

James M. Gavin:
!!! CRISIS NOW (Randall House, NY, 1967)

ing troops. I agreed with him—I thought a significant number of generals and admirals still lived in the “good and bad guys” world.

The President suggested that I call on Prince Souvanna Phouma of Laos in Paris and try to persuade him that the American objective was truly “to establish a free, neutral, independent Laos.” Up to this point the United States had been backing the CIA-picked General Phoumi Nosavan; and the President wanted to make it clear our policy had shifted to the support of Souvanna Phouma.

There was a good deal of suspicion of Souvanna Phouma in the U.S. government. It was felt he was, if not a Communist himself, pretty much controlled by the Communists. But the President argued, and hindsight convinces me more than ever he was completely correct, that Souvanna Phouma was the man the Laotians wanted and that he should receive U.S. support. My job was to convince Souvanna Phouma of our intention to respect the freedom, neutrality and independence of Laos.

Shortly after President Kennedy’s visit to Paris I called on Souvanna Phouma at his Paris apartment. His attitude was not entirely friendly toward me, but he seemed willing to listen. Among other things I tried to persuade him to visit the United States, meet President Kennedy and learn firsthand of the United States change in attitude. Souvanna Phouma seemed loath to do this, though he had a trip planned for the immediate future that would take him through several Communist countries. I was not sure I had accomplished much at the meeting.

I called on him again about a month later and this time felt that genuine progress was made. Souvanna Phouma

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was quite friendly and we got along well. I continued to visit with him frequently after that and reassure him of the genuineness of American intentions. In the end I am satisfied he became convinced of our sincerity. Finally, through the ability and craft of W. Averell Harriman in Geneva, a treaty was drafted which was acceptable to all parties. Once again the commitment of U.S. troops to Southeast Asia had been avoided.

While Laos then is not Vietnam now, there are distinct parallels. The Laotian experience convinced me of the need to work in Asia with national leaders of differing political persuasion, as we had with Tito in Yugoslavia. That we cannot remake the world in our own image is a truism often repeated but not always followed. And have we looked at our own image recently? Laos also convinced me of the fallacy of the falling-dominio theory. Laos went neutral; neither Cambodia nor Thailand fell. With a little diplomatic skill dominos can be buttressed; it sometimes seems to me that we deliberately try to link them to each other.

In the meantime in Vietnam things were not going well with the Diem government, though we were doing our verbal best to help him. Vice-President Johnson had visited the country in 1961 and referred to Diem as the “Churchill of Asia.” Shortly thereafter Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, on one of his frequent brief tours of inspection, called Diem “one of the greatest leaders of our time.” Yet the Diem government became more isolated and oppressive. By 1963 the war in Vietnam was going very badly and President Kennedy was having grave doubts about our course of action. Recent

books have indicated the depth and bitterness of the division in the Kennedy administration over Vietnam.

The President himself stated publicly at that time, "In the final analysis it is their war. They are the ones that have to win it or lose it. We can help them, give them equipment. We can send our men out there as advisers. But they have to win it."

However, the President's military advisers continued to tell him the war was going well. On October 2, 1963, after another whirlwind visit to Vietnam, Secretary McNamara insisted that the President issue the following statement:

The military program in South Vietnam has made progress and is sound in principle, though improvements are being energetically sought. . . . 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. . . . They reported that by the end of this year [1965] the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point that one thousand U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn.

A President deserves better counsel than this from his military advisers!

There has been much speculation about what President Kennedy would or would not have done in Vietnam had he lived. Having discussed military affairs with him often and in detail for fifteen years, I know he was totally opposed to the introduction of combat troops in Southeast Asia. His public statements just before his murder support this view. That the evil that men do should so often live

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after them while the good is interred with their bones is tragedy enough. Let us not also lay blame on the dead for our own failures.

By 1964 Vietnam had become a major political issue in the presidential campaign. President Johnson reassured those whom he was later to refer to as "nervous Nellies" with the words "I have not chosen to enlarge the war." He later reiterated, "We aren't going to send American boys nine thousand or ten thousand miles away to do what the Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

In August 1964, under circumstances still not totally clear, two U.S. destroyers were attacked by North Vietnamese PT boats. President Johnson ordered "air action" against "gunboats and certain supporting facilities" in North Vietnam. In the excitement following the attack on the destroyers, Congress, at the behest of the administration, adopted the Southeast Asia Resolution upon which the administration bases its action today. On February 7, 1965, the first air strikes were ordered against North Vietnam. On March 6 two U.S. marine battalions were landed in South Vietnam. The direct U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, against which some of us had fought for so long, had begun in earnest. By October 1965 draft calls were the largest since the Korean War and American forces in South Vietnam totaled 148,300. At this time, though now out of government, I once again felt a grave personal concern for the future. My concern was on two distinct levels. First I was distressed that so much of our physical wealth and human energy should be diverted from our urgent domestic problems. Even back then the war in Vietnam was costing more

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