

NYTimes
By Lyndon B. Johnson: Vietnam Problem
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INSTALLMENT II

Following is the second in the series of excerpts from the memoirs of Lyndon Baines Johnson, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 7 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

As Air Force I 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.

President Kennedy believed in our

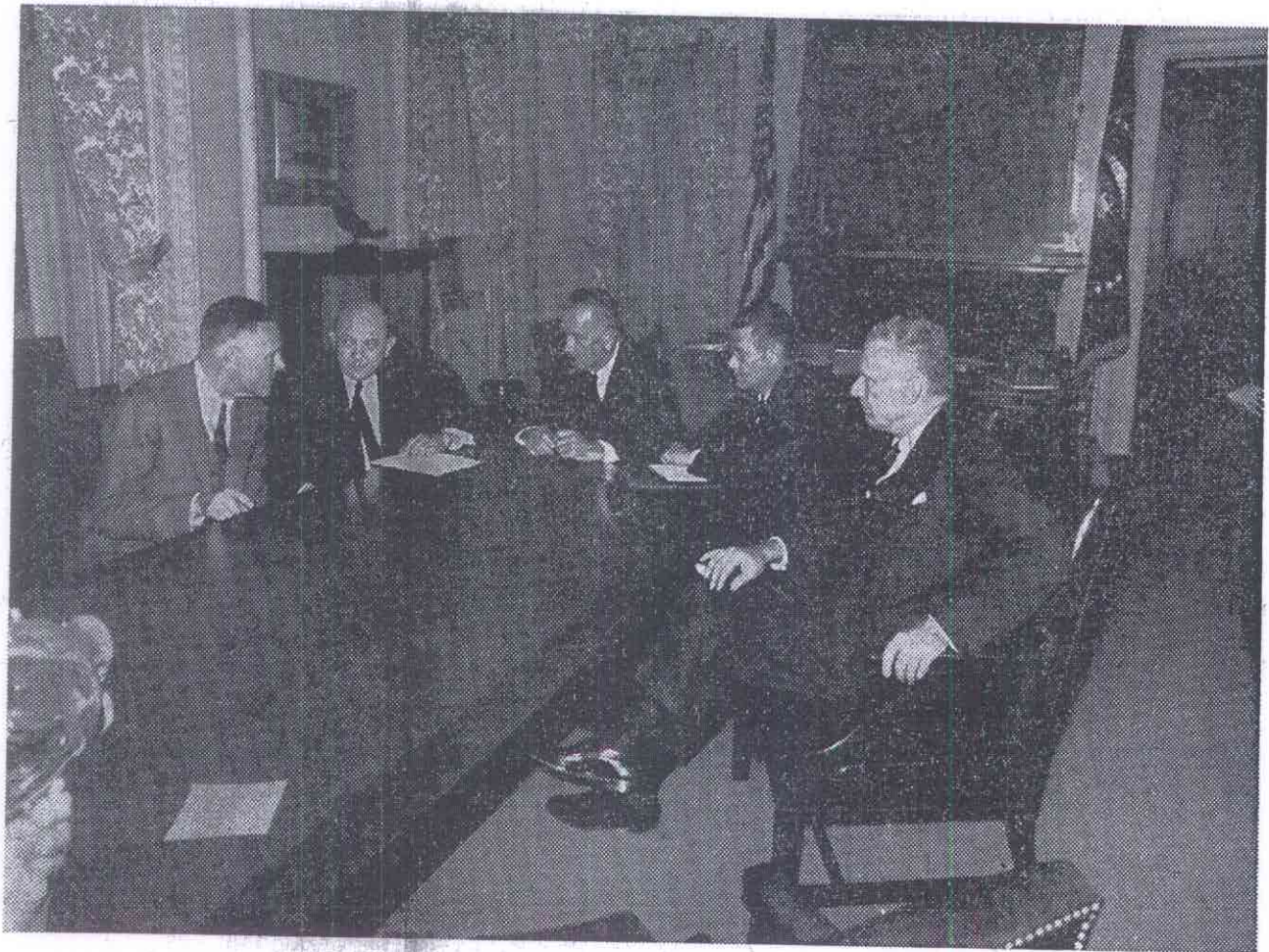
nation's commitment to the security of Southeast Asia, a commitment made in the SEATO Treaty and strengthened by his predecessor, President Eisenhower. President Kennedy had explained on many occasions the reasons he took this position. By late 1963 he had sent approximately 16,000 American troops to South Vietnam to make good our SEATO pledge.

My first exposure to details of the problem of Vietnam came 48 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. I sent for him and asked him to give me a firsthand account of recent events. I wanted his estimate and felt it was

important that he go back to Saigon with a clear understanding of my personal views. We met in my office in the Executive Office Building. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara were there, as well as Under Secretary of State George Ball, C.I.A. Director John McCone and McGeorge Bundy.

Lodge was optimistic. He believed 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 pressures, he admitted, had encouraged the military leaders who carried out the coup on Nov. 1, 1963. However, if Diem and his brother Nhu had followed his advice,

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Two days after taking office, the President was briefed on Vietnam by, from left, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Rusk, Secretary of State; Robert S. McNamara, Defense Secretary, and George Ball.

Cecil Stoughton

Lodge said, they would still be alive. In his last talk with Diem on the afternoon of Nov. 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 C.I.A. Director replied that his estimate was much less encouraging. There had been an increase in Vietcong 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.

I told Lodge and the others that I had serious misgivings. Many people were criticizing the removal of Diem and were shocked by his murder. Congressional demands for our withdrawal from Vietnam were becoming louder and more insistent. I thought we had been mistaken in our failure to support Diem. But all that, I said, was behind us. Now we had to concentrate on accomplishing our goals. We had to help the new government get on its feet and perform effectively.

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 nineteen-thirties, nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties, 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 nineteen-thirties had not given such an uncertain signal of its likely response to aggression in Europe and Asia.

I could not forget the refusal of the House of Representatives in 1939 and 1940 to provide \$5-million in funds for the strengthening of Guam, for fear of antagonizing the Japanese. I could not forget the long and difficult fight over the Selective Service Act in 1940, when major wars were already being fought in both Europe and China. I remembered the one-vote margin (203-202) in the House by which the length of service for draftees was extended half a year only four months before Pearl Harbor.

With the end of fighting in 1945 we almost repeated the errors of the past by dismantling too quickly the huge military force we had developed. Our haste provided an irresistible temptation to Stalin, who moved to consolidate control over Eastern Europe by 1948 and simultaneously exerted increased pressure on Western Europe. We righted the balance barely in time through the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

In 1947 I was in the heat of the legislative battle over President Truman's proposal to give economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey. It was clear from that debate that the voices of isolationism and appeasement had not been completely stilled, despite the painful lessons of the past. Another day stood out sharply in my memory—June 27, 1950, the day President Truman decided that American military force would be used to resist aggression in Korea. The day after that decision was made I sat down and wrote a letter to our Commander in Chief. I told President Truman that I admired and was grateful for his courage.

The spirit that motivated us to give our support to the defense of Western Europe in the nineteen-forties led us in the nineteen-fifties to make a similar promise to Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty was signed in Manila on Sept. 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.

In the key portion of the treaty, Article IV, each party recognized that armed aggression in Southeast Asia against a treaty member or a protocol state protected by the treaty, of which South Vietnam was one, "would endanger its own peace and security." Each pledged that in the event of armed aggression, it would "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes." Any action taken under SEATO would be reported immediately to the U.N. Security Council. It was further agreed that steps to resist aggression would be taken only "at the invitation or with the consent of the government concerned."

Under President Eisenhower American economic and military assistance to South Vietnam increased. It helped give the young republic strength and confidence. When the Vietnamese people voted for Ngo Dinh Diem to replace former Emperor Bao Dai as Vietnam's chief of state in late 1955, most Western experts thought the new country would last little more than six months. But under Diem's leadership the South Vietnamese moved forward. Non-Com-

munist Vietnam began to heal its wounds and to prosper. The small country absorbed about 900,000 refugees who fled from Ho Chi Minh's rule in the North. Production increased; so did exports; so did the number of schools. Living standards rose.

In South Vietnam the Communists had many agents and an underground apparatus. They had stockpiled thousands of weapons when the French began to pull out. The Communists had never abandoned terrorism and sabotage in the South, but in the late nineteen-fifties the order went out from Hanoi to begin a large-scale campaign of violence. The main target was the

Diem Government. Ho Chi Minh seemed confident that with Diem out of the way, his followers in the South would have no trouble taking over.

AFTER the 1960 election President-elect Kennedy invited me to Palm Beach to discuss working arrangements for the new Administration. He had several specific jobs he wanted me to do, especially to represent him on overseas trips. He mentioned Asia in particular. Early in May President Kennedy invited me to his office. He recalled that we had talked earlier about my going to the Far East and he said he thought the time had come. He wanted me to take a close, hard look at what was happening there. Above all, he wanted me to go to Vietnam and confer with President Diem. He said the Vietnamese were in trouble and we had to help them, but they had to help themselves too. He wanted my views on the situation and recommendations for the future.

He also asked me to visit the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, India, and Pakistan. This would be my first trip to the far Pacific since World War II and my first visit to Vietnam.

On May 8, 1961, President Kennedy wrote to Ngo Dinh Diem and asked me to deliver the letter in person. Kennedy told President Diem he was "ready to join with you in an intensified endeavor to win the struggle against Communism and to further the social and economic advancement of Vietnam."

The President then spelled out ways he thought American assistance could best be used: to support 20,000 additional regular Vietnamese troops under our Military Assistance Program, to enlarge the size and mission of our Military Assistance Advisory Group, to support the 68,000-man Civil Guard, to strengthen the Vietnamese Junk Fleet and to cooperate in other programs. He also offered to send economic experts to work with the Vietnamese in developing "a financial plan on which our joint efforts can be based."

The next day, May 9, Mrs. Jonnson and I left Washington aboard a Presidential jet. President Kennedy's sister Jean and her husband, Stephen Smith, went with us. We arrived in Saigon the evening of May 11.

The next morning I rode to Independence Palace for my first meeting with President Diem. Ambassador Fritz Nolting accompanied me. Diem was a hard bargainer and a proud man, and I expected differences. The Vietnamese President received us cordially. After exchanging greetings and gifts, as is customary, we immediately got down to business. I gave Diem the President's letter and sat back while he read it. Then he responded, one by one, to President Kennedy's proposals, and in less than three hours we had agreed on all of them.

From Saigon we flew to Manila, then on to Taipei, Bangkok, New Delhi and Karachi. We returned to Washington on May 24.

In summing up, I told the President that the main conclusion I had brought back from the trip was this:

"The fundamental decision required of the United States—and time is of the greatest importance—is whether we are to attempt to meet the challenge of Communist expansion now in Southeast Asia by a major effort in support of the forces of freedom in the area or throw in the towel. This decision must be made in a full realization of the very heavy and continuing costs involved in terms of money, of effort and of United States prestige. It must be made with the knowledge that at some point we may be faced with the further decision of whether we commit major United States forces to the area or cut our losses and withdraw should our other efforts fail. We must remain master of this decision. What we do in Southeast Asia should be part of a rational program to meet the threat we face in the region as a whole. It should include a clear-cut pattern of specific contributions to be expected by each partner according to his ability and resources. I recommend we proceed with a clear-cut and strong program of action."

President Kennedy shared this esti-

mate. He regarded our commitment to Southeast Asia as a serious expression of our nation's determination to resist aggression.

THE day before President Kennedy announced my trip to Southeast Asia he had a long talk with Senator Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. They discussed Southeast Asia and the possibility that our involvement there might require American forces. After the meeting, Fulbright told reporters about his talk with the President. The New York Times began its report of the Senator's comments as follows:

"Senator J. W. Fulbright strongly indicated tonight that the Kennedy Administration was considering the possibility of direct military intervention to counteract Communist threats in South Vietnam and Thailand.

"The Arkansas Democrat, who is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he would support the moves in South Vietnam and Thailand if they were considered necessary and if the nations concerned wished them."

The Kennedy-Fulbright discussion pointed up what everyone concerned with Southeast Asia in the Administration knew after President Eisenhower's talk with the President-elect just before inauguration—that keeping our word might mean spilling our blood.

During the summer and fall the situation continued on the downgrade in Vietnam.

President Kennedy realized that more had to be done if South Vietnam was to survive the onslaught. But before acting, he wanted to know several things: Was there real hope that South Vietnam could remain independent with American help? What forms of assistance would be most effective? He asked one of the United States' most distinguished soldiers, former Chief of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, to assemble a team of experts to go to Vietnam for a thorough look. The Taylor mission, composed of civilian and military specialists, was asked to study every aspect of the situation and then to recommend action—military, political, economic, intelligence and psychological—to help Vietnam resist the aggression that was slowly succeeding in the South.

Following this visit President Diem put into writing the request for additional assistance which he had made through the American Ambassador in Saigon.

The President had by that time studied carefully the Taylor report and its recommendations. He had consulted his principal advisers and had decided to adopt most of the proposals Taylor and his colleagues had suggested. This

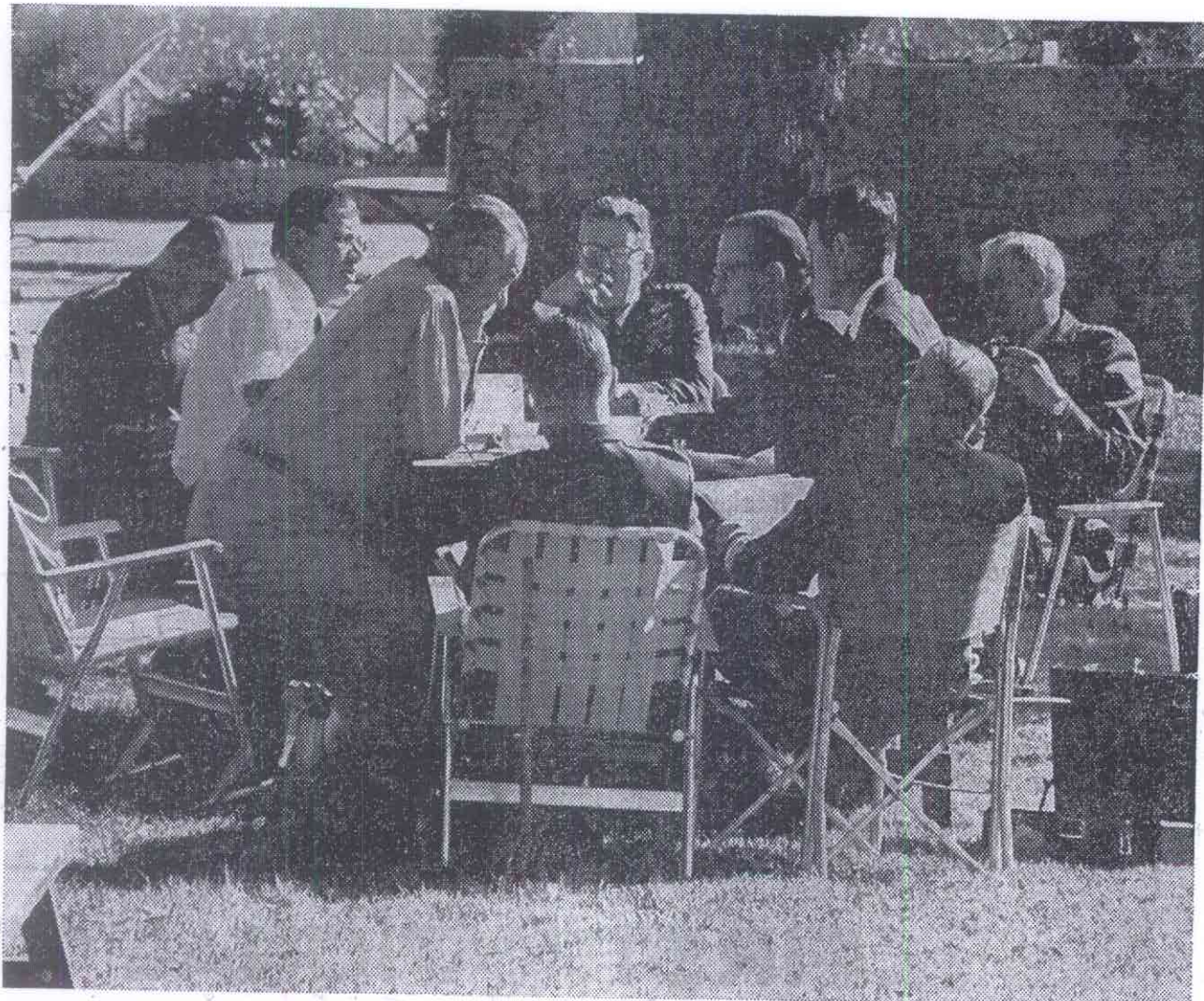
meant expanding the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group, assigning our men to work directly with Vietnamese combat units and increasing our support for the South Vietnamese Government and armed forces. The number of American military advisers serving with the Vietnamese was increased about 400 per cent, from about 700 late in 1961 to 3,400 by mid-1962. We sent planes and helicopters to give the Vietnamese Army greater mobility. We increased assistance to the Vietnamese Navy to enable it to protect the coast against infiltration from the North and to patrol the inland waterways used extensively by the Vietcong. A new command—the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—was formed, with Gen. Paul Harkins in charge, to direct all aspects of the expanding U.S. effort.

President Kennedy also decided to give the Diem Government additional specialists in administration and in such fields as agriculture, health, education, information and finance. This effort failed, however, to bring about urgently needed administrative reform at the top level of the Government in Saigon. I do not know whether such an effort could have succeeded, but I do know that it was not tried in any intensive or effective way, and we paid a heavy price for that failure later.

General Taylor and his group recommended sending to South Vietnam a military task force composed largely of combat engineers. General Taylor proposed that this force work with the Vietnamese initially to repair the effects of a devastating flood which had recently swept over many of the Mekong Delta provinces. Such a force would have provided an emergency reserve to back up the Vietnamese Army in case of a serious military crisis. Many of our officers feared that the Vietcong were preparing a major offensive in the Central Highlands. President Kennedy did not accept this proposal, nor did he reject it. He deferred action.

In his report to the President, General Taylor not only analyzed the existing situation in Vietnam and suggested what needed to be done about it but also looked ahead to what might come and told the President what he considered the most critical problem we faced. Taylor reported:

"... It is my judgment and that of my colleagues that the United States must decide how it will cope with Khrushchev's 'wars of liberation' which are really para-wars of guerrilla aggression. . . . It is clear to me that the time may come in our relations with Southeast Asia when we must declare our intention to attack the source of guerrilla aggression in North Vietnam and impose on the Hanoi Government a price for participating in the current war which is commensurate with the



Y. R. Okamoto

President Johnson and military advisers being told of Vietnam situation by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, who had just returned from Saigon. Mr. McNamara's appraisal was "gloomy indeed."

damage being inflicted on its neighbors to the South."

This warning from one of his most trusted military advisers had considerable impact on the President. Discussions at the time made it clear that President Kennedy did not consider the conflict in Vietnam as an internal matter or a civil war. Two months later, in his January, 1962, message to Congress on the State of the Union, President Kennedy said of Vietnam:

"The systematic aggression now bleeding that country is not a 'war of liberation'—for Vietnam is already free. It is a war of attempted subjugation—and it will be resisted."

By autumn of that year the tide of battle was moving in favor of the South. The influx of American military advisers and trainers, for both ground and air forces, was a great boost for the South Vietnamese. Helicopters and transports gave their armed forces a mobility they had never known, and they began to take the fight to the Vietcong. Though the turnaround was not 180 degrees, the trend was in the right direction. South Vietnamese military men and politicians, who had been sunk in gloom in 1961, began to realize that their country had a chance to survive.

The optimism did not last long, for several reasons. First, it quickly became obvious that the North Vietnamese had no intention of living up to the solemn promises they had made at Geneva on July 23, 1962, in the declaration on the neutrality of Laos.

There was another reason the modest successes of late 1962 were not enlarged and multiplied in 1963. This was internal disruption inside South Vietnam 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. Trouble had been brewing for some time, and it burst into the open in the ancient capital city of Hue on May 8, 1963. On that day 8,000 to 10,000 Buddhists marched in protest against a Government order banning parades and the display of Buddhist flags on Buddha's birthday. Army troops fired into the crowds, killing nine persons. The disorder soon spread to Saigon and other cities. A long, tense summer of protest had begun. A number of monks committed suicide, dying in flames on the streets. The Government responded by sending police and special-forces units into Buddhist pagodas

across the country, arresting Buddhist leaders. The protest spread to students in the universities, then the high schools. There were more arrests. A large number of those jailed were related to Government officials, army officers and businessmen. Bitterness against the regime, especially against Nhu, reached fever pitch.

Opinion was sharply divided in the U.S. Mission about the course we should pursue.

After the attacks on the Buddhist pagodas, a message prepared in the State Department was sent to Saigon on Aug. 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.

The coup against the South Vietnamese regime finally took place on Nov. 1, only 21 days before President Kennedy's death. Diem called Ambassador Lodge on the phone and our envoy offered assistance to assure the President's personal safety, but Diem did not respond. Diem and Nhu tried to locate military forces willing to come to their defense. They failed. The two brothers then escaped from the palace, but they were discovered hiding in a church in the Chinese sector of Saigon the next morning and were captured. They were killed in the rear of an armored personnel carrier en route to Vietnamese military headquarters.

AS I dug deeper into the Vietnam situation over the following weeks, I became convinced that the problem was considerably more serious than earlier reports had indicated.

I believe two things were wrong with the reporting in 1963: an excess of wishful thinking on the part of some official observers and too much uncritical reliance on Vietnamese statistics and information.

Secretary McNamara was preparing to go to Europe for a NATO meeting early in December. I asked him to return by way of Saigon. While in Vietnam, I wanted him to investigate all facets of the conflict and produce the most accurate estimate possible of the real situation. He agreed wholeheartedly. I think we all felt we had been misled into overoptimism.

The Defense Secretary spent Dec. 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."

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 Gen. Nguyen Khanh replaced the military junta that had overthrown Diem. More political turmoil followed. Six months later religious rivalries, which had been pushed into the background, broke out again. From then until well into 1965 governmental changes seemed to take place every few months. There was military rule, then civilian, then military again. First one man was in charge. Then there was a triumvirate. Then a council. General Khanh was in and out, then in again.

In March, 1964, I asked McNamara and Taylor to go to Vietnam once again for a firsthand assessment. I wanted a report on the situation in all its dimensions and requested recommendations on measures to improve the situation. They made the journey and reported to me on March 16 in my office, and the next day at a session of the National Security Council. They said that conditions had "unquestionably been growing worse."

McNamara listed a number of specific actions he believed we should take promptly. These included meeting a South Vietnamese request for assistance in increasing their armed forces by 50,000 men, raising both the quantity and quality of military supplies going to those forces and providing several forms of budgetary support to help the Vietnamese bear the costs of an expanding war.

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 N.S.C. 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. I approved the 12 actions on the McNamara list on March 7 and instructed the executive departments to carry them out, but rejected proposals to do more than that.

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 Vietcong. 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.

From the book "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969," by Lyndon Baines Johnson, to be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc. © 1971 HEC Public Affairs Foundation.

Tomorrow: The war on poverty
and the 1964 campaign