

Vietnam, Test of Presidents, Was

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WASHINGTON, April 30—It Franz Kafka's "The Trial," a priest sets out to explain the mysteries of life to a character called K. They discuss a parable of the law and disagree on its meaning.

News "No," says the priest, "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary."

Analysis "A melancholy conclusion," K responds. "It turns lying into a universal principle."

From Truman to Ford, six Presidents felt that they had to do and say what was necessary to prevent a Communist takeover of Vietnam. For all, perhaps with the exception of Mr. Ford, Indochina was their initiation into American foreign policy. While other threats to peace came and went, Vietnam was always there—a cockpit of confrontation, a testing place.

And there were always two battles going on for those 25 years: one out there and one back here.

There, it was the Promethean clash of colonialism, nationalism, Communism and Americanism. Here, it was the clash of imperatives not to "lose" a country to Communism and not to fight Asian land wars—how to walk the line between not winning and not getting out.

The battle would be endless in Vietnam until it finally was no longer viewed as necessary in Washington.

Memo to Truman

On the day after his inauguration, President Harry S. Truman received a memorandum from the State Department outlining the principal problems in the world.

The second item concerned France. It argued for restoring French morale even though the French have "put forward requests which are out of all proportion to their present strength and have in certain areas, notably in connection with Indochina, showed unreasonable suspicions of American aims and motives."

On Nov. 18, 1952, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower was briefed by the outgoing Secretary of State, Dean G. Acheson, on "only the most important problems." Mr. Acheson told the new President of the war weariness in France over fighting in her Indochinese colonies, of "the fence-sitting" by the people of Indochina, and of the fact that Washington was paying about half the cost of the war. He concluded, "This is an urgent matter upon which the new Administration must be prepared to act."

On Jan. 19, 1961, the day before the inauguration of John F. Kennedy, Mr. Eisenhower told the new President of "the deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia."

He said that Laos was the

Distant War and Battle at Home

THURSDAY, MAY 1, 1975

immediate problem, that it must be defended, and that "our unilateral intervention would be our last desperate hope in the event we were unable to prevail upon" allies to join.

On Nov. 23, the day after Mr. Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson listened to his new advisers and later wrote, "Only South Vietnam gave me real cause for concern." They offered very different estimates of the situation there, but all agreed on the need for continuity of policy.

President Richard M. Nixon had his Vietnam strategy worked out before he took office, but his first action on foreign affairs was to ask the bureaucracy for a detailed study of the prospects in Vietnam.

It will be some time before the memoirs and documents of President Ford emerge, but from what is known Vietnam quickly became his albatross as well.

The historical forces that set the Vietnamese civil war in motion started over a century ago, as European powers sought new territories and France claimed Indochina as her domain. World War II set loose many independence movements and, in Vietnam, the Communist laid claim to the mantle of nationalism. American Presidents pursued a course of diplomacy aimed at shaping the world in the image of American democracy, or at least, making sure that it was not shaped in the image of Communist idols.

There was only a brief time in the beginning when this American impulse was not paramount. During the years right after World War II President Truman walked a tightrope between the French, trying to reassert their hold on the Indochinese colonies, and the Vietnamese—a collection of Communists and nationalists—fighting for independence. Only after the Communist take-over in China did he clearly choose sides.

Essential to Security

In 1950, soon after Moscow and Peking recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh, Mr. Truman recognized the French-controlled state of Vietnam headed by Emperor Bao Dai. Then after the outbreak of the Korean war, he cast the American security net over Indochina.

The Presidentially approved National Security Council policy paper of June 25, 1952, said it all. It called Indochina "of great strategic importance in the general international interest rather than in the purely French interest, and as essential to the security of the free world, not only in the Far East but in the Middle East and Europe as well." The American object was "to prevent the countries of Southeast Asia from passing into the Communist orbit." This

thinking was not a secret, for President Truman had announced to the nation that the loss of Indochina "would mean the loss of freedom for millions of people, the loss of vital raw materials, the loss of points of critical strategic importance to the free world."

Five successive Administrations were to pay public and secret obeisance to this domino theory—including that of Mr. Ford. Five successive Presidents were to seek an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam.

This basic American commitment was set—in fact, although not in law—as early as 1950. Over the next two decades, American involvement would deepen in an effort to prevent a Communist take-over.

The question of whether American leaders would have started down this road had they foreseen the loss of more than 50,000 American lives and the expenditure of billions upon billions is historically irrelevant. The point is that each President was prepared to pay the immediate costs.

What drove them was a com-

bination of three factors: a strategic mode of thought that held that peace was indivisible; a domestic paranoia centered around a right-wing McCarthyite reaction, and, in time, a bureaucratic monster that wanted to prove and improve itself and do the job of stopping Communism.

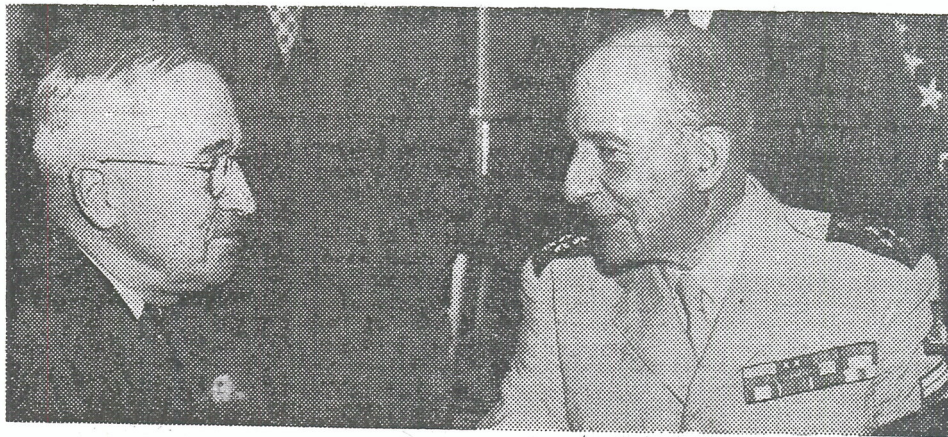
President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, fell into this pattern, although not completely. By 1954, the United States was providing almost \$3-billion in aid to the war effort in Indochina, or about 80 per cent of the total French cost. But Mr. Eisenhower faced his moment of truth in the spring of 1954, when French forces were surrounded by the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu. He knew that if the French garrison fell, the psychological shock would knock France out of the war.

Only American intervention could save the French. Mr. Dulles, Vice President Nixon and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Arthur W. Radford, said go. Other members of

the Joint Chiefs and a group of bipartisan Congressional leaders, including Senator Lyndon Johnson, said no — unless America's allies would help and Paris would grant true independence to Vietnam. President Eisenhower tried to meet these conditions and failed.

France then found a Premier — Pierre Mendès-France — who had the political courage to say "enough," and thus began the Geneva conference. The conferees — France, China, the Soviet Union, the Vietminh, and Bao Dai's representatives, and the United States as an observer — divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel, with the prospect of reunification within two years through free elections. Neither Washington nor, in time, the new Saigon strongman, Ngo Dinh Diem, agreed to these political terms. Saigon and Hanoi held opposing positions and a new war was about to begin.

From 1955 to 1961, President Eisenhower was to pour about \$200-million in military aid into Saigon annually, making



ABOVE: President Truman and Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, chief of French forces in Indochina, meeting in 1951.



RIGHT: President Eisenhower with Ngo Dinh Diem, President of South Vietnam, in 1957.

BELOW: President Kennedy and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a 1962 photograph.



South Vietnam the largest recipient of American arms after South Korea.

President Eisenhower left this legacy: He kept America out of war and put America into Vietnam. When President Kennedy took office, 685 American military men were in South Vietnam; when he died, 16,000 Americans were fighting a clandestine war there.

During President Kennedy's Thousand Days American television viewers witnessed self-immolations by Buddhists in protest against the Diem regime; the United States almost sent marines into Laos before a coalition government was established, and Indochina became steady front-page news, with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, pointer in hand, explaining the maps on television, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk never tiring of warning of the Chinese Communist menace.

It was the heyday of the Green Berets, for the young President saw them as praetorians against the new kind of Communist threat—guerrilla warfare. As President Kennedy privately warned of the hopelessness of a white man's war and kept calling it "their" war, he escalated American involvement and lent his public prestige to the cause.

Weeks before his assassination, he told a television audience: "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. I know people don't like Americans to be engaged in this kind of an effort. Forty-seven Americans have been killed in combat with the enemy, but this is a very important struggle."

Basic Patterns Emerge

It was during the Kennedy years that the basic patterns of the war were to emerge.

The Saigon Government and its military forces always were reported to be getting better, but they never got good enough. Something was wrong somewhere; something always was wrong. For military power without political cohesiveness and support proved to be an empty shell. The non-Communist groups could never unify and gain legitimacy.

Hanoi and its Vietcong allies in the South always were reported to be taking heavier and heavier losses, but they kept coming back. Something always went right for them. Their leadership remained unified, their nation and armed forces disciplined and organized, and it was they who held the banner of nationalism.

Victory would have been theirs on many occasions except for the pattern of increasing American involvement. Whenever Saigon was in immediate danger of losing, America would do more to redress the balance.

The upshot was a military stalemate. From time to time, negotiating efforts were begun. They got nowhere, under-

lining the fact that this was a civil war, a war that could not be ended by compromise, but only by force of arms. As each side tried for force, the other would match it, and death became a way of life in Vietnam.

Back in Washington, the credibility gap was emerging. As President Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, was later to put it, Mr. Kennedy "was not anxious to admit the existence of a real war." Later President Johnson was not eager to tell Americans that the "light at the end of the tunnel" was very far away, though he and his aides were well aware of it.

The basic policy problems that were to confront President Johnson were rooted in these patterns. They concerned how to build a Saigon Government able to stand on its own and how much American military power to use in the war.

President Johnson, like his predecessors, knew that the war could not be ended unless the Saigon Government reformed, so he made reforms a condition for further American aid. But, again like his predecessors, he violated his own condition. The problem was this: If the United States did not deliver first and the situation further deteriorated, reforms would become academic. The more Washington did, the less Saigon would be likely to do. The less Washington did, the more likely Saigon would be to lose. In this way, it became an American war, and American planes began the bombing of North Vietnam and American troop levels climbed to a peak of almost 550,000.

As President Johnson and his advisers later explained, they felt that if they used maximum force and tried to end the war by destroying North Vietnam, they would run the risk of igniting World War III.

A Middle Way Chosen

If they were to deal with Vietnam as President Truman handled China in 1949, and let it fall, they would run the risk of another round of McCarthyite attack.

Mr. Johnson chose the middle way, a policy of gradualism, similar to that used in Korea. He would hope to outlast the adversaries, to get them to stay on their side of the line. To avoid the nightmare of world war and McCarthyism, Mr. Johnson chose prolonged limited war.

The American public went along with this approach until the Communists launched their Lunar New Year offensive of early 1968. If Hanoi could launch such an offensive after so many years, more and more people thought, then America's Vietnam policy was a failure, and we had to get out. Thus began the agonizingly slow process of de-Americanizing the war. Under President Nixon and Henry A. Kissinger this policy—phasing out American forces slowly enough not to jeopardize

the battlefield situation but rapidly enough to assuage American political opinion—was labeled Vietnamization.

In January, 1973, after the war spilled over into Cambodia, and after Mr. Nixon ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor and the carpet-bombing of Hanoi, a peace accord was signed in Paris. The essence of this agreement was that all American forces were to be withdrawn in return for the release of American prisoners of war, and that Hanoi's forces could stay in the South.

The accords also called for a cease-fire leading to free elections in South Vietnam. Few expected this would happen, and to insure against future American military intervention, Congress legislated a ban on American military reinvolvement.

Little to Choose From

Over the years, given the goal of a non-Communist South Vietnam, the United States faced three historical dilemmas.

At first, American leaders realized that there was no chance of defeating the Vietminh unless France granted independence to Vietnam, but that if France granted independence, she would not remain and fight the war. So, the United States could not win with France and it would not win without her.

Then, American leaders recognized that Mr. Diem was losing popular support, but that at the same time he represented the only hope of future political stability. So the United States could not win with him and could not win without him.

Later, the leaders concluded that the Saigon regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu would not reform with more American aid and could not survive without American involvement, and that Hanoi's effort seemed able to survive despite American efforts. So again, the war could not be won with American might—but it could be lost without it.

When the last American soldiers left Vietnam, most analysts believed that it would be only a matter of time before the Saigon Government collapsed. That time came in the spring of 1975. The Ford Administration pulled out all stops to avoid the collapse, with warnings of bloodbaths and falling dominoes. As one senior Administration official privately put it, they tried to "feed the vegetable intravenously" with another dose of military aid. This time, entreaties to Congress were to no avail. The Saigon armed forces had lost the will to fight.

Vietnam now will know a kind of peace. What will happen in the United States—whether the nation will tear itself apart in assessing guilt or adjust with compassion and develop a new sense of purpose—is another matter.