

The Roots of Our Vietnam Involvement

The late Nikita Khrushchev sized up the Vietnam War during a talk with U.S. Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson in July 1962. As Thompson later recounted the conversation in a secret cable, Khrushchev told him brusquely: "In South Vietnam, the United States has stumbled into a bog."

How did we happen to get mired for a decade in the Vietnam bog? Perhaps I can help answer this historic question. The two men who called the shots during this crucial period, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, discussed their decisions with me off the record. I have found my notes of these conversations.

In the early 1960s, the Pentagon tried to pressure President Kennedy to send combat troops to Vietnam. A combat force was needed, the Joint Chiefs urged, to defend U.S. facilities and to bolster the South Vietnamese.

Kennedy told me he had no intention of sending a military expedition to Vietnam. The Bay of Pigs had taught him, he said, not to trust the Pentagon's advice. Vietnam could become a Sea of Pigs, he feared, sucking the U.S. deeper and deeper into the maelstrom.

He was troubled, nevertheless, by the infiltration of North Vietnamese regulars into the south. He described this movement of troops and arms across international boundaries as "a new form of aggression."

But the way to fight a guerrilla war, he suggested, was with guerrilla tactics. He wanted to develop the best counter-insurgency force in the world

and send them to Vietnam to train the South Vietnamese in anti-guerrilla warfare, he said.

Kennedy rejected the Pentagon's call to send combat troops to Vietnam, but as a compromise, he sent over more military advisers and technicians.

He became increasingly skeptical, however, of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam jungles. Shortly before his death, he indicated to me that he wanted to pull all American military people out of Vietnam. He asked me what I thought the political repercussions would be.

In more positive language, he told Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield in mid-1963 that he had made up his mind to end the American presence in Vietnam. "He felt we had made an error. He was going to order a gradual withdrawal," Mansfield told me.

Lyndon Johnson was cautioned against escalating the Vietnam War. The most urgent warning came from Under Secretary of State George Ball.

"The South Vietnamese are losing the war to the Vietcong," he told the new President. "No one can assure you that we can beat the Vietcong or even force them to the conference table on our terms, no matter how many hundred thousand white, foreign troops we deploy..."

"The decision you face now, therefore, is crucial. Once large numbers of U.S. troops are committed to direct combat... we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involve-

ment will be so great that we cannot—without national humiliation—stop short of achieving our complete objectives."

"Of the two possibilities, I think humiliation would be more likely than the achievement of our objectives—even after we have paid the terrible price."

Tragically for the United States, Johnson preferred the advice of the military brass who assured him that a show of force would prevent a Communist takeover of Vietnam.

Johnson spoke to me about Vietnam on three or four occasions. Each time, he repeated two statements. "They're not going to say Lyndon Johnson lost Vietnam," he would declare. He would also interject: "Lyndon Johnson isn't going to be the first American President to lose a war."

The Republican charges in the 1950s that the Democrats had "lost China" clearly had left a deep impression upon Johnson. He was determined not to be the victim of another "soft on communism" campaign.

Thus the United States, the mightiest military power the world has ever known—supreme on the seas and invincible in the skies—was out-maneuvered in South Vietnam by ragtag guerrillas, most of whom were simple peasants.

Armed with crude weapons manufactured in makeshift jungle arsenals, they fought a war of improvisation. Some of their heaviest weapons were mortars that could be dismantled and carried in three parts. They

marched on sandals hacked from old truck and airplane tires, slept in hammocks made from the nylon of our parachutes. Wicks enclosed in the metal of used cartridges provided just enough light to tread jungle trails at night. And they could survive for days on packets of rice.

Although substantially surpassed in manpower and firepower, the Vietcong's crude style of warfare, not unlike that used by our own forefathers to wrest independence from the British, often confounded those who fought by the book.

Worse, the U.S. buildup played into the hands of the Communist propagandists who were able to portray the war as a struggle between the American "imperialists" and Vietnamese "people." Intensive anti-American indoctrination gave point and purpose to the Communist jungle fighters.

Of course, their real support came from North Vietnam, which smuggled troops and supplies over the network of jungle paths. This infiltration approached the dimensions of a backdoor invasion after the United States began pouring troops into South Vietnam.

The American people not only gave 56,226 lives to the South Vietnamese cause; they also poured an estimated \$150 billion into South Vietnam. In contrast, North Vietnam's allies furnished no troops and contributed less than \$10 billion to Hanoi.

But once the U.S. pulled out, the South Vietnamese surrendered without fighting a major battle.