

FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE VIETNAM WAR:  
THE ATTEMPTED MODERNIZATION OF  
SOUTH VIETNAM

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## Introduction

The United States became deeply involved in Vietnam during the 1960s largely due to America's desire to assure that developing countries modernize as capitalist and democratic. Thus, American involvement began with economic and social support in South Vietnam. Yet slowly, throughout the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, the goal of modernizing South Vietnamese society and containing communism became increasingly implemented by military means. Further, it seems clear that, regardless of how much effort the United States geared towards Vietnam, American defeat was inevitable. By Richard Nixon's presidency, the initial modernization goals in Vietnam mattered only in so far as they could preserve American credibility. Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon all failed to realize that while U.S. time was limited in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese had all the time they needed to fight for the independence of their country. The South Vietnamese forces could not defend themselves and the United States had to withdraw eventually.

President Eisenhower and Kennedy both aimed to demonstrate to the world that a western, capitalist path towards development was better than an eastern, communist path. From the late 1950s to mid-1960s, the U.S. poured economic support into South Vietnam and attempted to develop the South's economy, education system, and infrastructure. Eisenhower sent many South Vietnamese to Michigan State to learn about capitalism, freedom, and democracy. Kennedy implemented a Strategic Hamlet program in South Vietnam that was meant to improve the economy. Yet, Johnson's programs were increasingly accompanied by military support in Vietnam. He used the U.S. military to train the South Vietnamese forces and assist them in the effort to contain communism.

Johnson believed that if he could contain communism in North Vietnam, then he could assure that South Vietnam modernized as a capitalist and democratic state, rather than a communist one. Suddenly, modernization became a strictly militarily implemented policy in Vietnam.

While Johnson also tried to improve South Vietnam's economy through strategic hamlets at the beginning of his presidency, he dramatically escalated military involvement in 1965. Soon enough, it was only through military means that the United States tried to modernize Vietnam to show the dominance of capitalism. Conversely, by the time Nixon was elected in 1968, modernization only mattered to sustaining U.S. credibility in the world. It seemed that keeping South Vietnam a capitalist, democratic state for the sake of proving that capitalism was superior to communism was no longer an issue. Instead, South Vietnam's modernization might have only mattered to show that American could finish what they started. Nixon wanted to appease the American people by withdrawing troops from Vietnam and do this honorably by avoiding the abandonment of the South Vietnamese. He created a policy called Vietnamization to achieve these goals. This policy aimed to build up the South Vietnamese forces so that they could defend themselves against communist aggressors. Nixon figured if the South could defend itself, he could withdraw troops without completely abandoning Thieu. Plus, there would still be a good chance that communism would stay contained in the North, allowing the South to develop capitalistically. However, Nixon was naïve in his predictions because the South Vietnamese forces were weak and the North Vietnamese had time on their side.

Instead of achieving “peace with honor” in Vietnam as he hoped, Nixon settled on a “decent interval” strategy. That is, he withdrew from Vietnam with the hopes that he strengthened the South’s army just enough so that they could defend themselves for a decent interval of time before communist forces took over the South. This way, Nixon could claim that the fall of South Vietnam to communism was not due to a shortcoming of the United States but rather, the inability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves.

It seems that the economic and social modernization of South Vietnam that gravely concerned Eisenhower and Kennedy might have mattered to Nixon only for the purpose of preserving American credibility. Paradoxically, the desire to modernize South Vietnam as a capitalist and democratic state to show the dominance of capitalism only plunged the United States military more deeply into Vietnam; yet, by the time America wanted out of the war, modernization mattered very little. Further, the North Vietnamese had all the time in the world to fight for the independence of their country. The United States would eventually have to withdraw and the South Vietnamese could never be strong enough to fight against the communist forces alone.

## Chapter 1: The Beginning of Modernization Politics

During the years after the end of World War II, a bipolar construct of world economies and ideologies began to emerge. On one side were members of the communist Eastern Bloc, which included the Soviet Union and its allied countries in central and Eastern Europe. On the other was the Western or capitalist bloc, consisting of countries that were allied with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In a period referred to as the Cold War, these opposing blocs tried to establish dominance over one another and influence the rest of the world. The two blocs competed for the best technology and held different views about how developing countries should modernize their economies. The United States sought to spread the American version of modernization, comprised of capitalism and democracy, to developing nations. The Soviet Union and China, on the other hand, sought to modernize countries by spreading communism to the developing world, to move away from economic competition towards theoretical economic equality.<sup>1</sup>

The developing world consisted mostly of countries that had gained independence from European imperialism during the mid-twentieth century. Several theories of development emerged during this period. The first was Modernization Theory, developed by economist Walt Whitman Rostow and sociologists Neil Smelser and James Coleman.<sup>2</sup> Modernization theorists argued that every developing country followed the

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<sup>1</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Companies, 2002), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Rostow concentrated on the economic modernization of developing countries. Smelser took a sociological approach to modernization (see Neil Smelser, *Toward a Theory of Modernization, Tribal and Peasant Economies : Readings in Economic Anthropology*, 1967.) Coleman took a political approach to

same linear path to full democratic, capitalist growth and potential. This process could be sped up by exposure to already fully developed countries. Rostow argued that the economic growth and modernization of developing countries happened in five different stages. During the first stage, “The Traditional Society”, a country was limited in its economic growth and functioned within the realm of pre-Newtonian science and technology. The second stage, “The Preconditions for Take-Off,” described countries that accepted new, western scientific developments and aimed towards economic progress. The third stage of growth, “The Take-Off” indicated that a country had abandoned its old patterns of slower progress and instead, embraced rapid expansion and economic growth. Rostow argued that a country was in the fourth stage, “The Drive to Maturity” when that country invested ten to twenty percent of its national income towards modern technology and programs that will expand the economy. During this stage, new industries accelerated and the country developed international economic relations. Last, Rostow called the fifth stage of growth “The Age of High-Mass Consumption,” in which a country becomes completely modernized. Once a country reaches this stage, it experiences two things: first, a large number of people gain access to consumption that translates to basic food, shelter, and clothing and second, “the structure of the working force changed in ways which increased not only the proportion of urban to total population, but also the proportion of the population working in offices or in skilled

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modernization (see James Coleman, *Education and Political Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965.)

factory jobs.”<sup>3</sup> Rostow argued that every modernizing country followed this same linear path, and exposure to already developed countries would speed up the process.<sup>4</sup>

Another economic development theory, dependency school theory, argued that countries did not develop in the same way but rather, each state contained its own unique traits and practices and thus developed in different ways. The dependency school originated in Latin America in the early 1960s with the bankruptcy of the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) program. Many populist regimes had previously hoped that the ECLA developmental strategy (which was, in fact, similar in some ways to the American modernization school) would lead to economic expansion. However, throughout the 1960s, Latin America experienced grave unemployment and currency devaluation, which made many question the American modernization school theory of development.<sup>5</sup>

The dependency school quickly spread to scholars in the United States.

Sociologist Alvin So argues that the new theory “resonated with the sentiments of a new generation of young radical researchers who came of age during the campus revolts,

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<sup>3</sup> W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 10.

<sup>4</sup> W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 1-16. Rostow derived his theories from sociologists and political scientists who introduced modernization theory as a historical process. Ferdinand Toennies discussed the modernization of social systems and his views were later modified and expanded by Talcott Parsons (see Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, (Englewood Cliffs, 1966). Howard Becker offered a theory about the conversion in developing societies from tradition and ritual to happiness and efficiency (see Howard Becker, *Through Values to Social Interpretation*, (Durham, N.C., 1950). Other early advocates of modernization theory include S.N. Eisenstadt, *Modernization: Protest and Change*, (Englewood Cliffs, 1966) and Marion Levy, *Modernization and the Structure of Politics: A Setting for International Affairs*, (Princeton, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, a critique of the dependency school emerged called the world-system school. For the purpose of my paper, however, I will only discuss the most relevant theories, modernization and dependency. For more information on the world-system school, see Alvin So, *Social Change and Development: Modernization, Dependency, and World-System Theories*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990).



antiwar protests, women's liberation activities, and ghetto rebellions of that time.”<sup>6</sup> The dependency school criticized how modernization theorists assumed that there was something wrong inside third world countries, which is why they were underdeveloped and needed to follow the Western path towards economic growth. However, unlike “modernized countries,” third world countries had experienced colonialism and thus might not take the same path as countries that did not experience imperialist rule.

Dependency school theorists also argued that the relationship between two or more countries “assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant ones) can expand and can be self-starting, while other countries (the dependent ones) can do this only as a reflection of that expansion.”<sup>7</sup> This interpretation of international relationships could eventually be directly applied to the relationship between Vietnam and the United States.

Even though dependency theory would eventually apply to U.S.-Vietnam relations, modernization school theory was more popular among politicians at the beginning of the war. In fact, there is a discussion amongst scholars about how the philosophies of modernization school theory served as a primary reason for our initial involvement in Vietnam. Alvin So attributes the rise of the modernization school in American politics to the global situation after World War II. The United States emerged from the war as a world leader and aimed to reconstruct Europe with the Marshall Plan. So argues that it became a U.S. task to manage world affairs. Many European colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America gained independence and needed a model of

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<sup>6</sup> Alvin So, *Social Change and Development*, 91-92.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in So, *Social Change and Development*, 98. Quote comes from Theotonio Dos Santos, *The Structure of Dependence*, 1971, 225-236 in K.T. Kan and Donald C. Hodges (eds.) *Readings in the U.S. Imperialism*, Boston: Extending Horizons.

development to promote their economy and political independence. With the threat of the communist movement, So asserts that “American political elites encouraged their social scientists to study the Third World nation-states, to promote economic development and political stability in the Third World, so as to avoid losing the new states to the Soviet communist bloc.”<sup>8</sup> These Third World nation-states included Vietnam, since Vietnam gained their independence from France in 1954.

Historian Howard Jones also argues that the rising postwar nations and the rivalry between east and west led to a foreign policy that involved containment of communism and capitalist development around the world. He claims that Eisenhower’s foreign policy “sought to achieve order in the world through economic and military measures.”<sup>9</sup>

Historian Michael Latham makes similar assertions about how “modernization would prove an effective response to an aggressive and opportunistic adversary in a decolonizing world.”<sup>10</sup> Latham goes in depth about how Kennedy made foreign policy decisions in Vietnam that were prompted by philosophies consistent with the American modernization school.<sup>11</sup> Orrin Schwab does something similar, referring to modernization as “developmental policies” and “defending the free world.” Like Latham, Schwab has

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<sup>8</sup> So, *Social Change and Development*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Jones, *Crucible of Power: A History of American Foreign Relations from 1897*, ed. 2, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008), 303-305.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Latham discusses the modernization school specifically pertaining to issues in Vietnam in Latham, *Modernization of Ideology*, Chapter 5: Modernization at War- Counterinsurgency and the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, beginning on page 51.

much to say about Kennedy's decisions, but also applies the idea of foreign development as a means of policy decisions to Johnson's administration up until the Gulf of Tonkin.<sup>12</sup>

In the historical timeline, scholars tend to stop discussing modernization theory and development in relation to U.S. involvement in Vietnam once they get to the middle of Johnson's presidency, when U.S. military involvement significantly increased. Thus, the literature about this period makes a jump from economic and developmental reasons for involvement to military reasons. This is most likely due to the fact that by this point, the Vietnam War had changed. Proving that capitalism was a dominant ideology to communism mattered much less by the mid-1960s than it mattered in the post-WWII years and at the beginning of the Vietnam War. While it seems that none of these historians take the time to explicitly point out this pattern, it is evident through their discussions of American involvement in the war.

Yet this does demonstrate that during the mid-1950s when the United States became more involved in the issues surrounding Vietnam, the modernization school heavily influenced the Eisenhower administration policies. In May 1954, the Vietnamese defeated the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, thus ending the French's imperialistic rule in Vietnam and the first Indochina War. In the following months, the Soviet Union, United States, United Kingdom, and the People's Republic of China joined in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss the unification of North and South Vietnam and the prospect for peace in Southeast Asia. The resulting document, the Geneva Accords, stated that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) led by Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam would be

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<sup>12</sup> Orrin Schwab, *Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War, 1961-1965*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

recognized as a legitimate government and temporarily separated from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) of the North at the seventeenth parallel. No military or economic assistance would be provided from an outside party such as the U.S. or China. The two zones would be politically unified in 1956 by free and democratic elections. However, as stated by Canadian diplomat John Holmes, the Geneva Accords were essentially a “nasty bargain accepted by all parties as the only way to avoid a dangerous confrontation.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, since the agreements were unappealing to all involved, it was no surprise when the unification of Vietnam did not happen. Rather, the 1956 elections only took place in the South, and the DRV led by communist Ho Chi Minh refused to recognize the Southern, democratic regime as legitimate.<sup>14</sup>

Eisenhower’s administration recognized that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the communist insurgency in the South, the National Liberation Front were, together, a powerful force. In fact, it was clear that they could defeat the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and take over the RVN to create a unified, communist state of Vietnam. Of course, in the bipolar context of the Cold War, Eisenhower’s administration felt threatened by the prospect of this happening. The United States represented a “free” society comprised of capitalism and democracy. Eisenhower placed urgency on protecting other free, democratic nations around the world from communist aggression. Thus, the United States administration sought to “protect” South Vietnam and prove democratic capitalism to be the more powerful ideology. On April 7, 1954, when asked about the importance of Indochina to the free world, Eisenhower replied, “With respect to

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Companies, 2002), 49.

<sup>14</sup> George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 49.

more people passing under this domination, Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its peoples to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses...the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world."<sup>15</sup>

The U.S. became determined to achieve one predominant goal in Southeast Asia: to assure that Vietnam developed as a capitalist, democratic state.

Several months later in September 1954, the United States formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) with France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan. SEATO held the primary goal of containing communism and repelling communist aggression. Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos could not join SEATO because of the Geneva Accords which stated that they may not receive assistance from outside parties. However, with the introduction of communist aggression from North Vietnam shortly after SEATO formed, these countries soon became territory under SEATO's protection. This gave Eisenhower and his administration legal rationale for continued involvement in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> It allowed The United States to help build South Vietnam's economy and guide Diem towards western economic development.

From the mid-1950s to early 1960s, the nation building of South Vietnam became one of America's top priorities. The U.S. contributed more than one billion dollars towards building South Vietnam's economy and military. More than 1,500 Americans were placed on South Vietnamese soil to work with the government and train Vietnamese forces. This nation building marked the beginning of developmental policies

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<sup>15</sup> Robert McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, "Eisenhower Explains the Domino Theory, 1954," (New York, Houghton Mifflin Company: 2008), 84-85.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *South Asia Treaty Organization (Seato), 1954*, Bureau of Public Affairs, accessed 20 January, 2014, <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato>

implemented in Vietnam, which would soon include the improvement of South Vietnamese education and society in general.<sup>17</sup>

To improve education in South Vietnam, Eisenhower worked with Michigan State University. Public administration specialists from the college taught Vietnamese civil servants a wide range of useful skills. Police officers from Vietnam trained at MSU's school of law enforcement.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, these efforts failed once the Vietnamese returned home. The students, having become very well adapted to democracy in America, were placed back in Vietnam where South Vietnamese Diem's so-called "democracy" demonstrated nothing more than a patron-client dictatorship.

Still, by attempting to build up South Vietnam's economy, military, government, and education, Eisenhower essentially worked towards one goal: the capitalist and democratic modernization of South Vietnam. This nation building sought to improve the lives of the South Vietnamese by adopting an American, Western bloc model of life. In less than a decade, though, the effort to modernize Vietnam's society as a whole would turn into a widespread military effort to contain communism in the North; involving hundreds of thousands of Americans and causing chaos within the United States.

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<sup>17</sup> George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 68-78.

<sup>18</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 73.

## Chapter 2: Modernization in the Kennedy Era

Throughout Kennedy's presidency, the modernization of Vietnam became increasingly enforced through policies that involved an expanded U.S. military effort. The U.S. wanted to contain communist aggression to ensure that South Vietnam modernized as a capitalist, democratic state. But the South Vietnamese forces had trouble defending themselves against the communist North and National Liberation Front and Kennedy worried that, if the North successfully took over the South, the South would become communist and develop a non-competitive economic system. To avoid this outcome and assist the South Vietnamese forces, Kennedy implemented modernization policies in South Vietnam that involved the escalation of U.S. ground troops in Southeast Asia. This U.S. military effort began to replace his concentration on economic development in South Vietnam. Unfortunately, these military policies proved exceedingly difficult to implement and failed to improve the situation in South Vietnam before Kennedy's death in 1963. However, his initial expansion of U.S. troop involvement had a large effect on continued American efforts in Vietnam and would subsequently encourage President Johnson to continue to use the military to prevent a communist victory.

Kennedy thought that the containment of communism was crucial and he was influenced by Rostow's ideas about economic development as a way to achieve this goal. This was demonstrated through his application of counterinsurgency programs all over the globe at in the early 1960s. At the time, Rostow was the deputy director of the National Security Council. Kennedy's CI system was meant to establish institutional and cultural connections between third world societies and the United States. Kennedy's

desire to expose developing countries to the United States went hand and hand with Rostow's belief that exposure to an already modernized country could speed up the modernization process for developing countries. By the end of Kennedy's presidency, almost every developing country outside of the Soviet bloc had an American team inside the U.S. embassy to steer that country away from communism and towards capitalist development. The members of the CI program underwent training so that they could assist the governments of developing countries and sustain the regimes that aligned themselves with the Western bloc during the Cold War. This included political and economic support—but also military means to modernize any given country.<sup>19</sup>

It was clear that Kennedy feared the spread of communism, and he publicly warned Americans of communist leaders who sought to spread their oppressive regimes to developing countries all over the world. He cautioned that America needed to defend free countries, or else men like Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro would influence countries in Africa and Asia. In a speech on September 15, 1960 in Paterson, New Jersey, Kennedy stated,

The last few years have seen a steady increase in the power and prestige of the Communist world. I think it is time we reverse it. We may be able next week to confine Mr. Khrushchev to the island of Manhattan, and Mr. Castro to the island of Manhattan, but we have not confined Mr. Khrushchev in Africa, and we have not confined Mr. Castro in Latin America. I think it is time that this country started to move again.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Orrin Schwab, *Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War 1961-1965*, (Westport, Connecticut: Prager Publishers, 1998), 8-9.

<sup>20</sup> John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "John F. Kennedy," The American Presidency Project, accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=74035>.



He argued that if the United States failed to defend free institutions, the entire world would begin to move towards the Communist bloc.<sup>21</sup> If just one country in Southeast Asia such as Vietnam fell to communism, other surrounding countries would fall as well. Scholar Michael Latham argues that this theory, called the Domino Theory, showed how communism posed a psychological threat to the United States. By 1961, the world viewed the United States as the back bone of South Vietnam's democracy. If South Vietnam fell to communism and other countries followed, Kennedy and his administration believed that this would challenge the validity of United States freedom and democracy.<sup>22</sup>

To make matters worse, in June 1961, Khrushchev asserted the Soviet Union would commit itself to countries participating in wars of liberation for independence. Not only did Khrushchev's remarks encourage the NLF's uprising, but they also suggested that the Soviets would assist similar uprisings around the world. This threatened Kennedy's administration because it would be more difficult to defend "free nations" if newly independent countries looked to the Communist bloc for support.<sup>23</sup> In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, many countries that aimed to gain independence from British colonization looked to the Eastern bloc for weapons as well as economic support. Colonies under the imperialistic rule of Western bloc members had a shared enemy with

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<sup>21</sup> George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, (New York: McGraw Hill Companies, 2002), 89.

<sup>22</sup> Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 163.

<sup>23</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 95.

the Eastern bloc and this is one reason why many developing countries ultimately ended up communist rather than capitalist.<sup>24</sup>

At the beginning of 1961, the military and political situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating rapidly. In an assessment by the U.S. embassy in Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam, the Country Team Staff Committee reported increasing activity of the NLF including guerilla warfare and propaganda. The committee stated that the NLF hoped to gain all control of the countryside, including the Mekong Delta and other “liberated zones.” The South Vietnamese forces at the Mekong Delta became particularly vulnerable to attack because of a flood that occurred throughout the next several months. The overall morale, performance, and organization of the South Vietnamese Army under Ngo Dinh Diem suffered as well. Diem ran a corrupt regime, committing nepotism in several cases and failing to show any serious commitment to the Vietnamese people in the countryside. With the help of the NLF, the communist North appeared to be winning the war, which prompted the United States to take action.<sup>25</sup>

By the summer of 1961, Kennedy and his administration’s commitment to containing communism put the struggle in Vietnam at the top of foreign policy agenda. As Michael Latham argues, “A small Southeast Asian country thousands of miles across the Pacific, Vietnam eventually acquired immense, unparalleled significance for the United States. By the early 1960s, it became the point around which vast quantities of American energy, resources, and lives would revolve.” President Kennedy sent Walt Whitman Rostow and Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam in order to assess the situation and

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<sup>24</sup> Notes from the course, “History of Contemporary Africa,” taught by Peter Mendy, Feb. 18, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Paper Prepared by the Country Team Staff Committee, January 4, 1961, Saigon, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, 1:1*.

make suggestions about future U.S. commitment. They reported back to Kennedy on the South's deteriorating situation and in a telegram on October 25, Taylor suggested that the U.S. send 6,000 to 8,000 troops to South Vietnam.<sup>26</sup>

To avoid any backlash for widening U.S. commitment in Vietnam, Taylor suggested that the Mekong Delta flood might be a plausible reason for the deployment of troops. He argued that "it gives a specific humanitarian task as the prime reason for the coming of our troops and avoids any suggestion that we are taking over responsibility for the security of the country."<sup>27</sup> At the end of the same telegram, Taylor noted that combined with "other actions", the additional troops would show that "a more effective working relationship in the common cause has been established between the GVN and the U.S."<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, Taylor aimed to use flood relief as a reason to militarily assist the South Vietnamese in the "common cause" of containing communism.

Senator Mike Mansfield severely critiqued Taylor's suggestions. Rather than playing along with the humanitarian jargon, Mansfield cut to the chase: "I would wholeheartedly favor, if necessary and feasible, a substantial increase of American military and economic aid to Viet Nam, but leave the responsibility of carrying the physical burden of meeting communist infiltration, subversion, and attack on the shoulders of the South Vietnamese, whose country it is and whose future is their chief responsibility."<sup>29</sup> While Mansfield demonstrated total opposition to military assistance in South Vietnam in order to contain communism, he quickly suggested other

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<sup>26</sup> Telegram for the President's Military Representative (Taylor) to the Department of States, October 25, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, 1:191.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum From Senator Mansfield to the President, November 2, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, 1:207.

modernization policies at a political and economic level. In the same memorandum, Mansfield recommended that the U.S. commit to vast economic development which “bears a Vietnamese hallmark and our name in small print no matter how much we may contribute to it.”<sup>30</sup> He also argued that the U.S. should rapidly introduce democratic practices at the village and provincial level.

In a memorandum on November 5, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara suggested a much more robust military commitment to South Vietnam. He argued that the administration needed to use the U.S. Army to contain communism in Southeast Asia; and a ground force of 6-8,000 troops would not achieve that goal. It would surely help Diem’s regime but that amount of men would “not convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow, Peiping, or Hanoi) that we mean business.”<sup>31</sup> Rather, McNamara argued that the 6-8,000 troops should be an initial force, followed by others over time. He estimated that to assure the independence of the GVN (and thus, assure that GVN modernizes as a capitalist, democratic state), the amount of U.S. forces committed to South Vietnam “will not exceed (6-8) divisions, or about (220,000) men” and that “our military posture is, or can be made, adequate to furnish these forces.”<sup>32</sup> McGeorge Bundy agreed with McNamara’s suggestions. Bundy argued that a force of 6-8,000 might not work out because 1. Diem might fail to improve his performance despite the help or 2. Moscow might rush to Hanoi’s side as a response to the addition of U.S. ground troops. Since this amount of men might not help Diem anyways, Bundy argued

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Draft Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, November 5, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 1:214.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

that a more robust commitment to South Vietnam from the start would be a smarter decision.<sup>33</sup>

The Taylor-Rostow Mission prompted the first proposals of U.S. military involvement as a means to contain communist aggression from North Vietnam. In repelling communist aggression, the U.S. could ensure that South Vietnam remained a capitalist, democratic state in the modernization process. On November 22, as a response to the pessimistic Taylor Report, McGeorge Bundy released National Security Action Memorandum No. 111, which laid out the “First Phase of Viet-Nam Program.” He stated that the U.S. would immediately take certain actions in support of the Government of the Republic Vietnam (GVN). These included an increase in air lifted supplies to the GVN forces, providing equipment necessary for air-ground support techniques and special intelligence, U.S. advisors and personnel, training and equipping the civil guard, and improving the military-political intelligence system.<sup>34</sup>

As well as equipping the South Vietnamese forces, Kennedy remained committed to modernizing South Vietnam’s infrastructure and economy. In February 1962, Kennedy implemented a Strategic Hamlet Program to consolidate the villagers into one easily defensible area, gain support from the South Vietnamese and assist in nation building.<sup>35</sup> However, several problems arose from this modernizing approach. First, the peasants who were removed from their homes and placed in strategic hamlets felt displaced. Second, the program did not do anything to remove the corrupt patron-client

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<sup>33</sup> Note From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Bundy) to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), November 7, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 1:223.

<sup>34</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 111, November 22, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 1:272.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 179.

system in South Vietnam. Thus, the hamlet program failed in gaining any support from the South Vietnamese. Lastly, American arms placed in the hamlets were open to peasant access- many of whom supported the National Liberation Front. Thus, Kennedy accidentally armed the enemy.<sup>36</sup>

Kennedy also implemented Project Beefup to support the counterinsurgency efforts aimed at undermining the NLF. The administration introduced Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in South Vietnam and American military involvement more than doubled between 1961 and 1962. Even when U.S. troops fought in combat, they were still deemed “advisers” to assure the public that America held a strictly advisory role in Vietnam. The U.S. had over 9,000 “advisers” in Vietnam by the end of 1962. The additional American assistance allowed ARVN to launch major military operations. Project Beefup, coupled with the strategic hamlet program, had the primary goal of generating support for Diem’s capitalist democracy in the South. Unfortunately, these efforts failed for several reasons. First, ARVN and MACV had trouble distinguishing between NLF members and innocent civilians. Second, South Vietnamese and U.S. advisers had different ideas of how they wanted to operate, which led to weak leadership. Third, regardless of training techniques and military operations, the insurgency still held a military advantage in South Vietnam. “Beefing up” ARVN proved to be a difficult task and thus, the U.S. could not count on South Vietnamese forces to defend themselves against communist aggression at that point.<sup>37</sup> Project Beefup served as a marker in Kennedy’s presidency of the transition from economic support and CI team programs to U.S. military support.

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<sup>36</sup> Notes from the course, “America and the Emerging World,” taught by Karl Benziger, Feb. 25, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> George Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 104.

The year 1963 brought new problems regarding Vietnam. Diem's poor leadership and corruption continued to worsen the military situation in the South. Historian Stanley Karnow argued that Diem ruled "like an ancient emperor, he could not deal effectively with either the mounting communist threat to his regime or the opposition of South Vietnam's turbulent factions alienated by his autocracy."<sup>38</sup> Some of Diem's generals were power hungry and others turned against him because of how he ruled like a dictator. By August, Diem's senior officers and Kennedy's administration began to talk about a possible coup d'état. Kennedy seemed for the most part, ambivalent about supporting the coup. However, the final decision regarding the overthrow of Diem was given to the ambassador of South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., who Kennedy understood was anti-communist and pro-Diem coup. By November 1, Diem had been ousted by the military and General Duong Van Minh assumed the leadership of South Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after, on November 22, Kennedy was shot in Dallas, Texas. Many argue that Kennedy's death dramatically changed the course of American involvement in Vietnam. Historian David Kaiser claims that Kennedy lacked enthusiasm about the war in Southeast Asia and regarded it as a liability. He argues that Kennedy neutralized Vietnam's neighbor Laos, rejected several proposals for escalated American troops in Vietnam, and was ultimately ambivalent about the Diem coup. According to Kaiser, this proves that Kennedy would not have escalated the Vietnam War to the extent that

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<sup>38</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam- A History: The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 277.

<sup>39</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and Escalation of War in Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 73.

President Johnson ultimately did.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, historian Frederik Logevall argues that Kennedy's ambivalence about the Diem coup ended when he let Lodge take action on the matter. Logevall adds that Kennedy's ambivalence was only due to his worry that the coup would be unsuccessful. Further, he argues that, although Kennedy put off difficult decisions about the Vietnam War, his actions ultimately led to an expanded U.S. presence in Vietnam that would have continued had Kennedy not been killed.<sup>41</sup>

One thing is certain: Kennedy was deeply concerned about the containment of communism and the ability of third world countries to develop as capitalist democracies. This is evidenced by his modernization policies in Vietnam. The failure of these policies should have indicated to Johnson the time and difficulty it would have taken to modernize a developing country. Containing communism in North Vietnam proved to be a hard enough task up to Kennedy's death—and the North Vietnamese forces and the NLF only continued to strengthen and gain popularity among the Vietnamese people. Yet, from the beginning of his presidency, Johnson was determined to achieve the same modernization goals that Kennedy aimed to achieve. This determination would soon lead to a dramatically escalated war in Vietnam, and consequently, a war in America as well.

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<sup>40</sup>Robert McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. 4, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 140-141.

<sup>41</sup>Logevall, *Choosing War*, 73.



### Chapter 3- Johnson and Modernization

The issue of building South Vietnam into a capitalist and democratic state persisted into the mid-1960s. However, many began to question whether or not this stood as a viable reason for escalated U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Johnson's top advisers, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Dean Rusk agreed that U.S. military escalation was necessary in order to achieve their primary goal of containment in Vietnam. As long as they contained communism in the North, South Vietnam could continue to modernize as a capitalist state. Other advisers such as Under Secretary of State, George Ball and Oregon senator Wayne Morse argued against military escalation. They claimed that the United States could not fight a war for the South Vietnamese. They also showed concern about how much time it would take for the U.S. to contain communism militarily or force the communists to negotiate.<sup>42</sup> In 1965, Johnson decided to significantly increase U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, which further pulled American efforts away from economic development in South Vietnam and towards a robust military presence there.<sup>43</sup> The escalation of American troop presence caused widespread dissent to the war in the United States, which in turn set the stage for the chaotic conflict that President Richard Nixon would soon inherit.

In the fall of 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin incident initiated serious discussion about U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. On August 2, communist forces attacked American ships with Soviet torpedo boats. The U.S. quickly retaliated and left the confrontation practically unharmed; the North Vietnamese only hit the U.S. with one

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<sup>42</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 148-151. Also in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 420-426.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Karnow, 426.

round of a deck machine gun. Two days later, the USS Maddox and destroyer C. Turner Joy were in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam when they reported that they were under attack. Nobody actually witnessed an attack; the reports were based on sonar and radar devices, which could have been easily disrupted by the alleged treacherous sea weather. In fact, it is unlikely that an actual attack on the U.S. ships took place on August 4. In summarizing the incident, the Department of the Navy has recently claimed that, "More recent analysis of that data and additional information gathered on the 4 August episode now makes it clear that North Vietnamese naval forces did not attack Maddox and Turner Joy that night in the summer of 1964."<sup>44</sup> However, in 1964, the mere possibility that the North Vietnamese launched a second attack against the United States prompted Johnson and his administration to discuss greater military involvement in Vietnam. Unbeknownst to Johnson at the time, the incident also caused the North Vietnamese to take action. Anticipating that the United States would send a ground force to assist the South Vietnamese forces, Hanoi went to the Soviet Union and China for assistance. Both agreed to aid the DRV in the struggle and China responded promptly by mobilizing forces along the North Vietnamese border.<sup>45</sup>

By the summer of 1965, Johnson's administration had entered a heavy debate about whether or not to expand U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. What is most interesting about the debate is actually what was left out completely: by mid-1965, there was a complete absence of anyone in Johnson's administration suggesting that the U.S. contribute to South Vietnam merely at an economic level. While financial assistance and

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<sup>44</sup> Department of Navy, Naval History and Heritage Command, *Tonkin Gulf Crisis, August 1964*, accessed 20 January 2014, <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq120-1.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> The entire Gulf of Tonkin incident is outlined in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 365-376. Also outlined in George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 141-147.

development took a predominant role in Kennedy's handling of Vietnam, the debate in Johnson's administration was about how much military involvement should be increased. It is evident that the modernization of Vietnam had turned into a military policy to assure that South Vietnam wasn't taken over by the communists.<sup>46</sup>

It was clear at this point that the communists controlled the battlefield and the Republic of Vietnam failed to find political stability. In the previous five years, the RVN had undergone five regime changes. Further, the current President, Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky did not look promising to the U.S. administration. To many of Johnson's advisers, the instability of South Vietnam's political state served as an even greater reason to become involved in the war against communist aggression. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara all suggested that broad U.S. military efforts were necessary to defend the free world from communism. In other words, the only way they could assure a Western modernization of Vietnam was with U.S. military assistance to train and equip South Vietnamese forces. Otherwise, they argued, Vietnam and much of Southeast Asia would be taken over by communism.<sup>47</sup>

In a memorandum to President Johnson, McGeorge Bundy argued that American military assistance in Vietnam would make the difference between a capitalist, democratic Vietnam and a communist takeover. He claimed that "the most significant element of stability and strength, insofar as the struggle against Communist insurgency is concerned, remains the external factor of U.S. military, economic and political support.

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<sup>46</sup> Debate outlined in Herring, *America's Longest War*, 148-151 and in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 420-426.

<sup>47</sup> George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 162.

Without it, the country would quickly succumb to Communist domination.”<sup>48</sup> Dean Rusk argued that the U.S. commitment in Vietnam was a representation of the U.S. commitment to the free world in general. He wrote,

The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war... There are obvious risks in any engagement between free and communist countries, especially where large communist countries are contiguous to the area of conflict. But these risks are present for the communists as well. If they discover that we are less resolved than they, the prospect for the future is exceedingly dark.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Rusk was primarily concerned about the ideological ramifications of the Vietnam War. In other words, if the U.S. would fail to prevent a communist takeover of Vietnam, then communists around the world might suspect that the U.S. failed to sustain a free democracy anywhere in the world. Rusk’s worries about the expansion of communism showed that he had grave concerns about modernizing South Vietnam as a capitalist, democratic state. He stated in the same paper that “so long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster...to our interests throughout the world.”<sup>50</sup> His mention of the risk that the war posed to American “interests throughout the world” suggests that he cared primarily about U.S. credibility. He argued that an abandonment of the Vietnamese would be disastrous to the American image if the Vietnamese still had the will to fight. In other words, the United States had to remain consistent in protecting “free” societies not only for each society’s sake, but to sustain a certain image on the world stage. So although Rusk’s anti-

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<sup>48</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, June 30, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 3:33.

<sup>49</sup> Paper by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, July 1, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 3:39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

communist rhetoric demonstrated his concerns about Vietnam developing as a non-communist state, it seems he had other worries as well.

McNamara also suggested expanded U.S. involvement in Vietnam in a memorandum to Johnson on July 20. He stated that the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces needed to create conditions for a favorable outcome in Vietnam. This involved demonstrating to the DRV and NLF that the odds were against them on the battlefield. This, he argued, would give the U.S. an upper hand at the negotiating table. He argued that “the course of action recommended in this memorandum—if the military and political moves are properly integrated and executed with continuing vigor and visible determination—stands a good chance of *achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time in Vietnam.*”<sup>51</sup> What McNamara failed to realize was that his predominant objective- containing communism and thus, modernizing South Vietnam as a democratic, “free” nation- would have taken much more time than he projected. McNamara never specified in this memorandum what he considered to be a “reasonable” amount of time. However, it is safe to assume he was not suggesting that the U.S. commit a military presence in Vietnam until 1973. In Social Change and Development, Alvin So stated several assumptions made by researchers of the modernization school. One of these assumptions was that modernization was a lengthy process. So argued that “it is an evolutionary change, not a revolutionary change. It will take generations, or even centuries to complete, and its profound impact will be felt only through time.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Italics added for emphasis. Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson, July 20, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 3:67.

<sup>52</sup> Alvin So, *Social Change and Development*, 34.

Under Secretary of State George Ball and Senator Wayne Morse argued against expanded U.S. efforts in Vietnam, partially because of the amount of time it would take to modernize South Vietnam. Ball argued that the U.S. could not create McNamara's "favorable conditions" regardless of how many American soldiers went to Vietnam. He also argued quite bluntly that the U.S. could not win another nation's war: "No one has demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war—which is at the same time a civil war between Asians—in jungle terrain in the midst of a population that refuses cooperation to the white forces (and the SVN) and thus provides a great intelligence advantage to the other side."<sup>53</sup> Morse also argued that Vietnam was a losing war. He refuted McNamara's suggestions for expanded U.S. involvement by claiming that, "it would be a very serious mistake to think the American people would support a stalemated ground war in Vietnam for a period long enough to force the Communists into negotiating."<sup>54</sup> Morse seemed to understand that forcing the communists to negotiate on U.S. terms by gaining an upper hand on the battlefield would take an extended amount of time (if possible at all). He understood the stubbornness of the North Vietnamese and Chinese and recognized the growing dissent to the Vietnam War in the United States. Since U.S. time seemed to be limited in Vietnam, Morse suggested that Johnson give the responsibility of finding peace in Vietnam to the United Nations.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Paper by the Undersecretary of State (Ball), undated, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 3:40.

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, June 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 3:10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

But President Johnson made it clear that America had an obligation to fulfill U.S. responsibilities in Vietnam and assure that South Vietnam remains independent. He stated,

There are those who wonder why we have a responsibility there... we found ourselves with continued responsibility for the defense of freedom. Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam and its freedom... We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.<sup>56</sup>

The “freedom” of Vietnam referred to the ability of South Vietnam to be an independent, democratic nation. Although Johnson did not literally use the words “democracy” or “capitalist society”, the term “free” stood for everything that the U.S. aimed to accomplish in Vietnam. Johnson made it very clear in this speech that he wanted South Vietnam to modernize as a non-communist (and therefore, capitalist and democratic) state. In fact, this goal was so important to Johnson that he allowed it to interfere with his Great Society plans for the United States. Johnson had intended to create programs that would lead America towards economic and racial equality. Funding the Vietnam War prevented him from making any substantial progress toward these domestic goals. Indeed, Johnson stressed the importance of containing communism in Vietnam compared to improving American society: “Losing the Great Society was a terrible thought, but not so terrible as the thought of being responsible for America’s losing a war to the Communists. Nothing would be worse than that.”<sup>57</sup>

Before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson seemed fully committed to improving South Vietnamese society using U.S. professionals. The U.S. had a team of

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<sup>56</sup> McMahan, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, “Lyndon B. Johnson Explains Why Americans Fight in Vietnam, 1965,” 163.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 321.

doctors, teachers, accountants and mechanics teaching the South Vietnamese in American schools. Johnson set up a strategic hamlet program similar to Kennedy's program to help build villages and strengthen South Vietnam's economy.<sup>58</sup> However, after the occurrence in the Gulf of Tonkin, U.S. assistance in South Vietnam became primarily a military effort. Both Stanley Karnow and historian Fredrik Logevall argue that Johnson and his administration hoped for a communist attack and used the U.S. ships as bait in the gulf. This way, Johnson would have an excuse to become militarily involved in Vietnam<sup>59</sup> Even though there was no confirmed attack, the Tonkin Gulf resolution gave Johnson permission to take whatever means necessary to protect the U.S. and South Vietnam from communist aggression. Thus, escalated U.S. military presence in Vietnam began.

This is not to say that Johnson *only* suggested plans for military involvement in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The occurrence surely prompted serious conversations about a more robust U.S. military commitment but it did not altogether eliminate other aid that Johnson hoped to provide in the modernization of South Vietnam. For example, in a speech given at John Hopkins University in April 1965, Johnson asked congress to invest one billion dollars towards the peace effort in Vietnam. He listed specific goals that this money could help accomplish in South Vietnam:

The wonders of modern medicine can be spread through villages where thousands die every year from lack of care. Schools can be established to train people in the skills that are needed to manage the process of development... I also intend to expand and speed up a program to make available our farm surpluses to assist in feeding and clothing the needy in Asia. We should not allow people to go

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<sup>58</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 347.

<sup>59</sup> Karnow argues this in *Vietnam: A History*, 370 and Logevall argues this point in Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 198.



hungry and wear rags while our own warehouses overflow with an abundance of wheat and corn, rice and cotton.<sup>60</sup>

Johnson seemed sincere about funding these efforts that would help modernize South Vietnam's economy and improve the living situation of the Vietnamese. He argued that the Mekong River could provide more food, water, power, and resources to the South Vietnamese than the Tennessee Valley Authority provided to Southern Americans. His speech created a positive vision of American-Vietnamese relations as he discussed his dream of a war-free and poverty-free world. He emphatically preached to America and the world for "reason to guide passion, and love to master hate."<sup>61</sup> Yet, his decisions that shortly followed this melodramatic speech failed to mirror the images that he so firmly "dreamed" about.

In fact, the speech at John Hopkins would be one of the last efforts to assist South Vietnam without using the U.S. military forces against communist forces. It appears that Johnson's good intentions were drowned out by the debate about an increase of U.S. troops in Vietnam. About three months after his speech, despite the fact that some of his top advisers were against a robust military commitment, Johnson decided to dramatically increase U.S. military presence in Vietnam. He increased the number of B-52s and heightened the bombing activity in North Vietnam. He also deployed 50,000 troops to Vietnam and agreed to send another 50,000 by the end of the year if they were needed.

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<sup>60</sup> University of Texas Archives, *President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address at John Hopkins University, "Peace without Conquest"*, April 7, 1965,

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650407.asp>.

<sup>61</sup> University of Texas Archives, *President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address at John Hopkins University, "Peace without Conquest"*, April 7, 1965,

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650407.asp>.

Johnson's implicit agreement to send more forces whenever necessary cleared the way for the U.S. to assume most of the fighting in South Vietnam.<sup>62</sup>

Naturally, this type of robust military involvement came with costs. The cumulating monetary costs and increasing number of U.S. troops on Vietnamese soil caused growing American resistance to the war over the next few years. This resistance took the form of street dissent and middle class dissent. This is significant because the administration could much more easily deal with hippies burning draft cards than wealthy, influential figures leading organizations supported by the middle class. The middle-class dissent presented the neo-colonial critique earlier put forth by Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Dubois. Robeson and Dubois pointed out the hypocrisy of a "free" democratic, capitalist society that denies basic civil rights to people according to their race. He argued that African Americans were subjected to similar inequities and dehumanizing that colonized peoples were exposed to under imperialism. With these similarities in mind, Robeson argued that it would be wrong for African Americans to fight in Vietnam against victims of imperialism.<sup>63</sup> Middle-class anti-war advocates such as Martin Luther King and Robert Moses preached these exact points during the late 1960s.

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<sup>62</sup> Herring, 164.

<sup>63</sup> In a speech on April 20, 1949, Robeson contended that African Americans will never fight against the Soviet Union. Although not considered by the United States Administration to be a "free" political regime, the Soviet Union treated blacks with much more respect. In reviewing Robeson's speech, W.E.B. Du Bois agreed with Robeson in that "American Negro victims of color prejudice, serfdom, slavery and race hate, if in their right minds, would never fight a country which alone among nations opposes these crimes against civilization." For their full arguments see Paul Robeson, *Ho Chi Minh is the Trousaint L'Overture of Indochina*, March 1954, found in, Philip Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974* (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1978) 377-378 and W.E.B. Du Bois, "Paul Robeson: Right or Wrong? Right," Herbert Aptheker ed., *Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited By Others* (New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1982) 136-140.

Robert Moses served as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council (SNCC) field secretary for voter registration based in McComb, Mississippi. In the “McComb Mississippi Protest” of 1965, Moses and SNCC stated five reasons why African Americans should not fight in the Vietnam War. The first reason mentions the inconsistency of freedoms in the U.S.: “No Mississippi Negroes should be fighting in Vietnam for the White Man’s freedom until all Negro people are free in Mississippi.” Moses and SNCC also group African Americans into a group with other oppressed people around the world, “We will be looked upon as traitors by the Colored people of the world if the Negro people continue to fight and die without a cause.”<sup>64</sup> These statements mirrored the neo-colonial critique put forth by Paul Robeson.

One of the largest middle-class, anti-war demonstrations took place on April 4, 1967 when more than 100,000 dissenters marched for four hours at the NYC Spring Mobilization Antiwar Rally. The marchers stopped at Riverside Church to watch MLK declare his opposition to the war; a speech considered to be one of the most moving and influential of his lifetime.<sup>65</sup> He argued that the Vietnam War destroyed the intrinsic values of the United States and claimed, “If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read ‘Vietnam.’”<sup>66</sup> In other words, the war exposed the inequalities and deprivation of human rights that African Americans experienced in a supposedly free society. Blacks fought for the freedom of the people of Vietnam and yet,

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Moses, “A McComb, Mississippi Protest,” in *Black Protest: 350 Years of History, Documents, and Analyses*, ed. Joanne Grant, (New York: Fawcett, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 179.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Luther King, “Martin Luther King, Jr., Declares his Opposition to the War, 1967,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, Fourth Edition, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 404.

did not receive freedom in the U.S. Rather, at home, they were subject to the same treatment of the colonized Vietnamese or the people of imperialist countries in Africa. MLK heavily influenced the middle-class and Moses had a broad influence on students and thus, their dissent proved to be threatening to the Johnson administration.

In fact, American approval of the war dropped drastically in 1968 alone when on January 30, the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong launched a large scale offensive on the South during the Tet Holiday. A Gallup Poll in February indicated that 50 percent of poll participants disapproved of President Johnson's handling of the war, while only 35 percent approved of the war effort.<sup>67</sup> Although the attack took the United States and South Vietnamese forces by surprise, they reacted quickly and regained most of the territory in less than a week.<sup>68</sup> Historians like James Willbanks and George Herring argue that the offensive resulted in a tactical victory for the United States and South Vietnam. The North did not gain any territory and suffered approximately 40,000 deaths in battle, while the combined U.S. and South Vietnamese forces lost about 3,400.<sup>69</sup> However, it proved to be a strategic long term victory for the North Vietnamese. The NLF and DRV penetrated the urban centers of South Vietnam such as Hue and Khe Sanh. American televised accounts of the fighting in these cities displayed gory scenes of death and despair for the U.S. troops and made it appear that the North's attack was successful. This made Americans believe that the situation in Vietnam was rapidly deteriorating, as newscaster Walter Cronkite infamously claimed, "What the hell is going on? I thought

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<sup>67</sup> The New York Times, *Tet Offensive: Turning Point in Vietnam War*, World News, Published 31 January, 1968. Accessed 9 December, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 5.

<sup>69</sup> George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 232.

we were winning the war!”<sup>70</sup> Cronkite’s views heavily influenced American society and soon after Cronkite’s pessimistic statements on Vietnam, Johnson reportedly exclaimed, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America.”<sup>71</sup>

This resistance made it increasingly difficult for Johnson to implement any military policy without domestic backlash. He dismissed his critiques with arbitrary accusations, even once claiming that young dissenters would not “know a communist if they tripped over one.”<sup>72</sup> Clearly, anti-communist Johnson had developed a military policy to contain communism in Vietnam and keep South Vietnam capitalist and democratic. However, he was exhausted from public dissent and the Vietnam War in general. On March 31, 1968, he announced to the United States that he would not run for a second presidential term. By October of that year, Johnson called for a bombing halt, attempted serious negotiations with the Vietnamese and aimed to de-americanize the war. Unfortunately, these efforts did not succeed and thus, the agonizing end to Johnson’s presidency set the stage for the upcoming president elect. Richard Nixon would walk into a battle similar to the one that Johnson dealt with for most of his presidency—the three-pronged struggle between a need to modernize Vietnam as a capitalist and non-communist state, the necessity to negotiate with the DRV on U.S. terms, and the urgency to appease and satisfy the American people.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in James Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 69.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 219.

#### Chapter 4: Nixon Takes the Reins

As the newly elected president in January, 1969, Richard Nixon had two primary goals regarding the Vietnam War: to appease the American people, and to achieve an honorable exit from South Vietnam. Unlike his predecessors, he did not seem too concerned about modernizing the South for the sake of demonstrating that capitalism is better than communism. Indeed, it appeared that Nixon may have only cared about the modernization of South Vietnam insofar as it helped him preserve American credibility. What he cared about most was the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam in order to satisfy Americans who had grown tired of the war. Completing this task “honorably,” according to Nixon, involved avoiding any abandonment of the South Vietnamese or their president, Nguyen Van Thieu.

Yet even for Nixon the goals of modernizing South Vietnam, supporting Thieu, and preserving American credibility remained directly connected. If Nixon did not help the South contain communism in the North, the South would fall to communism and fail to modernize as a capitalist and democratic state. Naturally, this would be seen as a complete abandonment of Nguyen Van Thieu and the South Vietnamese. There is evidence to suggest that Nixon thought this abandonment would make America look cowardly to the rest of the world. This very well could have been the reason why Nixon did not simply withdraw troops and end American involvement in the war from the start of his presidency. There was a point in which the modernization of South Vietnam still mattered—because Nixon needed to show the world that America would not just abandon their allies but rather, stay committed to protecting “free” societies around the world.

Nixon's "honorable exit" would be a difficult task to achieve because the strength of the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces (RVNAF) did not compare to the strength of the NLF and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). It was clear that the South's forces depended completely on U.S. troops to defend South Vietnam from the communist enemies. Nixon had walked into a dilemma: he wanted to avoid abandoning Thieu and the South Vietnamese, and yet he needed to bring the troops home because of America's chaotic and divided state. Thus, he created a policy called Vietnamization that he thought might solve this dilemma. This policy involved the strengthening of the RVNAF so that ultimately, the South Vietnamese would be able to defend themselves without the assistance of the United States. This way, U.S. troops could withdraw from Vietnam assured that there would not be a communist takeover of the South. However, given the overall inconsistent strength of the RVNAF and the amount of time it would take to train them, Vietnamization was bound to fail. In fact, there was much disagreement within the administration about the implementation of this policy for this very reason.<sup>73</sup>

In retrospect, Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger reflected upon the dilemma he and Nixon were faced with in 1969: "Whatever our original war aims, by 1969 our credibility abroad, the reliability of our commitments, and our domestic cohesion were alike jeopardized by a struggle in a country as far away from the North American continent as our globe permits."<sup>74</sup> Kissinger understood that Nixon was caught between domestic dissent, preserving U.S. credibility, and the dependency of South Vietnam on U.S. troops. Yet, the U.S. could not simply withdraw or walk away "from an

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<sup>73</sup> James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 15-16.

<sup>74</sup> Robert McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. 4, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 359.

enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel... No serious policymaker could allow himself to succumb to the fashionable debunking of ‘prestige’ or ‘honor’ or ‘credibility.’”<sup>75</sup>

One could reasonably argue that the ultimate modernization of South Vietnam did still matter to Nixon for the purpose of preserving American credibility. Simply “walking away” from Vietnam might have appeased the American war dissenters, but it would be an abandonment of the South Vietnamese and would practically guarantee a communist victory in Vietnam. This would hinder American honor and credibility. Further, it seemed that Nguyen Van Thieu wanted South Vietnam to remain capitalist. A memorandum of a meeting on June 8 between Nixon, Kissinger, Thieu, and Thieu’s assistant Nguyen Phu Doc states, “President Thieu felt that the intentions of the enemy are crucial; the issue is the spread of communism.”<sup>76</sup> Although Nixon did not fear communism spreading and becoming dominant over capitalism, Thieu might have held onto these concerns. After all, it was Thieu’s power and regime that was directly threatened by the communists. Thieu stated that he would not “accept a peace at all costs, especially a peace that would pave the way to the subjugation of 17 million South Vietnamese people by the Communists.”<sup>77</sup>

Now, it is possible that Thieu did not care about the ideological struggle between communism and capitalism any more than Nixon cared. So, the “subjugation of 17 million South Vietnamese” to communism might not have even been a legitimate concern

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 360.

<sup>76</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Midway Island, June 8, 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 6:81.

<sup>77</sup> Herring, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 172.



for Thieu. Rather, Thieu could have been merely concerned about staying in power, which by itself, served as a selfish reason to want to contain communism. Thus, even if the threat to his power was Thieu's only fear, he would overtly state worries about the future of the Vietnamese people to mask these selfish concerns. Regardless of what Thieu's actual motives were, if Nixon failed to contain communism in the North, he would be failing Thieu and the South Vietnamese. Instead, Nixon needed to achieve this goal to allow for an autonomous South, if only to show that the United States was capable of finishing what it started in Vietnam: creating and sustaining a capitalist and democratic state. Thus, one could argue that Nixon sought to contain communism in North Vietnam to preserve American credibility, and that this goal superseded the more serious hopes of Nixon's predecessors of completely modernizing Vietnam into a capitalist, democratic state.

In fact, Nixon even seemed to imply that he was concerned about modernization only for the sake of American credibility. When a reporter asked Nixon about the reaction to a communist takeover of Vietnam, Nixon replied, "We would destroy ourselves if we pulled out in a way that wasn't really honorable."<sup>78</sup> Thus, the concern was not the future of the Vietnamese people but rather, the possibility of America "destroying itself" or destroying its credibility if the U.S. did not exit Vietnam completely assured that the communists would not take over. Stanley Karnow argues that both Nixon and Kissinger believed that the war had to be ended "honorably" for the sake of America's global prestige.<sup>79</sup> These men did not seem to care much about the political and/or economic modernization of South Vietnam in general. However, they

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Herring, 273.

<sup>79</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 588.

agreed that the U.S. could not withdraw if communists would immediately take over the South. This would not be “honorable” and would make America look bad to the rest of the world.

A New York Times article written on September 14, 1969 argued something similar—that Nixon’s goal of creating a stable democracy in South Vietnam was merely to preserve American credibility:

His basic objective appears to remain the same. He and his aides insist they still want an “honorable” settlement—arrangements negotiated in Paris that would presumably guarantee temporary stability and autonomy for South Vietnam and, while far less ambitious than the military victory earlier envisaged by his predecessors, would leave intact what is still referred to in Washington as the “credibility” of America’s overseas commitments.<sup>80</sup>

Although there does not exist a large amount of evidence to support this point, it does not seem rational that Nixon would have put forth so much military effort to build up the RVNAF before withdrawing American troops without good reason. If he was only concerned about appeasing Americans and withdrawing from Vietnam, he could have easily done this—but he wanted an “honorable” exit from Vietnam. Whether or not Nixon actually believed he could attain this goal is surely questionable. However, it seems only rational that, in implementing Vietnamization, Nixon aimed to show the world that America wouldn’t simply give up their international goals and abandon South Vietnam.

Of course, it is possible that a rational explanation for Nixon’s efforts in the war did not exist, since both Nixon and Kissinger were incredibly naïve in the way they handled the war from the start. Even with the knowledge that some of their colleagues highly

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<sup>80</sup> New York Times, *Nixon and Vietnam: He Tries, Amidst Conflicting Pressures, to End an Ugly War*, Robert B. Semple Jr., September 14, 1969, pg. E1.

doubted Vietnamization, they expressed great confidence that they could end the war in a mere six months. Kissinger even stated to a group of antiwar protestors, "Give us six months, and if we haven't ended the war by then, you can come back and tear down the white house fence."<sup>81</sup> To begin, Nixon and Kissinger offered to negotiate with both the North Vietnamese and the Soviet Union, while also issuing a questionnaire to obtain a broad assessment of the military situation in Vietnam. On January 2, 1969, Nixon wrote a message to the Vietnamese explaining his willingness to negotiate and find peace in Vietnam, as long as the U.S. exit could be honorable. Hanoi's response on January 30 was not what Nixon wanted to hear:

If the US really desires to settle the Vietnamese problem it must end the war of aggression in Vietnam, withdraw in the shortest possible period all American and satellite troops from South Vietnam and leave the South Vietnamese population to settle itself its own affairs without foreign interference. The US must as soon as possible start without delay the Conference of Four to discuss these profound questions.<sup>82</sup>

Of course, Nixon had already decided that he would not settle for these terms. He wanted a bilateral withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese troops so that South Vietnam would not be left with the NVA in their territory. Again, an immediate, unilateral U.S. withdrawal essentially meant the abandonment of Nguyen Van Thieu and the South Vietnamese, which would not create the honorable exit from Vietnam that Nixon had hoped for.

Perhaps Nixon's next actions were fueled by the fact that Hanoi's demands did not allow an honorable U.S. exit from Vietnam. Or, perhaps, Nixon simply felt angry because he did not get what he wanted. Regardless, instead of continuing to politely

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<sup>81</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 101.

<sup>82</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to Secretary of State Rogers, January 30, 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 6:14.

negotiate, Nixon launched a bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in neutral Cambodia. This action was meant to prevent the North from mounting a military offensive against the South, but also to show Moscow and Hanoi that he meant business.<sup>83</sup> This attack was supposed to be kept secret from the American public but shortly after it was implemented, the *New York Times* published a story about the bombings. Since Nixon was concerned about appeasing the American people, he wire-tapped seventeen government employees to prevent further leaks and launched a public relations campaign to gain popularity for his actions. Overall, the Cambodian bombings did not prompt any cooperation from the North Vietnamese and once Americans sensed that the Paris negotiations were making no progress, Nixon's approval ratings dropped.<sup>84</sup>

The early negotiations with the North Vietnamese failed, so Nixon and Kissinger hoped that they could appeal to the Soviet Union and convince Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to pressure the North Vietnamese into ending the war. They would do this by using a "linkage" strategy; they would tell the Soviet Union that they were open to negotiate about other issues, such as strategic arms, as long as there was first, peace in Vietnam.<sup>85</sup> By this point, Sino-Soviet relations were deteriorating so Nixon and Kissinger also played the "China card" against the Soviet Union. That is, they warned Dobrynin that the U.S. would ally itself with China if the USSR did not want to help the U.S. find an honorable exit from Vietnam. Secret talks amongst Nixon, Kissinger, and Dobrynin began in February.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 276.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

<sup>85</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 115.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

These talks proved to be short-lived. By mid-April, Nixon and Kissinger ruined their chances of getting the Soviet Union to help end the war. On April 14, Kissinger met with Dobrynin to show him that Nixon was serious about ending the war. Kissinger threatened that if no agreement could be made on Vietnam, then the U.S. “would take measures that might create a complicated situation.”<sup>87</sup> Upon departing, Dobrynin told Kissinger, “This has been a very important conversation.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, no response to the meeting was ever received from Moscow or Dobrynin.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps, Dobrynin grew sick of Nixon and Kissinger’s threats and did not take the two men seriously. Whatever the case, Nixon and Kissinger failed to get the Soviet Union to cooperate in ending the Vietnam War at the beginning of 1969.

Simultaneous to the talks with Dobrynin, Nixon was making other efforts to achieve “peace with honor” in Vietnam. A day after his inauguration, he issued National Security Memorandum 1 (NSSM 1) titled, “Situation in Vietnam” to assess the military situation in South Vietnam. He asked twenty-eight questions about negotiations, the NVA and Viet Cong, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), Pacification, politics in South Vietnam, and U.S. Operations. Most respondents of NSSM 1 wrote a pessimistic report about the current military situation in Vietnam and held that the RVN could not defend itself against the NLF and NVA without United States assistance. However, assessments about the improvement of RVNAF performance differed. Most advisors in Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon, and commander in chief at the U.S. Pacific forces John S. McCain Jr.

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<sup>87</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 6:60.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 142.

all reported that the North Vietnamese had a current military disadvantage. Most of the senior advisors in ARVN agreed that the South Vietnamese had made great progress. In contrast, Lt. General Walter T. Kerwin Jr. from III Corps Tactical zone stated that he observed no improvement in South Vietnamese forces and doubted that they could ever prevail without U.S. assistance. The CIA, Defense Department, and State Department all offered similarly pessimistic conclusions.<sup>90</sup>

Rather than helping Nixon determine the situation in Vietnam, the mixed responses to NSSM 1 only confused matters. It seemed clear that South Vietnamese forces could not withstand the enemy on their own. Thus, a total United States withdrawal without a reciprocal North Vietnamese withdrawal remained out of the question. However, the number of optimistic reports about South Vietnam's progress gave Nixon hope that properly training the RVNAF could yield promising results. He introduced a policy called Vietnamization in order to train the South's forces. The policy involved the strengthening of the South Vietnamese so that they could defend themselves against the NLF and NVA. Nixon planned to increase the size of RVNAF, equip them with modern weapons and materiel, and improve the fighting abilities of the South Vietnamese. Meanwhile, regular U.S. troop withdrawals would take place. If Vietnamization succeeded, South Vietnamese forces could defend themselves and avoid a communist takeover. This way, Nixon could avoid abandoning Thieu and the South Vietnamese.<sup>91</sup>

Many of Nixon's closest advisors supported the Vietnamization policy. For example, the head of MACV, General Creighton Abrams, and Secretary of Defense

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<sup>90</sup> James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Kimball, 72-74 and Willbanks, 2.

Melvin Laird supported the policy from the beginning. At times, Vietnamization proved to be an incredibly difficult task for Abrams. The different tactical zones in South Vietnam showed inconsistency in strength and leadership. Pacification of the countryside and South Vietnamese troop morale proved to be an ongoing issue through 1969 and 1970. However, Abrams fully supported the Vietnamization policy itself.<sup>92</sup> Laird also supported the policy but understood in the early months of 1969 that U.S. time was limited in Vietnam. He argued that U.S. dissenters are “giving the new administration a little time here” and that “we’ve got to make the best use of that time as we possibly can. It’s important that we have this time, because everything could have been lost without time.”<sup>93</sup> Of course, the prospect of “losing everything”—losing South Vietnam to communism, failing to prevent this and as a consequence, losing American world credibility and losing more American lives—was extremely troubling to Laird. He would not watch years of U.S. military commitment result in a negative outcome in Vietnam. However, it appears Laird understood that building up the RVNAF in order to remain with Thieu and contain communism would be a lengthy process. Perhaps his fear of losing everything made him support Vietnamization as a solution for the Vietnam War nevertheless.

Others advisers, such as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle Wheeler and CIA Deputy Chief William Colby, expressed grave doubts about Vietnamization. When discussing troop withdrawals and negotiations with the North Vietnamese, Wheeler was anxious about the ability of the U.S. to successfully train the RVNAF. He argued that it would take “a great deal of time to train the kinds of units,

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<sup>92</sup> Willbanks, 15.

<sup>93</sup> Lewis Sorely, *The Abrams Tapes: 1968-1972*, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 141.

and to provide the types of sophisticated equipment, that would permit these little fellows to stand up to the North Vietnamese.”<sup>94</sup> Colby stated that the Vietnamization effort could enable the South Vietnamese to eventually stand up to the NLF but most likely, not the North Vietnamese Army. He also voiced a concern about dissent in the United States by pointing out that “there is a war weariness, there’s no question about it. People are tired of it, and they wish it would be over.”<sup>95</sup> Colby recognized the pressure that Nixon was under to announce troop withdrawals, but he also realized that Vietnamization would take much too long to complete, if it were at all possible.

National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger also had his doubts about the amount of time the United States would be allotted to implement Vietnamization. Although he appeared to agree with Nixon about the policy in 1969, in retrospect Kissinger admitted that their goals of building up the South’s forces and withdrawing American troops in a reasonable period of time would have been extremely difficult to accomplish. In Ending the Vietnam War, he argued,

Time was not on our side, and piecemeal concessions and withdrawals did more to encourage intransigence than compromise. Analytically, it would have been better to offer the most generous possible proposal imaginable—and then, if rejected, to seek to impose it militarily...If we had offered at one dramatic moment all the concessions eventually made in three years of war, and if the military actions taken with steadily declining forces over 1970, 1971, and 1972, in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam...had been undertaken all together in early 1970, the war might well have been appreciably shortened and the final settlement more sustainable.<sup>96</sup>

In fact, the most optimistic estimate for how long Vietnamization would take was three years. That is, it would take at least three years for Nixon to build up the South

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<sup>94</sup> Lewis Sorely, *The Abrams Tapes: 1968-1972*, 149.

<sup>95</sup> Sorely, 150.

<sup>96</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 105.



Vietnamese forces so that they could defend themselves against the NLF and NVA without the United States. This time framework would make it incredibly difficult for Nixon to withdraw a decent number of U.S. troops before its completion. And Nixon had no intentions of dragging on the war for another three years; he felt pressured by American dissent to withdraw troops and conclude the war. He also understood the controversy over Vietnamization within his own administration. Nixon could have realized at this point that he could not have it all; he could not make the American people happy by withdrawing troops from Vietnam and also avoid the abandonment of the South Vietnamese and Nguyen Van Thieu. Further, even if the modernization of South Vietnam did matter to Nixon (in order to preserve American credibility), this modernization became impossible because of Nixon's other war aims. It appears that he had to give up at least one of these goals in order to end the war in a timely manner. However, he could not accept this fact and Vietnamization became the new military policy in Vietnam.

## Chapter 5: Nixon Loses the Reins

By the end of 1970, it became clear that President Nixon and Henry Kissinger had abandoned all efforts to modernize South Vietnam as a capitalist and democratic state. Nixon also gave up on appeasing the American people, a goal he made impossible by his military strategy in Vietnam. During the second half of his presidency, Nixon made several moves in an effort to end the war: he invaded Cambodia, continued Vietnamization, appealed to China, and attempted to bomb the North into negotiating on U.S. terms. Vietnamization made little progress and China offered no immediate help for ending the war. Fed up with failed attempts to get out of Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger resorted to bombing the North because they assumed that, if they could control the battlefield, they could gain an upper hand in negotiations. Yet they were mistaken in these assumptions because regardless of the military situation, the communist forces had time on their side. Finally, having exhausted all other options, Nixon and Kissinger made one last attempt at trying to save face by settling on a "decent interval" strategy in Vietnam. All of their moves towards the end of Nixon's presidency moved them further away from the economic and social modernization of Vietnam. Thus, through his efforts to end the war, Nixon walked away from modernization plans of his predecessors.

In a speech on November 3, 1969, Nixon explained Vietnamization to the American public and gained some short-lived support. He cleverly appealed to the "silent majority of Americans"—the majority that, Nixon explained, did not want a quick withdrawal from Vietnam if it meant the devastation of the South's democracy.<sup>97</sup> After

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<sup>97</sup> President's Speech on "Vietnamization," November 3, 1969, <http://vietnam.vassar.edu/overview/doc14.html>.

the speech, a Gallup poll indicated that sixty-five percent of Americans approved of how he handled Vietnam.<sup>98</sup> In March 1970, Nixon announced the phased withdrawal of 150,000 troops over the next year in an attempt to prevent the massive protests that he feared would take place in the upcoming spring.<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately, he made other decisions that only fueled these protests. Nixon decided shortly after this speech that he would invade Cambodia.

His decision was based on several motives. It was initially prompted by the coup d'état of Cambodia's neutralist Prince Sihanouk in March by the pro-American group headed by Prime Minister Lon Nol. An invasion of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, a move that America had been long eager to make, would be easier with a pro-American leader. When Nixon addressed the nation about the Cambodian incursion on April 30, he explained that the goal was to bombard North Vietnamese military supply lines and prevent a communist offensive.<sup>100</sup> These goals were successful—supply lines were destroyed in Cambodia, forcing the communists to bring their supplies down alternative trails and the incursion prevented the North Vietnamese from immediately overrunning Cambodia.<sup>101</sup> However, Nixon had other motives for the incursion: he thought that it would buy time for Vietnamization and also threaten the North Vietnamese into negotiations.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Nixon, *RN*, 445.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 448.

<sup>100</sup> President Nixon's Cambodian Incursion Address, Richard Nixon Foundation, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cAAnoqmksg>.

<sup>101</sup> Willbanks, 84.

<sup>102</sup> Herring, 291-292.

By the end of June, Nixon withdrew from Cambodia because he neither had the funding nor the domestic support to train the Cambodian Army.<sup>103</sup> The invasion of Cambodia ultimately had no effect on the willingness of the North Vietnamese to negotiate. Further, domestic dissent caused by the Cambodian incursion proved worse than Nixon could have imagined. Dissent escalated to a peak when four students at Kent State University and two at Jackson State College were killed by the National Guard and policemen at anti-war demonstrations. Students at colleges and universities all over the country were in disbelief that they could be killed by speaking freely in an educational environment. Thousands went on strike from their studies, often for the entire semester, to participate in sit-ins and demonstrations against the Vietnam War.<sup>104</sup> Nixon gave up on appeasing the war dissenters and turned his attention towards Vietnamization and negotiations.

Yet, Vietnamization seemed doomed to failure from the beginning. Despite its minor pressures the Cambodian incursion did not help Nixon buy time to improve the performance of the South Vietnamese. In fact, it was naïve for Nixon to think that he could buy enough time with the incursion to actually improve Vietnamization. As some of Nixon's advisors suggested, it would take much too long for the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces to be strengthened enough so that they could defend themselves against the NLF and DRV. The RVNAF quickly became the most well-equipped army in the world due to U.S. support. However, money and weapons could only do so much to improve the overall performance of the South's forces. Knowing this, the United States implemented an intense training program for the South Vietnamese soldiers. However,

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<sup>103</sup> Notes from the course, "U.S. and the Emerging World," taught by Karl Benziger, April 15, 2013.

<sup>104</sup> Notes from the course, "U.S. and the Emerging World," taught by Karl Benziger, April 15, 2013.

as James Willbanks points out, training the South Vietnamese proved to be “an uphill battle.”<sup>105</sup> Many of the American advisors chosen for the job only offered the minimum effort required for training. Further, the South Vietnamese felt insulted by the term “Vietnamization” and refused to fully cooperate. They argued that they had been fighting in the war since the early 1950s, years before America became involved. The idea that they had to “take over the burden of the fighting” offended them, especially because they had suffered many more casualties than the American forces overall. Thieu also expressed these complaints and saw Vietnamization as a way for the Americans to abandon Vietnam.<sup>106</sup>

However, Thieu may have been mistaken about this, because Vietnamization seemed to be Nixon’s last attempt at *not* abandoning Vietnam. Theoretically, if Vietnamization succeeded the South Vietnamese could defend themselves, contain communism, and ultimately modernize as a capitalist and democratic state. But the Cambodian incursion did not increase the time that Nixon had for Vietnamization—in fact, it might have done just the opposite. Since the invasion caused such chaos in the United States, Nixon only became more pressured to withdraw troops from the war. Vietnamization seemed to be the last chance for the U.S. to modernize Vietnam, and Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia might have secured the policy’s failure.

While attempting Vietnamization, Nixon continued to negotiate on and off with the NLF, DRV, and RVN in Paris. These negotiations made little progress because, while Nixon wanted a bilateral withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese troops, the

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<sup>105</sup> Willbanks, 37.

<sup>106</sup> Willbanks, 39-41.

North persistently called for the unilateral withdrawal of American troops and the removal of Thieu.<sup>107</sup> Since it seemed like Nixon and Kissinger could not come to an agreement with the North Vietnamese, they appealed to China for help in ending the war. Nixon believed his meeting with Zhou Enlai, the Premier of the PRC, in January 1972 would prove helpful as a way to show Americans he was serious about ending the war. The most significant part about the negotiations with China, however, was kept secret. Nixon and Kissinger saw the tensions between the Soviet Union and the PRC as an opportunity. Kissinger offered China a bundle of documents—satellite images of the location of the USSR troops. In exchange, Enlai assured them that the PRC would help end the war in Vietnam. In appealing to China for help, Nixon and Kissinger made it clear that the modernization of South Vietnam was no longer a consideration. All they wanted by this point was to get out of Vietnam as quickly as possible.<sup>108</sup>

More confident having gained China's help, Nixon continued to negotiate with the North Vietnamese. He believed that if he could control the battlefield, he could control the negotiations. But Nixon failed to realize one critical fact: the North Vietnamese and NLF had time on their side. Regardless of how long Nixon held out for a superior military situation, the communist forces would not negotiate until they got what they wanted. Thus, for the United States, the war was inevitably lost due to the persistence of the North Vietnamese and NLF. As North Vietnamese politician, Le Duc Tho explained to Kissinger in 1970,

You try to strengthen the puppet troops, so they can assume responsibility for the war, and leave behind a large number of advisers...But we wonder

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<sup>107</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 108.

<sup>108</sup> Notes from the course, "U.S. and the Emerging World," taught by Karl Benziger, April 22, 2013.

whether and when the puppet troops can do that. It will take an unlimited time. We don't know when, or whether, it will be done. If it does not work, you will have the choice to remain in Vietnam or leave...If you prolong the war, we have to continue to fight...We are determined to fight until we win victory. If our generation cannot win, then our sons and nephews will continue. We will sacrifice everything...This is our iron will.<sup>109</sup>

The modernization of the South might have taken decades to complete, and Nixon and his predecessors failed to recognize how important this war truly was to the Vietnamese. For the United States, losing the war meant South Vietnam would become communist and American credibility would suffer (for, America would have failed to “defend a free state”—a job to which they were fully committed). However, losing the war for the Vietnamese meant losing their independence and unification as a country; something they had fought for since they were under French imperialistic rule. Nixon and his predecessors could not win in Vietnam and their efforts to modernize the South were in vain.

Nixon's last attempt at “controlling the battlefield” occurred in late 1972 after the DRV balked out of negotiations that appeared to be making progress. The “Christmas Bombing” dropped 158,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnamese bridges, roads, and railroads.<sup>110</sup> Shortly afterwards, Zhou Enlai and Le Duc Tho met to discuss the war. Tho was unaware of the secret negotiations that Nixon and Kissinger had made with the PRC, so he trusted Enlai's advice. This proved important, because Enlai's advice might have very well been what ended American involvement in the Vietnam War. In past negotiations, the DRV had refused to recognize Thieu's government as legitimate and wanted him to resign. This often delayed or prevented any negotiations from happening.

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<sup>109</sup> McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, Le Duc Tho Lectures Henry Kissinger About North Vietnamese Determination, 1970, 370.

<sup>110</sup> Notes from the course, “U.S. and the Emerging World,” taught by Karl Benziger, April 24, 2013.

Enlai suggested that Tho should recognize Thieu in the negotiations as a part of a coalition government. He stated, “It seems that the US is still willing to get out from Vietnam and Indochina. You should persist in principles while demonstrating flexibility during the negotiations. The most important [thing] is to let the Americans leave. The situation will change in six months or one year.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, Enlai told Tho to give Nixon, Kissinger and Thieu what they want—recognize the legitimacy of Thieu during the negotiations. Enlai argued that this would help them reach a settlement and once American troops were withdrawn, the North Vietnamese would find it much easier to finally achieve victory.

This worked out perfectly because Nixon and Kissinger were just about ready to settle on a decent interval strategy in Vietnam. Although the social and economic modernization of South Vietnam technically went out the window when Nixon became president, the decent interval theory would be the ultimate abandonment of any lingering modernization hopes. In applying this strategy to Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger hoped that the U.S. could withdraw and there would be a decent interval of time before South Vietnam fell to communism. This time interval would ensure that the fall of the South could not be blamed on the United States but instead, blamed on the inability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves. Nixon and Kissinger had been discussing “the decent interval” at least since August 1972. In a conversation on August 3, Nixon said to Kissinger, “South Vietnam is probably never going to survive anyway. I’m just being perfectly candid...can we have a viable foreign policy if a year from now or two years

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<sup>111</sup> Wilson Center Digital Archive, International History Declassified, *Discussion Between Zhou Enlai and Le Duc Tho*, January 3, 1973, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113116>.



from now, North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam? That's the real question."<sup>112</sup>

Kissinger replied,

If a year or two years from now, North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam, we can have a viable foreign policy if it looks as if it's the result of South Vietnamese incompetence... So we've got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which—after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it, say, this October, by January '74 no one will give a damn.<sup>113</sup>

The aim for a settlement in October proved to be too ambitious for all parties involved. However, on January 27, 1973, the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (of the NLF) met in Paris to finally agree on a settlement in Vietnam. This involved the complete withdrawal of all U.S. and other external troops in Vietnam, the future of Vietnam to be settled through an election, and until the election, a coalition government would consist of three equal powers of the PRG, GVN, and DRV.<sup>114</sup> This agreement practically guaranteed a communist takeover of the South and thus, left no hope for the modernization of South Vietnam as a non-communist state.

By the end of 1973, the Watergate scandal—deriving directly from Nixon's paranoia and extreme measures to defend and secure his policies in Vietnam—gave him little power as a president and even less support from the American public.<sup>115</sup> On August 8, 1974, Nixon announced that he was stepping down as President of the United States. By the fall of 1974, the PRG and DRV clearly controlled the battlefield and it was only a matter of time before they completely took over the South. Congress cut off funding to

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<sup>112</sup> McMahon, *Richard M. Nixon and Henry A. Kissinger Discuss South Vietnam's Fate, 1972*, 438.

<sup>113</sup> McMahon, 439.

<sup>114</sup> McMahon, *The Paris Peace Accords, 1973*, 440.

<sup>115</sup> Herring, 328.

the war, but eventually approved of the last \$300 million to evacuate Americans and U.S. citizens from South Vietnam. On April 30, 1975—much earlier than anyone, including the DRV and PRG had expected—Saigon crumbled in an offensive and South Vietnam fell to communism.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 338.

## Conclusion

Despite every attempt made to modernize South Vietnam as a capitalist and democratic state, no U.S. administration succeeded in reaching this goal. With that said, there are several interesting observations to note about how the Vietnam War began and ended. First, it appears that the urgency to prove that capitalism was a dominant ideology over communism plunged the U.S. into the war in the first place. Eisenhower, Kennedy, and even Johnson sought to modernize South Vietnam because they wanted to show that the Western way of development would prevail. But by the time Nixon took office, the social and economic development of South Vietnam mattered very little, if at all. Modernization may have mattered to Nixon at the beginning of his presidency, but only inasmuch as it helped preserve American credibility. By the second half of his presidency, any plans for modernizing South Vietnam had ceased to exist.

Second, the modernization of South Vietnam was initially sought by offering economic and educational assistance to Vietnam. But in the course of the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies, the means by which modernization was attempted changed. The ultimate goal of modernization became something that would be achieved by military involvement in Vietnam, rather than through economic or social assistance. Rather than nation building in the South, Kennedy and Johnson began to follow this flawed logic: if the U.S. can simply contain communism in the North, then the South can remain capitalist and democratic, which would lead to a Western modernization of the South. What they failed to understand was that communism could not be contained.

Third, regardless of how each administration justified the modernization of South Vietnam, one fact remains true: U.S. time in Vietnam was limited. The DRV and NLF would fight for as long as it took to gain their independence and freedom, while the United States had to eventually withdraw. As Ho Chi Minh exclaimed in 1966,

If by ‘final victory’ you mean the departure of the Americans, then we will fight to final victory. Everything depends on the Americans. If they want to make war for twenty years then we shall make war for twenty years. If they want to make peace, we shall make peace and invite them to tea afterwards.<sup>117</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon failed to confront the reality of the historical, military, and political circumstances in Vietnam and all colonized countries. Rostow and other contributors to the Modernization School Theory further increased this misunderstanding. They held a simplified and naïve understanding of what it would take for a formerly colonized country to develop. They thought that South Vietnam could be easily modernized as a capitalist and democratic country—and in a grossly underestimated amount of time. These assumptions caused the longest war in American history and a domestic divide that had never occurred before, and has not since been replicated.

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<sup>117</sup> Robert McNamara, *Argument Without End*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), 151.

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