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De Gaulle's Warning to Kennedy: An 'Endless Entanglement' in Vietnam

By CHARLES de GAULLE

The successor [to President Eisenhower] was John Kennedy. Chosen to get things done, but elected only by the skin of his teeth; placed at the head of a vast and wealthy country, but one with grave internal problems; by nature inclined to act swiftly and boldly, but hampered by the cumbersome machinery of Federal administration; entering upon the scene in a world in which American power and glory had spread far and wide, but whose every wound was suppurating and in which a hostile monolithic bloc stood opposed to America; enjoying the advantages of youth, but suffering the drawbacks of a novice—in spite of so many obstacles, the new President was determined to devote himself to the cause of freedom, justice and progress.

It is true that, persuaded that it was the duty of the United States and himself to redress wrongs, he was to be drawn into ill-advised interventions. But the experience of the statesman would no doubt have gradually restrained the impulsiveness of the idealist. John Kennedy had the ability, and had it not been for the crime which killed him, might have had the time to leave his mark on our age.

On May 31, 1961, he arrived in Paris brimming over with dynamism, he and his dazzling and cultivated wife forming a remarkably attractive couple. They were surrounded by an atmosphere of lively curiosity, and the welcome they were given by the public was enthusiastic in the extreme. The official receptions in the capital and at Versailles were of the greatest splendor. But the main thing, of course, was the series of meetings between the President, seconded by Dean Rusk and Gavin, and myself accompanied by Debré, Couve de Murville and Alphand.

From these it emerged that the attitude of the United States towards France had undergone a very decided change. The day was long past when—traditional friendship aside—Washington insisted on regarding Paris as just another of its protégés, to be dealt with, like everyone else, in the context of the various collective organizations: NATO, SEATO, U.N.O., O.C.C.D., I.M.F., etc. Now the Americans acknowledged our independence and dealt with us directly and specially.

But for all that, they could not conceive of their policy ceasing to be predominant or of ours diverging from it. Basically, what Kennedy offered me in every case was a share in his projects. What he heard from me in reply was that Paris was by all means dis-



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posed to collaborate closely with Washington, but that whatever France did she did of her own accord.

When the President reverted to the question of the Congo where, at the instigation of the United States, the U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, was setting up a government to replace that of Patrice Lumumba, I declined to have anything to do with the operation. But it was above all on the subject of Indochina that I pointed out to Kennedy how far apart our policies were. He made no secret of the fact that the United States was planning to intervene. In Siam, thanks to the virtually exclusive influence they exercised over

the Government of Marshal Sarit, they were setting up air bases. In Laos, whose neutrality was about to be reaffirmed at a conference in Geneva, they were nonetheless introducing their 'military advisers' in collusion with some of the local chiefs, in spite of the reservations of Prince Souvanna Phouma and the neutralist party. In South Vietnam, after having encouraged the seizure of dictatorial power by Ngo Dinh Diem and hastened the departure of the French advisers, they were beginning to install the first element of an expeditionary corps under cover of economic aid. John Kennedy gave me to understand that the American aim was to establish a bulwark against the Soviets in the Indochinese peninsula. But instead of giving him the approval he wanted, I told the President that he was taking the wrong road.

"You will find," I said to him, "that intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement. Once a nation has been aroused, no foreign power, however strong, can impose its will upon it. You will discover this for yourselves. For even if you find local leaders who in their own interests are prepared to obey you, the people will not agree to it, and indeed do not want you. The ideology which you invoke will make no difference. Indeed, in the eyes of the masses it will become identified with your will to power. That is why the more you become involved out there against Communism, the more the Communists will appear as the champions of national independence, and the more support they will receive, if only from despair.

"We French have had experience of it. You Americans wanted to take our place in Indochina. Now you want to take over where we left off and revive a war which we brought to an end. I predict that you will sink step by step into a bottomless military and political quagmire, however much you spend in men and money. What you, we and others ought to do for unhappy Asia is not to take over the running of these States ourselves, but to provide them with the means to escape from the misery and humiliation which, there as elsewhere, are the causes of totalitarian regimes. I tell you this in the name of the West."

Kennedy listened to me. But events were to prove that I had failed to convince him.

These are excerpts from the final volume of General de Gaulle's memoirs, "Memoirs of Hope, Renewal and Endeavor."