

The Ultimatum to Diem 'Was a Serious Blunder'

This is the second of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

**"STEADY ON COURSE:
VIETNAM: 1963-1964"**

As Air Force One carried us swiftly back to Washington after the tragedy in Dallas I made a solemn private vow: I would devote every hour of every day during the remainder of John Kennedy's unfulfilled term to achieving the goals he had set. That meant seeing things through in Vietnam as well as coping with the many other international and domestic problems he had faced. I made this promise not out of blind loyalty but because I was convinced that the broad lines of his policy, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, had been right. They were consistent with the goals the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945.

My first exposure to details of the problem of Vietnam came forty-eight hours after I had taken the oath of office. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had flown to Washington a few days earlier for scheduled conferences with President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and other administration officials.

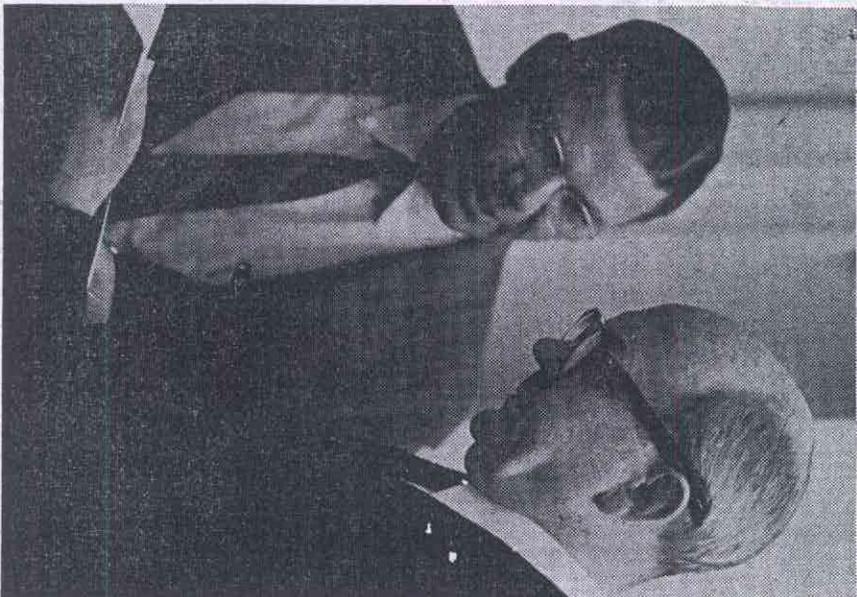
Lodge was optimistic. He believed



**LBJ's
Vantage Point**

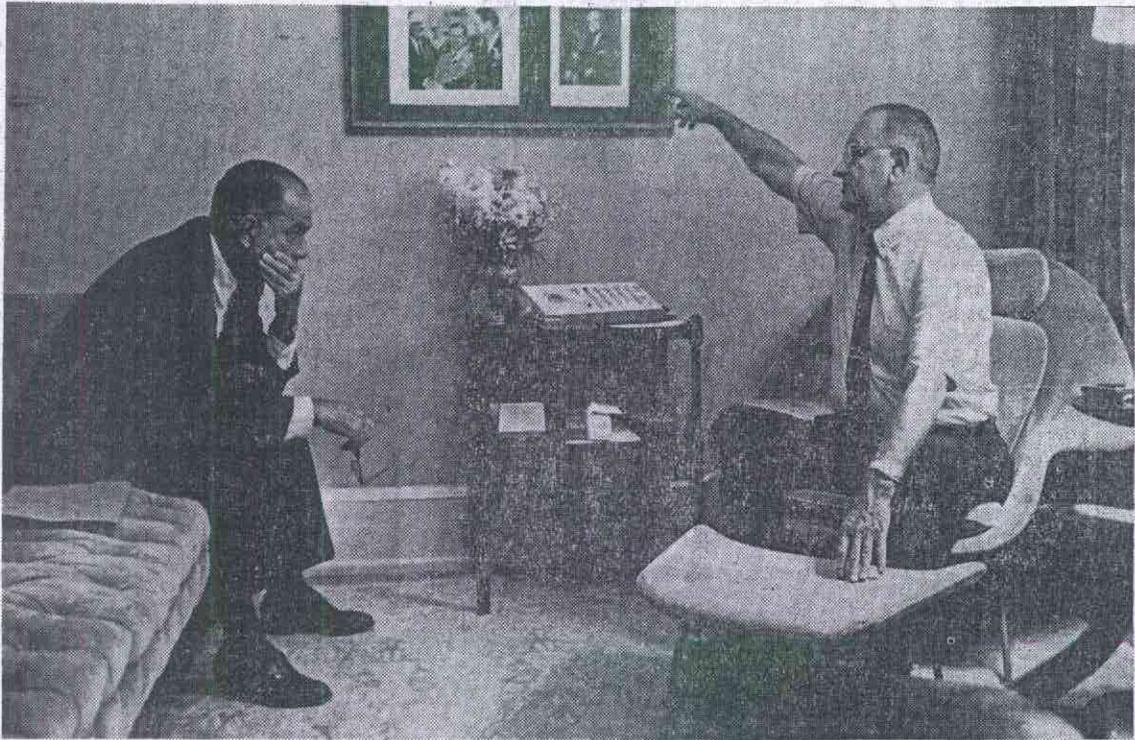
the recent change of government in Saigon was an improvement. He was hopeful and expected the new military leaders to speed up their war efforts. He stated that our government had put pressure on the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem to change its course. Those pres-

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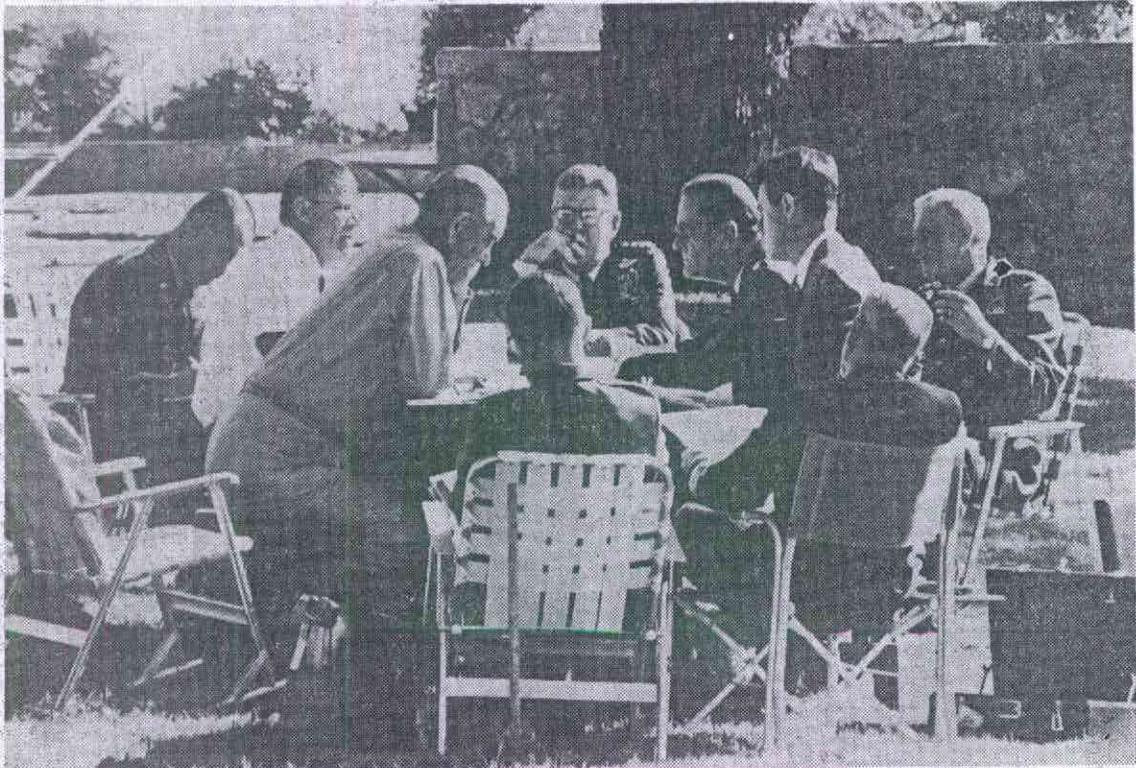
LBJ's Secretary of Defense McNamara and Secretary of State Rusk: 'McNamara's appraisal was gloomy indeed.'

Y. R. Akumoto



Y. R. Akamoto

President Johnson confers with Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.).



Y. R. Akamoto

November 24, 1963: President Johnson gets his first briefing on the war in Vietnam.

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sure, he admitted, had encouraged the military leaders who carried out the coup on November 1, 1963. However, if Diem and his brother Nhu had followed his advice, Lodge said, they would still be alive. In his last talk with Diem on the afternoon of November 1, Lodge had offered to help assure the Vietnamese leader's personal safety, but Diem had ignored the offer.

I turned to John McCone and asked what his reports from Saigon in recent days indicated. The CIA Director replied that his estimate was much less encouraging. There had been an increase in Viet Cong activity since the coup, including more VC attacks. He had information that the enemy was preparing to exert even more severe pressure. He said the Vietnamese military leaders who carried out the coup were having difficulties organizing their government and were receiving little help from civilian leaders. McCone concluded that he could see no basis for an optimistic forecast of the future.

President Kennedy's principal foreign affairs advisers agreed that it was important to underline, especially within government circles, the continuity of policy and direction under the new President. I agreed and on November 26 approved National Security Action Memorandum 273. It was my first important decision on Vietnam as President, important not because it required any new actions but because it signaled our determination to persevere in the policies and actions in which we were already engaged.

NSAM 273, addressed to the senior officers of the government responsible for foreign affairs and military policy, began:

It remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy. The test of all U.S. decisions and actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contribution to this purpose.

When a President makes a decision, he seeks all the information he can get. At the same time, he cannot separate himself from his own experience and memory. This is especially true

when his decisions involve the lives of men and the safety of the nation. It was natural, as I faced critical problems during those first few months in office, that I should recall crises of the past and how we had met them or failed to meet them. No one who had served in the House or Senate during the momentous years of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, as I had, could fail to recall the many highs and lows of our performance as a nation. Like most men and women of my generation, I felt strongly that World War II might have been avoided if the United States in the 1930s had not given such an uncertain signal of its likely response to aggression in Europe and Asia.

The spirit that motivated us to give our support to the defense of Western Europe in the 1940s led us in the 1950s to make a similar promise to Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty was signed in Manila on September 8, 1954, by representatives of seven countries—Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom—as well as the United States.

The Senate then approved the treaty by a vote of 82 to 1. The only dissenting voice was that of Senator William Langer of North Dakota, a long-time opponent of the United Nations, NATO, and other forms of U.S. involvement in the world. Among my old Senate colleagues who gave their advice and consent to SEATO that day were Aiken and Case, Fulbright and Gore, Mansfield and Morse.

I respect a Langer, even if I disagree heartily with him, when he argues against our having any involvements in Europe or Asia or the rest of the world—and votes his convictions. I respect far more an Eisenhower or a Kennedy who sees our responsibilities in the world and acts to carry them out. I have little understanding for those who talk and vote one way, and after having given our nation's pledge, act another; for those who stand firm while the sun is shining, but run for cover when a storm breaks. The protection of American interests in a revolutionary, nuclear world is not for men who want to throw in our hand every time we face a challenge.

The failure to obtain North Vietnamese compliance with the Laos Accords of 1962 was a bitter disappointment to President Kennedy.

There was another reason the modest successes of late 1962 were not enlarged and multiplied in 1963. This was internal disruption inside South Viet-

nam in opposition to the Diem government and, especially, in fearful reaction to Diem's brother Nhu, who was quietly taking the levers of power into his own hands.

Opinion was sharply divided in the U.S. Mission about the course we should pursue. Similar differences divided the official family in Washington. Some experts argued that there was no way to "win with Diem." Others thought that if Nhu left Vietnam, unity could be restored. Others believed that whatever his weaknesses and mistakes, Diem was the only qualified leader on the scene. They favored encouraging him to settle his differences with his opponents and get on with fighting the Viet Cong and building his country.

This controversy led to a crucial decision that never received the serious study and detached thought it deserved. Too much emotionalism was involved. After the attacks on the Buddhist pagodas, a message prepared in the State Department was sent to Saigon on August 24. In effect, it told Ambassador Lodge to advise Diem that immediate steps had to be taken to correct the situation and to meet the outstanding Buddhist demands. If Diem did not act promptly, the Ambassador was instructed to advise key Vietnamese military leaders that the United States would not continue to support the Saigon government militarily or economically. This ultimatum meant the removal of Nhu and his politically active wife from any continued influence or responsibility in the government. If Diem refused, the United States could no longer support him. If the military leaders then took over, we would support them.

This hasty and ill-advised message was a green light to those who wanted Diem's downfall. Once the Ambassador acted on his instructions, preparations for a coup were stimulated. In my judgment, this decision was a serious blunder which launched a period of deep political confusion in Saigon that lasted almost two years. In the weeks that followed President Kennedy urged the Diem government to change its attitude and method of operation. He had not revised his assessment of our role there or of the importance of South Vietnam to Southeast Asia and our own security. He opposed a U.S. withdrawal, which some people were beginning to urge. He continued to believe that the conquest of South Vietnam would have the most serious impact on Asia and on us.

The Defense Secretary spent December 18-20, 1963, in Vietnam. He reported to me on the 21st in the White House, less than 30 days after I had assumed the Presidency. Rusk, McCone, and other advisers were present. McNamara's appraisal was gloomy indeed. "The situation is very disturbing," he said. "Current trends, unless reversed in the next two or three months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state."

"Neutralization" of Vietnam was in many people's minds at that time, and it had a particular meaning. In August 1963 French President Charles de Gaulle had suggested that North and South Vietnam be unified and neutralized, and that all foreign forces be withdrawn. Most thinking people, I believe, recognized that the De Gaulle formula for "neutralization" would have meant the swift communization of all Vietnam and probably of Laos and Cambodia as well.

As we moved into 1964 events confirmed the gloomy forecast Secretary McNamara had made in December. Late in January a group of officers headed by General Nguyen Khanh replaced the military junta that had overthrown Diem.

The South Vietnamese often seemed to have a strong impulse toward political suicide. They hated the Communists and wanted to be able to run their own lives. But they had great trouble trying to get together to govern themselves. The busy critics of South Vietnam had a field day. When there were demonstrations or protests, the South Vietnamese were described as lacking in patriotism. When the government moved to limit protests, the leadership was called dictatorial. The South Vietnamese were attacked from both sides, and we were in no position to do much about it.

I had moments of deep discouragement, times when I felt the South Vietnamese were their own worst enemies. But I felt even more impatience with those who were always ready only to criticize. Building a new nation is never easy under the best of circumstances—with unlimited time, solid political traditions, a healthy economy, and peace. The South Vietnamese had none of these things, yet they were trying desparately to find their way to nationhood. I thought they needed and deserved understanding and patience, not constant vilification. But then a patient understanding of others is a great

human deficiency, whether in personal relationships or in international affairs. Criticism is much easier, even if it is destructive and invariably makes matters worse for those criticized.

In March 1964 I asked McNamara and Taylor to go to Vietnam once again for a firsthand assessment.

They said that conditions had "unquestionably been growing worse." They cited specific weaknesses in security, morale, and political effectiveness. They said that Hanoi's involvement in the insurgency, "always significant, has been increasing." The Defense Secretary once again described the disastrous consequences likely to follow should South Vietnam fall to the Communists.

McNamara concluded his report as follows:

"If the Khanh Government can stay in power and the above actions can be



Photo by Cecil Stoughton

President Johnson and his top advisers at a White House briefing on Vietnam early in the administration.

carried out rapidly, it is my judgment that the situation in South Vietnam can be significantly improved in the next four to six months. The present deterioration may continue for a part of this period, but I believe it can be levelled out and some improvement will become visible during the period. I therefore believe that this course of action should be urgently pursued while we prepare such additional actions as may be necessary for success."

His final recommendation was that we be ready to carry out, on three days' notice, certain border control actions as well as retaliation against North Vietnam. We should also be in a position, the Secretary said, to conduct a program of graduated military pressure against the North on a month's notice. The Defense Secretary specified that he was not in favor of either of these actions "at this time" but was recommending that we be prepared if they should prove necessary in the future.

At the NSC meeting no one opposed any of the military recommendations.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff thought the proposed actions might not be sufficient and favored taking immediate measures against the North. When this possibility was raised, then and later in the year, my key advisers voiced two principal objections, which I shared. First, we were concerned that the political and military base in the South was too fragile to invite increased action from the enemy. Second, we feared that striking the North might lead to involvement by the Chinese or the Soviets, or both. We did not know what secret military arrangements or agreements Hanoi might have worked out with Peking and Moscow. I approved the twelve actions on the McNamara list on March 17 and instructed the Executive departments to carry them out, but rejected proposals to do more than that.

The leaders in Hanoi obviously liked what they saw happening in the South at that time. In the summer of 1964 they decided the time was ripe to move from guerrilla warfare to a more

Meanwhile, we were trying to put on the brake. On June 17 Blair Seaborn, the new Canadian member of the International Control Commission for Vietnam, would be going to Hanoi in connection with his assignment. We outlined my first peace suggestion, along with some of our hopes and expectations, and asked him to sound out the authorities in North Vietnam regarding the chances for peace. We told him he could assure Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues that the United States had no intention of trying to overthrow their regime. We had no wish to retain military bases or a military position in the South. We were, of course, aware of Hanoi's control of the Viet Cong. We asked only that the leaders in Hanoi abide by the agreements reached with the French at Geneva in 1954 and in the Laos settlement in 1962: keep their men inside their own territory and stop sending military supplies into the South. If our peace proposal was accepted, we would assist all the countries of the area in their economic development. North Vietnam could benefit from that improvement along with her neighbors.

Seaborn, an experienced diplomat, presented our views not as an advocate but as a dispassionate intermediary. He listened to the North Vietnamese views in the same spirit. All he heard from Hanoi's leaders was propaganda repeated many times since: The United States should withdraw totally from the South; a "neutral" regime should be set up in accordance with the National Liberation Front's program; the Front would have to take a leading role in determining the future of the country.

Obviously, the Communist leaders believed they were winning in the South. With things presumably going their way, they had no interest in a peaceful settlement or compromise of any description. They slammed the door shut on our peace offer. In August, when Seaborn tried again to discuss the idea of a peaceful settlement with them, they slammed the door even harder. We could only conclude from his experience that the North Vietnamese had no desire to limit their actions or to negotiate; they were interested in only thing, victory on the battlefield. This experience of trying to open an avenue to peace negotiations and coming up against a roadblock was repeated dozens of times over the next several years.

In the United States that summer we were in the midst of a Presidential election campaign. I tried as far as possible to keep the war out of the political race, but the issue was too important to be ignored. I stated and restated our goals and explained why we were involved in Southeast Asia. On several occasions I insisted that American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves. I was answering those who proposed, or implied, that we should take charge of the war or carry out actions that would risk a war with Communist China. I did not mean that we were not going to do any fighting, for we had already lost many good men in Vietnam. I made it clear that those who were ready to fight for their own freedom would find us at their side if they wanted and needed us. We were not going to rush in and take over, but we were going to live up to the commitments we had made.

A good many people compared my position in 1964 with that of the Republican nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, and decided that I was the "peace" candidate and he was the "war" candidate. They were not willing to hear anything they did not want to hear.

The American people knew what they were voting for in 1964. They knew Lyndon Johnson was not going to pull up stakes and run. They knew I was not going to go back on my country's word. They knew I would not repudiate the pledges of my predecessors in the Presidency. They knew too that I was not going to wipe out Hanoi or use atom bombs to defoliate the Vietnamese jungles. I was going to do what had to be done to protect our interests and to keep our promises. And that is what I did.

From the book, *THE VANTAGE POINT, Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969*, by Lyndon Baines Johnson, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright (c) 1971 by HEC Public Affairs Foundation.

Book Complements Pentagon Papers

By Chalmers M. Roberts

When the shattering events of Dallas transferred the problem of Vietnam to a new President, Lyndon B. Johnson did not stop to ask whether an American role in Indochina made any sense. He plunged forward in the firm conviction that it did because he saw it as a part of the larger postwar history he knew so intimately.

This is the dominant fact that emerges from the initial chapter about the war in the former President's memoirs. What The Washington Post is printing are carefully chosen excerpts from the memoirs, chosen to give the heart of Johnson's views without all the detail the big book provides.

One immediate question is how his version compares with that in the Pentagon Papers published last summer. The answer is that, in this initial chapter covering 1963-64, the two versions are not so much in conflict as they are complementary.

This is the Presidential overview and it should be read as such.

Many of those whose views were so vital to the Pentagon Papers do not even appear in the Johnson account and there is only a passing reference or two to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the thoughts of its members. One point of similarity: the CIA in both cases appeared to be the most skeptical of success.

The former President writes in the prose designed for history; there is none of his famous informality, of the barnyard anecdote, even of the informal phrasing of his post-retirement television interviews with Walter Cronkite. Some points are skipped over; others omit much of the story the Pentagon Papers told.

Mr. Johnson never made any secret that he felt the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem was a mistake and he says so again. But he totally omits the detailed account of American responsibility in that coup. He limits him-

self to rapping the famous cable of Roger Hilsman on Aug. 24, 1963, as "a crucial decision" that launched two years of chaos in Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers show that President Johnson defined "neutralization" of Vietnam as "a Communist takeover" and that he instructed Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that "your mission is precisely for the purpose of knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head . . ." In this chapter of the Johnson memoirs, however, the ex-President is content to declare that he believed "most thinking people" recognized that French President de Gaulle's "neutralization" formula would have meant "swift Communization" in Indochina.

At another point Mr. Johnson refers to a recommendation by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara to prepare for "certain border control actions." The Pentagon Papers disclosed that that term really meant "covert Vietnamese operations into Laos."

The Pentagon Papers created a major row in Canada with the disclosures of American use of a Canadian diplomat, J. Blair Seaborn. Mr. Johnson states that Seaborn "presented our views not as an advocate but as a dispassionate intermediary." The Pentagon Papers, as The New York Times account presented it, had Seaborn conveying an "obvious threat." The point remains uncertain.

Finally, Mr. Johnson in this chapter once again vents his disdain for such sunshine patriots as Sen. J. William Fulbright, as he saw them. He is defensive as he has been before about his 1964 campaign statement that American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves. He insists that the voters that year "knew what they were voting for," that they were not, in effect, lied to by a man who many came to believe was secretly planning to escalate the war while running as a peace candidate against Barry Goldwater.