national elections rolled around in mid-1956, Diem would not permit the elections, claiming again that he had not signed the Geneva accords and charging that since the Communists would not permit free electioneering in the North, he would not permit free elections in the South.³³ North Vietnam objected to little avail and the United States stood firm behind Diem's decision.³⁴ The real reason for refusing to permit the elections which the Geneva Accords provided for unifying Vietnam seemed obvious, however. All observers agreed that had such elections been held, Ho Chi Minh would have won.³⁵ Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs that "I have never talked to or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 percent of the population would have voted for Ho Chi Minh."³⁶

Thus, it became clear that the "free" people Eisenhower supported were "free" only to agree with the United States policy and its puppet Diem.

It was not long before Diem lost whatever semblance of popular support he

might initially have had. He paid little heed to the condition on which his U.S. aid supposedly depended, namely his "undertaking needed reforms." In 1956, he abolished elections for village headmen and municipal councils in favor of his own direct appointments. Such 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 predominance of Catholics in the regime was also strongly resented in this country where Buddhists are in the majority. The more criticism there was of his regime and family, the more Diem bore down on his opposition, moving more and more toward a police state and ever closer toward policies of repression in denying any form of political activity or expression.³⁷ As his authoritarianism grew, it involved manhunts, political "re-education" camps and the "regroupment" of population. The \$300 million dollars of annual U.S. aid went almost solely to the cities where the government was kept fat and happy, little reaching the countryside where most of the South Vietnamese lived and where Communist sympathy was high. All of this produced a spreading resistance among the population.³⁸ Beginning in the midst of the growing repression, the guerrillas in the South began to act with sporadic outbursts of terrorism and assassinations of local Diem appointees. In 1958, trained cadres from the 90,000 Communist sympathizers who had fled the South in 1954 when Diem came into power began returning to their native villages and districts to carry on the struggle against Diem.³⁹

This activity, in the view of the United States, put the "security" of the countryside in danger by the end of 1958.⁴⁰ This meant that the population of the countryside was in overt opposition to Diem, since guerrilla activity cannot exist without the support of the local inhabitants. Indeed, most of the guerrillas then had spent all their lives in the South, only a small pro-

portion of them having gone north in 1954.⁴¹ This was the beginning of a civil war which the United States was directing.

The struggle in the South against Diem was formalized at the end of 1960 and the beginning of 1961. In 1959, the Communist Party of North Vietnam called for the reunification of Vietnam through all "appropriate means."⁴² In March 1960 the guerrillas in the South (known as the Viet Cong) initiated the National Liberation Front, which the Communist Party in the North soon supported.⁴³ By 1961, when Kennedy came into office, the Viet Cong had gained control of a considerable portion of the countryside.⁴⁴ Diem was the master of but a third of the territory of South Vietnam.⁴⁵

JFK AND VIETNAM

By the close of the Eisenhower Administration, military "advisers" in South Vietnam were having a high time. They were not "winning," though, because they conceived of the conflict not as guerrilla activity but as conventional warfare. They took their mission as that of training a conventional army designed, not to fight guerrillas (and it is tenuous at best to think guerrillas can be fought effectively), but to repel a Korean-style invasion from the North. This they accomplished with a systematic barrage of self-serving reports about the commendable efficiency of this army and its capability to control any situation.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, they were creating a new branch of the military-industrial complex which meant money and jobs, all military oriented.

Kennedy's first actions toward Vietnam were to approve a set of recommendations prepared during the previous administration to increase the number of advisers in Vietnam and to step up the economic and military aid programs.⁴⁷ This was to begin a series of steps to bolster our involvement, all done at

the urging of Kennedy's top military advisers, including his Vice President, Lyndon Johnson.

These actions were not consistent with Kennedy's personal feelings about Vietnam, as expressed during his tenure as a Senator in the 50's. Of our early involvement, Kennedy said in 1951:

In Indochina, we have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of a French regime to hang on to the remnants of an empire....To check the southern drive of communism makes sense but not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is rather to build strong native non-communist sentiment within these areas and rely on that as a spearhead of defense rather than upon the legions of General de Lattre. To do this apart from and in defiance of inately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure.⁴⁸

Kennedy spoke with great foresight and wisdom. At this early stage, he recognized that the struggle in Vietnam was a political rather than a military one and that military means could not win over a people against their own nationalistic beliefs. Later that year on Meet the Press, he said, "Without the support of the native population, there is no hope of success in any of the countries of Southeast Asia."⁴⁹ In 1954 he opposed Dulles' efforts to gain Congressional support for United States military intervention in Vietnam. "I am frankly of the belief," he said, repeating his earlier position, "that no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere, and at the same time, nowhere, 'an enemy of the people' which has the sympathy and covert support of the people."⁵⁰

By 1961, enough fortunes and careers were at stake in South Vietnam that Kennedy could have been sufficiently pressured to act against his own instincts which, in this case, were sound. A close Kennedy aide, Ted Sorenson, explained:

Kennedy recognized far more clearly than most of his advisers that military action alone could not save Vietnam...But as President, unfortunately, his effort to keep our own military role in Vietnam from overshadowing our political objectives was handicapped by the State Department's inability to compete with the Pentagon.⁵¹

This is Sorenson's polite way of saying that, on Vietnam at least, the Pentagon

could not be controlled. It is the State Department's responsibility to execute the President's foreign policy, which means keeping all other agencies in line, including the Pentagon. Kennedy, according to those close to him, would grumble from time to time about what he called our "overcommitment" in Vietnam.⁵²

In May, Kennedy sent Johnson on a tour of the Far East to reassure our Asian "allies" of the intentions of the new administration. In Vietnam, Johnson, with less than the soundest political judgment, called dictator Diem the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia."⁵³ He was able to see, however, that Diem was "remote from the people," and he told Kennedy, "The country can be saved--if we move quickly and wisely."⁵⁴ He recommended that we "move forward promptly with a major effort to help" Vietnam defend itself.⁵⁵ On May 13 Johnson and Diem issued a joint communique stating that aid would be provided on an expanded and accelerated basis.⁵⁶

But the Viet Cong continued to make further gains. In October 1961 Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Walt Rostow (who later became the fiercest non-Pentagon hawk in the Johnson administration) on a mission to Vietnam to make "an educated military guess" as to what would be needed to salvage the situation.⁵⁷

Their answer to Kennedy was that South Vietnam had enough vitality to justify a major United States effort. To halt what they called a decline in the "confidence" of the South Vietnamese people, Taylor and Rostow recommended increased intervention. Most significantly, this included the commitment of an initial force of 10,000 U.S. ground troops in Vietnam. It was essentially the same large-scale involvement which Johnson had favored earlier. Rostow in particular took the hard line. He strongly argued in favor of bombing North Vietnam as part of contingency policy of "retaliation" against ~~that~~ North, graduated, he said, to match the intensity of Hanoi's support of the Viet Cong.⁵⁸

This policy of instant escalation was based on a fallacy embraced by most of the military people who advised on the Vietnam situation, namely that the real source of Communist-guerrillas in the South was the North, and that to "win" the war, we must "seek out and engage the ultimate source of the aggression." However, by the end of 1962, military statistics indicated that at the most only three or four thousand infiltrators had made their way down the Ho Chi Minh trails from the North. Yet, the total regular unit strength of the guerrillas was then estimated at between sixteen thousand and twenty-three thousand.⁵⁹ Also, the small proportion of Viet Cong infiltrating from the North were natives of the South who had fled north in 1954. While Hanoi supported the National Liberation Front and provided some assistance, most of the "enemy's" arms and equipment had been captured from Diem's army which meant that the Viet Cong were fighting with American equipment.⁶⁰ Bombing the North could do nothing but provide it with a perfectly valid reason for joining the struggle with its own regular forces, which, in turn, would simply justify further U.S. bombings which, it would seem, was what Rostow was aiming for.

The President's decision was to accept most of the Taylor-Rostow recommendations. He approved of the effort to bring about reforms in the Diem government (which Diem successfully resisted), and of the step-up in military and economic aid and the increase of American advisers, technicians, and helicopter pilots, including "Farmgate" B-26's and T-28's with their pilots and mechanics. But he drew the line at the commitment of American ground troops.⁶¹ Such action would have been totally alien to Kennedy's analysis of the situation. He told Schlesinger in November 1961 that the war in Vietnam could be won only so long as it was their war. If it were ever converted into a white man's war, we would lose as the French had lost a decade earlier.⁶² Kennedy was right. But it would be over a year before he realized that, even without the ground troops,

this was a "white man's war." It was being fought in a country which wesset up under a government which we installed, supported by our funds to conduct a war in which we controlled the military situation and provided the arms to conquer a force which had the support of two thirds of the native population.

Schlesinger explains that at this time Kennedy was not giving his full attention to Vietnam and was instead relying on Taylor and Robert McNamara, his Secretary of Defense. Moreover, he was doubtlessly pressured by the world situation which, from the U.S. standpoint was not good. Our image had taken a beating from the Bay of Pigs, nuclear testing had resumed, Kennedy was shaken by his meeting that June with Khrushchev. Thus, says Schlesinger:

The President unquestionably felt that an American retreat in Asia might upset the whole world balance. In December he ordered the American build-up to begin. General Paul Harkins, as the new American commander in Saigon, and Ambassador (Frederick) Nolting worked closely together. Both saw Diem as the key to success and both were convinced that attempts to bring pressure on him would be self-defeating....

tar

The result in 1962 was to place the main emphasis on the military effort. When the social and economic program developed in Washington encountered the usual resistance in Saigon, it was soon dropped....The appeal to the peasants was concentrated in the so-called strategic hamlet program, launched by the regime in April.

This idea, adapted from the British experience in fighting the guerrillas in Malaya, called for the relocation of peasants into fortified villages, surrounded by barbed wire fences and ditches filled with bamboo spikes. The theory was that the hamlets would give the peasants protection and a sense of security, control the movement of people and supplies through the countryside and cut the Viet Cong off from their primary sources of food, intelligence and recruits....It was an idyllic conception.⁶³

"Insane" would be a better word. The strategic hamlet program was a fatal mixture of Dulles and Orwell. It was an attempt to put a society of 15,000,000 people into some 11,000 "fortified" cities, the practical application of Dulles' bastions of freedom. If a whole country could not be made into a western bastion because of lack of popular support, then you get down to the grass roots and create playpens of "freedom"! This was a program destined to fail; rounding

up the well-settled inhabitants and carting them off into arbitrary "hamlets" would cause a resentment toward Diem and the United States that would turn more and more of the peasants to the Viet Cong.

Roger Hilsman, who served in the Kennedy Administration first as Director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and then, in 1963, as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, is extremely helpful in conveying the nature of the situation in Vietnam from 1962-1963. His book To Move a Nation tells much, but must be approached with caution for it is immersed in the most appalling efforts at self-justification, since he was a part of many of the programs and blunders he describes.

Of the strategic hamlet program which he championed, Hilsman says, "Inevitably, there would be opposition to being moved from the traditional homesite, away from family graves, away from family fields, even if it were only a few hundred yards." In cases where whole villages had to be moved to compose a hamlet, "the opposition would be even greater."⁶⁴ Hilsman does not mention that the peasants' "opposition" at being uprooted would necessarily defeat the supposed purpose of the entire program, for it would drive peasants to support the guerrillas. But, as Schlesinger reveals, there was a way of overcoming "opposition." Often the peasants had to be herded at bayonet point into the hamlets where they engaged in forced labor.⁶⁵

Ah, the freedoms for which we spend billions to protect!

A chief advocate of strategic hamlets and someone to guarantee their failure was Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, a fascist who, in comparison, made Diem seem democratic. Nhu, eager to adapt the strategic hamlet program to his own purposes and attempt to blanket the whole country with hastily constructed fortified villages, was appointed head of the program by Diem on March 19, 1962.⁶⁶

It did not take the Viet Cong long to figure out what the new strategy was. By July they had successfully infiltrated the majority of those hamlets already established. As Hilsman concedes, "the hamlets were terribly vulnerable."⁶⁷ In fact, the Viet Cong were actually able to improve their access to the villages, their source of food and recruits.⁶⁸

In early 1963, upon completing a tour of Vietnam requested by the President, Hilsman wrote Kennedy a memorandum which, although it seemed to defend the hamlet program, really told of its failure. He said, in part:

...the basic question of the whole war--is...the attitude of the villagers. It is difficult if not impossible to assess how the villagers really feel....But in an unknown but probably large number of strategic hamlets the villagers have merely let the Viet Cong in or supplied what they wanted without reporting the incident to the authorities. There is apparently some resentment against the Viet Cong about the 'taxes' they collect (does not the fact that they could actually levy taxes indicate the extent of their strength and popularity?--HR)...But there may be just as much resentment and suspicion directed toward the government (of Diem)...At the very least, the figures on Viet Cong strength imply a continuing flow of recruits and supplies from these same villages and indicate that a substantial proportion of the population is still cooperating with the enemy (what kind of "enemy" gets this kind of support?)--although it is impossible to tell how much of this cooperation stems from fear and how much from conviction.⁶⁹

It would seem, however, that the greatest source of Viet Cong recruits was the U.S. military in South Vietnam, from whose operations (mild compared to those of today) millions of peasants had lost loved ones and suffered great losses and were now permanently embittered against the Diem regime and its U.S. backing.

The operation at Binh Hoa, a small town near the Cambodian border and 17 miles west of Saigon, conducted January 21, 1962, illustrates how the U.S. military effort worked in favor of the Viet Cong. A senior American adviser decided to attack Binh Hoa where, according to five-day old intelligence reports, there were 300 Viet Cong with a full guerrilla battalion three or four miles away. First, a squadron of B-26's were to bomb the cluster of huts

in which the 300 Viet Cong were allegedly gathered. However, a "map-reading error" caused the planes to bomb a nearby Cambodian village. Troops positioned in boats the night before gave the Viet Cong ample warning of the attack to come and certainly the first mistaken bombing was an even greater warning. The area in which the battalions (plus bordering huts) were alleged to be was pounded with rockets from T-28's while more B-26's dropped 500-pound bombs on suspected munitions manufacturing areas. "The greatest problem is that bombing huts and villages will kill civilians and push the population still further toward active support for the Viet Cong," says Hilsman to prepare us for the shocking outcome of this U.S. offensive. The Viet Cong in the area had evacuated before the air strikes began and as a result no contact with them was made that day. It was not possible to say how many Cambodians were killed in the first bombing, but five civilians were killed and eleven injured in the second strikes. Of the five killed, three were children under seven years of age. Operations like this, cautions Hilsman, help to recruit more Vietcong than (they) could possibly have killed." The news of Binh Hoa upset Kennedy. "I've been President for over a year," he said. "How can things like this go on happening?"⁷⁰

The military had other favorites besides bombing, among them napalm and defoliants. Napalm--jellied gasoline used in incendiary bombs that burned horribly--was enthusiastically favored by Diem and Nhu as well as the military high command. When General Harkins was asked about the political consequences when villages were hit with napalm, he replied that it "really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong"--forgetting that in theory at least they were Communists and therefore atheists. Defoliants were wiping out miles of lush forests and acres of crops. In almost no case did it so much as inhibit the Viet Cong, but there is no telling how it embittered the peasants.⁷¹

The official deception regarding the military efforts was staggering. There was ample evidence that operations were being conducted against places where intelligence had indicated no Viet Cong were present.⁷² This would inflate General Harkins' statistics on offensive operations. In January 1963 the South Vietnamese and U.S. forces suffered a horrible defeat at Ap Bac in another offensive of their engineering. Hilsman provides a sample of the deceptions coming from government sources in Vietnam:

The Diem government, naturally, tried to put the battle (of Ap Bac) in the most optimistic light by arguing that the Viet Cong had suffered even more heavily than the government. It disgusted American reporters that the American military headquarters did not deny this interpretation. It disgusted them even more when American headquarters actually seemed to agree with that interpretation. Then, a few days later, General Harkins himself called Ap Bac a "Vietnamese victory," because it had "taken the objective"--and their disgust was complete.⁷³

American reporters in Vietnam, especially David Halberstam of the New York Times, became convinced that General Harkins was misleading his own government in the information he was sending to Washington.⁷⁴

By January 1963, we had at least 11,000 troops in Vietnam, 14,000 by July and some 2,000 more by the time of Kennedy's death. United States aid had reached \$3,000,000,000, and was averaging about \$1,500,000 a day.⁷⁵ Throughout 1962, those who viewed Vietnam as primarily a military problem had dominated the policy making process.⁷⁶ These people thought the answer to disasters such as Ap Bac was an intensified military effort--more advisers, more helicopters, more mortars, more defoliation spray, more napalm bombs, more three-star generals in Saigon, more visitations by VIPs.⁷⁷ Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, was well satisfied with the military dominance in the formation of our Vietnam policy. On April 22, 1963 he claimed to discern "a steady movement (in South Vietnam) toward a constitutional system resting upon popular consent," declaring that "the 'strategic hamlet' program is producing excellent results," the "morale on the countryside has begun to rise," and "to the Vietnamese

peasant," the Viet Cong "look less and less like winners." He concluded, "The Vietnamese are on their way to success."⁷⁸

It was a heyday for the military-industrial complex. For the military it meant more jobs, more careers, a firmer hand in policy. For the rich and powerful industries allied with the military it meant more defense contracts, more production. For all of them, it meant increased profits and power.

A CHANGE IN POLICY

For some time, Kennedy had been doubtful of the official optimism. According to Schlesinger, he "used to say dourly that the political thing there was more important than the military, and no one seemed to be thinking of that."⁷⁹ According to another source, "...by the end of 1962 in a conversation with Roswell Gilpatrick, (JFK) talked in a restless and impatient way about how the United States had been sucked into Vietnam little by little."⁸⁰ Another incident at the end of 1962 was recounted by a close Kennedy aide, Kenneth O'Donnell. It involved Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield who, it would seem, had undergone a change since his 1953 opinion of the Vietnam conflict.

Late in 1962, when the U.S. was accelerating shipments of reinforcements to South Vietnam, Senator Mike Mansfield visited the President at Palm Beach, where the Kennedy family had gathered for the Christmas holidays. The Senate majority leader, whose opinions the President deeply respected, had just returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, which he had made at the President's request. Mansfield emphatically advised, first, a curb on sending more military reinforcements to South Vietnam and, then, a withdrawal of U.S. forces from that country's civil war, a suggestion that startled the President. A continued steady increase of American military advisers in South Vietnam, the senator argued, would lead to sending still more forces to beef up those that were there, and soon the Americans would be dominating the combat in a civil war that was not our war....The President was too disturbed by the Senator's unexpected argument to reply to it. He said to me later when we talked about the discussion, "I got angry with Mike for disagreeing with our policy so completely, and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him."⁸¹

That Kennedy would have been disturbed by Mansfield's suggestion, I believe, was not really because as President he was closely allied with the current policy. His record as a senator and his grumblings as President indicate this is not the policy he would have chosen on his own. He was disturbed because he recognized Mansfield was right, but the thought of what he would have to overcome to implement the right policy must have been staggering. If Kennedy did not think this then (though I believe he did), he surely came to know it by the end of his life.

On May 8, 1963, a group of Buddhists (South Vietnam was predominantly Buddhist) gathered in Hue to protest a Diem order for forbidding them to display their flags on Buddha's 2587th birthday. Government troops in armored cars were brought in, firing indiscriminantly into the crowd and leaving a moaning mass of nine dead and several wounded.⁸²

At this time Kennedy decided the situation required a new ambassador. This was a good sign that some policy change was to come. The ambassador in a foreign country has the responsibility of carrying out the President's foreign policy. Nolting, the old ambassador to South Vietnam, was close to Diem and a firm supporter of the dictatorial mandarin regime. This blatant act of repression was more than Kennedy could tolerate. Either Diem would have to change, or he would have to go. But neither could happen with an ambassador so closely tied to the regime.

Another significant indication of a policy change came later that month at a Presidential news conference. There Kennedy announced: "We are hopeful that the situation in South Vietnam would permit some withdrawal in any case by the end of the year, but we can't possibly make that judgment at the present time.... As of today, we would hope we could begin to (withdraw) at the end of the year..."⁸³

According to O'Donnell and confirmed by Mansfield, by this time Kennedy

~~had said~~

had made up his mind on the need for a complete withdrawal from South Vietnam. In the Spring of 1963, Kennedy spoke with Mansfield after the senator had had sharply criticized our military involvement in Vietnam before the congressional leadership at a White House Breakfast. "The President told Mansfield that he had been having serious second thoughts about Mansfield's argument and that he now agreed with the Senator's thinking on the need for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam. 'But I can't do it until 1965-- after I'm re-elected,' Kennedy told Mansfield." Kennedy feared that a withdrawal prior to the 1964 election would create a conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term. Says O' Donnell:

After Mansfield left the office, the President told me that after his re-election he would take the risk of unpopularity and make a complete withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. "In 1965, I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now, we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm re-elected. So we had better make damned sure that I am re-elected."⁸⁴

The Buddhist demonstrations continued. Beginning June 11, a new form of protest was added: self-immolation. That day, in a rather formal public ceremony, a Buddhist monk set himself on fire. This began a series of more frequent demonstration, met by the police with indiscriminate beating and mass arrests. Madame Nhu, Ngo Dinh Nhu's bitter wife (she can be best described as the Martha Mitchell of South Vietnam) sneered that all the Buddhists had done was to "barbecue a monk," and that she "gaily clapped her hands" at the self-immolations, suggesting that some of the American newsmen should follow the example--and offering to furnish the gasoline and a match.⁸⁵

Kennedy was vehemently opposed to Diem's repression of the Buddhists, although he was quite cautious in his public statements. He said on July 17 that he felt the conflict had been an impediment to the effectiveness of American aid in the war against the Viet Cong. "I would hope this would be

settled," he added, "because we want to see a stable government there, carrying on a struggle to maintain its national independence....We're bringing our influence to bear."⁸⁶

But Diem did not heed. On August 21, Nhu sent the "Special Forces"--trained and financed by the CIA--in a raid on the major Buddhist pagodas in Saigon, Hue and several other cities. Where there was resistance, the Buddhists were shot down and grenaded. Religious statues and holy relics were desecrated.⁸⁷ Madame Nhu described it as "the happiest day in my life since we crushed the Binh Xuyen (a private army) in 1955."⁸⁸

The next day, the new ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, arrived in Saigon. He immediately cabled Washington for instructions as to what actions should be taken against the Diem regime in light of its new and savage repression of the Buddhists. A reply was drafted by George Hall, Averell Harriman, Mide Forrestal and Roger Hilsman, and sent by cable on August 24. Its tone was firm. The American government could no longer tolerate the systematic repression of the Buddhists nor the domination of the regime by Nhu. The generals could be told that we would find it impossible to support Diem unless these problems were solved. Diem should be given every chance to solve them. If he refused, then the possibility had to be realistically faced that Diem himself could not be saved. We would take no part in any action; but, if anything happened, an interim anti-communist military regime could expect American support.⁸⁹

This cable was an ultimatum to Diem and the official word that, if no changes were made, the United States would support a coup against the regime. Kennedy approved it but, as he soon learned, neither McNamara, nor McCone of CIA and Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, got the opportunity for their clearance.⁹⁰ Schlesinger recounts that when Kennedy learned the military and

and CIA had not been given the chance to approve the cable, "he felt rather angrily that he had been pressed too hard and fast."⁹¹ The impression is that Kennedy did not agree with the strong position expounded in the cable. This, however, was not the case. Kennedy was entirely in support of that position. But he knew the military and the CIA were not; they were firm supporters of Diem. While they would have to be brought around to the President's line of thinking, this would have to be carefully done. The way in which the cable was sent would be a clue to the military that the President was plotting behind their backs. This could invite a military revolt.

Vietnam was rapidly becoming, as McGeorge Bundy would later call it, "the most divisive issue in the Kennedy administration."⁹² Ted Sorenson reports:

Kennedy's advisers were more deeply divided on the internal situation in Saigon than on any previous issue. The State Department, by and large, reported that the political turmoil had seriously interfered with the war effort outside of Saigon (Rusk, however, did not hold this position--HR)...The military and the CIA, on the other hand, spoke confidently of the war's prosecution and Diem's leadership, and questioned the likelihood of finding any equally able leader with the confidence of the people who could prosecute the war as vigorously.⁹³

The division became apparent at a secret meeting of the National Security Council on August 31, held in Kennedy's absence. Rusk, heading the meeting, offered his opinion that the mass "disaffection" with the Diem regime had not yet affected the war effort. Hilsman, Harriman, and others from the State Department disagreed, despite the optimistic statistics, which they and Kennedy had come to distrust. McNamara, Taylor, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, were strongly against any measures which would restrict Diem. "They were less worried about the consequences of Diem's and Nhu's policies of repression, and they were more sympathetic to the argument that Vietnam really needed a certain amount of authoritarianism if it was to beat the Viet Cong." The last opinion expressed was that of Lyndon Johnson; he agreed with the Pentagon.⁹⁴

Long before, Kennedy had granted an interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS News for September 2. Now, the question of the Vietnam crisis was inevitable. Kennedy had to make some statement which, of course, would in effect be a policy statement. Thus far, the NSC meetings had been inconclusive and only exposed the intra-administration conflict. The White House staff, sensitive to the conflict, prepared a statement for the President which tended to favor the military's position. Kennedy tossed this aside and took a rather firm position:

I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government (of South Vietnam) to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it--the people of Vietnam--against the Communists. We are prepared to continue to assist them, but I don't think that the war can be won unless the people support the effort, and, in my opinion, in the last two months the Government has gotten out of touch with the people.

Mr. Cronkite: Do you think this Government has time to regain the support of the people?

President Kennedy: I do. With changes in policy and perhaps with personnel, I think it can. If it doesn't make those changes, I would think that the chances of winning it would not be very good.⁹⁵

Here Kennedy clearly rebuffed the military. This was contrary to their opinion and their strong advice. But he merely stated what by then was obvious to anyone without the interests of the military in keeping Diem in power. The Saigon regime had gotten so out of hand, so fascistic and repressive, that it had lost the support of the people and the solution offered by the guerrillas, which had already appealed to the majority of the population, was now the only acceptable solution in their eyes. They could not be counted on to continue the war. And the reference to "personnel" changes was unmistakable. Kennedy put his stamp of approval on a coup to remove, in the least, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

There was a point at which Kennedy stopped. "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw," he told Cronkite. "That would be a great mistake." This, of course, was not Kennedy's personal posture. But for the time it would have to be his public stance. It would last exactly one month.

At the next NSC meeting on September 6, Attorney General Robert Kennedy put things into context by making a rather startling statement. He said that what we were doing was the first and fundamental question to be answered. As he understood it, we were helping the people resist a Communist take-over. Then he asked the next crucial question, the crux of the matter: Could a communist take-over be resisted with any government? If it could not, now was the time to get out of Vietnam entirely, he said.⁹⁶ Robert reflected his brother John's thinking.

As a senator, John had said that to fight communism in Vietnam without an innate anti-communist popular sentiment "spells foredoomed failure," "Without the support of the population, there is no hope of success in any of the countries of Southeast Asia." He was then convinced that we could not conquer "an enemy of the people" which has the sympathy and covert support of the people. This was also the essence of his September 2 statement to Cronkite: without the support of the people, there was no chance of winning the war.

According to Hilsman,

In 1963....the President became increasingly skeptical that the Vietnamese were either willing to carry through the needed reform nor capable of it.

He made it abundantly clear to me on several occasions that if that judgment turned out to be correct, his intention was to negotiate a settlement along the lines of the 1962 Geneva accords on Laos (making Laos a neutral nation), and to reject the advice, which like his successor he also received, to bomb the North and introduce American combat forces.⁹⁷

Kennedy's September 2 statement may be read as his conclusion that the appropriate reforms were not forthcoming, hence, this was the time for us to pull out. Indeed, the failure to reform was in itself justification for withdrawal. The initial commitment to Vietnam made by Eisenhower stipulated that our aid was dependent on the "undertaking of needed reforms." In 10 years, the Diem regime had not met its side of the bargain, and it was now especially appropriate for us to maintain that our "commitment" was dissolved.

On September 9, Kennedy was interviewed by NBC. His comments were substantially weaker than those of the previous week. While he stated that "We are using our influence to persuade the Government there to take those steps which will win back support," he indicated aid reductions were not to be undertaken. He expressed his belief in the domino theory, which was not his true feeling, though he based his statement on his fear of the possibility of China's expansion. Again he said that "we should not withdraw."⁹⁸ These postures were to be publicly reversed within a month. In light of this and the general trend of his thinking, I would interpret these remarks as intended to quell the military and the public, both problems with which he had to cope by making his policies acceptable to them.

However, on this same day there began a campaign of "unofficial" announcements in the form of press leaks which would prepare the public for the upcoming changes in policy. These, in turn, were part of a general effort to overcome the obstacles preventing Kennedy from carrying out his own policy, which was to disengage ourselves from Vietnam to whatever degree possible. Although Kennedy had told NBC that aid cuts were not to be made, the New York Times carried a story by Tad Szulc entitled, "U.S. Considering Cut in Saigon Aid to Force Reform; New Policy Traced to View that Regime Must Regain Backing of Population." According to Szulc, "This major decision, reported today on high authority, is said to reflect the Administration's deep conviction that the war against the Communist guerrillas cannot be won under the present circumstances. Continued aid, it is said, would no longer serve its original purpose without reforms in the Government." Szulc quotes one official as having said, "We cannot go on supporting a dictatorial regime that is different from Communism only in name and in its international connections." As if to make this revelation more acceptable, the administration "leaked" another story to the Time which appeared

beside that by Szulc: this reported the fact that the Special Forces responsible for the brutal August raids on Buddhists pagodas were supported with \$3,000,000 a year from the CIA.⁹⁹ Szulc's story is confirmed by Schlesinger's "inside" account. Lodge, he recalls, had been recommending the suspension of American aid for some time. Kennedy agreed with this position although McNamara and Rusk were opposed.¹⁰⁰

The next day, September 10, the National Security Council met. Among those who spoke was John Mecklin, head of the USIA in Vietnam. Hilsman describes this important incident:

When John Mecklin's turn came he reported that in his judgment the "regime's action against the Buddhists had decisively alienated such a large portion of the population that it could no longer hope to win a war in which popular support was vital?" Even if the Pentagon was right that the military effort had not yet been weakened, the rot was so widespread it would eventually weaken it disastrously. In Mecklin's judgment, the time had come for the United States to apply direct pressure to bring about a change of government....This would be dangerous--there might be a civil war. For this reason he would recommend deciding right now to introduce American combat forces to fight the Viet Cong themselves.

There was an awkward silence after that. Introducing American ground forces in Vietnam and becoming involved in the "land war in Asia" that MacArthur had warned against was the one thing everyone knew Kennedy wished to avoid. The specter of it raised Robert Kennedy's question in everyone's minds--was this the time to withdraw entirely?¹⁰¹

On September 12, Kennedy issued a new policy statement which established the framework within which our "commitment" could be terminated. He said:

What helps win the war, we support; what interferes with the war effort, we oppose. I have already made it clear that any action by either government which may handicap the winning of the war is consistent with our policy....This is the test which I think every agency and official of the United States Government must apply to all of our actions, and we shall be applying that test in various ways in the coming months, although I do not think it desirable to state all of our views at this time. I think they will be made more clear as time goes on.¹⁰²

As Kennedy had already made clear, the Diem regime "interfered with the war effort." Therefore, he opposed it. He now expected "every agency and official"

of the government to act consistent with this policy.

But there was still little consistency within the administration. The CIA and the military were operating as they always had, in support of Diem, though now against the declared policy of the President. Kennedy's campaign to prepare Congress for the coming changes began on September 20 with the theme of the intra-administration conflict. His friend and Vietnam confidant, Mansfield, spoke before the Senate and, as the New York Times reported, warned that the United States would be "face-to-face with a disaster" unless all agencies of the Government obeyed the President in carrying out policy in Vietnam. The Times noted that the State Department and USIA were in favor of aid cuts to Saigon, a position which Ambassador Lodge supported. "According to highly placed informants, however, this policy is forcefully opposed in Saigon and Washington by the United States military and Central Intelligence Agency." State Department officials confided to Tad Szulc that Lodge "faced deep differences in opinion among the heads of the United States Agencies represented in Vietnam." In line with this, Mansfield told the senate that if certain persons should be removed to obtain a unified policy, "the sooner they are removed the better."¹⁰³

In late September, Kennedy sent McNamara and General Taylor to South Vietnam. His purpose was to have Lodge bring them around to his point of view, so that the President could have some support for his policy within the military. As Hilsman explains it,

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military "brass" did not like the policy of keeping the struggle in Vietnam limited or the attempt to emphasize the importance of the political aspects of the struggle. But they had not yet moved into open opposition, and there was still a chance that they could be persuaded to go along with the President's policy. If the JCS and the higher ranking generals did move into open opposition, on the other hand, they could muster powerful support in the Congress and the split inside the American Government might develop into the kind of nationwide political civil war that had paralyzed America during the McCarthy era. The President indicated

that he felt he had to keep the JCS on board, that the only way to keep them on board was to keep McNamara on board--and that the only way to do that, apparently, was to let him go to Vietnam himself.¹⁰⁴

In Saigon, Lodge and General Harkins fought a quiet duel for the Secretary's ear, but, in the end, Lodge made the political case so effectively that McNamara returned to Washington in agreement with a program to put pressure to the Diem regime.¹⁰⁵ However, McNamara elicited a price for his support of Kennedy's political pressure. He and the Joint Chiefs would support the President not only if the State Department and the White House in turn supported the Pentagon's optimistic view of the "shooting war."¹⁰⁶

By this time, however, Kennedy's mind was made up. O'Donnell has reported that the President had already decided to withdraw from Vietnam, an account which Mansfield strongly corroborates. "There is no doubt that he had shifted definitely and unequivocally on Vietnam but he never had the chance to put the (withdrawal) plan into effect," said Mansfield.¹⁰⁷ Against the objections of many around him, Kennedy in fact ordered the withdrawal to begin by bringing home 1,000 U.S. soldiers by the end of 1963. This would have removed about one sixteenth of America's military men at that time, a considerable withdrawal.¹⁰⁸

Thus, when the National Security Council met on October 2 upon McNamara's and Taylor's return from Vietnam, Kennedy decided that this was the time to begin preparing the public for our new withdrawal policy. He told McNamara to announce to the press after the meeting the immediate withdrawal of 1,000 soldiers and to say that we would "probably" withdraw all American forces from Vietnam by the end of 1965. As McNamara left the meeting to talk to the White House reporters, the President called to him, "And tell them that means all of the helicopter pilots, too."¹⁰⁹ This comment doubtlessly referred to an article appearing in the New York Times of September 21, exposing the fact that U.S. "advisers" in South Vietnam were participating in helicopter operations against

the Viet Cong and that the military command was divided on the effectiveness of these maneuvers.

Secretary McNamara and General Taylor prepared a statement which was read to the press by Press Secretary Pierre Salinger. It stated that we adhered to our desire to work "with the people and Government of South Vietnam to deny this country to communism and to suppress the externally stimulated and supported insurgency of the Viet Cong." However, the "central object of our policy in South Vietnam" was now "the effective performance in this undertaking." Here is how the President's order to announce the withdrawal was worded:

Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of U.S. training personnel. They reported that by the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn.¹¹⁰

The statement added that the repressive actions of the Diem regime "could" affect the military effort "in the future."

This important statement introducing the President's new policy in Vietnam has become a black sheep to Kennedy's closest "friends" and advisers. Says Hilsman, "It was a statement ~~that~~ came to haunt Secretary McNamara."¹¹¹ Of the several popular memoirs of the Kennedy administration, only Hilsman's and Schlesinger's mention the announcement, and both pass over it blithely as if it had little meaning. Kennedy's closest friend in his administration, Sorenson, pretends the statement was never made and rewrites history in this way: "Obviously, then, in November 1963, no early end to the Vietnam war was in sight."¹¹² In his memoir With Kennedy, close friend Salinger chooses not to mention anything of this statement which he read to the press.

Kennedy's "friends" were no better than Caesar's!

The official position set forth in McNamara's October 2 statement was

strengthened by another "leak" to Tad Szulc, which was included in his article in the October 3 New York Times. Szulc wrote in connection with the withdrawal statement, "Administration quarters said later that while the present decision was to maintain military and economic aid to South Vietnam at its present levels, this policy would come under review at any time if it became clear that, indeed, the political crisis was seriously damaging the conduct of the war.

Five days later the Times' headline read, "Some of U.S. Aid to Saigon Halted; Policy Reviewed." This article originated in Saigon, written by the Times' controversial reporter David Halberstam. The source ~~must~~ have been Lodge, who was in a position to know about aid to Saigon and who made notorious use of news leaks to unofficially telegraph the President's policy.¹¹³ Halberstam revealed also that no U.S. commercial aid dollars to Saigon had been released since the August 21 raids on the Buddhist pagodas. By the date of the article, October 7, \$10 to \$12 million dollars would have normally been released. On the same day, the administration officially announced that it had been "reviewing" its economic aid programs to South Vietnam for several months "to be sure they are supporting the war effort against Communist guerrillas."¹¹⁴ Schlesinger confirms Halberstam's account, saying that "early in October a selective suspension (of aid) went quietly into effect."¹¹⁵

In the meantime, the rift in the administration was dangerously growing. At its height, Arthur Krock on October 2 in his New York Times "In the Nation" column, ran an article entitled "Intra-Administration War in Vietnam." He drew attention to the split within the administration, focusing on the CIA and "dispatches from reporters--in close touch with intra-administration critics of the CIA--with excellent reputations for reliability." He spoke of one frightening leak:

One reporter in this category is Richard Starnes of the Scripps-Howard newspapers. Today, under a Saigon dateline, he related that "according to a high United States source here (Ambassador Lodge, I presume--HR) twice the CIA flatly refused to carry out instructions from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge...(and) in one instance frustrated a plan of action Mr. Lodge brought from Washington because the agency disagreed with it." Among the views attributed to the United States officials on the scene, including one described as "very high American official...who has spent much of his life in the service of democracy...are the following:

The CIA's growth was "likened to a malignancy" which the "very high official was not sure even the White House could control... any longer." "If the United States ever experiences (an attempt at a coup to overthrow the Government) it will come from the CIA and not the Pentagon." The agency "represents a tremendous power and total unaccountability to anyone."¹¹⁶

Sources within the government were going out on a limb to bring the problem of the CIA in Vietnam to the public. There was a reason for this publicity campaign, however. It followed the pattern of press leaks from within the administration relating to the war, signaling a coming policy change and readying the public sentiment.

Two days after Krock's column appeared, Halberstam wrote in the Times, "Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and the head of Central Intelligence Agency operations in Saigon do not agree on United States policy for Vietnam."¹¹⁷ Again, Halberstam's source was doubtlessly Lodge, who is quoted as saying he would be happier with a new CIA chief. At the root of the conflict was the question of whether the CIA should be primarily a straight intelligence network or have operative functions as well.

The next day, the CIA station chief in Saigon, John Richardson, was recalled to Washington on Kennedy's orders. Richardson served as the CIA's personal link with Nhu and was close to the regime's top officials, including Diem himself. He was, according to one source, "the very symbol of the (CIA's) commitment to the regime. As long as he remained in Vietnam, it was all but impossible to convince either Diem or his enemies of any change in United States policy."¹¹⁸

The Administration succeeded in creating a public outcry against the CIA for its activities against declared policy in Vietnam. The Times on October 6 ran an editorial which asked "Is the Central Intelligence Agency a state within a state?", charging that the recall of Richardson confirmed the long-voiced charges that "our intelligence organization too often tends to 'make' policy." Predictably, the Times called for a Congressional committee to monitor intelligence activities. The same day in the Times, James Reston reported that CIA director John McCone was convinced "that there is a conspiracy within the Government and the press to destroy his agency."

On October 9, Kennedy attempted to cool the situation. He claimed that the reports of the CIA's independent operations were "wholly untrue," though he based that statement on the assurances of the men at the top, who do not always know what the working-level officers in the field are up to. He specified this, leaving antout for himself in reference to the lower-level functions. Saying, "I know what the transfer of Mr. John Richardson...has led to surmises," the President added,

...I know of no disagreement between the State Department at the top, CIA at the top, Defense at the top, the White House and Ambassador Lodge, on what our basic policies will be and what steps we will take to impliment it. Now if down below there is disagreement, I think in part it will be because they are not wholly informed of what actions we are taking. Some of them are necessarily confidential....I would think that Saigon, and personnel in the various agencies, should support that policy, because that is the policy we are going to carry out for a while. (emphasis added)¹¹⁹

The press took this as a pro forma denial. It was really a warning to those "down below." Kennedy was now the master of his policy. If anything, his removal of Richardson demonstrated that. He would not tolerate "disagreement" among those whose responsibility was to execute the President's policy.

As for the situation within the Diem regime, there was but a further adaptation of more repressive tactics. On October 22, the United States with-

drew support for "those elements of the special forces (South Vietnam's secret police financed by the CIA) which are not committed to field operations or engaged in related training programs."¹²⁰ Up to this time, Nhu had been using the Special Forces for his own purposes, which included protecting the Presidential palace in Saigon.¹²¹ Shortly after U.S. support was withdrawn, coup rumors began to circulate, as they had so often before. Now, however, the regime was without its only source of protection. On November 1, a group of South Vietnamese generals overthrew the regime and assassinated Diem and Nhu. General Duong Van (Big) Minh became the head of the military junta which assumed power in Saigon. Seven days later the U.S. announced its recognition of the new government and resumed its commodity-import assistance to Vietnam which had been suspended since August 21.¹²²

Tom Wicker has described a particular situation which existed in South Vietnam after the coup which is crucial in light of Kennedy's policy:

After the fall of Diem there were visible signs in South Vietnam of a growing "neutralist" sentiment, and the fact was that the generals who had come to power were probably in the best position of any government before or since to make a political arrangement with the Viet Cong, and through them, with Hanoi. There were several reasons for this, and the first was the obvious fact that these generals had overthrown and done away with the hated Diem and his brother, against whose dictatorship at least the nationalist, Southern, non-Communist elements of the National Liberation Front had gone to war in the first place.¹²³

In addition, the man who had taken over in Saigon, "Big" Minh had considerable popularity among the people as a Southern Buddhist peasant. Now, with Diem dead and disavowed by the Americans, the NLF had lost its "main drawing card."

For these reasons and others, on November 8, 1963, the NLF broadcast a statement which set forth its willingness to enter into negotiations to end the war. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), which summarizes foreign broadcasts for circulation within the government in Washington, did not print the NLF statement until November 18, ten days after it was made.

It begins by stating that "full conditions" were present in South Vietnam to end the war. Then, it offers a six-point plan for peace. The recent postures of the Kennedy administration plus those of Minh's junta strongly indicate that the NLF's demands were being met.

The first point contained a series of demands. It began, "Unconditionally abolish the dictatorial and fascist regime of Ngo Dinh Diem as a whole..." On November 3, the New York Times reported that students had burned the homes of several government leaders, police stations and offices of government controlled newspapers, as well as demolishing a statue resembling Madame Nhu. On the same day, the new junta suspended the old constitution and dissolved the national assembly. On November 12, the junta announced the formation of a special committee to remove "the vestige of the former corrupt regime."¹²⁴ By November 23, Minh had ousted Brigadier General Van Thah Cao and 30 other high ranking officers who backed the Ngo regime.¹²⁵ The NLF also demanded that several reactionary political organizations be abolished, naming those it had in mind. The Times of November 13 reported that at least three of those named had already been banned by the junta. Abolish "the network of policemen and secret agents" which were used to "suppress the people," the NLF said. On November 4, Colonel Le Quang Tung, head of the murderous Special Forces, was executed.¹²⁶ The NLF also sought the abolishment of "strategic hamlets, quarters and sectors." A leak from a November 20 conference of U.S. policy makers in Honolulu reported that a revision in the strategic hamlet program was being considered.¹²⁷ Further, the Times of December 3 reported that "the provincial government is slowing down the strategic hamlet program." There was a "temporary halt to new hamlet construction...(and a) directive ordered to stop forcing peasants into the hamlets." There would also be no more forced labor. Another NLF demand: "Release all political detainees regardless of tendency." As early

as November 2, the Times reported that several political prisoners had been released. On December 2, General Minh announced that "all Buddhist monks, teachers, students and other opponents of the old regime had been released from prison."¹²⁸ Finally, "Bring out into the open the crimes of the U.S.-Dien regime..." The Times of November 22 reported that a commission had been established to probe the alleged abuses of the Ngo regime.

The second point demanded that the new government "carry out without delay real and broad democracy." guaranteeing universal freedoms. On November 16, the Times reported that Minh foresaw elections for a civilian government within six to twelve months. On December 2, Minh sent a message to the United Nations stating that one of the major goals of the coup was "to restore man's basic rights."¹²⁹

The NLF's third point stated, in part, "Put an immediate end to the U.S. aggression in South Vietnam, withdraw all U.S. advisers from the Republican Army units...in an advance toward withdrawal from South Vietnam all troops and military personnel of the United States..." As we have seen, this had become Kennedy's own policy although it was not yet explicit to the public. Before the end of November, it would be explicit, as we will shortly see.

Demand number five paralleled number three. "Generally speaking, end the war," it said adding, "We loudly declare that 18 years of war is more than sufficient!"

The sixth and final point read more like a synopsis of Kennedy's policy toward Southeast Asia than a demand from what we officially consider an insidious Communist front. The NLF stated:

The parties concerned in South Vietnam (should) negotiate with one another to reach a cease-fire and solve the important problems of the nation...with a view to reaching free general elections to elect state organs and to form a national coalition government composed of representatives of all forces, parties, tendencies, and strata of the South Vietnamese people. South Vietnam, once

independent, will carry out a policy of neutrality....It will accept aid from all countries regardless of political regime and establish friendly relations on an equal footing with all countries.

This was Kennedy's explicit policy on Laos. He saw no need for a military solution there and sought peaceful negotiations to restore a neutral coalition government. In spite of the CIA-military position, he felt this was the only feasible alternative.¹³⁰ As Roger Hilsman has stated, Kennedy "made it abundantly clear to me on several occasions" that if it turned out the South Vietnamese were neither willing to nor capable of carrying out the needed reforms, "his intention was to negotiate a settlement along the lines of the 1962 Geneva accords on Laos."¹³¹ In his book, he adds:

President Kennedy's policy, in sum, was to meet guerrilla aggression within a counter-guerrilla framework, with the implied corollary ~~that~~ that ~~Viet~~ ~~Hanoi~~ Viet Cong could not be defeated within a counter-guerrilla framework and the allegiance of the people of Vietnam could not be won, then the United States would accept without fatal consequences to our position in the rest of Asia.¹³²

Obviously, in the summer and fall of 1963, Kennedy realized that the Diem regime was not capable of the "needed reforms." Furthermore, he was of the belief, as his actions indicate, that the Horrible political situation had so affected the military situation that there was really no hope of "victory." Mecklin of USIA in South Vietnam told Kennedy that the Diem repressions had alienated so large a portion of the population that there was no longer any chance of winning the war.¹³³ After the coup, it came out that the statistics on the strategic hamlets and the number of villages under government control had been completely false, that there was in fact virtually no government control on the countryside, where the Viet Cong drew their primary support.¹³⁴ The situation was hopeless. In late November, Kennedy gave a Security Affairs staff officer, Mike Forrestal, "100 to 1 that the United States could not win" in Vietnam.¹³⁵ It was under such conditions that ~~Senator Kennedy~~ Kennedy said we

should withdraw! It was under such conditions that Robert Kennedy reminded his brother, the President, we should withdraw; and it was now that Kennedy was putting into effect his withdrawal plans.

On November 12 ~~it~~ was announced that on November 20 in Honolulu there would be a one-day meeting of top U.S. officials to discuss Vietnam strategy. Included at the meeting would be Rusk, McNamara, Lodge, Taylor, Bundy, Harkins, Admiral Felt (commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific), plus a host of others in the administration. With this announcement came another from the Defense Department: there had been no change since the November 1 coup in the plans to bring home 1,000 U.S. servicemen before the end of the year.¹³⁶

There are several possible interpretations as to why this meeting was called. One seems the most likely to me, in light of the policy change and the opposition to it in all quarters of the government, especially CIA and military: Kennedy, who had been executing his new policy in Vietnam through Lodge, wanted Lodge to "fill the rest of the boys in." He would want them to have no doubts about the future plans for Vietnam, and I think he felt Lodge could persuade at least Rusk and McNamara that the government should unite behind the withdrawal plan.

On November 14, Kennedy made his policy explicit. "Now, that is our object," he said, "to bring Americans home." No, Richard Nixon did not invent this line in 1970. He took it from Kennedy, although those who rewrite history would deny us this fact. Kennedy was asked at a news conference for his "appraisal of the situation in South Vietnam now since the coup and the purposes for the Honolulu conference." Here is his response in full:

Because we do have a new situation and a new government, and, we hope, increased effort in the war. The purpose of the meeting in Honolulu--Ambassador Lodge will be there, General Harkins will be there, and others with Secretary McNamara and others, and then, as you know, Ambassador Lodge will come here. It is to attempt to

assess the situation, what American policy should be, what our aid policy should be, how can we intensify the struggle, how can we bring Americans out of there.

Now, that is our object--to bring Americans home, to permit the South Vietnamese to maintain themselves as a free and independent country and permit democratic forces within the country to operate (this is the essence of the NLF's peace program--HR), which they can, of course, much more freely when the assault from the inside and which is manipulated from the north, is ended. So, the purpose of the meeting in Honolulu is how to pursue these objectives. (emphasis added)¹³⁷

As we know, it was Kennedy's policy to "pursue these objectives" through negotiations. And, in the words of the New York Times, the time was now "ripe" for negotiations.¹³⁸

Kennedy was also asked if, in view of the changed situation in South Vietnam, he still intended to bring back 1,000 troops before the end of the year "or has that figure been raised or lowered." "No," Kennedy replied. "We're going to bring back several hundred before the end of the year. But I would think on the question of the exact number, I thought we'd wait till the meeting of November 20" in Honolulu.

The announcement did not wait until the Honolulu meeting. It came the very next day, November 15, from the head of the Military Advisory Assistance Group in Vietnam, Maj. Gen. Charles Timmes. The statement, which reflected U.S. policy, had to have been authorized by the President. It said, without equivocation, that 1,000 troops would leave Vietnam by the end of the year.¹³⁹

In the meantime, there was a continuing fervor over the prospect of negotiations. Immediately after the coup, General DeGaulle, who 10 years before came to know the futility of fighting in Vietnam, began advocating a neutral settlement to unify Vietnam and free it from "foreign influences." According to the Times of November 5, "East European diplomats report that Ho Chi Minh told the South Vietnamese communist organization he backs DeGaulle's unification proposal." James Reston's column of November 6, criticizing the

U.S. lack of effort to negotiate thus far, was entitled "Why a Truce in Korea and Not in Vietnam?"¹⁴⁰ The Times in an editorial of November 10 called for a redefinition of our aims in Vietnam and reminded the government that "such concepts as a negotiated settlement and 'neutralization' of Vietnam are not to be ruled out." The FBIS Daily Report of November 13 reported another broadcast in which the NLF said that the Minh junta could "have a future which will be brilliant, which will have no more nightmares," if it separated itself from the United States, worked for national independence and brought "freedom and democracy to the people," again, exactly what Kennedy defined as the U.S. aim in Asia in his November 14 news conference.¹⁴¹ A syndicated column by William Frye on November 16 dealt with "the revival of talk about a negotiated peace for Vietnam."¹⁴²

Back in Honolulu, the conference went as scheduled on November 20. Participants in the meeting were reluctant to make statement to the press, although some information was released. One obviously false release was that "the war against Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam had taken a decided turn for the better since the coup..."¹⁴³ This was consistent with the military's well established position on the "shooting war." Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester reaffirmed the plan to bring home 1,000 troops by January first, adding that the first contingent of 300 would leave Saigon on December 3. Officials said there would be no changes in basic U.S. policy.¹⁴⁴ When asked specifically if there would be any overall change in U.S. policy in Vietnam, a spokesman for Rusk replied, "No."¹⁴⁵

On Thursday, November 21, Lodge flew to Washington where he was scheduled to meet with Kennedy the following Monday in reference to the conference. No matter what had even tentatively been decided for policy at the Honolulu "summit," it would be the President who would make the final decision, and he

had already committed himself both privately and publicly to the goal of withdrawing. This was his strong conviction. The meeting would wait until Monday, however, because, on November 21, Kennedy left for San Antonio, Texas, to begin a tour of that state in an effort to repair a split in its democratic party.

The next day, November 22, President Kennedy was dead.

LBJ TAKES OVER

On November 24, Lodge met with the new President, Lyndon Johnson. Also at the meeting were Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, McCone and George Ball, the Undersecretary of State. Lodge told Johnson what he would have told Kennedy. Tom Wicker gives this account:

Lodge's report was bleak, although he made no specific requests for Johnson to decide upon. In the wake of Diem's removal, the Ambassador said, the new government of South Vietnam was shakey and ineffective, political rivalries were sprouting in and out of it, and the various forces set free by the end of Diem's repression were threatening political chaos. The Viet Cong, already powerful enough, seemed to be redoubling their efforts to take military advantage of what amounted to a divided and leaderless nation. The South Vietnamese Army had managed the coup but otherwise it was corrupt and inefficient and lacked a real will to fight as well as the leadership to succeed in such battles as it could not avoid.

In short, Lodge...told the emotionally drained Texan that if Vietnam was to be saved, hard decisions would have to be made.

Unfortunately, Mr. President," Lodge said, "you will have to make them."¹⁴⁶

If Kennedy had been the recipient of this information, it would merely have bolstered what, by then, was the President's conviction. There was no chance of "winning" in South Vietnam unless the United States took over completely and sent in its own troops to do all the fighting. Obviously, this was something alien and unacceptable to Kennedy's personality and politics. With Lodge's assessment of the situation, Kennedy would have been that much more certain that this was the time to withdraw from Vietnam and look toward a negotiated settlement, which was then in the making.

But Johnson was not Kennedy. All along, he had sided with the Pentagon on Vietnam policy, viewing the situation primarily as a military one, looking primarily for military solutions. When Lodge told Johnson "you will have to make" the hard decisions about our future in Vietnam, the new President scarcely hesitated.

"I am not going to lose Vietnam," he said, "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."

"What kind of political support will you have?" Lodge, the experienced politician, asked Johnson.

"I don't think Congress wants us to let the Communists take over South Vietnam," he replied.

At this Johnson firmly directed Lodge to return to Saigon and assure the new government there that the new government in Washington intended to stand by its "commitments," those that Kennedy in his last months strived to break away from.¹⁴⁷ A press release after the meeting repeated this information and stressed the theme of "continuity," a word given new meaning that day.¹⁴⁸

It would seem that Johnson's posture was not in keeping with the brewing sentiments of negotiations and neutralization. In addition to the suggestion of DeGaulle, reportedly accepted by Ho Chi Minh, Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk urged South Vietnam to join his country in a neutral confederation. His proposal came on December 2 along with a joint proposal for a nine-nation conference to guarantee his nation's independence and neutrality.¹⁴⁹ This was the perfect opportunity to negotiate. The Times hailed it and urged the United States to delay no longer.¹⁵⁰

However, once Johnson was in power, neutrality and negotiations became dirty words in Washington and Saigon; mention of either was intolerable. An FBIS report of December 16 reveals that the "Saigon Press Review" on December 10

rejected the idea of neutralizing South Vietnam and condemned international appeals for such proposals. "It is utterly absurd and unreasonable for one to talk about the neutralization of South Vietnam but not of North Vietnam." Also on December 10, the Premier of the revolutionary government, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, served notice on the press that its "period of grace" under the new regime was over and that "if any Viet Cong or neutralists" were found among the press, "the Government will have to take the necessary measures."¹⁵¹ Tho was one of the few holdovers from Diem. The next day, three daily papers were shut down by the Government, two for having criticized Tho and the third for having printed neutralist editorials.¹⁵²

Back in Washington, any semblance of "continuity" had vanished. With one frontpage headline containing three subtitles, the New York Times revealed that the new administration had done away with every aspect of Kennedy's Vietnam policy. The December 21 headline read, in full:

U.S. DROPS PLANS FOR 1965 RECALL OF VIETNAM FORCE

McNamara Assures Junta Troops Will Stay as Long as Wanted and Needed

JOHNSON SENDS PLEDGE

Washington Also Disavows Any Interest in Proposals to Neutralize Country

The occasion of this dismal news was a new visit to Saigon by McNamara. The next day, December 21, McNamara returned to Washington and reported directly to the President. The essence of what the Defense Secretary told the press was that increased Viet Cong activity since the coup necessitated a review in U.S. policy for 1964. However, according to the Times, repeating what it had learned the day before, "the Administration acknowledged with silence that it had abandoned the 1965 deadline for the removal of most United States troops from South Vietnam." The story said, "Mr. McNamara ignored a question about the 1965 deadline, as he had at the airport this morning and in Saigon before his departure

yesterday."¹⁵³ Did it matter that on three occasions the Secretary ignored such a question, when it had already been leaked that the 1965 plan was dropped?

The fact is that before the body of John Kennedy had grown cold in its grave, Johnson and his military boys were deliberately laying the foundations to escalate the Vietnam war. This could have been documented before June 13, 1971, although it might have been said that the charge was so wild that nothing short of overt confessions by the participants could make it credible. On June 13, those "confessions" came in a 7,000 page document leaked to the New York Times, written in 1968 on McNamara's orders, and outlining exactly how covert plans were made within the government to step-up the war and keep the American people uninformed. To avoid otherwise lengthy documentation, I will rely largely on that report.

Roger Hilsman had previously revealed that after Kennedy's death there was renewed pressure to bomb North Vietnam. Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay was particularly forceful in his advocating bombardment, saying "We are swatting flies when we should be going after the manure pile." The (false) assumption behind this was that the Viet Cong were deriving their support from the North and thus bombing the North would cut down on infiltration. General Thomas Power argued that with conventional bombs alone the Strategic Air Command, which he just happened to head, and its B-52's could "pulverize North Vietnam," and after the assassination he made a special trip to Washington to plead his case. Walt Rostow presented Johnson with a detailed plan for gradual escalation and another proposal was put forth by the Pentagon and the CIA for a program of increased military pressures on the North.¹⁵⁴ Hilsman also reveals that in December 1963 Johnson appointed an interdepartmental committee to develop a list of bombing targets in the North and lay the groundwork for a future decision to bomb.¹⁵⁵

The new information reveals that on the day he returned from Vietnam, December 21, McNamara submitted a memorandum to Johnson detailing "plans for covert action into North Vietnam" that "present a wide variety of sabotage and psychological operations" that should "provide maximum pressure with minimum risk." These clandestine measures became known as "Operation Plan 34-A" which was launched on February 1, 1964.¹⁵⁶

Meanwhile, in Saigon, General Harkins was quite unhappy with the new junta. There were rumors stirring that members of the junta under Minh (though not including Minh) were expressing neutralist sentiments. Accordingly, officers on Harkins' staff began looking for new candidates.¹⁵⁷ Johnson, on December 31, sent a message to Minh pledging our help anew and stating that "neutralization of South Vietnam is unacceptable."¹⁵⁸ Harkins had found a prime candidate, his good friend, Maj. General Nguyen Khahn. Khahn and Harkins devised a plan to overthrow Minh's junta, although there was some reluctance on the part of Lodge. A meeting of the junta chiefs on January 27 settled that. Contrived by Khahn, the topic of discussion was the impossible military situation and the inevitability of a negotiated settlement based on some form of neutrality. This notion found support in various degrees from Generals Minh, Don, Dinh, Kim, and Vy. Exposing this neutralist sentiment brought Lodge around. So, on January 30, Khahn staged his coup, arresting three of the Junta Generals most closely associated with neutralism.¹⁵⁹ In a proclamation that day, Khahn announced that he had acted because some members of Minh's government had "a tendency to advocate neutrality, thereby paving the way for the Communists to enslave our country."¹⁶⁰ The next day Khahn met with Lodge and told him the aim of the coup was to prevent the "neutralists" supported by a foreign power (France) from taking power.¹⁶¹

Just at this time, DeGaulle once again expressed his hope for a neutral agreement in Southeast Asia. Johnson, expectably, rejected it the day after it

was proposed.¹⁶² A month later, the secret documents reveal, Johnson told Lodge that part of his job was "knocking down the idea of neutralization."¹⁶³ "Nothing is more important than to stop neutralist talk wherever we can by whatever means we can," he added.¹⁶⁴

The Gulf of Tonkin incident, which Johnson used to rob Congress of its war-making powers, occurred early in August 1964. It was planned in advance as a measure to get Congressional approval for expanding the war into North Vietnam.

An April 17, 1964 Memorandum from Admiral Felt discloses the major military planning. First, we should "stall off any conference," which, of course was to become secret policy for quite a long time. Negotiations were out of the question in the eyes of the administration, although the public stance was that we would talk "peace" anywhere with anyone.¹⁶⁵ Then, we would wait for "D-Day," when we would stage an open attack on the North announced by a Presidential speech launching a Congressional resolution approving strikes by air against the North. The resolution was drafted by McGeorge Bundy and ready by May 25.¹⁶⁶ On July 24, Johnson publicly warned that while "the United States seeks no wider war," a "provocation" from North Vietnam "could force a response."¹⁶⁷ On July 31 Rusk announced the United States intention to increase its forces in South Vietnam "as required by the situation."¹⁶⁸

Then, on August 2, the Tonkin incident came. Although at the time we loudly protested the "unprovoked" attacks on our ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in North Vietnam, it is now known that the attacks were provoked, deliberately. On July 31, South Vietnam PT boats (supplied by the U.S.) bombed two North Vietnam islands in the Tonkin Gulf, three miles off the mainland. This was part of the U.S. Operation 34-A, a plan designed to provoke the North into moves which would justify our escalation. The military was aware of the bombings by the South Vietnamese, but shortly afterwards, they sent the U.S. destroyer

Maddox into the area. The Maddox, expectably, was fired upon. There was a volley of shots and the Maddox retreated, having suffered no damage. Then, on the night of August 3, the South Vietnam ships staged another bombing raid, with the Maddox and the Turner Joy accompanying. The U.S. maintains that its ships were again attacked in this raid. At the February 1968 testimony of Robert McNamara before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where he divulged the sickening truth about the Tonkin incident, the Government was still trying to deny that the Maddox and Turner Joy had in any way provoked the attack on them on August 3, arguing that neither ship was taking part in the South Vietnamese operation. Senator Morse apparently had enough of McNamara's doubletalk (and this was not the only occasion). He said:

One of the things that disturbs me is that I think the cablegram itself (from the Maddox) shows that we were trying to draw those North Vietnamese boats away from the South Vietnamese boats in order to give the South Vietnamese boats greater freedom of action, and if that is not involving our destroyers in the 34-A project, I do not know what it is.

I think we were using them as a decoy.¹⁶⁹

Now, this certainly was enough to provoke an attack on our ships. However, the evidence seems to indicate that the August 3 attack by the North Vietnamese against the U.S. ships was a total fabrication. Again, the U.S. ships suffered no damage. Yet, the official story is that the North Vietnamese PT boats collectively fired 22 torpedoes. When the Maddox's radarman heard that report, he said, "Aw, God, if there are that many torpedoes in the water, the whole 7th Fleet would be blown up by now."¹⁷⁰

By noon, August 4, the United States had "retaliated" in response to these contrived "unprovoked attacks." It had sent 64 bombing sorties into North Vietnam, wiping out four patrol boat bases, their boats, and "a major supporting oil depot."¹⁷¹

Johnson, as planned, was making speeches protesting the "unprovoked attacks"

and, on August 5, the resolution he had been carrying around for so long was in Congress, to be passed on the 10th.¹⁷² The Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorized Johnson "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."¹⁷³ Now, the President's power to wage war was carte blanche, its traditional Congressional check gone.

Things had to quiet down for a little while, at least. After all, Johnson was running for President now and he was a peace candidate, opposing that war-monger, Barry Goldwater, who had the audacity to promise that, if elected, he would bomb the hell out of North Vietnam. Johnson was a man of peace. He plotted secretly to bomb the hell out of North Vietnam. But he told the public, one month after his planes had gone North and dropped bombs, "We are not going north and drop bombs at this stage of the game."¹⁷⁴ His most repeated promise, to be broken six months after his inauguration, was "we don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys...and get tied down in a land war in Asia."¹⁷⁵

The plans for a massive bombing of the North began no later than two weeks after the Tonkin incident. The new ambassador in Saigon, Maxwell Taylor, cabled Washington that he agreed with the Administration's "assumption" that the Viet Cong could no longer be defeated by a war confined to the South alone. Taylor suggested "a carefully orchestrated bombing attack on North Vietnam, directed primarily at infiltration and other military targets." On August 26, 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted a memorandum to McNamara agreeing with Taylor. They devised a "provocation strategy--deliberate attempts to provoke the DRV (North Vietnam) into taking actions which could then be answered by a systematic U.S. air campaign."¹⁷⁶

On February 7, 1965, the sustained bombing began, initiated by another

Tonkin-like incident, this time, a Viet Cong attack on an American camp at Pleiku. The South Vietnamese Army allowed this attack to occur and, it might be said, the U.S. Army also helped it since the VC were using captured American weapons.¹⁷⁷ Johnson ordered "retalitory" bombing of the North which, with some brief recesses, would continue "retaliating" for years to come.

The policy of bombing the North in response to every VC attack in the South was one which, as the military had planned, guaranteed that we would never stop bombing. As Tom Wicker explains:

To strike back only when struck was ridiculous and impossible. It handed the enemy the initiative. It made the lives of American boys a sort of trigger for American air raids. It gave over to the Viet Cong the decision whether an American air raid could be launched against North Vietnam. Retaliation was simply untenable and even the word could be justified only if it were a "cover," a sugar coating, for the launching of a general air bombardment of North Vietnam.¹⁷⁸

Another aspect of the official justification of the full scale bombings was that they were an effort to halt infiltration from North Vietnam. The White House announced when it began bombing that the attacks such as that at Pleiku "were only made possible by the continuing infiltration of personnel and equipment from North Vietnam."¹⁷⁹ At the same time, the State Department released the official "documentation" of this infiltration, a booklet entitled "Agression From the North: The Record of North Viet-Nam's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam." For duplicity, this rivals the Warren Report in the field of important government documents. From beginning to end it is the most obvious propaganda. In the end, "North Vietnam's campaign to conquer" the South seems modest in comparison with the United States "campaign" to conquer the people of South Vietnam, which is what the war had become. The infiltration statistics, for which no source is given, amounted to 20,000 Viet Cong coming from the North over the six year span from 1959 to 1964. The Report asserted, however,

that the Viet Cong "hard-core" forces numbered 35,000 with 60,000 to 80,000 composing the "local" VC forces. Thus, out of at least 95,000 guerrillas in the South, only 20,000 from the North had accumulated in 6 years, though there were never 20,000 present at any one time. To show how North Vietnam was responsible for directing the "subversion" in the South, nine "illustrative" cases were presented, each detailing the story of a captured Viet Cong. Yet, all none "illustrative" guerrillas were natives of the South who had fought the French in the South and then gone North. No evidence was presented that native Northerners or regular Northern Army divisions had come into South Vietnam at any time for any reason.

The State Department named, among the purposes of the guerrillas, "the cause of overthrowing the legitimate Government in South Vietnam." Which one? From 1963 to February 1965 there were only eight governments, none of which were legitimate, all of which came into power by overthrowing the previous one. It may be said that during this period, inot every South Vietnamese general's life a little reign ddd fall! And what our Government called "legitimate" in public, it was calling "non-government" inpprivate. It referred to the political situation in Saigon as an "Alice-In-Wonderland atmosphere."¹⁸⁰

Infiltration was simply a spurious excuse for bombing the North. North Vietnamese regular units did not start coming down until 1965 when the bombing began and the United States forced their participation as mere self defense.¹⁸¹ Even at that, the bombing was utterly ineffective. It so happens that infiltration increased by more than 100 percent after the bombings started.¹⁸²

President Kennedy foresaw this all. In March of 1962 he discussed the so-called "infiltration routes" with Hilsman. He knew then that it would be impossible to cut off infiltration completely, no matter what drastic measures were taken. It was not that anyone would lie, Kennedy said, but sometime in

the future if things were going bad, there would be reports of an increased use of the infiltration routes. "No matter what goes wrong or whose fault it really is, the argument will be that the Communists have stepped up their infiltration and we can't win unless we hit the north. Those trails are a built-in excuse for failure, and a built-in argument for escalation."¹⁸³

A month of sustained bombing convinced Johnson that air power could not win the war so he secretly ordered "a change of mission." Our acknowledged combat role((as opposed to advisory) began on March 8, with the introduction of 3,500 Marines at Danang. On April the American commander in Saigon, General William Westmoreland, requested 200,000 troops to hold off defeat long enough to make possible another troop build-up. The Joint Chiefs in collaboration with Westmoreland had deployed the 173d Airborne Brigade to South Vietnam on April 12, before Presidential sanction for the move was obtained, something the Pentagon calls "a little cart-before-the-horsemanship." On April 30, 1965, the Joint Chiefs presented a detailed program for the deployment of 48,000 American troops to South Vietnam in preparation for later escalation. Finally, on June 26, Johnson granted Westmoreland full authority to commit U.S. forces to battle whenever he wished, "as close to a free hand in managing the forces as" he could get, in the Pentagon's words. From June 27-30, the 173d Airborne engaged in offensive operations against the Viet Cong. Public announcement came on July 28 when Johnson said, "I have asked...Gen. Westmoreland what more he needs to meet this mounting aggression. He has told me. We will meet his needs." By the end of 1965, Westmoreland's needs indeed proved copious. By then, we had 184,314 troops in South Vietnam. Soon that figure would rise to half a million. The Pentagon asserts that just what Johnson and McNamara expected their decisions of July to bring "is not clear, but there are manifold indications that they were prepared for a long war."¹⁸⁴

And what a long war they got. Costly, too. But now this was our war, and we were doing the fighting for those "Asian boys" Johnson spoke of in his pacifist year, 1964. No more of that talk of Kennedy's about it being "their war...they are the ones who have to fight it." Now we knew that if "they" were left to fight it it wouldn't be fought. We were on the long and arduous road to make South Vietnam free to decide that it didn't want to go Communist. And on February 18, 1965 when he justified the bombing to the House Armed Services Committee, McNamara made it perfectly clear that this had become our war.

The choice is not simply whether to continue our efforts to keep South Vietnam free and independent, but rather whether to continue our struggle to halt Communist expansion in Asia. If the choice is the latter, as I believe it should be, we will be ~~far~~ better off facing the issue in South Vietnam. (emphasis added)¹⁸⁵

Here we stop the history, for the rest is known; it lingers today. Now we ask why: Why did Lyndon Johnson plunge us into a militarily hopeless war, costing us over two billion dollars a month, one which could be won only by killing almost every person in Vietnam? Where in all the phony commitments did we get the right to take complete control of South Vietnam to run and fight a war in which we have decided not to permit Communism?

To understand this, we must understand Johnson and to know him, it is said, one must get down to the Brown and Root of the matter. For this we turn to a brilliant expose of Johnson by Robert Sherrill, called The Accidental President. Sherrill's thesis is this: "Lacking anything more logical in his actions to explain our full-scale assault upon Vietnam, it might be concluded that Johnson, who is capable of such ruthlessness, was consciously serving the military-industrial complex and was expanding and extending the war in order to shore up the economy."¹⁸⁶ The case is persuasive.

All of Johnson's experience and enthusiasm as a representative and a senator were bound up with the military. He was a member of the House Naval

Affairs Committee, the Senate Armed Services Committee, chairman of the Senate Preparedness Committee, chairman of the Space Committee, and member of the Appropriation Subcommittee for the Armed Services. Sherrill adds:

Aside from his fellow legislators, his chief cronies came from the brass, the admirals and generals hanging around the Capitol corridors for a reason. When it was Scotch-and-water time, Johnson turned to them and to his semi-service buddies to share it--(Richard) Russell, whom he likened to a Daddy; and William Knowland, the silly right-wing senator from Formosa...; and Stennis and Eastland and the other Southern belligerents who swung like Romulus and Remus from the tits of the military appropriations bill, growing fat.¹⁸⁷

Johnson spent much of his time in the Senate trying to circumvent President Eisenhower's modest plans for curtailing the military. Around 1953, Ike's efforts to cut defense spending had the buildup of Congressional hawks underway. It was at this time that Johnson came to Democratic leadership through the help of Richard Russell and Walter George. To Eisenhower's defense budget of 1955 was added \$356 million to push the production of B-52 bombers. Most of the military airfields are in the South, and planes are needed to keep them open. For the 1957 budget, \$800 million was tacked on for the B-52's. In 1958, Johnson felt the military could help clear up the nation's 5.2 percent unemployment figure. "I want the Senate to have assurances on behalf of the Senate Preparedness Committee," he said, "that we are going to continue to urge faster decisions on the Department of Defense. These decisions would be followed by contracts which would do a great deal to put men and women back on the payrolls." Between 1957 and 1958, the generals and the retired generals, the colonels and the retired colonels began lobbying in the Capitol, causing a furor which led to hearings in the House. There it was discovered that swarms of retired officers were working for defense contractors--186 at General Dynamics, 171 for Lockheed, 92 for North American Aviation, etc.--and corruption among them was running wild. A bill to regulate the activities of retired officers passed the House. In the Senate, Johnson saw that the bill was laid to rest without

even a quiver of action.¹⁸⁸

One story in particular, that of Johnson's relationship with the giant Texas construction company Brown and Root, is an epoch of "patriotism", the down to earth tale of a politician and his military-industrial connections. The Brown brothers were the principle financiers of Johnson's early rise to power and, in return, Johnson is the man who more than anyone else made them rich. Brown and Root's ascension from penny ante Texas road builder to the world's third largest construction company--which numbers among its contracts a piece of the \$1,600,000,000 base construction program in Vietnam--is largely the doing of Lyndon Johnson.¹⁸⁹ We will avoid Johnson's escapades with Brown and Root other than their patriotic (and profitable) service in Vietnam.

Brown and Root's involvement in Vietnam began in 1962 when, joined by Raymond International of New York, Morrison-Knudsen of Idaho, and J.A. Jones Construction Company of North Carolina, they were awarded a \$900 million defense contract, the highest contract of its type ever granted.¹⁹⁰ Following the 1965 super-escalation, Brown and Root's revenues for 1966 soared to 57 percent higher than the previous year. Morrison-Knudsen's income for the first half of 1966 was twice that of the entire previous year. Vietnam pulled Raymond International out of a deficit in the first six months of 1965 to its highest six-month earnings in that decade. By the spring of 1967, the companies were putting down \$3 million worth of construction each day. However, when Senator Stuart Symington went snooping around in Southeast Asia in 1967, he discovered that records on \$120 million out of a \$300 million contract has been "lost." With pressure, they were found. In 1966, the Defense Department discovered that it had "underestimated" the cost of projects authorized for Vietnam by more than \$200 million. The official story was that one day "the contractor" came to the Navy and said he needed an extra \$200 million to finish projects currently

authorized. As it turned out, the contract the Navy gave Brown and Root and the others worked so that the contractor, in effect, could set his own profits.¹⁹¹

There was not real watch over any of the contractors. For the first years, the giant consortium was audited by one man; between June 1964 and September 1965, this staff was increased to two Navy auditors. By January 1966, after a congressional howl, the auditing was done by six Air Force Officers and one Army enlisted clerk. With such control, the contractors could not have asked for a freer hand.¹⁹²

The Governemtn Accounting Office looked into the matter and came up with some shocking findings. The contractors had looked over only about one seventh of the claimed cost reimbursements, and the backlog was increasing daily. The amount of waste was anybody's guess. Congressional critics charged that Brown and Root and friends had "lost or wasted as much as \$125 million worth of materials" alone by mid-1966. GAO also found contractor irregularities, many of them with the apparent complicity or indifference of the Navy--and each one serving to raise the cost, and profit, of the Brown and Root, et. al., contract.¹⁹³

"In short," says Sherrill, "a certain kindoff profit will follow those who follow Johnson, as the Vietnam war proves." As of his writing in 1967, Defense contracts had risen more than 30 percent in the previous year; of these Texas reaped a lusty \$2.5 billion. For Christmas of 1966, the Pentagon placed \$186 million orders for aircraft fuel. Chemical companies--in which the Houston area abounds--had sold more than \$10 million in defoliants for use in Vietnam by mid-1966.¹⁹⁴ As for the bombing, as Tom Wicker points out, "Air bombardment requires aircraft; aircraft require pilots, crew, maintenance; and these in their turn require air bases."¹⁹⁵ By January 1967, we had lost over 450 F-4 Phantoms at \$2.5 million dollars each in the bombing raids which had already proved unsuccessful.¹⁹⁶

In 1968, Sherrill added this:

The Pentagon spends more money than the annual net income from all the corporations in America; half of its procurement money goes to 25 companies. Whether out of weakness or collusion, Johnson has permitted these war industrialists to have a free reign with his administration. But it is a fair exchange, the war contractors use him, and he used war contracts to tighten his political hold at home in Texas and throughout the nation....The Bounty of the Johnson war machine is so great that it pours upon the ground and rusts and rots. The General Accounting Office discovered that so much unneeded equipment and supplies had been sent to Vietnam at one point that \$32.9 million of it was just lying around. It was a banner year for chemical companies, with napalm output alone reaching 50,000,000 pounds a month. The GAO discovered Mathieson Chemical Corporation making 65 percent profits on missile fuel. With the space program in a momentary lull, the electronics companies needed work, so Johnson capitulated to the generals and agreed (over Mc Namara's protests) to build a \$5 billion anti-missile system aimed at China (to be expanded to the \$40 billion anti-Russian version later). In addition to their really big war work, the steel companies were tossed a little lagniappes, such as \$5 million contracts to produce 50,000 miles of barbed wire and 5 million steel fenceposts to build the McNamara Line between North and South Vietnam. The picture was so clear that even some Senators could see it for what it was--"blood money profits...the profits of bloodletting," in the words of Wayne Morse.¹⁹⁷

It was all done, Sherrill says, to artificially shore up the economy and prevent a recession. And, we might add, to keep LBJ's military cronies fat and happy. Johnson knew from long experience that the best way to do such things is via the military pork barrel, so "he went instinctively to the biggest pork barrel of them all, war, to keep a nation working and prosperous and content with his administration."¹⁹⁸ It's "the only war we've got," LBJ would remind the people in his administration from the start.¹⁹⁹ His pride in his creation was abounding. It was a rare speech after he plunged us into a full scale war in which Johnson did not refer to the "longest period of uninterrupted prosperity in our history."²⁰⁰ By September 1967 the Labor Department was admitting that the intensification of the war was responsible for 23 percent of the total increase of more than four million jobs since 1965. Johnson's escalation was supporting 10 percent of the nation's work force, including civilians directly

employed in war work, plus those in retail work catering to military bases, and, of course, the men in uniform, increased by 700,000 since 1965.²⁰¹

So, says Sherrill,

It was the natural thing for him to do. If you were a cactus-patch politician who had moved into the Washington stream during the days when FDR was proving the invincibility of a combined welfare-war program; if you were the shrewd kind of mechanic who quickly caught on to the gimmickry of the Roosevelt program without picking up the philosophy behind it; if you, furthermore, were convinced, and wisely so, that this nation would put up with anything but joblessness; if your long experiences in office had convinced you that the easiest way to prime the pump was through defense spending; and if coupled to that was a basic disposition to "shive it down the throats" of your selected victim--wouldn't you probably hunt up a nicely-~~placed~~ ~~war~~ war as just the ticket to prosperity? A war too far removed from sight and understanding to be successfully criticized by more than the intellectuals; with a race of people that is unknown to most American and therefore unlikely to attract much sympathy; rising out of a dispute that was fuzzed and clouded by old, esoteric treaty alliances? Vietnam was perfect.²⁰²

The results of the Kennedy assassination were those of a coup d'etat. A young and vigorous leader who planned and began to execute a revolutionary foreign policy was murdered. His successor brought back and extended the old policies, those which clearly favored but one aspect of our society, the military-industrial complex. The policies of the young executive were a threat to the military. They robbed it both of the fame and fortune it had come to thrive on, and, more important, the sheer power by which it prevailed in the government. Under the administration which came into power through the assassination, the military was given a free hand in controlling policy. Its power and its fortune grew and grew to absurd proportions.

Lyndon Johnson did what Eisenhower warned about and Kennedy fought to prevent: He gave the military a blank check and allowed it to make policy.

So Johnson and his military-industrial cronies plunged into Vietnam,

showering the land with their beloved bombs, burning and maiming mothers and children, young and old, with their sacred napalm, gradually stripping the forests and the fields with the holy defoliants, erecting hundreds of military bases and airfields like shrines, and blessing a race of people and hundreds of thousands of American boys with a kiss from the high god of death and suffering. And the high priests and tribal lords lustily reaped the profits of their new religion.

It would seem that American democracy leaves no way out for the people living under this reign of terror. At the next election, can they vote the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of office? Or maybe choose a new ambassador to Saigon? Or elect a new commander of our forces in South Vietnam? Some different generals? A new CIA head? OR even organize a massive campaign to pressure their congressmen into picking only certain contactors to get defense contracts? Of course there are the presidential elections. Although a choice between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson or Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon doesn't exactly offer the widest range of policy alternatives.

American are stuck with what the military dishes out to them. All they can choose is the particular man who will hand the blank check to the military. The people who really make the policy and determine our "interests" are not accountable to the electorate. They are only accountable to each other and their interests are all military. The people's interests are not. But the people just do not have any kind of adequate institutionalized channel by which they can change the power structure which spends their money and sends them to fight and die for its own purposes.

This is not democracy.

It is military dictatorship.

And unless John Kennedy was out of the way, it could not have happened.

NOTES

1. Thomas Ross and David Wise, The Invisible Government (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), pp. 130-133.

2. For accounts of the Bay of Pigs invasion and related information, see: Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), Chapter XI; Arthur Schlesinger, A Thousand Days (Fawcett Crest Books: 1967), Chapters X and XI; Wise and Ross, op. cit., Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

3. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 277.

4. Ibid., p. 276.

5. Ibid., p. 258.

6. Ibid., p. 395.

7. Ibid., 395-397.

8. Ibid., p. 396.

9. The story of the U.S. involvement in Laos from the early 50's to 1962 may be found at: Wise and Ross, op. cit., Chapter 9; Sorenson, op. cit., pp. 721-731; Schlesinger, op. cit., Chapter XIII.

10. For accounts of the missile crisis, see: Sorenson, op. cit., Chapter XXIV; Schlesinger, op. cit., Chapters XXX and XXXI; plus Robert Kennedy, Thirteen Days (New York: Signet Books, 1969).

11. See Sorenson, op. cit., pp. 803, 806, 808-809.

12. Robert Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 94-95, 108-109.

13. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 815.

14. Ibid., pp. 832-833.

15. Ibid., p. 822.

16. The full text of the American University Speech can be found at the State Department's publication 8111, American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, 1963, pp. 23-29. (Hereinafter referred to as "Foreign Policy Documents.")

17. Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 911-912.

18. William Carleton, "Kennedy in History: An Early Appraisal," from Aida Donald, ed., JFK and the New Frontier (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), p. 207.

19. Ibid.

20. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 929.

21. Ibid., p. 840.
22. A good capsule history of this period may be found in the Washington Post of June 2, 1968.
23. Ibid.
24. Wise and Ross, op. cit., pp. 166-167.
25. Washington Post, June 2, 1968.
26. Ibid.
27. The full text of Eisenhower's letter can be found in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations publication, Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam.
28. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 495.
29. Wise and Ross, op. cit., pp. 168-169 and Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 416-417.
30. Wise and Ross, op. cit., p. 169.
31. Washington Post, June 2, 1968.
32. Wise and Ross, op. cit., p. 169.
33. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 417.
34. Washington Post, June 2, 1968.
35. Ibid.
36. Wise and Ross, op. cit., p. 167.
37. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 418.
38. Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 495-496.
39. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 419.
40. Washington Post, June 2, 1968.
41. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 498.
42. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 419.
43. Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 497-498.
44. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 419.
45. Wise and Ross, op. cit., p. 170.

- 46. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 498.
- 47. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 420.
- 48. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 300.
- 49. Ibid.
- 50. Arthur Krock, In the Nation (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 374.
- 51. Sorenson, op. cit., p. 739.
- 52. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 420 and Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 497.
- 53. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 420.
- 54. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 501.
- 55. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 420.
- 56. Wise and Rods, op. cit., p. 170.
- 57. Ibid.
- 58. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 422-423 and Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 504-505.
- 59. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 450-451.
- 60. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 498.
- 61. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 424.
- 62. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 505.
- 63. Ibid., pp. 506-507.
- 64. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 431.
- 65. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 897.
- 66. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 441.
- 67. Ibid., p. 445.
- 68. Ibid., p. 451.
- 69. Ibid., p. 464.
- 70. Ibid., pp. 436-438.
- 71. Ibid., 442-443.
- 72. Ibid., pp. 447, 552.

73. Ibid., p. 449.
74. Ibid. See also Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 896-897.
75. Wise and Ross, op. cit., pp. 171-173.
76. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 895.
77. Ibid., p. 898.
78. Ibid., p. 899.
79. Ibid., p. 901. See also Life magazine, August 7, 1970, p. 51.
80. Henry Brandon, Anatomy of Error (Boston: Gambit, 1969), p. 30.
81. Life, August 7, 1970. Mansfield confirmed this. See the Washington Post, August 3, 1970.
82. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 468.
83. Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, p. 855. See also the New York Times, May 23, 1963.
84. Life, August 7, 1970, pp. 51-52.
85. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 473-474.
86. Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, p. 860.
87. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 482.
88. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 903.
89. Ibid., p. 904 and Hilsman, op. cit., p. 487.
90. Ibid.
91. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 904.
92. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 12.
93. Sorenson, op. cit., p. 744.
94. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 496.
95. See Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam, op. cit.
96. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 501.
97. Hilsman's letter to the New York Times, printed in the August 8, 1970 issue.
98. See source cited in number 95.

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99. Seen the New York Times, September 9, 1963.
 100. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 907.
 101. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 503-504.
 102. Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, pp. 873-874.
 103. New York Times, September 21, 1963.
 104. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 507-508.
 105. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 908.
 106. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 510.
 107. Washington Post, August 3, 1970. See also the Tampa Tribune of August 4, 1970.
 108. Life, August 7, 1970, p. 52.
 109. Ibid.
 110. See the New York Times, October 3, 1963, for the full statement.
 111. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 571.
 112. Sorenson, op. cit., p. 745.
 113. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 514.
 114. New York Times, October 8, 1963.
 115. Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 908.
 116. This was also reprinted in Krock's book In the Nation, op. cit., pp. 376-377.
 117. New York Times, October 4, 1963.
 118. Wise and Ross, op. cit., pp. 174-175. See also the New York Times, October 5, 1963.
 119. The text of the President's remarks was reprinted in the New York Times, October 10, 1963.
 120. Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, p. 877.
 121. Jean LaCouture, Vietnam: Between Two Truces (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 84.
 122. Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, pp. 877-880.
 123. Tom Wicker, JFK and LBJ (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 188.

124. New York Times, November 23, 1963.
125. Ibid., November 23, 1963.
126. Ibid., November 4, 1963.
127. Time magazine, November 29, 1963 p. 40.
128. New York Times, December 3, 1963.
129. Ibid.
130. Sorenson, op. cit., pp. 723-724.
131. New York Times, August 8, 1960.
132. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 537.
133. Ibid., p. 503.
134. Ibid., pp. 522-523.
135. Henry Brandon, op. cit., p. 30.
136. New York Times, November 13, 1963.

137. The text of the President's remarks was printed in the New York Times, November 15, 1963.

Actually, Kennedy made it known that our policy was for "the Americans to go home" in his September 12 statement that "what helps to win the war, we support; what interferes with the war effort, we oppose." However, at this time, the conditions which he indicated must accompany withdrawal seemed far more belligerent than those he stated on November 14. He said:

But we have a very simple policy in that area, I think. In some ways I think the Vietnamese people and ourselves agree: We want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home. That is our policy. (Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, p. 874)

Kennedy knew by then that the war could not be "won" nor the "Communists" "contained." But stating this openly risked a frightening military, Congressional and public reaction which had to be avoided. There were certainly enough troubles with the military at this point. Kennedy was being careful, although he was gradually making it known that he wanted Americans out of Vietnam.

138. New York Times, November 10, 1963.
139. Ibid., November 16, 1963.
140. Ibid., November 6, 1963.
141. Wicker, op. cit., p. 189.
142. Honolulu Star-Bulletin, November 16, 1963.

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143. New York Times, November 21, 1963.
 144. Ibid. See also the St. Louis Post-Dispatch of the same date.
 145. Honolulu Star-Bulletin, November 21, 1963.
 146. Wicker, op. cit., pp. 184-185.
 147. Ibid., p. 205.
 148. New York Times, November 25, 1963.
 149. Ibid., December 4, 1963.
 150. Ibid., December 8, 1963.
 151. Ibid., December 11, 1963.
 152. Ibid., December 12, 1963.
 153. Ibid., December 22, 1963.
 154. Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 526-527.
 155. Ibid., p. 534.
 156. Philadelphia Inquirer, June 14, 1971.
 157. Wilfred Burchett, Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerilla War (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 213. See also Jean LaCouture, op. cit., p. 131.
 158. Foreign Policy Documents, 1963, p. 884.
 159. Burchett, op. cit., pp. 214 -216.
 160. Foreign Policy Documents, 1964, p. 958.
 161. Jean LaCouture, op. cit., p. 133.
 162. Foreign Policy Documents, 1964, p. 959.
 163. Philadelphia Inquirer, June 14, 1971.
 164. Ibid., June 16, 1971.
 165. The secret documents revealed by the New York Times disclose that Johnson was deliberately avoiding and frustrating negotiations. (See Philadelphia Inquirer, June 14, 1971 and Evening Bulletin, June 15, 1971.) This was a matter of public record previously as well. See, for example, "How the U.S. Spurned Three Chances for Peace in Vietnam," by Norman Cousins in Look, July 29, 1969; "February 1967: When the War in Vietnam Might Have Ended-- England's Prime Minister Charges That Lyndon Johnson Let Slip a Historic Opportunity Which Could Have Led to Peace Four Years Ago," by Harold Wilson in Life, May 21, 1971. Also see Robert Sherrill, The Accidental President

(New York: Pyramid Books, 1968), pp. 212-214.

166. Philadelphia Inquirer, June 14, 1971.
167. Foreign Policy Documents, 1964, p. 978.
168. Ibid., p. 979.
169. "The Gulf of Tonkin, The 1964 Incidents: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate," the February 20, 1968 testimony of Robert McNamara, printed by the Government Printing Office, p. 50. The information described in the text is included in this testimony.
170. New Orleans Times-Picayune, September 22, 1969.
171. Foreign Policy Documents, 1964, p. 988.
172. Ibid., pp. 984-985.
173. Ibid., p. 991.
174. Ibid., p. 1000.
175. See Wicker, op. cit., pp. 231-232.
176. Evening Bulletin, June 15, 1971.
177. Wicker, op. cit., pp. 256-257.
178. Ibid., p. 260.
179. Ibid., p. 256.
180. Evening Bulletin, June 15, 1971. For a good account of the various coups from 1963 to 1965 see Jean LaCouture, op. cit., pp. 24, 119-148.
181. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 578.
182. Robert Sherrill, op. cit., p. 211 and Washington Post, July 7, 1966.
183. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 439.
184. Evening Bulletin, June 15, 1971.
185. Wicker, op. cit., p. 273.
186. Sherrill, op. cit., p. 224.
187. Ibid., p. 182.
188. Ibid., pp. 193-195.
189. See "Building Lyndon Johnson" by David Welsh in Ramparts, December 1967, p. 53.

190. Sherrill, op. cit., p. 202.
191. Ramparts, December 1967, pp. 62-64.
192. Ibid., p. 64 and Sherrill, op. cit., p. 202.
193. Ibid.
194. Sherrill, op. cit., p. 203.
195. Wicker, op. cit., p. 268.
196. Life, January 20, 1967, p. 4.
197. Sherrill, op. cit., p. 225,
198. Ibid., p. 189.
199. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 534.
200. Sherrill, op. cit., p. 192.
201. Ibid., p. 225.
202. Ibid., p. 189.