

Up the Mekong Without a Paddle: An Analysis of American Military and Political Indecision in Vietnam, 1958-1965

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Introduction

American involvement in Vietnam did not, as some may believe, begin with President Lyndon Johnson's decision to deploy the United States military in a non-advisor role after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964. Rather, this was the culmination of nearly two decades of American policy beginning in the waning months of the Second World War. Regardless of why Johnson committed American troops to South Vietnam, the fact remains that in both military and political affairs, the overall policy of the United States remained indecisive throughout the war and especially during the period from 1958 to 1965.

Why this Period?

To give a bit of insight into why this era deserves examination, it is important to first understand the situation on the ground in South Vietnam during the period. Politically, the Republic of Vietnam was at the height of the repressive regime of US-backed dictator Ngo Dinh Diem whose crackdown on his peoples' freedoms and civil liberties went unpunished by his benefactors in Washington.¹ By 1958, American military advisors had been on the ground for three years, having taken over from their French counterparts in 1955 after the French defeat in the First Indochina War to North Vietnam the year prior, thus marking the end of French colonization in the region.² Additionally, 1958 marks the point at which violent revolutionaries within the Indochinese Communist Party fighting against the RVN became a force that the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) could not reliably or consistently contain.³ That said, 1958 was chosen as the

¹ The Republic of Vietnam will henceforth be referred to as either the RVN or South Vietnam with both terms being used interchangeably.

² Russell Hunt Fifield, *Americans in Southeast Asia: The Roots of Commitment* (New York: Cromwell, 1973), 260.

³ Fifield, *Americans in Southeast Asia*, 262.

starting point because of the marked increase in political and military tension within South Vietnam with violent Communist revolutionaries ravaging the countryside and Diem's regime cracking down on Buddhists, leftists, and non-Catholics as a whole. Two years after 1958, in late 1960, these Communist agitators would form the National Liberation Front, whose militant wing, the People's Liberation Army Front (PLAF) or Viet Cong, would continue this fight.

The end point of the period, 1965, deserves scrutiny because it marks the first full calendar year in which the United States committed ground troops in Vietnam after years of providing advisors, aircraft, and other means of military and humanitarian support to South Vietnam. While the first non-advisor troops had been sent in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, large-scale American military strategy started to take form in 1965. However, due to the political nature of the war, American political indecision will also be analyzed as well as its impact on military policy with regards to the conduct of the Vietnam War.

Limited Intervention

Historical Context: World War Two to Eisenhower (1940-1958)

American involvement and interests in Southeast Asia did not begin with the NLF's insurgency in the late 1950s. To offer a bit of context to American affairs in the region, one needs to travel back to the waning months of the Second World War. At the time, Southeast Asia was a French colony known as French Indochina and had been caught in a delicate political balancing act for nearly the duration of the war given its proximity to Imperial Japan.

Japanese aggression during World War Two was primarily driven by the desire for natural resources and with France's capitulation to the Nazis in mid-1940, Japan stepped up to fill the void left by Paris. By September 1940, Japan managed to secure territorial control, special resource rights, and military bases in French Indochina, leaving remaining French officials scrambling to contend with growing Japanese influence in their colony.⁴

⁴ David Krugler, (Lecture, History 3400, UW-Platteville, Platteville, WI, January 25, 2023).

As part of the deal made with France, Japan agreed not to invade Indochina, a provision that would be violated in March 1945 as the United States was knocking on its door in the Pacific. To give their new Indochinese puppet a veneer of legitimacy, a man named Bao Dai was installed as Emperor, though his power was largely ceremonial. As a result of the invasion, Communist rebels led by Ho Chi Minh (and supplied by American intelligence services) were, for the most part, able to push Japanese forces out of the northern portion of Vietnam by the conclusion of the war, with Ho Chi Minh setting up an independent Communist government in Hanoi at the very end of the war.⁵ Despite Minh's government only controlling the northern half of Vietnam, Communist elements in the south sought to bring the rest of the country under Minh's control, though such efforts in the 1940s and early 1950s would fail.

Understandably, the newly reinstated French government in Paris was unhappy with this development and after a period that saw the northern half of Vietnam occupied by China and the south by the United Kingdom, France quickly reasserted its claims over the whole of Indochina. The Hanoi regime, newly and functionally independent, successfully resisted France's attempt to restore national pride via armed conflict, fighting and winning the First Indochinese War from 1946 to 1954. In defeat, the French colonial hold over Southeast Asia effectively came to an end with Indochina being split into four nations: the Kingdom of Laos, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Vietnam (in the southern half of Vietnam), and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (in the northern half of Vietnam).

The United States, however, did not idly let one of its closest European allies suffer a long and humiliating defeat at the hands of Communist partisans. As the First Indochinese War progressed, the French economy, still recovering after World War Two, was unable to meet the growing financial burdens of so sudden a war. As a result, the First Indochinese War became increasingly subsidized by the United States with over 80% of the French war being paid for by American taxpayers by its midway point. The French also prosecuted the war with American materiel and pilots being used by French forces.⁶ As this demonstrates, several years before American military advisors were on the ground and a decade and a

⁵ Krugler, (Lecture, January 25, 2023).

⁶ Krugler, (Lecture, February 1, 2023).

half before combat troops were deployed, the United States had a vested interest in maintaining a friendly regime in some part of Vietnam, be it a French-dominated puppet or an independent state. For military involvement post-1954, American military advisors began taking over for their French counterparts one year after the Geneva Conference, continuing to train ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) in conventional warfare, the same doctrine that failed the French against the guerrilla tactics of the DRV.⁷

While it is certainly fair to question whether the failure of French forces in Indochina were in some part caused by the after effect of the Second World War, the main reason the French Republic fought so desperately to maintain their overseas empire was to restore their shattered sense of national pride. However, to have battle-hardened soldiers and commanders fail to adapt against a guerrilla-style opponent in a war that lasted eight years (1946-1954) in an attempt to restore pride to France demonstrates a continuation of the military inflexibility that allowed the Wehrmacht to defeat the French army in six weeks in 1940. To that end, it is fair to say that the French adherence to a doctrine of conventional warfare was a major failing in Indochina, due, in some part, to a desire to shake off the effects of the Second World War.

From an electoral standpoint, the policy of the United States was initially clear: install a friendly president at any cost. Conveniently, there just so happened to be a virulent anti-Communist politician who was willing to rule the new Republic of Vietnam with a star-spangled iron fist and that was Ngo Dinh Diem. In the election of 1955, Diem was given explicit permission from US officials to rig the vote in his favor in an election that was never truly intended to be democratic.⁸ This initial election kicked off what was perhaps the most consistent policy of the United States during its decades of involvement in Vietnam: the preservation of a non-Communist South Vietnam. While the South Vietnamese constitution under Diem was technically democratic, pro-Diem candidates managed to win 89 out of 123

⁷ Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York, NY: Van Rees Press, 1969), 67.

⁸ Howard R. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Public Policy Research, 1972), 21.

seats in parliament in subsequent elections in the late 1950s.⁹ Under the Eisenhower administration, United States political and military policies in Vietnam were, at the very least, consistent.

Indecision Under Eisenhower (1958-1961)

American policy during the late Eisenhower administration was indecisive yet consistent. When, late in his administration's tenure, the Diem regime's authoritarian repressions of non-Catholics gave rise to the National Liberation Front (NLF), Eisenhower initially remained steadfast in his attitudes toward Vietnam. At first, the NLF was a mostly peaceful group of political dissidents campaigning for free elections within the RVN. However, that quickly changed when, in 1959, Diem violently cracked down on South Vietnamese Communists.¹⁰ It is at this point that Eisenhower's commitment to Vietnam started to waver, in no small part due to his not wanting to support an increasingly oppressive dictatorship. While the majority of policymakers in both Washington and Saigon believed the NLF—and all leftists in South Vietnam for that matter—to be Hanoi stooges, it did nothing to change US military strategy in 1959 other than increase the number of military advisors already present, a trend that would continue throughout the next two administrations.¹¹

Politically, however, the last years of the Eisenhower administration featured shifts in geopolitical priorities. By 1960, Eisenhower wrongfully believed Diem to have a tight grip on the NLF insurgency and as such, Laos became a more important target for American foreign policy due to an uptick in Communist activity in the country and an active civil war that sought to overthrow an American-backed government.¹² Eisenhower's approach to Laos was far more hands-off than his approach in Vietnam, as no US troops ever set foot in the country during his administration. As for

⁹ Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 24.

¹⁰ George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1986), 110.

¹¹ Kahin, *Intervention*, 121; Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988), 293.

¹² Kahin, *Intervention*, 122.

Diem, his days in power were numbered due to his growing reliance on American money and complacency with his “handling” of the NLF. By the end of Eisenhower’s time in office, the NLF controlled large swaths of the Vietnamese countryside, even as Diem supposedly won a large part of the vote in those very same regions.¹³ Even more disastrous for Diem was the marked uptick in political assassinations carried out by the NLF from 1959 to 1961. As US support for the RVN regime waned, assassinations rose from 239 in 1959 to over 1,400 in 1961.¹⁴ This showed that a regime propped up by American aid could do little to defend itself against an enemy it did not want to be rid of.

Taking a More Active Role

The Kennedy Years (1961-1963)

The Kennedy administration’s position on Vietnam was similar to Eisenhower’s, though more cracks began to show in overall commitment to the Diem regime. By the time of Kennedy’s inauguration, so much territory had been lost to the NLF that the DRV had reversed an earlier decision to reign in the southern rebels and instead openly acknowledged their partisan comrades in late 1960.¹⁵ However, instead of giving Vietnam his full attention, Kennedy was more focused on dealing with a resurgent and belligerent Soviet Union, once again on its feet with Nikita Khrushchev at the helm and backing numerous Communist militant groups in Latin America and Africa. Despite this, Kennedy had political reasons to be involved in Vietnam, though there was clear indecision in his policymaking.

Not wanting to be seen as another Democratic president to lose a country to Communism after China fell during the Truman administration, Kennedy decided to drastically increase the amount of support given to ARVN despite a policy of “calculated escalation” so as not to provoke a response from the Soviet Union or the People’s Republic of China.¹⁶ This

¹³ Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 26. The 1961 election saw Diem win 88% of the nationwide vote.

¹⁴ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 294.

¹⁵ Kahin, *Intervention*, 114; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 284.

¹⁶ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 297; George McT. Kahin and John Wilson Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Dell, 1979), 127; Fifield, 256.

drastic change in course from simple monetary support and limited military advisors saw US manpower in Vietnam increase from 900 in 1961 to 11,326 in 1962 with crewed helicopters also being sent to support ARVN operations as well as material support, training, and intelligence for ARVN special forces operations.¹⁷

Politically, however, Kennedy did try (and fail) to do what Eisenhower could not: reign in Diem. Kennedy tried to force Diem to pass economic and social reforms as conditions of this latest aid package. Predictably, the Vietnamese autocrat scoffed at these reforms despite a rise in NLF terror attacks.¹⁸ This increased US aid did, however, see ARVN and US advisors make tangible progress in combating the NLF, so much so that Diem felt confident enough to defy Kennedy and launch an active anti-American media campaign designed to make him drop any pressures for reform.¹⁹

By this point in 1962, Diem's incompetence led to his downfall. While Kennedy had taken a novel military approach to combat the NLF in that he favored an actual counterinsurgency strategy instead of the conventional warfare favored by the French and US advisors on the ground. Diem only tacitly supported Kennedy's approach.²⁰ By 1963, however, it became apparent that Diem was squandering not only his financial aid, but his military aid as well, and the successes of 1962 had rather quickly faded back into the familiar defeats of the Eisenhower administration. A hands-on approach to RVN's government had clearly failed and Kennedy himself gave tacit support to a coup to overthrow Diem, a coup which would take place in the early days of November 1963 only two weeks before Kennedy himself was assassinated in Dallas.²¹

Kennedy's Indecision

¹⁷ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 300-301.

¹⁸ Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 137-140.

¹⁹ Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 137-140.

²⁰ Kahin, *Intervention*, 131-132.

²¹ Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 3.

It was readily apparent that President Kennedy's approach to Vietnam policy was ripe with indecision. Not only did he significantly increase U.S. presence in the country while treating it as a secondary policy concern, but he also supported the overthrow of a staunch US ally when his incompetence became apparent. There was no overreaching goal of Kennedy's Vietnam policy except that which had been standard since the First Indochinese War: to prevent Communism from taking hold in the south at any cost. Kennedy simultaneously treated South Vietnam like a client state with the sheer amount of military aid provided and a hostile power with his support of the November coup that ousted Diem and put a succession of ineffective generals into power. By all appearances, Kennedy did not know quite how to treat the issue of Vietnam other than a nail which needed the hammer of American military assistance, especially when faced with an adversary in Ho Chi Minh who would not accept anything less than a united Vietnam under Communist rule.

Johnson and Unlimited Intervention (1963-1965)

With Kennedy's murder in late 1963, the United States soon found itself operating from a position of weakness in the early weeks of the Johnson administration. However, with regards to Vietnam, there was one major holdover from Kennedy's administration that carried into Johnson's decision making: the lack of any comprehensive planning.²² In fact, it seemed as though most of Johnson's planning throughout the early months of 1964 were made by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara who greatly expanded the size and combat readiness of the army following the policy that the "...United States must be willing to stand and fight in Vietnam."²³ This policy had already been set up by Kennedy's rapid expansion of American advisors among ARVN in 1962 and increasing economic subsidization, and Americanization, of combat operations in Vietnam. Johnson, however, at first did not commit Kennedy's numbers of troops to support ARVN, instead following more limited interventionist policies by providing economic support and political legitimacy to which ever South

²² Hoopes, *Limits of Intervention*, 1.

²³ Hoopes, *Limits of Intervention*, 19.

Vietnamese general held power.²⁴ In 1964, ARVN received over \$357 million meant for the aid of 43 countries and that amount doubled in 1965.²⁵

By mid-1964, however, Johnson started gunning for a fight with DRV forces, eventually inciting the Tonkin Gulf Incident in August of that year. As a result of the perceived attack on American naval forces, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on August 7, 1964, which "...[approved] and [supported] the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."²⁶ Johnson now had a blank check to do whatever he felt necessary in Vietnam. One of Johnson's first actions was to increase American manpower in Vietnam. This was primarily done at the behest of Secretary of State Walt Rostow, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and MACV commander General William Westmoreland.

However, there was not a clear understanding of how to fight the war in which the Johnson administration found itself. As part of a bulletin released by the State Department on February 27, 1965, on DRV aggression, the Johnson administration asserted that "The war in Vietnam is a new kind of war,"²⁷ despite the fact that the guerrilla war being waged by the NLF (and also the Viet Cong) had been waged against Japanese, French, and RVN forces for nearly two consecutive decades. In a memo sent to Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton at the end of 1965, future Undersecretary of the Air Force Townsend Hoopes asserted that "The best we [the United States] could hope to gain [from increasing manpower] would be a further stalemate at a higher level of effort, human sacrifice and risk."²⁸ Here, Hoopes called out one of

²⁴ Hoopes, *Limits of Intervention*, 31.

²⁵ Hoopes, *Limits of Intervention*, 38.

²⁶ Tonkin Gulf Resolution, 88th Congress, August 7, 1964.

²⁷ Department of State Bulletin, March 22, 1965, Vol. 52, No. 1343 (1965).
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/usstatedept-vietnamfeb1965.asp>.

²⁸ Townsend Hoopes, Memo to Sec. of Defense John McNaughton, December 30, 1965, in Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, 44-48.

the major flaws of Johnson's policy of Americanization: the fundamental misunderstanding of the war.

As has been shown, President Johnson was incredibly indecisive on all but one issue related to Vietnam. That one issue was the decision to go to war. Otherwise, Johnson was constantly agonizing over whether to escalate further and, like Kennedy and Eisenhower, run the risk of Soviet and Chinese intervention or continue to play it safe and allow American servicemen to fight and die for unclear reasons halfway around the globe. Johnson could not decide whether to do what was necessary to enact real change in the war or save face globally by making no significant progress at great cost of life to both soldiers and civilians. Unlike his predecessors, President Johnson was clearly uncomfortable with foreign policy, though this led him being able to make one clear decision regarding Vietnam: the decision to go to war.²⁹

Conclusion

Ultimately, the administrations of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson were indecisive. Eisenhower was content to funnel money and guns along with a token force of American advisors to a corrupt regime led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy, however, began rapidly escalating the amount of aid given, expanding the advisory mission from 900 soldiers to over 11,000, sending helicopters with crews, and increasing economic aid to Diem. Despite this, Kennedy also approved the overthrow of Diem in late 1963, showing that Kennedy really was not overly certain of how to handle RVN's situation other than to throw money and manpower at it.

Johnson, meanwhile, was perhaps the only one of the three to make a clear decision in actively seeking to provoke a war after initially following Eisenhower's policy of economic welfare and political legitimacy, ultimately provoking an incident in August of 1964 and sending American soldiers to fight a war with tactics that had failed three successive armies since the ending months of the Second World War.

In short, the indecision with which Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson handled Vietnam led to a war that would involve U.S. combat troops for nearly twenty years (1955-1973) and American taxpayer money for thirty (1945-1975). By the end of 1965, the United States was so firmly

²⁹ Hoopes, *Limits of Intervention*, 7-8.

entrenched in its support of RVN that it was truly stuck up the Mekong River without a paddle to guide it back to sanity.