CROSSING OCEANS WITH WORDS: DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATION DURING
THE VIETNAM WAR, 1945-1969

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ABSTRACT

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From the start of the First Indochina War to the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, Vietnamese and Americans (each with their many allies) fought to claim Vietnam in the name of communism or democracy. While violent bloodshed and constant miscommunication did occur quite frequently, both parties attempted to cross cultural boundaries in hopes of negotiation.

This project focuses upon cross-cultural communication from 1945-1969. I highlight letters and telegrams between the following American presidents and North, South Vietnamese leaders: Ho Chi Minh and Harry Truman, Ngo Dinh Diem and Dwight Eisenhower, Ngo Dinh Diem and John F. Kennedy, Ho Chi Minh and Lyndon B. Johnson, and Ho Chi Minh and Richard Nixon. I use more personalized forms of communication to create interconnections rather than continue to emphasize cultural disconnect and misunderstanding. Specifically, I argue that despite ideological and socio-cultural differences, each leader did strive and hope for something other than war. Unfortunately, these individuals remained steadfastly devoted to the idea of ideology and victory more than peaceful resolution.

Letters, telegrams, memorandums, and meetings serve as the main primary sources for this project. Since the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, government documents pertaining to the Vietnam War have been declassified, transcribed, and made public. In particular, this project utilizes the National Archives’ digital collection of the Pentagon Papers and Office of the Historian’s digital Foreign Relations of the United States.
For My Parents and Sister, Mia
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to the support, guidance, and inspiration of the people around me and only wish I could do them more justice in this short section.

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To the scholars and staff of the Office of the Historian’s FRUS series and National Archives’ Pentagon Papers, thank you. Without the compilation and digitization of thousands of memorandums, letters, telegrams, and meetings, I could not imagine writing this thesis.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“CROSSING OCEANS WITH WORDS:” AN INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: “SPEAKING THROUGH SILENCE:” HARRY TRUMAN AND HO CHI MINH</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Communist Foe to Catholic Friend</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: “FALLING DOMINOES ON DIEN BIEN PHU:” DWIGHT EISENHOWER AND NGO DINH DIEM</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: “A WORLD ON THE BRINK:” JOHN F. KENNEDY AND NGO DINH DIEM</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Diem and Back</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: “AN ENDLESS QUAGMIRE:” LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND HO CHI MINH</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: “NON-NEGOTIABLE NEGOTIATIONS:” RICHARD NIXON AND HO CHI MINH</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“CROSSING OCEANS WITH WORDS:” A CONCLUSION</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: LETTERS AND TELEGRAMS FROM HO CHI MINH TO HARRY TRUMAN</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: LETTERS AND MEMORANDUMS BETWEEN DWIGHT EISENHOWER AND NGO DINH DIEM</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: LETTERS AND TELEGRAMS BETWEEN JOHN F. KENNEDY AND NGO DINH DIEM ................................................................. 137

APPENDIX D: LETTER EXCHANGE BETWEEN LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND HO CHI MINH ................................................................. 162

APPENDIX E: LETTER EXCHANGE BETWEEN RICHARD NIXON AND HO CHI MINH ................................................................. 165
“CROSSING OCEANS WITH WORDS:” AN INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War was a war of missteps, misunderstandings, and misconceptions. Ambiguity and complexity only begin to explain what seem like never-ending contradictions, whether in military strategy, ideological framework, or foreign policymaking. Even into the 21st century, scholars continue to debate the factors and individuals most responsible for the war. Was it Ho Chi Minh, fervent nationalist and communist despot? Ngo Dinh Diem, autocratic American puppet? Harry Truman, anti-communist traditionalist devoted to ideology? Dwight Eisenhower, absent leader and indefatigable Cold Warrior? Lyndon B. Johnson, egoistic and forever indecisive schemer? Or Richard Nixon, paranoid liar, manipulator, and aggressive gamer? Rather than engage in a continuation of the efforts to assign blame, this thesis examines and reinterprets these human embodiments of the Cold War, recognizing that all of their flaws, faults, and triumphs contributed to a deeply multifaceted war. In particular, this project analyzes the letters and telegrams of U.S. presidents and two Vietnamese leaders, exploring the nuances of policymaking and individual ideology instead of overlooking these documents for their more personal approach to diplomacy. The letters and telegrams between Diem, Ho, and the American presidents (albeit with some elements of diplomatic etiquette) reveal surprising similarities, which suggest that despite what seemed to be insurmountable differences – ideological and socio-cultural – each did hope and strive for something other than war. Unfortunately, these individuals remained steadfastly devoted to the idea of ideology and victory more than peaceful resolution and thus orchestrated one of the most devastating wars of the twentieth century.

1 Note: Ho, Diem, and the American presidents were certainly part of vast and complex networks of advisors, military leaders, citizens, etc., all who contributed to the war. However, given their authority and leadership positions, they were key components of the war - its processes, ideologies, and frameworks.
During the Cold War, policymakers, presidents, and military leaders regularly communicated, whether through memorandums, telephone calls, telegrams and letters, or face-to-face conservations. These written communiqueés have been recorded and transcribed for scholars and the public through such collections as the Office of the Historian’s *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* and the National Archives’ *Pentagon Papers*. This project examines how diplomatic communication becomes personalized when two warring parties attempted to communicate with each other one-on-one, primarily in letters or telegrams. Interestingly, during the Eisenhower presidency, Ngo Dinh Diem was afforded the unique opportunity to visit the Oval Office, which provided not only in-person communication, but also resulted in in-depth written records. Ultimately, what made these forms of communication more personal was the direct contact between presidents and Vietnamese leaders as they exchanged ideas or tried to negotiate. While dialogue failed to support cooperation or at least prevent further prolonged warfare, it highlighted unique attempts to cross vast cultural and socio-political oceans with words of diplomacy.

The process of composing letters and telegrams was not simply delegated by the various presidents, but by his networks of advisors, policymakers, personal confidants, and allies. Letter writing was collaborative; for example, after a meeting with Lyndon Johnson, Ngo Dinh Diem was encouraged to write a letter to John F. Kennedy. Given lingual differences - French, Vietnamese, and English - this letter crossed the boundaries between American and South Vietnamese administrations. Kennedy’s subsequent response ran through its own channels of approval with drafting and rewording by key advisors in the administration. Moreover, letters

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became rhetorical, tactical, and political devices, particularly those released to the public in the Department of State Bulletin. Publicized exchanges revealed to the American people that progress was being made (or at least attempted), alliances were forged, and negotiations were proposed. However, these political motives do not devalue the communication between culturally disparate allies or enemies. Letters and telegrams thus provide an often overlooked window into departmental and cross-cultural communication during a fragmented and violent period, in which any kind of discussion concerning peace seemed ostensibly impossible.

I focus upon the following letter exchanges: Harry Truman and Ho Chi Minh, Dwight Eisenhower and Ngo Dinh Diem, John F. Kennedy and Ngo Dinh Diem, Lyndon B. Johnson and Ho Chi Minh, and Richard Nixon and Ho Chi Minh. Cross-cultural exchanges were not limited to these individuals as Ambassador Nolting wrote extensively to Secretary of State Nguyen Dinh Thuan and Henry Kissinger spoke in-depth with Le Duc Tho. However, as Barbara Hinckley emphasizes, “if symbolism is central to politics, it is clearly also central to the office of President.” Higher offices of leadership carry symbolic significance in the policies they enact, propaganda they encourage, devotion they inspire, and rhetoric they support. For many Americans, Kennedy was a symbol of youthful vitality, bringing new ideas and perspectives into the White House, while for many Vietnamese, Ho was a symbol of independence, resilience, and hope. Such symbols begin to capture similarities between supposedly irreconcilable leaders.

Methodologically, this project is not easily served by one particular theory or key text, but by bringing together and interconnecting multiple scholarly disciplines. In new historicism and cultural studies, history is not viewed as a series of linear events progressing in time, but in


ideological, spatial, and cross-cultural terms. Consequently, the analysis of presidential letters and telegrams places the scholar in both a circular and linear historical progression as presidents and Vietnamese leaders wrote and reconsidered evolving and stagnant ideas. Temporally, the Vietnam Wars moved forward in time, but the ideologies espoused and upheld by both Vietnamese and American moved circularly. Simply, small changes in policy continuously revolved around two singular ideas – containment vs. communist-nationalism. However, communication proves difficult to understand without familiarizing oneself with those who chose to communicate: the historiography and leadership studies of the five presidents and two Vietnamese leaders. In order to proceed with a rhetorical, communications analysis, I have also referenced scholars who reinterpret and examine the discourse and speech patterns of modern American presidents. Finally, the study of foreign policymaking has been invaluable in this scholarly endeavor as it highlights the role of communications, diplomacy, military strategy, and ideology during the Cold and Vietnam Wars. With such an interdisciplinary framework, this project looks both inward at personal communiqués and outward at the broader world.

Presidential historiography regarding the conflicts in Indochina commences with Harry Truman, who is often a subject of great controversy as many scholars question his decision to drop the atomic bomb, contributing to the end of World War II and launching the United States’ entry into the Cold War era. He was Roosevelt’s after-the-fact successor, determined to carry on traditions of American exceptionalism and morality, becoming deeply involved in the preservation of American democracy, as evidenced by policy decisions during the Korean War. Truman’s legacy in Vietnam has often been perceived as one of rigid ideology, indecision, and complacency as he refused to negotiate with Ho in deference to his French allies. For Truman, a stable French ally in Cold War Western Europe was simply more valuable than any notions of
self-determination for Southeast Asian peoples. More recent scholarship, however, is not always so condemnatory, for example; Robert Ferrell who reconsiders Truman as interpreted by historical revisionists: “whatever their view of U.S. responsibility for the cold war, the revisionists adopted an unhistorical-and also unfair-tactic by virtually assuming that a statesman was wrong until proved right.” Refusing to denounce Truman as wholly responsible for the Cold War, Ferrell portrays him as more of a product of his environment and repudiates revisionist scholars’ accusations of economic and imperial aggression. Elizabeth Edwards Spalding appraises Truman’s role in the Cold War and delineates his ideological policy and approach to warfare: “political thought and action of Truman’s … war of nerves … both infused and was subsumed in a new postwar liberal internationalism.” Dennis Merrill and Robert McMahon reaffirm these crucial connections between policymaking and ideology, depicting the former president as a multifaceted player in an ambiguous postwar world. In their analyses of Truman, no longer simply an anti-communist ideologue or hapless successor, these scholars bring nuance to Truman’s emerging Cold War ideologies.

Dawning a new era of Republican leadership, Dwight Eisenhower also hoped to contain communism as he aided the French in the First Indochina War and extended American involvement in South Vietnam by supporting Ngo Dinh Diem. He served as general during World War II, negotiated the end to the bloody Korean War, tested the limits of the nuclear arms

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race, and introduced the presidential bureaucracy. Given his success in largely keeping boots off the ground in Southeast Asia, Eisenhower’s role in bringing about the Second Indochina War remains highly contested. Some scholars, for example, Edward Cuddy, contend that it was Eisenhower who created the socio-political, ideological, and military debacle that became the Vietnam War: “Johnson had the misfortune to be in the barn when Ike’s chickens came home to roost.” While Cuddy’s overly sympathetic portrayal of an often egoistic and very human president denies Johnson agency in his own orchestration of events, it reveals an emphasis upon broadening the parameters of culpability. James Arnold indicates that “Eisenhower’s … legacy was clear. He had kept the country out of another Asian war but he had ordered American advisers into Vietnam and permitted them to edge toward active combat … until his last day in office, he retained a firm belief in the domino theory. He bequeathed it to his successor.”

However, scholars do not simply blame Eisenhower without exploring the nuances of his Cold War environment, including the threat of nuclear war, the rise of postcolonial revolutions, the decline of western European power, and the ever-prevalent communism vs. democracy dichotomy. For Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, Eisenhower thought cautiously and pragmatically about foreign and domestic policymaking: “orderly process was the sine qua non for protecting a decision against poor execution because of misinterpretation,

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7 Unfortunately, the narrow scope of this project limits other significant components of Eisenhower historiography, for example, his role in the Korean War and as Republican leader: Callum A. MacDonald, Korea: The War Before Vietnam (New York: The Free Press, 1986) and Steven Wagner, Eisenhower Republicanism: Pursuing the Middle Way (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006).
miscommunication, or ignorance.” In particular, Eisenhower redefined Truman’s National Security Council and bureaucratized his disorganized White House advisory system. Eisenhower is therefore seemingly responsible for broadening American intervention in South Vietnam and applauded for avoiding overt escalation.

John F. Kennedy’s legacy is also under review and debate because scholars continue to question if Kennedy would have escalated the Second Indochina War had he not been assassinated. Two interpretive schools have emerged: pro-Kennedy or anti-escalation versus culpable-Kennedy or possible-escalation. Gary Hess outlines these two schools as the orthodox exceptionalist narrative and the orthodox continuity narrative. David Kaiser and Lawrence Freedman occupy the first historiographical trend as Kaiser contends that “Kennedy would never have made a decision to fight in Southeast Asia in isolation from his broader foreign policy goals.” While less critical, Freedman also writes that “it is probably fair to say that, unlike Johnson, [Kennedy] would have looked hard at methods by which he might have escaped from this commitment including negotiations with the North.” For Kaiser and Freedman, Kennedy’s prudent policy allowed him to delay escalation in Vietnam, so much so that if he had lived, the so-called formula for escalation, delineated in the Pentagon Papers, would have resulted in a successful withdrawal.

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11 Kaiser also writes, “that John F. Kennedy … was the most skeptical senior official of his administration regarding the wisdom of war in Southeast Asia gives the war its particularly tragic character … Kennedy’s cautious approach to the use of American power and his interest in accommodation with America’s adversaries distinguished him from most of his senior subordinates. Kennedy’s attempts to inspire his countrymen showed an understanding that Americans needed new kinds of challenges” (8). David Kaiser, American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 485.
Kennedy not only for the ethnocentric design of his administration’s foreign policy program, but also for the expansion of American intervention. According to Bassett and Pelz, “by late 1963 Kennedy had radically expanded the American commitment to Vietnam … By arguing that Vietnam was a test … of American credibility in the Cold War, he raised the costs of withdrawal for his successor.” Clearly, for scholars following the second historiographical trend, Kennedy did not significantly deviate from the ideological mindset and anti-communist framework of his predecessors. For Hess, who provides a balanced overview of both narratives, “in no area of scholarship on the war is there greater imbalance.” This contested legacy of culpability, as well as the image it defines, remains a key component of the historiography related to the Kennedy phase of the Vietnam War.

Like Kennedy, Johnson inherited an increasingly difficult situation in Vietnam while he also remained relatively unprepared to deal with the challenges of foreign policy, particularly in such a hostile policymaking environment. Domestic tensions, especially involving race, and international power struggles weighed heavily on the president. Johnson made one of the most controversial decisions of the Vietnam War: drastic military escalation in conjunction with key advisors and the legitimization of these actions by Congress (Gulf of Tonkin Resolution).

Edward Cuddy’s interpretation of Johnson’s role in Vietnam is unique in its shift of culpability simply because so many scholars view Johnson as directly responsible for the most violent years of the Vietnam War. For example, Larry Berman writes that “Johnson chose to Americanize the war … he chose to accept General Westmoreland’s attrition strategy; he chose to paint optimistic

\[14\] “This move exposed the neocolonialism that never lay very far from the surface of the U.S. approach to the patron-client relationship with South Vietnam.” Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 211. Note that Catton also explores Diem’s relationship with the Eisenhower administration, but the majority of his monograph focuses upon the Kennedy era.


scenarios for the American public; he chose to hide the anticipated enemy buildup prior to Tet.… Vietnam had become, against his every desire, Lyndon Johnson’s war.”17 However, Berman devalues Johnson’s role in a diverse and complex White House advising system where he inherited an extremely unstable domestic and global policymaking environment from his rather idolized predecessor. Brian VanDeMark, David Barrett, and Fredrik Logevall provide much more in-depth analyses of Johnson’s presidential character and policymaking decisions. VanDeMark addresses the major foreign policy failures of Johnson and his advisors, but manages to depict Johnson as a human being, not simply irrational or power-hungry: “fearing injury to the perception of American power … policymakers rigidly pursued a course which ultimately injured the substance of American power.”18 Barrett argues that while Johnson’s decisions reflected an American-centric view of the world, he did not escalate casually without “diverse information and advice.”19 In eloquent summation, Logevall indicates that “the decision by … Johnson and his closest advisers for major war in Vietnam made a horrible kind of sense. They were not evil individuals, but individuals who are not evil can enact policies that have evil consequences.”20 Though sympathetic accounts of Johnson certainly carry significance, these more nuanced interpretations begin to shed light on the complexity of Johnson as both victim and perpetrator. Thus, Johnson was both responsible for escalation and victim of almost twenty years of fervent anti-communism and invariable containment.

Nixon is known for an administration rife with corruption and secrecy, but like Johnson, he quickly realized that uncomplicated negotiations and straightforward military solutions alone could not solve the Vietnam problem. Determined to achieve “peace with honor,” Nixon found himself in a prolonged and progressively hopeless war, in which peace and honor were merely facades for an ideological and military victory. Those closer to Nixon, for example, James Humes, historicize Nixon’s legacy tentatively, remembering an intelligent, yet fundamentally flawed leader who “was prepared to do the unthinkable to achieve the ultimate objective of making a safer world.”

However, given the overwhelming evidence of Nixon’s corrupt politics, backdoor dealings, and disturbing devotion to secrecy, most scholars approach the Nixon presidency with censure and very little empathy. Andrew Johns argues that Nixon should even be credited for pushing a hawk-like foreign policy agenda before coming into power: “Nixon’s persistent hawkish rhetoric made it virtually impossible for Johnson to take any meaningful steps toward a negotiated settlement or even withdraw from Vietnam.”

The analysis by Johns captures Nixon’s prowess for manipulation and ideological fervor, but it also reveals a pro-Johnson and anti-Nixon bias that affords Nixon unwarranted authority and Johnson little accountability. Jeffrey Kimball and Larry Berman reaffirm this emphasis upon Nixon’s penchant for deception and hawkish politics. However, Kimball’s psychohistorical methodology provides Nixon with some form of sympathy as he considers the grueling hours and overwhelming stress of the presidential office: “after another night without much sleep, [Nixon] was awake at 5:30 AM.”

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21 James C. Humes, *Nixon’s Ten Commandments of Statecraft* (New York: Scriber, 1997), 181. Humes’ connection to Nixon certainly complicates his scholarship. During Nixon’s presidency, he served as “a White House speechwriter and then director of Policy and Plans in Public Affairs at the Senate Department” (15). However, it was Nixon who wrote these ten commandments of statecraft, which involved negotiations, covenants, publicity, bargains, challenges, retreats, friends, enemies, and faith.

… and spent the day completing the speech and reviewing follow-up public relations plans.”

Ultimately, Nixon’s story remains a “story of diplomatic deception and public betrayal” as the Nixon behind the mask of presidential authority and ideological dogmatism becomes almost impossible to penetrate.

In North Vietnam, one man has emerged as a symbol of the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh; scholars continuing to debate his ideological nature, whether he should be primarily considered a communist ideologue or nationalist unifier. Ho died in 1969, the first year of the Nixon presidency, failing to witness the eventual reunification of his country and the victory of communist-nationalists over American imperialists. An enigmatic and controversial figure, Ho often remains inaccessible to scholars who wrestle with the historiographical difficulties of portraying a charismatic leader who was also responsible for violence and psychological terror. Consequently, two popular historiographical methods have been invoked by scholars in an attempt to understand Ho and his ambiguous persona: ideological and biographical. The ideological approach captures the debate over Ho’s politics – communist or nationalist - though many scholars have come to a more moderate consensus that Ho’s communism was an amalgamation of nationalism and Marxist-Leninism: “These diverse Marxist and indigenous

[25] Note that scholars are beginning to explore the role that other Party members played during the war. In particular, Le Duan was a powerful influence within the Party, focused intently upon the Southern war as he advocated “full-scale war for reunification” (47). Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 17-47. However, this does not diminish Ho Chi Minh’s invaluable role in both the war and revolution. Ho carried symbolic significance, considering his contacts with American presidents and use in North Vietnamese war propaganda. In the United States, it was Ho whom many perceived as the sole leader of the Party.
[26] Access to North Vietnamese archives is now becoming more available to scholars.
intellectual legacies informed Ho’s sustained discussion of the American revolution.”

Incorporating this ideological debate into a socio-political delineation of Ho, biographical scholars frame Ho within the context of a tumultuous domestic and international environment, evoking some admiration for the successes of Ho’s leadership. According to William Duiker, “For good or ill, Ho Chi Minh managed to reflect in his person two of the central forces in modern society—the desire for national independence and the quest for social and economic justice.”

Ironically, Ho has acquired more historiographical nuance than some of the American presidents, thereby providing insight into the very complexity of Vietnam War historiography.

In South Vietnam, it is Ngo Dinh Diem who stands symbolically as he is reinterpreted by scholars. On November 2, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu were assassinated by Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) officers, ending a nearly decade reign of nation building, coups, cross-cultural diplomacy, and violent police action. Given his less than celebratory end, Diem has often been portrayed as nothing more than an American puppet, governing tyrannically and inefficiently over the culturally diverse and multifaceted South Vietnam. Seth Jacobs chooses this method of analyzing Diem as he focuses primarily on the American role in the alliance, highlighting cultural superiority, religion, and ideological propaganda. Jacobs clearly establishes the dependent relationship between Diem and his U.S. allies, describing Diem as a self-serving sycophant who fit perfectly with a religiously dogmatic conception of nation-building: “viewed through the prism of American racism, Diem was … that rarest of commodities: a straight-shooting, God-fearing, two-fisted man in the inscrutable, un-

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Christian, effeminate East.” However, Edward Miller and Jessica Chapman reconsider this seemingly traditional narrative, depicting Diem and other South Vietnamese actors as nuanced individuals with motive and agency. Miller writes of a man who, while overly familial, insular, dogmatically unyielding, and violently idealistic, believed in Vietnamese independence: “Diem’s calls for ‘true independence’ resonat[ed] strongly with his fellow anticommmunists…. Bao Dai himself later acknowledged … the prestige and credibility that Diem … had gained in nationalist circles was a crucial factor in his decision to appoint Diem.” Chapman broadens her interpretation of Diem to include an in-depth analysis of three influential South Vietnamese politico-religious organizations: Binh Xuyen, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai. According to Chapman, “Diem too often stands alone or alongside his American advisors … while the varied and complex Vietnamese experiences of the country’s postcolonial moment remain understudied and largely unknown.” Not one monograph is more insightful than the other as they each tell a unique story about an individual whose paradoxes and perhaps even fatal flaws render his personality difficult to neatly categorize.

While information concerning Diem’s relationships with policymakers other than his family members and the United States is slowly becoming more accessible to scholars, the communication and rhetoric of modern U.S. presidents has been widely studied. Interestingly, in the following communications analyses, more personal forms of dialogue – individual letters and

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telegrams – are not the main focus, but rather how presidents portray themselves on a much larger scale. Roderick Hart emphasizes that the modern presidency of media politics and symbolic imagery commenced with John F. Kennedy: “it became apparent that it was he who shifted the rhetorical focus of the White House.”\footnote{32} For Hart, the modern presidency is more about image than substance as presidents constantly talk to the American public while often failing to convey messages of deeper meaning. Moreover, Barbara Hinckley and Colleen Shogan address how the presidential office becomes a means of providing the American people with a sort of institutionalized rhetoric.\footnote{33} Taking this broader concept of presidential rhetoric, Denise Bostdorff applies it to the conventions of crisis, in which American presidents shape the public’s understanding of foreign policy. According to Bostdorff, “average Americans have little direct experience with foreign affairs, and they defer to presidential words of expertise for guidance in such matters.”\footnote{34} Ultimately, lingual constructions, signs and symbols, and presidential personas interconnect in Moya Ann Ball’s monograph, \textit{Vietnam-on-the-Potomac}. Ball’s study of decision-making culture within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations is significant not only because it focuses upon Vietnam, but also because it highlights more personal connections and individual idiosyncrasies. Ball argues that the “creation of a small-group communication culture … became the motivating force behind the overt action taken in July 1965.”\footnote{35} In the modern presidential era, communication therefore emerges as a method of shaping policy, whether domestically or abroad.


\footnote{33}{Hinckley writes that “through forty years of American history, presidents present themselves to the public in much the same way. They are alone in the government, equivalent to the nation, religious and cultural leaders who shun politics and elections.” Barbara Hinckley, \textit{The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves} (New York: Routledge, 1990), 133. Colleen J. Shogan, \textit{The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents} (College Station: Texas A& M University Press, 2006).}

\footnote{34}{Denise M. Bostdorff, \textit{The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 205.}

\footnote{35}{Moya Ann Ball, \textit{Vietnam-on-the-Potomac} (New York: Praeger, 1992), 187.}
Communication helped policymakers maneuver among the many minefields of tense negotiations and on-the-brink military situations throughout the Cold War. However, foreign policy during the Cold War is quite broad as it can encompass topics as diverse as Soviet-U.S. relations, the Cuban Missile Crisis, massive retaliation versus flexible response, and American intervention in Guatemala. Thus, for practical purposes, I will highlight literature that primarily explores strategic and diplomatic policymaking through an American perspective. 

Strategies of Containment by John Lewis Gaddis provides a comprehensive survey of containment policy and ideology during the Cold War era, chronicling the Truman through Reagan administrations. Understanding how containment functioned as both a strategy and ideology is essential for the value-laden component of cross-cultural communiqués. Gaddis articulates in his conclusion that “containment … was an extension of war, diplomacy, and values by other means.”

Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Windt offer another close look into the early development of Cold War policymaking, analyzing the presidential shift from Roosevelt to Truman, which welcomed the global dichotomy between communism and democratic capitalism. Narrowing the scope of research, Alexander George and William Simons, Francis Gavin, and Marc Trachtenberg examine how diplomacy worked in the post-World War II world, one in which nuclear weaponry and the threat of total warfare allowed for more coercive forms of negotiation. Finally, Zachary

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Karabell presents a novel reinterpretation of postcolonial revolutions, consequences of American interventionist policies: “My position is less that successful intervention depended on collaboration than it depended on the convergence of interests.”\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, foreign policy during the Cold War was part of a complex web of strategy, ideology, diplomacy, and postcolonial development, all of which compelled American leaders to wage war in Vietnam.

Expanding upon American-centric interpretations, more scholars are beginning to approach foreign policy during the Vietnam War as multifaceted. Vietnam encompasses many landscapes, from the French imperialists to the exceptionalist Americans to the indomitably determined North Vietnamese. Frances FitzGerald was one of the first Western scholars to consider the Vietnam War from the perspectives of both North and South Vietnam. But unfortunately, her almost celebratory portrayals of Ho, North Vietnam and condemnatory depictions of the U.S., South Vietnam often become unsettling caricatures. For example, FitzGerald compares the relationship between the U.S. and South Vietnam to that of Shakespeare’s Prospero and Caliban: “Prospero … has invented a world that he with his ‘magical powers’ can dominate. In Caliban, the ‘bestial’ native … he sees everything he detests in himself.”\textsuperscript{40} Extensively researched and eloquently narrated, Fredrik Logevall’s \textit{Embers of War} adds more complexity to each historical actor, offering a comprehensive analysis of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations’ early involvement in Indochina. Logevall illustrates that policymaking, whether military or diplomatic, was a multi-party affair: “Chinese, Soviet, and Viet Minh … met … in Geneva to evaluate the changed situation in Paris and to coordinate

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{39} Zachary Karabell, \textit{Architects of Intervention: The United States, the Third World, and the Cold War, 1946-1962} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 12.
\item\textsuperscript{40} Frances FitzGerald, \textit{Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam 1972} (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002), 297.
\end{footnotes}
Maintaining the focus upon Vietnamese voices, Lien-Hang Nguyen highlights the North Vietnamese approach to policymaking as she captures the shifting alliances and key individuals within the Politburo – Le Duan and Le Duc Tho. According to Nguyen, Party unity was rather deceptive because the Party had divided into two camps, pro-Soviet negotiations or pro-Chinese military escalation, thereby reinforcing the multiplicity of interests involved in foreign policy. Furthermore, in shorter essays, Robert Brigham, William Duiker, and Qiang Zhai depict Vietnam as a complex and divisive landscape, which included the National Liberation Front (NLF), North Vietnamese diplomats, and the People’s Republic of China. Such interpretations indicate that policy is no longer simply comprised of Kennedy memorandums, Johnson telephone calls, or Nixon tapes.

Each section of this review has outlined methods and scholarly disciplines that helped frame, explain, or elaborate my analysis of cross-cultural communication. In this final section, I focus upon the sources of greatest influence, whether regarding topic, methodology, or philosophy. Edward Miller and William Duiker have been two of the most influential scholars on this project due to their emphasis upon reinterpretation and transnationalism. Miller, who has already been discussed in the Diem segment, rejects solely American viewpoints in favor of a transnational analysis of the Diem-U.S. alliance. While broader in scope, Duiker also seeks to readdress the questions, debates, and complications that have emerged in Vietnam War.

historiography, including Kennedy’s culpability and North Vietnam’s military strategy. In his conclusion, Duiker indicates that “there is reasonable doubt that nations are able to learn abiding lessons from past experience…. each generation must learn from its own experience … the nation could all too willingly march blindly into another Vietnam.”44 Allan Goodman’s study on transnational negotiations is less comprehensive, but just as invaluable for its multifaceted approach to cross-cultural diplomacy. Goodman recognizes that negotiations were a complicated affair and that both the U.S. and North Vietnam were responsible for prolonging the war through stalemated diplomacy: “behind-the-scenes diplomacy … secret negotiations … reinforced Washington’s and Hanoi’s intransigence. Hanoi’s strategy of negotiating to protract the fighting and Washington’s counterstrategy of gradual escalation … prolonged the war.”45 Lastly, David Armstrong and Cathal Nolan consider the many ethical quandaries that can emerge in any project on the Vietnam War: “war … encapsulates so many moral ambiguities.”46 These scholars have thus emphasized the rich complexity of the Vietnam War – part of diverse cultural environments, interplay between nuanced enemies and allies, and rife with unsettling moral complications.

In this historiographical review, I have highlighted key texts that shaped and influenced the course of my project. While these monographs and articles are quite illuminating, they do not spend a great deal of time analyzing personalized letters and telegrams. Thus, I am helping to create a new sub-section of Vietnam War studies, which emerges from more unorthodox transnational reinterpretations. However, my contribution does not attempt to diminish the work

of those who emphasize cultural disconnect, as misunderstanding certainly exacerbated diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam. This project provides a reinterpretation that reduces the perceived gap between American presidents and Vietnamese leaders. As Edward Miller writes, “For all their differences, Americans and their South Vietnamese counterparts actually had more in common than they sometimes cared to admit.” Differences remain, whether religious, political, or ideological, but through a more intimate form of written communication, both presidents and leaders revealed that they were all human beings fighting an impossible war.

Harry Truman, despite disregarding Ho Chi Minh’s many letters and telegrams, was more similar to the communist-nationalist leader than he realized. As both individuals navigated the increasingly dangerous postwar world, their images and legacies became intertwined.

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CHAPTER ONE: “SPEAKING THROUGH SILENCE:” HARRY TRUMAN AND HO CHI MINH

The April 12, 1945 death of Franklin D. Roosevelt resulted in Harry S. Truman assuming the presidency, facing the traumatic and tragic end to World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. In his address to Congress, Truman grieved for Roosevelt’s death and prepared for the battles to come: “It is not enough to yearn for peace. We must work, and if necessary, fight for it.”48 The struggles any new president might face were compounded by such issues as the development of nuclear weapons, rising tensions with the Soviet Union, an unstable and weakened Western Europe, and the emergence of postcolonial revolutions. Truman even admitted that he was relatively unfamiliar with the workings of foreign policy, particularly during wartime: “I knew the President had a great many meetings with Churchill and Stalin. I was not familiar with any of these things and it was really something to think about.”49 Consequently, Truman relied upon Roosevelt’s policymaking framework to proceed with diplomatic relations and military operations, becoming more acquainted with his own value-making system as he eased into his presidential role. Robert McMahon indicates that at this point, the fate of Indochina “ranked relatively low on the overall scale of U.S. priorities.”50 Nonetheless, before his death, Roosevelt appears to have shifted his policy stance on Indochina from an advocate of a trusteeship to a grudging role as a colonial apologist. Emerging Cold War realignments had forced Roosevelt to reconsider his stance particularly because the French were to play an important role in the on-going war against communism. Truman, like his predecessor,

emphasized a rather U.S.-Eurocentric conception of global stability, but more explicitly, as he did not seem to have much interest in supporting an end to European imperialism.

In August, Truman ordered the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, acts which effectively ended World War II and provided a glimpse of the nuclear future. However, postwar euphoria was short-lived as Winston Churchill outlined a dichotomous ideological shift emerging in the postwar world: “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended.... famous cities and the populations around them lie in ... the Soviet sphere, and all are subject ... not only to Soviet influence but to... control from Moscow.”\(^51\) Heavily influenced by Churchill’s Iron Curtain,\(^52\) Truman prepared his administration to combat the tyranny of Soviet communism, preserving alliances with non-communist nations, even those with colonial ties. His inaugural address even captured Churchill’s Iron Curtain dichotomy: “Communism is based on the belief that man is so weak and inadequate that he is unable to govern himself, and therefore requires the rule of strong masters. Democracy is based on the conviction that man has the moral and intellectual capacity, as well as the inalienable right, to govern himself with reason and justice.”\(^53\) Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States, as during the Roosevelt administration, was no longer possible as the Soviets moved to acquire nuclear power and satellite states throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Feeding anti-communist hysteria, this global shift instilled in the Truman administration an obsession with national security, credibility, and military power, including such factors as the development of the National Security Council, the containment policies of

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NSC-68, Soviet rollback, and anti-Soviet NATO strategies. Truman, like his advisors and the American public, would eventually view any form of communism as a threat to American hegemony and thus the policy of containment was born.

Thousands of miles from the United States, in a region unfamiliar to many Americans, communist-nationalist Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence: “we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, solemnly declare to the world that Viet-Nam has the right to be a free and independent country ... The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize ... their physical and mental strength ... sacrifice their lives and property ... to safeguard their independence and liberty.” After eighty years of French colonial rule, Vietnam was prepared to achieve self-determination and end what was perceived to be an oppressive reign of socio-political, economic, and cultural subordination. Throughout the 1930s and during World War II, many anti-French Vietnamese parties had prepared to challenge French domination, but Ho’s consolidation of nationalist groups with his communist coalition proved most effective in championing national independence. Although the French purge of communist parties prevented a strong communist presence in South Vietnam, by the end of the


war, most Vietnamese believed that Ho was the leader to unite Vietnam – regardless of cultural or religious faction.\footnote{Even by the mid-1950s, “Ho Chi Minh remained a tremendously popular figure and no one doubted he would win a Vietnam-wide election.” James R. Arnold, \textit{The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America’s Intervention in Vietnam} (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 285.}

Modeling his pronouncement after the U.S. \textit{Declaration of Independence}, Ho hoped that this act of independence would establish connections and eventual alliances between Vietnam and western nations. Unfortunately, Ho’s relations with communist countries and leaders complicated his efforts to communicate with Western Europe and the United States as Vietnamese independence was one of the early ideological and military signs of a dichotomous Cold War. Reaching out to the global community, Ho implored upon free nations to take Vietnamese independence seriously and offer their assistance in what he termed “the Resistance war” in his appeals: “Peoples of the Allied powers!.... The Vietnamese ask you to intervene ... The Resistance war will be long and fraught with sufferings. Whatever sacrifices we have to make and however long the Resistance war will last, we are determined to fight to the end, until Vietnam is completely independent and unified.”\footnote{Ho Chi Minh, “Message to the Vietnamese People, The French People, and The Peoples of the Allied Nations (December 21, 1946),” in \textit{Ho Chi Minh Selected Articles and Speeches 1920-1967}, edit. Jack Woddis (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 37-8.} However, such appeals were contradicted and tempered by more explicit communist rhetoric, which were suggestive to U.S. policymakers of the ideology of the Soviet Union: “[the French] have hampered the prospering of our national bourgeoisie; they have mercilessly exploited our workers.”\footnote{Ho Chi Minh Speech, “Vietnam Declares Independence, 1945,” in \textit{Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War}, edit. Robert McMahon (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 24.} Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh compatriots had thus reached an impasse, attempting to foster communication with the United States while espousing rhetoric with a decidedly disconcerting communist tinge.\footnote{Ibid.}
On October 17, 1945, Ho pleaded with Truman for the “establishment and consolidation of world peace and prosperity.” Unfortunately, for Ho, this would remain one of many unanswered communiqués as he naively attempted to develop a diplomatic relationship with the U.S. government, unaware that he was in the process of being labeled a communist menace by American political officials. In this opening letter, Ho not only emphasized the legitimacy of Vietnamese independence, but he also entreated Truman to include Vietnam in negotiations and decisions concerning Indochina since “France ... ignominiously sold Indo China to Japan and betrayed the Allies.” An October 18, 1945 paraphrase of Ho’s letter to Truman, composed by the U.S. Embassy in Chinking, expressed sympathy for the death of Colonel Peter Dowey (O.S.S Commander of Saigon) and continued to espouse such “admiration and friendship ... toward American people and its representatives.” While Ho grieved over the loss of a supportive American ally, he also used this letter to speak to Truman’s sense of global responsibility, peace, and democratic ideology: “[the] US stand for international justice and peace is appreciated by entire Viet-Namese nation and ‘governing sphere.’”

Less than a month later, November 8, Ho wrote Truman once again, outlining the violent situation in Indochina and reiterating the French betrayal of the Vietnamese people. Ho indicated that the French relinquished their colonial holdings by allowing the Japanese takeover, which violated “pledges contained in protective treaties March 1874 and June 1884.”

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62 Ibid., C-74.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
defending the legality of the Provisional Government, Ho maintained that independent Vietnam emerged in accordance with the Atlantic and San Francisco Charters. It was thus the French who were entirely responsible for the developing war: “if ... disorder, bloodshed or general conflagration ... break out ... entire responsibility must be imputed to French.”

Ho’s November 23 letter continued to condemn French colonialism, “two million Vietnamese died of starvation during winter of 1944 and spring 1945 because of starvation policy of French,” but it also carried a humanitarian message to the Truman administration. Pleading with Truman, Ho wrote that “unless great world powers and international relief organizations bring us immediate assistance we face imminent catastrophe.” These November communiqués attempted to resonate with an American sense of justice, particularly in the vein of anti-imperialism. Furthermore, they captured Ho’s reluctance to embrace an all-out military conflict against the French, thereby suggesting that peace and cross-cultural dialogue remained very much in Ho’s mind.

Growing desperate for a response from Truman, Ho wrote a more explicit letter, dated February 16, 1946, reminding Truman and his advisors that Vietnam had resisted the violent colonialism of France and Japan and in turn, the U.S. should honor “promises made by the Allies at YALTA, SAN FRANCISCO.” What was quite significant about this letter was Ho’s emphasis upon U.S. responsibility: “it violently contrasts with the firm stand you have taken in

66 Ibid., C-86.
68 Ibid., C-88.
your twelve point declaration, and with the idealistic loftiness and generosity expressed by your delegates.”

According to Ho, the Vietnamese defeated the Japanese and in the process, established their own government (reflective of their socio-political ideologies), which should receive the protection and legitimization granted by international agreements. Interestingly, implicit in this letter was a plaintive demand and challenge to the “United States as guardians and champions of World Justice to take a decisive step in support of our independence.”

Almost two weeks later, on February 28, 1946, Ho wrote his most well known letter reiterating the Atlantic and San Francisco Charters, clearly feeling betrayed by the country – and its eminent leaders - that once supported Vietnamese independence. Moreover, hoping to preclude the advent of war, Ho wrote, “I therefore most earnestly appeal to you personally and to the American people to interfere urgently in support of our independence.” However, it was too late as Truman disregarded the aforementioned coups and military aggression of the French colonists, viewing Ho as another Mao Zedong or Josef Stalin and believing that only a U.S.-French alliance could stop war and preserve democracy.

Though Truman’s dismissal of Ho’s many letters and telegrams may very well indict him for the Vietnam War, Merrill emphasizes that scholars must study his environment, in which “shattered by global war and nuclear nightmares, world peace seemed a distant dream.” While Ho communicated with Truman to avoid war and acquire powerful western allies, the Truman

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71 Ibid.


administration ignored Ho for similar reasons: maintaining pro-democratic alliances, upholding
often fervent ideologies, and preventing a third world war. In order to understand this
communicative silence, consider the political and ideological rhetoric that Truman encountered
and advocated throughout his early presidency: “now is the vital time to ward off a Third World
War. It will be scotched or hatched in the dozen years immediately ahead, not thirty years from
now when hostilities and suspicions have grown to explosive proportions and new scientific
means of planetary destruction are ready at hand.”74 For Truman, silence not only indicated an
explicit rejection of Ho’s connections with communism, but also signaled the possibility for
peace by supporting any form of democratic government - even the colonialist-focused French. If
peace were to prevail, the U.S. simply could not afford to associate with or - more disturbingly -
become like its communist enemies. As Secretary of State George Kennan said, in his infamous
and policy-changing “Long Telegram,”75 “we must have courage and self-confidence to cling to
our own methods and conceptions of human society ... the greatest danger that can befall us in
coping with this problem of Soviet Communism, is that we shall allow ourselves to become like
those with whom we are coping.”76 Retrospectively, Truman’s silence seems ill-advised and
dogmatic, but given the ideological and socio-political environment, Truman would not have
likely considered any other means to avoid war.

74 “Report: ‘Why Are The Russians Slow To Trust The Western Powers?,’” President's Secretary's File, Truman
75 Interestingly, John Lewis Gaddis emphasizes that while constructing the “Long Telegram,” George Kennan was
primarily focused upon Western Europe and the Soviet Union since the “overall situation in Asia, ‘while serious,
[w]as neither unexpected nor necessarily catastrophic’” (45). Moreover, Kennan believed that containment was not a
Security Policy during the Cold War 1982, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005),
24-52.
76 George Kennan to James Byrnes [“Long Telegram”], February 22, 1946, Harry S. Truman Administration File,
It is important to note that Harry Truman alone was not responsible for the disconnect and unresponsiveness rampant throughout his administration. James Arnold explains that “Truman never saw Ho Chi Minh’s letters. He only saw related documents that contained allusions to them.” William Duiker also indicates that Ho’s letters/telegrams were primarily ignored by the Department of State whose administrators “were able to win approval for a policy of not responding to such messages.” Simply, “Ho Chi Minh’s messages … reached Washington, where they disappeared into the bureaucracy.” Assistant Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, Kenneth Landon, even said, “our government was just not interested.” Furthermore, given Truman’s relative unfamiliarity with foreign policy issues, he continued to rely heavily upon the perspectives of this wide, sometimes disorganized circle of advisors. Thus, communiqués often became casualties of interdepartmental policies and politics.

Ideologically, the likelihood of something other than war was impractical as Cold War paranoia pervaded domestic and foreign politics. Robert McMahon emphasizes that communism symbolized “defeat for the West,” indicating that any peaceful solution to Vietnam simply defied the socio-political constructions of American thought post-World War II. According to Spalding, “Truman believed … freedom, independence, and peace must be defended and … the Communists presented the primary threat to these objects. This two-part conclusion provided the
practical core of the strategy of containment.” Strategic and ideological, containment blinded the Truman administration to the possibility for a negotiated and peaceful settlement to Vietnam, which meant support for a waning French colonial empire unprepared to deal with counterinsurgency warfare. This devotion to containment was rooted in an abstract idea rather than a tangible understanding of reality as Truman believed that containment “was proof ‘that the United States earnestly desire[d] peace and [wa]s willing to make a vigorous effort to help create conditions of peace.’” However, underlying American interventionism and democratic idealism was a clear course of aggression that culminated in war and contradicted conditions of peace: “‘I do not think we should play compromise any longer.... I’m tired babying the Soviets.’” Containment was therefore tainted by an inherent need and desire for violence, remaining incompatible with Truman’s idyllic notion of compulsory peace through westernization.

Interestingly, Ho’s ideological framework did not preclude him from seeking contacts with the Truman administration, but it did foster distrust and miscommunication between Vietnamese and Americans. While anti-communist paranoia may seem puzzling to a 21st century reader, Ho’s links with communism were the primary grounds for a lack of diplomacy between the United States and Vietnam immediately after World War II. Scholars continue to debate the semantics and relevance of Ho’s communist tendencies, but in general, they accept that Ho fostered and sustained communist connections even before the First Indochina War. Although

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84 Harry Truman, Longhand Notes File, quoted in Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 30. Spalding also delineates the paradoxical nature of containment: “a military facet had to be included; a component of strength was necessary” (71).
Ho’s communiqués to American policymakers celebrated Vietnamese nationalism, speculations as to his ties with communist nations were not completely unfounded as he had developed relationships with both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Even Ho’s letters and telegrams revealed the extent of communist rhetoric that he relied upon, ideologically, in order to support a revolutionary movement with a nationalist base: “but the French colonialists, who had betrayed … both the Allies and the Vietnamese, have come back and are waging on us a murderous and pitiless war in order to reestablish their domination.”

For an American administration that consistently reaffirmed allied ties with Western Europe, this inclination to espouse communist rhetoric was certainly off-putting, no matter how hyperbolic it seems. Unfortunately, Ho inadvertently destabilized a peaceful resolution to Vietnam, as well as the chance for cross-cultural diplomacy, merely through his own ideological leanings: “We are energetically fighting slavery and the ruthless policy of the French colonialists.”

Ideological paradoxes ultimately framed both Ho and Truman’s approach to foreign policy, which remained intertwined with ideals of victory. While the Truman administration decided upon communicative silence as a tactful response to Ho’s letters and telegrams, Truman continuously voiced his desire for victory against communism: “Someone was in to see me just recently, and he asked why we didn’t go ahead and make peace. ‘Why don’t you get to the Russians and fix this thing up?’ he said. I said, ‘All right, we will give them Berlin, we will give them Germany, we will give them Korea, we will give them Japan, we will give them East Asia.

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Then they will settle. Is that what you want?” As Spalding explains, Truman viewed communism as the ultimate threat to American hegemony, democracy, and freedom and thus only victory over communism - military, economic, and political - could solidify America’s place in the world. Moreover, though Ho believed that an alliance between Vietnam and the United States could engender peaceful independence, his letters and telegrams also reiterated victory, often underlined by militarism: “we will do utmost to ... out culprits and punish them severely.”

Compromise was only plausible if Vietnamese allies accepted absolute independence rather than gradual self-government with western intervention. Prolonged warfare and brutal violence were no obstacles as “we are determined to sacrifice even millions of combatants, and fight a long-term war of resistance in order to safeguard Vietnam’s independence.”

For the U.S. government, Vietnam remained a relatively minor foreign policy concern, but Truman and Ho revealed that negotiation and cross-cultural understanding would be difficult to maintain during an ideological war.

Unfortunately, for Ho, the legacy of speaking through silence was one that signaled a new era of communication. While diplomatic contact between North Vietnam and the United

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States continued, negotiations were carried out mainly through third party intermediaries. The United States had embraced a new ally – South Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Diem.

From Communist Foe to Catholic Friend

By the late 1940s, it had become clear to Ho Chi Minh that a military or diplomatic relationship between North Vietnam and the United States was unlikely. Though North Vietnam had officially declared independence, the French remained unwilling to abandon their last sphere of influence and thus the First Indochina War was about to begin. From 1945-1963, American involvement in Vietnam wavered indecisively between the line of absolute commitment and that of limited partnership. Realizing that the United States would continue to support French colonial goals, the Vietnamese turned to other allies, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, in order to help sustain their efforts for a prolonged revolutionary war. Consequently, while the U.S. was developing its legacy as an interventionist and internationalist power, North Vietnam turned inward, with the help of communist allies, in order to solidify its domestic base. Communication between the two nations, whether through telegrams, letters, or clandestine meetings, was no longer as important as military preparedness. However, for the upcoming American presidents, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, cross-cultural dialogue emerged in the fateful partnership between Washington and South Vietnam – Ngo Dinh Diem.

While scholars continue to point to the stark differences between the charismatic Ho Chi Minh and the despotic, insular Ngo Dinh Diem, both Vietnamese leaders espoused independence for their fragmented and war-torn countries. Personally and politically disparate, Ho and Diem each hoped to acquire a nationalist Vietnam rather than a puppet nation ruled by imperialistic foreigners. Although Ho was ultimately more successful, both he and Diem

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recognized the significance of U.S. connections, as well as the power of ideology when acquiring
total control and popular support. Interestingly, had it not been for the murder of Diem’s brother and
nephew, Diem might have allied himself with Ho Chi Minh, regardless of his communist ties.

Seth Jacobs highlights one of the few conversations between Diem and Ho, in which Ho offered
Diem an alliance and a position in his anti-colonialist government. Viewing Diem’s rejection as
evidence of foolishness, inferior leadership, and weak character, Jacobs depicts this
conversation as a devastatingly missed opportunity:

Diem: What do you want of me?
Ho: I want of you what you have always wanted of me—your cooperation in gaining
independence. We seek the same thing. We should work together.
Diem: You are a criminal who has burned and destroyed the country, and you have held
me prisoner.
Ho: I apologize for that unfortunate incident. When people who have been oppressed
revolt, mistakes are inevitable and tragedies occur... You have grievances against us, but
let’s forget them.
Diem: You want me to forget that your followers killed my brother?
Ho: I knew nothing of it. I had nothing to do with your brother’s death. I deplore such
excesses as much as you do.... I have brought you here to take a position of high
importance in our government.
Diem: My brother and his son are only two of the hundreds who have died—and hundreds
more who have been betrayed. How can you dare invite me to work with you?
Ho: Your mind is focused on the past. Think of the future—education, improved standards
of living for the people.
Diem: You speak a language without conscience.

Unfortunately, Jacobs rejects the very personal nature of this conversation and the presence,
albeit mere, of communication between two men struggling to redefine their nation’s future.

92 “The ensuing dialogue between the two men vividly demonstrated both Ho’s political skills … and the dogmatism
that would hamstring Diem’s efforts to pull off a similar feat.” Seth Jacobs, America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam:
93 Seth Jacobs, America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in
that Diem’s refusal of this alliance was also connected to power and politics: “As Diem later admitted, he would
have been willing to serve in a Viet Minh government if Ho had granted him authority over internal security policy.”
Edward Miller, Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam (Cambridge:
Thus, Jacobs develops an image of Diem as the political foil of Ho, an unworthy autocrat who relied incessantly upon U.S. support in order to maintain his corrupt puppet government.

However, in the same vein of scholars who have reconsidered the image of Ho Chi Minh as communist tyrant, Edward Miller’s *Misalliance* portrays Diem as a nuanced individual, more than a bumbling sycophant or murderous pawn. Historiographically, Diem has often been characterized by his Catholicism, close knit – and perhaps disturbing – family, manic obsession with power, and almost childlike dependence upon American policymakers. While Miller does not deny Diem’s religious devotion, familial ties, or reliance upon violence, he contends that “Diem obtained power in 1954 through his own efforts and those of his brothers…. He was … interested in how he might use … Catholic and Confucian principles to craft what he believed was a distinctively Vietnamese vision of development for Vietnam.”

A priest turned politician, Diem worked fervently with Catholic nationalists, like Nguyen Huu Bai, who had tired of French colonialism, while simultaneously meditating about the role of Confucianism in the future of Vietnam. By 1940, Diem and other nationalists favored collaborating with the Japanese rather than continuing to support the French, but when Bao Dai (the former Annam king reinstated after the Japanese occupation of French Indochina) offered him a government position, he refused.

Unfortunately, this refusal was a setback for Diem who faced the choice of a returning French colonial regime or an alliance with Ho’s communists (those who had murdered his brother and nephew). Consequently, “Diem was among the most prominent of Vietnam’s *attentistes* [Third Force or Fence Sitters],” waiting in the wings for the right moment to seize

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96 Ibid., 32.
power. Lobbying communists and French colonial officials, Diem waited patiently, but found his political fortunes running out when the Viet Minh called for his assassination and he was forced into exile. During his exile, Diem began to forge invaluable connections and contacts that would serve him in the future, particularly with American political scientist Wesley Fishel.\textsuperscript{97} Traveling in the United States to Washington D.C., Diem encountered Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, benefactors who would be key components of forthcoming political relationships. Significantly, Miller also delineates that during Diem’s exile, his family played an essential role in preparing for his eventual rise to power: brothers Ngo Dinh Can in central Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Luyen in Europe, and Ngo Dinh Nhu through the Can Lao Party.\textsuperscript{98}

Leaving the U.S. in May 1953, Diem arrived in Europe and prepared to reenter the Vietnamese political stage as his brothers intimated that many Vietnamese were growing impatient with what they perceived to be Bao Dai’s apathetic acceptance of French rule. In an effort to address divisions within the South Vietnamese government, Diem’s brother Nhu proposed the Unity Congress, which revealed a desire for complete independence rather than continued collaboration with the French. According to Miller, Diem and his family had carefully orchestrated events in their favor, validated when Bao Dai finally offered Diem the premiership as he realized that his own viability as leader was no longer intact. Contrary to scholarly speculation, Miller indicates that these events, “the prestige and credibility that Diem and Nhu had gained in nationalist circles,”\textsuperscript{99} arose from perseverance and self-determination rather than American intervention. The Diem years thus commenced on June 16, 1954, opening channels of communication between the U.S. government and the vulnerable, but resilient, South Vietnam.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 42-8.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 52.
Like the Ho and Truman exchanges, forms of communication – letters, telegrams, even personal visits – revealed possibilities for peaceful negotiation during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. As Ho became heavily involved in the internal workings of North Vietnam (preparing for and waging war, domestic reform), Diem’s relationship with the U.S. presidents provided another invaluable window into a form of dialogue between friends and enemies. Although Eisenhower and Kennedy attempted to maintain friendly relations with Diem, in the end, he would become as much an enemy as Ho Chi Minh – ousted and murdered in one of many South Vietnamese coups. However, these following chapters do not suggest that Diem, Ho or Eisenhower, Kennedy were strikingly similar individuals with little nuance. Nor do they attempt to disregard the tragedy and violence perpetuated by these individuals throughout the Vietnam War. What they do indicate is that moments of personal communication highlight these men as similarly human, paradoxically devoted to peace, violent war (or police action), and the power of ideology. Ho may have been more successful in his rule of North Vietnam, but he, like Diem and the American Presidents, was also a flawed individual in an impossible situation.

The Diem-U.S. alliance tested individual leaders and policymakers. The Eisenhower administration discovered a South Vietnamese landscape of politico-religious factions, power struggles, and communist insurgents. Ngo Dinh Diem’s idealistic vision of a modern South Vietnam continued to clash with American principles of containment. A smooth governmental transition following the Geneva Accords became increasingly unlikely.
CHAPTER TWO: “FALLING DOMINOES ON DIEN BIEN PHU:” DWIGHT EISENHOWER AND NGO DINH DIEM

The transitional period from the Truman administration to Eisenhower signaled the end of an era as for the first time in nearly two decades, a Republican president entered the White House. With public approval ratings low,\textsuperscript{100} Truman left office as the Korean War remained in a stalemate, a legacy of the newly founded containment policy. Eisenhower, a disciplined and decorated military officer, abhorred the disorganization, confusion, and ostensible ineptitude of the Truman policymaking machine. Devoted to change, more personal than partisan, Eisenhower reshaped the White House into a well-oiled bureaucratic institution, in which cooperation, spirited debate, and extensive dialogue fostered an evolving policy agenda. In particular, the National Security Council, under Truman a competitive and ill-defined organization, became deeply involved in the Vietnamese conflict throughout Eisenhower’s two terms in office. However, though Eisenhower may have criticized Truman’s conception of the presidency, he faced many similar dilemmas: an expansive and powerful Soviet Union, postcolonial revolutions, and the threat of world war. Consequently, Eisenhower’s ideologies, decisions, and policies echoed the sentiments expressed in Truman’s farewell address: “Where free men had failed the test before, this time we met the test. We met it firmly. We met it successfully. The aggression has been repelled. The Communists have seen their hopes of easy conquest go down the drain. The determination of free people to defend themselves has been made clear to the Kremlin.”\textsuperscript{101} When inaugurated, Eisenhower espoused that “freedom is pitted against slavery; lightness against the dark. The faith we hold belongs not to us alone but to the free of all the

\textsuperscript{100} “Job Performance Ratings for President Truman,” Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, University of Connecticut, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Truman.

Regardless of personal and political nuances, Eisenhower continued to support a number of ideological components of the Truman presidency, reinforcing a policymaking framework that unconditionally favored American victory.

By 1954, Eisenhower entered his second year of the presidency fully devoted to maintaining peace and stability in the midst of the Cold War. For American policymakers and everyday citizens, the threat of nuclear war seemed imminent as the world had seemingly divided into two fundamentally different camps: despotic communism and utopian democracy. While many Americans viewed the dual nature of the world as reality, it was a much more myopic view of a multifaceted global environment. Battlegrounds in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia symbolized this dichotomous ideological warfare: “I deeply and firmly believe that … America cannot live alone, and that her form of life is threatened by the Communistic dictatorship.”

Although Eisenhower believed that it was possible to coexist peacefully with the Soviet Union - “a major preoccupation of my mind through most of 1953 was the development of approaches to the Soviet leaders that might be … a start toward the birth of mutual trust” – he focused his foreign policy agenda on national security and credibility. Significantly, this newly emerging global order demanded dynamism, advocating intervention and nation building in developing countries, maintaining ties with western allies, and formulating nuclear deterrence policies. Thus, as the French position in Indochina remained dangerously tentative, American policymakers and military leaders continued to provide cautious support.

while they weighed the consequences of military intervention. Eisenhower decided against overt military operations, opting instead for political, economic, and socio-psychological involvement because he adamantly believed that Vietnam was key to the security of the free world and the establishment of democratic hegemony: “the collapse of Indochina would produce a chain reaction which would result in the fall of all of Southeast Asia to the Communists.”

In Vietnam, the country remained ideologically and politically divided as the Viet Minh emerged as a viable socio-political and economic power while in South Vietnam, Diem and his family, with American backing, acquired control as anti-communist Catholics. From April to July of 1954, the Western allies, including the United States, France, and Britain, convened to discuss the fate of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference, hoping to peacefully stabilize the region. Simultaneously, Viet Minh forces, under Vo Nguyen Giap, succeeded in driving the French from their last great stronghold, Dien Bien Phu. A stunning military victory, Dien Bien Phu appeared to symbolize the end of colonialism in Vietnam as guerrilla forces triumphed against French military superiority. Unfortunately, the promises of Geneva devastated Ho Chi Minh and his coalition as they reinforced Vietnam as a divided nation with the North as communist and the South as ostensibly democratic. During this transitional period, from French rule to U.S.

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106 Although Eisenhower was invested in military intervention in the developing world, he would not commit forces to Vietnam without British collaboration. Unfortunately, the British refused, hoping to preserve their last colonial vestiges, which included Hong Kong – too close to communist China. James R. Arnold, The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America’s Intervention in Vietnam (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 156-224.

107 NSC meeting: Ann Whitman File, NSC Series: 190th Meeting, 25 March 1954; Box 5, EL, quoted in James R. Arnold, The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America’s Intervention in Vietnam (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 160. Arnold argues that Eisenhower’s actions were carefully calculated in order to acquire congressional support for war in Indochina: “However much Eisenhower wanted authorization to intervene, he … was acutely aware of certain political facts bearing on his situation” (167). Thus, Eisenhower’s caution was both a desire to maintain peace and wage war with jurisdiction.

108 James Arnold clearly delineates the terms of the Geneva Accords, unsigned by the United States: “In Vietnam, the cease-fire agreement called for the rivals to regroup on opposite sides of a provisional demarcation line along the 17th parallel. The regrouping would be completed within three hundred days. During that time, any civilians residing
intervention in South Vietnam, North Vietnam prepared for a possible Second Indochina War: “at this moment American imperialism, the principal enemy of peoples of the world, is becoming the direct principal enemy of the people of Indo-China.”\textsuperscript{109} Under Diem and his family-centered autocracy, South Vietnam became a multifaceted anti-communist state interconnected with Western and local politics, religious uprisings, and dangerous instability. Well aware of the competing factions within South Vietnam, Diem and his family used ruthless methods to crush any opposition and consolidate power, threatened in particular by three dominant politico-religious organizations: the Binh Xuyen, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai.\textsuperscript{110} Interestingly, despite obvious political and ideological differences, both North and South Vietnam devoted this period to strengthening and solidifying their internal regime. For Ho Chi Minh, this manifested in less direct contact with the United States, but for Ngo Dinh Diem, the fateful partnership was just beginning.

Framing the context of Eisenhower’s first letter to Ngo Dinh Diem, October 23, 1954, requires a brief delineation of the alliance between the United States and South Vietnam, a partnership that would continue until 1974. While many scholars depict this West-East friendship as the imperialistic pet child of deluded presidents, the relationship between South


Vietnam and the United States was much more complex. Rebuilding the postcolonial world under the banner of American democracy remained one of the fundamental goals of presidential administrations post-World War II, but for some time, the extent of agency in these collaborations has been distorted and misunderstood. According to Zachary Karabell, developing world and first world alliances were a two-party exchange: “intervention was one of the most dramatic forms of interaction between the third world and the United States … this work argues that both American and third-world actors designed an ‘architecture’ for U.S. policy.”

American intervention may have sustained such relationships, but leaders of developing nations often initiated these alliances and maintained ties with the U.S., no matter what the cost.

Aforementioned, Ngo Dinh Diem’s rise to power was not a coincidence nor a stroke of luck, but an amalgamation of internal regime building, international contacts, and ideological connections. However, some scholars continue to emphasize Diem’s image as a westernized Vietnamese puppet rather than a capable leader in his own right, thereby diminishing his active role in helping to shape the future of South Vietnam. Edward Miller, on the other hand, contends that this puppet analogy oversimplifies and disregards cornerstones of Diem’s personal and political persona, as well as the motives of U.S. policymakers. In particular, Miller indicates that support for South Vietnam during the Cold War was part of the American nation building

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program: “to promote the transformation of Asian, African, and Latin American societies.”

Nation building certainly contained the spread of communism, but as an army telegram from the American embassy in Saigon delineated, it also promoted a healthy and stable nation that could readily embrace the course of the modern world: “Mission: Establish political psychological, military, economic courses action for adoption by US to insure Free Vietnam survival as nation. Develop Vietnam as effective barrier continued Communist expansion as nation.” A political, socio-cultural, economic, and military partnership, this nation-building alliance supposedly benefited both the United States and South Vietnam. Consequently, the relationship between the Eisenhower administration and Ngo Dinh Diem aimed to foster development within South Vietnam, which in turn, would prevent the establishment of communism as a viable socio-political force.

On October 23, 1954, Ngo Dinh Diem received his first letter from Dwight Eisenhower, opening the channels of communication and preparing for nearly a decade of tumultuous cross-cultural friendship. It should be noted that unlike the Truman-Ho exchanges, Eisenhower’s letter was open to the public through the Department of State Bulletin. In one of the first lines of his letter, Eisenhower acknowledged the fragmented state of Vietnam and indicated his own deep concern for the continuation of violence: “weakened by a long and exhausting war and faced with enemies without and by their subversive collaborations within.” Much of the letter focused upon the role of the United States in providing Diem’s South Vietnamese government with political, economic, psychological, and military aid, reinforcing the role of nation building

in the alliance. Writing “[t]he purpose of this offer is to assist the Government of Viet-Nam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means,” Eisenhower clearly intended to establish pragmatic cross-cultural repartee. However, political idealism and emotion also emerged in Eisenhower’s attempts to connect with Diem on a more human level: “I am glad that the United States is able to assist in this humanitarian effort.” According to James Arnold, this emphasis upon peace and cross-cultural coexistence remained an important part of Eisenhower’s foreign policy agenda. As he advocated in a televised address, “‘The United States will never start a war.’” Regardless of the strong anticommunist sentiments within Eisenhower’s administration, this letter manifested the possibility for a peaceful and personable resolution to the volatile situation in Vietnam.

From 1954-1957, the Eisenhower-Diem relationship was fragile, despite optimistic assurances from policymakers throughout the administration. Rigged elections and coup attempts post-Geneva suggested that South Vietnamese were, at best, dissatisfied with Diem’s governmental legacy. Nonetheless, contact between the two administrations continued.

Although Diem did not respond directly to Eisenhower’s letter, in 1957, he visited Washington and provided his own insights into the importance of maintaining peace, avoiding war, and continuing cross-cultural communication. Diem’s visit to Washington was not his first as he had traveled extensively during his exile, but it was a significant moment in fostering dialogue between the West and East. Memorandums compiled during this May visit reveal a

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117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
120 Note the presence of interpreter Mr. Sedgwick. Although Diem spoke both French and English, an interpreter was used for clarification and to smooth the rough patches of communication and interpretation. Captain B.A.
great deal of debate and discussion concerning the fate of South Vietnam and the role of U.S. aid in its reconstruction. Dialogue remained particularly serious in these lengthy memorandums as Diem, Eisenhower and Vietnamese, U.S. policymakers debated the feasibility of fiscal aid, strength and conscription of Free Vietnam troops, and the daunting presence of Viet Minh cadres. Underlying these concerns was South Vietnam’s symbol as the vanguard against communism: “Viet-Nam is endangered by two things: subversive elements under Communist direction and aggression by invasion.”121 However, lighter instances emerged throughout the cross-cultural communication as when Eisenhower used humor to mitigate the tense atmosphere of the talks: “The President, half jokingly, said that there was an old adage that roads sometimes were a ‘golden bridge for your enemies.’”122 While Diem may have “replied [rather seriously] that this aspect had been given careful study,” the mere presence of humor suggests the possibility for a congenial working relationship. 123 Though disconnect and dissatisfaction plagued both parties, “[Diem] seemed unconcerned by the criticism … indicating that his shoulders were broad and he could take it,”124 Eisenhower, Diem, and their policymakers managed to collaborate on the future of South Vietnam. A relatively peaceful working relationship provided both administrations with rational and non-military solutions to the

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123 Ibid.

containment of communism in Indochina, thereby indicating that war was not the only means of acquiring peace.

A year later, May 23, 1958, Eisenhower wrote yet another letter to Diem, ruminating on Diem’s visit to Washington and hoping that despite the problems faced by Diem’s regime, he would ultimately prevail. While Eisenhower and many in his administration, for example, General J. Lawton Collins and even John Foster Dulles,125 questioned the viability of Diem’s government and even plotted to remove it, they could see no alternative in the ever-shifting and unstable environment of South Vietnamese politics. Surviving a failed assassination attempt on February 22, 1957,126 Diem seemed prepared to tackle the challenges of leadership in a nation intertwined in competing socio-political visions. Interestingly, Eisenhower’s rather benign letter reflected Diem’s own assessment of the situation in Vietnam, in which personal confidence and perseverance could solidify the regime. 127 Eisenhower even intimated that “a new member of the family of free nations can overcome almost insurmountable obstacles to preserve its sovereignty and independence.”128 The obstacles certainly were daunting, including unsuccessful agrarian reform programs, counterinsurgency warfare, and the continuation of fear and violence


in the face of communist infiltration.\textsuperscript{129} Despite such overwhelming concerns, and the desire for some sort of governmental replacement, Eisenhower reiterated the possibility for peace: “The positive suggestions put forth in your Government’s declaration place the burden on the Communists to create conditions which will enable the peaceful reunification of your country.”\textsuperscript{130} Though relations between the Eisenhower and Diem administrations may have become tenuous, enough so that removal of Diem was always a possible option, the desire for peace remained in these instances of cross-cultural communication. By 1961, it would be up to Kennedy to decide Diem’s fate, but Eisenhower still concluded his communiqué with a positive message for Diem, no matter how sincere it truly was: “May I extend to you my warmest personal greetings and my best wishes for your continued success in the development of Viet-Nam in the free world.”\textsuperscript{131}

However, peace remained short-lived as by the late 1950s, tensions had almost reached a breaking point between the Eisenhower and Diem administrations. Though historians have tended to emphasize the similarities between Diem and the American policymakers he courted, they have often discounted the ideological nuances that formulated Diem’s policymaking

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Diem was certainly a devout Catholic who relied heavily upon a Catholic support base to advance his political power, but he was also a Vietnamese nationalist who developed, with his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, an ideological system that brought together elements of Vietnamese and Western European philosophy – personalism. Rooted in the writings of Emmanuel Mounier, Nhu defined personalism as a sort of “poli
tico-economic revolution … aimed at making the Person the focus of concern.” Personalism supposedly provided non-communist Vietnamese with a means of achieving nationalist revolution and moving forward, dynamically, in the modern age. Moreover, Diem believed that by combing the personalist philosophy with “Confucian principles,” Vietnam could embrace a forward-thinking future: “We are not going back to a sterile copy of the mandarin past.” But significantly, as delineated by Edward Miller, “the actual substance of [this] revolutionary agenda would remain maddeningly opaque.” Unfortunately, although Diem and Nhu had failed to construct a clear plan of action, which would complement their value-system, they considered violent enforcement and oppression viable means to realize their revolutionary ideologies. Casually and rather callously, Nhu even suggested that “village bullies and tyrants [- exploitative village officials -] be liquidated.” Consequently, devotion to an abstract idea on the true course of

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South Vietnam, rooted in militancy and autocracy, became a decisive factor in deconstructing the interrelationship between Eisenhower and Diem.

Thus, what brought Diem and Eisenhower together and threatened the mere possibility for peaceful resolution were not simply religious similarities or westernized ideals, but a deep belief in their own ideological frameworks. Interestingly, Eisenhower, with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, favored a dynamic policymaking ideology that would revitalize Western and developing countries in the face of communist expansion. In particular, Eisenhower deeply believed in the domino theory: “but when we come to the possible sequence of events, the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula, and Indonesia following…the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.”

However, Bowie and Immerman indicate that “Eisenhower intended to modify and improve upon Truman’s foundation, not obliterate it.” A dynamic form of containment was certainly compatible with the fervent anti-communism of Diem’s government: “It is on this plane that your and our fight are one and the same. We too will continue to fight communism.” Nevertheless, containment remained entrenched in ideas of American exceptionalism, how western nations could reinvent themselves and the postcolonial world not only to stop the spread of communism, but also to uphold their own credibility and power. Reinforcing Truman’s containment paradox, dynamic containment espoused peace and democracy through military strength, interventionism, and a certain degree of inflexibility.

According to the Eisenhower Doctrine, “the occasion has come

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140 Miller emphasizes that “deeper philosophical differences-differences that became increasingly contentious as the 1950s wore on” (152) also began to divide the interests and goals of the Eisenhower and Diem administrations. In particular, conceptions of nation building and democracy destabilized a relationship built upon South Vietnam as the
for us to manifest again our national unity in support of freedom and to show our deep respect for the rights and independence of every nation ... We seek not violence, but peace. To this purpose we must now devote our energies, our determination, ourselves.”

Containment was an idea rather than a reality, eroding cross-cultural communication in favor of an ideological construction that could not sustain the possibility for peace.

For both Eisenhower and Diem, the desire for victory remained inextricably intertwined with ideological abstractions. Edward Miller writes that in spite of all the problems faced by both administrations, “[l]eaders in both governments remained strongly optimistic about the current course of the war.” The memorandums of the Diem visit provide invaluable insight into this disturbing emphasis upon victory, especially given their more formalized and bureaucratic structure. Clearly differing in their means to achieve victory, Diem and the Eisenhower administration discussed possible military measures, viewing the possibility for success through ideological, political, and cultural parameters. Unfortunately, both parties failed to show much emotion or human concern for the impact of devastating weaponry, particularly the atomic bomb, on Vietnamese civilians. Diem considered atomic weapons as more impractical than unethical: “it would be most disastrous to use A weapons on … civilian concentrations, because the Vietnamese Government counted on the population in the North to rise up against the communists … which would make it counter-productive to use A bombs.”


141 Dwight Eisenhower, “The Eisenhower Doctrine,” January 5, 1957, The Miller Center, University of Virginia, http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3360. Note: Although this doctrine addressed intervention in an increasingly volatile Middle East, it espoused principles that were simultaneously being applied to intervention in Southeast Asia.


the other hand, proposed atomic weapons as a possible last resort: “President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles had declared on several occasions that in case the communists should open hostilities … the United States would use all means at its disposal to stop them, including the use of tactical A-weapons.”144 Ideas of what could or could not constitute military victory fueled these rather impersonal discussions, thereby revealing a break down in a more human form of dialogue. Such instances thus reflected an almost fanatical militarism and ideological obsession rather than the nuances of peace and cross-cultural communication.

When Eisenhower passed the baton of leadership on to his much younger Democratic successor, it ostensibly dawned a new era of the U.S.-Diem alliance. Ambitious revitalization programs, including land reform, blinded both Diem and Kennedy to the many problems rampant throughout South Vietnam. With increased violence and totalitarian policies – particularly by Ngo Dinh Nhu – it was apparent that the alliance was coming to an end.

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CHAPTER THREE: “A WORLD ON THE BRINK:” JOHN F. KENNEDY AND NGO DINH DIEM

John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency prepared to bring youth and vitality to a White House entrenched in the leadership of Cold Warriors. According to Lawrence Freedman, “As it had suited Eisenhower to present himself as being rather dull and unimaginative, there were plenty of opportunities to emphasize a contrasting style full of vigor and vision.” America’s first Catholic president fully transformed the modern presidency into a public spectacle of charm, masculinity, and rhetorical nuance. While a sort of Cold War paradigm remained – containment, revolution, tension – Kennedy believed that a New Frontier was in order to combat the orthodoxy of the Eisenhower administration: “the frontier of the 1960s -- a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils --a frontier of unfilled hopes and threats…. Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war.” In particular, Kennedy’s New Frontier “sought to reconcile the extremes,” focusing intently upon foreign policy, including the role of nuclear weapons in a postwar world and American intervention in developing countries. Unlike Eisenhower, Kennedy modeled his national security staff as a more fluid network that incorporated close friends and allies rather than the supposedly stifled creativity associated with a bureaucratized hierarchy. This structure, though valuable, emerged as competitive and disorderly, especially as Kennedy attempted to moderate and rework the positions of more hawkish and dogmatic policymakers like Dean Acheson. Nonetheless,

Kennedy’s democratic mix of idealism and realism\textsuperscript{149} still failed to transcend a dominant and dichotomous policymaking framework, as evidenced in his inaugural address: “The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”\textsuperscript{150}

Pragmatically and ideologically, the Kennedy administration found it difficult to abandon paradigms of Eisenhower policymaking largely because the global environment seemed unchanged. From 1961-63, Kennedy faced many daunting challenges, including the Bay of Pigs, Berlin and Cuban Missile Crises, the threat of imminent nuclear war, an increasingly volatile civil war in Laos, and a deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. At any moment, the Cold War could turn hot, leaving Kennedy and his administration with once again a paradoxical construction of foreign policymaking – peace espoused through military strength. Like Eisenhower, Kennedy was willing to negotiate with the Soviets, but he approached such diplomatic exercises cautiously in order to maintain America’s exceptional position as peacemaker in a dichotomous world. Unlike Eisenhower, Kennedy ostensibly applied the fluidity of his policymaking team to his policymaking framework, emphasizing flexible response as a more nuanced approach to cold warfare: “We should plan for a war of nerve, of demonstration and of bargaining, not of tactical target destruction.”\textsuperscript{151} Vietnam’s place in this foreign policy agenda was quite complex as James Arnold emphasizes that in “April 1954, Senator John F.

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\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 35-41.
\textsuperscript{151} Thomas Schelling, Nuclear Strategy in the Berlin Crisis, FRUS, XIV, pgs. 170-72, quoted in Lawrence Freedman, \textit{Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 101. However, Kennedy also came “to appreciate that nuclear deterrence might be more persuasive in practice than in theory. He would not abandon flexible response so long as it was advocated with such conviction by his senior aides. As a philosophy that argued for keeping the widest range of options open for the longest possible time it conformed to his approach to all political problems. But as a politician he could see the difficulties…. The value of the extra forces was largely that they strengthened the West’s bargaining position” (111). See: Francis J. Gavin, \textit{Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 30-56.
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Kennedy ... [made] a comprehensive denunciation of American policy.**152 By 1961, however, Kennedy was in a similar position as was Eisenhower, in which support for South Vietnam reaffirmed key elements of American Cold War policymaking. Even in 1963, he continued to support the domino theory: “I think we should stay. We should use our influence in as effective a way as we can, but we should not withdraw.”**153 Kennedy would reevaluate these statements in light of violence and persecution in South Vietnam, but nevertheless, they provide invaluable insight into his initial commitment to anti-communist and nation-building ideals.

For South Vietnam, the advent of a new American president, already somewhat acquainted with Ngo Dinh Diem, afforded an opportunity to renew promises of friendship between the two nations. Edward Miller indicates that the “Ngos remained confident that the alliance could be remade in a form that would facilitate a new drive toward victory over their enemies.” Just as his predecessor, Kennedy remained tentatively devoted to progress in South Vietnam as he did not want to fully commit American military forces to a multifaceted and progressively more dangerous conflict. Thus, he believed that other means, primarily economic and socio-psychological, could be used in order to maintain the nation-building progress of the Eisenhower administration. For example, the Strategic Hamlet Program, remodeling the Agroville Program, attempted to provide rural South Vietnamese with an ideological vanguard against communism, military protection, and economic growth. Although deemed a success, tensions between American and South Vietnamese policymakers, aggravated by Ngo Dinh Nhu’s unclear abstractions and penchant for violent enforcement, revealed a dangerous future between the two allies. Diem and Nhu refused to accept American guidance as absolute, believing that

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American policymakers misunderstood the situation, as well as the cultural nuances of South Vietnam: “You do not understand these villagers.” Kennedy’s liaison Rufus Philips, on the other hand, was “baffled by [Nhu’s] combination of wooly-headedness with some fairly good insights.” Philips suggested that it was Diem and Nhu who did not understand their own people and their seemingly desperate need for American aid. Ultimately, both perspectives illuminated the unstable situation in South Vietnam, in which cross-cultural friendship became a casualty of ideological devotion and an obsession with victory.

Though this cross-cultural alliance would eventually end in tragedy and violence, Kennedy believed that communication could foster lasting connections between the United States and postcolonial nations: “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.” Renewing positive relations with Diem, Kennedy sent an introductory letter, April 26, 1961: “we have watched with sympathy your courageous leadership during your country's struggle to perfect its independence ... The United States stands firmly with you ... The recent treaty of amity and economic relations ... are symbols of ... cooperation.” On May 8, 1961,

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157 John F. Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem, Washington, April 26, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume I, Vietnam, 1961, Document 34. National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files FRC 66 A 878, 350 GVN Elections. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d34. Attached to the source text was a brief covering note from [Elbridge] Durbow to Diem dated April 29. The text of the letter was transmitted to Saigon in telegram 1306, April 26. It was W.W. Rostow who encouraged Kennedy to send a letter to Diem as a reintroduction, shifting from one presidential administration to another: “a letter to Diem which would not only congratulate him, reaffirm our support, specify new initiatives we are prepared to take, but would make clear to him the urgency you attach to a more effective political and morale setting.” Walt W. Rostow, Memorandum from the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to the President, Washington, April 12, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume I, Vietnam, 1961, Document 27. Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 66D 193, 20 US Govt, GVN 1961. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d27. Attached to the source text was a note initialed by Anderson which reads: “Mr. Nolting, this is further evidence of high-level interest in your country.” The note was also initialed by Nolting.
Kennedy wrote a more in-depth letter to Diem, clearly outlining his personal investment in Vietnam, as well as the extent of American aid promised to the South Vietnamese government. Significantly, Kennedy emphasized the alliance as a partnership between two nations: “we are prepared to initiate in collaboration with your government a series of joint, mutually supporting actions.”\[158\] Highlighting the South Vietnam-U.S. relationship as an exchange, Kennedy recognized, rather perceptively, that American parameters for progress and nation-building were often the product of an explicit American policymaking framework: “it is my understanding that certain of the proposals ... may not entirely reflect your own judgment. However, I hope you would feel free to discuss any issues frankly.”\[159\] Moreover, though Kennedy continued to emphasize preventative military measures in response to the spread of communism, from North to South Vietnam, he also valued peaceful methods of Southern national growth and democracy. Peace and cross-cultural communication thus emerged as overarching themes within these personal communiqués: “we can help you and your brave countrymen to help themselves in their determined struggle to defeat the Communists and find a better way of life.”\[160\]

Diem wrote two letters in response to Kennedy, May 15 and June 9, 1961, in which he not only offered a South Vietnamese perspective on the situation in Vietnam, but also indicated that diplomacy was preferable to war. It is important to note, however, that just as in North Vietnam, Diem’s peaceful solution to the establishment of governmental stability would come at


\[159\] Ibid.

a heavy price. Nonetheless, such letters indicate that communication and connection did occur, as in Diem’s May 15 letter, he discussed Vice President Johnson’s visit to South Vietnam and endorsed the desire to “win the struggle against communism in Vietnam and further the advancement of our country.” Interestingly, Diem indicated that he greatly appreciated Johnson’s willingness to collaborate with him on important issues: “I was most deeply gratified by this gracious gesture by your distinguished Vicé-President, particularly as we have not become accustomed to being asked for our own views as to our needs.” While Diem certainly recognized the need to acknowledge his American benefactors, this moment speaks to an important sense of agency and friendship afforded by cross-cultural communication. Much of the letter then emphasized interconnections between the U.S. and South Vietnam, “sacrifices in blood and manpower,” and a sort of hopefulness for a peaceful and independent future.

Diem’s June 9 letter, on the other hand, was much more specific and formulaic in its emphasis upon what Diem believed was necessary to stop the infiltration of communism in South Vietnam: military, economic, political, and social. According to Diem, the “enormous accumulation of Russian war material in North Vietnam” provided disconcerting evidence of the extent of communist activity in the South. Consequently, despite hoping for peace, South Vietnamese were “willing to fight and die for their freedom,” but they could not do so alone in the midst of communist subversion. However, Diem also listed reform programs and supposedly

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163 Ibid.
164 Ibid., 156.
166 Ibid., 168.
positive instances of social progress, such as the agrovilles, which tempered more monetary and militaristic requirements with nation-building ideals. Thus, Diem’s disturbing reliance upon military strength did coexist with a tangible desire for Vietnamese national progress – without imperial or communist intervention. In the end, the letter concluded by foreseeing a peaceful resolution to the fragmented state of South Vietnamese society: “I will manage to reestablish law and order ... to accelerate progress ... for a ... society of free men, happy and prosperous.” Diem firmly believed that following a sort of violent social reorganization, international cooperation could culminate in a stable and more importantly, self-sustaining nation.

Kennedy responded promptly, July 3, to Diem’s extensive list of concerns, expressing once again that “we have sought to be as cooperative as possible.” Like Diem, Kennedy recognized that despite nation-building aspirations, military strategy and financial need occupied the discussions of many policymakers. At this stage in the cross-cultural alliance, debate and cooperation remained on-going as South Vietnamese and U.S. administrators worked with one another, to some extent, to reach an agreement on a successful course of action in South Vietnam. Counterinsurgency warfare dominated Kennedy’s military agenda, but he also continued to support less overtly violent facets of counter-communism, including political, educational, and socio-cultural growth: “I hope that these [political] institutions and others like them will be strengthened by the participation of the rising generation and that they will have a healthy growth.” But as was often the case with 20th century American policymakers, Kennedy felt quite comfortable providing Diem with advice on how to negotiate with

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167 Ibid., 173.
169 Ibid.
neighboring nations: “would it not be in the interests of your Government to seek accommodation with Cambodia.” Regardless of some cultural blind spots, evident in the summer 1961 exchanges was dialogue between two ostensibly different worlds, coming together to understand their situation and to develop a peaceful solution to a rather volatile environment in Vietnam. Reiterating his support, the “courage and tenacity displayed ... by the people of Viet-Nam,” Kennedy concluded by sending his “warm personal regards” to Ngo Dinh Diem.

On August 5, 1961, Kennedy wrote another longer letter to Diem, delineating the specifics of the American aid program to South Vietnam: joint planning, security measures, counterinsurgency tactics, and social, educational programs. On October 24, South Vietnam’s sixth anniversary, Kennedy reinforced the symbolic importance of South Vietnam, responding to Diem’s deep concerns for communist infiltration and espousing American devotion to the containment of communism. Although these two communiqués disregarded the violent and autocratic nature of the Diem government’s anti-communist campaign, they provide insight into a kind of back-and-forth cross-cultural conversation.

In December of 1961, Kennedy and Diem affirmed their commitment to one another, as well as to the American public, in a letter exchange publicized in the Department of State Bulletin. Significantly, this exchange was carefully orchestrated by the State Department in order to coincide with the release of the Jorden Report, outlining the Democratic Republic of

170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
Vietnam’s violations of the Geneva Accords and U.S. devotion to its South Vietnamese allies.\footnote{174} Drafted by Kennedy, Diem, and their respective aides, the letter exchange fostered diplomacy, reinforced peace, and conveyed American intent involving humanitarian assistance to South Vietnam. While the letters certainly relied upon emotional rhetoric and idealized a much more problematic relationship, they captured a possibility for something other than war and cultural misunderstanding. Diem’s December 7 letter commenced by highlighting the South Vietnamese-U.S. alliance as a form of cross-cultural cooperation: “we have built a bridge of understanding and friendship between an Asian people and a Western people, setting an example for all who believe that great historical and cultural differences need not separate men of goodwill.”\footnote{175} Throughout his letter, Diem cited examples of communist aggression and celebrated South Vietnam’s attempts to uphold the Geneva Accords, emphasizing that like “the United States, the Republic of Viet-Nam has always been devoted to the preservation of peace.”\footnote{176} Kennedy’s letter, December 14, confirmed American promises for aid, “we are prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence,”\footnote{177} decried North Vietnam’s violation of the Geneva Accords, and continued to hyperbolize the menace of


\footnote{177}{John F. Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem, December 14, 1961, PBS, JFK, The Presidents, \url{http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amERICANEXPERIENCE/features/primary-resources/jfk-diem/}}}
communist terror. Whether through blind optimism or half-hearted sincerity, Kennedy remained intent upon sustaining peaceful ties with the Diem government: “we are confident that the Vietnamese people will preserve their independence and gain the peace and prosperity for which they have sought so hard and so long.”

On March 31, 1962, Diem, encouraged by American policymakers in South Vietnam, sent a letter to the heads of ninety two non-communist states, as well as to Kennedy himself. The letter highlighted North Vietnamese violations of the Geneva Accords and the guerilla threat to peace and stability in South Vietnam. In a draft response, which was not sent to Diem, Kennedy and his policymakers reaffirmed American assistance to South Vietnam, condemned communist violence, and expressed confidence in a peaceful solution.

Brief July exchanges, however, revealed growing tensions between the Kennedy and Diem governments as Kennedy (July 9) pleaded with Diem to accept the international agreement designating Laos as a neutral state. Diem begrudgingly accepted the terms, verbally through Frederick Nolting, (July 10) but expressed distaste for allowing a communist fate in Laos.

178 Ibid.
179 Ngo Dinh Diem to John F. Kennedy (and allies), Saigon, March 31, 1962, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 1962, Document 137. Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/3-3162. This letter was also sent to the Pope and 92 heads of state in non-communist countries. The Australian Mission to the United Nations had agreed to circulate the letter to all member delegations, but on April 26 Madame Chuang, the Vietnamese Ambassador to the United Nations, undertook the distribution herself.
180 Theodore J.C. Heavner, Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman) to the Secretary of State, Washington, May 15, 1962, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 1962, Document 191. Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 66 D 193, 16-E.I, GVN 1962, Presidential Letters. After reviewing the memorandum, Walter Cutler returned it with this attached note: “Upon reviewing the attached memorandum the Secretary expressed strong doubt as to the advisability of sending the letter to Diem at this late date and having the President refer to it at a press conference. The Secretary would appreciate your reconsidering this matter in the light of his reservation.” Note - this memorandum was not sent to Kennedy.
181 John F. Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem, Saigon, July 9, 1962, 8 p.m., in Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume II, Vietnam, 1962, Document 238. Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 67 A 677, 350 International Pol Rels-350 Laos Conf. After reviewing the memorandum, Walter Cutler returned it with this attached note: “Upon reviewing the attached memorandum the Secretary expressed strong doubt as to the advisability of sending the letter to Diem at this late date and having the President refer to it at a press conference. The Secretary would appreciate your reconsidering this matter in the light of his reservation.” Note - this memorandum was not sent to Kennedy.
182 Frederick Nolting, Verbal Reply from Ngo Dinh Diem to John F. Kennedy, Saigon, July 10, 1962, midnight, in Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-
Such disagreements illustrated the difficulties of maintaining cross-cultural communication and peaceful relations in the midst of growing violence and discontent throughout South Vietnam.

Edward Miller writes that at the end of 1962, “both governments continued to hope and believe that more and greater triumphs were imminent.” Kennedy wrote another anniversary letter to Diem, October 24, celebrating the ostensible progress of the past year, specifically the economic development fostered by the Strategic Hamlet Program. Kennedy recognized, however, that peace and stability had yet been realized: “citizens would begin to enjoy ... freedom and prosperity ... That day is approaching.” In this communiqué, Kennedy introduced a newer and perhaps more humanistic theme, one which acknowledged the agency and diversity of Southeast Asia. Although Kennedy referred to the developing world as a vanguard against communism, grouping together unique individuals as one, he offered Diem a very nuanced perspective: “Each of these nations has its unique character and philosophy. In common they are confronted not only by grasping Communism but also by the chance to develop together.” For a product of a generally ethnocentric policymaking framework, Kennedy appeared willing to understand the complexities of South Vietnam and its neighbors, exemplifying the benefits of a more collaborative relationship. Signing the letter as a friend rather than a colleague, Kennedy

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185 Ibid.

186 Jessica Chapman, however, indicates that “from the outset, American officials conferred legitimacy on Ngo Dinh Diem and discounted the claims of his adversaries based on moral distinctions that made sense within their own framework of thinking about the Cold War, religion, and modernization, but that reflected a fundamental misreading of the complicated political contest that swirled within southern Vietnam.” The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations were thus blinded by their own ethnocentric policymaking framework, which led them to disregard the validity of politico-religious sects, including the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. Nevertheless, Kennedy’s statement was a step in the right direction. Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 5-6.
provided Diem with warm wishes for the future and thus expressively renewed a cross-cultural friendship founded upon dialogue.

Diem responded by not only celebrating his questionable successes throughout the year, but also by lionizing American support. In particular, Diem exaggerated the triumphs of security and economic policy, deemphasized growing tensions between pro-Diem and anti-Diem factions, and attempted to flatter Kennedy and his administration. Albeit obsequious and rhetorical, Diem’s letter did reflect the type of camaraderie that had developed between the two administrations, a willingness to work together despite often immense cultural, personal, and political differences: “I bow with respect to the sacrifices of those American citizens who came and shared our trials and hardships and sealed with their blood the brotherhood of our two peoples.” Metaphorically and literally, blood had been shed and shared between Americans and South Vietnamese, thereby suggesting that cultural misunderstanding and disconnect did not always impede a form of communication. While the sincerity of these letters can certainly be questioned, they provide a window into an exchange of possibilities: “In reaffirming the friendship of the United States of American and its faith in our future, your message is not only particularly auspicious but also really heartening to us.”

Commencing optimistically, 1963 became a year of tragedy, controversy, and unprecedented violence. ARVN forces faced a devastating defeat by the National Liberation Front in the Battle of Ap Bac, Ngo Dinh Nhu advocated for South Vietnamese autonomy with opaque revisionism, and the Buddhist Crisis threatened to destabilize the Diem regime. The Kennedy administration could no longer turn a blind eye to Diem and Nhu’s penchant for

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188 Ibid.
violence and oppression, evidenced most disconcertingly by the Buddhist Crisis, in which monks and nuns protested the South Vietnamese police state through self-immolation. Moreover, possible negotiations between Nhu and Hanoi proved futile and only detrimental to South Vietnamese-U.S. relations. According to American policymakers, “we should set no fixed criteria, but recognize that we would have to decide ... whether to move to more drastic action or try to carry on with Diem even if he had not taken significant steps.” Diem, however, attempted to maintain contact with the Kennedy administration, especially early in the year, writing February 23 that the Vietnamese people deeply appreciated American friendship and were “more than ever determined to redouble their efforts and sacrifices in the year ahead to come near to the final victory that will bring them security and peace.”

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189 The Battle of Ap Bac, fought near the Mekong Delta city of My Tho, was between National Liberation Front battalions and ARVN soldiers, Civil Guardsmen. Blind optimism dominated Diem thinking regarding Ap Bac as Diem placed governmental loyalty, as well as the ability to stave off complete defeat, as more important than actual victory. Commencing with the May 8 bombing of a radio station in Hue, the Buddhist Crisis signaled the end to the regime. In response to the growing crisis, Thich Quang Duc, a monk from central Vietnam, immolated himself and inspired a string of self-immolations. Led by Thich Tri Quang, the movement responded not only to the violence and repression of the Diem regime, but also to the regime’s threat to the Buddhist revival. Ultimately, while Diem did attempt, rather weakly, to negotiate and appease Buddhist leadership, he and Nhu relied upon violence to subdue the movement – the Pagoda Raids. Edward Miller, Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 249-78.

190 Scholars approach the North Vietnam-Nhu talks with differing opinions. In particular, Freedman contends that talks provided Nhu with a means to prevent further American intervention. Lawrence Freedman, Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 382-85. Miller, on the other hand, acknowledges two common theories – leverage with the U.S. versus cooperation with the enemy in order to sever U.S.-GVN ties – but contends that these theories overlook a possible third. According to Miller, talks were viewed optimistically, offering the Diem regime victory over the NLF. Edward Miller, Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 302-4.


192 Ngo Dinh Diem to John F. Kennedy, February 23, 1963, Papers of President Kennedy: President’s Office Files: Countries: Vietnam, General, 1963, 1963-1963. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, http://research.archives.gov/description/193707. Unfortunately, the communications breakdown between the two administrations precluded further dialogue. While the Kennedy administration did draft a letter to Diem, it was decided by all that sending it was ultimately futile. Roger Hilsman Jr. (and others), Draft Letter from President Kennedy to President Diem, Washington, September 16, 1963, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, Document 115. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, Memos and Miscellaneous Part II. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v04/d115. There is no drafting information on the source text, but this letter was prepared by Hilsman and others at the Department of State. The source text is labeled: “Suggested Draft of Presidential Letter, Adapted to Phase 1 of
“social justice and collective ascent” revealed blatant hypocrisy, sheer desperation, and flattery, but this last communiqué also provided a glimpse into what had once been a cross-cultural friendship. It was clear that despite cultural differences, Diem believed that his relationship with the U.S. signified the possibility for a promising future: “offer the gratitude and admiration of the Vietnamese people to the great nation and people ‘who have always been willing to pay the dearest costs for liberty.’”

Yet on November 2, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu were shot to death in a military vehicle that intermediaries had promised would take them to safety, effectively ending one of the longest relationships between the U.S. and a South Vietnamese leader. Although Kennedy’s specific role in the coup remains unclear, it was apparent that U.S. policymakers, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, approved, supported, and even helped foster the coup. Below is the chilling and last conversation between Diem and Lodge a day before Diem’s death:

Diem: After all, I am a Chief of State. I have tried to do my duty. I want to do now what duty and good sense require. I believe in duty above all.
Lodge: You have certainly done your duty. As I told you only this morning, I admire your courage and your great contributions to your country…. Now I am worried about your physical safety. I have a report that those in charge of the current activity offer you and your brother safe conduct out of the country if you resign. Had you heard this?
Diem: No. (And then after a pause) You have my telephone number.
Lodge: Yes. If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me.
Diem: I am trying to re-establish order. 196

While Kennedy called the coup and killing “abhorrent,”197 it seemed that the violence and repression carried out by Diem, Nhu, and their supporters could only be solved through bloodshed. Unfortunately, as many scholars have indicated, the “end of Diem’s reign was momentous”198 as the power vacuum was not filled by a competent or stable South Vietnamese leader for years to come. But more importantly, Diem and Nhu’s deaths suggest that communication and peace were only facets of American and South Vietnamese policy during the interregnum period. Ideological ideals and an obsession with victory ultimately eroded promises and fractured an initially positive cross-cultural relationship.

For Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu, this obsession with an ideological ideal impeded their ability to foster communication within their own government, as well as with their democratically minded allies. Jessica Chapman delineates that Diem “believed in the virtues of his particular brand of democracy. His democratic ideal, rooted in personalism, reflected a critique of the Western model and was based less on citizens’ participation in government than citizens’ moral participation in society at the local level.”199 Like his American allies and even Ho Chi Minh, Diem’s idea of ideology remained paradoxical as it promised democracy, but


demanded absolute obedience and morality. Diem explained his philosophy of government as “a sacred respect ... due to the person of the sovereign.... He is the mediator between the people and Heaven as he celebrates the national cult.”

By 1963, as tensions between the Diem administration and general population were at their breaking point, Diem and especially Nhu relied upon torture, violence, and oppression to eliminate opposition: “[Nhu] said that if his father-in-law ... were to ‘come to Saigon, I will have his head cut off. I will hang him in the center of a square and let him dangle there. My wife will make the knot on the rope because she is proud of being a Vietnamese and she is a good patriot.”

Comfortable with their own paradoxes, Kennedy and his policymakers rightfully viewed the Diem government as a totalitarian police-state, denying South Vietnamese basic human rights. Kennedy’s policymakers noted that the “fundamental weakness of the Diem regime was the curious rigidity and political insensitivity of its mandarin style in the face of a dramatic crisis of popular confidence.”

Diem revealed such rigidity and insensitivity in some of the dichotomous themes of his letters: “in the dramatic situation of an underdeveloped country, divided and mortally

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menaced by communism.”

Desperately clinging to political power, Diem no longer possessed a rational understanding of his presidential role as he sacrificed what could have been socio-political progress for denial, survival, and justification. Communication and peaceful resolution thus became increasingly implausible given Diem’s contradictory ideological framework.

Diem was not the only president concerned with ideology as “Kennedy was transfixed by the perceived threat from international communism.” While Kennedy’s discomfort with the violence and oppression of the Diem regime was more than ideological, “in his fear of communism, Kennedy was a product of his age,” Kennedy continued to reaffirm a containment policy espoused and supported by both the Eisenhower and Truman administrations: “I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Viet-Nam went, it would not only give them an improved ... position for a guerrilla assault ... but would also give the impression that the wave of the future ... was China and the Communists.” Diem shared Kennedy’s aversion to the spread of communism in South Vietnam: “I believe the facts of Communist aggression against the Vietnamese people are ... well known to you. Despite Communist lies, the evidence on record

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205 For example: “He repeated the allegations of orgies in pagodas, and emphasized that the heart of the problem was the fact that ‘anyone could become a bonze (priest) who shaved his head and acquired a yellow robe.’” Frederick W. Flott, Memorandum of Conversation, Saigon, September 29, 1963, 2:30-5:30 p.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, Document 158. Department of State, Central Files, POL 7 US/McNamara. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v04/d158.
207 Ibid.
cannot be hidden.” However, for Kennedy, South Vietnam was one of many dominoes in a larger international battle against communism, in which nation-building and cross-cultural friendship often became minutiae in the midst of Berlin Walls and Cuban Missiles. Unfortunately, even Kennedy’s rhetorical and diplomatic eloquence could not preclude the miscommunication and tension emerging from the paradoxical construction of containment – simultaneously peaceful and militant. Devoted to this unrealistic idea of ideology, Kennedy depicted South Vietnam as part of a complex anti-communist network: “as to Cambodia, the communist threat to Southeast Asia would appear to clearly outweigh all other considerations.” Kennedy and his administration continued to think globally, disregarding the internal nuances of South Vietnam and thus missing invaluable opportunities to maintain cross-cultural communication, reestablish peace, and foster a nation-building partnership.

Ideological ideals laid the groundwork for Kennedy and Diem policymaking decisions, but it was a devotion to victory that sustained Kennedy and Diem throughout the worst years of their alliance. Victory fuelled optimism for inevitable success, encouraged denial, and provided ample opportunities for both administrations to restructure and reinterpret events and people, like the strategic hamlets, in their favor. Even when the Buddhist Crisis forced American policymakers to welcome coups as a means to end the despotism and instability of the Diem regime, Diem stood firm: “They can send ten Lodges ... but I will not permit myself or my


country to be humiliated.”  

Kennedy, despite feeling increasingly ambivalent on the dangerous situation in Vietnam, also concluded that withdrawal “‘would be a great mistake.’” Such parallel instances reveal startling similarities between Diem and Kennedy as each viewed victory through a predetermined framework and believed in their own nationalist exceptionalism. The language of victory emerged in the Kennedy-Diem exchanges as Kenney wrote, “this ... is ... our thinking on how we can help you and your brave countrymen to help themselves in their determined struggle to defeat the Communists.” Diem responded in turn, “I want to reiterate to you here, in my personal name and in the name of the entire Vietnamese people, our indomitable will to win.” Like Truman, Ho and Eisenhower, Diem, the desire for victory shaped the course of events in South Vietnam, but unfortunately, it jeopardized a cross-cultural friendship founded upon the possibility for peace. Neither party was willing to compromise their definition of victory, whether it be a non-communist world or a rigidly governed, yet free South Vietnam, thereby losing sight of what could have been an enduring diplomatic relationship.

From Diem and Back

After Diem and Kennedy’s assassinations, the fate of South Vietnam was in the hands of Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, a domestic-minded president generally ill prepared to handle the nuances of American foreign policy. Interestingly, it was Johnson who at the end of his presidency, desperately attempted to communicate with Ho Chi Minh in an effort to establish diplomatic communication. Silence, however, was sustained throughout the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations as North Vietnam turned inward, as well as to its Kremlin allies, to

foster domestic growth and to prepare for the second war. Possibilities did arise for communication between North Vietnam and the United States: the Geneva Conference for the Eisenhower administration and the Laos talks, through Governor Averell Harriman, for the Kennedy administration.215 Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz delineate that even in “late 1962 the NLF also offered a cease-fire which did not first require the withdrawal of the Americans…. Kennedy rejected the NLF offer.”216 But silence remained as North Vietnam focused on socio-political, economic, and military developments, particularly land reform programs, which resulted in a devastating purge of the land-owning class and a horrible famine.217 Kennedy and Eisenhower, on the other hand, believed that by rebuilding South Vietnam as a symbolic vanguard against communism, the U.S. could stop the dominoes from falling and stabilize the balance of global power. Unfortunately, this interregnum period discounted communication between the enemy and the United States, making diplomacy and a negotiated settlement complicated by a prolonged period of distrust, anger, and frustration. Though Johnson lacked

215 Harriman was finishing up Laos negotiations when Kennedy encouraged him to “broach the idea of a peace conference on South Vietnam with North Vietnamese representatives.” William J. Duiker, U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 289. James Barrington, the Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs in Burma, arranged a meeting with the North Vietnamese, Foreign Minister Ung van Kiem, Mr. Hoang Nguyen (Sec. Gen. of Delegation), and an interpreter. Much of their discussion concerned Laos as a neutral state, but they also touched upon the role of the U.S. in Vietnam and the possibility for some sort of agreement between North Vietnam and the United States. See below: “Before departing, however, he wished to return to the first part of the conversation which he and the Foreign Minister had had concerning Laos. He felt that clear undertakings on the part of the US Government and on the part of the North Vietnamese to carry out scrupulously all the provisions of the Geneva Agreements on Laos would result in peace in Laos. He trusted that that would be done and that this sort of cooperation between the US and North Vietnam could make a great contribution toward the peace of Southeast Asia. The Foreign Minister agreed with this statement and said he would remember the first part of the conversation that he and Governor Harriman had had this afternoon. He hoped, however, that Governor Harriman would not forget the second part of the conversation, and particularly what the Foreign Minister had had to say about American military intervention in Vietnam.” William H. Sullivan, Memorandum of Conversation, Geneva, July 22, 1962, 2:30 p.m., Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document 410. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Harriman Papers, Chronology File, May to August, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v24/d410.


217 Hanoi also believed that the Diem regime would collapse on its own, thereby avoiding a second Indochina war. William J. Duiker, U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 265-8.
foreign policymaking experience and rhetorical finesse, he “would [ultimately] be called to pay the price for the miscalculations of his predecessors.”

With the end of the Kennedy era, the U.S. began to transform its policy approach to Vietnam, especially as the situation in the South failed to stabilize with the collapse of the Diem regime. Escalation no longer seemed avoidable, leading the Johnson administration to search for a military solution that originated in the North. Discussions with North Vietnam, still mediated by third parties, resumed in full swing, which culminated in the Johnson-Ho contact.

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CHAPTER FOUR: "AN ENDLESS QUAGMIRE:" LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND HO CHI MINH

"Under John Kennedy's leadership, this Nation has demonstrated that it has the courage to seek peace, and it has the fortitude to risk war." These were the words of Lyndon Johnson in his address to Congress after the Kennedy assassination. Like Truman, Johnson entered the White House as a politician with a focus primarily domestic in nature, unprepared to face the difficult realities of foreign policymaking. Fredrik Logevall emphasizes that Johnson “found the realm of diplomacy and statecraft complicated and frustrating.” Johnson realized that, unfortunately, the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem had further destabilized the future of South Vietnam as communist infiltration and violence continued as factions immediately emerged in the new government. Initially, Johnson approached Vietnam by continuing the decision-making process of his predecessors, in which military escalation was viewed as a last resort. However, Johnson also formulated his own interpretation of the symbolic meaning of Vietnam: “I knew that ... Truman and ... Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared to what might happen if we lost Vietnam.” For Johnson, Vietnam was a concrete problem that he could solve, thereby blurring the lines between personal and national credibility. Consequently, Johnson reworked his policymaking team in order to fit his seemingly black-and-white perspective on the role of Vietnam in the world. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara,

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Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy formed this close advisory circle, more tight-knit than Kennedy’s. A generally hawkish and dogmatic group of individuals, these policymakers reinforced Johnson’s dichotomous understanding of Vietnam and his devotion to winning the war against communism.

Regardless of Johnson’s own commitment to the war in Vietnam, the path to escalation was not immediate, but intertwined with deep indecision, policymaking debate, and moral agony. Early in 1964, “administration officials dealing with the Vietnam conflict shifted their primary focus from the South to the North. A general consensus still existed that the war could not be won until the situation in South Vietnam had stabilized, but some sought the key to that stability in Hanoi, not in Saigon.”

William Duiker delineates that rampant instability throughout South Vietnam and administrative shifts in the White House resulted in Johnson’s embrace of a more militant circle of advisors. Resituating the focus of the war, “The ground had thus been prepared for a possible extension of the war into North Vietnam.” Two particular incidents, the Gulf of Tonkin events and the attacks on military installations near Pleiku, transformed the course of American policy, providing the impetus for military and socio-political escalation. Highly controversial, the Gulf of Tonkin, supposedly unprovoked attacks on American ships, offered Johnson enough evidence to present to Congress for legalized intervention. Legitimized by the

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222 Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 399. Logevall indicates, however, that Johnson’s decisions were, for the most part, his own: “The better explanation is that Johnson, though he inherited a difficult Vietnam problem from his predecessors, stepped into a trap substantially of his own making, which in turn raises doubts about the extent of his political acumen.” Fredrik Logevall, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34.1 (2004): 111.


225 Ibid., 317.
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Johnson was prepared to take action: “Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”\textsuperscript{226} According to Duiker, the “Pleiku incident opened the floodgates”\textsuperscript{227} in a Viet Cong attack upon the U.S. Army at Qui Nhon. Thus, by the end of 1964, escalation through ground or aerial campaigns seemed a natural response to an increasingly militant and volatile situation in Vietnam: the Second Indochina War was about to begin.

When Johnson wrote his seemingly desperate letter to Ho (1967), he was in the midst of an escalated Vietnam War, with ideological and military victory expected by Congress and the public. After being elected in his own right, Johnson was determined not to lose Vietnam and thus devoted much of his presidency, regardless of an ambitious domestic policy program, to solving Vietnam: “If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries that we barely know, then that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant.”\textsuperscript{228} Johnson’s decision to escalate – Americanization – involved a combination of American military power, including air strikes and technologically advanced weaponry, with the introduction of ground troops. After Pleiku, Johnson and his more militant advisors decided upon Operation Rolling Thunder, a massive bombing campaign to boost morale in South Vietnam and cripple North Vietnamese war-making capability while avoiding direct


confrontation with Chinese communists.\textsuperscript{229} At the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder, Johnson seemed hopeful for the eventuality of American victory: “we know that air attacks alone will not accomplish all ... But it is our best and prayerful judgment that they are a necessary part of the surest road to peace. We hope that peace will come swiftly. But…. we must be prepared for a long continued conflict. It will require patience as well as bravery-the will to endure as well as the will to resist.”\textsuperscript{230} Reinforcing the “orthodoxy of containment,”\textsuperscript{231} hawkish escalation emerged because Johnson refused to allow any outcome that could be interpreted by political opponents as a communist victory. Unfortunately, by the end of 1967, over 11,000 Americans\textsuperscript{232} had been killed in combat as American military strength proved relatively futile in impeding the North Vietnamese ability to wage a counterinsurgency war.

For North Vietnam, the Second Indochina War was just as devastating as the war against the French, but Ho Chi Minh and his compatriots recognized that victory was certainly achievable if they continued to wear down their technologically superior enemy. While Operation Rolling Thunder did disrupt military operations and industrial production, the North Vietnamese could generally rely upon assistance from their Chinese and Soviet comrades: “So far, in the spirit of international solidarity, the people and Government of your country have been


giving whole-hearted support and assistance to the Vietnamese people.”

Moreover, despite the psychological and physical effects of the bombing campaign, Ho declared that “North Viet-Nam will not falter.” Devotion to an independent and reunified Vietnam remained, especially as infiltration continued in the South, with embedded cadres working with the National Liberation Front. Interestingly, the American military did succeed in winning major battles against Viet Cong soldiers, especially as evidenced by the preferred metric of the body count accumulated throughout the escalation years. However, whether through coercion or actual support, it was the North Vietnamese and their Southern NLF counterparts who won over the hearts and minds of the many citizens of the South, particularly rural villagers who often felt powerless. As the North Vietnamese began to prepare for the Tet Offensive, Ho continued to espouse absolute victory: “the U.S. aggressors have brazenly launched air attacks…. Our army and people have shown redoubled eagerness … to … fight heroically. So far we have blasted out of the skies more than 1,200 aircraft. We are determined the defeat the enemy’s war of destruction.”

In 1967, a sense of optimism emerged in the Johnson administration, in which victory seemed inevitable regardless of the problems in South Vietnam and with North Vietnam. During this period, compromises and peace initiatives dominated backrooms and conferences, but unfortunately, none came into fruition. U.S. policymakers had attempted to work with Canadian and Polish mediators while dropping bombs and performing search-and-destroy

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235 Ibid.

missions on the Viet Cong. After the Marigold plan, British and Soviet diplomats met in order to hammer out the details of a peace arrangement, or at least come to some way of getting the U.S. and North Vietnam together – the Sunflower initiative. Interestingly, the flower motif appeared to be a rather explicit attempt to frame initial diplomatic contacts through images of peace, as the marigold symbolizes passion, creativity (also used as an offering) and the sunflower joy, adoration. Simultaneously, Johnson sent his letter to Ho Chi Minh in order to provide the North Vietnamese with a clarified American perspective, which only diminished Soviet and British offers for peaceful dialogue. Allan Goodman indicates that this exchange was somewhat confusing as multiple initiatives and perspectives were emerging: British, Soviet, American, North, and South Vietnamese. In Goodman’s view, Johnson’s letter to Ho complicated the situation rather than alleviated tensions. He emphasizes that Henry Kissinger “came away from the experience convinced that the differences in the thought processes of the two adversaries were so fundamental that it was impossible for either to imagine a negotiated … settlement.” However, as I will discuss below, it was the similarities between the two adversaries – and their leaders – that continued to reinforce war over diplomacy and seemed to foster cultural disconnect instead of cross-cultural communication. Both remained stubbornly devoted to ideological fanaticism and victory, thereby denying any possibility for peace.

Often dismissed given the controversial nature of Johnson’s flawed policymaking decisions, Johnson’s letter to Ho revealed a very human desire for communication, though

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237 “‘Marigold’ was the code name for the next abortive attempt to arrange peace talks between Washington and Hanoi” (20). Commencing in 1966, Marigold involved Polish and Italian mediators, particularly Janusz Lewandowski who claimed to have spoken directly with Ho in June. Allan E. Goodman, *The Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), 20-5.


tempered by Johnson’s folksy rhetoric. Because the American people were eager for some sort of contact between North Vietnam and the U.S., the Johnson administration included the communiqué in The Department of State Bulletin. Reaching out to Ho on February 8, 1967, Johnson still remained committed to Operation Rolling Thunder and ever-increasing military and political escalation that would ultimately result in a presidency marred by widespread popular unrest. Ho responded, illustrating that the cultural divide between Vietnamese and American need not always preclude understanding. Johnson commenced his letter by expressing what seemed to be genuine sorrow and even regret for the Vietnam War: “I am writing to you in the hope that the conflict in Vietnam can be brought to an end. That conflict has already taken a heavy toll—in lives lost, in wounds inflicted … and in simple human misery. If we fail to find a just and peaceful solution, history will judge us harshly.”

After this introduction, Johnson focused upon fostering negotiations between the North Vietnamese and American governments, which Johnson hoped to accomplish before the Vietnamese New Year. In a bit of diplomatic tit for tat, Johnson offered to halt Operation Rolling Thunder and other military actions, but in return, he expected the North Vietnamese to stop their infiltration of the South. While exhibiting concern with his own historical legacy, as well as American prestige abroad, Johnson’s letter captured deep indecision and discomfort with the escalation of Vietnam. As Johnson lamented privately, “I just haven’t got the nerve to do it, and I don’t see any other way out of it.”

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However, Ho found Johnson’s letter fairly offensive as he retorted, “Permit me to ask you: Who perpetrated these monstrous crimes? It was the American soldiers and the soldiers of the satellite countries. The United States Government is entirely responsible for the extremely grave situation in Viet-Nam.” For Ho and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) leadership, then preparing for the 1968 Tet Offensive, Johnson’s letter failed to provide an adequate solution to war because it was the “United States Government [that] provoked the war of aggression in Viet-Nam.” In particular, Ho reiterated his emphasis upon violated agreements, citing the Geneva Conference as a legitimatization of Vietnamese sovereignty and agency, thereby questioning Johnson’s authority to decide for Vietnam. Ho also claimed that North Vietnam had acquired the support of other nations, as well as some American citizens, which reinforced American culpability as Johnson’s own people no longer supported his ostensibly war-mongering policies. Regardless, Ho still appeared open to negotiations if and only if the U.S. was willing to stop all acts of war: “[we] will never accept conversation under the clear threat of bombs.” Underlying Ho’s aggressive and condemnatory response was a possibility for communication and perhaps even legitimate peace opportunities.

Johnson’s desire for any form of compromise or peaceful resolution was simply incompatible with the ideological foundation of American foreign policy during the Cold War – containment. Although twenty years had passed between Ho’s communiqués to Truman and the Johnson-Ho exchange, the Johnson administration still conducted international politics with the guiding tenets of containment: “An arrogant and stubborn faith in America’s power to shape the

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244 Ibid.
course of foreign events compounded the dangers sown by ideological rigidity.”247 The idea of containment remained paradoxical as unwavering devotion to peace and democracy could only be accomplished through extreme military force, which often created domino-like waves of violence and instability. Though many policymakers considered military strength a key component of the containment policy, it tended to exacerbate an already-tense global environment and precluded the cross-cultural exchange evident in the Johnson-Ho letters. While hoping for peace, Johnson simultaneously pushed for war, ordering McNamara and General Wheeler to “‘get plenty more targets’ … as ‘damn many planes’ as necessary ‘to find ‘em and kill em.’”248 Johnson had attempted to communicate with Ho, but he also felt compelled – by ideology, emotion, and power – to reject diplomacy and reinforce American values dependent upon almost relentless destruction. Even Johnson himself recognized the inherent conflict between democratic ideals and the means to uphold these ideals: “I wish it were possible to convince others with words of what we now find it necessary to say with guns and planes … because we fight for values and we fight for principle.”249 Ultimately, containment was an abstract idea rather than a concrete framework with which to conduct the Cold War, thereby compelling Johnson and his administration to reject a “just and peaceful solution.”250

Ideologically, Ho’s communist ties fueled misunderstanding and mistrust within the Johnson administration. Like Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Diem, Ho’s ideological views were guided and reinforced by paradoxes: nationalism vs. communism, violence vs. peace, utopian ideal vs. stark reality. Although Ho’s form of communism was not doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist, communist-nationalism served as a constant impetus for war against the United States: “Compatriots! The Fatherland is in danger. All of us must rise up! Long live independent and united Vietnam! Long live the successful Resistance War!”

Ho condemned Americans for their (very real) crimes of violence and deception, and the North Vietnamese leader noted that the “barbarous U.S. imperialists have unleashed a war of aggression in an attempt to conquer our country... They have used a puppet administration and mercenary army fostered by them as instruments of their aggressive policy.” Nonetheless, Ho conveniently disregarded the thousands of Vietnamese purged or murdered in land reform and other communist initiatives. Unfortunately, the communist regime periodically relied upon violence, repression, and bloodshed – ironically, methods of the heavily criticized Diem regime – to maintain control in the North. But according to Ho, only the United States perpetrated crimes of violence: “in South Viet-Nam a half-million American soldiers … have resorted to … inhumane … and … barbarous methods of warfare, such as napalm … in order to massacre our fellow countrymen …

In [the] North … thousands of … planes have rained down … tons of bombs, destroying cities,

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253 Ho did eventually admit to his own culpability: “because I lacked a spirit of democracy, I didn’t listen and didn’t see, so we must now promote democracy. I accept responsibility in this time of trial!” (485). Quoted in Ho Chi Minh bien nien tieu su [A chronological history of Ho Chi Minh], vol. 7, p. 334. William J. Duiker, Ho Chi Minh (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 474-514.
villages.” Simply, Ho praised only the North Vietnamese Revolution as ideal: “our people have shown great heroism, courage, enthusiasm and industriousness. They have always followed the Party … with unqualified loyalty.” Just as the American presidents and puppet South Vietnamese leaders, Ho embraced an idea of perfect dogmatism, in which peaceful resolution remained irreconcilable with violent ideological warfare.

In February 1966, Johnson said to Senator Eugene McCarthy, “‘I know we oughtn’t to be there, but I can’t get out. I just can’t be the architect of surrender.’” Underlying an almost fanatical ideological devotion, the Johnson administration (except for a select few, like George Ball) remained obsessed with American victory. During that same year, Ho espoused that the “Vietnamese people will never submit to the U.S. imperialists’ threats.” Regardless of the mere possibility for a negotiated peace, Ho and Johnson viewed Vietnam through the lens of absolute victory, in which compromise and cultural understanding were illusions rather than realities. Throughout their letter exchange, the rhetoric of victory continued to emerge, somewhat hidden beneath what appeared to be the genuine sympathy of cross-cultural connectivity. Johnson and Ho defined victory through their own socio-political parameters, which inevitably discomfitted the other warring party and precluded meaningful negotiations.

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256 Conversation between President Johnson and Eugene McCarthy, February 1, 1966, tape WH6602.01, conversation 9602, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Recordings, online by University of Virginia Miller Center, Presidential Recordings Program, http://millercenter.org/presidentialrecordings/lbj-wh6602.01-9602.
Johnson wrote, “I am prepared to order a cessation of bombing … and the stopping of further augmentation of U.S. forces…as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Viet-Nam … has stopped.” Conversely, Ho responded by demanding that the United States completely withdraw from Vietnam, including its involvement in South Vietnamese military and political affairs: “it must cease that aggression, it is the only road … to the re-establishment of peace.” Ho and Johnson were thus surprisingly comparable in their search for absolute victory as the continuation of war seemed the only plausible solution to negotiation without compromise.

On September 29, 1967, Johnson made another offer of peace, the San Antonio Formula, in his address to the National Legislative Conference. Appealing to the North Vietnamese to see reason, Johnson said, “The United States is willing to stop all aerial and naval bombardment of North Vietnam when this will lead promptly to productive discussion. We … assume that while discussions proceed, North Vietnam would not take advantage of the bombing cessation or limitation.” However, not only was this plea relatively informal – spoken at an American conference, not written – it merely reiterated the sentiments of Johnson’s original letter to Ho. Larry Berman emphasizes that “Ho Chi Minh had nothing to gain by negotiating with an American president facing re-election, and knowing LBJ had more to lose, Ho rejected the San

Antonio proposal.”263 At the start of 1968, LBJ would have much more to lose as the Tet Offensive proved the North Vietnamese capable of sweeping military operations. Regardless of multiple attempts to establish contact with Hanoi, negotiations remained at a standstill while Johnson continued to lose support of the American public. Ultimately, Johnson decided not to run for reelection – Vietnam had destroyed him.

In a revealing conversation with Leonard Marks, director of the U.S. Information Agency, Marks conveyed to Johnson Senator George Aiken’s recommendations for withdrawal. Disgusted with both Marks and Aiken for challenging his presidential authority, Johnson angrily dismissed Marks from his office. Several years later, Marks visited Johnson at his ranch where he finally asked about the abrupt dismissal. Johnson, despite all the ego-posturing and personal justification, simply replied, “Because you and George Aiken were right.”264

After almost a decade, the Democratic reign was over as Richard Nixon won the presidential office, poised for a Republican takeover that would redefine foreign and domestic policy. Unfortunately, as the many predecessors before him, Richard Nixon became bogged down, even obsessed with ending the Vietnam War – victoriously. Prolonged warfare and stagnant negotiations forced yet another contact with the waning Ho Chi Minh.

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CHAPTER FIVE: “NON-NEGOTIABLE NEGOTIATIONS:” RICHARD NIXON AND HO CHI MINH

“We are caught in war, wanting peace,” affirmed Richard Nixon in his inaugural address to a nation that had faced some of the most devastating years of the Second Indochina War, a nation torn apart by anger, frustration, and mistrust. Unlike Lyndon Johnson, Nixon had accrued an impressive foreign policymaking resume from his tenure as Vice President during the Eisenhower administration, and he was already very familiar with the workings of American policy in Vietnam. Structurally, Nixon continued to narrow the circle of influence in his administration, as did Johnson, particularly in his close relationship with Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor. Stressing secrecy, task efficiency, and clarity, Nixon seemed rather intolerant of any form of dissent regarding policymaking decisions: “As I have emphasized on several occasions, I expect and encourage the free exchange of conflicting views on any policy issue up until the time a decision is made. Following decision, however, viewpoints in conflict with stated policy should be silenced [emphasis added].” However, like his predecessors, Nixon believed that he was uniquely positioned to solve the Vietnam War, but found after months of negotiations, back-and-forth conversations, and policymaking deliberations, success would not be that simple. While intimating that cross-cultural cooperation was possible, noting that after “a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation ... during this administration our lines of communication will be open,” Nixon relied upon more extreme measures of diplomacy. Though Cold War tensions were diminishing, paradoxical constructions

of peace and war, as well as a dichotomous understanding of the global environment, reinforced and developed new strategies of containment: linkage, throffer, brinkmanship, and détente.\textsuperscript{268} Thus, for Nixon, peace was on the horizon, but it would not come without a fight: “I want peace, but I will never accept defeat and will not have the U.S. humiliated by Hanoi.”\textsuperscript{269}

Perhaps surprisingly, Nixon communicated with Ho right before the DRV leader’s death in a rather half-hearted, yet emotional attempt to strike up negotiations with the waning symbol of North Vietnam. Unfortunately, Nixon’s legacy has been sufficiently marred by well-documented deception and corruption that these characteristics sometimes preclude a more in-depth analysis of this somewhat strange occurrence of Nixonian sympathy and humanity. Before acquiring presidential power, Nixon cunningly manipulated 1968 negotiations with North Vietnam (discrediting Johnson), which promised South Vietnamese President Thieu unrealistic protection in the reunified government.\textsuperscript{270} Once in office, however, Nixon discovered that “peace with honor” was almost implausible as the North Vietnamese, National Liberation Front, South Vietnamese, and U.S. government came to the negotiating table with conflicting demands and expectations.\textsuperscript{271} Interestingly, Nixon’s approach to “peace with honor” also remained tainted by constant political and military delays, as well as his reliance upon displays of extreme violence: “Don’t worry, we’re not gonna go out whimpering; we’re gonna blast the god-damn


The Nixon-Kissinger duo applied madman tactics, inspired by Eisenhower and developed by Nixon’s madman theory of diplomatic relations, to force the North Vietnamese into submission: “diplomatic efforts coupled with irresistible military pressure” — an oblique reference to the carrot-and-stick approach. A shrewd diplomatic, Nixon delegated carrots and sticks to feuding allies, Sinos and Soviets, as he recognized that the split between the two communist powers provided the United States with the unique opportunity to reshape foreign policy relations. Linking China, the Soviet Union, and the United States together in an amalgamation of détente foreign policy, Nixon was determined to augment the hegemony and credibility of the United States – thereby containing the spread of communism.

Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese, led in negotiations by Le Duc Tho, viewed radical U.S. measures as ploys to coerce a deceptive agreement that would benefit the United States and enhance its prestige as democratic protector. According to Nixon, “What really rides on Vietnam, is whether US people are going to play [a] big role in [the] world or not.” By 1969, the North Vietnamese had waited years fighting and negotiating and thus they were prepared to demand eventual reunification with a coalition government of South Vietnam’s Government of Vietnam (GVN), DRV, and NLF/PRG (Provisional Government of Vietnam) representatives. During a discussion with Henry Kissinger, Le Duc Tho revealed the extent of North Vietnamese devotion to the independence cause: “If our generation cannot win, then our sons and nephews

will continue. We will sacrifice everything, but we will not again have slavery. This is our iron will. We have been fighting for 25 years … You wanted to quench our spirit with bombs and shells. But they cannot force us to submit.” Tho contended that American presidents and their policymakers continued to underestimate the North’s commitment to the revolutionary war, believing that air strikes and non-traditional warfare could terrorize the people into submission. For men like Ho Chi Minh and Le Duc Tho, Vietnam had become a battlefield stained with the blood of free Vietnamese men and women and the failure to achieve victory was no longer, and perhaps never had been, a viable option. Before his death, Ho wrote, “Whatever difficulties and hardships may be ahead, our people are sure of total triumph. The U.S. imperialists shall have to quit. Our Fatherland shall be reunified…. We, a small nation, will have earned the unique honour of defeating...two big imperialisms.”

It is important to note, however, that the unified vision of the North Vietnamese Politburo was a rather fragmented illusion. Lien-Hang Nguyen reveals that the Party had split between moderates and hawks, the moderates gravitating towards the pro-negotiations Soviets and the hawks supporting more militant action in line with Chinese principles of revolutionary warfare. Generally, the split framed the course of war as hawks advocated overt militancy, which included forced Southern reunification, while moderates still believed in gradualist warfare that favored the North. More importantly, the shift within the Party highlighted the waning power of Ho Chi Minh and others in his more moderate camp, such as General Vo Nguyen Giap. Hawkish Party leaders – Le Duan and Le Duc Tho – used this opportunity to acquire more control of Party politics, enough so that purges were ordered to oust Soviet supporters. In 1964, Duan even

shamed Ho Chi Minh for his “wrongful capitulation to the French in 1945 and incorrect acceptance of the terms of the Geneva Accords in 1954.” Consequently, Ho was becoming increasingly marginalized within the Party by the mid-1960s, although his role as Sino-Soviet mediator and symbol did remain significant up until his death.

In order to understand the context of the Nixon-Ho exchange, it is essential to delineate the negotiating process that commenced with the Nixon administration. Negotiations were already on Nixon’s mind before assuming the presidency, as evidenced by his backhanded communication with President Thieu during the Johnson administration. Unfortunately, experience with Vietnamese diplomacy generally proved futile when Nixon actually moved forward to deescalate the war in Vietnam, finding communication with the North Vietnamese, National Liberation Front, and South Vietnamese exceedingly difficult. While Nixon and Kissinger remained optimistic that they could wrap up negotiations quickly, every party involved wanted something different, whether the promise to maintain their regime (Thieu), an active voice in the government (NLF), or the end to American intervention (DRV). As on-and-off talks continued, Nixon lamented, “We’ve got to get the hell out of there. That’s for sure.” Nixon and his policymaking team thus believed that direct contact with Ho Chi Minh could move the diplomatic process into a direction that would save American credibility and prevent a complete communist takeover of South Vietnam. Interestingly, Nixon’s letter to Ho Chi Minh, sent through French contact Jean Sainteny, was publicized in the Department of State Bulletin.

suggesting that Nixon considered public opinion an important facet of his foreign policymaking decisions.\textsuperscript{283} Regardless, diplomatic conversations were complicated by Nixon and Kissinger’s winner-take-all attitude, in which the American public, North Vietnamese, and President Thieu often became frustrating minutiae: “Right now there’s not a goddamn thing to lose. Nothin’ to lose. We gonna turn Right. We’re gonna hit’ em, bomb the livin’ bejesus out of ‘em.”\textsuperscript{284}

Nixon’s July 15 letter to Ho thus becomes marred by controversy as scholars wrestle with the psychology of a man who was not averse to resorting to illegal means to solve Vietnam and maintain presidential power. However, Jeffrey Kimball reminds scholars and readers that the “goal [is] neither to prosecute nor to defend American, Vietnamese, [etc.,] policymakers for historical crimes or wrongdoings ... [but] to keep an open mind... allow the evidence to suggest answers to the questions asked.”\textsuperscript{285} In spite of Nixon’s noteworthy personal and political weaknesses, his letter to Ho provides an often unanalyzed window into his seemingly legitimate concern for the prolonged and tragic nature of Vietnam. Nixon opened his letter with an emotional, as well as rhetorical plea for peaceful resolution, one which suggests some sort of regret for the war: “I deeply believe that the war in Vietnam has gone on too long and delay in bringing it to an end can benefit no one--least of all the people of Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{286} In the body of the


letter, Nixon reiterated diplomacy, emphasizing what he believed to be a fair proposal, South Vietnamese political agency, and the possibility for compromise with the NLF 10-point plan. Admittedly, it is difficult to ascertain the sincerity and authenticity of Nixon’s message, but his more personalized and private letter did capture the mere possibility for peace: “Let history record that at this critical juncture, both sides turned their face toward peace rather than toward conflict and war.”

Less than a month before his death (September 2), Ho responded to Nixon and reaffirmed the North Vietnamese desire for peaceful resolution while simultaneously denouncing the U.S. for crimes committed against the Vietnamese people. After years of bombing campaigns and diplomatic stagnancy, Ho did appear more sympathetic, even gentler, in his response to Nixon: “the war … accumulates the mourning and burdens of the American people…. I am also deeply touched at the rising toll of death of young Americans.” Although Ho tempered this cross-cultural understanding with a need to underscore U.S. responsibility, he clearly indicated that diplomacy was preferable to military action, whether bombing or troop escalations. “But Nixon chose to characterize [Ho’s response] as a ‘cold rebuff’” because Ho only offered diplomacy based upon Vietnamese stipulations: “the overall solution in 10 points of the [NLF] of South Vietnam and of the Provisional Revolutionary Government … of South Vietnam is a logical and

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reasonable basis for the settlement of the Vietnamese problem. It has earned the sympathy and support of the peoples of the world." Interestingly, Nguyen indicates that it was really “Le Duan who had rejected [Nixon’s] offer; Ho Chi Minh might have been amenable had he not been marginalized in the Politburo and nearing the end of his life.” According to Nguyen, “Le Duan and his hawks strove for total victory,” thereby suggesting that the mix of militant and conciliatory rhetoric was some sort of letter drafting exchange forced by Le Duan. Nonetheless, in what was still Ho’s letter, he concluded by stating, “This is the path that will allow the United States to get out of the war with honor. With good will on both sides we might arrive at common efforts in … finding a … solution.” In essence, Nixon viewed Ho’s response as meaningless and counterproductive, but once again, it revealed that some sort of connection between culturally disparate enemies was possible.

But “peace with honor” remained deeply entrenched in a paradoxical idea, one that discouraged a negotiated peace and cross-cultural understanding. Although Nixon and Kissinger adhered to a rather radical form of Republicanism, they viewed Vietnam through the same ideological lens as their Democratic predecessors: containment. Jeffrey Kimball emphasizes that for Nixon and Kissinger, détente was a simply an instrument of containment, which underlined foreign policy goals and value-based frameworks: “Nixon and Kissinger saw détente … as … ‘a strategy to contain and harness Soviet use of its increasing power’…. détente was a means by which they thought they could encourage and coerce Soviet acceptance of the existing world

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292 Ibid., 90.
order.” Nixon himself clearly believed that Vietnam symbolized this ideological battle between communism and democracy: “We’re not going to turn [South Vietnam] over-17 million people-over to the Communists against their will. Put that down and get those sons of bitches to say it that way.” However, like his Republican and Democratic predecessors, Nixon’s reliance upon violence and military action remained disturbingly intertwined with a contradictory rhetoric of peace and democracy. As Nixon said, “I had to think of the effect of my decision on the next generation and on the future of peace and freedom in America and in the world.” Consequently, the Vietnam War had spanned almost three decades, but Nixon and his predecessors continued to manifest an almost dogmatic loyalty to the idea of containment – an idea rooted in contrasting means and moralisms.

Only two years had passed between the Johnson-Ho and Nixon-Ho exchanges, indicating that Ho’s devotion to a communist-nationalist victory over the American imperialists had not wavered. In his final testament, Ho wrote, “All my life, I have served the Fatherland, the revolution and the people with all my heart and strength. If I should now depart from this world, I would regret nothing, except not being able to serve longer and more.” For Ho, age did not soften his ideological framework, but reinforced his commitment to a utopian vision of Vietnamese society – independent and socialist. Moreover, Ho’s response to Nixon continued to reiterate the National Liberation Front’s plans for a negotiated peace, thereby constructing both

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diplomacy and the postwar landscape through a nationalist-communist lens. Ideological
dichotomies reemerged, “Vietnamese people are deeply devoted to peace … [but] they are
determined to fight to the end,” which fostered cultural disconnect and miscommunication.
Significantly, Ho’s death did not temper the ideological passions of North Vietnamese leaders
and diplomats as his symbolic image permeated every facet of North Vietnam: “due to the
resistance struggle of our people, [Ho Chi Minh’s] death became a source of inspiration to us.”

Reaffirming ideological anti-communism and military aggression, Nixon’s letter to Ho
also carried a very explicit message, verbally communicated by Jean Sainteny: “Sainteny was …
under instructions to convey an … oral warning from the president … that if by November 1 ‘no
valid solution has been reached, he will regretfully find himself obliged to have recourse to
measures of great consequence and force.’” While Nixon may have believed himself superior
to Johnson, he remained perhaps even more committed to absolute victory defined by American
conceptions of warfare, ideology, and international credibility. In his letter, Nixon tried to
appear somewhat benevolent, but through his use of direct and dominant language, Nixon
implied a North Vietnamese compromise rather than American: “As I have said repeatedly, there

298 Ho Chi Minh to Richard Nixon, August 25, 1969, in "Letters of the President and President Ho Chi Minh of the
Problems in the History of the Vietnam War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 371. As Nguyen indicates,
“although by the time of his death he was more or less a figurehead … Ho still commanded international respect …
he had played a crucial diplomatic role that helped North Vietnam manage a policy of equilibrium between China
and the Soviet Union…. Ho[‘s] posthumous appeal ensured that Moscow and Beijing would need to avoid any
allegation of collaboration with the United States.” Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Hanoi’s War: An International History of
is nothing to be gained by waiting.” Ho also spoke persistently of his desire for victory as he had devoted his life to Vietnamese independence, witnessed death and relentless destruction, and would never simply give into American demands. Furthermore, Ho’s militant rhetoric was intertwined with Le Duan’s hawkish approach to military strategy: “I say we increase our military attacks so we can then seize the initiative to advance the diplomatic struggle in order to use world public opinion against the imperialist Americans and their bellicose puppets.”

Thus, North Vietnam consistently offered the same solutions to end the war, those in which the Americans must “cease the war of aggression and withdraw … troops from South Vietnam, respect the right of … the South and of the Vietnamese … to dispose … themselves, without foreign influence.” The Party leaders clearly recognized the reluctance of Nixon and Kissinger to abandon South Vietnam, but they refused any American military or diplomatic presence, including President Thieu. Both Ho and Nixon indicated that they were well aware of the possibility for cross-cultural compromise and genuinely concerned for the sorrows of war, yet they continued to demand victory and in turn, seemingly disallowed peace.

Unfortunately, after the death of Ho Chi Minh, peace talks between North Vietnam and the United States stalled as policymakers debated the terms of negotiation, including a central Vietnamese government, reunification, and prisoner exchange. But in 1973, the Paris Peace Accords signaled an “ending [to] the war and restoring peace in Viet-Nam on the basis of respect for the Vietnamese people’s fundamental national rights and the South Vietnamese people’s right

to self-determination. "However, the Paris Peace agreement was merely symbolic when on April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese forces overwhelmed Saigon, renamed it Ho Chi Minh City, and finally ended the Second Indochina War. By this time, Americans and Vietnamese alike expressed frustration, anger, and disgust for years of prolonged warfare. For Nixon, who had promised so much, the fight to preserve "peace with honor" would ultimately end in a sacrifice of personal integrity – the Watergate Scandal.

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“CROSSING OCEANS WITH WORDS:” A CONCLUSION

“Well, I'm not a crook. I've earned everything I've got,” Richard Nixon claimed as the Watergate Scandal ended his political career and forced resignation before impeachment. Those are words that resonate with many Americans who view the Nixon presidency as the culmination of American faith in governmental leadership, particularly the office of the president. Ho Chi Minh, on the other hand, left behind a very different legacy, despite discord within the North Vietnamese Politburo and power shifts that rewarded hawkish Party members. In his testament, Ho wrote, “Finally, to the whole people, the whole Party, the whole army, to my nephews and nieces, the youth and children, I leave my boundless love.” It is thus unsurprising that many scholars continue to ignore, or only touch upon briefly, personal communiqués as evidence of cross-cultural similarity between American, North and South Vietnamese.

The significance of this project is that it not only looks at letters and telegrams between American presidents and Vietnamese leaders, but also that it finds value in these exchanges. Letters and telegrams provide evidence of cross-cultural communication, signifying real dialogue and attempts to negotiate. While presidents and Vietnamese leaders recognized the rhetorical uses of high-level diplomatic communication, particularly in communiqués released to the public in the Department of State *Bulletin*, they also approached such dialogue as a solution. When miscommunication and disconnect occurred, often quite frequently, letters and telegrams could cross boundaries and offer a human desire for peace. Yet, according to many scholars, like Frances FitzGerald, the “meeting between [North Vietnam and the United States] was the

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meeting of two different dimensions, two different epochs of history.” However, I argue that cultural misunderstanding should not render Vietnamese and American incompatible.

In exploring personal communiqués between U.S. and Vietnamese leaders, I have indicated that even the smallest possibility for peace is significant in and of itself. The Vietnam conflicts certainly were wars of tragic flaws, mistakes, and violence, but these were not times without instances of cross-cultural understanding. Diem, Ho, and the American presidents viewed Vietnam through their own socio-political and ideological lenses, but they also strived for a solution that would avoid another world war and ultimately, would lead to peace. Letters and telegrams captured personal moments of humanity and compassion, often tempered by rhetoric and unreasonable wartime demands. Ironically, such communiqués highlighted a cross-cultural hubris: the idea, rather than the reality, of ideology and the importance of absolute victory. Moreover, Ho, Diem, and the American presidents were human beings who perhaps had more in common with each other than they ever would have liked to admit. And while these human similarities do not condone any violence or deception perpetrated by either party, “decision-makers [cannot] escape responsibility-including moral responsibility-for their conduct,” they offer a more nuanced reinterpretation. Thus, we cannot simply blame these individuals for the tragedies that took the forms of the First and Second Indochina Wars as these conflicts are not so easily defined by an overly simplistic notion of culpability.

Personalized nuances of the Vietnam War encourage us to reflect on how controversy not only complicates scholarship, but also our interpretations of leadership success or failure. Ho, Diem, and the American presidents often relied upon questionable, even cruel policymaking

decisions, such as the Cambodian bombings, illegal wiretapping, manipulated negotiations, and the purging of non-supporters. Unfortunately, they decided that bloodshed and corruption were the only practical means to achieve victory as declining morale and waning public support complicated the ideal vision of just and honorable warfare. Even widely admired presidents, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, made morally ambiguous and problematic decisions, most notably the Japanese internment during World War II. Such discomforting instances contradict moments of humanity or cross-cultural understanding, but they remind us that war, and leadership, are not simply divided into a naïve dichotomy of good and evil.
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There follows summary of letter dated at Hanoi September 29 addressed to President of US by Ho Chi Minh who signed ___ “President of Provisional Govt of Republic of Viet-Nam”; letter was delivered by US General Gallagher head of Chinese Combat Command Liaison Group with Chinese forces in North Indochina and forwarded to Embassy through US Army channels:

Saigon radio September 27 reported killing of US Colonel Peter Dowey in course of French instigated ___ between Viet-Namese nationalists and French aggressors in Cochin China. As Saigon is in hands of Franco-British forces report cannot be investigated now but we hope sincerely it is not true. But if correct incident may have been due to confusion in darkness or other unfortunate circumstances or may have been provoked by French or British. No matter what the case news moves us deeply and we will do umost to search out culprits and punish them severely. Measures are being taken to prevent further such incidents. We ensure you we are as profoundly affected by death of any american resident in this country as by that of dearest relatives.

We ask only of your representatives in this country to give us advance notice of ___ of your nationals and to be more cautious in “trespassing” fighting areas. This will avoid accidents and aid in welcoming demonstrations. (Sont to Dept repeated to Paris)

I assure you of admiration and friendship we feel toward American people and its representatives hero. That such friendly feelings have been exhibited not only to Americans themselves but also to ___ in American uniform is proof that US stand for international justice and peace is appreciated by entire Viet-Namese nation and “governing sphere.”

I convey to you Mr. President and to American people expression of our great respect and admiration (END OF SUMMARY).

ROBERTSON

Establishment of advisory commission for the Far East is heartily welcome by Vietnamese people in principle stop. Taking into consideration primo the strategical and economical importance of Vietnam secundo the earnest desire which Vietnam deeply feels and has unanimous manifested to cooperate with the other democracies in the establishment and consolidation of world peace and prosperity we wish to call the attention of the allied nations on the following points colon [:]

First absence of Vietnam and presence of France in the advisory commission leads to the conclusion that France is to represent the Vietnamese people at the commission stop Such representation is groundless either de jour or de facto. Stop. De Jure no allegiance exists any more between France and Vietnam colon [:] Bao Dai abolished treaties of 1884 and 1863 comma [.] Bao Dai voluntarily abdicated to hand over government to democratic republican government comma[,] provisional government rectorated abolishment of treaties of 1884 and 1863 stop de facto since March with France having handed over governing rule to Japan has broken all administrative links with Vietnam, since August 18, 1945, provisional government has been a de facto independent government in every respect, recent incidents in Saigon instigated by the French roused unanimous disapproval leading to fight for independence.

Second France is not entitled because she had ignominiously sold Indo China to Japan and betrayed the allies Third Vietnam is qualified by Atlantic Charter and subsequent peace agreement and by her goodwill and her unflinching stand for democracy to be represented at the advisory commission. Stop We are convinced that Vietnam at commission will be able to bring effective contribution to solution of pending problems in Far East whereas her absence would bring forth instability and temporary character to solutions otherwise reach. Therefore we express earnest request to take part in advisory commission for Far East. Stop. We should be very careful to Your Excellency and Premier Attlee Premier Stalin Generalissimo Tchang Kai Shek for the conveyance of our desiderata to the United Nations.

Respectfully,

[Ho Chi Minh]


Secretary of State,

Washington

1948, November 8, 6 p.m., [1945]

There follows substance of letter addressed to President Truman by Ho-Chi-Minh who signs as “President of Provisional Government of Republic of Vietnam” : Letter was given to General Gallagher and forwarded to Embassy through U.S. Army channels: (Embassy’s 1820 October 18 to Department repeated to Paris).
I wish to give following information concerning situation of Viet-Nam:

(1) When Japanese came to Indo-China from September 1940 to September 1941 France, by protocol July 1941 and secret military pact December 8, 1941, gave up sovereignty and took position opposed to Allies. On Japanese drive March 9, 1945 French either fled or surrendered to Japanese contrary to pledges contained in protective treaties March 1874 and June 1884, thus breaking all legal and administrative ties with people of Indo-China. Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam was set up August 19, 1945 after independence of entire country was wrested from Japanese. After Japanese surrender, while Viet-Nam Provisional Government in capacity of an independent Government was carrying out a building-up program in conformity with Atlantic and San Francisco Charters, French, ignoring deliberately all peace treaties concluded by the United Nations at end of World War II, attacked us treacherously in Naigon, September 23, and are planning a war of aggression against Viet-Nam. (Sent to Department repeated to Paris).

(2) People of Viet-Nam are willing cooperate with United Nations in erection of lasting world peace and, having suffered so severely under direct domination of French and much more from bargain made by French with Japan in 1941, are determined never so permit French to return to Indo China. If French troops coming either from China where they fled during Japanese occupation of Indo-China or from other places put foot on any part of Viet-Namese territory the people of Viet-Nam are determined to fight them under any circumstances.

(3) If, therefore, disorder, bloodshed or general conflagration due to causes mentioned above in paragraph (2) break out in Far Eastern Asia entire responsibility must be imputed to French. (End substance letter).

Identical message from Ho-Chi-Minh addressed to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek has also been received by same army channels. Embassy will not deliver message to Gimo unless so directed by Department.

Robertson

JMS


Secretary of State,

Washington,

2026, Nov 23, 4 p.m. [1945]

Below is given substance of identical communications addressed by Ho-Chi-Minh to President Truman and to Director General of UNRRA; communications were given to General Gallagher and forwarded to Embassy through US Army channels (Embassy’s 1952, Nov 9 to Dept/repeated to Paris):
I wish to invite attention of your Excellency for strictly humanitarian reasons to following matter. Two million Vietnamese died of starvation during winter of 1944 and spring 1945 because of starvation policy of French who seized and stored until it rotted all available rice (Sent Dept; repeated Paris). Three-fourths of cultivated land was flooded in summer 1945, which was followed by a severe drouth [drought]; of normal harvest five-sixths was lost. The presence of Chinese occupational army increases number of persons who must be fed with stocks already not sufficient. Also transport of rice from Cochinchina is made impossible conflict provoked by French. Many people are starving and casualties increase every day. Everything possible has been done under these circumstances by Provisional Government of Vietnam Republic. Unless great world powers and international relief organizations bring us immediate assistance we face imminent catastrophe. I earnestly appeal to Your Excellency, therefore, for any available assistance. I request your Excellency to accept my heartfelt and anticipated thanks in name of my people.

Robertson


Hanoi February 16 1946

President Ho Chi Minh, Provisional Government of Vietnam Democratic Republic, Hanoi

To the President of the United States of America, Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President,

I avail myself of this opportunity to thank you and the people of the United States for the interest shown by your representatives at the United Nations Organization in favour of the dependent peoples.

Our ____ people, as early as 1941, stood by the Allies’ side and fought against the Japanese and their associates, the French colonialists.

From 1941 to 1945 we fought bitterly, sustained by the patriotism of our fellow-countrymen and by the promises made by the Allies at YALTA, SAN FRANCISCO, and RUSSIA...
When the Japanese were defeated in August 1945, the whole ___ territory was united under a Provisional Republican Government which immediately set out to work. In five months, peace and order were restored, a democratic republic was established on legal bases, and adequate help was given to the Allies in the carrying out of their ___ mission.

But the French colonialists, who had betrayed in war-time both the Allies and the Vietnamese, have come back and are waging on us a murderous and pitiless war in order to reestablish their domination. Their invasion has extended to South Vietnam and is menacing us in North Vietnam. It would take volumes to give even an abbreviated report of the crimes and assassinations they are committing every day in the fighting area.

This aggression is contrary to all principles of international law and to the pledges made by the Allies during the World War. It is a challenge to the noble attitude shown before, during and after the war by the United States Government and People. It violently contrasts with the firm stand you have taken in your twelve point declaration, and with the idealistic loftiness and generosity expressed by your delegates to the United Nations Assembly, ___ Byrnes, Stettinius, and J.F. Dulles.

The French aggression on a peace-loving people is a direct menace to world security. It implies the complicity, or at least, the connivance of the Great Democracies. The United Nations ought to keep their words. They ought to interfere to stop this unjust war, and to show that they mean to carry out in peace-time the principles for which they in war-time.

Our ___ people, after so many years of spoliation and devastation, is just beginning its building-up work. It needs security and freedom, first to achieve internal prosperity and welfare, and later to bring its small contribution to world-reconstruction.

These security and freedom can only be guaranteed by our independence from any colonial power, and our free cooperation with all other powers. It is with this first conviction that we request of the United States as guardians and champions of World Justice to take a decisive step in support of our independence.

What we ask has been graciously granted to the Philippines. Like the Philippines our goal is full independence and full cooperation with the United States. We will do our best to make this independence and cooperation profitable to the whole world.

I am, Dear Mr. President,

Respectfully Yours,

Ho Chi Minh


Hanoi February 28 1946
Telegram

President Ho Chi Minh Democratic Republic Hanoi

To the President of the United States of America Washington D.C.

On behalf of Vietnam government and people I beg to inform you that in course of conversations between Vietnam government and French representatives the latter require the secession of Cochin China and the return of French troops in Hanoi STOP Meanwhile French population and troops are making active preparations for a coup de main in Hanoi and for military aggression STOP I therefore most earnestly appeal to you personally and to the American people to interfere urgently in support of our independence and help making the negotiations more in keeping with the principles of the Atlantic and San Francisco Charters.

Respectfully,

Ho Chi Minh

Eisenhower's Letter of Support to Ngo Dinh Diem, October 23, 1954

Dear Mr. President:

I have been following with great interest the course of developments in Viet-Nam, particularly since the conclusion of the conference at Geneva. The implications of the agreement concerning Viet-Nam have caused grave concern regarding the future of a country temporarily divided by an artificial military grouping, weakened by a long and exhausting war and faced with enemies without and by their subversive collaborations within. Your recent requests for aid to assist in the formidable project of the movement of several hundred thousand loyal Vietnamese citizens away from areas which are passing under a de facto rule and political ideology which they abhor, are being fulfilled. I am glad that the United States is able to assist in this humanitarian effort. We have been exploring ways and means to permit our aid to Viet-Nam to be more effective and to make a greater contribution to the welfare and stability of the government of Viet-Nam. I am, accordingly, instructing the American Ambassador to Viet-Nam to examine with you in your capacity as Chief of Government, how an intelligent program of American aid given directly to your government can serve to assist Viet-Nam in its present hour of trial, provided that your Government is prepared to give assurances as to the standards of performance it would be able to maintain in the event such aid were supplied. The purpose of this offer is to assist the Government of Viet-Nam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means. The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Viet-Nam in undertaking needed reforms. It hopes that such aid, combined with your own continuing efforts, will contribute effectively toward an independent Viet-Nam endowed with a strong government. Such a government would, I hope, be so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance, that it will be respected both at home and abroad and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology on your free people.

Sincerely,

Dwight D. Eisenhower


Memorandum of a Conversation, The White House, Washington, May 9, 1957, 11:13 a.m.–12:05 p.m.

- SUBJECT
- General Discussion of Situation in North Viet-Nam by President Ngo Dinh Diem

- PARTICIPANTS
After introductory remarks by the President praising President Diem for the excellent achievements he has brought about in the last three years in stabilizing the situation in Viet-Nam, President Eisenhower asked President Diem to outline the principal problems he is facing today.

President Diem replied that his country has gone through a very grave and serious crisis and has been able to hold on despite strong pressures from all sides. The principal problem of establishing internal security and building up their defense posture has been achieved to a considerable extent. The principal reason Viet-Nam has been able to hold out against these pressures has been because of the sympathy and encouragement given by the United States despite the fact that for a time even some people in the United States did not think that the Diem government could maintain itself.

At the present time Viet-Nam is faced with the possibility of a strong Communist offensive from the Vietminh who have 400 thousand men under arms. Fortunately, however, the Vietminh are faced with serious problems such as high taxes needed to maintain this large force and must have other controls which have caused discontent among the population in the North. Diem feels that Red China is faced with the same problems. They are maintaining a large army which requires heavy taxes and controls over the people, which Diem hopes in the long run will force the Chinese Government to demobilize a considerable portion of their forces and treat the people in a more liberal manner. There is, nevertheless, the possibility that the Vietminh with their large army might try to attack now while they have a superiority in numbers. The Vietminh during the first year after the Geneva Conference did not think it would be necessary to use armed force to take over the South; they thought the government in the South would crumble and they could take over without difficulty. With internal stability in Free Viet-Nam and the build-up of their own armed forces, they have now the possibility of holding out for a few years more during which time Diem reiterated the strain and drain on the economy of the Vietminh may cause them to demobilize some of their forces and adopt a more liberal attitude toward the population.

Free Viet-Nam now has 150 thousand men under arms which has been the principal deterrent to an armed attack from the North. In order to put the Free Vietnamese forces on a more solid basis, Diem has recently decreed universal conscription. In three years, over two-thirds of the forces in Free Viet-Nam will be conscripts. This development will cut costs considerably since conscripts will only be paid about half as much as the regular troops are paid today.

Despite the fact that the Free Vietnamese forces have been built up into a fairly strong organization, the structure of the army is not orthodox. Diem pointed out that the figure of 150
thousand was arrived at during the time the French had considerable military influence in Viet-
Nam and the French were convinced that it would not be possible by training to make good
soldiers out of the Vietnamese. The French, therefore, proposed the creation of a mixture of light
(about 5500 men) and heavy (about 8600 men) divisions. Furthermore, the so-called heavy
divisions were not really heavy in fact. Diem would like to have a more balanced military force
by having the army made up of all heavy divisions of 10 thousand men each. In order to do this,
the overall number of troops under arms should be raised by 20 thousand to 170 thousand. This
increase can be brought about with the change over to conscription, without additional cost for
the remainder of the calendar year 1957, since there is enough material on hand for the initial
equipping of the additional 20 thousand men. However, as the American military advisers in
Viet-Nam know, a lot of the logistical support equipment is old and they do not have enough
artillery. This, therefore, should be replaced as soon as possible. The Vietminh have three times
as much artillery as Free Viet-Nam and with that they could probably break through the
demarcation line at the 17th parallel.

In Diem’s opinion his main military requirement is ground forces. Diem is convinced that
because of the poor visibility of low cloud cover prevailing through most of the year, it would be
difficult if not impossible to give adequate air support to the ground forces. He is afraid, also,
that any Vietminh-Communist attack would probably come down the Mekong River Valley
through Laos, which is a scantly populated area where it would not be possible to use tactical
atomic weapons since there would be no concentrated targets suitable for A-bomb attacks. He
added that while the Laotians are sympathetic to the Vietnamese cause, they do not have a strong
army and hope that the Vietnamese could help defend Laos. The Laotians, however, do not have
too much courage and are intimidated by the presence of Red China to the North.

Diem then reiterated that Viet-Nam has attained stability due primarily to the volume of
American aid. He pointed out that the magnitude of American aid permitted the US Government
to have a large number of advisers and consultants in Viet-Nam who not only can assist Viet-
Nam with its problems but also follow closely developments and the use to which aid is placed.
In contrast, the small amounts of aid given to other countries, such as 20/30 million dollars, does
not permit the US Government to maintain such close control over developments in other
countries as is the case in Viet-Nam. Diem pleaded for the maintenance of the present aid level
of 250 million dollars a year of which 170 million dollars is allocated for defense purposes. This
aid has permitted Viet-Nam to build up its armed strength and thus play an important role in
Southeast Asia. If this aid should be cut both the military and economic progress would have to
be reduced. This would cause serious repercussions not only in Viet-Nam but among
neighboring countries in Southeast Asia who look on Viet-Nam as an example of the good US
aid can bring. Any cut would also bring serious political repercussions in Viet-Nam.

When asked about the possibility of devaluing the currency, Diem replied that any devaluation
would bring about serious military and economic problems unless production should be
increased sufficiently to prevent inflation. He added that they are just beginning their industrial
development and if they should devalue now the results would be disastrous for the economy.
Diem reiterated that Viet-Nam is a pilot experiment in Southeast Asia which has made a strong
impression on other countries in that area. He pointed out that in 1954 and 1955 the Indian
Government did not believe that Free Viet-Nam could hold out against the Communists. Now,
however, basically because of American aid, the situation has been stabilized and the Indians are now looking on Viet-Nam sympathetically.

Defense Plans

Diem outlined his strategic defense plans emphasizing first of all the need for a highway system in the plateau area. He stated that such a plan had been devised by the French after the First World War but had never been implemented. This plan was devised in order to operate against an attack by way of Laos. Diem is convinced that the new highway system should be given high priority. Diem stated that if the Communist attack comes, it will probably come by way of Laos which is the easiest route, through a sparsely populated area which constitutes an easy area for infiltration. In connection with Diem’s general strategic concept and the request for additional force levels, President Eisenhower asked whether the Geneva Agreement prohibited such increase. Diem replied that there are no limitations on the strength of the armed forces of either North or South Viet-Nam in the Geneva Agreement. Under the Agreement, however, additional war matériel could not be brought in but provision is made for the replacement of worn-out matériel. Diem pointed out that the French have withdrawn a very large quantity of matériel so that it would be legally possible to replace this matériel with new equipment within the provisions of the Geneva Agreement. President Eisenhower asked whether, with the planned conscription there would also be a hard corps of professional soldiers and whether the officers and men are given sufficient pay to make a military career attractive. Diem replied that about one-third of the future army forces would be professionals and the pay was high enough to be attractive.

President Eisenhower then reminded Diem that his territory is protected by SEATO. Diem agreed but believes he should have enough troops of his own to carry out his own defense. President Eisenhower then asked Diem whether the proposed highways were primarily important from a purely military standpoint or whether they were also economically desirable. Diem replied that the roads were important both from a military and economic point of view. The President, half jokingly, said that there was an old adage that roads sometimes were a “golden bridge for your enemies”. Diem replied that this aspect had been given careful study and his experts are convinced that the roads are important for the defense of Viet-Nam because the present highway system is very vulnerable and inadequate. These roads in the high plateau area are not only militarily necessary but from an economic point of view they would permit the opening up of new farm land, allow these scarcely populated areas to be filled by people from the crowded coastal area and thus fill a vacuum in a vulnerable area which is now easily subject to infiltration. Regarding SEATO, Diem said that he has studied this question carefully and while SEATO constitutes a good deterrent, there are only two countries which could possibly come immediately to the aid of Viet-Nam—Thailand and the Philippines. Pakistan is too far away. However, the Filipinos only have about 60 thousand troops and they would be needed to defend the Philippines and could not come to the aid of Viet-Nam. The Thais only have about 150 thousand men under arms and if an attack on Thailand should come by way of Laos these troops would be needed to defend Thailand itself. Diem feels there is a strong possibility that given the revolutionary situation in Southeast Asia, the Vietminh might attack by commando methods which would be hard to stop unless Viet-Nam has a sufficiently large ground force. Such type of warfare would not lend itself to tactical atomic weapon defense and Diem again questioned
whether the SEATO plans which call for use of both tactical atomic weapons and air offensive would be effective in Viet-Nam where visibility is poor because of the overcast conditions throughout most of the year and the lack of any real concentrated targets for atomic weapons. Therefore, Viet-Nam must be in a position first of all to discourage an attack by having a large enough army. Secondly, if an attack should come, it would be possible with sufficient forces to hold out until SEATO machinery can get into operation. For psychological as well as political reasons, it would be necessary for Viet-Nam to counter-attack as soon as possible. This must be done by Vietnamese troops and not foreign troops. While naval and air support would help to diminish enemy potential and permit naval landings in the North in a drive toward Hanoi, most of the military operations would have to be done by ground troops.

President Eisenhower stated that he, of course, understood the need for a strong army but the maintenance of a large army brings about serious political and economic problems. While the US wants to do all it can to help its friends, it must be remembered that we have many international commitments which we must live up to and we have undertaken great obligations from Korea to NATO and the volume of aid we can give is not limitless. For these reasons, we must use our best judgment in allocating the resources we can make available. Our problem is to do all we can to fight Communism as well as develop satisfactory solutions for many problems facing us and the free world. We must, therefore, study these problems from a global point of view and adopt the best programs for all concerned.

Devaluation

Secretary Dulles again brought up the question of the possible need to devaluate the Vietnamese currency by pointing out that the official rate is about 35 to the dollar and the Hong Kong black market rate is about 100 to the dollar. He wanted to know whether Diem planned for a devaluation. Diem replied that this is a very serious and complex problem but he agreed to make a joint study of the matter.

Résumé

Diem stated that he is convinced that all must be done to advance the successes which have already been attained in Viet-Nam and he hoped that assurances could be given that future aid would continue at the present level. President Eisenhower replied that he has not had an opportunity as yet to study the proposed distribution of aid for fiscal year 1958 and emphasized that the amount of aid for that year would depend upon what the Congress will do, but in any event, he promised Diem to do the best we can once it is known how much money will be available.


Memorandum of a Conversation, The Pentagon, Washington, May 10, 1957, 10:40 a.m.–12:40 p.m.
Secretary Quarles opened the meeting by explaining that instead of a briefing for President Ngo as had originally been scheduled, it was felt that this might be considered presumptuous in view of the President’s knowledge of Southeast Asia, and therefore the President was invited to express his views on the situation.

President Ngo proceeded to sketch out his thoughts on the strategic problem of Viet-Nam, the military situation and its requirements. He views Viet-Nam as a bridgehead, which in case of conflict would receive support and assistance from SEATO. Viet-Nam is endangered by two things: subversive elements under Communist direction and aggression by invasion. This latter may take the form of invasion at the 17th parallel, or over the high plateau and then down through Laos to cut off the capital from the west, or a combination of both. The invasion route across the 17th parallel would cut off a large percentage of the population and not enough would be left to raise additional forces for resistance. The interior line of invasion along the border area has no natural defenses after the enemy passes through the Annam Chain. This is a soft area for defensive purposes. Either one, or a combination of both, of the above routes is possible and feasible. Above the 17th parallel the Viet Minh have 200,000 regular troops and 250,000 regional troops. Secretary Quarles raised the question as to restriction on those forces by the Geneva Accords. It was stated that there is no restriction on the numbers. The troops, however, have been given modernized equipment and training by the Chinese Communists and their re-equipment is a violation of the Geneva Accords. President Ngo also stated the Russians are particularly concerned with the training of these forces and in accordance with Russian practice have emphasized artillery to the point that they have three times as much as Viet-Nam. He stated that the Viet-Minh air force has been training in Communist China since 1951.

The Vietnamese do not have sufficient forces to guard the entire border. Laos has a weak army, very poor roads and is lightly populated. Infiltration through Laos is both easy and dangerous to Viet-Nam. It is believed possible that the Viet Minh could infiltrate this interior route with as many as 100,000 troops disguised as coolies which could be very dangerous. President Ngo views a strictly defensive plan as unsatisfactory if only because of the demoralizing factor. He feels the plan must be both offensive and defensive. He covered this concept as follows: (1)
Vietnamese do not know the SEATO Plan. (2) The General Staff first conceived a defensive plan which was considered demoralizing. (3) They have now conceived an offensive-defensive plan which has been referred to General Williams. (4) Population of the North is against Communism. If free to move it would move out to the South. In the North soldiers are the principals in the privileged class. (5) It is believed necessary in the event of aggression to bring airborne troops into the high plateau area of Laos–Viet-Nam, and also conduct airborne operations to pin down the Viet Minh and make possible an offensive to the North. In addition the line of the 17th parallel must be held as this is the route of refugees. Any airborne landings must be Vietnamese troops not foreign troops. Foreign troops should be limited to use below the 17th parallel as support forces.

Big question for Vietnamese is when do they get the foreign troops. Thai forces will be otherwise occupied. The civil guard is poorly equipped and would not be effective. There are no other ground forces available in the Southeast Asia area. In answer to a question as to whether the troops to be used in the plateau could be Thai, the President answered no. Laos is afraid of the Thais; they are afraid of a Pan-Thai movement to swallow Laos. Laos hates Cambodia, distrusts the Thais but likes the Vietnamese. They would like an outlet to the sea at Tourane. They have promised to send officers to be trained by the Vietnamese. President Ngo then commented on his planned second counter move which is to fill up the vacuum of the high plateau area, the forest border area and the Plaine des Joncs. This plan will be begun by placing trained demobilized men from the Civil Guard in these areas with their families, 3,000 so far. He is now appealing to the people of the central Viet-Nam area to settle on the high plateau and is asking people of South Viet-Nam, the southern areas, to move into the Plaine des Joncs.

SEATO has always recognized the need of the fight against subversion. Planting men in these areas will construct a human wall effective against Communist infiltration and subversion. The above goes hand in hand with construction of roads in the above areas. Stationing men and building roads serve both a strategic and economic purpose. The road building projects is [are] really a stage of the French plan that goes back to 1919 and continues to 1942.

Secretary Quarles asked the status of the road construction now. The President answered it had not yet begun but Capital Engineering Firm was starting construction studies and he thought construction could begin next year. These roads in the interior are important because the road along the coast is easily disrupted. It has many bridges and that is why French, thinking of the possibility of Japanese aggression along the coast, thought roads in this area desirable. This was part of the French Empire Plan to tie together Viet-Nam, Cambodia and Laos. It is still a good plan for the defense of South-east Asia. It includes a road across the interior to Pakse on the Mekong which is near the Thai Railroad terminus at Ubon. Route 9 from Tourane to Savannakhet is too close to the 17th parallel, but Laos is interested in an outlet to the sea for economic reasons. SEATO principles are (1) to parry aggression (2) struggle against subversion and (3) economic and social aspects required to support the above. The French and British are interested mostly in number 3. The military strategic aspects of offensive-defensive plan are favored by the air force and navy. In case of aggression tactical atomic weapons could be used. Vietnamese feel they must emphasize ground weapons because the Viet-Nam war showed that it was difficult to use air effectively in this country. Communist troops are very mobile. The irregular forces advance ahead of regular troops to sabotage and cut communications. They also
follow the regular troops to subdue the population. Use of atomic weapons against the aggression through the sparsely settled territory of Laos would not be effective. Therefore, the President believes that the Vietnamese must reorganize their Army to be prepared for such a struggle.

Despite the efforts of General O’Daniel the present Army structure is now not satisfactory. This is due to the French policy which insisted on keeping Vietnamese forces in small units no larger than a battalion, preventing the development of a proper Viet-Nam Army. This is why Diem could not come to power sooner. French said Vietnamese couldn’t be trained and were too weak physically. They limited them to light forces. After the Armistice the French continued to control the forces. Following the French phase out, and the elimination of French forces, training was conducted under a mixed French-US training group. The French concept of light battalion, light division, heavy division, made no sense at all not even for use against the sects. I [i.e., President Diem] therefore felt the Army should be completely reorganized, and consolidation of training into a strictly US mission made this possible. The US military know that the Vietnamese make good soldiers. I have talked over my idea with General Williams, and it is to reorganize my 6 light and 4 heavy divisions of 5,600 and 8,300 men respectively, into the same number of field divisions with 10,000 each, with 3 regiments per division. To achieve this the Army must increase to 170,000. This would avoid a complete shift of the present division. If we stay at the present 150,000 men it would be necessary to shift or change the basic structure. If our total forces are raised to 170 thousand we could increase each division to 10,000. To reduce the impact on the budget I have decreed a draft as a stop gap plan. Draftees will be inducted for 1 year terms in the age group 20 to 21. Beginning 1 August 150 per day will be inducted. This will amount to 48,000 per year. In 3 years this will make it possible to replace 2/3 of the Army at the end of 3 years. The budget will be stabilized. At the present time Viet-Nam Army is organized along French colonial lines with the families traveling with the troops. The average pay is a thousand piasters a month. The military budget is 170 million dollars a year. The use of draftees would reduce the cost by half. Draftees would be young people with no families. The U.S. military recommend that I not replace all my troops with draftees but retain 30,000 minimum as a hard core. I believe the above is necessary because in my view to meet aggression in my country requires emphasis on the ground forces. As the present troops with their families are demobilized they would be settled in the high plateau and the Plaine des Joncs area. This would be beneficial both from [for?] economic and strategic reasons.

At this point Secretary Quarles noted that the President was due at the Press Club shortly and requested time for a few U.S. questions. His first was whether the Geneva Accords inhibited training personnel. President Diem replied that there had been no protests—there had been embarrassing questions, but the Geneva Accords only prohibited troop reinforcements.

Mr. Quarles asked a general question on the status of training and equipment of the Viet-Nam air force. General Don replied that the planes turned over by the French had been retained for training until no longer usable and then returned. President Ngo said that in general vehicles and communications equipment were in bad shape. These can be replaced with the same type used by the French without violating the Geneva Accords. He continued to say that the French training of the air force and navy in his opinion was very poor because the French were dragging their feet. For the Viet-Nam Air Force actually they were providing only 6 months training for mechanics
which U.S. military personnel considered inadequate. When the French questioned him about the renewal of their training contract the conversation resulted in an agreement to withdraw the French Air Force training mission with the exception of special French personnel who would remain until the end of the year for technical training. All other requirements would be met by the U.S. He had therefore requested the [that] MAAG provide these training personnel and several instructors for the military academy (Armed Forces Academy).

After brief closing remark by Secretary Quarles the session ended.


Memorandum of a Conversation, En Route to Los Angeles, May 17, 1957

- **SUBJ**
  - Doubtful SEATO and American aid in case of armed hostilities in Vietnam

- **PARTICIPANTS**
  - President Ngo Dinh Diem
  - Ambassador Tran Van Chuong
  - Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow

The following are highlights of a long conversation I had on the flight to Los Angeles with Ambassador Tran Van Chuong in which President Ngo Dinh Diem participated except for the beginning of discussion. It is perhaps worthwhile to point out how discussion arose. In going over the Los Angeles speech Chuong was preparing for Diem, Chuong included a statement to the effect that the communists were not deterred or much worried about American possession of A and H bombs. When I disagreed with this statement Chuong outlined at length his basic concepts of any future military operations which might take place in Vietnam. President Diem did not listen to the first part of the discussion, but listened without saying much during the bulk of the discussion.

Chuong’s thesis is that he feared that Vietnam could not count upon the United States to come to its aid militarily under certain circumstances despite U.S. and SEATO commitments. He added that he is convinced that we would not use tactical or other nuclear weapons in the event we did come to their aid. He cited our refusal to use A bombs in Korea and our failure to enter the war in Indo-China with or without the use of A bombs before and after Dien Bien Phu. Chuong added that in conversations with other Asian colleagues in Washington most of them share his fears that the United States probably would not come to the aid of any individual country in case of hostilities unless it were in direct United States interest to do so. Chuong claims this is the reason why many Asian countries have turned to neutralism. He is also quite doubtful whether SEATO would, in all circumstances, come to aid of Vietnam if hostilities should break out. Chuong was very emphatic in saying that he and most of his Asian colleagues in Washington agree that the West lost a great deal of prestige in Asia by the Korean stalemate and the French collapse in Indo-China.
Chuong then outlined in detail the strong temptations facing all Asian countries to embrace neutralism. He argued that most of these countries reasoned that if they did not have to maintain large military forces they could balance their budgets and might, by their neutral attitude, be spared in any future war. He added that such temptations might also appeal to the people of Vietnam, although he gave assurances that Vietnam is different and realized that despite the heavy cost they must maintain as large an Army as they feel necessary to defend themselves and counter attack against any communist thrust. That is why President Diem wants to raise his force goal to 170,000 men.

When Chuong reiterated he did not believe the U.S. would use tactical A weapons in a local war in Vietnam, President Diem disagreed by stating he could envisage certain situations in which U.S. would use tactical A weapons. The President did not agree with Chuong’s contention that a perpetual nuclear stalemate has been reached between the USSR and the U.S. The President believes the U.S. must keep on developing better nuclear weapons in order to keep ahead of the Soviets. If we did not the Soviets might develop a truly overpowering weapon which they might use to conquer the world provided they were certain the U.S. did not have as good a weapon with which to retaliate. Both agreed, however, that it would be most disastrous to use A weapons on Hanoi or other civilian concentrations, because the Vietnamese Government counted on the population in the North to rise up against the communists in the case of hostilities which would make it counter-productive to use A bombs on any populated areas. Both reiterated that they did not believe that American Air or Naval support could be effective in Vietnam, because of the prevalence of heavy cloud cover over most of country throughout the year.

Chuong stated that although Admiral Stump and other American Commanders had given assurances that we would come to the aid of Vietnam in case of difficulty, and he knew that they were most sincere in making these statements, he feared that they would not be permitted, by overall considerations, to carry out these commitments in all circumstances. I reminded him that in the last few weeks the world had seen a very forceful example which should convince everybody that we would come to the assistance of small nations under communist attack. I then referred to the movement of the Sixth Fleet with a reinforced Marine Division to the Eastern Mediterranean in the recent Jordan crisis. Chuong and Diem both agreed that this forceful action did, in fact, indicate that we apparently intended to carry out our commitments.

Comments:

The reason I have reported these remarks in some detail is that it is the first time that I have heard Vietnamese, and in this case Diem by his silence apparently concurring, openly question whether we would carry out our commitments. I reported this conversation to Admiral Stump before he talked with President Diem about the situation in Vietnam.


Memorandum of a Conversation, Honolulu, May 20, 1957

- PARTICIPANTS
President Ngo Dinh Diem
Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. Chuong
Admiral Felix B. Stump
Vice Admiral Anderson
Ambassador Durbrow

SUBJECT
Summary of Talk Between Admiral Stump and President Ngo Dinh Diem at Honolulu.

President Diem outlined again in some detail his strategic concept to justify the need to increase the Vietnamese forces by 20,000 additional men. Prior to this talk I had informed Admiral Stump of the conversation I had had with Ambassador Chuong, with President Diem participating, in which the Ambassador had indicated, among other things, that he was afraid the United States could not, in all circumstances, live up to the commitments given to Vietnam to come to its assistance in case of hostilities, as well as the Ambassador’s conviction that, as in Korea, we would not use A-weapons in the event we should come to Vietnam’s assistance.

After Diem had finished explaining his strategic concept, Admiral Stump, without giving any indication that he had been filled in on Ambassador Chuong’s ideas, informed Diem along the following lines:

The Admiral stated that President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles had declared on several occasions that in case the communists should open hostilities against any free-world country, the United States would use all means at its disposal to stop them, including the use of tactical A-weapons as well as other nuclear weapons if necessary. The Admiral added that we would not in any case hold back as we had in Korea. He added that we would not use nuclear weapons against concentrated civilian centers and that, if we were unable to stop the communists in Vietnam or nearby territories in connection with any hostilities, we would not hesitate to use all weapons at our disposal on such areas as the Canton military complex in order to bring about the defeat of the communists. The Admiral assured his listeners that the United States now has military capabilities which can stop and defeat any communist military thrust. The Admiral added that SEATO powers would also help in such circumstances. Diem again questioned whether the Asian SEATO powers could be very effective in assisting Vietnam in connection with any communist attack. He reiterated without indicating that he wished to be informed about them that the Vietnamese Government was not cognizant of SEATO military plans.

After the meeting in Admiral Stump’s office while we were on the way to a military review, Ambassador Chuong asked the Admiral whether he personally believed that the Vietnamese army should be increased by 20,000 men as Diem has requested. The Admiral replied that this matter would have to be studied but that he personally thought Diem’s request had merit, but added that before any decisions could be taken it would be necessary to know how much money the United States Congress would appropriate for various aid purposes. The Admiral stated he was sure that Diem and Chuong were well aware of the present economy drive in the Congress affecting all matters of aid.
Memorandum of a Conversation, Saigon, August 1, 1957, 8:15–11:20 a.m.

- PARTICIPANTS
  - President Ngo Dinh Diem
  - Vice President and Secretary of State for National Economy Nguyen Ngoc Tho
  - [Name and title deleted]
  - Wolf I. Ladejinsky, Land Reform Adviser to the Government of Vietnam
  - Wesley R. Fishel, Chief Adviser of the Michigan State University Group

The President was in a good mood. After the usual introductory remarks and discussion of the teletype reports of the day, he made a few flippant comments about the possibility of his marrying a Lao princess, and discussed briefly (a) the weakness of the Cambodian Government, (b) the fact that he does not know the new Cambodian Prime Minister at all but doesn’t think very highly of him, and (c) the apparent solution of the Chinese problem as evidenced by the small numbers of Chinese who were actually leaving the country.

He then mentioned that General Oai was being replaced provisionally as Director General of the Civil Guard by Mr. Vu Tien Huan, who will continue also as Assistant for Internal Security to the Secretary of State for Interior. He commented that General Oai had made a number of statements, that he talked well, that he was not too bad a soldier, but that he had not, shall we say, “produced.” That is to say, he had promised to make several changes in the Civil Guard, he had told the President he was making those changes, and he had then told the President he had make them. However, the President now learned that the changes had not in fact been made, that General Oai had simply talked a lot and had done nothing along those lines.

The changes in question involved the mass transfer of Civil Guard units from their home provinces, that is, the provinces in which their members were recruited, to other provinces in order to develop a sense of national unity on the part of the Guardsmen. As it was, the Civil Guardsman felt loyalty to only his province, and when there was trouble in an adjacent province, he and his officers felt no urge to accept the call for assistance which came from that other province, go over there and clean up whatever mess existed. This, the President said, must stop. We are a nation; we are not a conglomeration of independent provinces, and regardless of all that General Oai had said, he had not carried out these Presidential orders.

It should be noted that this constituted a 180-degree reversal of the President’s earlier expressed opinions concerning General Oai, his abilities, his vigor, his dynamism, the fact that he was one of the most promising young men and would clean up and reorganize the Civil Guard. It also is interesting to tie these remarks to the comments made to me by General Oai at dinner when we were together last Sunday evening (July 28) when General Oai commented that his Deputy, Colonel Cuong, whom he had left in charge of the Civil Guard when he went to take over the Fifth Military Region, was trying to give him a “kick in the tail” in an effort to get him out of the job of Director General and take it over himself. And the General was quite concerned that his colonel might succeed. He claimed the colonel was painting a bleak picture of what had been
accomplished, when, in point of fact, he, the general, had accomplished a great deal and intended to be given credit for it. The President’s remarks would indicate that the colonel’s words carried more weight than had the general’s.

Virtually the rest of the morning was devoted to a discussion of administration in Vietnam and a justification, quite defensive for the most part, by the President of his continual interference in the affairs of his ministers and his tendency to go around them rather than through them, to check up on them by talking with their underlings, and so on. (He became even more defensive when Mr. Ladejinsky observed that it was commonly assumed that the President made all government decisions himself.) Present at the breakfast also with the President, Mr. Ladejinsky, and myself, were Vice President Tho and [name and title deleted]. The President praised Mr. Tho several times during the course of the breakfast and seemed to have complete confidence in him, both as an individual and as an administrator. Mr. Tho agreed whole-heartedly with probably 95% of what the President said and commented after the breakfast that we had heard the true views of the President, rather than some of the things which he occasionally said for publication or just to be nice; that these were indeed the President’s innermost thoughts. (As a matter of fact, I had heard the President express many of these thoughts before, but this was the first time that I had heard him express them all in such a steady stream for so long a time, and indeed so defensively. At one point, he even referred to criticisms I had made of his administrative methods, which I had made to his face, nearly three years ago when I was new in Vietnam and was trying to get him to delegate authority and responsibility to lesser officials in his Government.)

Generally speaking, he said, the quality of my ministers is very poor. They are, for the most part, honest men, but you understand that in Vietnam in the last ten years we have had no training of fonctionnaires which has been sufficient to turn out men who understand even the routine of their jobs. The average fonctionnaire is incompetent. He is a man who may have had the proper cultural training to turn him into a good civil servant, or he may not. He has, in all probability, very little real capacity to do or to understand the work which he should be doing. He is sometimes intelligent, sometimes less intelligent, but whether he is a good man or not he is, generally speaking, untrained, and this is true of the ministers, even as it is of the lesser members of the bureaucracy.

Accordingly, the President feels compelled to spend much time dictating this and that; instructing his officials in the rudiments of administration. He cited the lack of control and understanding manifested by some of his ministers vis-à-vis administrative problems which came before them. In particular, he mentioned an incident involving Secretary of State for Finance, Mr. Ha Van Vuong, as an illustration of the weakness of members of his cabinet, with the obvious exception of Mr. Tho and the occasional exception of Mr. Nguyen huu Chau. (See terminal note.) In discussing the shortcomings of Secretary of State Vuong, the President noted that when he himself had been a young man he had been the scourge of wrongdoers. He gave a specific example of how a good education, sharp eyes, and a clear head made it possible for him to catch a district judge in a falsification which rendered him unfit for office. Briefly, the story was as follows.

[Here follow two paragraphs recording Diem’s detailed description of this episode.]
However, said he, some of the present day civil servants don’t show as much energy and initiative as he remembers himself showing in his youth. Province chiefs sometimes do not get out and see all the people in their provinces; district chiefs often do not know what goes on in villages within their districts; and in the ministries in Saigon there are civil servants who never get out in the country to learn about the services which they head within their ministries in Saigon.

This brought the President to the question of briefings given him by his ministers during cabinet sessions or privately and of reports which were requested or expected of provincial chiefs, district chiefs, and other field officers. By and large, the quality of such briefings and reports was extremely poor. As a matter of fact, I might note here that in March of this year, just before my departure for the United States, the President had made similar statements to me and had asked if the MSUG could prepare a guide for briefings for his ministers and a report guide for his provincial chiefs, provided he made available to us some of the briefing materials which his ministers and reports which his chiefs of province had submitted to him. I agreed that we could and would, and subsequently MSUG prepared a sample report form for the provinces; however, the President never made available the briefing and report materials he had promised, and the matter stood thus until this day. And when the President brought up the question of the poor quality of the briefings and reports that he received from his officials, I reminded him of this earlier incident which apparently had escaped his memory.

He took this occasion to point out how few civil servants really understood how to present a report to a superior. At this point also, many of his prejudices against northerners and southerners and for people of the center, who are, in his opinion and in that of [name deleted], far superior either to northerners or southerners, came to the surface as they often do. He remarked, as is his wont, that the northerners are facile of tongue, are good pedagogues, write very well—and indeed often beautifully—and are by all odds the most skillful writers, lecturers, professors in Vietnam. When they write a report, however, they are not content to report the facts—they embroider them, they make beautiful literature out of them, and in so doing they often lose sight of their objective. They become infatuated with the beauty of their prose and the result is that their report reads beautifully, sounds eloquent when read aloud, but very often doesn’t make the points it should. Northerners are extremely didactic and very clannish—where you find one northerner, you find very soon five northerners, and where these five are then you will find 50, and so on.

The southerner, by contrast, does no writing, generally speaking; he has no eloquence of tongue, and in most respects is the reverse of the northerner. But the man from the central provinces embodies the best virtues of north and south. He is more direct, he is more honest, he is not quite so eloquent, but he is more reliable in most respects than either his northern or southern compatriots.

This in turn, led the President to review the development of administrative training and education in Vietnam since the earliest days of the Vietnamese emperors on through the French colonial period and up to the present time. The only new statements he made were with respect to the training of the past ten years, which he said had been virtually nonexistent. Whereas during the imperial days and during the period of French rule young civil servants were taught how to write
reports, how to make out a form, how to do all the routine practical things which a civil servant should know, in the past years such techniques had been lost. Most of the civil servants of today, he repeated, didn’t even know how to prepare, for example, an order of service. He, the President himself, frequently had to edit, to correct, to rewrite orders of service which had been prepared by lesser officials. This was true of almost every form he could think of, and he had himself created new forms for the civil servants because they didn’t seem to have any judgment of their own. Therefore, he felt that the curriculum of the National Institute of Administration, which was the hope of future in respect to the training of civil servants, should be more practical than it had been in the past, less legalistic and more practical, less philosophical and more practical.

The sine qua non of a good administrator is a good formal education. One of the troubles with the Institute was that most of the professors came from the north. And like all northerners, they were eloquent; they taught the students philosophy; they taught the students all sorts of nice metaphysical things, but they didn’t teach them how to think, and they didn’t teach them the practical things which an administrator should know when he goes out into the field. An administrator should be able on his own to order supplies, to report a crime, to write an order of service, to arrest a man and fill out the forms properly, and to write a decision in a case over which he is presiding as judge, and so on. The quality of the professors at the Institute (and by this he made clear that he meant the Vietnamese professors) was very poor, but it was very difficult to find men from the center or from the south to serve on the faculty. When he found such men who were capable, it was more important that they go into positions in the administration than that they spend their time teaching at the Institute. Therefore, it was more necessary than ever that we form good young professors to teach at the Institute.

Throughout this discussion, he referred again and again to the fact that he found it necessary as a result of the shortcomings that he had noted among his ministers and other civil servants, to go down into the administration himself and pull out people and get them to report to him personally so that he could be sure of having the facts, because his ministers didn’t know how to get the facts and he had to teach them. He had given them all the responsibility and all the authority they needed. He had delegated, and delegated, and delegated, but they had proved unworthy of the delegation of authority and responsibility time and again, and this was why he felt constrained to step into the breach which existed and bring order out of the chaos. Several times during the conversation, the word chaos attracted him, and he spoke of the chaos of Taoism, the fact that the philosophy of many of the people of Vietnam, both of the north and of the south, was Taoist. These people felt that out of the chaos which reigned about them order inevitably and spontaneously arise and then everything would be beautiful. However, he commented, “Unfortunately, I am not content to wait for the chaos around me to turn into order of its own accord. I am going to try to bring order out of chaos myself.”

Again, at one point, he referred to the willingness of people on the outside, such as those he refers to as Dai-Viet types and Viet-Minh, to criticize officials within the Government who are trying to do a good job, and the person who is the brunt of most of the criticism these days is Secretary of State for National Economy and Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho. Mr Tho, he said, was an examplary civil servant, and yet, look at the scurrilous treatment to which he is subjected by citizens of Vietnam. Mr. Tho nodded approvingly during this discussion and seemed quite amused by the fact that he receives every week many dozens of letters, all, it seems, anonymous,
many scurrilous, all pointing out shortcomings in the administration of the National Economy Department or other departments. In response to my questioning, he said he personally read every single letter and had found that many of them contained elements of truth but the large majority were totally false. He seemed unconcerned by the criticism, however, indicating that his shoulders were broad and he could take it.


DEAR MR. PRESIDENT: I am taking the occasion of Ambassador Durbrow’s return to Saigon to send this direct message to you.

Your friendly visit to the United States about a year ago continues to stand out vividly in my mind. The opportunity which we had to discuss the Communist problem confronting the free world, the political and military progress of Viet-Nam since 1954, and the relations between our two countries was invaluable.

Since that time, I have observed with much interest the visits that you have made to Thailand, Australia, Korea, India, and the Philippines. It is clear that by these visits you have increased the prestige and understanding of your Government abroad. The visits have also given you the opportunity to demonstrate to leaders of these countries that a new member of the family of free nations can overcome almost insurmountable obstacles to preserve its sovereignty and independence.

I have also been highly impressed by your Government’s declaration of April 26, 1958, on the reunification of Viet-Nam. It lays bare the propaganda nature of the proposals of the Communist regime in Hanoi. The positive suggestions put forth in your Government’s declaration place the burden on the Communists to create conditions which will enable the peaceful reunification of your country.

May I extend to you my warmest personal greetings and my best wishes for your continued success in the development of Viet-Nam in the free world.

Sincerely,

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Letter From President Kennedy to President Diem


Dear Mr. President: I wish on the occasion of your second inauguration to offer to you and to the Vietnamese people my personal congratulations and those of the American people. We have watched with sympathy your courageous leadership during your country's struggle to perfect its independence and its efforts to create a better life for its people. The United States stands firmly with you in this struggle and in these efforts. The recent treaty of amity and economic relations and the inauguration of the Saigon-Bien Hoa highway are symbols of the cooperation between our countries.

The progress made under your leadership has caused the Communists to step up their campaign of hatred, terror and destruction by which they seek to further their purposes in Asia. I am encouraged that the Communist-instigated guerrilla war failed to disrupt the elections and that in the midst of a perilous struggle your country was able to conduct a political campaign with frank exchange of opinion. Your leadership has again been nourished and strengthened by the mandate of your people. This augurs well.

I look toward a future in which VietNam will be able to pursue the aspirations of its people in peace and freedom. I do not minimize the difficulties your country must pass through, but I am confident because I know that as always in history the cooperation of free men will ultimately triumph over tyranny.

It is fitting that Ambassador Durbrow should be present on this occasion to deliver my message to you, for he has worked tirelessly and with understanding for the common good of our countries. I look forward to his return, when I shall have opportunity to hear from him first hand of his services in your country.

Sincerely yours,

John F. Kennedy

Communist aggression, and to assure you that my message of April 27 was more than an expression of moral support.

Since I took office my colleagues and I have watched developments in Viet-Nam with attention and concern. We have been urgently considering ways in which our help could be made more effective. I can now tell you that, for our part, we are ready to join with you in an intensified endeavor to win the struggle against Communism and to further the social and economic advancement of Viet-Nam. Because of the great importance we attach to this matter, I have asked Vice President Johnson and Ambassador Nolting to discuss it fully with you.

If such an expanded joint effort meets with your approval, we are prepared to initiate in collaboration with your government a series of joint, mutually supporting actions in the military, political, economic and other fields. We would propose to extend and build on our existing programs including the Counterinsurgency Plan and infuse into our actions a high sense of urgency and dedication.

It is my understanding that certain of the proposals in the Counterinsurgency Plan may not entirely reflect your own judgment. However, I hope you would feel free to discuss any issues frankly with Ambassador Nolting so that we may find a common viewpoint. I am happy to tell you, however, that the steps already taken to implement the Plan have made it possible for us to have approved Military Assistance Program support of the 20,000 increase of your regular forces.

I speak first of military measures. But I fully share your view that Communism cannot be stopped by such measures alone. Parallel political and economic action is of equal importance. I, believe we are in agreement that the military actions proposed in the Counterinsurgency Plan for controlling and defeating the Viet Cong are soundly conceived and should be taken. However, in light of current conditions, these measures may no longer be sufficient. Therefore, in addition to actions in the Counterinsurgency Plan, we would be prepared to:

1. Augment the personnel of the MAAG to enable it to carry out increased duties.

2. Expand the MAAG's duties to include supporting and advising the Self Defense Corps.

3. Provide Military Assistance Program support for the entire Civil Guard force of 68,000.

4. Provide material support for the Vietnamese Junk Force to help it prevent clandestine supply and infiltration of the Viet Cong.

We would also be prepared to consider carefully with you, if developments should warrant, the case for a further increase in the strength of your forces beyond the 170,000 limit now contemplated.
I also believe that the problem of Viet-Nam’s borders requires our further urgent joint study to
develop techniques whereby crossing of these borders by unfriendly elements can be more
effectively controlled.

I believe we should consider the establishment in Southeast Asia of a facility to develop and test,
using the tools of modern technology, new techniques to help us in our joint campaign
against the Communists.

We would be prepared to collaborate with your Government in the use of certain military
specialists to assist and work with your armed forces in health, welfare and public works
activities in the villages. We can also offer additional Special Forces training to assist your
government in accelerating the training of its Special Forces.

In the political field, in addition to the steps contemplated in the Counterinsurgency Plan, I feel
you will agree that the strengthening of border control arrangements, particularly with
Cambodia, is perhaps the most important element. While I fully recognize the difficulty and
delicacy of this problem, I urge you to authorize the renewal of negotiations on this subject with
the Royal Khmer Government. If you concur, we will use our best efforts with the Cambodians
to facilitate these discussions.

Other governments have shown an interest in assisting Viet-Nam in its actions against the
guerrillas and have indicated that certain expert personnel with long experience, e. g., in Malaya,
might be made available to help. We would be glad to cooperate with your government in
planning the most effective use of this welcome assistance.

Turning to the economic aspects, I am aware of the increased burden that an increase in your
military forces will place on your internal budget. However, budgetary problems must not be
permitted to interfere with the successful prosecution of our joint effort against the Communists.
It seems to us that the chief problem is how to make the best possible use of all available
resources. This is a complex problem which taxes the ability of the best experts and we feel must
be attacked by the best talent we both can muster. If you concur, I will send to Viet-Nam
a group of highly qualified economic and fiscal experts who would meet with your experts and
work out a financial plan on which our joint efforts can be based.

I wish to assure you of our continued interest in the social advancement and economic
betterment of your people. Various joint programs are under way and much has been
accomplished. These will be continued and improved.

In addition, Ambassador Nolting will be prepared to discuss new economic and social measures
in rural areas to accompany the anti-guerrilla effort in which the U. S. can provide direct
assistance, if desired. Such programs, we feel, can be organized, in close cooperation with
military operations and with maximum mobility, speed and flexibility. Funds for expanded
efforts along these lines can be allocated.

We have great confidence in the long-range political and economic future of Viet-Nam.
Therefore, I am certain you will agree that, despite our present focus on the immediate Viet Cong
problem, it would be good for us to work together toward a longer range economic development program, including increased assistance on our part in the fields of agriculture, health, education, fisheries, highways, public administration and industrial development. I have authorized Ambassador Nolting to enter into preliminary discussions with members of your government concerning the best ways of moving forward with a program whose eventual goal would be a Viet-Nam capable of self-sustaining economic growth.

This, Mr. President, is the broad outline of our thinking on how we can help you and your brave countrymen to help themselves in their determined struggle to defeat the Communists and find a better way of life. I am confident of your success. I look forward with great interest to Vice President Johnson’s report on his talks with you, and I would be especially happy to hear from you personally.

Please accept again, Mr. President, the expression of my warmest friendship and respect.

Sincerely;

His Excellency
Ngo Dinh Diem
President of the
Republic of Viet-Nam


May 15, 1961

Dear Mr. President:

The gracious visit of Vice-President of the United States and Mrs. Johnson to Vietnam has brought to us an even warmer feeling of friendship for the American people and strengthened the bonds of friendship which had existed between our two countries since the birth of the Republic of Vietnam. The presence of your brother-in-law and your charming sister, Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Smith, brought to the Vietnamese people a warm feeling of your own personal interest in Vietnam, an interest which you may be sure will be long remembered.

Your thoughtful and understanding letter of May 8th, 1961, which was handed to me by Vice-President Johnson, contains wise and far-sighted proposals, many of which I myself have advocated for four years or more. I was accordingly glad to tell Vice-President Johnson without hesitation that the Government of Vietnam accepts the proposals in your letter to initiate, in collaboration with the Government of the United States, the series of joint, mutually supporting actions to win the struggle against communism in Vietnam and further the advancement of our country. Our agreement to these proposals was made public in the joint communiqué which was
released to the press on Saturday morning 13th, just before Vice-President Johnson’s departure from Saigon.

In the course of our frank and fruitful conversations, Vice-President Johnson graciously asked for my own suggestions as to the most urgent needs as we see them to save our country from the vicious communist aggression being waged against us, both within our borders and from every side today. I was most deeply gratified by this gracious gesture by your distinguished Vice-President, particularly as we have not become accustomed to being asked for our own views as to our needs. The recent developments in Laos have emphasized our grave concern for the security of our country with its long and vulnerable frontiers.

With the very real possibility that we may find ourselves faced with communist military forces pressing our borders not only from the north of the 17th parallel but from a possibly communist dominated Laos and a communist or neutral Cambodia on the west as well, we have undertaken urgent plans to determine the needs to save our country. These studies will be completed in preliminary form in about a week.

We now know that as a small nation we cannot hope to meet all of our defense needs alone and from our own resources. We are prepared to make the sacrifices in blood and manpower to save our country and I know that we can count on the material support from your great country which will be so essential to achieving final victory.

I was deeply gratified at Vice-President Johnson’s assurances that our needs will be given careful consideration in Washington. An estimate of these needs as we see them will accordingly be furnished to you in a second letter which I shall write in about a week. The Government and people of Vietnam have been greatly heartened by the encouraging visit of your distinguished Vice-President and the members of his official party. I now feel confident that in the mutual interest of our two countries the sacrifices the Vietnamese people are prepared to make will find full support from the United States in our joint effort to save Vietnam and consequently Southeast Asia from being overwhelmed by communist aggression.

Please accept, Mr. President, this expression of my deep respect and friendship.

Sincerely,

[Ngo Dinh Diem] – signature

His Excellency

JOHN F. KENNEDY
President of the United States of America


Saigon, the 9th of June, 1961
Dear Mr. President:

In reference to my letter dated 15 May 1961 and in reply to the invitation that was made to me in your name by Vice President Johnson, I have the honor to send you a study on our needs to meet the new situation.

As I expressed verbally to your eminent representative, it pertains to a situation which has become very much more perilous following the events in Laos, the more and more equivocal attitude of Cambodia and the intensification of the activities of aggression of international communism which wants to take the maximum advantage to accelerate the conquest of Southeast Asia. It is apparent that one of the major obstacles to the communist expansion on this area of the globe in Free Vietnam because with your firm support, we are resolved to oppose it with all our energies. Consequently, now and henceforth, we constitute the first target for the communists to overthrow at any cost. The enormous accumulation of Russian war material in North Vietnam is aimed, in the judgment of foreign observers, more at South Vietnam than at Laos. We clearly realize this dangerous situation but I want to reiterate to you here, in my personal name and in the name of the entire Vietnamese people, our indomitable will to win.

On the second of May, my council of generals met to evaluate the current situation and to determine the needs of the Republic of Vietnam to meet this situation. Their objective evaluation shows that the military situation at present is to the advantage of the communists and that most of the Vietnamese Armed Forces are already committed to internal security and the protection of our 12 million inhabitants. For many months the communist-inspired, fratricidal war has taken nearly one thousand casualties a month on both sides. Documents obtained in a recent operation, along route No. 9 which runs from Laos to Vietnam, contain definite proof that 2,860 armed agents have infiltrated among us in the course of the last four months. It is certain that this number rises each day. [?], the Vietnamese people are showing the world that they are willing to fight and die for their freedom, not withstanding the temptations to neutralism and its false promises of peace being drummed into their ears daily by the communists.

In the light of this situation, the council of generals concluded that additional forces numbering slightly over 100,000 more than our new force level of 170,000 will be required to counter the ominous threat of communist domination. The 100,000 reservists to be called up according to the plan of my council of generals were to meet the requirement for an augmentation of the Vietnamese Army by nine infantry divisions plus modest naval and air force increases. First priority called for one division to reinforce each of the three Army Corps in Vietnam plus a two divisional general reserve for a total of five divisions. In second priority, an additional division for each of the three Army Corps plus one in general reserve brought the total to nine new divisions. With the seven existing divisions, fragmented in anti-guerilla operations, the Army of Vietnam would thus have a strength of 16 divisions of slightly less than 10,000 men each plus appropriate combat and logistic support units.

We have now had an opportunity to review this initial force requirement with General McGarr and the MAAG staff who have recommended certain modifications which are basically in consonance with our plan and with which we agree.
After considering the recommendations of our generals and consulting with our American military advisors, we now conclude that to provide even minimum initial resistance to the threat, two new divisions of approximately 10,000 strength each are required to be activated at the earliest possible date. Our lightly held defensive positions along the demilitarized zone at our Northern border is even today being outflanked by communist forces which have defeated the Royal Laotian Army garrisons in Tchepone and other cities in Southern Laos. Our ARVN forces are so thoroughly committed to internal anti-guerilla operations that we have no effective forces with which to counter this threat from Southern Laos. Thus, we need immediately one division for the First Army Corps and one for the Second Army Corps to provide at least some token resistance to the sizeable forces the communists are capable of bringing to bear against our Laotian frontier. Failing this, we would have no recourse but to withdraw our forces southward from the demilitarized zone and sacrifice progressively greater areas of our country to the communists. These divisions should be mobilized and equipped, together with initial logistic support units immediately after completion of activation of the presently contemplated increase of 20,000 which you have offered to support.

Following the activation of these units, which should begin in about five months, we must carry on the program of activation of additional units until over a period of two years we will have achieved a force of 14 infantry divisions, an expanded airborne brigade of approximately division strength and accompanying supporting elements of logistical, naval and air units. In other words, our present needs as worked out with General McGarr's advice and assistance call for a total force of 15 divisional equivalents plus combat and logistic support units instead of our original plan for a 16 division force. The strategic concept and mission of this total 270,000 man force remains the same, namely, to overcome the insurgency which has risen to the scale of a bloody, communist-inspired civil war within our borders and to provide initial resistance to overt, external aggression until free world forces under the SEATO agreement can come to our aid. The question naturally arises as to how long we shall have to carry the burden of so sizeable a military force. Unfortunately, I can see no early prospects for the reduction of such a force once it has been established, for even though we may be successful in liquidating the insurgency within our borders, communist pressure in Southeast Asia and the external military threat to our country must be expected to increase, I fear, before it diminishes. This means that we must be prepared to maintain a strong defensive military posture for at least the foreseeable future in order that we may not become one of the so-called "soft spots" which traditionally have attracted communist aggression. We shall therefore continue to need material support to maintain this force whose requirements far exceed the capacity of our economy to support.

To accomplish this 100,000 man expansion of our military forces which is perfectly feasible from a manpower viewpoint will require a great intensification of our training programs in order to produce, in the minimum of time, those qualified combat leaders and technical specialists needed to fill the new units and to provide to them the technical and logistic support required to insure their complete effectiveness. For this purpose a considerable expansion of the United States Military Advisory Group is an essential requirement. Such an expansion, in the form of selected elements of the American Armed Forces to establish training centers for the Vietnamese Armed Forces, would serve the dual purpose of providing an expression of the United States' determination to halt the tide of communist aggression and of preparing our forces in the minimum of time.
While the Government and people of Vietnam are prepared to carry the heavy manpower burden required to save our country, we must know that we cannot afford to pay, equip, train and maintain such forces as I have described. To make this effort possible, we would need to have assurances that this needed material support would be provided. I have drawn on our past experience of United States support we have received to make some extremely rough estimates of the costs of these proposals.

The costs of providing essential initial equipment to the added forces under the Military Assistance Program would probably be in the neighborhood of $175,000,000 with deliveries to be distributed over the next two and one-half years as units can be activated. If the United States assumes the task of providing this initial equipment for the additional forces, I understand that the annual Military Assistance Program for force maintenance will increase by about $20 million above the level of MAP support for the presently authorized 170,000 force.

The Vietnamese Military Budget, which includes piaster requirements, must also be supplemented. As you know, Vietnam contributes to this budget to its fullest capability now with respect to existing forces. Despite our best efforts, your Government has largely supported this budget through Defense Support Assistance. Although we have made significant progress in developing our economy in the last four years, the support of even the inadequate armed forces we have has far exceeded the modest capabilities of the economy of our small country. In order to carry out the expansion of forces, the piaster military budget now averaging nearly 7.0 billion piasters a year will have to be supplemented. As I see it, the annual maintenance cost will increase gradually during the force implementation and will ultimately level off at approximately 10.60 billion piasters.

This program, I realize, will be expensive in money, equipment and personnel. The benefits to be gained, however, in preventing the subjugation of our free people and in establishing a solid obstacle to the advance of communism, I know you will agree, far outweigh the cost. With your support, we stand determined to survive in independence and freedom.

It goes without saying that in the face of the extremely serious situation created by the communist aggressor, we must temporarily accord priority to the military problems. However, my Government does not attach less importance to economic, political and social problems. At this point the doctrinal position which pertains to South Vietnam is clear and clean. It was expressed in a free and sincere manner in my message to the American Congress in April 1957. It was not varied since. Neither did it vary during the recent presidential campaign when I was elected by a very large majority.

Presently, it is necessary not to be maneuvered by the communists, who exploit our tendency to consider military efforts as reactionary and fruitless, to divert our effective action, which is necessitated by the moral communist attacks, toward a long range project of economic and social improvement, and which, of course, supposes that we are still alive. We see for the army an economic and social mission along with military role, a conception which rationally responds to the double challenge which the newly independent countries of Africa and Asia have had to face: underdevelopment and communist subversive war. It is along this line that, since my taking office in July 1954, I have undertaken to create an economic infrastructure throughout the
country, including the least inhabited regions; to develop the lines of communication with the double purpose of facilitating intercourse and facilitating the mobility of our troops; to increase and diversify the agricultural production; to given each family a tract of land which will belong to them; to create each day more employment by industrializing the country; in brief to open new horizons to the rural masses, the determining factor in the struggle against communism. It is sufficient to consider the product of our exportation these last two years, the reduction of our importation program, to count the factory chimneys which make their appearance to realize the progress already made. On the other hand, in spite of its lack of resources, the Government increases the social investments at the rate of 3% per year: hospitals in the towns, dispensaries in the villages, primary schools in each commune, secondary schools in each city of whatever importance. Education is developing at the annual rate of 20% while in the domain of public health, we have a hospital bed available for each thousand inhabitants. We want to progress more rapidly but, in addition to the budgetary limitations which constitute a primary obstacle, the lack of trained personnel has made itself felt despite our accelerated training programs. The agrovilles, which I have built in the last year, are another proof of the Government’s efforts: These are agricultural communities located between two urban centers to give the rural population the benefits of the commodities of modern life and to correct the extreme dispersion of the population. All foreign observers who travel in the country are struck by the standard of living enjoyed by the mass of peasants: sewing machine, bicycle, transistor radio for each family in more or less comfortable circumstances, theater, movies in the most backward areas, motor boats on the inumerable canals, tricycle buses on all passable roads. And it is precisely in order not to interrupt this development program that we ask for supplementary aid to finance our war effort; otherwise we will be forced to make the tragic decision to abruptly cease all our social and economic programs.

Concerning Cambodia, our diplomatic efforts would have results only if we recognize our adversary.

The idea of Cambodia being afraid of Vietnam is a myth. For 7 years, Sihanouk has not missed one chance to provoke South Vietnam, of which he has militarily occupied six islands. Having no reason to fear a Vietnam, divided and weakened by the subversive communist war, Sihanouk has nothing to fear at all. However, this idea would be pleasing to those who would seek to arbitrate between Cambodia and South Vietnam. It would also be pleasing to certain Vietnamese because this idea is flattering to their vanity and to their infantilism which consists of minimizing the difficulties and proposing any solutions. It would also be pleasing to Sihanouk who has a need to give substance to another myth that of encirclement which he needs to excuse his internal failures in order to justify his presence in power, to accuse the Americans and to court the communists. In reality, Sihanouk is committed intellectually and morally to communism, which he considers the stronger party and the inevitable victor in the future. In spite of the aid which he receives from America, has Sihanouk ever aided the US in the battle with the communists? He always takes positions favorable to the communists against the USA. His conduct in the Laotian affair is clear. Not only does he serve the communists, but he is proud to serve a stronger master. On the other hand, Cambodia, like Laos, is unable to ensure the security of her territory from the communist guerillas because he will not or does not wish to make the appropriate efforts. It is for this reason that he takes refuge in communist servitude under the guise of a neutralist. It is also
for that reason that he has always refused to accept any arrangement for the effective control of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border under the fallacious pretext of neutrality.

From the political point of view, the reforms that I have anticipated, that is to say the elective system established at the village level, the creation of the provincial councils, the institution of a High Economic Council, of a National and Social Council .. all these measures are tending to assure more and more active participation by the population in public affairs, in the dramatic situation of an underdeveloped country, divided and mortally menaced by communism.

Such is the direction of my efforts and such in our regime .. a regime open to progress and not a closed system. I am convinced that with your support and so generously aided by your great, friendly nation, I will manage to reestablish law and order in our provinces, in our villages, to accelerate progress in all other areas for the edification of a society of free men, happy and prosperous. Vietnam thus constitutes a pole of attraction for the countries of Southeast Asia, for those who fight communism as well as for those who still doubt the future of the free world.

I wish to assure you, Mr. President, of the sincerity of my sentiments and most cordial wishes.

[Ngo Dinh Diem] signature


Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam

Washington, July 3, 1961, 5:27 p. m.

8. Task Force VN. There follows text of a letter from the President to President Diem. In presenting it to President Diem the Ambassador should explain that it is not intended for publication.

“Dear Mr. President:

I have read with care your letters of May 15 and June 9 and have discussed with your able representative, Secretary of State Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the grave problems which you and your people are facing. Vice President Johnson has told me of the valor of the Vietnamese.

In view of the communist menace in Viet-Nam and of the serious threat posed to your country by the situation in southern Laos, both of which were set forth cogently in your second letter, I am very pleased to learn that the process of increasing the armed forces of Viet-Nam from 150,000 to 170,000 was recommenced recently, before a final understanding on financing had been reached. I am also gratified to know that on June 29 your government reached agreement with Ambassador Nolting on the joint financing of this increase. Due to the gravity of the situation and to the Vietnamese government's willingness to go ahead with this increase in its armed
forces even before the question of joint financing had been settled, we have sought to be as cooperative as possible.

Meanwhile, as the mobilization to 170,000 is continuing, the Department of Defense is urgently studying your request for support in a further long term increase to a 270,000 man force. In addition to exploring the usefulness, methods and procedures of such an increase we will both have to give the most careful attention to the large amount of funds which such an increase will involve for our two countries. I hope that the findings of Dr. Eugene Staley may provide helpful guidelines for both our Governments.

Returning to your letter of June 9 I was gratified to read of the determined and intelligent efforts being made to continue the economic and particularly the educational progress which Viet-Nam has made despite the Communist campaign of violence. Such programs are among the basic developments which will nourish the aspirations of the Vietnamese. I have also noted the new political institutions which were mentioned in your letter. I hope that these institutions and others like them will be strengthened by the participation of the rising generation and that they will have a healthy growth.

As to Cambodia, the communist threat to Southeast Asia would appear to clearly outweigh all other considerations and to necessitate improved relations among the free nations of the area. Would it not be in the interests of your Government to seek accommodation with Cambodia on the questions of improved border control and the settlement of the debts which are outstanding under the Paris Accords? Ambassador Nolting is at your disposition should you wish to discuss the matter further.

In closing I would like to affirm to you in the strongest terms that we support your government's determination to resist communist aggression and to maintain its independence.

We admire the courage and tenacity displayed by the Government and people of Viet-Nam and particularly by their President.

With warm personal regards,

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy


Letter From President Kennedy to President Diem

Dear Mr. President: Dr. Eugene Staley has told me personally of the mission which he and his special financial group undertook to Viet-Nam at my request. He has told me of the courteous and understanding welcome he received from you and from the members of your government, and has described to me the progress you have already made despite the great difficulties of Communist subversion which you face. I was pleased to hear of the cooperative and friendly spirit which animated the meetings of the Vietnamese and American experts. It is particularly encouraging to me that this spirit of cooperation, which was embodied in the joint undertakings of the counter-insurgency plan and which was so evident during the visit of Vice President Johnson, will now be carried on through the very practical medium of parallel Vietnamese and American committees.

I have examined the joint action program which the Vietnamese and American experts propose and I heartily agree with the three basic tenets on which their recommendations are based, namely:

1. Security requirements must, for the present, be given first priority.

2. Military operations will not achieve lasting results unless economic and social programs are continued and accelerated.

3. It is in our joint interest to accelerate measures to achieve a self-sustaining economy and a free and peaceful society in VietNam.

I also agree that we are more likely to succeed if both of our countries take adequate action now than if we react to the Communist threat by slow and insufficient measures.

I consider that the joint action program put before us by our expert groups offers a sound foundation on which our two governments can build rapidly and successfully. Therefore, having in mind your letter of June 9 and the strong recommendation of Ambassador Nolting, I should like to inform you that the United States will provide equipment and assistance in training as needed for an increase in the armed forces of Viet-Nam from 170,000 to 200,000 men. In order to make such an increase as effective as possible I suggest that before the time when the level of 170,000 is reached our governments should satisfy themselves on the following points: (1) That there then exists a mutually agreed upon, geographically phased strategic plan for bringing Viet-Cong subversion in the Republic of Viet-Nam under control; (2) That on the basis of such a plan there exists an understanding on the training and use of these 30,000 additional men; (3) That the rate of increase from 170,000 to 200,000 will be regulated to permit the most efficient absorption and utilization of additional personnel and material in the Vietnamese armed forces with due regard to VietNam's resources.

I also suggest, in view of the fact that the force level of 200,000 will probably not be reached until late in 1962, that decision regarding a further increase above 200,000 be postponed until next year when the question can be re-examined on the basis of the situation which we shall then be facing. Meanwhile, the buildup in equipment and training of the Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps within already agreed levels should be expedited.
Returning to the joint action program, I am most encouraged to learn of the large measure of agreement reached by our expert groups on the steps required to meet the piaster financing problems posed by the joint action program. It seems to me that in the light of these recommendations we can move forward simultaneously on measures to solve this problem by a combination of actions by the two governments: by the Government of the United States, within the limits of available funds, to provide the external resources which are required, including commodity imports which can be justified and absorbed under the seven criteria of the joint action program; and by the Government of VietNam, to generate the piasters to direct the resources of Viet-Nam to the highest priority requirements. The several means to acquire such piasters are spelled out in the joint action program. I hope that our parallel committees can immediately cooperate in working out target estimates for an import program which will give both our governments a basis for planning.

The early implementation of the joint recommendation of the expert groups regarding tax reform and the principle of a single and realistic rate of exchange, using methods which take into account the political and psychological factors which I know you have to weigh, will certainly increase the effectiveness of American aid to VietNam. I hope this recommendation can be implemented soon. Within the limits of funds to be made available by the Congress and within the agreed criteria, my policy shall be to help you as much as possible to achieve a break-through in your efforts to bring security to your people and to build toward economic independence.

Turning to the experts' joint recommendations for emergency social action and to the direct aid programs already under way, I am asking Mr. Labouisse, Director of International Cooperation, to conduct through USOM Viet-Nam a thorough and expeditious review with your experts of the new proposals and of other programs which these proposals were intended to supplement. Among these I mention as of special interest the fields of communications, including television and radio; agrovilles, land development, agricultural credit and agricultural extension; extended assistance to road building; continued efforts to expand education, particularly primary and elementary education in the villages; training for rural administration; and plans to assure more and better equipped and trained officials, adequately compensated, especially in rural areas and in the villages. Our basic premise is that these programs be designed with your government to meet your needs and conditions, and that they be carried out by your people, with our assistance where required. I especially wish USOM to offer whatever help you think will be most effective to strengthen the vital ties of loyalty between the people of Free Viet-Nam and their government.

As an integral part of our efforts to meet the current crises, I believe it is essential that we continue and expand the progress which has already been made toward the long range development of VietNam. The emergency measures which we undertake should be solidly anchored-as soon as possible-in a comprehensive long range planning process to determine the best uses which can be made of available resources on a time-phased basis. Only in this way can we adequately meet the long and short term requirements which interact in the problems which our two countries must solve together. This will require the creation of more effective planning machinery as recommended in the joint report of our experts. In addition to development of a long range plan, the training of staff to carry on planning activities (covering such matters as the use of medical manpower and teachers for which Viet-Nam has competing civilian-military
requirements) might be expedited. I urge that our parallel committees develop specific projects in line with the general recommendations of the report.

In the face of competing and urgent demands for aid and assistance from countries throughout the world we shall make our contribution to the future of VietNam. Our support of VietNam's independence and development will, as I have assured you in the past, remain among the highest priorities of American foreign policy. As indicated above, we are prepared to commit, within the limits of our available aid funds, substantial resources to assist you in carrying out the military and economic and social components of the special action program. In order to speed the action during this emergency period and to permit greater flexibility I should like to emphasize that the chief responsibility for the planning and execution of the American share of the program will, more than ever, rest with Ambassador Nolting and, under his direction, with MAAG and USOM. In this connection I hope that, with the delegation of maximum authority to the parallel committees as recommended by our experts, the committees will assure follow-up action, approve modifications of the program and “recommend measures to improve and adapt the special action program as the situation changes.”

In conclusion I believe that we have now agreed on sound ways to strengthen the Vietnamese economy and Vietnamese security in the face of the mounting Communist threat. Now we can proceed to develop additional concrete plans and carry them out rapidly and effectively.

I firmly believe that if our countries continue to work so effectively together, the Almighty will grant us the strength and the will to succeed.

With warm personal regards,

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

Mr. President, in 1955 we observed the dangers and difficulties that surrounded the birth of your Republic. In the years that followed, we saw the dedication and vigor of your people rapidly overcoming those dangers and difficulties. We rejoiced with you in the new rice springing again from fields long abandoned, in the new hospitals and roads and schools that were built, and in the new hopes of a people who had found peace after a long and bitter war. The record you established in providing new hope, shelter and security to nearly a million fleeing from Communism in the North stands out as one of the most laudable and best administered efforts in modern times.

Your brave people scarcely tasted peace before they were forced again into war. The Communist response to the growing strength and prosperity of your people was to send terror into your villages, to burn your new schools and to make ambushes of your new roads. On this October 26, we in America can still rejoice in the courage of the Vietnamese people, but we must also sorrow for the suffering, destruction and death which Communism has brought to Viet-Nam, so tragically represented in the recent assassination of Colonel Hoang Thuy Nam, one of your outstanding patriots.

Mr. President, America is well aware of the increased intensity which in recent months has marked the war against your people, and of the expanding scale and frequency of the Communist attacks. I have read your speech to the Vietnamese National Assembly in which you outline so dearly the threat of Communism to Viet-Nam. And I have taken note of the stream of threats and vituperation, directed at your government and mine, that flows day and night from Hanoi. Let me assure you again that the United States is determined to help Viet-Nam preserve its independence, protect its people against Communist assassins, and build a better life through economic growth.

I am awaiting with great interest the report of General Maxwell Taylor based on his recent talks and observations in Viet-Nam, supplementing reports I have received from our Embassy there over many months. I will then be in a better position to consider with you additional measures that we might take to assist the republic of Viet-Nam in its struggle against the Communist aggressors.

Mr. President, we look forward in these perilous days to a future October 26, when Viet-Nam will again know freedom and peace. We know that day is coming, and we pray that it may be soon. I speak for the American people when I say that we are confident of the success of the Vietnamese nation, that we have faith in its strength and valor, and that we know that the future of the Vietnamese people is not Communist slavery but the freedom and prosperity which they have defended and pursued throughout their history.

Sincerely,

JOHN F. KENNEDY


Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam
Washington, November 15, 1961, 9:02 p.m.

620. Following is draft letter from President Diem to President Kennedy which should be handled accordance instructions contained Deptel 619.

“Dear Mr. President:

1. Since its birth, more than six years ago, the Republic of Viet-Nam has enjoyed the close friendship and cooperation of the United States of America. On our mutual concern for the future of the Vietnamese people, on our mutual determination to defend the frontiers of the Free World against Communist aggression, and on our mutual dedication to the ideal of human dignity, we have founded an international partnership which I believe is of great and lasting value not only to our two peoples but to all free men. Together, we have built a bridge of understanding and friendship between an Asian people and a Western people, setting an example for all who believe that great historical and cultural differences need not separate men of goodwill. Together we have laid the material foundations of a new and modern Viet-Nam in which my people can realize their aspirations. Together, we have checked the thrust of Communist tyranny in Southeast Asia. These are great accomplishments and our two peoples can be rightly proud of them.

2. Like the United States, the Republic of Viet-Nam has always been devoted to the preservation of peace. My people know only too well the sorrows of war. We did not sign the 1954 Geneva Agreements because we could never consent to the partition of our country and the enslavement of more than half of our people by Communist tyranny. But we have never considered the reunification of our nation by force. On the contrary, we have publicly pledged that we will not violate the demarcation line and the demilitarized zone set up by the Agreements. We have always been prepared and have on many occasions stated our willingness to reunify Viet-Nam on the basis of democratic and truly free elections.

3. The record of the Communist authorities in the northern part of our country is quite otherwise. They not only consented to the division of Viet-Nam, but were eager for it. They pledged themselves to observe the Geneva Agreements and during the seven years since have never ceased to violate them. They call for free elections but are ignorant of the very meaning of the words. They talk of “peaceful reunification” and wage war against us.

4. From the beginning, the Communists resorted to terror in their efforts to subvert our people, destroy our government, and impose a Communist regime upon us. They have attacked defenseless teachers, closed schools, killed members of our anti-malarial program and looted hospitals. This is coldly calculated to destroy our Government's humanitarian efforts to serve our people.

5. We have long sought to check the Communist attack from the north on our people by appeals to the International Control Commission. Over the years, we have repeatedly published to the world the evidence of the Communist plot to overthrow our Government and seize control of all of Viet-Nam by illegal intrusions from outside our country. The evidence has mounted until now it is hardly necessary to rehearse it. Most recently, the kidnapping and brutal murder of our chief
liaison officer to the International Control Commission, Colonel Hoang Thuy Nam, compelled us to speak out once more. In our October 24, 1961, letter to the ICC, we called attention again to the publicly stated determination of the Communist authorities in Hanoi to “liberate the South” by the overthrow of my Government and the imposition of a Communist regime on our people. We cited the proof of massive infiltration of Communist agents and military elements into our country. We outlined the Communist strategy, which is simply the ruthless use of terror against the whole population, women and children included.

6. In the course of the last few months, the Communist assault on my people has achieved a new ferocity. In October, they caused more than 1,800 incidents of violence and more than 2,000 casualties. They have struck occasionally in battalion strength, and they are continually augmenting their forces by infiltration from the north. The level of their attacks is already such that our forces are stretched to the utmost. We are forced to defend every village, every hamlet, indeed every home against a foe whose tactic is always to strike at the defenseless.

7. A disastrous flood was recently added to the misfortunes of the Vietnamese people. The greater part of three provinces was inundated, with a great loss of property. We are now engaged in a nation-wide effort to reconstruct and rehabilitate this area. The Communists are, of course, making this task doubly difficult, for they have seized upon the disruption of normal administration and communications as an opportunity to sow more destruction in the stricken areas.

8. In short, the Vietnamese nation now faces what is perhaps the gravest crisis in its long history. For more than 2,000 years, my people have lived and built, fought and died in this land. We have not always been free. Indeed, much of our history and many of its proudest moments have arisen from conquest by foreign powers and our struggle against great odds to regain or defend our precious independence. But it is not only our freedom which is at stake today, it is our national identity. For, if we lose this war, our people will be swallowed by the Communist Bloc, all our proud heritage will be blotted out by the 'socialist society,' and Viet-Nam will leave the pages of history. We will lose our national soul.

9. Mr. President, my people and I are mindful of the great assistance which the United States has given us. Your help has not been lightly received, for the Vietnamese are a proud people, and we are determined to do our part in the defense of the Free World. It is clear to all of us that the defeat of the Viet Cong demands the total mobilization of our Government and our people, and you may be sure that we will devote all of our resources of money, minds, and men to this great task.

10. But Viet-Nam is not a great power, and the forces of International Communism now arrayed against us are more than we can meet with the resources at hand. We must have further assistance from the United States if we are to survive the war now being waged against us.

11. If our request for aid needs any further justification before the court of world opinion, we need only refer to the Charter of the United Nations which recognizes the right of self-defense for all nations. We can certainly assure mankind that our action is purely defensive. Much as we
regret the subjugation of more than half our people in North VietNam, we have no intention, and indeed no means, to free them by the use of force.

12. I have said that Viet-Nam is at war. War means many things, but most of all it means the death of brave people for a cause they believe in. Viet-Nam has suffered many wars, and through the centuries, we have always had patriots and heroes who were willing to shed their blood for VietNam. We will keep faith with them. When Communism has long ebbed away into the past, my people will still be here, a free united nation growing from the deep roots of our Vietnamese heritage. They will remember your help in our time of need. This struggle will then be a part of our common history. And your help, your friendship, and the strong bonds between our two peoples will be a part of VietNam, then as now.”

Rusk


Letter from President Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem, President of South Vietnam December 14, 1961

Dear Mr. President:

I have received your recent letter in which you described so cogently the dangerous conditions caused by North Vietnam's effort to take over your country. The situation in your embattled country is well known to me and to the American people. We have been deeply disturbed by the assault on your country. Our indignation has mounted as the deliberate savagery of the Communist programs of assassination, kidnapping, and wanton violence became clear.

Your letter underlines what our own information has convincingly shown -- that the campaign of force and terror now being waged against your people and your Government is supported and directed from outside by the authorities at Hanoi. They have thus violated the provisions of the Geneva Accords designed to ensure peace in Vietnam and to which they bound themselves in 1954.

At that time, the United States, although not a party to the Accords, declared that it "would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the Agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security." We continue to maintain that view.

In accordance with that declaration, and in response to your request, we are prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence. We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort as well as help relieve the destruction of the floods which you describe. I have already given the orders to get these programs underway.

The United States, like the Republic of Vietnam, remains devoted to the cause of peace and our primary purpose is to help your people maintain their independence. If the Communist
authorities in North Vietnam will stop their campaign to destroy the Republic of Vietnam, the measures we are taking to assist your defense efforts will no longer be necessary. We shall seek to persuade the Communists to give up their attempts to force and subversion. In any case, we are confident that the Vietnamese people will preserve their independence and gain the peace and prosperity for which they have sought so hard and so long.


Letter From President Diem to President Kennedy


Mr. President: I believe the facts of Communist aggression against the Vietnamese people are now well known to you. Despite Communist lies, the evidence on record cannot be hidden.

However, I would like to draw your particular attention to the January 18 Hanoi announcement of the founding of the so-called people's revolutionary party. This announcement is virtual admission of Hanoi's direction and control of the Viet Cong rebels who are brutally attacking our people.

On January 18, the Hanoi radio broadcast the declaration of the new Communist creation, the so-called Vietnamese people's revolutionary party. This declaration states that in the last days of 1961 “Marxist-Leninists” in South Vietnam established a new party, with its “immediate tasks” being to unite the people and “to overthrow” the Government of Viet-Nam. It also declared that the party “calls on the people in the North to build an ever more prosperous and strong North Vietnam, making it a solid basis for the struggle for peaceful reunification of the country, to give active support to their compatriots in South Vietnam in their revolutionary struggle.” Here at last is a public admission of what has always been clear—that the Viet Cong campaign against my people is led by Communists.

The North Vietnamese admission that the Viet Cong attacks on the free people of Viet-Nam—attacks which now average more than 400 per week and claim total casualties of nearly 800 per week—are henceforth to be openly Communist directed must be a matter of concern for all nations.

The Communists have now themselves made it clear that they are making another brutal attempt in their effort to achieve world domination.

This attempt is not new. For more than seven years the Communists have most cynically violated the Geneva Accords of 1954. The central purpose of these Accords, which established a cease-fire, is to maintain the peace in Viet-Nam. The Communist regime in Hanoi is violating this basic purpose by its direction and support of the expanding guerrilla war which it is carrying on in South Vietnam.

The Hanoi regime made clear its objective when the Communist (Lao Dong) Party in North Vietnam stated at its 1960 congress that a strategic task of “the Vietnamese revolution” is “to
liberate South Vietnam”—the Communist jargon for conquering a country already free. Evidence based on captured documents and prisoners shows that, in order to carry out this task, the Hanoi regime is infiltrating armed personnel by the thousands into South Vietnam to mount over increasing guerrilla war activities.

In view of this guerrilla campaign, the Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam has been compelled to appeal for increased military assistance and support from free world countries to help prevent it from being overwhelmed by massive subversion from Communist North Vietnam, backed by heavily increased support from the Communist bloc. Even the regime in Hanoi has recognized that the free world's increased assistance is needed and being used in South Vietnam for defensive purposes. In an interview broadcast over Hanoi Radio January 1, 1962, Major General Nguyen Van Vinh, chairman of the so-called “National Reunification Commission”, stated that the Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam supported by the United States is not now preparing for a “march to the North.”

On the other hand, the Communist bloc has conducted an extensive airlift of military supplies into North Vietnam for aggressive purposes for well over a year. Part of this military material has been sent on to Laos to support the rebels and Viet Cong fighting the legitimate Government there, but much of it has been turned over to the Communist regime in North Vietnam to build up its war potential against South Vietnam.

A grave threat to peace thus exists and can be removed only if the Communist regime in Hanoi is forced to desist in its guerrilla war against the legal Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam, of which I have the honor to be President. World opinion is likely to serve as an important factor in the future decisions of the Communist authorities about this guerrilla war. I am, therefore, writing to you, Excellency, to bring the facts about the serious situation in Viet-Nam to your attention and to request that you raise your voice in defense of freedom and peace in this area of the world by condemning the Communist aggression against the duly constituted Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

Yours sincerely

Ngo Dinh Diem


Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam

Saigon, July 9, 1962, 8 p.m.

28. Re: Confe's 1196 and 1197. You are authorized to deliver the following letter from President Kennedy to President Diem urgently.

“I have been told of your concern over the agreements on Laos now being negotiated at Geneva. Since these long and difficult negotiations are reaching a conclusion, I thought it would be
helpful to Your Excellency for me to review with you our thinking about Laos and Southeast Asia generally.

We have sought to counter the communist drive in Southeast Asia by programs and tactics which recognize both the regional nature of communist threat and the particular circumstances of each country in the region.

In the case of your own country, the strategy best calculated to preserve Vietnamese independence and enable your brave people to build a better future is clearly very different from the strategy required for Laos. Such a strategy is based upon the fierce desire of your people to maintain their independence and their willingness to engage in an arduous struggle for it. Based as it is on these facts, our policy toward Viet-Nam must and will continue as it has since my administration took office. We have helped and shall continue to help your country to defend itself. We believe your efforts have been and will continue to be increasingly effective. We believe the Vietnamese will defeat communist aggression and subversion.

In Laos, the circumstances are quite different. Because of that country's location and because of the conditions in which its people find themselves, the United States believes that a neutral government, committed to neither the west nor the east, is most likely to succeed in providing the Lao people with peace and freedom. We are supported in this belief by most of the free world governments.

In negotiating with the communists to achieve a free and neutral Laos, we have not been unmindful of the relationship between Laos and the security of its neighbors. We have sought to build adequate safeguards into the Laos settlement, including assurance Lao territory will not be used for military or subversive interference in the affairs of other countries. We are aware of the danger that the communists will not honor their pledges. But the only alternative to a neutral Laos appears to be making an international battleground of Laos. This would not help the Lao people and it would not contribute to the security of Laos' neighbors.

I am informed that the Geneva negotiations have reached the point where the agreements which have been hammered out over the past thirteen months are nearly ready for signature. In considering the position of our government at this juncture I think it is important for us to keep firmly in mind the real political foundation upon which these agreements rest.

When Mr. Khrushchev and I met in Vienna last year, we were able to agree on only one of the many issues which divide us. This was our mutual desire to work for a free, independent and neutral Laos. The result has been that the Soviets, as one of the Co-chairmen, have undertaken an international responsibility under the Geneva Accords to assure the compliance of the communist signatories with the terms of those accords. This responsibility will be tested soon as the agreements are signed.

In return for these undertakings by the Soviets, both your delegation and mine have made some concessions in the course of the thirteen months of negotiations. These concessions are the result of the almost complete ineffectiveness of the Royal Laotian Army, as demonstrated again in the recent action at Nam Tha. It is only the threat of American intervention that has enabled us to
come as far as we have in Laos. But I hope you agree with me that considering this deteriorating situation the safeguards built into the Laos settlement give us the best hope of future improvement against continuing communist military encroachment through that country.

It is in this light that I hope you will reconsider the wisdom of insisting upon a solution of the problem of diplomatic recognition by Laos as a condition for your signature of the Geneva Accords. I recognize the importance of the question and particularly the problem it may create in other countries. On the other hand, I believe that when it is compared with the change of achieving a viable settlement of the Laos problem, the question of the type of representation in Vientiane should not be allowed to determine your country's attitude toward our mutual effort at Geneva.

I hope you will instruct your delegation not to raise issues on which general agreement had been reached last December, nor to bring up new issues. It is unrealistic to expect that other countries will undertake obligations to your nation unless your government, through its signature of these accords, assumes reciprocal obligations. That is why I urge you most earnestly to continue your help in making it possible for the Geneva Accords to be signed promptly by all the participants.

In working to ensure peace and freedom for the people of Southeast Asia, the United States must, of course, depend heavily on its friends. Most of all, we must have the cooperation of the governments and the peoples of Southeast Asia itself. Your government has been most closely associated with mine in this effort, and together we have achieved a great deal to defeat the communist threat to Southeast Asia. It is my earnest hope that we may continue this fruitful cooperation by working together to establish a truly neutral Laos.”

In presenting letter you should stress in strongest terms the importance we attach to Vietnamese help in reaching Laos settlement, safeguards we have in Russian promises and which we building into settlement itself and our determination continue help Viet-Nam defend itself.

We plan no publicity on this note and believe you should request GVN handle as classified communication

Rusk


Letter From President Kennedy to President Diem


Dear Mr. President: As the Republic of Viet-Nam comes once again to celebrate its establishment and its independence, the United States of America sends greetings to the Vietnamese people and to their government.
In writing to you on this same occasion last year, Mr. President, I paid tribute to your country's 
heroic struggle against the campaign of terrorism, destruction and suffering by which 
Communism had responded to the progress which your young republic had achieved. In those 
dark days the American people joined with your compatriots in looking forward to a future 
October twenty-sixth when Viet-Nam would again know peace, and its citizens would begin to 
enjoy the freedom and prosperity which Communist subversion would deny them. That day is 
approaching. The valiant struggle of the past year, the sacrifices and sorrows of countless heroes 
and the introduction of new institutions such as the strategic hamlet to bring lasting social and 
economic benefits to the people in the countryside earn for Viet-Nam the world's admiration. 

As Viet-Nam gains its victory over adversity and aggression, it will be in a position increasingly 
to devote its energies to achieving closer cooperation among the community of free Southeast 
Asian states. Each of these nations has its unique character and philosophy. In common they are 
confronted not only by grasping Communism but also by the chance to develop together. By 
sharing the development of their individual capacities they can multiply their mutual strength. 
Thus can Southeast Asia become unassailable and contribute to the stability of the world 
community. This task is as difficult as it is necessary. It will require a mutual submergence of 
differences and bold leadership. It will call upon those of vision to see a future of Asian peoples 
working for their common benefit in a harmony and freedom bequeathed them by their 
forefathers. 

Mr. President, I again express my faith and that of the American people in Viet-Nam's future and 
I look forward with confidence to a year of increased momentum and progress leading to the 
restoration of peace, law and order, and a better life for the Vietnamese people.

Sincerely,

John

Source: John F. Kennedy to Ngo Dinh Diem, October 24, 1962. Foreign Relations of the United 

Letter From President Diem to President Kennedy

Saigon, November 15, 1962.

Dear Mr. President, I wish to thank you warmly for the message, so cordial and full of 
understanding, which you sent me for the people and Government of the Republic of Vietnam on 

As we celebrate the seventh anniversary of our Republic this year, we note with great satisfaction 
that our determination has overcome the difficulties which the enemy has heaped in our way, and 
that our efforts in the economic and social fields already bear the most promising fruits, raising 
the hope, as you kindly pointed out, that the day is approaching when the Vietnamese people 
finally enjoy peace, security and happiness again. I deeply appreciate the fact that you made a 
special reference to our strategic hamlets and described them as an institution designed to help us
rapidly attain the essential objectives of our policy, which are respect for the human person, social justice and the creation of true democracy.

It is hardly necessary to add that the assistance of the United States, under your leadership, definitely contributed to the successes which we have scored, particularly during recent months. I bow with respect to the sacrifices of those American citizens who came and shared our trials and hardships and sealed with their blood the brotherhood of our two peoples. I want to renew here the expression of our gratefulness to these noble sons of America, to their families, and to the entire American people as well. Their sacrifices will not be in vain, as they show that the cause which the Vietnamese people are defending is just, one which deserves to be upheld by all peoples dedicated to freedom, and the more so by those directly interested in the maintenance of peace and stability in this part of the world.

In reaffirming the friendship of the United States of American and its faith in our future, your message is not only particularly auspicious but also really heartening to us.

Please accept, [etc.].

Ngo Dinh Diem


February 23, 1963

Dear Mr. President;

The whole Vietnamese people were deeply touched by the message which Your Excellency, as spokesman for the great American democracy, so kindly sent them on the occasion of their New Year Day.

They have welcomed this message as a magnificent and perfect expression of the comprehension and friendship of the American people who have supported them with strong and effective aid in these difficult days of their struggle against communist subversion and aggression.

This is indeed a major source of inspiration for my countrymen who are more than ever determined to redouble their efforts and sacrifices in the year ahead to come near to the final victory that will bring them security and peace, and promote social justice and collective ascent within the framework of the economic development of the country.

In the reverent memory of the noble sons of America who have given their lives in our land for the common cause, I want to thank you cordially, Dear Mr. President, for your wishes which express so well our common aspirations and hopes and to offer the gratitude and admiration of the Vietnamese people to the great nation and people “who have always been willing to pay the dearest costs for liberty.”
Ngo-dinh-Diem
President of the Republic of Viet-Nam

APPENDIX D: LETTER EXCHANGE BETWEEN LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND HO CHI MINH

PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN VIETNAM

Letter from President Johnson to Ho Chi Minh, President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, February 8, 1967

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to you in the hope that the conflict in Vietnam can be brought to an end. That conflict has already taken a heavy toll—in lives lost, in wounds inflicted, in property destroyed, and in simple human misery. If we fail to find a just and peaceful solution, history will judge us harshly.

Therefore, I believe that we both have a heavy obligation to seek earnestly the path to peace. It is in response to that obligation that I am writing directly to you.

We have tried over the past several years, in a variety of ways and through a number of channels, to convey to you and your colleagues our desire to achieve a peaceful settlement. For whatever reasons, these efforts have not achieved any results.

In the past two weeks, I have noted public statements by representatives of your government suggesting that you would be prepared to enter into direct bilateral talks with representatives of the U.S. Government, provided that we ceased "unconditionally" and permanently our bombing operations against your country and all military actions against it. In the last day, serious and responsible parties have assured us indirectly that this is in fact your proposal.

Let me frankly state that I see two great difficulties with this proposal. In view of your public position, such action on our part would inevitably produce worldwide speculation that discussions were under way and would impair the privacy and secrecy of those discussions. Secondly, there would inevitably be grave concern on our part whether your government would make use of such action by us to improve its military position.

With these problems in mind, I am prepared to move even further towards an ending of hostilities than your Government has proposed in either public statements or through private diplomatic channels. I am prepared to order a cessation of bombing against your country and the stopping of further augmentation of U.S. forces in South Viet-Nam as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Viet-Nam by land and by sea has stopped. These acts of restraint on both sides would, I believe, make it possible for us to conduct serious and private discussions leading toward an early peace.

I make this proposal to you now with a specific sense of urgency arising from the imminent New Year holidays in Viet-Nam. If you are able to accept this proposal I see no reason why it could not take effect at the end of the New Year, or Tet, holidays. The proposal I have made would be
greatly strengthened if your military authorities and those of the Government of South Viet-Nam could promptly negotiate an extension of the Tet truce.

As to the site of the bilateral discussions I propose, there are several possibilities. We could, for example, have our representatives meet in Moscow where contacts have already occurred. They could meet in some other country such as Burma. You may have other arrangements or sites in mind, and I would try to meet your suggestions.

The important thing is to end a conflict that has brought burdens to both our peoples, and above all to the people of South Viet-Nam. If you have any thoughts about the actions I propose, it would be most important that I receive them as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Lyndon B. Johnson


PRESIDENT HO CHI MINH'S REPLY TO PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S LETTER

February 15, 1967

Excellency, on February 10, 1967, I received your message. Here is my response.

Viet-Nam is situated thousands of miles from the United States. The Vietnamese people have never done any harm to the United States. But, contrary to the commitments made by its representative at the Geneva Conference of 1954, the United States Government has constantly intervened in Viet-Nam, it has launched and intensified the war of aggression in South Viet-Nam for the purpose of prolonging the division of Viet-Nam and of transforming South Viet-Nam into an American neo-colony and an American military base. For more than two years now, the American Government, with its military aviation and its navy, has been waging war against the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, an independent and sovereign country.

The United States Government has committed war crimes, crimes against peace and against humanity. In South Viet-Nam a half-million American soldiers and soldiers from the satellite countries have resorted to the most inhumane arms and the most barbarous methods of warfare, such as napalm, chemicals, and poison gases in order to massacre our fellow countrymen, destroy the crops, and wipe out the villages. In North Viet-Nam thousands of American planes have rained down hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs, destroying cities, villages, mills, roads, bridges, dikes, dams and even churches, pagodas, hospitals, and schools. In your message you appear to deplore the suffering and the destruction in Viet-Nam. Permit me to ask you: Who perpetrated these monstrous crimes? It was the American soldiers and the soldiers of the satellite countries. The United States Government is entirely responsible for the extremely grave situation in Viet-Nam. . . .
The Vietnamese people deeply love independence, liberty, and peace. But in the face of the American aggression they have risen up as one man, without fearing the sacrifices and the privations. They are determined to continue their resistance until they have won real independence and liberty and true peace. Our just cause enjoys the approval and the powerful support of peoples throughout the world and of large segments of the American people.

The United States Government provoked the war of aggression in Viet-Nam. It must cease that aggression, it is the only road leading to the re-establishment of peace. The United States Government must halt definitively and unconditionally the bombings and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, withdraw from South Viet-Nam all American troops and all troops from the satellite countries, recognize the National Front of the Liberation of South Viet-Nam and let the Vietnamese people settle their problems themselves. Such is the basic content of the four-point position of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, such is the statement of the essential principles and essential arrangements of the Geneva agreements of 1954 on Viet-Nam. It is the basis for a correct political solution of the Vietnamese problem. In your message you suggested direct talks between the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and the United States. If the United States Government really wants talks, it must first halt unconditionally the bombings and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam. It is only after the unconditional halting of the American bombings and of all other American acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam that the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and the United States could begin talks and discuss questions affecting the two parties.

The Vietnamese people will never give way to force, it will never accept conversation under the clear threat of bombs.

Our cause is absolutely just. It is desirable that the Government of the United States act in conformity to reason.

Sincerely,

Ho Chi Minh

APPENDIX E: LETTER EXCHANGE BETWEEN RICHARD NIXON AND HO CHI MINH

Note: The President's letter was dated July 15, 1969, and released November 3, 1969.

Dear Mr. President:

I realize that it is difficult to communicate meaningfully across the gulf of four years of war. But precisely because of this gulf, I wanted to take this opportunity to reaffirm in all solemnity my desire to work for a just peace. I deeply believe that the war in Vietnam has gone on too long and delay in bringing it to an end can benefit no one--least of all the people of Vietnam. My speech on May 14 laid out a proposal which I believe is fair to all parties. Other proposals have been made which attempt to give the people of South Vietnam an opportunity to choose their own future. These proposals take into account the reasonable conditions of all sides. But we stand ready to discuss other programs as well, specifically the 10-point program of the NLF.

As I have said repeatedly, there is nothing to be gained by waiting. Delay can only increase the dangers and multiply the suffering.

The time has come to move forward at the conference table toward an early resolution of this tragic war. You will find us forthcoming and open-minded in a common effort to bring the blessings of peace to the brave people of Vietnam. Let history record that at this critical juncture, both sides turned their face toward peace rather than toward conflict and war.

Sincerely,

RICHARD NIXON


President Ho Chi Minh's reply dated August 25, 1969, was released by the White House Press Office along with the President's letter.

To His Excellency Richard Milhous Nixon President of the United States Washington

Mr. President:

I have the honor to acknowledge receipt of your letter.

The war of aggression of the United States against our people, violating our fundamental national rights, still continues in South Vietnam. The United States continues to intensify military operations, the B-52 bombings and the use of toxic chemical products multiply the crimes against the Vietnamese people. The longer the war goes on, the more it accumulates the mourning and burdens of the American people. I am extremely indignant at the losses and destructions caused by the American troops to our people and our country. I am also deeply
touched at the rising toll of death of young Americans who have fallen in Vietnam by reason of the policy of American governing circles.

Our Vietnamese people are deeply devoted to peace, a real peace with independence and real freedom. They are determined to fight to the end, without fearing the sacrifices and difficulties in order to defend their country and their sacred national rights. The overall solution in 10 points of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam is a logical and reasonable basis for the settlement of the Vietnamese problem. It has earned the sympathy and support of the peoples of the world.

In your letter you have expressed the desire to act for a just peace. For this the United States must cease the war of aggression and withdraw their troops from South Vietnam, respect the right of the population of the South and of the Vietnamese nation to dispose of themselves, without foreign influence. This is the correct manner of solving the Vietnamese problem in conformity with the national rights of the Vietnamese people, the interests of the United States and the hopes for peace of the peoples of the world. This is the path that will allow the United States to get out of the war with honor.

With good will on both sides we might arrive at common efforts in view of finding a correct solution of the Vietnamese problem

Sincerely,

HO CHI MINH