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## To urge common sense on the Americans: United States' relations with France, Great Britain, and the Federal Republic of Germany in the context of the Vietnam War, 1961-1968

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TO URGE COMMON SENSE ON THE AMERICANS:  
UNITED STATES' RELATIONS WITH FRANCE, GREAT BRITAIN,  
AND THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY IN THE CONTEXT OF  
THE VIETNAM WAR, 1961-1968.

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Eugenie Margareta Blang

2000

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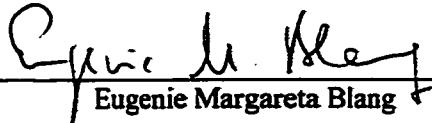
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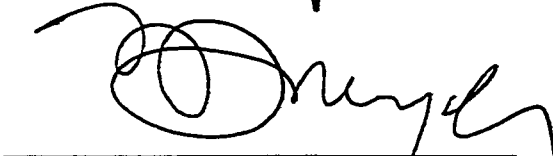
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**Für Mama  
In Liebe und tiefer Dankbarkeit**

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## Abstract

America's Vietnam War had profound ramifications beyond its immediate effect on Southeast Asia and the United States. This dissertation utilizes the debate over Vietnam between the United States and its major European allies, Britain, France, and West Germany, as an analytical framework to examine inter-allied relations. The "Vietnam problem" strained the trans-Atlantic alliance and revealed the respective self-interest of the four member nations. The British, French, and West Germans had serious misgivings about the American strategy in Vietnam, based on a differing view of the nature of the conflict and a pessimistic assessment of American chances for success in South Vietnam. Equally important, the Europeans feared that Washington might disengage from Europe and that the fighting in Southeast Asia might develop into a major, perhaps even world war. European security hence might be dangerously undermined by further American escalation in Vietnam. According to the European powers, the Cold War should be primarily fought in Europe. Although London, Paris, and Bonn were deeply apprehensive about the American engagement in Vietnam they failed to develop a unified policy to affect American decision-making because they were unable to transcend their nationalistic agendas. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson unsuccessfully attempted to win substantial European support for America's role in Vietnam. To the United States, Vietnam was a prime domino that could not be allowed to fall and Washington viewed European concerns as parochial and counter-productive. The essentially unilateral approach of the United States in Vietnam led to tragic failure. Subsequent of the Vietnam experience, Washington realized that it could not fulfill all its global obligations without the backing of its European allies. The lack of a cohesive European policy toward America's engagement in Vietnam revealed inherent shortcomings of the European nation-states which were still guided by a nationalistic approach in foreign policy-making. Britain, France, West Germany, and the United States painfully recognized that in order to successfully meet global challenges they needed to listen more closely to each other and develop a mutualistic policy that would better serve their shared interests as allies and friends.

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*The United States has not fully learned that the political advice or criticism of less powerful friends who share a common heritage does not necessarily denote hostility or envy or malice - or even bad judgement.*

George Ball, *The Discipline of Power*, 1968

## Introduction

The American involvement in and subsequent escalation of the conflict in South Vietnam has been intensely researched and documented. Most historiography on the subject is limited to examining American and Vietnamese policies and actions.<sup>1</sup> Only a few historians have adopted a broader approach that investigates the global ramifications and significance of America's Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship acknowledges the need to better understand the American past within the framework of international politics. Currently, historians are taking a fresh look at the American experience ranging from a reinterpretation of the Colonial period based on an Atlantic perspective to inclusive

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the varying interpretations of American scholars on the Vietnam War see two articles by George Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Debate Continues," in: American Historical Review, 92, (April, 1987) and "The War in Vietnam," in Robert A. Devine (ed.), Exploring the Johnson Years, (Austin, 1981). In addition to historians' analysis of the Vietnam War, the interested reader can find a plethora of autobiographical accounts ranging from Ambassador Frederick Nolting's, From Trust to Tragedy, (New York, 1988) to Mark Baker's, Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There, (New York, 1981) and Truong Nhu Tang's, A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath, (New York, 1985). Lyndon B. Johnson, Robert McNamara, and Dean Rusk also address Vietnam and its implication in their autobiographies. Journalist like Stanley Karnow and David Halberstam provide yet another angle to the complex American experience in Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> The standard was set by Ralph Bernhard Smith's three volume work: An International History of the Vietnam War, (New York, 1983, Vol. II, 1985, and Vol. III, 1991). Smith discusses American, Vietnamese, Soviet, Chinese perspectives, and also the British role in finding a diplomatic settlement, from 1955 to 1966. Ilya V. Gaiduk's book The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War, (Chicago, 1996), uses newly available Soviet documents to demonstrate that for Moscow the conflict in Vietnam was also less than welcome and that the Soviets struggled to please their allies without creating "showdowns" with their rivals. Fredrik Logevall incorporates French and British points of view in his recent book Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam, (University of California Press, 1999).

studies on Cold War history.<sup>3</sup> Given the global obligations, challenges, and opportunities that have influenced and still affect the United States, an international approach in researching America's past is important.

This dissertation examines America's Vietnam policy in a global context by focusing on the United States' relationship with its Cold War partners Great Britain, France, and West Germany. The European response to America's Vietnam policy provides an analytical framework to assess this important chapter in recent American history within the wider perspective of international relations. Equally significant, the respective approaches to the "Vietnam question" by the Europeans and Americans reveal the on-going challenge for nation-states of transcending narrowly defined state-centered policies for a global perspective pursuant of common goals among the trans-Atlantic allies.

During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations Great Britain, France, and West Germany perceived the growing American military involvement in South Vietnam as misguided, dangerous, and unwanted. Did European "criticism" of America's role in Vietnam, to use Ball's phrase quoted above, "denote hostility, or envy or malice?" While some envy of America's super-power status affected all three European powers, their anxiety over U.S. policy in Vietnam first and foremost resulted from both a concern for their respective national self-interest and a pragmatic, realistic assessment of the situation in Southeast Asia. European leadership feared that the crisis in Asia portended a

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<sup>3</sup> For Colonial and Revolutionary history see for example the recent *American Historical Review*, February 2000, which discusses Revolutions in the Americas. Cold War Studies proceed along similar lines by employing newly accessible archives in the Soviet Union and recently released documents of America's European allies. The German documents on foreign relations for the 1960's, which have been recently



decreasing American interest in European affairs, and a possible reduction of American troops which might leave Western Europe more vulnerable to potential Soviet encroachments. The Europeans also worried that the conflict in Vietnam might escalate into a major Asian and perhaps even world war, thereby endangering the security of Western Europe.

In light of these profound concerns, the failure of Britain, France, and West Germany to significantly influence American policy-making is intriguing and of historical importance. Disregarding European concerns, the United States unilaterally embarked on a strategy of escalation in South Vietnam. Had Washington listened closer to European advice, the American quagmire in Vietnam might have been averted. In addition, the United States was forced to fight in Vietnam without its European allies. Whether European troops might have improved the military situation in South Vietnam cannot be assessed, but European assistance certainly would have reinforced America's Vietnam policy both in the court of world opinion and within the United States. A joint Western position proved essential to secure the independence of South Korea during 1950 to 1953, but ten years later American leaders were unable to form a similar alliance with the West Europeans to defeat Communism in South Vietnam.

Why, then, was a mutualistic trans-Atlantic approach to the Vietnam question unattainable? First, the Europeans missed the opportunity to develop a joint, well coordinated critical response to America's policy in Vietnam. The Europeans were hampered by a centuries old paradigm of state-interest which precluded any unified

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published, have been extremely helpful to this author to interpret U.S.-German relations and the Vietnam question.

strategy aimed at affecting U.S. decision-making. Reliance upon “nationalistic” ideologies prevented the British, French, and Germans from moving beyond their individual agendas to come to an understanding with each other regarding the American role in Vietnam. The “Vietnam question” became a lesson for the Europeans about the limitations of their impact on global politics. Second, unilateral advice and expressed misgivings from the Europeans were ignored by Washington. All three European powers had a grander imperialist past but were reduced to secondary rank in global affairs following the Second World War. Britain and France, especially, had profound experience in the affairs of Asia which led to the conviction that American policy in South Vietnam was mistaken and portended little chance of success. While some of their advice may have been valid, their behavior still exhibited the patterns of a bygone era. The United States was less inclined to follow suggestions of European states which, until recently, had exploited Third World nations for their self-interest. Britain, France, and even more so West Germany were in fact “less powerful friends.” In light of the world-wide obligations of the United States, to Washington the European voices appeared parochial and detrimental to America’s efforts in South Vietnam. Washington was even more dismayed by the fact that European misgivings over the “Vietnam question” left the United States fighting alone in Southeast Asia without the direct support of its principal European allies.

A closer analysis of the motives and approaches taken by London, Paris, and Bonn is necessary in order to define the respective “national” agenda of each country. What were the forces and factors that brought about such an ineffective European response to Washington’s Vietnam policy? It was neither “hostility” toward the United

States nor “bad judgement,” but rather self-interest. All three powers had to adapt to the bi-polar world while trying to restore influence with the superpowers and thus enhance their international status. Also, policy-makers in London, Paris, and Bonn faced a domestic audience that was reluctant to endorse the American policy in Vietnam. While most Europeans appreciated American military protection and were grateful for American economic aid after the Second World War, the American escalation in Vietnam led to concern and criticism of the United States.

Great Britain, apprehensive of losing its role as “special ally” to the United States, was painfully aware of the need for American military protection. But the crisis in Southeast Asia ran counter to British goals and realities. During the 1960’s, London was overseeing the demise of its colonial empire but still hoped to play a global role as leader of the Commonwealth. British forces were strained already by commitments in Malaysia, Aden, Cyprus, and the turmoil in Rhodesia. Economic difficulties within the United Kingdom further precluded additional British military engagements elsewhere. Britain neither desired to participate in a doomed effort in Southeast Asia nor wished to risk its own security in Europe. In addition, British leaders were apprehensive about negative reactions within the Commonwealth to America’s role in Vietnam. Hence London attempted to find a peaceful political solution of the Vietnam problem through quiet but solid diplomatic initiatives. By doing so, Harold Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home, and Harold Wilson aspired to remain a “special ally” to the United States while carefully balancing British economic limitations with the country’s political obligations toward its Commonwealth partners.

France analyzed America's policy on Vietnam through the prism of its own long, disastrous experience in Indochina. Charles de Gaulle endeavored to convey France's hard-learned lessons in Asia to Washington by urging U.S. leaders not to become bogged down in the jungles of Vietnam. When his warnings went unheeded, de Gaulle used the increasing difficulties of the United States in Southeast Asia as an opportunity to enhance the role of France in global affairs. The French president sought closer relations with Third World countries, particularly those of the former French empire. Toward these nations de Gaulle depicted his country as a trustworthy friend genuinely interested in promoting their well-being. De Gaulle's rhetoric presented France as an alternative to what he characterized as the ideologically driven interference of the Soviet Union and the United States. By pursuing this foreign policy de Gaulle hoped to restore France once more to a position of *grandeur* in the world - replacing Cold War ideology with one of French nationalism. French "envy" of the United States was certainly a factor in de Gaulle's foreign policy. But de Gaulle could not afford to pursue an outwardly hostile policy toward the United States and genuinely tried to save the Americans from undertaking a doomed Vietnam policy. Despite a decade of tensions with the United States, de Gaulle provided good judgement on Vietnam.

The West Germans had far more immediate concerns to deal with than a struggle of distant people in Southeast Asia. The necessity of American military protection, the unity of Berlin, and the issue of German reunification topped the agenda of West German foreign policy-making. Berlin suffered division in 1961 and reunification was postponed partly as a consequence of the crisis in Southeast Asia. Consequently, the Vietnam conflict became a major policy dilemma for Bonn. If Washington continued to be

distracted by events in Southeast Asia, what would happen to the German agenda? Yet, open opposition to the widening American role in Vietnam was impossible because West Germany - still not a fully sovereign state at the time - relied on Washington's good-will for survival and for possible German reunification in the future.

Obviously, the basis and aims of foreign policy-making differed among the three European powers. Nevertheless, their approach to global issues and the U.S. Vietnam policy in particular was rather similar. British, French, and German foreign policy decision-making was founded on an ideology of nationalism, the notion that the nation's best interest was paramount. The divergent Europeans' view on the Vietnam problem was due to their interpretation of Communism. Harold Macmillan keenly remarked on the Soviet-Sino split that so-called "Communist" countries demonstrated similar political and ideological debates that marked Europe's history. Charles de Gaulle always referred to "la Russie" refusing to use the term Soviet Union because to him ideologies were temporary while nations were not. Konrad Adenauer believed that the Soviet Union would ultimately have to relinquish its hold on the East Germans because the reality of freedom and prosperity in the West would prove far more desirable than a rigid planned economy. The Soviet Union was threatening in the eyes of Western Europeans because it represented a totalitarian system, taking the guise of Marxist idealism, and bent on extending its influence further into Western Europe. Soviet goals vis-à-vis Western Europe were not new historically. Ever since the days of Tsar Peter the Great Russian interest lay toward the West.

American policy-making was also driven by self-interest, but its objectives differed profoundly from those of the Western Europeans. Propelled into the role of

leader of the Western world by the Second World War, it became America's self-assumed duty and burden to defend the freedom of its allies against the Communist threat. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were guided by the demands of domestic politics and by a different ideological view on global affairs than were the Europeans. While the Europeans pursued agendas of national self-interest aimed at retaining or enhancing their roles in global affairs, the cold-war dogma of the Free World versus Communist oppression pervaded the mind-set of Americans and foreign-policy advisors. After the "loss" of China in 1949, stalemate in Korea in 1953, and a dissatisfactory political settlement for Laos in 1962, for Washington Vietnam became the front-line in the continuing Cold War struggle. According to the American doctrine of containment, South Vietnam simply could not be abandoned because its fall might open the flood-gates to Communist expansion in the entire region. A lack of American determination in Southeast Asia might also backfire politically at home. Republicans as well as "hawks" within the Democratic Party insisted that the United States had to stand up to any Communist encroachment. Both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were unwilling to risk potential political defeat at home. Therefore, they chose to expand America's commitment against Communism in South Vietnam.

In retrospect, Paris and London arrived at a more realistic assessment of the Vietnam situation than Washington and, based on their own history of empire, believed that nothing good could come out of the deployment of American forces to the region. West German policy-makers also privately shared French and British reservations on the conflict in Vietnam. Yet, the three European countries failed in their efforts to affect American policy-decisions on Vietnam. Britain, France, and West Germany were miles

apart from accepting a mutual agenda because their self-centered perspectives remained paramount. Internal differences among the Europeans were prevalent throughout the 1960's. Britain applied for membership in the European Economic Community but was twice rejected by de Gaulle's veto. De Gaulle worked toward French leadership in Europe but ultimately failed because other Europeans rejected French dominance. Erhard looked to Washington, Paris, and London for support of German unification. His strategy was a failure as well. A divided, contained Germany would not challenge the *status quo* in Europe and to the United States, Great Britain, and France was preferable to a unified, potentially powerful "greater" Germany.

The consequences of the failed trans-Atlantic dialogue over U.S. policy in Vietnam were twofold: Presidents Kennedy and Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam despite European advice to the contrary and by doing so found itself fighting Communism without its European allies' support. The United States lost more than 58,000 Americans in this tragic chapter of American history and ultimately also failed to secure the independence of South Vietnam. Secondly, the American refusal to listen closer to European concerns led to a profound strain in trans-Atlantic relations. In the end the conflict in Vietnam did not escalate into a major Asian or even Third World War. But America's effort to gain European support by means ranging from friendly coercion to outright pressure left deep scars in U.S.- European relations. Instead of desired support, the United States faced a Europe critical of the American role in Vietnam which further undermined the American claim that Western liberty had to be defended in Vietnam. For Washington the lack of European support in Vietnam not only resulted in a set-back for American goals in South-East Asia but caused a fissure in trans-Atlantic relations.

The fall-out from the Vietnam conflict allowed the European allies to assert their agendas with varying degree of success. But it was also obvious that these short-term achievements of national self-interest could not reap greater benefits in a multi-polar world. On the one hand, for Britain, France, and West Germany, the “Vietnam question” served as a lesson that their foreign policy-making was constructed under severe limitations. None of the European powers could succeed in the global framework on its own. On the other hand, if the Europeans pursued a more mutualistic policy in the future, these limitations might be overcome. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Americans experienced the inherent limitations of a unilateral strategy to arrive at a solution of the Vietnam conflict and also realized the need to understand and consider the concerns and thinking of its Cold War partners. Despite its military-economic might, the United States could not dictate policy to the Europeans and, conversely, neither could the Europeans tell Washington how to proceed in Vietnam.

The transatlantic debate over the “Vietnam question” served as a difficult and painful lesson that neither the Europeans nor the Americans would benefit by pursuing a state-centered policy. This learning process led to greater appreciation of their respective views and initiated a more profound and genuine conversation over common goals of all four allies. The strengthened trans-Atlantic dialogue between the United States and its European allies allowed for a more mutualistic approach to problems facing the alliance during the following decades. All four powers realized that “political advice or even criticism” had little to do with envy or bad judgement, as Ball put it, but facilitated “good judgement” among the trans-Atlantic friends in order to secure a safe future based on an commitment to freedom and democracy.



**Part One:**

**The Reluctant Ally:  
Great Britain and the Search for a Negotiated Settlement  
in Vietnam**

*The elements that will enter our understanding with America can only be assessed in the light of particular British policies. These must be brought together and talked over as a whole with USA - with a coherent and understood give and take . . . We must back US in SE Asia - though working slowly for a solution by leaving things to people of the area.*

Patrick Gordon Walker, *Thoughts on Foreign Policy*, August 1964

Great Britain experienced a taste of the difficulties in Vietnam first-hand in 1945. British troops under General Douglas Gracey cleared out Japanese soldiers from the southern part of Vietnam and helped restore French colonial rule. As a colonial power, London did not question the legitimacy of French imperialism, since Britain, too, had a strong interest in maintaining its own dominions.<sup>4</sup> By 1948, Britain also faced a Communist insurgency in Malaya. During the early 1950's Winston Churchill shared American beliefs about the threat of a Communist take-over in Southeast Asia. Soon, Churchill reevaluated the British policy on Southeast Asia. He distanced himself from the French struggle in Indochina because he believed that the French effort was both a quixotic endeavor to reestablish French colonial rule and a dangerous path risking war with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Britain was in the middle of dissolving its colonial empire and not willing to engage itself further in Southeast Asia to save French colonial rule. The Churchill ministry supported a diplomatic solution and rejected an American proposal to intervene jointly in Vietnam. Britain co-chaired the Geneva Conference in 1954 with the Soviet

Union, resulting in international guarantees to adhere to the neutralization of Vietnam. Churchill agreed to join the American sponsored defense community for Southeast Asia (SEATO), designed to forestall further Communist aggression in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Churchill's policy during the First Indochina War set the pattern for his successors of how to respond to the growing American role in Indochina. While Britain refused to intervene in Southeast Asia, no British leader felt at liberty to openly challenge the U. S. policy in Vietnam. The United Kingdom relied on American military protection for its security but this safety net might be weakened if Washington engaged in a major war in Southeast Asia. London discerned a twofold scenario in case tensions intensified in the Far East. First, U.S. primary interest would shift from Europe to Asia, leaving Europe more vulnerable to Soviet encroachment. Second, the American commitment to defending Southeast Asia could explode into a major, perhaps even world war. These prospects were dismal but London also had to consider maintaining its "special relationship" with the United States. The partnership with Washington became even more important after Great Britain was denied entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) by France's president Charles de Gaulle in 1963. Britain had to find a policy that accommodated its own self-interest without alienating the United States. In addition, British prime ministers from Harold Macmillan to Harold Wilson faced intensifying

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<sup>4</sup> See for the discussion of British involvement in Vietnam: George Rosie, The British In Vietnam: How the Twenty-Five Year War Began, (London, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> On British policy during the First Indochina War see: Anthony Eden, Full Circle: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, (Boston, 1960), and Kevin Ruane, Refusing the Pay the Price: British Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Victory in Vietnam, 1952-1954, English Historical Review, (Feb. 1995); see also: Richard Lamb, The Macmillan Years, 1957-1963: The Emerging Truth, (London, 1996), pp. 377-381: while Churchill and his foreign minister Anthony Eden admitted that a French defeat would have serious consequences for Southeast Asia, they ultimately decided that a British intervention would not serve the

domestic opposition to the American policy in Vietnam. The growing U.S. engagement in Vietnam proved to be a serious test for British leaders to walk the tight rope of staying out of an unwanted conflict in Vietnam, appeasing domestic opponents, and continuing good relations with the United States.

### **I. The Tory Approach: Harold Macmillan (1961 to October 1963)**

During the early 1960's Prime Minister Harold Macmillan followed the framework set for Vietnam by Churchill. Admittedly, Communism threatened Southeast Asia, but in the final assessment, it was neither in the best interest of the United Kingdom nor of the United States to pursue a policy of greater involvement. Subsequently Macmillan tried to discourage John F. Kennedy from a greater commitment in Southeast Asia. Macmillan, born in 1894, had been in government service since 1939. He became Prime Minister in January 1957, after the Suez Crisis. The conservative leader enjoyed a very cordial relationship, even friendship with President Eisenhower and he was somewhat concerned whether this mutual understanding would continue with Kennedy - a man a generation younger than himself. Soon these doubts were dispersed and both leaders developed good personal relations, although each espoused a different approach toward Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup>

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best interest of the United Kingdom. Eden adamantly resisted American pressure to intervene in favor of the French.

<sup>6</sup> Alistair Horne, Harold Macmillan: Vol. II, 1957-1986, (New York, 1989), p. 281; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House, (Boston, 1965), p. 375; Harold Macmillan, At the End of the Day, 1961-1963, (London, 1973), p. 517; Macmillan's understanding and support after Kennedy's dreary encounter with Krushchev in Vienna set the pattern for Macmillan's relations with Kennedy: "I was sort of the son to Ike, and it was the other way around with Kennedy". When Macmillan

Macmillan strongly favored a political solution for Indochina. In February 1961 he sent David Ormsby-Gore to the newly inaugurated John F. Kennedy to convey British concern about the American role in Southeast Asia in general, and the current crisis over Laos in particular. The English ambassador openly criticized the American role in Laos and accused the United States of backing a corrupt government, a policy, the ambassador warned, could lead to serious consequences for the Kennedy administration in the future.<sup>7</sup> Less blunt, but in essence not that different, was the advice of Macmillan when he met Kennedy a month later. Macmillan indicated that America's allies were unwilling to support any major American intervention in Laos. Britain also could not subscribe to an "unlimited commitment" to the region.<sup>8</sup>

The Prime Minister looked at Indochina not in terms of Cold War ideology but based on a pragmatic, state-centered assessment. The once solid Communist alliance had been breaking apart since the late 1940's when Marshall Tito had sought his own independent version of Communism in Yugoslavia. More importantly, in the early 1960's Moscow and Beijing were at odds both over the interpretation of Marxism and how to proceed internationally. The Soviet-Sino split demonstrated that, although both the Soviet Union and the PRC adhered to Communist ideology, they also acted according to self-interest, which led to the cessation of diplomatic relations between both countries in late 1961. Macmillan concluded:

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resigned from office because of bad health, JFK send a "touching" letter, expressing his affection and respect for the Prime Minister.

<sup>7</sup> Ormsby-Gore was an old friend of JFK, dating back to Joseph P. Kennedy's term as ambassador in Great Britain. JFK trusted his advice; see: Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 335; for a more detailed discussion of the American role in Laos, see chapter four.

<sup>8</sup> Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 386; JFK asked Macmillan repeatedly whether Great Britain would "join in" to save Laos, but the PM refused to give any firm support.

These developments made it clear to me even at the time that the old lessons of history were once again proving true. Ideological agreement led no more on the Communist side to automatic cooperation than it did among the nations of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Macmillan blamed poor French colonial rule for the conflict in Indochina. Britain, according to the Prime Minister, had done far better in India and Pakistan by providing “a legacy of efficient local, provincial and central administration.”<sup>10</sup> In Indochina, the situation was clearly different. Although granted formal but not actual independence, the new states of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam experienced “confusion and internal weakness, coupled with the unrelenting pressure under Communist direction.”<sup>11</sup> British foreign minister Anthony Eden had worked “tirelessly” to end the conflict in 1954, because British interests were not served by war in Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> Macmillan conveniently overlooked the “tireless” French effort to end the debacle in Indochina with an acceptable and face-saving settlement.

British hopes for a permanent peace in Southeast Asia proved elusive. French influence was soon replaced with that of the United States. In 1960, when the civil war in Laos became a focal point of the Eisenhower administration, Macmillan grew anxious about a potential American intervention. He feared that American involvement might lead to a wider conflict, eventually including the PRC and the Soviet Union. Consequently, London urged a cease-fire and was strongly opposed to any direct Western interference. Macmillan and his cabinet were also uncertain about American aims in Laos and feared

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<sup>9</sup> Macmillan, *End of the Day*, p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236; the British legacy allowed India under Jawaharlal Nehru and Pakistan’s leaders Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaqut Ali Khan to maintain law and order and make a “good start”.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

that Britain could be dragged into an open-ended conflict. Like Churchill, Macmillan was unwilling to get involved in Southeast Asia.

In his first meeting with Kennedy in March 1961 in Key West, the British leader expressed his concern about Indochina, and Laos in particular, and warned Kennedy of “the danger of being sucked into these inhospitable areas without a base, without any clear political or strategic aims and without any effective system of deploying armed forces or controlling local administration.”<sup>13</sup> Macmillan did not want to engage Britain in a widening conflict in Southeast Asia. But as a SEATO member London might still face the decision to follow the American lead and send British troops. He had to convince Kennedy that a major military operation in landlocked Laos was futile.

Macmillan discerned three options for the Americans in Laos. First, they could set up a puppet regime, which “would be useless and corrupt,” eventually forcing the United States to get more deeply involved in Laotian politics. Second, the United States could intervene directly, with “bigger and bigger” armies. Third, the Americans could stay out. To Kennedy, the first option was too close to imperialism and hence not feasible. The other two possibilities required more deliberation. Macmillan felt however that Kennedy was not keen on intensifying the American role and neither leader wanted to proceed in Laos unilaterally.<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, in turn, pressured Macmillan to agree that it might be politically necessary “to do something” in Laos, before the West lost more ground to the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237; Macmillan deplored the fact that the United States did not sign the Geneva Agreement and quickly undermined the settlement by backing Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnamese independence.

<sup>13</sup> Macmillan, *End of the Day*, pp. 238-239; Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 385.

<sup>14</sup> Home, *Macmillan*, p. 293. Macmillan was briefed by his minister of Defense, Harold Watkinson, that “military intervention in Laos has always been nonsense” and that Britain could not risk “being drawn into a major war”; Macmillan asked JFK whether “the thing was worth doing all”; see: Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, pp. 386-87.

Soviet Union. Yet, Macmillan also made it clear that his government was not willing to do more than “join in the appearance of resistance” and emphasized that the geography and conditions in Laos made it a dangerous place to fight.<sup>15</sup>

In a letter to Queen Elizabeth II in September 1961, Macmillan addressed his misgivings and concern about the American course in Laos. He deplored particularly the attempt of some members of the U.S. State Department, including Americans stationed in Laos, to sabotage negotiations seeking to neutralize the country. The American officials favored a military solution to the Southeast Asia “problem” involving SEATO. Macmillan told the Queen that if he promised support to Washington, the United Kingdom might be asked to intervene militarily, if a limited intervention became necessary. The British leader was relieved to learn that President Kennedy decided against the use of force soon after their Key West meeting.<sup>16</sup>

The situation in Laos demonstrated the dangers of the Cold War world, especially the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons. Britain would seriously undermine its self-interest by endorsing or even contributing militarily to an unnecessary show-down in Southeast Asia. Already, by the summer of 1961 Macmillan reconsidered his promised support to the United States in case of a SEATO intervention. He regarded his approval given to Kennedy at Key West as “lapsed” and looked upon the entire operation as “more

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<sup>15</sup> Horne, *Macmillan*, p.293; Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 386.

<sup>16</sup> Macmillan, *End of the Day*, p. 239; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 334; Macmillan explained to the Queen that on Laos “the dualism of American policy is much worse than it is in Europe”. He perceived a profound split between Kennedy and Rusk on the one hand and lesser ranks of the State Department and members of the U.S. military on the other hand who urged intervention in Laos, which included SEATO members. The British military strongly advised against such commitment. Macmillan concluded his report: “We are thus threatened with the possibility of being asked to intervene militarily in the Far East, just at the time the European crisis is deepening [i.e. Berlin].”



and more unreal.”<sup>17</sup> It was obviously far better for London to end conflicts in Southeast Asia through diplomacy and negotiations. London’s insistence that Laos was not worth risking a major war contributed to the American decision in favor of a negotiated settlement.

The Laotian crisis made clear that Great Britain was hesitant to commit any military forces to fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Foreign Secretary, Lord Alec Frederick Douglas Home - Macmillan’s successor in office in 1963 - expressed the profound relief of the British government over the peaceful solution in Laos in a speech before the United Nations. Lord Home pointed out that the other alternative might have been warfare between the great powers. He added that both sides realized the difficulty of containing a military face-off and fortunately chose to talk, instead of escalating the conflict. War would have devastated Southeast Asia and perhaps the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> Negotiation, not armed contest, was the key to solve the problems of that region and best served Britain’s interest.

Yet, the possibility of renewed conflict in Southeast Asia worried British leaders. Kennedy demanded British financial contributions to rebuild Laos. Reluctantly, London provided more than one million pounds. While pleased that Britain had regained its traditionally good understanding with the United States, Macmillan understood that the special relationship was not without hazard. Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home noted:

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<sup>17</sup> Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 391; Home was more willing than Macmillan to send a token force to Laos in case the Geneva Conference failed because Anglo-American relations were at stake and Britain could not “back out.”

I think that our policy of close co-operation with the Americans in South-East Asia has been the right one. It is more likely we should have been faced with a local war in the area in 1960 or 1961 if we had not been able to persuade the Americans to take the right line. The risk of a disaster in Vietnam, Laos, or even Cambodia is still considerable.<sup>19</sup>

Home was partly correct. Washington and London were in close contact over Laos and British objections had some impact on American thinking. But Home certainly overestimated British influence on American foreign policy decisions. The growing American involvement in South Vietnam soon revealed the limits of British impact in Washington. Kennedy and later Lyndon B. Johnson refused to make the “right” decisions, decisions which reflected British self-interest. Hoping to avoid disaster in Indochina and, as importantly, keep Britain out of another war in Southeast Asia while retaining good relations with the United States, London continued the role of honest advisor and peace-maker.

Prime Minister Macmillan was increasingly troubled about the American involvement in South Vietnam. In December 1961, Washington deployed helicopters, planes, and four hundred additional men to Saigon to assist the South Vietnamese military in the struggle against the Viet Cong. At the time Macmillan did not foresee “any more grave developments,” but admitted in hindsight that this arrangement was the first step leading to a “long and inextricable entanglement” of the United States in Southeast Asia.<sup>20</sup> The Prime Minister also believed that American military operations were inadequate “to deal with this kind of infiltration” by Vietnamese Communists.

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<sup>18</sup> John F. Kennedy National Security Files: Western Europe; Country Files: Great Britain; October 12, 1962; copy of Lord Home’s speech of September 27, 1962.

<sup>19</sup> Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 394; Home urged Macmillan to financially contribute to Laos, despite the objections of the British treasury; good relations with Washington were more important than fiscal concerns.

Macmillan relied on Britain's own experience with Communist insurgents in Malaya. The British combined political and military actions to crush the Communist opposition. Macmillan maintained that the situation in Vietnam was different because the United States neither had efficient control over the South Vietnamese government nor offered a political alternative to those opposed to Diem. Unless the great majority of local population could be engaged in the struggle the Americans had no real basis on which to build a successful policy.<sup>21</sup> The Prime Minister was right in that the situation in Vietnam differed from Malaya. However, it was not only British skills but different conditions that facilitated British success in Malaya. There, insurgents were ethnic Chinese who found little support among the indigenous population. The Malaysians simply regarded British rule as the lesser of two evils. A more appropriate comparison should be the British experience in India. After decades of doing too little too late, Britain quit and handed the "crown jewel" back to the Indians. Perhaps this would have been the better analogy for Americans to study but too painful a memory for the British leader.

In February 1962, the United States sent four thousand additional troops to Vietnam. Macmillan deplored that move because additional American aid could not cure the failures of Diem. But Britain's concern over the consequences of an expanded American commitment to Vietnam required an open exchange with the United States administration. Macmillan chose to express his apprehension privately to Kennedy,

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<sup>20</sup> Macmillan, *End of the Day*, p. 240.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246; The insurgence in Malaya consisted mainly of ethnic Chinese, supported by Beijing. Macmillan points out that the English had established strategic hamlets to protect non-violent Chinese and Malayan peasants and also offered political outlets for their grievances. Opposing Chinese were deported to the PRC; all measures allowed Britain to gain the upper hand.

refusing to publicly challenge American policy. The Prime Minister's strategy soon encountered domestic opposition in Parliament.

Parliamentary debates on the "Vietnam problem" revealed not only profound differences between Tory and Labour MPs but exemplified the ambiguity of how to react to both Washington and the perplexing situation in Southeast Asia. Most Tory representatives endorsed the American policy in Vietnam. Labour was more critical, voicing concerns that were shared in private by Macmillan. For most members of the Conservative Party allegiance to the United States was the overriding concern. Regarding Vietnam, Tories generally subscribed to the American assessment that South Vietnam was threatened by Communist insurgents sponsored by Hanoi and its allies. The Labour view was more complex. The conflict in Vietnam was a civil war and also a struggle against foreign interference. The United States had violated the Geneva agreement and its growing aid to Saigon made things only worse. These divisions outlasted changes in British government. The same Labour MPs who attacked Macmillan did so again when their Prime Minister Harold Wilson refused to adopt their point of view.

In March 1962, the House addressed the recent increase in American personnel, the role of American pilots in bombing raids, and the threat of further escalation in South Vietnam. MPs also questioned the legality of the American involvement, and inquired about the British position toward Vietnam and the government's willingness to end the fighting through diplomatic means. Peter Thomas, Joint Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, defended his government's policy and rejected charges that Washington

was responsible for the “inflammatory development in Southeast Asia.”<sup>22</sup> The Undersecretary emphasized that the “threat to peace in Vietnam” was not a result of American activities, but aggression from the North Vietnamese government, which was encouraging and supporting an “insurrectionary movement” in the South.<sup>23</sup>

But Thomas agreed that the situation in Vietnam was serious. His government awaited further information from the International Control Commission (ICC) before Britain decided on any political action. Labour MP Harold Wilson was not satisfied with the government’s position. He could not comprehend why Britain did not take responsive action as co-chair of the Geneva Conference. Wilson argued that the appropriate policy was to put “pressure on all concerned” and that the Geneva Agreement had to be adhered to.<sup>24</sup> Two years later, as Prime Minister, Wilson would face similar questions and criticism from his Labour MPs, who repeatedly reminded him of his statements as opposition leader.

Later in March 1962, Undersecretary Thomas again defended his government policy on Vietnam from attacks by members of Parliament. Britain’s role as Geneva co-chairman and influence on Washington were the prime issues.<sup>25</sup> MPs Brockway, Davies, and Mayhew worried how the conflict affected British obligations to SEATO, perhaps even leading to a British military engagement. Moreover, they inquired whether the British government was discussing with Washington its military aid to South Vietnam,

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<sup>22</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, (London, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office), 14 March 1962, p. 1318. William Warbey accused the U.S. of “military intervention in a civil war which the Americans themselves have provoked by their sabotage of the Geneva Agreement.”

<sup>23</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 14 March, 1962, p. 1318.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1319.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 March 1962, pp. 836-837; several MPs were concerned about Anglo-Soviet differences impeding a joint approach to work for a negotiated settlement on Vietnam.

hoping that London urged the United States “not to go beyond operational military training” of South Vietnamese troops.

Thomas made clear that the United Kingdom had no responsibility to Saigon but was less certain how the present situation affected British obligations within SEATO. Labour MP Konni Zilliacus summed up his colleagues’ concerns and demanded definite assurances that Great Britain would not be drawn into the Vietnam conflict or even a war with China because of the continuous American assistance to Diem:

Is the hon. Gentleman aware that American armed intervention in Southern Vietnam, whatever may be the allegations concerning North Vietnam help or otherwise to Southern Vietnam, is contrary to the Charter and might involve us in war? Will the hon. Gentleman at least give the same warning that Mr. Eden, as he then was, gave to Mr. Dulles over Dienbien-phu, that, if American military action in Vietnam results in war with China, we will dissociate ourselves from such a war and will refuse to be involved in it?<sup>26</sup>

Secretary Thomas was unable to give such guarantees, citing the need to await the ICC report first before deciding on further action. His response reflected the position of the Macmillan government. While Macmillan was doubtful about American policy in Vietnam, he was unwilling to openly pressure Washington to change course. Any understanding with the Soviets or a unilateral British initiative in the U.N. council urging negotiations might endanger Anglo-American friendship.

The ICC report arrived in the summer of 1962 and recommended the immediate withdrawal of all American personnel and the end to any American weapon shipments to South Vietnam. The Soviet Union sent a note to Macmillan asking him to condone the findings of the commission.<sup>27</sup> Some MPs backed the Soviet suggestions but Edward

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<sup>26</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 26 March 1962, p. 839.

<sup>27</sup> The Soviet note to Her Majesty’s Government is printed in: Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 23 July, 1962, pp. 114-116; Moscow accused Washington and Saigon of preventing national elections to

Heath, speaking for the government, firmly rejected the Soviet point of view. Heath regarded North Vietnam as solely responsible for the present dangerous situation in Vietnam. According to Heath, not Washington but Hanoi violated the 1954 Accords in its attempt to overthrow the Saigon government.<sup>28</sup>

The discussions in Parliament illuminated domestic concern about events in Vietnam. Like Macmillan, members of Parliament were deeply anxious about further military escalation, particularly a war with the PRC. Consistent with British policy since the 1950's, they believed that Britain could not and should not support any policy leading to war in Indochina. Several Members of Parliament attacked the U.S. engagement which they charged violated the Geneva Agreement and risked a major war. In their view, Britain should bring the issue before the U.N. Security Council and dissociate itself from the dangerous American policy. Parliament was increasingly divided between supporters and critics of the American policy. Consequently, Macmillan and his successors confronted the difficult task of how to stand up to critics at home and at the same time counsel Washington against further escalation in Vietnam - how to stay out of Vietnam without alienating the United States.

Prime Minister Macmillan expressed his doubts of the American strategy repeatedly in consultations with American leaders during the Kennedy presidency. He hoped that solid advice and also Britain's own experience in the Far East might influence American thinking and allow a reevaluation of the engagement in South Vietnam.

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unify Vietnam. Moscow also pointed to previous communications with London in which the Soviets had urged Britain to support the demand for an immediate American withdrawal from South Vietnam. London refused to do so and in Soviet eyes only encouraged the United States in its aggressive course in South Vietnam.

Macmillan rejected any British troop deployments to Vietnam and favored a negotiated settlement following the example of Laos. In addition, British global security interests drained Britain's resources. British troops were stationed in West Germany, Kenya, Southern Arabia, and the Far East. In 1963, the United Kingdom spent almost two billion pounds on defense, about a tenth of the gross national product.<sup>29</sup> Britain simply could not afford another war. Unlike the French, who openly attacked the American intervention in Vietnam, Britain's leaders Macmillan, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, and even Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, believed that solid diplomatic work might bring all involved countries to the conference table and that an all-out attack on the American policy would only hurt British interest.

#### **Tories Again: Sir Alec Douglas-Home (October 1963 to October 1964)**

After seven years at the helm, Macmillan resigned as Prime Minister in October, 1963 due to health problems. His last days in office saw a decline of general support for his Conservative Party. Foreign secretary Lord Alec Frederick Douglas-Home, heir to an old and distinguished Scottish family, was invited by Queen Elizabeth II to form a new government on October 18, 1963. Born in 1903, Home had served in the British government since 1951 and became Foreign minister in 1960.<sup>30</sup>

Home represented the ambiguities of Britain after 1945. Britain had to come to terms with its loss of empire and global status. Home supported the British decision to

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<sup>28</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 23 July 1962, p. 116-117.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, The People's Peace: British History, 1945-1989, (Oxford, UK, 1990), pp. 217-218.



build its own nuclear force and favored an independent course toward the two superpowers. Communism was an obvious threat to Western security but Britain also had to play an autonomous role in global affairs, albeit within the framework of the North Atlantic alliance.<sup>31</sup> Home accepted the limits of British global power but insisted that the United Kingdom continue to be a special partner, though with lessened influence, of the United States. Britain faced the dilemma to fulfill its military commitments while it barely had the resources to do so. London could no longer maintain its prestige by military might but had to resort to diplomacy in maintaining prestige throughout the world.<sup>32</sup> Home held firm in his belief that the United Kingdom should not become engaged in South Vietnam. As foreign minister, Home expressed this conviction to Kennedy on several occasions, pointing to the British commitment in Malaya and Singapore. Britain did not have sufficient forces to intervene in Vietnam but even if it had Home maintained that the “country would swallow up almost any army, as indeed it swallowed the French and then the American.” Moreover, public opinion in Britain was against British intervention or outright endorsement of the American role in Vietnam.<sup>33</sup>

As Prime Minister Home had a rocky start. Rumors persisted that he was hand-picked by Macmillan and not really up to the job. His status as peer was also seen as an impediment. How could a Scottish aristocrat understand the problems of the poor and

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<sup>30</sup> See *passim*: Kenneth Young, *Sir Alec Douglas-Home*, (London, 1970), pp. 80-122.

<sup>31</sup> Young, *Alec Douglas-Home*, pp. 103-105; Home stressed that Britain could not leave “everything to the United States and the Soviet Union” because otherwise Britain would lose her “national soul” and would be unable to preserve peace.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124; Home remained suspicious of Soviet policy but also was anxious about American design, which was obvious in Laos. He felt that the American interference in Southeast Asia was misguided and dangerous for Britain. He was relieved when Washington agreed to a diplomatic settlement, removing another obstacle in Anglo-American relations.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

underprivileged in Britain? Labour leader Harold Wilson even labeled Home the “scion of effete establishment.” The Prime Minister responded by disclaiming his peerage, leaving it to his son, and from Earl of Home transformed himself into Sir Alec.<sup>34</sup> Yet, problems persisted and the British economy was clearly in decline while the pound was losing in value. Home underestimated the economic difficulties in Great Britain which aided in the Labour victory in 1964. In foreign policy, the prime minister faced crises ranging from Cyprus, Rhodesia, to once again Malaya which further strained British finances. Economics and self-interest clearly dictated that Britain could not embark on any major foreign policy operation in Southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup> Both Cyprus and Southeast Asia complicated Anglo-American relations and despite attempts to conceal their differences defense planners were at odds on how to proceed.<sup>36</sup>

Home’s first visit to the United States as Prime Minister was the sad occasion of John F. Kennedy’s funeral in late November 1963. Three months later he returned to meet with Lyndon Johnson. The Prime Minister received a warm welcome and Johnson reaffirmed the close relations between both countries despite recent differences in opinion. Home emphasized that Britain and the United States shared the same goal of worldwide peace. Regardless of sometimes contrary approaches - British sale of buses to Cuba being one - Home maintained that it was his sincere desire to “keep as close as we

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<sup>34</sup> Morgan, *The People’s Peace*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>35</sup> In Cyprus, conflict between the British and Greek radicals, seeking a union with Greece proper dated back to the mid-1950’s; adding to the problem were claims by the Turkish population of Cyprus. In Rhodesia, the southern half of the country gained independence as the state of Zambia, while in the north, white supremacists led by Ian Smith tried to establish their independence. Malaysia, now a member of the British Commonwealth suffered from guerrilla activity sponsored by its neighbor Indonesia.

<sup>36</sup> *The Times*, London, February 1, 1964, p. 8; Young, *Alec Douglas Home*, pp. 197-198; Robert M. Hathaway, *Great Britain and the United States: Special Relation since World War II* (Boston, 1990), p. 88;

can” to the United States as partners and as allies since the “peace of the world” depended on their understanding.<sup>37</sup>In his conversation with Johnson the main topics were Vietnam and Malaysia. The meeting resulted in a compromise; both sides agreed that they were facing similar problems in Southeast Asia. While the United States recognized the British position to maintain the independence of Malaya against encroachment from Indonesia, Home announced his support for the American policy in Vietnam.<sup>38</sup>

The Prime Minister also agreed to explore the French position on Vietnam and to discuss with President Charles de Gaulle the French proposal calling for the neutralization of both Vietnams. Home was interested in the American progress in Vietnam but received the bad news that the situation was not improving. Johnson emphasized that it was crucial that the United States and Britain concurred on Southeast Asia in adopting a policy that offered both the “olive branch and arrows,” instead of the vague and counterproductive French neutralization proposal.<sup>39</sup>Both leaders agreed on the need to assist the free nations in that area in maintaining their independence and reaffirmed their defense commitment to the region:

The Prime Minister and the President gave special consideration to South-east Asian matters and to the problem of assisting free states in the area to maintain their independence . . . The Prime Minister reemphasized the United Kingdom’s support for the United States policy in South Vietnam. The President reaffirmed the support for the peaceful national independence of Malaysia. Both expressed their sincere hope that the leaders of the independent countries in the region would by mutual friendship and cooperation establish an area of prosperity and stability. . . Both Governments reaffirm that in all these fields [i.e. Southeast Asia and Latin America] their aim remains solely to

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Anglo-American misgivings surfaced with a visit by Robert Kennedy to London. The attorney general accused the British of colonialism in Malaysia, to which Home strongly objected.

<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, February 13, 1964, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. I, Memorandum of Conversation, White House, Washington, February 12, 1964, p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> De Gaulle suggested the neutralization of both Vietnams following the withdrawal of all foreign forces. See below, chapter two.

achieve and safeguard the integrity and stability of the countries of the free world on the basis of full independence.<sup>40</sup>

To Home the visit was a success. Washington finally accepted the British position on Malayan security and the American role in Southeast Asia was defined solely in terms of assistance. Home also hoped that in the future Britain would be closely consulted by Washington on all global issues.<sup>41</sup> Like France, Britain was not willing to be dominated by the United States and wherever possible expressed its independence and sovereignty. Johnson, however, was angered by Home's insistence to send non-military machinery to Cuba in defiance of the American embargo, and henceforth distrusted British leaders.

The events in the Tonkin Gulf in early August 1964 surprised Home in the middle of his summer holidays. The first news was not too worrisome since Washington described the attack on the *Maddox* as an "isolated incident." Though the United States increased naval patrols in the Gulf, along with a protest note to the United Nations, the situation did not appear serious.<sup>42</sup> A second attack two days later led to retaliatory air-strikes against North Vietnam and a Congressional Resolution on Southeast Asia. On August 4, 1964 Johnson informed Home of the attack and the retaliatory air raids. The American president expressed his determination to "take all measures necessary to prevent such attacks and protect our forces." Johnson assured Home that the American goal in Southeast Asia remained unchanged and focused on maintaining peace and security. Johnson promised to stay in close contact and continuously inform the Prime

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<sup>40</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. I, Memorandum of Conversation, February, 12, 1964, pp. 69-70; Quote: *The Times*, February 14, 1964, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *The Times*, February 14, 1964, p. 10; Britain also insisted on retaining its own nuclear deterrent despite American efforts of nuclear disarmament. Home strongly rejected an American proposal to transform British forces into a conscript military. To him this ran counter British tradition and was completely unnecessary because UK forces did their job efficiently.

Minister of future developments.<sup>43</sup> Home and his foreign secretary, R. A. Butler expressed their full support for Johnson's actions:

As regards to the North Vietnamese attacks on United States naval forces, H.M. Government made their position clear in the Security Council when they supported the action taken by the United States Government, in accordance with the inherent right of self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the charter of the United Nations. They share the desire of the President of the United States to avoid risk spreading the conflict.<sup>44</sup>

Britain was not alone in its support of the American reaction to the Tonkin Gulf attack. Bonn showed "full understanding," New Zealand and Australia also responded favorably. In Canada and France approval was mixed with caution. However, not all British papers endorsed the American course in Vietnam. The *Manchester Guardian* actually went so far as to question the circumstances of the attack on the Maddox and accused Washington of having manufactured the entire crisis so that it could implement air-strikes planned months earlier.<sup>45</sup> The *Times* commentary on the events also expressed some concern while it dismissed the "furious responses" of Beijing and Hanoi to American airstrikes. Danger could arise if either Beijing and Hanoi claimed the Tonkin Gulf as territorial waters or if Washington changed its strategy:

If President Johnson had announced that he was henceforth carrying the war by land, sea, and air into North Vietnam, or even was going on with air raids indefinitely, then more of the allied peoples would have qualms and doubts. It is true that some Americans would like to broaden the war in that way . . . yet the answer is not to let American or

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<sup>42</sup> *The Times*, August 4, 1964, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. I, Message from President Johnson to Prime Minister Macmillan [the editors of the FRUS obviously missed that Macmillan resigned in October 1963], Washington, August 4, 1964, pp. 622-623.

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, August 7, 1964, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> see: *The Times* August 7, 1964, p. 8, *Wide Support for U.S. Action against N. Vietnam*; Hathaway, *Great Britain and the United States*, p. 89.

any other foreign servicemen invade or bomb North Vietnam indefinitely. Such an action, in China's doorstep would almost certainly bring more havoc than profit.<sup>46</sup>

Times editorialists argued that the best course for saving South Vietnam was to expand on the current approach, which included military aid and training, economic support, as well as confidence building measures for the Vietnamese people. Without such help South Vietnam would be lost. Military escalation by either Washington, which seemed unlikely for the time being, or the Chinese would only make matters worse. The place to settle the tensions in Southeast Asia was the U.N. Security council and not the battlefield.<sup>47</sup> The *Times* summed up the thinking of many British citizens and their government when editorialists held that the American response to the attack in the Tonkin Gulf was justified, but any further escalation had to be prevented.

## II. The Labour approach: Harold Wilson

In October 1964, after thirteen years of Tory rule, the Labour Party won the majority in Parliament, by the very slim margin of three seats. Harold Wilson was invited by the Queen to form the new government. Wilson, born 1916 in Yorkshire, studied economics at Oxford and entered government as minister for trade during the Labour cabinet of Clement Attlee from 1947 to 1951. In 1963 Wilson was elected leader of the Labour party and restored party discipline to exploit the Tory weaknesses and oust the Conservative party.<sup>48</sup> In terms of British foreign policy, particularly toward the United

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<sup>46</sup> *The Times*, August 7, 1964, p. 11, *Saving South Vietnam*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 239, 243-244.

States, Wilson's election did not represent a departure from the attitudes of his Tory predecessors. Although Wilson as opposition leader urged for a more independent policy from Washington, as Prime Minister he too placed great emphasis on close Anglo-American relations.

The serious economic crisis of the mid and late 1960's revealed that Britain was far over-extended in its international commitments and could no longer play great power policies. Britain depended on American economic support and Wilson realized that political autonomy could not be achieved without economic strength.<sup>49</sup> Patrick Gordon Walker, Wilson's first foreign minister, outlined Labour foreign policy shortly before the 1964 election victory. The United Kingdom could not afford a "full nuclear armoury" and instead had to rely on the United States for protection, which meant that Britain needed to base its policy on the alliance with Washington. Generally, Walker argued:

The basis of British foreign policy must be to re-think the US alliance and coordinate it. Almost every British policy will react in one way or another upon relations with the US. We must try to co-ordinate them and build a coherent whole out of them. If we are dependent upon the US for ultimate nuclear protection we must so arrange our relations with US that our share in the pattern of this alliance is as indispensable as we can make it . . . In some matters we must adapt our views to theirs - in exchange for similar concessions by US in matters which greatly concern us.<sup>50</sup>

Britain had to retain its independence but needed to approach foreign policy based on the obvious limitations as a global power. Accordingly, Walker advocated a more active role in Europe and closer ties with West Germany. France would always be a difficult partner but Britain should work out a "common analysis of Latin America and

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<sup>49</sup> Chris Wrigley, *Now you see it, now you don't: Harold Wilson and Labour's Foreign Policy 1964-1970*; in: Richard Coopey, Steven Fielding, and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments, 1964-1970*, (London, 1993, p. 128.

SE Asian policies” with Paris. Walker recommended consulting with Washington on the Sino-Soviet split and find a joint position on the “nature of Communism in the new context.” He was determined to support the United States in Southeast Asia but suggested that Britain bring about a solution that allowed for American disengagement by leaving a settlement up to the peoples of the region.<sup>51</sup> Undoubtedly, Britain was dependent on the United States’ nuclear shield and therefore had to devise foreign policy skillfully to pursue its best interest without causing strains in Anglo-American relations.

The major concern for Wilson was the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson remained angry about Alec Douglas-Home’s refusal to abide by the American embargo against Cuba. In spring 1964 Johnson told Wilson, then still opposition leader, that he would never again trust a British Prime Minister.<sup>52</sup> Wilson faced a rather complex challenge. He had to strengthen the special relationship and then try to influence American decision-making on Vietnam. But he could and would not commit British forces to the conflict in Southeast Asia despite the British need for continuous American military protection in Europe.

The Prime Minister also had to fend off domestic criticism, mostly from the ranks of his own Labour party, on British support for Washington in Vietnam, along with possible complications with members of the Commonwealth who sympathized with the Communist-Nationalist forces in Vietnam. Wilson’s solution was to play the role of

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<sup>50</sup> Patrick Gordon Walker, *Political Diaries, 1932-1971*, Edited with an introduction by Robert Pearce, (London, 1991), pp. 298-299; Wrigley, *Harold Wilson and Labour’s foreign policy*, p. 127.

<sup>51</sup> Walker, *Political Diaries*, pp. 299-302.

<sup>52</sup> Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, (London, 1971), p. 46; Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 591; Wrigley, *Labour’s foreign policy, 1964-70*, pp. 123-125, 128; Wrigley maintains that Wilson was determined to maintain a voice in world affairs and tried to master crisis with multifaceted initiatives.



mediator and work for a political settlement. The British co-chairmanship in the 1954 Geneva conference gave Wilson the political framework in which he could operate. Wilson's goal was to prevent further escalation in Southeast Asia, and protect British security in Europe by maintaining close ties with the United States.

### **The British assessment of Vietnam (1964)**

In October 1964, American Secretary of State Dean Rusk emphasized to British Foreign Minister Walker that the United States had no intentions of withdrawing from Vietnam, and instead might even expand its commitment. Shortly afterwards, Walker received an assessment of the conditions in South Vietnam from his Ambassador in Saigon, Sir Gordon Etherington-Smith. The ambassador criticized the uncoordinated and often misguided American economic aid to Vietnam. The general population saw little of the millions and millions of dollars pouring into the country while South Vietnamese leaders indulged in costly pet projects such as a four lane highway leading nowhere. Overall, the situation was not hopeless. What was required was a more effective American contribution to the development of South Vietnam, particularly in the countryside.<sup>53</sup>

The Southeast Asia experts in London disagreed with Etherington-Smith by pointing to the lack of over-all analysis in the ambassador's report. The problem was not only whether economic aid reached Vietnamese farmers, but if the American effort was sufficient to defeat the Viet Cong. Moreover, the overriding concern in the Foreign

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<sup>53</sup> G. Etherington Smith to P.H. Peck (Foreign Office), October 10, 1964, Public Records Office; in: Steinger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 593-594.

Ministry focused on possible escalation of the war by the Americans if their current policy proved futile. London generally regarded the chances of an American victory against the Vietnamese Communists as rather slim.

The Wilson government hoped that the United States might against the greater odds still turn the tide and prevail against the insurgents in South Vietnam. If the effort failed, however, British interest would not be severely harmed by the loss of South Vietnam. London had already been very pessimistic about the survival of South Vietnam in 1954 and despite the dire predictions the country actually still survived. In 1964, no one could foresee how long Saigon might be able to prevail. If Saigon fell and the West had to withdraw to its major defense line in Thailand, this would not result in a major catastrophe, at least in the assessment of Whitehall. Nevertheless, it would be detrimental for the West if American international prestige was severely damaged by failure to save South Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> Ambassador Etherington-Smith challenged this judgement; he saw the dominoes falling in Southeast Asia and even favored the deployment of American combat troops. But he could not with certainty predict future developments in Vietnam that might undermine the American effort. In light of the unstable situation in Vietnam, the ambassador agreed that it was necessary to prepare Washington for the worst case scenario.<sup>55</sup>

To gather a more detailed estimate about American prospects in Vietnam, London turned to Robert Thompson, head of the British Advisory Mission in Saigon (BRIAM) -

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<sup>54</sup> Memorandum J.E. Cable (Foreign Office), October 30, 1964; E.H. Peck (Foreign Office) to Ambassador Etherington-Smith, PRO; in: Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 594-595; London was also concerned that failure in South Vietnam would affect the neutrality of Cambodia and Laos.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, Etherington-Smith to Peck, November 11, 1965, p. 595.

the English counterpart to CIA expert Edward Lansdale. Thompson was the most seasoned British expert on the region and guerrilla warfare. He had served in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia since the 1950's. His estimate was similar to the briefings Johnson received from his advisors but Thompson's conclusions clearly differed from these of his American colleagues. Thompson discerned three options for the United States: Continue the war along the current lines, or bomb North Vietnam and its supply lines to the South, or last, withdraw and lose South Vietnam.<sup>56</sup> Options A and B were not very promising. The present course had led only to further deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam and bombing would not end North Vietnamese aggression either. Attacks on the North might increasingly undermine the will of the South to stand up to aggression, seeing outsiders killing their own people. Moreover, bombings ultimately would not prevent Northern infiltration of supplies and men to the South and posed the danger of Chinese and Soviet involvement.<sup>57</sup> Withdrawal was not a pleasant alternative, but Thompson argued that it was "better to accept the consequences of defeat and try to ameliorate the situation than making everything worse" in escalating the conflict. In conclusion, the best solution for Washington was to negotiate with the National Liberation Front (NLF), withdraw American forces, and reach a political settlement with Hanoi. Thompson also maintained that, whatever decision made by Washington, Vietnam

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<sup>56</sup> Thompson to Peck, November 25, 1964, PRO; in: Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 595-597; for more detail on Thompson see his book: Robert Thompson, *No Exit From Vietnam*, Updated Edition, (New York, 1970); Thompson argues that generally the United States misunderstood the nature of the conflict and Vietnamese conditions. Instead of responding to indigenous problems the United States perceived the conflict solely in terms of the containment of Communism and was step by step drawn into an undefined commitment.

<sup>57</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 596. See also, Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, p. 120; Thompson held that the U.S. should have stuck to their limited commitment even after Diem's fall

would eventually be united under Communist rule. Yet, this prospect was not as dreadful as many in the West thought because the prime motive of the North Vietnamese was reunification. This nationalist agenda, in addition to the centuries old enmity with China precluded Vietnam from ever becoming a mere satellite of Beijing.<sup>58</sup>

The Foreign Office agreed with Thompson's analysis. The task now was to develop a strategy to convince Washington that negotiations were the best choice, and to prevent further escalation of the conflict. A peaceful settlement in the near future was recommendable before events in Vietnam might destroy any chances for an American way out. London was not so much concerned about the fate of Saigon rather than maintaining Western influence in Southeast Asia, where Britain was worried about the safety of Malaysia as well as Singapore. London believed that it was important to convey its position to Washington as soon as possible. Wilson did not want to cause Anglo-American tensions over Vietnam and repeat the mistakes of Anthony Eden's vacillating course in 1954, which signaled first support for a united action on Dienbienphu and then changed policy.<sup>59</sup>

Another military coup in Saigon made the Wilson mission more difficult. The Americans were deeply angered by the violent infighting among the Vietnamese military and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor expressed his frustration in no uncertain terms to the new South Vietnamese leader, General Khanh. Further Viet Cong attacks on American installations gave the hawks in Washington more ammunition to call for air-strikes

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instead of assuming full responsibility for the outcome of the war. The former approach would have placed the blame for failure on the South Vietnamese, allowing Washington an honorable way out.

<sup>58</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 597.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

against North Vietnam. In light of the recent events in Vietnam, Wilson believed it unwise to propose negotiations to Johnson during his visit to Washington.

Wilson's first visit to Washington in early December 1964 went better than expected. Johnson opened the conversation by restating that he would never trust a British Prime Minister again, perhaps Johnson's way of checking out what his counterpart was made off. Wilson remembered the President's earlier remark, but was determined to hold his ground. The Prime Minister expressed his understanding of American concerns about British allegiance and promised complete confidentiality of any talks with Johnson. Johnson set the tone of the discussions by complaining that he was tired of being constantly told that it was the United States' "business to solve all the world's problems and do so mainly alone." Obviously, the president was not so much interested in British advice but action.<sup>60</sup>

The American desire for a more active British role in Southeast Asia was also apparent in Wilson's conversation with Rusk. The American Foreign Secretary asked Wilson for British cooperation in Vietnam, even on a token basis. The United States contacted a number of allied states for assistance "both for its practical effect as well as for the political impact" to demonstrate "free world solidarity" to North Vietnam and China. Washington hoped that Britain would deploy both civilians and military advisors to the country-side where support was needed the most. Wilson refused to enter such a commitment because Great Britain, as co-chairman of the Geneva conference, was

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<sup>60</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 47; FRUS, *Western European Region, 1964-1968*, Memorandum for the Record, Washington, December 7, 1964, p. 137. LBJ emphasized that he did not want to become bogged down as FDR was in 1937 when totalitarianism was on the rise and the American people and Congress were opposed to an active foreign policy.

obligated to a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. In addition, Britain was already deeply engaged in Malaysia with fifty-four thousand troops and could not spare any more for Vietnam.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, Wilson not only opposed any British commitment in Vietnam, but any further escalation of the conflict, with or without his government. In his opinion, any Western effort in South Vietnam would prove futile and additional military engagement by the United States potentially endangered world peace. A larger conflict with the PRC and even perhaps the Soviet Union did directly affect Britain's own self-interest both in terms of its Asian interests and security in Europe. Britain, like France and West Germany, was strongly against such a perilous course.

Members of Parliament were concerned about the events in Vietnam as well. They were appalled by the cruelty of the conflict, including the torture of prisoners of war by all sides involved. They desired better information on the conflict and a British initiative to "call attention to the universal horror and disgust and grief caused to all civilised men" by the current practice of torture in Vietnam. MP Derek Page asked whether Britain, as co-chair of the Geneva conference, was bent on inviting all powers concerned to the conference table as soon as possible to prevent further escalation.<sup>62</sup>

These questions put Wilson between a rock and a hard place. He did not agree with the potentially dangerous American strategy in Vietnam, but he also did not desire to alienate his major ally. It was his government's policy to "support the Republic of Vietnam in their effort to put an end to the Communist insurrection" which was aided by

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<sup>61</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. I, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington December 8, 1964, pp. 985-987; Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 48.

Hanoi in direct violation of the 1954 agreement.<sup>63</sup> Hence the Wilson government recognized the effort of the United States to aid the South Vietnamese. Labour MP Konni Zilliacus did not agree with the British government's view and accused the United States of breaking the Geneva agreement and Wilson of further abetting the American transgression:

Does not my hon. Friend recognise that the American policy in Southern Vietnam is in violation of the 1954 Treaties, to which we are a party, that the Government which they are supporting is a puppet Government which they themselves have imposed, that public opinion will be shocked at the revelation that we are following the policy of the Tories in this matter and that, apart from being a crime, this policy is a blunder because it will make our name stink throughout the Far East, and that this policy is bound to fail anyway?<sup>64</sup>

These strong and divisive words impacted Wilson. As opposition leader, he had taken a similar stand but as Prime Minister he needed to diffuse Labour criticism to stay in power. If he endorsed the view of radical Labour on Vietnam he would cause a crisis in Anglo-American relations. If he favored American strategy in Vietnam, he might lose his slim parliamentary majority. The Prime Minister needed to find a course that silenced his Labour opponents without creating tensions with Washington.<sup>65</sup>

Under pressure at home, Wilson was determined to urge Washington to consider negotiations and withdrawal from South Vietnam. At the end of December 1964 he consulted with Foreign Secretary Walker about British strategy in Washington. Walker recommended against any initiatives for the time being since Wilson had given his

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<sup>62</sup> Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, 14 December 1964, pp. 7-8.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 December, 1964, pp. 1049-1050; Zilliacus reminded Wilson of his previous statements on Vietnam as opposition leader. Wilson affirmed what he had said but an outright attack on U.S. Vietnam policy was no longer an option for a sitting Prime Minister.

diplomatic support to the American policy during his recent visit to Washington. In addition, Wilson had to appreciate the pressures facing Johnson at home. To abruptly change course, Walker argued, might lead to American accusations of British disloyalty. London could clearly not become the scape-goat for any failure in Washington. In order to avoid possible tensions with the Americans, it was preferable that Johnson make the first move to initiate a political settlement. In case Johnson desired British assistance, he would probably not be shy to ask for it.<sup>66</sup> Britain obviously did not want to step right in the middle of the firing line; and though peace in Vietnam was a major goal, amiable Anglo-American relations were of equal importance. Wilson agreed with Walker. He was not willing to risk trans-Atlantic misunderstanding over Vietnam even though it created considerable difficulties in Parliament. Surely, it had been easier for him to attack government policy than making it. Like his predecessors Wilson chose amicable relations with Washington instead of Anglo-American confrontation over the Vietnam question.

#### **Wilson's effort to prevent escalation: February- March 1965**

Wilson decided to wait for a more opportune moment to present his views to Washington. But the conflict in Vietnam again developed its own momentum. General Khanh resigned and a civilian government was formed in January 1965, yet within days was purged by Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and General Nguyen Chanh Thi. For the Americans the coup presented a "real mess." As a result of widespread Buddhist revolts,

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<sup>66</sup> Memorandum of Patrick Gordon Walker for Harold Wilson, December 29, 1964, PRO, in: Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 600; British ambassador to Washington, Lord Harlech agreed with Walker. Nobody in Washington was willing to talk about retreat and Britain had to be very cautious in proposing negotiations.



attacking both the Saigon government and the American presence in the country, the South Vietnamese military finally agreed to cooperate with the civilian government. Conspiracy rumors persisted and Washington feared that a new government might be willing to negotiate with the Viet Cong and advocate an American withdrawal. In Washington the supporters of greater military involvement gained the upper hand, waiting only for another incident that justified further intensifying the air-war and possible troop deployments. The attack on U.S. army barracks in Pleiku on February 6, 1965 gave Washington the reason to strike back forcefully at North Vietnam.<sup>67</sup>

Wilson endorsed the immediate American retaliation against North Vietnam after the attack on Pleiku and so did his new foreign secretary, Michael Stewart.<sup>68</sup> Understandably, it was impossible for the Americans not to respond to the sustained violence against their personnel. Moreover, following strict interpretation, Washington actually could not be accused of breaking the Geneva agreement, because it was not a party to the settlement, and North Vietnam had repeatedly disobeyed the stipulations of 1954. The British government hoped - against all odds - that the Viet Cong would cease their guerrilla attacks and leave the South Vietnamese in peace. London then would have the opportunity to work for negotiations:

The British government would be glad to see negotiations for a new settlement begin, but until a basis for reasonable negotiations has been achieved, suggestions that a new Geneva conference should be convened are regarded as premature.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, Second Edition, (New York, 1986), pp. 127- 131.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon Walker had lost his seat in Parliament and was forced to resign his position as Foreign Secretary.

<sup>69</sup> *The Times*, "Britain Supports America", February 9, 1965, p. 9.

Pleiku and the subsequent attack on Americans at Qui Nhon, profoundly disturbed Wilson because he feared that Johnson might give in to the demand of his hard-liners and escalate the war in Vietnam.<sup>70</sup> Wilson, once more under pressure from Parliament about the implications of American air-strikes, tried to establish contact with Johnson. Late in the evening of February 10, the Prime Minister met with Stewart after receiving the news of the assault on Qui Nhon. Wilson believed it was urgent to have a personal encounter with the American president to better express British concerns. After several attempts Wilson reached Johnson by phone.<sup>71</sup> It turned out to be a very unpleasant conversation. Johnson admonished the British leader not to get overexcited and when Wilson replied that his cabinet suggested he fly to Washington perhaps the next day, Johnson cut him off and harshly rejected the idea:

I think a trip, Mr. Prime Minister, on this situation would be very misunderstood and I don't think any good would flow from it. If one of us jumps across the Atlantic every time there is a critical situation next week I shall be flying over when Soekarno jumps on you and I will be giving you advice . . . As far as my problem in Vietnam we have asked everyone to share with us. They were willing to share advice and not responsibility. . . I won't tell you how to run Malaysia and you don't tell us how to run Vietnam . . . If you want to help us in Vietnam send us some men and send us some folk to deal with these guerrillas. And announce to the press that you are going to help us.<sup>72</sup>

Wilson was baffled and asked what he could tell the House of Commons and Johnson snapped back that it was actually Wilson who called him. Wilson responded that

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<sup>70</sup> On February 10, 1965 a bomb killed twenty-three Americans at the coastal city of Qui Nhon, wounding thirty more. FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, Diary Entry by the Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Bruce), Washington, February 10, 1964, p. 213; Bruce reported that Johnson was by now clearly obsessed with events in Vietnam.

<sup>71</sup> Wilson felt the situation was comparable to 1950 when the U.S. considered the use of nuclear weapons in Korea. Then PM Clement Atlee flew immediately to Washington to consult with Truman. Wilson's effort in 1965 turned out to be far more quixotic. His ambassador Harlech reached Bundy on the phone, who rejected Wilson's travel plans. So did LBJ, but Johnson finally accepted Wilson's phone call. see: Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 602.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 79-80.

he had to say something to his constituency and suggested a conference on Vietnam. Johnson was clearly not in the mood to consider a political settlement. Instead, he argued in terms of self defense; when the Communists attacked in the middle of the night and killed his people there was only one immediate and appropriate response. If Wilson ever faced a similar challenge Johnson would expect the same straightforward forceful response and back him up "one hundred percent."<sup>73</sup>

Johnson's outburst definitely ended the prospect for a peace conference for the time being. Instead the president preferred to see the Union Jack flying in the Vietnamese country side. But the Prime Minister was not ready to back down either. Despite the negative signals coming from Washington, Wilson was determined to initiate negotiations on Vietnam. Whether or not successful, the Prime Minister could only gain both internationally and domestically. By playing the role of peace-maker Wilson could neutralize his own Labour opponents in Parliament. After consultations with Washington, Wilson sent a note to Moscow on February 20, 1965 to contact the governments of the Geneva conference to seek their view "on the circumstances in which a peaceful settlement" might be obtained.<sup>74</sup> London urged Washington to delay further attacks on North Vietnam to allow the Soviets sufficient time to consider the proposal and contact Hanoi. Secretary Rusk concurred but would not delay reprisals against North Vietnam much longer. Ultimately, Moscow and Washington were not interested in the British conference proposal and Soviet leaders responded to Wilson's proposal by denouncing

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<sup>73</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 601-603.

<sup>74</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 80-8.

the United States' policy in Vietnam and demanding the withdrawal of all American forces and equipment.<sup>75</sup>

Even before Moscow replied to the British proposal, on March 2, 1965 Washington started operation *Rolling Thunder* - the air-campaign against North Vietnam and deployed 3500 Marines to South Vietnam. Washington had made its decision to resolve the conflict in Vietnam by military means. Negotiations were relegated to secondary importance and could only take place from an American position of strength. To placate Wilson, Washington continued to signal its eagerness for a peaceful solution. Former Foreign Minister Walker met with Rusk on March 6, 1965, and the American assured Walker that Johnson indeed appreciated the British initiative on Vietnam. Rusk considered two possibilities: a follow-up conference on Laos where Vietnam would be informally discussed or direct negotiations with the Soviet Union.<sup>76</sup>Rusk had also contacted the Soviets and hoped for a productive dialogue on the Vietnam question. Even if the Soviets did not cooperate, Britain should pursue its role as Geneva co-chairman and approach various governments to hear their opinion on possible venues for a settlement.

Walker had sufficient experience to realize that Rusk's overtures were little more than a smoke screen. When Rusk suggested that Johnson was willing to risk war against Indonesia to show loyalty to the British support of Malaysia it was evident that Washington aimed at British military contributions to Vietnam. Walker remained non-committal on Vietnam but expressed the willingness of his government to work for a genuine settlement for Vietnam. He emphasized that Britain did not desire the role of a

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<sup>75</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, February 21, 1965, pp. 343-345; Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 604-608.

neutral negotiator between Russia and the United States. However, American willingness to settle in Vietnam would strengthen Wilson's control over Labour in Parliament.<sup>77</sup> Britain neither wanted a war over Malaysia nor to be forced to intervene in Vietnam. In order to maintain his narrow majority in Parliament, Wilson needed negotiations not escalation in Vietnam.

### Wilson under Fire at Home

Wilson's domestic difficulties increased after the Pleiku attack. In several parliamentary debates during March 1965 the Tories generally supported the American strategy in Vietnam and labeled the Prime Minister's peace initiatives as an attempt in "appeasement." Politically more dangerous to Wilson was Labour opposition to the American engagement in Vietnam. Labour MPs demanded greater British pressure on Johnson to accept negotiations and even suggested a joint British-French initiative leading to the neutralization of Vietnam. Wilson had no intentions to team up with de Gaulle and defended American air-strikes. The culprit was not Washington but Hanoi.<sup>78</sup> Wilson's solution to the complex "Vietnam question" and his domestic problems was negotiations. The British leader hoped to quiet radical Labour MPs and critical Conservatives by playing the role of constructive peace-maker. This approach would also

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<sup>76</sup> Walker, *Political Diaries*, pp. 302-303.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303-304; Walker quickly got the impression that Rusk's readiness to negotiate was far from being decided policy. Hence, he refused to commit Britain to either Vietnam or a futile role of intermediary between Washington and Moscow.

<sup>78</sup> Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, 22 February 1965, pp. 4-6; and March 1, 1965, pp. 166-168; 9 March, 1965, pp. 236-241; MPs wondered whether Britain was willing to reconvene the Geneva conference in achieving the peaceful reunification and neutralization of Vietnam or at least work to convene any type of high level conference in an "attempt to stop the war in Vietnam."; Zilliacus favored de

allow continuous good relations with the United States. Wilson argued that Parliament should endorse his policy of a negotiated settlement and refrain from destructive narrow minded accusations of both his government and the United States:

In the past few weeks I have made our position quite clear about the situation in Vietnam. I have said that we are pursuing these matters through diplomatic channels. I am more concerned with getting the right answer than with getting the right declaration.<sup>79</sup>

Years before a large number of Congress members began to question the American commitment in Vietnam, British MPs voiced pertinent concerns about the conflict in Vietnam. Certainly many MPs stood by the United States but others, refusing to follow the containment theory, squarely blamed Washington for intensifying a civil war and endangering world peace. They demanded that Wilson take action to bring about a peaceful settlement. Even less so were these politicians willing to send a single British soldier to Vietnam.

Former Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas Home, well aware of Wilson's dilemma, endorsed the Prime Minister's course and favored support of the United States, at least for the time being. Once again, Wilson encountered more understanding for his effort to seek negotiations, without alienating the United States, from the Tories rather than his own Labour Party. Regardless of the debate in the House of Commons about the

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Gaule's plan of neutralization, but Wilson obviously preferred his own approach of international diplomacy. See also: Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 83

<sup>79</sup> Parliamentary Records, 16 March, 1965, pp. 1069-1070 and 9 March 1965, pp. 239-241. Wilson fought a valiant battle mainly against his own party. He admonished his colleagues to out aside their self-righteousness which made his job even more difficult. Wilson also had to answer to charges by Labour Sydney Silverman that American action in Vietnam was an "act of plain, naked war."

means to restore peace in Vietnam, Wilson was convinced that his way of diplomatic initiatives was the “only way.”<sup>80</sup>

The Soviet refusal to cooperate with London in reconvening the Geneva conference was a set-back but did not discourage Wilson. But his chances to convene an international conference on the Vietnam problem became increasingly remote. A visit by Soviet foreign Secretary Andrei Gromyko to London in March 1965 did not produce any results on Vietnam. Gromyko indicated that Moscow was no longer interested in reconvening the Geneva Conference and supported Hanoi’s demand of an immediate American withdrawal from Vietnam. Wilson refused to concede failure. While Moscow stalled on reconvening the Geneva conference it might change its mind in the future. Consequently, it was important to maintain contact with the Soviet Union while Britain also needed to explore further venues to influence Washington. Wilson realized that the climate, wherein both Washington and Moscow put the blame on each other, was not conducive to create an atmosphere of trust, yet there was no other way than to keep trying to find a political solution.<sup>81</sup> Washington disagreed and hoped for military success to turn things around in Vietnam.

### **The Stewart Mission to Washington**

“Time is running out swiftly in Vietnam and temporizing or expedient measures will not suffice” summed up a report to President Johnson in March 1965. Before any

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<sup>80</sup> Parliamentary Records, 16 March, 1965, p. 1071.

<sup>81</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 85; R.B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War. Volume III: The Making of a Limited War, 1965-1966*, (New York, 1991), p. 59; Moscow faced strong pressure by Hanoi and Beijing. Hanoi demanded more support while Beijing accused Moscow of doing too little.

negotiations could begin, Washington insisted on a program of “graduated reprisals” against Hanoi.<sup>82</sup> On March 22, 1965 American ambassador to Saigon, Maxwell Taylor, suggested that the U.S. might further expand the war in Vietnam. On the same day, the Pentagon admitted that American troops were using a “variety of gas” in Vietnam. Wilson’s Labour Party was enraged and the British public was shocked. In Parliament Wilson was asked to end his “unconditional” support of the United States and dissociate himself from American actions by pronouncing the “horror and indignation” felt in Britain.

In this charged atmosphere, British foreign secretary Stewart arrived in Washington to explore whether the Johnson administration was either willing to work for a political settlement or force Hanoi into submission. Several members of Parliament, led by Labour MPs Michael Foot and Philip Noel-Baker, sent a telegram to Stewart en route to Washington which made it clear that they found the recent escalation simply appalling. In a letter to Wilson they added to these complaints by pointing out that the ideals of the Labour Party were at risk if London condoned Washington’s course in Vietnam. Both the Labour party and Wilson’s government would face a severe crisis unless London issued a strong protest.<sup>83</sup> Vietnam was increasingly threatening the unity of the Labour Party. While Stewart empathized with the American effort in Vietnam, he was determined to confront Rusk and President Johnson to calm the brewing storm at home.

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<sup>82</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964–1968, Vol. II, Johnson Report Outline, March 14, 1965, p. 438; and Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense, McNamara, March 15, 1965, pp. 440–441; Washington insisted that Hanoi end its infiltration to South Vietnam before any talks could commence.

<sup>83</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 85; Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 611–612.



The Americans were prepared for the British charge. A memorandum from National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to Johnson revealed that Washington was fully aware of the domestic pressure on Wilson. The British leader needed some cooperation from Johnson to get out of an increasingly untenable situation at home. The question for Washington was whether it was willing to help Wilson out of his dilemma, but Bundy decided not to.<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, Wilson was responsible for the troubles he was in and everyone in England was rather misstating the Vietnam situation. Obviously, the Prime Minister was more interested in saving his own neck than helping the United States. Given his “outrageous phone call” to the president in February it was tempting to let him struggle with his own problems. In the long run, however, Bundy believed it was not wise to “fall out with Prime Ministers” since the blame usually ended up in Washington. Moreover, a strong rebuttal from Washington would probably induce Wilson to “make critical noises about us, thus appealing both to his own party and the natural nationalism of many independent Englishmen.”<sup>85</sup>

In the context of the obstinate French attitude on Vietnam it was not prudent for Washington to alienate another Western ally and reap more damaging criticism for its policy in Southeast Asia. What then was the best way out for Washington? In the end, it was some give and take from both sides. Washington would publicly announce that it was in close contact and fully exchanged views with London on Vietnam, saving some of Wilson’s reputation and making the British feel significant. Bundy added:

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<sup>84</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, Washington, March 22, 1965, p. 468. U.S. ambassador to GB, David Bruce fully related the criticism Wilson faced from within the Labour party.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Then we can put on some parsley about how glad we are to have Mr. Stewart and how much we look forward to the Prime Minister's visit [planned for April]. In return, the British should undertake not to advocate negotiations and not to go back on their existing announced approval of our present course of action. They should limit themselves to the expression of hope that a path to a peaceful settlement will come, plus expression of alertness, as Co-Chairman of the Geneva conference, to any opportunities for peaceful settlement which may develop in the future.<sup>86</sup>

Wilson would not be exhilarated about the American position, but according to his ambassador an expression of kind words and mutual understanding was preferable to an open split with the United States. As with de Gaulle's insistence on neutralization of both Vietnams and lack of efficient support by West Germany, Washington was not concerned about the motives of Britain in suggesting negotiations, but only the impact a divergent European views had on Washington's own success in Vietnam. The British position was another nuisance that might affect European, and perhaps world opinion, undermining the effort to subdue the Communists in Vietnam. To pre-empt the accusations of spraying lethal gas in Vietnam, Bundy sent another memo to the President, explaining that no poison was used but that it was simply "riot-control gas" that police forces all over the world employed.<sup>87</sup>

Both sides, ready for the diplomatic battle, met on March 23, 1965. Rusk took some wind out of Stewart's sails by addressing possible diplomatic channels for a settlement. Stewart interrupted and addressed the use of "poison-gas" which Rusk denied. Stewart was not finished and maintained that the use of gas as well as napalm led to inappropriate suffering of civilians and produced only limited military gains. Rusk strongly disagreed and emphasized that napalm was of great value for military progress. He contended that the United States limited the deployment of napalm to attacks on

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<sup>86</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, March 23, 1965, p. 469.

military targets and stressed that Britain had previously used napalm as well. He added that this war “was not a Sunday- school party” but was a “rough business.”<sup>88</sup> Rusk was not against British initiatives to explore a diplomatic solution of the conflict as Co-chair of the Geneva conference but he was opposed to any British role as arbiter or intermediary on Vietnam.

President Johnson, too, deflected Stewart’s complaints about employing “barbarous and horrible weapons” by explaining that poison gas was in fact never used, yet admitted that London should have been better informed. Then Johnson worked hard to win British sympathy. For an hour he told Stewart about his own hopes and fears, as well as the fierce domestic pressure he had to face. He did impress Stewart and suddenly changed gear. Johnson favored negotiations “if one could offer a reasonable prospect of their succeeding.”<sup>89</sup> In the meantime, he had to pursue a policy a “appropriate and measured response” to aggression in Vietnam. Nobody could expect that the United States would abandon South Vietnam and American withdrawal would lead to the fall of Southeast Asia, perhaps even India. Ambassador to the United Kingdom David Bruce described Johnson’s performance as “grand theatre” with the president as forceful as “Niagara Falls.” Johnson told Bruce after the meeting that Stewart had offered not a

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<sup>87</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Memorandum Bundy to Johnson, March 22, 1965, p. 470.

<sup>88</sup> M. Stewart to Harold Wilson, Secret Record of a Conversation between the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Dean Rusk, Washington March 23, 1965, PRO; in: Steinger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 612.

<sup>89</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Vol. II, Diary Entry by the Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Bruce), Washington, March 23, 1965, pp. 471-472; Johnson explained that some Americans wanted to quit the war while others demanded that he bomb China and destroy Hanoi.

“single practical or helpful suggestion”.<sup>90</sup> Like the French, the British complained a great deal but did not provide Johnson with what he really wanted - an unequivocal endorsement of the American policy in Vietnam.

Although Wilson failed to change Johnson’s mind on negotiations, the Prime Minister claimed the Stewart visit was a success. His foreign minister had voiced profound concern and opposition to the American policy in Vietnam. He was pleased with his secretary’s comments after the meeting with Johnson, issuing a statement intended to reflect the Labour government position and also appease Wilson’s critics at home. Stewart told the National Press Club in Washington:

In the choice of measures everyone responsible should consider not only what is militarily appropriate for the job in hand but the effect on people around the world. What I am, in fact, asking the United States to display is what your Declaration of Independence called ‘a decent respect for the opinions of mankind.’<sup>91</sup>

De Gaulle used the same argument in his Phnom Phenh speech a year later in September 1966. On neither occasion did European opinion make a profound impact on Washington. De Gaulle’s persistent criticism, though, was far more irritating than British statements, by influencing opinions in Southeast Asia, and in the Third World in general. Wilson felt he scored a point with Stewart’s visit, but Johnson saw things otherwise and complained bitterly over the lack of European support. The president was determined to pursue the commitment of his predecessors and respond to North Vietnamese aggression until it ceased. He thought it was “insulting” that all these politicians from Europe came over to see him to use these meetings for solely domestic purposes although they had no

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<sup>90</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II; Bruce remarked that LBJ “is power sublimated” and served the British “oratorical sandwiches, with layers of gravity and levity.” Stewart probably would never forget these ninety minutes with LBJ.

<sup>91</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 85-86.

“practicable solutions to offer for American problems.”<sup>92</sup> On the same day of the Stewart visit, Johnson emphasized that he was not willing to negotiate and believed his message was “getting through” to both the Europeans and Hanoi. He added: “I don’t wanna go to Hanoi. I was a hell of a long time getting into this. But I like it.”<sup>93</sup>

The American view was not encouraging to Wilson, coming shortly after the Soviet refusal to reconvene the Geneva conference. But in face of his rebellious party members in the Commons, he remained determined that his peace initiatives would lead to a initial first step, some kind of response by any side, however minor, but nevertheless better than further military escalation. Wilson eagerly awaited a memorandum by Rusk explaining the American policy in Vietnam, which Rusk had promised to Stewart. The British leader hoped he could use a more detailed and encouraging statement by Washington to deflect domestic criticism in Parliament. The position paper never arrived and Wilson once more took the initiative, publicly reaffirming the British proposal of February 1965 to convene a conference.<sup>94</sup> Since Washington was not responding to British suggestions, Wilson’s conference idea was the only face-saving measure left.

In early April Wilson met with de Gaulle in Paris and discussed the crisis in Vietnam. The French President was openly anti-American and unwilling to modify his

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<sup>92</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Vol. II, Diary Entry by the Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Bruce), Washington, March 23, 1965, p. 472.

<sup>93</sup> National Security Files, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Luncheons with the President, Vol. I, March 23, 1965, LBJ Library; the issue of gas warfare almost led to an open skirmish between Washington and London. Stewart condemned the American use of gas in Vietnam in his Washington press conference. LBJ was enraged and was ready to send a note of protest to Wilson, but decided otherwise. McNamara charged that Britain had used gas in Cyprus and was one of the leading manufacturers in tear gas. Now the British felt insulted. see: FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, pp. 481-482.

<sup>94</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 614-615.

neutralization proposal for Vietnam.<sup>95</sup> Wilson defended the United States but could not overcome the intransigence of de Gaulle on Vietnam. Wilson explained to de Gaulle the British peace initiative and the overall difficulty to precisely assess the intentions of Hanoi and Beijing. The North Vietnamese demand of an American withdrawal, and the American precondition of an end of North Vietnamese infiltration made any negotiations impossible.<sup>96</sup>

Anglo-French differences in the approach to Vietnam were even more obvious in the meeting between Stewart and Maurice Couve de Murville, the French foreign minister. Murville reiterated that the conflict in Vietnam was essentially a civil war in which the United States had no right to interfere. The American engagement was only aggravating an already bad situation. Stewart strongly disagreed. He regarded an American withdrawal from South Vietnam as an open invitation to Beijing to intervene directly. Ultimately, negotiations were the only possible way to end the conflict and Britain was willing to take the lead in organizing a conference. Murville replied that France had only recently probed the chances for negotiations after the Soviets suggested a conference based on the cessation of American air attacks on North Vietnam. It was obvious that the Communists were willing to negotiate, while the United States refused to stop its attacks on North Vietnam, which diminished the possibility of a political

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<sup>95</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>96</sup> Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of France, April 2, 1965; PRO; in: Steinger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 615.

solution.<sup>97</sup> The entire exchange reflected the inability of both London and Paris to set aside past differences in Anglo-French relations and pursue common goals.

Similar conversations over Vietnam took place between the French and the West Germans and, on a few occasions, between the British and the West Germans. The French were increasingly outspoken in their criticism of the United States and also held that the chances for a negotiated settlement faded with every American bomb dropped on North Vietnam. Obviously, Wilson and German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard shared the French skepticism about the possibilities of American success in Vietnam. All three European countries were deeply troubled about further escalation in Vietnam and a potential larger war with the PRC. A larger conflict might result in American troop reductions in Western Europe, which would obviously affect European security. However, Wilson as well as Erhard were unwilling to join the French position because neither was ready to follow the French lead and risk complications with the United States.<sup>98</sup>

Wilson valued the good relations with Washington higher than causing further tensions by adopting a common position with de Gaulle. Certainly de Gaulle's own leadership ambitions in Europe played a significant role in Wilson's analysis and Britain would not and could not renounce its own voice in global affairs in favor of Paris. The need for American military protection, therefore, outweighed the possibility of a closer alliance with France. While a unified policy by Britain, France, and West Germany regarding the American engagement in Vietnam might have had a greater impact on Washington, a common strategy was never considered by all three countries. Wilson

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<sup>97</sup> Record of a Meeting between the Foreign Secretary and Monsieur Couve de Murville, the French Foreign Minister, April 2, 1965, PRO; in: Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 616.

decided to continue his course and work for negotiations, while refraining from publicly condemning the American role in Vietnam.

### **Second Wilson Visit to Washington: Separate Functions but Common Course?**

In mid-April 1965, Wilson was back in Washington, fully prepared to hold his own on the issue of Vietnam. A few days before his arrival Johnson had finally publicly outlined his goals for Vietnam at John Hopkins University, where he announced his readiness to enter negotiations with Hanoi without preconditions. Wilson regarded the speech as a promising sign and hoped he could facilitate the process by offering British help. At lunch with the Prime Minister, Johnson was clearly in a better mood than during their phone conversation in February.<sup>99</sup> George Ball prepared Johnson for the meeting by pointing out that British support for the American policy in Vietnam “has been stronger than that of our major allies” and that Wilson, despite increasing domestic opposition to the war, “stoutfastly” remained on course. Johnson should express his appreciation for British loyalty.<sup>100</sup> The president followed Ball’s advice and Wilson found the discussion on Vietnam far more constructive than during previous encounters. However, Johnson was still reluctant to address negotiations and instead stressed the three “D’s”, determination, development, and discussion. He asked again for a British military contribution which Wilson politely declined. Johnson then expounded on what he understood by discussions, which reassured Wilson that the Americans were at least

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<sup>98</sup> The French and German position on Vietnam is discussed in detail below.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 94-95.



contemplating a political settlement. The Prime Minister pledged his full support in urging the Soviet Union to revive the Geneva process and “build on this new American willingness to secure a settlement round the conference table.”<sup>101</sup> Undoubtedly, Wilson was pleased with the new attitude in Washington and the appreciation of his efforts for a political solution for Vietnam. He interpreted Johnson’s remarks as a division of function between both countries:

The American government would not be deflected from its military task; but equally he [Johnson] would give his full backing to any British initiative which had any chance of getting peace-talks on the move.<sup>102</sup>

Wilson started his initiative even before he met with Johnson by sending former foreign secretary Walker on a tour of Southeast Asia as his personal emissary to discuss Vietnam. Walker produced some “useful” reports but was not admitted to meet with leaders in Hanoi and Beijing.<sup>103</sup> This setback did not discourage Wilson. He hoped to employ a conference proposal by Cambodian leader, Prince Sihanouk, to open discussion on all the issues troubling Indochina. The Soviets agreed to a conference over Cambodia and Beijing also signaled its willingness to participate. Everything depended now on the American position. Wilson discussed the idea with Rusk on April 15 and interpreted the favorable response from Moscow as a sign that both Hanoi and Beijing might actually consider talks. Rusk remained skeptical and wanted more details. Any conference had to be well planned to evade a “total disaster.” Washington needed more time to evaluate the

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<sup>100</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, p. 557.

<sup>101</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 95.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*; and Walker, *Political Diaries*, p. 302; Walker was in the region from April 14 to May 4 and visited Saigon, Phnom Penh, Tokyo, and Delhi; Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, p. 61.

proposal, but in general terms the United States was interested in the Soviet offer for a conference.<sup>104</sup>

Soon after Wilson's visit to Washington Foreign Secretary Stewart received a reply from the Americans which again indicated that Washington required additional time to decide on a conference, and for the time being could only endorse Walker's fact-finding mission in Southeast Asia. Stewart was disconcerted by the American response. He simply could not understand the reluctance of Washington to embark on a political initiative, which in fact had been outlined and promoted by Johnson in the Johns Hopkins speech. Stewart argued that American failure to act on any conference proposal probably would be interpreted as lack of sincerity to reach a negotiated solution for Vietnam. The Foreign Secretary urged his ambassador to Washington, Sir Patrick Dean, to do everything possible to obtain a quick American response.<sup>105</sup> Washington did not comply. Rusk was waiting for an assessment of the top brass in Honolulu. He further argued that the South Vietnamese could not be forced to accept a conference. London was not impressed and regarded American hesitation as a calculated policy to prevent a conference. London felt that time was an issue and the longer Washington waited to agree to talks the slimmer the chances were for any diplomatic success.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 617-619; Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, pp. 61-62, 108-109. China was interested in the conference to increase its own role in Southeast Asia and curb North Vietnamese growing influence in Laos and Cambodia. Washington did not want to reject a conference on Cambodia outrightly, fearful that Sihanouk might completely break relations with the U.S. and drift toward the Communist side.

<sup>105</sup> Stewart to Embassy in Washington, 18 April 1965, PRO; in: Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 619.

<sup>106</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 619-620; both administrations also disagreed about the conference format. London hoped for extended discussion to give Hanoi and Beijing time to accept serious talks, Washington insisted on a detailed agenda on which a conference would put a stamp of approval.

Again Wilson met with disappointment. Prince Sihanouk distanced himself from his own conference proposal and the Honolulu meeting of American policy makers recommended a further increase in U.S. troops and continuous aerial attacks on North Vietnam. The division of functions that Wilson had envisioned after his visit to Johnson was far from becoming reality. In fact, Washington fulfilled its part by solely focusing on the military side of the conflict but it was not willing to allow Britain to play the role of peace-maker. Partly Washington's intransigence resulted from Hanoi's unwillingness to accept negotiations without preconditions. Hanoi insisted on an American withdrawal and cessation of air-attacks, no foreign interference, recognition of the NLF by Saigon, and "peaceful unification" of Vietnam. Only after these conditions were met would Hanoi be interested in a Geneva type conference.<sup>107</sup>

Washington stressed that the basis for a settlement must be the independence of South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Undersecretary George Ball argued that Washington should seek some common ground with North Vietnam. He felt that a peaceful reunification of Vietnam could be achieved, provided that it was based on free elections, expressing truly the will of the Vietnamese people.<sup>108</sup> Johnson gave the Ball proposal a try and ordered a short bombing halt in May 1965. In addition, he was willing to explore the diplomatic angle and send Foy Kohler to present a note to the North Vietnamese embassy

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<sup>107</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, Intelligence Memorandum from the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Danney) to the Secretary of State Rusk, April 15, 1965, pp. 558-559; Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, pp. 109-110; Sihanouk demanded that Saigon not be represented at the conference, knowing that this request would be unacceptable to the U.S.; Sihanouk was primarily interested in settled issues on Cambodia. In addition, the prince was angry over a Newsweek article insulting his wife and the incidental bombing of a Cambodian village by the Americans.

<sup>108</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State (Ball) to President Johnson, pp. 586-589. Ball early on criticized the growing American involvement in Vietnam

in Moscow. The North Vietnamese refused to accept any communication and the effort to deliver an oral message through Soviet channels also failed.<sup>109</sup>

Wilson, after the disappointment over his Cambodia initiative, was elated by the bombing pause and the American effort to establish a direct contact with Hanoi. Once again, he saw an opportunity to act as peacemaker and silence growing criticism at home. This bubble burst due to Hanoi's intransigence to respond to Kohler and the subsequent American resumption of aerial attacks. The Soviets also refused to consider a conference after these recent set-backs.<sup>110</sup> The Prime Minister was "extremely concerned about the worsening Vietnam situation" and his cabinet feared a widening of the war which would inextricably draw Great Britain into the fighting. Also, Wilson's failure on the diplomatic front did not ease any of his domestic problems. Adding to Wilson's quagmire was the issue of British credibility in the Commonwealth.

Wilson wondered how the Vietnam problem might affect the upcoming Commonwealth conference in June 1965. It was obvious that the Asian and African members of the Commonwealth would take a strong anti-American line, complicating proceeding within the Commonwealth, and adding further fodder to his domestic critics.<sup>111</sup> Wilson worked hard to find a way out of the dilemma he faced in the

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and eventually gained the position of "devil's advocate" during the Johnson administration. Ball position is discussed below.

<sup>109</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, May 13, 1965, pp. 651-652. In June 1965, Johnson again asked for international pressure to bring Hanoi to the conference table. see also: Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, p. 154.

<sup>110</sup> Record of a Conversation between the Foreign Secretary and the Soviet Foreign Minister, Mr. Gromyko, at the Imperial Hotel, Vienna, 15 May 1965, PRO; in Steininger, p. 623. Gromyko rejected any conference for the time being and was "singularly negative, even by his own standards" on any prospect in Vietnam.

<sup>111</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 108.

Commonwealth and in Parliament, and to obtain additional leverage on Washington. The result was the Commonwealth peace initiative. The Commonwealth represented about a sixth of the U.N. members and its political views ranged from strongly pro-American, as in Australia and New Zealand, to neutral or non-aligned, to anti-American. If all of them agreed on a common policy, it would obviously give Wilson a stronger backing vis-à-vis Washington, keep the Commonwealth from disunity, and score valuable points in Parliament.

As soon as the Commonwealth leaders arrived in London, Wilson made his rounds and won the endorsement of most of them. The Commonwealth leaders proposed both an end to American bombing of North Vietnam and infiltration by North Vietnamese troops to the South. The next step would be a cease-fire and an international conference, leading to the withdrawal of all foreign troops from South Vietnam. Vietnam eventually should become a neutral country and an international force was to guarantee peace. Washington also gave its "warm support" and Wilson promised Johnson to go "into battle" and win endorsement of the Commonwealth.<sup>112</sup>

Domestically, too, Wilson's initiative brought the desired rewards. Both Douglas Home for the Tories, and Jo Grimond for the radical wing of Labour endorsed the Prime Minister's strategy. The press applauded the Commonwealth initiative calling it a "bold and imaginative stroke." Johnson responded favorably and so did the government of

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<sup>112</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 108-110; Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 625; Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, p. 154; Julius Nyerere of Tanzania proved the greatest obstacle to the Commonwealth initiative. He was strongly anti-American and also very much concerned about his image as an independent African leader in an up-coming African Third World Conference in Algiers. In the end Nyerere was forced to accept the majority view of the Commonwealth countries.

Saigon. By June 23, 1965 four Commonwealth ambassadors delivered a joint message to Soviet Premier Kosygin asking for his backing.<sup>113</sup>

But Wilson experienced disappointment once again. Washington did not agree to a bombing pause for the duration of the Commonwealth initiative unless North Vietnam ceased its own aggression in the South. The reactions in Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi turned out discouragingly as well. Beijing even accused London of supporting American aggression in Vietnam. Hanoi flatly rejected the proposal and restated that peace would be restored only after an American withdrawal and cessation of their “aggressive war.”<sup>114</sup> A last stance effort to personally deliver the peace proposal by British MP Harold Davies, who had maintained good connections with Hanoi, did not succeed.<sup>115</sup> Wilson had tried and failed again. Domestically he had to suffer through Tory advice that he should not try anything “unless you are sure that it will succeed.” But given the domestic and international constraints on Wilson the question remains, what else could be done?

Britain did not want the war in Vietnam to threaten its own security interests. As a SEATO member, though, London still faced the possibility to be forced to deploy British soldiers.<sup>116</sup> Wilson would face even more opposition from his Labour Party and might lose his slight majority in Parliament. Given the overextension of British forces, any intervention in Vietnam was far too costly. It would also be too costly in terms of British security interest in Europe. The role of peacemaker was the only alternative left. But any

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<sup>113</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 111-113.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122; Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, pp. 625-626; Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, p. 154.

<sup>115</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 122; Davies met an adamant Ho Chi Minh and returned to London empty-handed.

opportunity to reach a negotiated settlement was evaporating quickly with the increasing number of G.I.'s arriving in South Vietnam.

In July 1965 McNamara admitted to Walker that the chances of success in Vietnam were rather small. Joint South Vietnamese and American forces were far from gaining the upper hand. Even additional American troops were unlikely to succeed in a limited war such as in Vietnam. McNamara hoped the Soviet Union would still apply pressure on Hanoi to reach a negotiated settlement. At the same time he prepared a memorandum asking for a substantial increase of American troops in Vietnam. Three weeks later, Johnson announced that he would do precisely what McNamara suggested and increase the number of American soldiers "by a number which may equal or exceed the 80,000" already in Vietnam.<sup>117</sup>

Against growing odds and rising numbers of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, Wilson still hoped for a negotiated settlement. In December 1965, he met again with President Johnson and once more Vietnam topped the agenda. Arriving in Washington, Wilson received a telegram from sixty-eight Labour MPs who demanded that the United States cease its bombing raids on North Vietnam. The MPs were appalled that American bombs hit increasingly close to population centers such as Haiphong. They also were apprehensive of a recent McNamara statement alluding to the "near certainty of war with China." Wilson urged Johnson to suspend aerial attacks in order to assess recent hints that Hanoi was in fact willing to begin negotiations. At least, Johnson did not outrightly reject

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<sup>116</sup> Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War*, pp. 154-155; Britain stated that the defense of Malaysia already strained its resources and hence could not commit combat forces to Vietnam. Yet, Commonwealth members Australia and New Zealand were willing to do so, however as allies to the U.S.

the British request and both leaders discussed possible venues for negotiations with North Vietnam. Wilson made it clear that in case U.S. planes directly attacked Hanoi and Haiphong he would be forced to publicly denounce any such attack.<sup>118</sup> Later that day, Johnson publicly affirmed that he regarded Britain's role as Geneva co-chair essential in bringing all sides to the conference table. Furthermore, Johnson promised to support any British initiative leading to negotiation on Vietnam. The British media responded favorably to Wilson's visit. Most importantly, Johnson had not insisted on British troops bound for Vietnam. Also the American president was welcoming Wilson's approach to a conference on Vietnam.<sup>119</sup>

#### The failure to urge "Common Sense"

Wilson's success in Washington was another pyrrhic victory. By the time he visited Johnson, more than 180.000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam and their numbers were increasing. The exchange of pleasantries with the American leaders could not disguise the fact that they were not seriously interested in any negotiations. Wilson, while genuinely trying, could not prevent further escalation in Vietnam. His foreign office was equally pessimistic. Even before the Prime Minister went to the States, his advisors at Whitehall regarded any chance of a negotiated settlement as bleak. For the present, negotiations "would achieve precisely nothing."<sup>120</sup> But Wilson could not simply abandon his policy of reaching a negotiated settlement. Facing a rising number of Labour

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<sup>117</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 628. see also: Robert McNamara, In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, (New York, 1995), pp. 192-200.

<sup>118</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 187.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 188.



MPs protesting the American policy in Vietnam, domestic challenges added to London's apprehension about the international implications of American escalation in Vietnam. With the extension of the Christmas bombing halt of late 1965, Wilson hoped that another round of diplomatic initiatives might finally bring results. Yet, in late January 1966 Johnson ordered the resumption of air attacks on North Vietnam. The Foreign office issued a press statement supporting Johnson's decision before it was cleared with Wilson. The result was a major crisis within the Labour Party over Vietnam.<sup>121</sup>

In Parliament, Wilson defended his effort to seek negotiations but also expressed understanding for Washington's position. Hanoi and Beijing had not demonstrated any desire to embark on a peaceful solution. Wilson deplored that his colleagues, while strongly criticizing the Americans, had shown less enthusiasm in urging both Hanoi and Beijing to come to the conference table.<sup>122</sup> But domestic, particular Labour opposition could not be denied and Wilson had to devise an approach that would both reunite the Labour Party and promise results on Vietnam Again, diplomatic initiatives seemed the best way, since outright criticism of American policy appeared self-defeating.

In Parliament, Wilson pleaded with Labour and Tories alike to consider the consequences of the war in Vietnam both for Britain and the United States. Surely, the conflict was a tragedy for the Vietnamese people. But even more threatening was the possibility of escalation "to the scale of a major land war in Asia." Lastly, the fighting in Vietnam prevented a lessening of tensions between East and West. Wilson therefore had

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<sup>120</sup> Steininger, *Grossbritannien und der Vietnamkrieg*, p. 628.

<sup>121</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>122</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 205-206; Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, 8 February 1966, pp. 253-257.

no other choice but to work for a political solution, pursuing British self-interest. Yet, he reminded his colleagues that unilateral withdrawal by the United States was a double-edged sword. American allies might question Washington's word. But an American withdrawal could only be seen as "a humiliating defeat" which most likely would drive the United States into a position of "intransigent isolation."<sup>123</sup> Once again, Wilson walked the tight rope balancing immediate domestic concerns with the long-term interest of Great Britain. To the British leader the only possible approach to settle the thorny Vietnam issue was in finding a diplomatic solution.

In February, 1966 Wilson visited the Soviet Union but got nowhere on Vietnam. However, Wilson managed to establish private contacts with Hanoi. Soon, too, this prospect evaporated into thin air.<sup>124</sup> Neither the Soviets nor the North Vietnamese were receptive to Wilson's efforts. Wilson agreed with Moscow during the official press conference that "there can be no military solution in the interests of the people of Vietnam." He hastened to assure his allegiance to the United States by explaining that his foremost loyalty was to British allies and friends. Despite the East-West divide both sides should work to settle the Vietnam issue.<sup>125</sup>

Members of Parliament were not satisfied. In June 1966 Wilson was urged to meet with President Johnson and demand an end to the war in Vietnam. MP Winnick pressured Wilson to express the view of many British to Lyndon Johnson:

Is the Prime Minister aware that there are many people in this country who would like him to do precisely what Attlee did in 1950 - to urge common sense on the Americans?

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<sup>123</sup> Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, 8 February 1966, pp. 250-252.

<sup>124</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 213-214.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Will the Prime Minister inform President Johnson that the majority of the British people have no stomach for this colonial war that the Americans are engaged in?<sup>126</sup>

A remarkable statement for a former colonial power. It summarized the ambiguities of Britain's past and present. Chastened by the loss of empire, Britain could only advise against its own former mistakes. This advice was certainly not unbiased and reflected British self-interest. Wilson rejected the comparison to the Attlee mission on Korea in 1950. Unlike 1950, Britain did not have troops on the battlefield in Vietnam. Wilson had time and again explained British views on Vietnam to the Americans. He related his effort to encourage the Soviet Union to participate in the process of finding a peaceful settlement. But neither Moscow nor Beijing proved receptive to British initiatives.

Wilson, in an almost quixotic endeavor, held fast to the approach adopted by his predecessors. Unwilling and unable to commit Britain to the futile war in Vietnam he tried repeatedly to initiate a negotiated settlement. In early 1967, Wilson was again certain that the United States was earnestly interested in an initiative to end the war in Vietnam. Johnson sent his personal envoy Chester Cooper to London to express the genuine desire to establish contacts with Hanoi. Accordingly, Washington offered to suspend the bombing of North Vietnam. Hanoi then would reduce its troops in the South, leading to gradual de-escalation. Wilson was asked to convince the Soviets that Washington was sincere in the newest initiative. Hopefully, the Soviets would pressure Hanoi to seriously consider negotiations.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 21 June 1966, p. 282.

<sup>127</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 345-346.

Wilson complied. In fact, Soviet Premier Kosygin proved interested as well when he visited Britain in February 1967. Wilson conveyed the so-called Phase A/ Phase B plan to Kosygin and hoped that the Soviets could impress Hanoi, leading to negotiations. Kosygin was receptive and suggested that it should be the task of the two Geneva chairmen "to advise and assist the US and DRV to meet and discuss their problems at the negotiating table."<sup>128</sup> Immediately, Wilson phoned U.S. ambassador Bruce and Chester Cooper while Kosygin contacted Hanoi. Wilson handed a copy of the American proposal to Kosygin, after the Prime Minister had cleared the exact wording with Washington. American Ambassador Bruce was elated that Kosygin not only took the proposal seriously but expressed hope that Hanoi might accept the American plan. Bruce told the Prime Minister: "I think you've made it. This is going to be the biggest diplomatic coup of the century."<sup>129</sup>

It turned out otherwise. Hours later Wilson was informed that Washington had changed the proposal. Johnson now insisted that Hanoi stop infiltration to the South immediately as a precondition for any negotiations. Only when Washington was assured that infiltration had ceased would the Americans halt in bombing North Vietnam. Wilson fumed but to no avail. For Wilson Washington's actions were a "total reversal of policy" and it "had been deliberately taken" just when there was a real chance for a settlement. An angry Wilson could still not believe that the White House had taken him and Kosygin "for a ride." Even profound confusion in Washington could not explain this stab-in-the-

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<sup>128</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp., 347-348; see also: Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, (New York, 1991), p. 181; and Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, (Chicago, 1996), pp. 102-103; Soviet contacts with Hanoi indicated some North Vietnamese willingness to talk; Moscow was clearly interested in establishing contacts between the U.S. and North Vietnam.

back. Instead, Wilson deduced correctly, that hawks had won the day and changed Johnson's mind. Washington neglected to consider that its reversal put the Prime Minister in "a hell of a situation" for his remaining talks with Kosygin.<sup>130</sup>

Wilson was determined to salvage the honor of his government and decided to go it alone. Henceforth, he was presenting the views of the British government and insisted on the original two phase proposal. But Wilson remained in constant contact with Washington, hoping that Johnson would fall in line. Ultimately, the American response lay in between both proposals, insisting that Hanoi respond within hours. Kosygin proved understanding to the British dilemma and forwarded the new American offer to Hanoi. Nothing came out of it and within days the United States resumed the bombing of North Vietnam.<sup>131</sup>

To Wilson another "historic opportunity" had been missed by a "disastrous" decision in Washington and his diplomatic approach was in shambles. As his predecessors in office, Wilson chose behind the scenes diplomacy to urge common sense on the Americans. His approach was based on what he perceived as Britain's self-interest. Wilson, Douglas-Home, and Macmillan shared the initial assessment that a war and escalation in Vietnam run counter British goals. The United Kingdom feared that conflict in Southeast Asia might not only demand British military intervention, which the country could ill afford, but endangered security in Europe by increasing East-West tensions and a lessening American ability to honor all its global commitments. From Churchill to

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<sup>129</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 356.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 357-359; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, pp. 181-182; Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and Vietnam*, pp. 103-106; Kosygin was as disappointed as Wilson. He felt that Washington destroyed a real chance to open negotiations.

Wilson, British leaders did not share the American assessment that South Vietnam had to be held at all costs. British dependence on American military protection and London's desire to remain the "special ally" precluded outright criticism of American policy in Vietnam. As reluctant but loyal ally, London chose to initiate diplomatic solutions of the Vietnam conflict and failed in this effort. The "special relationship" also ruled out a joint European initiative. After de Gaulle's veto on the British entry into the Common market in 1963, London depended even more so on a close relationship with the United States. Like Paris and Bonn, London remained limited by its own perceived self-interest and hence lacked the leverage to change American policy-making on Vietnam.

British leaders from Macmillan to Wilson painfully learned the lesson that they could not change American policy-making on Vietnam. On Laos, it seemed that British opposition actually impacted the Kennedy administration. But Kennedy's decision was mainly based on his astute assessment of the military and geographical conditions of that landlocked country. While Kennedy at least proved willing to listen his successor Johnson was not inclined to do so. Johnson hoped to convert the British to his point of view and when they failed to follow his lead, gave time and again the impression - contrary to his strategy in Vietnam - that he was considering negotiations.

In March 1968, Johnson finally did what Wilson had hoped for during the past three years. Johnson announced an unconditional bombing halt north of the demilitarized zone and offered open peace talks to Hanoi. Wilson was elated and probably not too sorry to see Johnson fade from leadership. The new administration of Richard Nixon paid more attention to European and British concerns, giving hope that London still had a

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<sup>131</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 363-365.

voice in Washington. De Gaulle left the scene in 1969, removing the major obstacle to British membership in the European Economic Community. In 1973, London bridged the gap over the Channel and entered the EEC. The "Vietnam question" was both a lesson in failure but also one of opportunities. As a result of cooling relations with Washington over Vietnam, British leaders increasingly turned toward Europe. Today, Britain still prides itself in the role of "special ally" to the United States - the legacy of Margaret Thatcher and the Gulf War, but the United Kingdom's international influence is at least equally grounded in Europe. Like France and Germany, Britain is realizing that its potential in global affairs has to be based on both the Europe pillar and mutual understanding with the United States.

**Part Two:**

**The Defiant Ally:  
France, *Grandeur*, and Neutralization of Vietnam**



*You will find that intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement . . . We French have had experience of it. You Americans want to take our place. I predict that you will sink step by step into a bottomless military and political quagmire, however much you spend in men and money.*

Charles de Gaulle to John F. Kennedy on the prospect in Vietnam, May 1961

On August 31, 1966 French President Charles de Gaulle strongly criticized the American War in Vietnam in a speech to a supportive crowd in Pnomh Penh, Cambodia. He accused the United States of outright aggression in Vietnam and urged the withdrawal of all American forces to allow for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. While leaders in Great Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany also had misgivings and doubts about America's involvement in Vietnam, neither dared to challenge Washington as openly and publicly as France. Why then, did de Gaulle?

Obviously, France had extensive and painful experiences in Vietnam, as the colony gained its independence in a bloody and costly war. Based on French experience in Indochina, beginning in 1960 de Gaulle urged Washington against extending its commitment to the region. His advice went unheeded by both President John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Again, the question is why? Two related factors contributed to divergent French and American views. First, de Gaulle approached foreign policy based on an ideology of superiority which depended for its maintenance on the restoration French "grandeur", a larger international role and voice for France. Washington placed far greater emphasis on Cold War ideology and regarded the Vietnam conflict first and foremost in terms of the struggle against Communism. Second, de Gaulle steadfastly insisted on an independent policy for France in Europe and globally in directly

challenging American leadership of the Western alliance. Washington was obviously bewildered by the mixed signals coming from Paris and was therefore less inclined to seriously consider de Gaulle's advice concerning Vietnam.

Charles de Gaulle's character and upbringing shaped his policy. He was born in November 1890 into a patriotic family and grew up cherishing the images of France's past. In 1909 he joined the French military and graduated from St. Cyr a lieutenant in 1912. Wounded twice during the First World War he was rewarded with the legion of honor medal. After the war, he moved up ranks only slowly. His superiors certainly acknowledged his intelligence but his egotistical behavior did impede smooth promotion and he only made colonel in 1937. De Gaulle observed the rise of Hitler with growing concern and recommended an augmented defense strategy against the increasingly aggressive Germany but his advice was discarded by his superiors. His fears became reality when Hitler attacked France in the summer of 1940. In London at the time of the French surrender, de Gaulle found himself cast in the role of leader of the French resistance.<sup>132</sup>

Years spent as the leader of the Free French left a profound mark on de Gaulle and laid the foundation of his policy toward Great Britain and the United States during the 1960's. Although supported by Britain and the United States, de Gaulle was excluded from most major decisions during the war and feared that French interests were not

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<sup>132</sup> Don Cook, *Charles de Gaulle: A Biography*, (New York, 1983), pp. 28-79; Herbert Luthy, "De Gaulle: Pose and Policy", in: Hamilton Fish Armstrong (ed.), *Fifty Years of Foreign Affairs*, (New York, 1972), pp. 356-357; Luthy stressed that de Gaulle family "abhorred" the Third Republic and instead relished in the images of France's former glory, the days of Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte. This upbringing instilled in de Gaulle the "sublime idea" of France, that she would again play a major role in world politics.

sufficiently acknowledged.<sup>133</sup> The general interpreted the “haughty” Anglo-American attitude during the war as insults on French honor. De Gaulle was determined more than ever to restore France to great power status. His first effort toward this goal was short-lived. With the establishment of the Fourth Republic in January 1946, de Gaulle resigned from office and left a burdensome legacy in Indochina to his successors.

During the Second World War de Gaulle was unwilling to grant Indochina independence and quickly reaffirmed French sovereignty there in 1945. He regarded possession of colonies as an important element of French prestige. After French humiliation during the Second World War, it was of prime importance to de Gaulle to restore the French colonial empire. The general postulated that neither the British nor the Americans should be permitted to expropriate parts of the French Empire.<sup>134</sup> To continue French rule in Southeast Asia, de Gaulle conceded limited autonomy to the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, which became members of the French Union.

In Vietnam the French faced fierce resistance from Ho Chi Minh, who aspired toward the complete independence of his country. Negotiations between Ho and the French government failed due to French intransigence, leading to the First Indochina War. Despite increasing American support, the French lost the war and agreed to the

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<sup>133</sup> Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times*, (New York, 1987), Fourth Edition, pp. 396-400; Robert Dallek, “Roosevelt and de Gaulle”, in: Robert Paxton and Nicholas Wahl, (eds.), *De Gaulle and the United States: A Centennial Reappraisal*, (Oxford, UK, 1994), pp. 49-60; De Gaulle suspected that Britain intended to take over the French colonial empire. Churchill had no such intentions but colonial questions did trouble Anglo-Franco understanding. Even more humiliating to de Gaulle was the fact that FDR questioned the general’s claim to represent all French. It took three months after the Normandy invasion for Washington to recognize de Gaulle as the head to the new government in France.

<sup>134</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavor*, translated by Terence Kilmartin, (New York, 1971), p. 12; de Gaulle strongly justified his decision to offer only limited autonomy to Indochina; as associated states these countries would better be prepared for eventual independence. He did admit that this course would be difficult, but with “determination” these problems could be overcome. see also: Jean Lacoutre, *De Gaulle: The Ruler, 1945-1970*, (New York, 1991), pp. 157-158; Cook, *de Gaulle*, p. 315.

neutralization of the country in the Geneva Accord of 1954.<sup>135</sup> By then, de Gaulle regarded the colonial question as being a burden to France. Conflicts within the empire drained the strength of the French military in distant wars while its main purpose, to secure France proper, was undermined. Moreover, France could not possibly become a major power player in Europe or globally as long as she was distracted and weakened in the colonies. In Vietnam, it was evident that France was unable to maintain her influence by force and, for de Gaulle, it was more important to focus on Europe first. Only from a solid base in Europe could France then expand her role in global politics through diplomatic and economic support of her former colonies and other Third World countries.

In 1958, de Gaulle was back at the helm of French politics. He replaced the bankrupt Fourth Republic with his own creation - the Fifth Republic. A new constitution gave wide powers to the president, particularly in foreign policy. Taking advantage of his increased mandate, de Gaulle ended French intervention in Algeria and facilitated Algerian independence in 1962. Domestically, de Gaulle restored stability, ending the rapid succession of cabinets that marked the Fourth Republic. The Fifth Republic gave de Gaulle the basis to continue the policy he envisioned for France during his first years in power: independence and *grandeur*. The major obstacle to his grand design was what de Gaulle defined as “Anglo-Saxon dominance” - the policies of Great Britain and the

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<sup>135</sup> Lacoutre, *De Gaulle*, pp. 85-88; Anthony Clayton, *The Wars of French Decolonization*, (London, 1991), pp. 16-21, 41-43; De Gaulle rejected the decision of the Potsdam conference to divide Vietnam temporarily and sent his own representative General Jean Leclerc and Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu in August 1945 to restore French sovereignty over Indochina. While Leclerc did negotiate with Ho Chi Minh, d'Argenlieu dismissed all claims to Vietnamese independence.

United States. Regarding the Soviet Union, de Gaulle desired a policy of cooperation and reaffirmation of historical ties between both countries.<sup>136</sup>

The growing conflict in Vietnam revealed to de Gaulle potential shortcomings in American leadership of the Western Alliance. The American commitment in Vietnam also offered de Gaulle an opportunity to assert his country's role in world affairs. France could assume the part of champion of the non-aligned world. By supporting the independence of Third World countries politically and economically, de Gaulle hoped to provide an alternative to these new nations, "freeing" them from the Cold War contest between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>137</sup> Greater influence around the globe might allow France to become a third force, while not quite a superpower. Once again the base for France's greater role was Europe. De Gaulle preferred a multi-polar over the bi-polar world and hoped that France and Europe as well as the People's Republic of China would create a new balanced power system going beyond the nuclear stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>138</sup>

From 1961 until his resignation from office in March 1969, Charles de Gaulle steadfastly reiterated his conviction that the Vietnam conflict could only be ended

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<sup>136</sup> Maurice Couve de Murville, *Aussenpolitik, 1958-1969*, translated into German by Herman Kusterer, (Munich, 1973), pp. 8-10, 38-45, 57-59; While Murville gratefully acknowledged American help in rebuilding France, he deeply deplored American intervention with domestic politics in Europe. Using the battle-cry of Communism the United States supervised the policies of Western European countries which were, according to Murville reduced to a subservient status. Obviously, this situation was unacceptable to de Gaulle. See also: W. W. Kulski, *De Gaulle and the World: The Foreign Policy of the Fifth French Republic*, (Syracuse, NY, 1966), pp. 25-27; Stanley Hoffman, *Decline or Renewal? France Since the 1930's*, (New York, 1974), pp. 283-290; Hoffman provides an excellent analysis of de Gaulle's overall foreign policy goals in the context of France's international limitations.

<sup>137</sup> De Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope*, p. 38; de Gaulle admitted that nationalism drove the resistance in both Indochina and Algeria. Most of the indigenous leaders had been educated in the West and adopted Western principles of human rights and liberty. Ultimately, imperialism was a policy of the past, but France could still play a global role by actually fostering the independence of its former colonies.

<sup>138</sup> Hoffmann, *Decline or Renewal*, pp. 285-286.

through a negotiated settlement providing for the withdrawal of all foreign forces and the neutralization of the entire country. He argued strongly against further escalation of the conflict by increasing the American presence and directly engaging North Vietnam. Initially, de Gaulle attempted to influence American policy-making on Southeast Asia through confidential advice. When this approach failed, he went public in criticizing the United States. Although de Gaulle addressed concerns shared by Great Britain and West Germany, neither country endorsed his view.

French refusal to sanction American policy on Vietnam led to crisis and a turning point for the trans-Atlantic alliance. Britain and West Germany were cautious not to alienate the United States. But de Gaulle did challenge the United States on Vietnam and skillfully utilized the Vietnam controversy to question American predominance in the Western alliance. His withdrawal from NATO command in 1966 exemplified the rift between France and the United States.<sup>139</sup>

De Gaulle's policy of independence certainly dismayed Washington. He dismissed the Cold War framework of American policy-makers and questioned American leadership in the alliance. As a consequence he failed to change American policy on Vietnam but left Washington fighting in Southeast Asia without his country's support. The United States eventually learned that de Gaulle's assessment on Vietnam was correct. Even more importantly, subsequent American administrations realized that the

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<sup>139</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 62; Membership in NATO accordingly might engulf France in an unwanted and dangerous war in Southeast Asia. NATO membership also undermined French sovereignty and de Gaulle insisted on developing his own nuclear force to free his country from American control of the nuclear trigger.

United States needed the support of its European allies as much as the European needed American protection.

The situation in Indochina in 1960 offered France the opportunity to embark on the role of honest broker. In Laos, to the dismay of the Eisenhower administration, France supported the neutralists led by Prince Souvanna Phouma. A year later France refused to participate in any intervention by SEATO forces.<sup>140</sup> For Vietnam, de Gaulle soon adopted the same policy of advocating neutralization, coupled with the demand of withdrawal of all foreign forces, for Vietnam.

### **I. De Gaulle's diplomatic Approach: 1961- 1964**

The election of John F. Kennedy gave de Gaulle new hope that he might influence American foreign-policy making. Eisenhower had increased the American commitment to Indochina, but conflicts in Laos and South Vietnam nevertheless intensified. Perhaps Kennedy was more amenable to de Gaulle's suggestion of a political settlement for the entire region. In March 1961, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, president of the National Assembly, was scheduled to visit the United States. Before leaving, he received instructions from de Gaulle, who asked Chaban-Delmas to report what impression President Kennedy made. De Gaulle added: "See him and tell him not to get caught up in the Vietnam affair. The United States could lose its forces, but also its soul."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Marianna P. Sullivan, France's Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations, ( Westport, Ct., 1978), pp. 62-65.

<sup>141</sup> Lacoutre, *De Gaulle: The Ruler*, p. 371.

Kennedy listened and agreed in principle to the political settlement in Laos, but rejected a similar solution for Vietnam. De Gaulle was concerned about the growing crisis in South Vietnam and he repeated his advice during Kennedy's visit to France in May 1961. Kennedy indicated that Western intervention in Southeast Asia might be necessary to stop further advances of the Communist forces. De Gaulle refused to directly interfere in South Vietnam and rejected Kennedy's plan to establish a barrier against the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Indochina. The general argued that military intervention was a hopeless endeavor that ultimately would do more to strengthen the Communist than destroy them. He warned Kennedy:

You will find that intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement. Once a Nation has been aroused no foreign power, however strong, can impose its will upon it. You will discover this for yourself. For even if you find local leaders who in their own interest are prepared to obey you, the people will not agree to it, and indeed not want it. The ideology which you invoke will make no difference. Indeed, in the eyes of the masses, it will become identified with your power. That is why the more you become involved out there against Communists, the more the Communists will appear as champions of national independence, and the more support they will receive, if only from despair. We French have had experience of it. You Americans want to take our place. I predict that you will sink step by step into a bottomless military and political quagmire, however much you spent in men and money. What you, we and others ought to do for unhappy Asia is not to take over the running of these states ourselves, but to provide them with the means to escape the misery and humiliation which, there as elsewhere, are the causes of totalitarian regimes.<sup>142</sup>

Hindsight validates de Gaulle's prediction. He correctly assessed the appeal of nationalism in Southeast Asia, having experienced its power both in Europe and within the former French colonial empire. As de Gaulle noted, ideologies were temporal and

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<sup>142</sup> De Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope*, p. 256.



simply another tool to justify a nation's self-interest and self-determination.<sup>143</sup> Based on this realistic assessment, the only successful way for the West to influence events in Southeast Asia was an indirect approach through economic aid and political support. Obviously, de Gaulle did not want to see the Communists succeed in Southeast Asia, but military intervention was undoubtedly the wrong way to defeat the Communist insurgents. Also, de Gaulle was not willing to relinquish the French role in her former colony, and the best way to maintain ties was through economic aid to help improve the viability of South Vietnam.

Kennedy, however, could or would not perceive the turmoil in South Vietnam within de Gaulle's framework. In fact, Kennedy regarded the conflict in Vietnam primarily in terms of the ideological battle of the Cold War. Although the United States already provided ample economic and military aid, Kennedy hoped that a concerted Western policy might further prevent Communist successes. Western support of American strategy in Vietnam would further justify Kennedy's policy and score some points in Congress. In Asia, it was necessary to realize the dangers of a North Vietnamese thrust into Laos and South Vietnam, an operation which in American eyes was backed by Moscow. In addition, Beijing might also become involved in Indochina, further encouraging Communist insurgents in South Vietnam. To meet the Communist challenge, the West had to adopt a joint strategy for the up-coming conference on Laos and, in case the conference failed, a contingency plan for Indochina. Washington believed

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<sup>143</sup> De Gaulle's conception of the only relative importance of ideologies is even more apparent in his approach to the Soviet Union. He insisted in using the term Russia and regarded Communism as only another chapter in the quest for great power politics that went back to the days of Peter the Great.

that an "increased understanding from the international community" would actually accelerate a settlement in Vietnam.<sup>144</sup>

Washington did appreciate the considerable role France still played in South Vietnam. National Security advisor McGeorge Bundy suggested the formation of joint U.S.-French committees to find solutions for the complex problems in South Vietnam. More importantly, Washington hoped to "eliminate past cross purposes in Southeast Asia" and obtain an "urgent high-level effort to concert UK-French-US position on Vietnam."<sup>145</sup> De Gaulle was receptive to these suggestions, favoring closer consultations as well.<sup>146</sup> But de Gaulle expected Washington to recognize the French position on Indochina as a prerequisite for any French support of America's policy in Vietnam. He rejected Western intervention and favored the neutralization of the region. The French president was unwilling to give up his own policy on Indochina simply to placate the Americans.

For Kennedy to accept de Gaulle's position but continue American policy in Vietnam was virtually impossible. Kennedy remained confident that an honest debate on American goals in South Vietnam could win the general's endorsement. In his encounters with Chaban-Delmas and de Gaulle, Kennedy outlined his approach but was ultimately unsuccessful in altering French perceptions. De Gaulle was convinced that Kennedy's policy on Vietnam would only lead to further escalation and possibly stalemate. It was

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<sup>144</sup> Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy, *De Gaulle, Africa, and Southeast Asia*, May 13, 1961; John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963, France, Box 70.

<sup>145</sup> Memorandum for Bundy, May 13, 1961; and Memorandum: *What we want from Paris*, May 30, 1961, both in: National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963, Box 70, JFKL.

<sup>146</sup> Record of Conversation, February 17, 1961, and Memorandum of Conversation, May 6, 1961, both in: JFK, NSF, Western Europe, 1961-1963, Box 70. De Gaulle expressed his desire for consultations within

not in France's best interest to either support such policy or become entangled in the American struggle.<sup>147</sup> The general's position was difficult for Washington to comprehend or to accept since it ran counter to American perceptions. Over Laos, at least, a political settlement could be reached, with both the United States and the Soviet Union as guarantors of that country's neutrality. Yet, the issue of Vietnam proved more thorny and ultimately more divisive in future French-American relations. De Gaulle insisted on complete neutrality for both Vietnams, allowing for closer ties between North and South, and eventually leading to the peaceful unification of the country.

In 1962 President Kennedy was not ready to acquiesce to de Gaulle's policy of neutralizing Vietnam. The State Department duly noted de Gaulle's "distaste" for Diem and worried over French support of Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk, who pursued a neutral course between East and West. In November 1962, presidential advisor Walt Rostow met with Jean-Claude Winkler, special envoy to de Gaulle, to devise a strategy to convince the French president of the validity of the American approach in South Vietnam. A recent attack by the PRC on India served as an pertinent example of overall Communist aggression. According to Rostow, the incident in the Himalayas should make it more than obvious to de Gaulle that "the containment of China can be conducted along the lines similar to the containment of Russia in Europe."<sup>148</sup> Washington was certain its policy of

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weeks of Kennedy's inauguration. French Ambassador Herve Alphand restated de Gaulle's intentions in a meeting with Paul Nitze in May 1961.

<sup>147</sup> De Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>148</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Walt Rostow and Jean-Claude Winkler, Nov. 29, 1962, NSF: France, Box, 72, JFKL.

stemming the tide against Communism in Vietnam would lead to positive results and hoped to gain de Gaulle's support.<sup>149</sup>

Again the general refused to join ranks. Washington, in turn, was unwilling to accept French obstinacy to a concerted Western policy in Southeast Asia. While both sides agreed that South Vietnam should not fall into the hands of the Communists, their respective approaches to prevent the loss of South Vietnam differed profoundly. A possible understanding was further complicated by a strong conviction - both in Paris and Washington - that their policies exclusively promised success. Kennedy reiterated his view that only Western support could save Vietnam in a meeting with French foreign secretary Maurice Couve de Murville in May 1963. The president, deeply concerned about the nuclear ambitions of China, reiterated his obligation to preserve the independence of South Vietnam to guarantee the freedom of the entire region. Murville believed that China did not intend to take over Southeast Asia and only desired to establish a "buffer region" to protect itself from the United States. If the French view proved correct, the best recourse was to "achieve a political solution to the problems in the area."<sup>150</sup>

In private with Kennedy, and then publicly in the Summer of 1963, de Gaulle expressed his misgivings about the American involvement in Vietnam. In a press conference on August 29, 1963 the French leader maintained that only the Vietnamese people could determine their future and choose the path to independence as well as

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<sup>149</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Rostow - Winkler, Nov. 29, 1962, NSF: France, Box 73, JFKL.

<sup>150</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Kennedy and Couve de Murville, May 25, 1963, NSF: France, Box 73, JFKL.

internal peace and harmony. France was willing to do everything within its power to facilitate the Vietnamese struggle for domestic stability and peace:

The French Government is following with attention and emotion the grave events occurring in Vietnam. The task accomplished in the past by France in Cochin China, Annam and Tonkin, the ties she has maintained with the country as a whole, and the interest she takes in the development explains why she understands so well and shares so sincerely in the trials of the Vietnamese people. In addition, France's knowledge of the merits of this people makes her appreciate the role they would be capable of playing in the current situation in Asia for their own progress and to further international understanding, once they go ahead with their activities independently of the outside, in internal peace and unity and harmony with their neighbor. Today more than ever, this is what France wishes for Vietnam as a whole.<sup>151</sup>

For de Gaulle the best way to achieve peace in Vietnam was the neutralization of the country in accordance with the 1954 Geneva Agreement and the solution for Laos reached in 1962. The French leader instructed his ambassador in Saigon, Roger Lalouette, to convey de Gaulle's vision of a peaceful settlement to Diem and his brother Nhu who, facing mounting pressure from the United States, were receptive to the French proposal of negotiations with the Viet Cong and even Hanoi.<sup>152</sup>

Washington was disturbed by de Gaulle's comments and was anxious to learn what the general's long term policy for Vietnam entailed. The Americans were also concerned about possible contacts between Nhu and North Vietnamese leaders as well as French knowledge of or acquiescence to such talks.<sup>153</sup> While Kennedy was well aware of de Gaulle's position ever since their 1961 summit, he still did not "understand just how

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<sup>151</sup> *Statement on Vietnam by President Charles de Gaulle on August 29, 1963*, in: Major Addresses, Statements and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle, May 19, 1958 - January 31, 1964, French Embassy, Press and Information Division, New York, p. 241.

<sup>152</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 94-95; Fredrik Logevall, "De Gaulle, Neutralization, and the American Involvement in Vietnam, 1963-1964," in: Pacific Historical Review, Vol. LXI, Feb. 1992, No. 1, pp. 79-80.

<sup>153</sup> Outgoing Telegram: Department of State, George Ball, September 23, 1963, NSF, France: Box 73, JFKL.

General de Gaulle envisages the development of a unified and neutral Vietnam without the successful development of a strong non-Communist society” in South Vietnam.<sup>154</sup> The American president maintained that South Vietnam still needed “external support and cooperation” to establish a viable non-Communist society. Further he could not conceive of how, “in the face of Communist subversion,” a withdrawal by the West would lead to any acceptable solution. Washington was certain that de Gaulle’s plan of neutralization would have no “other result than the abandonment of Vietnam to the Communists.”<sup>155</sup> If de Gaulle perceived other venues of solving the crisis in South Vietnam, Washington was willing to listen. Bundy recommended “private conversations” between American officials and the French president to prevent further misunderstandings and counterproductive public statements by de Gaulle on Vietnam.

Actually, Washington was less willing to listen than to convey its point of view or at least stop de Gaulle from meddling in the affairs of Vietnam. Not surprisingly, de Gaulle continued to pursue a policy he regarded as proper. He reaffirmed the right of self-determination of Third World countries in a late September 1963 speech. To Washington, de Gaulle’s policy remained unpredictable in terms of how he would next proceed on Vietnam.<sup>156</sup>

By October 1963, Kennedy received reports that de Gaulle was “exploring possible deals with Communist China and North Vietnam” and also considered diplomatic recognition of the PRC. A CIA report conceded that Paris might be discussing

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<sup>154</sup> Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to Embassy in Paris, September 25, 1963, NSF, France: Box 73, JFKL.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

terms of a negotiated settlement in Beijing and Hanoi. The CIA regarded the chances of success for such a diplomatic solution as slim and doubted that de Gaulle had a “grand design” for the Far East.<sup>157</sup> Even if de Gaulle lacked a “grand design” his opposition to the American commitment might diminish the chances of success in South Vietnam. The French leader was little impressed by American concerns and adamantly contended that the American approach would only lead to a military quagmire and defeat.<sup>158</sup>

By the fall of 1963, Washington and Paris were deeply entrenched in their respective positions on Vietnam. The United States believed it had to defend the Free world from Communist encroachment in South Vietnam. De Gaulle regarded the conflict in Vietnam both as a struggle for self-determination as well as domestic opposition against the corrupt Saigon regime. Foreign intervention would only make things worse. Therefore, it was advisable to reach a political solution as quickly as possible. The general also worried about the possible increase of East-West tensions as a consequence of a deepening American engagement in Vietnam. He obviously could not envision a victory should the United States become bogged down in the jungles of Southeast Asia. In addition, de Gaulle’s opposition to Washington’s Vietnam strategy gave him the opportunity to pursue an independent foreign policy and enhance France’s image in the Third World. A greater role in international affairs would also improve France’s position in Europe. Both to the Western Europeans as well as to Moscow and its allies France again demonstrated leadership and national independence.

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<sup>156</sup> Memorandum for the President, Murville’s Meeting with the Secretary of State, Oct. 7, 1963, NSF, France: Box 73, JFKL.

<sup>157</sup> Telegram from Ambassador Charles Bohlen, Oct. 16, 1963; Central Intelligence Agency, Office of National Estimates, Sherman Kent, both in: NSF, France: Box 73, JFKL.

### **The widening gap: De Gaulle and Johnson**

From 1961 to 1963, Paris and Washington developed different approaches to the increasing problems in South Vietnam based on their respective foreign policy paradigms. Each side tried to convince the other of the validity of its view toward ending the conflict in Southeast Asia. Although Kennedy deployed a growing number of personnel and military equipment to South Vietnam, he remained reluctant to fully commit the United States in the struggle against the Communist insurgents. Kennedy's refusal to send American ground troops left the door still open for de Gaulle's concept of a negotiated settlement. Diem's overthrow in early November 1963 ended the possibility of an internal Vietnamese settlement for the time being. Three weeks later Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson became president. During 1964 the situation in Vietnam further deteriorated and the Johnson administration gradually expanded the American commitment to Vietnam, resulting in the deployment of ground forces in March 1965.

De Gaulle refused to reconsider his initial assessment on Vietnam. Consequently, both Washington and Paris grew more intransigent in their approaches to solve the problems of the region. De Gaulle's opposition to the American course in Vietnam became more outspoken and damaging to Washington. The Johnson administration tried to contain the potential fall-out of French policy both in Southeast Asia and within the Western alliance by continuing to persuade de Gaulle of the effectiveness of the

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<sup>158</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 94-98.



American strategy in Vietnam. De Gaulle remained unconvinced and persistently insisted on a political settlement and the neutralization of that country.

To the French leadership Lyndon Johnson appeared reserved and inscrutable - in essence quite the contrary to John F. Kennedy, who was always willing to engage in open discussion. French foreign secretary Murville described Johnson as an "cunning politician" from the South, who had made his name in Congress, but was virtually unknown outside of the United States. Accordingly, Johnson assumed office unprepared but with the determination to lead his country and control its policy.<sup>159</sup>

Johnson had misgivings about de Gaulle as well. The French leader had privately complained that the United States had entered both World Wars rather late and wondered whether the Americans would be reluctant to support freedom in Europe in the future. Johnson, understandably, was apprehensive to meet the French president following Kennedy's funeral in November 1961. While both leaders generally agreed on overall policies their encounter was dampened by a minor diplomatic spat over the planned de Gaulle visit to the United States in May of 1964.<sup>160</sup> De Gaulle's proclaimed confidence in American support in case of Soviet aggression sounded hollow to Johnson. French desire of a closer organization of Europe, first economically and then politically, worried

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<sup>159</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 99; Rusk described LBJ as "intelligent, authoritarian, and extremely sensitive" to his French colleague. Rusk left no doubt that Johnson was determined to take the reins of power.

<sup>160</sup> Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969*, (New York, 1973), pp. 504-505; Cook, *de Gaulle*, pp. 366-367; De Gaulle regarded the previous invitation invalidated by Kennedy's death and expected Johnson to go through protocol procedure again. Johnson believed the visit was a done deal and told so to reporters. De Gaulle, as the statesman already in power, felt slighted by Johnson's comments. Though the entire episode appears silly and was based on a misunderstanding, it revealed again de Gaulle's insistence on *grandeur* even in protocol procedure, which was probably quite difficult to follow by Lyndon Johnson, who liked to take his state guest to his ranch and take them on a fast car trip through the Texas country side. Johnson and de Gaulle would meet in person only once more - at the funeral of Konrad Adenauer in April 1967.

Washington even more. To Johnson, it was unclear what the French president intended to do in Europe.<sup>161</sup> Johnson later expressed his ambiguous feelings about de Gaulle which were overshadowed by the Vietnam controversy:

In the years that followed, when de Gaulle's criticism of our role in Vietnam became intense, I had many occasions to remember that conversation. The French leader doubted - in private, at least - the will of the United States to live up to its commitments. He did not believe we would honor our NATO obligations, yet he criticized us for honoring a commitment elsewhere in the world. If we had taken his advice to abandon Vietnam, I suspect he might have cited that as "proof" of what he had been saying all along: that the United States could not be counted on in times of trouble.<sup>162</sup>

The missed opportunity of a good personal rapport between both leaders was not only caused by the character and style of the new American president, but according to the French assessment, by Johnson's insufficient interest in the affairs of Europe. With the mounting difficulties in Vietnam, Johnson's foreign policy focus shifted almost exclusively to Southeast Asia. Murville was not completely surprised by Johnson's lack of concern about Western Europe. Kennedy had repeatedly complained about the narrow, self-centered view of the Europeans. In addition, Johnson faced a multitude of domestic problems, which became even more urgent from 1965 onward, when civil rights, racial tensions, and domestic opposition to the war in Vietnam increasingly challenged and undermined Johnson's "Great Society."

Johnson displayed an interesting mixture of distrust and respect for de Gaulle. He described their peculiar relationship in very American terms, that of baseball. He saw himself "as the power hitter" whose rival, de Gaulle, was trying to outplay him, yet

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<sup>161</sup> Lloyd Gardner, "Johnson and de Gaulle," in: Robert Paxton and Nicholas Wahl (eds.) De Gaulle and the United States: A Centennial Reappraisal, (Oxford, UK, 1994), p. 258.

<sup>162</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969, (New York, 1971), p. 23.

Johnson “would just lean back and let the ball go in the catcher’s mitt.”<sup>163</sup> Despite increasing tensions with France because of de Gaulle’s contradictory policies and American escalation in Vietnam, Johnson rejected a more forceful approach in counteracting French policy. He admonished his administration to abstain from any public criticism of de Gaulle in the hope that Johnson could outlast the old general and prevent further damage in the Western alliance.<sup>164</sup>

The Vietnam conflict did not allow Johnson to neutralize the general. Since Johnson was unwilling to change course over Vietnam de Gaulle had to find other means to pursue French interests in Southeast Asia and increase French status in the world. Consequently, de Gaulle explored new venues to facilitate a political settlement for Vietnam. The obvious solution was a rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). France did not recognize the PRC in 1949 because of its own Indochina war. In 1963 global conditions had changed while war was still ravaging Vietnam. China was a major force in Asia and de Gaulle postulated that no political solution could be found for Vietnam without including Beijing. China proved receptive to French overtures during the Geneva Conference on Laos in 1961-62. In late October 1963 de Gaulle sent China expert Edgar Faure to Beijing to investigate the prospect of diplomatic relations. Chairman Mao and Prime Minister Chou En-lai were openly pleased with the idea and

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<sup>163</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 99-100; Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S. and Vietnam*, p. 79; George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs*, (New York, 1982), p. 336. The respective views of Murville and Johnson regarding the de Gaulle/Johnson relation are in itself interesting evidence in the different perspectives of each leader; de Gaulle would probably been quite pleased to make such a “good” impression on his American counterpart. Ball noted the enormous patience LBJ had with de Gaulle - quite against LBJ’s character - but it was obvious that LBJ respected the French leader because of “his presumption, cunning, and imperial style.”

negotiations finally led to full diplomatic recognition of the PRC by France in January 1964.<sup>165</sup>

Paris was fully aware that the French decision would perturb Washington, but de Gaulle remained firm. It was a mistake for the United States to continue a policy of non-recognition of the PRC. While Mao's regime was totalitarian and despicable, China's increasing role in Asia could simply not be discounted. French recognition of Beijing served two purposes; one affected Europe, the other might bring new initiatives to the conflict in Southeast Asia. The Sino-Soviet split offered new opportunities for Western Europe to play the China card against Moscow. In Southeast Asia, de Gaulle sought a *modus vivendi* which would neutralize Vietnam. This solution presented the only possible alternative to further military escalation but required Chinese consent. The basis of any productive Western relations with Beijing was the recognition of this vast country. Admittedly, de Gaulle had no guarantee that the Chinese might actually agree to the neutralization of Vietnam but, in his opinion, it was at least worth the effort. Given the profound domestic challenges facing Beijing, Chinese leaders might be willing to accept the neutralization of Vietnam.<sup>166</sup>

The Khanh government in South Vietnam fumed over de Gaulle's decision and resolutely criticized the recognition of Beijing. From Saigon's perspective the French

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<sup>164</sup> H.W. Brands, "Johnson and de Gaulle: American Diplomacy Sotto Voce," in: *Historian*, XLIV, August 1987, pp. 478-479; Maurice Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique. Une Amitié tumultueuse*, (Plon, Paris, 1973), p. 359.

<sup>165</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 102-103; Philippe Devillers, "French policy and the second Vietnam war," in: *The World Today*, June 1967, p. 256; *Le Monde*, Jan. 18, 1964, p. 1. Eventually, the United States saw the validity in de Gaulle's approach during the presidency of Richard Nixon and his understanding with China facilitated the Paris Peace Accords of 1973.

<sup>166</sup> Akten zur Aussenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (AAPD), 1964, Vol. I, Conversation Erhard - de Gaulle, Paris, Feb. 14, 1964, pp. 211-212; Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 102-103.

move further condoned Communist aggression. Saigon took issue with de Gaulle's interference in Vietnam's business. Government officials called de Gaulle's policy illusionary and considered it just another French effort to restore her influence in Southeast Asia, this time with the help of Beijing. France was undermining the struggle of the South Vietnamese against Communism and Saigon contemplated breaking diplomatic relations with Paris.<sup>167</sup>

Washington also deplored the French decision calling it an "unfortunate step, particularly at a time when Chinese Communists are actively promoting aggression and subversion in Southeast Asia and elsewhere." A Senate resolution asked the French not to recognize Beijing or face grave consequences in Franco-American relations. Secretary of Defense McNamara told journalists that countries which recognized the PRC were aiding Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. He was also afraid that Paris' decision would be followed by the French speaking nations in Africa. Recognition of the PRC might upset the balance of nations against Communist China in the United Nations complicating the American role in that assembly. But de Gaulle was encouraged by the mostly positive response to his decision in the rest of the world, particularly in Asia.<sup>168</sup>

France had again a voice in world affairs. The general would definitely not reverse his views on Vietnam in order to placate the United States and undermine his strategy of *grandeur*. Publicly de Gaulle defended his decision to recognize China in the overriding context of the conflict in Vietnam and the China's role in Asia as a whole:

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<sup>167</sup> *Le Monde*, January 22, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>168</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 103-104; *Le Monde*, January 25, 1964, p. 5, January 28, 1964, p. 1, January 29, 1964, pp. 1-2; Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S. and Vietnam*, p. 85; Gardner, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 265-266; As expected Taiwan protested and recalled its ambassador in Paris.

There is no political reality in Asia . . . which does not interest China. Neither war nor peace is imaginable on that continent without China's becoming implicated. Thus it is absolutely inconceivable that without her participation there can be any accord on the eventual neutrality of Southeast Asia.<sup>169</sup>

France had to recognize this vast country of 700 million people to further French involvement in matters of international importance: "il est clair que la France doit pouvoir entendre directement la Chine et aussi s'en faire écouter." Only with Chinese participation was the neutralization of Southeast Asia possible through ending foreign interference in the region.<sup>170</sup>

The policy of neutrality for Vietnam was discarded by Washington since it would allegedly only lead to a Communist victory. All of Johnson's principal advisors rejected de Gaulle's concept as detrimental to American objectives in Vietnam. None of them gave more than a cursory glance at the French proposal. Only a few voices of dissent within the U.S. government favored the French proposal but the Johnson administration was displeased by any suggestion of neutralization. Washington aimed at convincing Americans and the world that the United States would stand by its commitment to South Vietnam.<sup>171</sup> This would prove more difficult than anticipated.

### **The American effort to contain de Gaulle**

The Johnson administration grew apprehensive over the ramifications de Gaulle's ideas had in Europe and also in South Vietnam. Although the Khanh government in

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<sup>169</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S. and Vietnam*, p. 85.

<sup>170</sup> *Le Monde*, February 2-3, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>171</sup> Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York, 1995), p. 55; Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, pp. 82-83; Gardner, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, p. 267; on dissent within the American government see below Chapter IV.

Saigon strongly rejected the idea of negotiations, not all South Vietnamese were opposed to French suggestions.<sup>172</sup> General Khanh claimed that French agents were plotting to assassinate him and were also cooperating with the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong, in fact, did react positively to de Gaulle's ideas and issued an official communication that approved "President de Gaulle's proposal to establish a regime of neutrality in South Viet-Nam."<sup>173</sup> Washington needed to take action to prevent further damage by de Gaulle and once again adopted the strategy of friendly coercion.

During the spring and summer of 1964 Johnson explored ways of influencing de Gaulle's position in Washington's favor. Ambassador to Paris Charles Bohlen and John Cabot Lodge in Saigon as well as CIA advisors set out to develop an approach to contain de Gaulle. Bohlen characterized the French president as "highly egocentric and with touches of megalomania" but argued against any direct criticism of the French leader by the Johnson administration.<sup>174</sup> Bohlen recommended that Washington should present a clear political objective and course of action in Vietnam to de Gaulle and request his cooperation in that policy.<sup>175</sup> Johnson concurred with the ambassador. Hence, it became Bohlen's task to work directly with de Gaulle and win him over to the American point of view.

Johnson asked Lodge to reassure the South Vietnamese government that Washington was determined to "stop neutralist talk wherever we can by whatever means

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<sup>172</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, p. 87.

<sup>173</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, Saigon, March 23, 1964, p. 187.

<sup>174</sup> Brands, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 479-480.

<sup>175</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. I, Memorandum prepared by the Ambassador to France (Bohlen), Washington, March 12, 1964, pp. 140-141; the CIA also warned of the detrimental consequences de

we can."<sup>176</sup> Further, Johnson hoped that Lodge could give advice on how to handle the French president. Lodge immediately went to work by devising a strategy that might change de Gaulle's mind. De Gaulle had to understand that American goals in Vietnam were profoundly different from French objectives during the First Indochina war. The United States was not seeking an exclusively military solution, which by itself had no chance of success, but was sincerely endeavoring to improve the lives of the Vietnamese people. Moreover, American and French interests in Vietnam were not so different. The American effort to strengthen South Vietnam was "directly to the advantage" of French doctors, teachers, and businessmen in that country. French nationals could play a significant role for the overall progress in South Vietnam by aiding the American commitment.

Given the still considerable French influence in South Vietnam Washington had to convey to de Gaulle that neutralization at the present was counterproductive to both countries' objectives in Vietnam:

France has an influence in Viet-Nam way beyond what it contributes in the way of men, weapons, and money. This is because French is still the Western language which is possessed by the largest number of Vietnamese . . . at the present, the so-called people who count in Viet-Nam read French newspapers; in particular, they read background news stories which the Agence France Presse gets from the Quai d'Orsay. Some are impressed by it and others are infuriated by it, and altogether no good purpose is served. If what is desired is the eventual neutralization of Indo-China or of Viet-Nam, the way not to do it is to create the furor which these statements out of Paris create. General de Gaulle is thus a very influential figure in Viet-Nam and, unwittingly, in a way which is defeating his own stated purpose.<sup>177</sup>

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Gaulle's policy had in South Vietnam, and on Western unity in general. See: Brands, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, p. 482.

<sup>176</sup> FRUS, Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President, Washington, March 15, 1964, p. 152; Message from the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Lodge), Washington, March 20, 1964, p. 185.



All de Gaulle needed to do was to modify his time-schedule for neutralization and postpone it for some future time. Lodge suggested de Gaulle take a look back into France's own history during 1940 and 1944. Had Washington adopted neutralization for France then, France might have suffered Nazi occupation far longer. As in the 1940's, Americans continued to oppose neutralization because such policy only facilitated hostile attacks.<sup>178</sup>

Johnson urged Bohlen to seek an appointment with de Gaulle as soon as possible and inform the French president that the United States, after thorough investigation, rejected the idea of disengaging from Vietnam or initiating negotiations at the present time. Based on Lodge's recommendation, Johnson told Bohlen of what he expected de Gaulle to do:

What we actually want from de Gaulle is a public statement, prior to the SEATO meeting [April 13-15, 1964], that the idea of "neutralization" does not apply to the attitudes or policies of the government in Vietnam or its friends in the face of the current communist aggression. We want him to state that he does not favor "neutralization" of this sort at the present time. We are not asking him to drop his idea for all eternity. What we want is a statement that he does not think it applies now.<sup>179</sup>

Bohlen could use whatever argument he felt was most convincing but Johnson stressed in no uncertain terms that he expected de Gaulle to comply with his wishes and, as an ally and friend, "adopt an attitude of cooperation rather than obstruction" in this area of vital interest to the United States.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> FRUS, Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam, March 23, 1964, p. 188.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 1964, pp. 188-189.

<sup>179</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Message from the President to the Ambassador in France (Bohlen), Washington, March 24, 1964, p. 191.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192. LBJ wanted to hear from de Gaulle what French diplomats said in private: an American withdrawal from Vietnam would have disastrous results. The message to Bohlen included a

The Khanh government reacted more quickly and demanded a public statement from de Gaulle in which he would modify his view on neutralization. If France complied, South Vietnam would remove current economic restrictions on French imports and finally appoint a new ambassador to Paris. Washington was caught unprepared by the Vietnamese move; Secretary Rusk deplored that “Khanh went roaring in” and decided to wait a few days to allow things to calm down in order to prevent a strong response by de Gaulle to the combined South Vietnamese-American pressure.<sup>181</sup>

On April 2, 1964 Bohlen finally met with de Gaulle. During forty-five minutes of discussion Bohlen failed to convince the general of the validity of the American Vietnam strategy. De Gaulle flatly refused to reject neutralization for Vietnam. He disagreed with the American prognosis that the Khanh government was winning the war against the Communist insurgents. The French leader pointed to the similarities of both the French and American Indochina conflicts. He asserted that the South Vietnamese had “no taste for this war” and therefore were unable to meet the challenge of the Communist insurgents.<sup>182</sup> Bohlen did not concur with de Gaulle’s assessment. The French struggle differed profoundly from the American efforts. France had fought a colonial war, while the United States assisted South Vietnam against foreign aggression. The ambassador implied that de Gaulle surely did not favor a Communist victory. Indeed, the general did not want to see a Communist take-over in Vietnam, but questioned American strategy. He

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personal note of Johnson to de Gaulle which reiterated the main points in a very straightforward language and was modified to prevent an adverse reaction from the general.

<sup>181</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Message from the Ambassador in France (Bohlen) to the President, Paris, March 25, 1964, pp. 194-195.

<sup>182</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Message from the Ambassador in France (Bohlen) to the President, Paris, April 2, 1964, pp. 216-217. De Gaulle did not even consider the Khan regime a real government. Since the fall of Diem, Saigon had been under the rule of military usurpers.

doubted whether the United States could even obtain military stabilization in the country and, unless Washington changed course, would eventually suffer the same debacle as France had a decade earlier.

According to de Gaulle's judgement the best solution was the neutralization of Vietnam through another Geneva conference including Beijing. If Washington was unwilling to consider negotiations, then it had to be willing to "really carry the war to the North and if necessary against China."<sup>183</sup> The latter alternative was disconcerting but presented a more clearly defined policy. De Gaulle regretted that France and the United States had not done more to coordinate their policies in Southeast Asia. Bohlen responded that the United States had in fact strongly supported France in Indochina from 1949 onward. Regardless, de Gaulle declined to support the American policy in Vietnam because neutrality was the "only way out to the US other than engage in major hostilities against North Vietnam and China."<sup>184</sup>

The French leader rejected Bohlen's view that neutralization would lead to further Communist advances. Although de Gaulle could not guarantee Communist, particularly Chinese, cooperation in a peace conference, he repeated that the sooner the United States "went for neutralization the better off they would be." Bohlen, quite displeased, ended the conversation by pointing out that Washington would be considerably disappointed by de Gaulle's intransigence. The general unfortunately missed a "good opportunity" to work

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<sup>183</sup> FRUS, Bohlen to the President, April 2, 1964, pp. 217-218.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

closely with the United States on the situation in Vietnam.<sup>185</sup> But de Gaulle saw no reason to reverse his views.

Bohlen left the meeting dismayed over his failure to impress de Gaulle. Although Bohlen later questioned the war in Vietnam, in 1964 he concluded that de Gaulle was misinformed and did not comprehend the seriousness of the Communist threat in Vietnam, a feeling that was shared by Lodge.<sup>186</sup> The answer was simple, de Gaulle was not misinformed. Unlike Washington, he did not perceive the conflict in Vietnam in terms of Cold War ideology. To him, conditions in Vietnam had not changed since the First Indochina War. Now, as ten years ago, the Vietnamese were fighting for independence and for a government that truly represented the people's interests. By supporting a corrupt regime, the United States only provoked Vietnamese resistance.

Washington and Paris perceived the conflict in Vietnam each in terms of its own national self-interest. Their differing self-interests and resulting political agenda were too diametrically opposed to allow for compromise. Washington feared that a withdrawal from Vietnam endangered not only its strategic interests in the Pacific but undermined American credibility as leader of the Western world. De Gaulle dreaded that further escalation might draw France and Europe into an unwanted war - a war that once the PRC became involved, could become devastating for the entire world. Clearly, Vietnam was not valuable enough to bring the world to the threshold of annihilation. French opposition

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<sup>185</sup> FRUS, Bohlen to the President, April 2, 1964, pp. 218-221; Bohlen could not discern whether de Gaulle was operating on genuine conviction based on the current situation or past French experience in Indochina, yet whatever the reasons the general remained firm that neutralization was the only alternative to further escalation. De Gaulle displayed considerable contempt not only for the Khanh government but the Vietnamese people in general. Khanh's recent behavior might partly account for de Gaulle's view. But again it was also obvious that Vietnam served as a means to de Gaulle's end - a greater role for France, independent from the Anglo-Saxons.

to the American policy, moreover, allowed France to distinguish her own views from those of Washington and present herself as an alternative leader to the Third World and in Europe. Common ground was lost in this competition between the current superpower and the "grande nation."

The SEATO Conference in Manila of April 1964 further exacerbated the French-American rift over Vietnam. Rusk met with Murville to discuss the situation in South Vietnam quickly learning that the French position was as resolute as ever. To the French foreign minister the problems in South Vietnam were essentially political. He suggested returning to the provisions of the 1954 Geneva agreement which prohibited foreign interference in Vietnam. If these provisions were obeyed, Vietnam could obtain independence, nonalignment, and reunification. Non-intervention in fact affected both North and South Vietnam because the North also was not independent but ruled by outside forces.<sup>187</sup> Murville believed that Saigon could not defeat the Communists insurgents unless the United States escalated its commitment. He told Rusk:

[I]f you tell me military victory, I will say that is fine. But if the war is not extended to the North and if U.S. forces do not participate, there is not likely to be a military victory in Viet-Nam. The South Vietnamese people are out of the game. All you have is a professional army supported from outside.<sup>188</sup>

But even escalation might not succeed. Once again Murville alluded to his country's experience. In 1962, France controlled most of Algeria but still lost the battle. He reminded Rusk that victory was impossible "without the people."<sup>189</sup> Murville also

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<sup>186</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>187</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Memorandum of Conversation, U.S. Embassy Chancery, Manila, April 12, 1964, p. 234; Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique*, p. 362.

<sup>188</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, U.S. Embassy Chancery, Manila, April 12, 1964, p. 235.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

maintained that the situation in Vietnam was further complicated by Beijing. Washington needed to consider Chinese interests and influence in the region. For centuries China had coveted Southeast Asia but in 1964 any imperialist aim was impeded by the immense domestic difficulties within China. Thus, Beijing might be interested in any negotiated solution for Vietnam provided it did not threaten the PRC. Hanoi would have to follow suit and, at least for the time being, agree to "leave South Vietnam alone."

Rusk was curious to learn what argument could induce China to accept neutralization at the present since it had been reluctant to do so in the past. The French answer was very simple; Beijing implicitly regarded the American presence in Vietnam as a potential threat to China proper. Murville stressed that the Chinese were "terrified" by U.S. personnel in Vietnam.<sup>190</sup> Given the last two hundred years of Western imperialism in and around China even a few hundred Americans stationed in Vietnam might be a potential threat to Beijing. While Murville perceived China from a historical perspective, Rusk was unable to move beyond the more narrow American ideology of containment.

The meeting between Murville and Rusk was as unproductive as that of Bohlen and de Gaulle. While each side remained friendly and polite they were far from reaching common ground. The French foreign minister acknowledged the divergence in opinion but agreed with his American counterparts to keep the matter confidential. During the SEATO conference, Murville was obliged to present the French view unequivocally which made news headlines. He refused to embrace a joint communiqué endorsing the American policy in Vietnam. Such act of defiance had never occurred before in the

history of the alliance. Murville explained to his colleagues that France could not support the American course because this policy would lead only to defeat. South Vietnam might fall or, even worse, the conflict could escalate, which was far more damaging for all involved. The SEATO members firmly opposed the French position. They refused to even consider neutralization because all were convinced that the United States would prevail in South Vietnam.<sup>191</sup>

Washington and Paris could only agree to disagree. Neither side was willing to give way.<sup>192</sup> To Paris, the American position in Vietnam was obviously misguided. So was the French view to the Americans. Murville recounted numerous discussions with Rusk, who exemplified the thinking of the Johnson administration. Accordingly, Rusk was convinced that the United States fought a good fight for a just cause, namely the battle against World Communism. He did not distinguish between the Soviet and Chinese Communism, ignoring the conflict between these two countries. Regarding Vietnam, Murville maintained that Rusk also proved incapable to understand the determination of many South Vietnamese to resist American intervention. In addition, Paris alleged that American intervention only intensified the already difficult situation in South Vietnam.<sup>193</sup>

Rusk grew increasingly irritated about the French attitude and regarded de Gaulle as living a dream of France's past glory. The French had failed in Vietnam because they

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<sup>190</sup> Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique*, p. 235.

<sup>191</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 104.

<sup>192</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Telegram from the Delegation at the SEATO Ministerial Council Meeting to the Department of States, Manila, April 15, 1964, p. 239.

<sup>193</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 105-107; Rusk, at least to Murville, never doubted that American strategy in South Vietnam would lead to success. Also, Rusk persistently adhered to the domino theory, further justifying the American role in Vietnam. Murville stated that Beijing was interested in peace talks but could not tolerate an expanding American presence on the Asian mainland. See also: Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique*, pp. 365-368.

were a declining power that had tried in vain to uphold a colonial empire. He admitted that the American commitment was not without peril but Washington was willing to accept the risks in order to succeed against Communism.<sup>194</sup> To the French any military intervention in Southeast Asia would prove futile. But Washington was increasingly determined to use military means to end the conflict in Vietnam. As the conflict in Vietnam approached a new phase so did Franco-American relations. Since Washington refused to listen to de Gaulle, the general escalated his attacks of America's Vietnam policy.

## **II: De Gaulle recalcitrant, Summer 1964 to 1968**

For Washington, a diplomatic solution was not feasible as long as the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops intensified their attacks on the Saigon government. Johnson and most of his counsel rejected the French view as being mistaken. For the administration, neutralization was only the first step toward a Communist victory in Vietnam, endangering all of Southeast Asia. The loss of South Vietnam would not only have serious repercussions for American leadership in the Free World, but also at home. Further criticism by de Gaulle was hence both unwelcome and damaging.

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<sup>194</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, p. 90; for Rusk's view on Vietnam, see: Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, (New York, 1990), pp. 441-443.



In June 1964 Johnson attempted once more to gain French approval of his Vietnam policy. This time he chose the skeptic among his advisors on Vietnam, George Ball, to convey the American position to de Gaulle. Ball, like the French president, favored an American withdrawal from Vietnam, but Johnson predicted correctly that Ball would loyally defend American policy.<sup>195</sup> Johnson instructed Ball to elucidate the American commitment to a free and independent South Vietnam. More importantly, Johnson counted on French cooperation to prevent “doubts between our two Governments, and even division of purpose” that could play into Communist hands and lead to further escalation in Vietnam. The American leader expected full French support in case he had to use military force:

In the event that the United States should find itself forced to act in defense of peace and independence, in Southeast Asia, I am confident that I could place reliance upon the firmness of General de Gaulle as a friend and ally, as America properly did in the Cuba crisis of '62, and if by any chance I am wrong in this point, it is a matter of importance that we should know it now.<sup>196</sup>

Ball met de Gaulle on June 5, 1964. The undersecretary explained that Johnson was interested in de Gaulle's comments and advice on the situation in Southeast Asia. While both countries desired a viable government in South Vietnam, they differed over methods and procedures. Washington and Paris agreed in fact that a Communist takeover in Southeast Asia would be a “catastrophe for the whole free world.” Ball blamed Hanoi for the guerrilla activities in South Vietnam and claimed it was Ho Chi Minh not

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<sup>195</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 377.

<sup>196</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Memorandum from the President to the Under Secretary of State (Ball), Washington, June 4, 1964, pp. 449-450; LBJ repeated that he favored a peaceful solution but was determined to see things through if necessary. He stressed that Ball should not mention any contingency planning for South Vietnam because he feared de Gaulle might leak this information to the Chinese. However, he was “open” for any French suggestions to solve the conflict in Vietnam.

Washington who decided over further escalation.<sup>197</sup> The United States, according Ball, had no ambition of establishing military or political control in Southeast Asia. But if American aid to Saigon failed to lead to significant progress, Washington was resolved to “bring increasing military pressure on Hanoi in order to change the Communists’ course of action.”<sup>198</sup> Ball argued that Washington did not prefer military action and still hoped for a political solution. But Ho Chi Minh had to fully understand American determination. The last statement was perhaps a hint to de Gaulle to utilize his diplomatic channels with Beijing and convey the sincerity of the United States in holding its ground in South Vietnam.

According to Ball, French and American views conflicted the most on the PRC. Washington did not expect that Beijing would accept a solution for Vietnam that contained the spread of Communism. Past experiences demonstrated that the Communists could only be stopped by a countervailing force. The United States could not abandon Saigon, even after a political solution was reached, until the South Vietnamese government was strong enough to control the entire country.<sup>199</sup>

De Gaulle listened patiently and took note of the American “hope” to defeat the insurgency. Yet he believed chances of success were faint. The French leader then repeated almost verbatim what he had told Kennedy in May 1961; the United States could not win this struggle despite its military might. The conflict was not a military but a

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<sup>197</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Telegram from the Undersecretary of State (Ball) to the Department of State, Paris, June 6, 1964, pp. 464-465.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465-466.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 466; Ball argued that the PRC was still in an expansionist and bellicose phase of its revolution which precluded an understanding with Washington.

political and psychological challenge, affecting not only the government of General Khanh but the entire Vietnamese people. De Gaulle explained to Ball:

“I [i.e. de Gaulle] do not mean that all of the Vietnamese are against you but they regard the US as a foreign power and a very powerful foreign power”. The more the US becomes involved in the actual conduct of military operations the more the Vietnamese will turn against us, as others will in Southeast Asia.<sup>200</sup>

De Gaulle did not deny that the United States had the military might to destroy Hanoi, Canton, and even Beijing. But what would the consequences be of such a strategy? For de Gaulle it was obviously not worth the risk to allow events to proceed that far. Vietnam was a “rotten country” for the West to fight in, which France had learned with much sorrow. If the United States decided to escalate the war in Vietnam, France refused to have any part in it, as “an ally or otherwise.” The message to Johnson was abundantly clear: no French support for any policy other than negotiations as proposed by de Gaulle.<sup>201</sup>

De Gaulle also doubted that present American support to Saigon could lead to success. Washington had to realize that its involvement in Vietnam was futile and thereby come to the conclusion that a political settlement was the only decent way out of the quagmire. A political agreement could not be reached without China and other regional powers. Regarding China, de Gaulle was doubtful whether the American view of an aggressive, expansionist country was correct. Nevertheless, the United States should have

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<sup>200</sup> FRUS, Ball to Department of State, June 6, 1964, p. 467.

<sup>201</sup> FRUS, Ball to Department of State, June 6, 1964, p. 467; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 378; De Gaulle alluded to Chinese history and pointed to the relative ease in which Western powers had defeated the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. For the time being, nobody could predict the outcome of a war between the West and the PRC.

contact with Beijing to gain a better understanding of “what China was up to.”<sup>202</sup> Ball interjected that diplomatic overtures to either Beijing and Hanoi at present would undermine the will of Saigon to combat the insurgents. Even if conditions in South Vietnam were more agreeable toward peace talks, Washington questioned strongly whether the Communists would fully honor an agreement.<sup>203</sup>

De Gaulle maintained that U.S. diplomatic efforts alone might not bring the expected results. He suggested a conference of the major Western and Asian powers to positively affect world opinion. International guarantees to uphold a settlement would preclude further North Vietnamese aggression. De Gaulle recognized American concerns but argued that all “policy involves risk. If it is a policy that does not involve risk there is no choice of policy.”<sup>204</sup> The present American course was unfortunately self-defeating and, as French experience had shown, it did not have any chance of success. Again the general did not move an inch from his position. Despite his assurance of empathy with American hardship Ball received the impression that de Gaulle was patiently waiting for events in Southeast Asia to develop as he predicted:

He is confident that they will. He is certain no improvements will result from the present efforts. He probably envisages that some time in the not distant future we will begin to consider seriously his suggestions of a conference. He quite likely assumes that we will then ask the French to take soundings with the Chinese and North Vietnamese.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> FRUS, Ball to State Department, June 6, 1964, p. 468; de Gaulle dismissed Ball’s comparison of the PRC and Soviet Russia in 1917: “Russia had had an intelligentsia, an army, and agriculture. China has none of these things.”

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*; Ball maintained that South Vietnam had to be further strengthened and Hanoi’s infiltration had to be reduced before any talks could take place. He also pointed to the repeated transgression by Hanoi in violation of the Laos accords.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 469.

<sup>205</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Telegram Ball to State Department, June 6, 1964, 469–470. De Gaulle resented American criticism of his policy which cast him in the role of scapegoat. Ball had privately hoped that de

De Gaulle's refusal to fall in line triggered another round of diplomatic debate between Paris and Washington on American policy in Vietnam. On July 1, 1964 Rusk met with French Ambassador Hervé Alphand in yet an effort to find consensus.<sup>206</sup> Once more the discussion led nowhere. Both sides repeated the same arguments but the tone of the debate sharpened. Alphand blamed American interference in South Vietnam since 1954 for the current difficulties. Rusk discarded this view and demanded that France help create a viable government in South Vietnam. Paris should publicly recognize the need for a continuous American presence in Vietnam: "Standing aside and equating the U.S. with Communist presence was definitely not helpful."<sup>207</sup> As soon as Hanoi and Beijing would "leave Southeast Asia alone" the Americans could withdraw. Rusk asked Alphand to inform the Chinese that the United States was determined to protect the independence of South Vietnam.<sup>208</sup>

Rusk then became "brutally frank" and in scarcely veiled terms charged de Gaulle with rejecting America's Vietnam policy in the false belief that Washington threatened to diminish French influence in Southeast Asia. The United States, according to Rusk, did not seek to challenge French power and welcomed an "extension of French influence in Southeast Asia, in Africa, and other parts of the world." Alphand angrily rejected Rusk's allegations and stated that nobody in the French government feared American predominance at the cost of French prestige. The ambassador emphasized that the global role of the United States had been a "good thing" and had helped in securing peace in the

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Gaulle's argument might affect and perhaps even change the perceptions of LBJ and his "hawkish" advisors. To no avail.

<sup>206</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, p. 95; FRUS, Vietnam, Memorandum of Conversation, Rusk-Alphand, Department of State, Washington, July 1, 1964, p. 533.

West. Nevertheless, American policy-making led to the deep U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia which obviously was not a good idea.<sup>209</sup>

Rusk strongly disagreed and attacked the parochial perspective of the Europeans. The United States looked beyond the confines of the Atlantic and, as a Pacific power, the security of Asia was of equal importance to that of Europe: "To us, the defense of South Vietnam has the same significance as the defense of Berlin." The French ambassador dismissed the comparison between Berlin and Vietnam as erroneous. The loss of Berlin would seriously threaten Western security while failure in Vietnam would not endanger the Western world.<sup>210</sup> Rusk was obviously frustrated with the inconclusive discussion and once more demanded outright French support:

The secretary [Rusk] said that the appearance of a division of the West in regard to Southeast Asia had a definite bearing on the problem and made a solution more difficult. He said that the French should tell the North Vietnamese that they must leave the South Vietnamese alone and that France will oppose them if they continued their interference.<sup>211</sup>

Rusk expected that the French would also emphasize to Beijing the need to refrain from further support of Hanoi. If the Chinese refused, then Paris should also oppose the PRC. Ultimately, a persuasive French stand against the Communists would truly allow the neutralization of Southeast Asia. A non-aligned Southeast Asia would probably turn toward Paris, increasing the French role and influence in the region.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>207</sup> FRUS, Vietnam, Memorandum of Conversation, Rusk-Alphand, July 1, 1964, p. 534.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 535.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., pp. 535-536; Rusk maintained that the loss of Saigon would undermine American credibility in the West. Alphand did not share this view and affirmed European confidence in the United States.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., pp. 536-537.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 537.

The intense debate did not change de Gaulle's mind. With every contact between American and French diplomats the gap between the two powers widened, increasingly preventing any mutual agreement concerning Vietnam. The more Washington intensified its commitment to South Vietnam and implored de Gaulle to support U.S. policy, the more obstinate de Gaulle became in his refusal to follow America's lead. Ball and Rusk identified the basic motivation of de Gaulle in his desire to pursue an independent foreign policy. Regarding Vietnam the French president, unlike Washington, also enjoyed the leisure of waiting for events to turn in his favor. Events did play into the hands of de Gaulle. He was probably not deeply interested in the fate of the Vietnamese but focused on how his government could benefit from the turmoil in Vietnam. France now maintained relations with China, and offered an alternative from the Cold War conflict to Third World countries. Both were important elements for de Gaulle's policy in Europe and the world.

De Gaulle would not relinquish the newly found opportunity for French *grandeur* by placating Washington. Instead he used the conflict in Vietnam effectively to serve his own political goals. But de Gaulle also profoundly worried over the possibility of another large-scale war in Asia, a sentiment that was shared by London and Bonn. A major war in Asia might refocus American attention away from Europe, possibly leading to the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Europe. Therefore Europe might be more vulnerable to the Soviet Union. Lastly, de Gaulle, as Wilson and Erhard, was apprehensive of being drawn into an Asian war. Europe could live with the fall of South Vietnam but not the fall of West Berlin.

Consequently, de Gaulle became increasingly outspoken about the American course in Vietnam. At a state dinner given in honor of Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk de Gaulle deplored the "cruel division" of Vietnam which only aggravated Vietnamese hardships by unending foreign intervention. At a July 23, 1964 press conference de Gaulle addressed Vietnam at length and criticized American policy. He regretted that the 1954 Geneva Accords, which prohibited outside interference, had not been adhered to for long. The United States quickly established itself as the protector of the Diem regime in the sincere effort to combat Communism. When Diem tried to end the civil war he faced American objection and was replaced by military rule. Other coups followed as the Vietnamese grew less inclined to support a cause pushed on them by a foreign power. Frankly, he argued, the United States could not desire a wider conflict but should logically want a political solution. De Gaulle proposed a Geneva type conference, including all major powers, to end the bloodshed in Vietnam.<sup>213</sup> The alternative was that Asia and then the rest of the world might be drawn into a major war which nobody wanted.

French intelligence indicating that Johnson contemplated augmenting American troops in Vietnam made de Gaulle even more pessimistic about the prospects for peace in the region. He was encouraged to hear that the Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant, also favored a political solution for Vietnam and was asking other countries to do likewise. By the end of July 1964 the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong all expressed their interest in a peace conference.<sup>214</sup> Washington and

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<sup>213</sup> *Le Monde*, July 25, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>214</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, pp. 95-96.



Saigon, however, refused to consider a conference for the time being. Saigon issued a statement denouncing the idea of another Geneva conference and neutralization as contrary to the self-interest of Vietnam. General Khanh added that he was committed to pursue the fight for freedom and independence against the insurgents despite "colonialist [i.e. French] and Communist efforts." He also appealed to his allies to expand their aid in light of growing Viet Cong aggression. Johnson backed Saigon by increasing the American personnel in South Vietnam from 16,000 to 21,000 under the mantle of further military advisors and technicians.<sup>215</sup>

The Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964 and initial American bombings of North Vietnam led to Johnson's decision in March 1965 to send the Marines to Da Nang. To Paris this was a turning point which further exacerbated conditions in Vietnam. A month before American ground troops arrived in Vietnam, Murville had another meeting with Rusk and Johnson. Murville was distressed about the Tonkin Gulf incident, aerial attacks on North Vietnam, and rumours that Washington might send substantial military units to Vietnam. He urged Rusk to consider a political solution and suggested the withdrawal of all foreign forces so that the Vietnamese could finally determine their future without any foreign interference. Rusk was not inclined to listen.<sup>216</sup>

President Johnson openly expressed his annoyance to Murville for anyone desiring negotiations. In a long monologue he presented the French foreign minister with his views on the situation in Vietnam. Accordingly, the Viet Cong grew increasingly

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<sup>215</sup> Logevall, *De Gaulle, the U.S., and Vietnam*, pp. 96-97; *Le Monde*, July, 26, 1964, pp. 1-2; and July 29, 1964, p. 3; Paris was concerned by these developments and feared that Hanoi would increase its activity in the South. American comments that Washington would respond "appropriately" to such aggression intensified French anxiety.

aggressive, causing serious incidents which also involved Americans. The United States had to fight back to prevent another Korea. Johnson did not desire further escalation but he had to decide which military response was appropriate for each incident:

We are going to keep them guessing and use appropriate means in response to their aggression. We don't want to move to escalation, but if the others do it, we will do whatever is required on the basis of the wisest military judgement. We would like to have everybody else's help in our efforts and we haven't had much help from others.<sup>217</sup>

Johnson was merely honoring a commitment made by his predecessors to assist South Vietnam in establishing a viable government. He only desired that the Viet Cong stop its aggression and allow peace to return in South Vietnam. But negotiations were presently unrealistic. Saigon had first to improve its bargaining position. Johnson openly wondered what de Gaulle would do if he were in the same situation facing attacks on his people and installations. He also pointed out that he was under growing domestic pressure from Republicans to respond more forcefully to Communist aggression in Vietnam. Unless Johnson secured sufficient support from his European allies, the American public as well as Congress would maintain doubts about European reliability and the purpose of the Western alliance in general.<sup>218</sup>

Murville was neither intimidated nor convinced by the president's arguments. Although he understood the problems the president was facing, Murville insisted that a political settlement was the only way out of the American dilemma. The French politician point by point refuted Johnson's views about the current situation in Vietnam calling

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<sup>216</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>217</sup> Gardner, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, p. 271.

<sup>218</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 108-109; Gardner, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 270-271. LBJ's intimidation strategy and threat to withdraw American troops from Europe certainly worked with Bonn and in a lesser

them misguided, unrealistic, and unconvincing.<sup>219</sup> Johnson could obviously not count on French support. But to Murville it was also apparent that he had no chance of changing Johnson's mind. Once more both sides were deadlocked.<sup>220</sup>

On March 1, 1965 de Gaulle made public his intention to cooperate with Moscow in finding a negotiated settlement for Vietnam. His announcement came only days after Johnson stated that the time was not yet ripe for negotiations. Washington was deeply angered by the French initiative. Accordingly, de Gaulle violated the spirit of SEATO which had been created to defend Southeast Asia against Communist aggression.<sup>221</sup> But de Gaulle's proposals received some favorable responses in South Vietnam.

The civilian government of Dr. Pham Huy Quat was contemplating negotiations as well. Sources close to the government revealed that his cabinet, under public pressure to reach a peaceful solution, was willing to establish contact with the Viet Cong to conclude a cease-fire. It was uncertain, however, whether this was just another political move or a serious effort to secure peace for South Vietnam.<sup>222</sup> Dr. Quat soon changed his mind. He told the press that his country would continue to fight Communist aggression and demanded that the NLF cease all hostilities before any settlement could be reached. Quat also attacked any foreign power that demanded a return to the Geneva settlement since, he claimed, the great majority of the Vietnamese thought otherwise. The Buddhist

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degree also with London. But Paris was far from being impressed. Two years later, it was France which withdrew from NATO command, citing the war in Vietnam as one of the reasons for this decision.

<sup>219</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 109-110; Murville also pointed to recent French contacts with the PRC which revealed that Beijing favored a peace conference. Paris received similar signals from Hanoi.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110; Gardner, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 271-272. Murville partly blamed the influence of the CIA and some of advisors for LBJ's intransigence. Accordingly, the American president received too many "facts" that were not based on realities in Vietnam.

<sup>221</sup> Gardner, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, p. 272.

<sup>222</sup> *Le Monde*, March 1, 1965, p. 2.

movement defied the government position and demanded the withdrawal of all foreign forces from South Vietnam.<sup>223</sup> While the South Vietnamese were divided on how to react to the Viet Cong, Washington was increasing its pressure on the insurgents in Vietnam. Bombing of North Vietnam continued as part of the desire to negotiate only from a position of strength. Washington dismissed the notion that the conflict in Vietnam was basically a civil war but instead increased its pressure on Hanoi.<sup>224</sup>

On March 8, 1965, two battalions of Marines landed in Da Nang. Soon other Marines and Army troops followed. The United States had begun the Americanization of the war in South Vietnam. Washington now faced the dangers of an unlimited commitment which de Gaulle had described to Kennedy in 1961; by pouring in more and more troops, it hoped to turn the tide, but would find itself riding the tiger's back. Paris opposed the American escalation and intensified its criticism of Washington's Vietnam policy. This course eventually led to outright accusations that the United States was primarily responsible for the war in Vietnam.

Although contacts between both countries continued, France and the United States were evidently "hostile allies." The tensions between both countries would only ease with the beginning of peace talks on Vietnam in 1968. While the other Western Europeans initially endorsed the American escalation in Vietnam, despite private concerns, the French position remained consistent labeling American policy as gravely mistaken.

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<sup>223</sup> *Le Monde*, March 1, 1965, p. 2.

<sup>224</sup> *Le Monde*, March 2, 1965, p. 2; the paper commented on a recently published "White Paper" that alleged that most Americans were insufficiently informed on the complicated situation in Vietnam or why the United States was involved in that country. On the CIA White Paper see also: Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, (New York, 1991), pp. 141-142; a few critics within the United States argued along similar lines as Paris by stating that the pace of escalation had accelerated not because of Vietnamese action but due to increased American pressure.

Unlike the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, de Gaulle was not willing to handle the issue of Vietnam solely through diplomatic channels, but chose to present his case to the media. Once again, he was motivated by profound concerns over the world-wide implications of the conflict, and the possible geo-political benefits he could harvest for France by openly defying the United States.

In the spring of 1965, Murville related to the Soviet ambassador that France was more determined than ever to reconvene the Geneva conference and end the conflict in Vietnam. While Washington was seeking Western support for a widening war in Southeast Asia, France was talking to Cold War opponents, Moscow and Beijing, in order to find a political solution. The French opposition to American escalation in Vietnam found the approval of U.N. General Secretary U Thant, and other Western governments, as that of Canada for example. India, Poland, and the Soviet Union, representing the unaligned world and the Warsaw pact, also condemned the American course as a violation of the Geneva agreement, calling for an end of hostilities.<sup>225</sup>

A visit by George Ball to Paris in early September 1965, renewed speculations that the Americans might be willing to consider talks over Vietnam. It was quickly apparent that Washington was not about to change course. Johnson was not interested in any French mediation and sent Ball to reiterate American goals and policy in Vietnam. North Vietnam was also unwilling to begin any negotiations as long as American troops remained in the South. De Gaulle, nevertheless, insisted that military force could not end the conflict and urged the return to the 1954 settlement, yet was unsuccessful at

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<sup>225</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 110; *Le Monde*, March 4, 1965, p. 1; March 9, 1965, p. 1.

convincing the Americans.<sup>226</sup> The buildup in Vietnam continued and with it French opposition to America's policy in Southeast Asia.

Later in September 1965, Murville addressed the General Assembly of United Nations on Vietnam. He pleaded for the admission of the PRC to the United Nations. Without Beijing the agonizing problems of Southeast Asia could not be solved satisfactorily. Murville insisted on a political settlement for the conflict. But such a solution was only feasible if all foreign powers involved in Vietnam ended their interference:

Voici des années, et d'abord par la voix du général de Gaulle, que la France s'est exprimée très clairement sur le règlement qui lui paraît seul être possible et qui doit être, à son avis, fondé sur l'indépendance, la neutralité et la non-intervention dans les affaires intérieures du Vietnam, tels que ces principes avaient été définis dans les accords de Genève de 1954. Une négociation à cet effet aurait sans doute été jadis immédiatement possible.<sup>227</sup>

According to Murville, the French were appalled by the devastation caused by war and deeply empathized with the Vietnamese people who, despite the previous conflict with France, remained a true friend to the French nation. The war not only had bloody repercussions in Vietnam but seriously hurt its neighbors Cambodia and Laos, which were also torn apart by opposing factions. In the sole interest of the people of Southeast Asia and world peace, France was willing to use all her experience, influence, and good will to work for a peaceful settlement and the reconstruction of Vietnam. The French government once more reaffirmed that it did not support any "war of aggression" in

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<sup>226</sup> *Le Monde*, September 1, 1965, pp. 1-2; September 2, 1965, p. 1.

<sup>227</sup> *Le Monde*, October 1, 1965, p. 1.

Vietnam, and opposed foreign interference by North Vietnamese, Chinese Communists, as well as the United States.<sup>228</sup>

The war allowed de Gaulle to pursue his 'Grand Design' and he exploited successfully the American dilemma in Vietnam, thereby enhancing the French position in the world. He continued to seek contacts with North Vietnam leading to the resumption of diplomatic relations with Hanoi in July 1967.<sup>229</sup> De Gaulle also sought better relations with Moscow in order to promote French leadership in the West. In April 1965 the Soviet foreign secretary, Andrei Gromyko, visited Paris with both sides agreeing on their opposition to the American role in South Vietnam. De Gaulle used the occasion to publicly distance himself from Washington and present France as an honest friend and supporter of the Third World:

Yes, we are helping these countries, and they rely on France as a result. In their view the contrast between us and the United States has become immense: while we are helping them, the Americans are using all their brilliant new technological inventions to exterminate in the most horrible ways thousands of these poor long suffering Vietnamese, who merely want to be left alone.<sup>230</sup>

In the summer of 1965 de Gaulle visited the Soviet Union, hoping to increase his status as the leader of Western Europe and creating a counter-balance to Washington. The rapprochement with Moscow culminated in 1966 in the joint Soviet-French declaration of friendship which constituted a virtual non-aggression pact.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 110-111; *Le Monde*, October 1, 1965, p. 1.

<sup>229</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 111.

<sup>230</sup> Gardner, *Lyndon Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>231</sup> Guy Carmoy, *The Foreign Policies of France, 1944-1968*, translated by Elaine P. Halperin, (Chicago and London, 1970), p. 477; De Gaulle also used economic pressure to defy the United States. He decided to convert U.S. currency into gold, which not only aimed to diminish American gold reserves but drained American financial resources at a time when the U.S. government experienced the growing expenditures caused by the commitment in Vietnam.

## All out 'war' against the United States: Withdrawal from NATO and the Pnomh Penh Speech

On March 7, 1966, de Gaulle wrote to Johnson that France appreciated the achievements of the Atlantic Alliance and the essential role of the United States by securing its members' freedom. However, the world and France had changed considerably since the signing of the NATO treaty in 1949:

France considers the changes which have taken place or are in process of occurring since 1949 in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere as well as the evolution of her own situation and her own forces no longer justify insofar as that concerns her the arrangements of military nature adopted after the conclusion of the alliance.<sup>232</sup>

Because France no longer required foreign forces on her soil for defense, France would "reassume on her territory the full exercise of her sovereignty." All NATO forces had to leave within thirteen months. Forewarned of de Gaulle's move by Ambassador Bohlen Johnson remained calm and accepted the decision by offering France a leading role in the Alliance if de Gaulle changed his mind.<sup>233</sup>

De Gaulle did not change his mind. On March 11, 1966 Paris sent an *Aide-Mémoire* to Washington elaborating further the decision to resume its full sovereignty. Most importantly, Europe was no longer the center of international crisis. The threat of

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<sup>232</sup> FRUS, Western European Region, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, Letter from President de Gaulle to President Johnson, Paris, March 7, 1966, p. 325.

<sup>233</sup> FRUS, Western European Region, 1964-1968, Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bator) to President Johnson, March 7, 1966, p. 327. Washington was clearly angered by de Gaulle's decision but would not criticize him in public because it might lead to detrimental reactions by other European countries. Most frustrating was the fact that France did enjoy the status of "free-rider" because its geography guaranteed NATO protection.



conflict lay now in Asia where the Alliance was “obviously not implicated.”<sup>234</sup> De Gaulle addressed two major concerns which forced him to disengage from NATO: the war in Vietnam along with American demands to give at least moral support to its policy there and the infringement on French sovereignty by NATO. Paris saw no choice but to disengage after years of discussion with the United States to revise the structure of NATO.

To Washington the French withdrawal along with the recent overtures to Moscow indicated that de Gaulle was set on a neutralist course between the two blocs, which might have serious repercussions in Europe.<sup>235</sup> Ambassador Bohlen blamed de Gaulle and his policy of *grandeur* for this new affront to the United States. Regardless, Washington would be unable to alter French policy. Bohlen commented that the current NATO crisis revealed two “diametrically” opposed ideas toward the conduct of foreign relations:

On one hand de Gaulle is fanatically a proponent of the idea of independence; that the nation-state is the sole enduring, viable entity in international relations; that this entity is uncompromisable and multilateral arrangements tend to limit its freedom and independence. On the other hand is the concept espoused by the US and other states in the modern world which considers all nations, even the most powerful, as interdependent in their relations with other like minded, particularly allied states.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> FRUS, Western European Region, Aide-Mémoire from the French Government to the U.S. Government, Paris, March 11, 1966, p. 333.

<sup>235</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 61-66; Gardner, *Lyndon Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 273-275; Brands, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 488-490.

<sup>236</sup> FRUS, Western European Region, Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, Paris, March, 31, 1966, p. 352.

While the French would not find fault with the first part of the statement they disagreed profoundly with the second. Interdependence meant nuclear sharing and an equal voice in the alliance, yet Washington had refused to comply with these French demands.<sup>237</sup>

Washington, albeit angered by the French decision, was hopeful that once de Gaulle had gone U.S.-French relations would revert back to normal. Yet the resentment over de Gaulle's decision was obvious in McGeorge Bundy's statement to the Senate Foreign Relation Committee in June, 1966. Bundy regarded de Gaulle's policy as disappointing, "costly in its pride, wasteful in its lost opportunities, irrelevant in much of its dramatics." Both countries could still reach an understanding on larger issues but Bundy dismissed the French claim that it presented an alternative to a bi-polar world. De Gaulle's leadership had failed to unite West Germany or attract other Western European countries:

The notion of leadership in a third world was simply unreal; this heady wine did not survive its first voyage. The recognition of China was a gesture with no practical result. And the present specter of a deal with Moscow is sheer fantasy - as far beyond French power as it is contrary to French intentions . . . We have many differences with France, but none that we cannot endure. The most painful may be the quite special French position toward Vietnam, but in the light of the French past there, it is not surprising that there should be some differences between us. The French attitude is not helpful, but it is understandable and marginal.<sup>238</sup>

Even if Americans regarded the French view on Vietnam as marginal, de Gaulle was certainly not discouraged and continued his criticism of the American Vietnam policy. From mid-1965 to 1966 onward he expressed his misgivings to all foreign

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<sup>237</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 63-64; Murville emphasized that, while Paris had repeatedly asked for a revision of NATO, Washington considered its predominance in the alliance as the "easiest and most efficient way."

<sup>238</sup> Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 89th Congress, Second Session, June 20, 1966, Statement of McGeorge Bundy, pp. 4-5.

diplomats, particularly Americans. The conflict was not only devastating Vietnam but poisoned the international climate by augmenting the fear of another world war. Moreover, the war in Vietnam demonstrated again that the United States simply could not accept the sovereign will of other nations.<sup>239</sup> De Gaulle could perceive only one solution for Vietnam - the immediate halt of the bombing against North Vietnam and negotiations.

Washington did not comply and de Gaulle decided to take the offensive. He chose the occasion of his state visit to Cambodia to express his position on the conflict in Vietnam.<sup>240</sup> Upon his arrival to Phnom-Penh on August 31, 1966 de Gaulle laid out what was to follow. He told Prince Sihanouk that he appreciated Cambodia's policy of independence and neutrality as promising precedent for the entire region. Vietnam deeply troubled both de Gaulle and Sihanouk. The two leaders defended the resumption of diplomatic relations with North Vietnam as a venue to explore new possibilities of peace and gather further information about the future intentions of Hanoi. Moreover, Sihanouk shared de Gaulle's pessimism about the outcome of the Vietnam war and was apprehensive of further escalation.<sup>241</sup>

Although the prospect of peace was distant, de Gaulle could not resist the opportunity to voice his opinion on the Vietnam War. To a cheering crowd of 100,000 he congratulated the Cambodians for defending their independence from both the Khmer

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<sup>239</sup> Anne Sa'adah, "Idées Simples and Idées Fixes: De Gaulle, the United States, and Vietnam," in: Robert Paxton and Nicholas Wahl, *De Gaulle and the United States: A Centennial Reappraisal*, (Oxford, UK, 1994), pp. 295-298.

<sup>240</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 112; Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique*, p. 370; De Gaulle urged LBJ in February 1966 to accept a negotiated settlement, worried over the renewed bombing of North Vietnam after a short break during the Christmas Holidays.

<sup>241</sup> *Le Monde*, September 1, 1966, p.1; Sihanouk deplored that recent initiatives by France and Canada to Hanoi had failed. His country was certainly anxious to prevent any further escalation of the Vietnam conflict.

Rouge and the United States and saving “their lives and souls.” Unfortunately, the people of South Vietnam still suffered from outside intervention. The United States interfered in a civil war. American attacks on North Vietnam, inching closer to Chinese territory, endangered not only peace in Asia but in the world at large. Hence, American policy was increasingly criticized by the peoples of Europe, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>242</sup>

De Gaulle endorsed the Cambodian policy of neutrality as the solution for all of Indochina and condemned those who aspired otherwise. France had learned from its own painful experience not to fight the will of the people. The French leader advised all combatants, particularly the Americans, to accept the lessons of history. Washington lacked clearly defined political objectives and the Vietnamese resented American intrusion on their domestic affairs. The peoples of Indochina should demand an explanation of why the Americans were fighting in their countries in the first place:

Eh bien! la France considère que les combats qui ravagent l’Indochine n’apportent, par eux-mêmes et eux non plus, aucune issue. Suivant elle, s’il est invraisemblable que l’appareil guerrier américain vienne à être anéanti sur place, il n’y d’autre part aucune chance pour les peuples de l’Asie se soumettent à loi de l’étranger venu de l’autre rive du Pacifique, quelles que puissent être ses intentions.<sup>243</sup>

Why did the United States resist a peaceful settlement and refuse to accept the Geneva Accord of 1954? Why did it oppose the right of self-determination for the peoples of Indochina? The path of negotiation was complicated and arduous, and would require the eventual withdrawal of all American forces, but it was the only way to secure peace. While the chances for negotiation were presently remote, de Gaulle appealed once

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<sup>242</sup> *Le Monde*, September 1, 1966, p. 2; de Gaulle met with representatives from Hanoi and the NLF before he addressed the Cambodians.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

again to the United States to listen to reason and not condemn the world to worse afflictions. De Gaulle was obligated to speak out because of France's earlier experience in Indochina and the strong ties she still maintained in the region. But it was also out of a deep and old friendship with the United States that de Gaulle had to remind the Americans of their long cherished belief in independence and self-determination of all nations.<sup>244</sup>

De Gaulle argued that Washington still had the opportunity to change course and heed the advice he had repeatedly offered regarding Vietnam. It was time for the United States to renounce a policy from which it did not benefit and which it could not justify. Washington had to accept a settlement endorsed by the major international powers which would restore peace to Indochina and guaranteed prosperity of this important region. To continue its military engagement would only hurt American pride, contradict American ideals, and undermined its national interest. Negotiation was also in the best interest of the West, and would serve to restore the credibility of the United States in Europe and in

Asia:

Elle [i.e.France] le dit enfin, avec la conviction qu'au degré de puissance, de richesse, de rayonnement auquel les Etats-Unis sont actuellement parvenus le fait de renoncer, à leur tour, a une expédition lointaine, dès lors qu'elle apparaît sans bénéfice et sans justification, et de lui présenter un arrangement international organisant la paix et le développement d'une importante région du monde n'aura rien, en définitive, qui blesser leur fierté, contrarier leur idéal et nuire à leurs intérêts. Au contraire, en prenant une voie aussi conforme au génie de l'Occident, quelle audience les Etats-Unis retrouverait-ils d'un bout à l'autre du monde et quelle chance recouvrerait la paix sur place et partout ailleurs.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> *Le Monde*, September 1, 1966, p. 2.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

While a peaceful solution was de Gaulle's most sincere desire, he refused to mediate the conflict, believing that such effort did not promise any chance of success. Instead of France, Cambodia might be better situated to initiate negotiations and offer her service as a model of independence in Southeast Asia.<sup>246</sup>

It was de Gaulle at his best. Foreign minister Murville was deeply impressed by the wisdom and clairvoyance expressed by his "glorious and venerated" president advising Asia and the world on restoring peace in Southeast Asia. De Gaulle was close to having the best of both worlds. He presented the solution for war-stricken Vietnam, speaking only in terms of "friendship and respect" for the United States. At the same time he directly accused Washington of imperialism. But de Gaulle refused to take any active role in mediating the conflict and tossed this thankless task to the Cambodians.<sup>247</sup> In the final communiqué of de Gaulle and Sihanouk, Paris promised to guarantee the independence and neutrality of Cambodia. Both heads of state expressed their anxiety about the situation in Vietnam, where foreign intervention had transformed a civil war into an "international conflict." All foreign powers involved had to recognize the Geneva Accord of 1954, cease their intervention and withdraw all troops from Vietnamese soil.<sup>248</sup>

Washington was infuriated by de Gaulle's attempt to blame the United States for the war in Vietnam. President Johnson, in public at least, again remained calm. But he was worried about a domestic backlash to de Gaulle's speech. French accusations might either intensify opposition to the war or push Congress toward a more isolationist policy in Europe. Within a week, Johnson responded to de Gaulle's challenge in a press

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<sup>246</sup> *Le Monde*, September 1, 1966, p. 2; Sa'adah, *Idées Simples and Idées Fixes*, pp. 307-311.

<sup>247</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 112-113; Gardner, *Lyndon Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 275-276.

conference. The United States was more than ready to withdraw from Vietnam if Hanoi did so as well. However, Hanoi was not listening and mainly spoke about war. Johnson emphasized that the world should not only scrutinize the American role in Vietnam but also focus on the deeds of the aggressor, North Vietnam and its allies.<sup>249</sup> The French responded with another attack on America's Vietnam policy. Murville used a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations to reiterate the main points de Gaulle made in Phnom-Penh. He blamed the United States for the escalation of the war and maintained that Washington was obligated to take the first steps for a negotiated settlement.<sup>250</sup>

In October, 1966, the French foreign minister met again with Johnson. Although storms clouds were gathering between Paris and Washington, the American president was surprisingly pensive during their ninety minute private meeting. Instead of demanding direct French support Johnson employed a much more subtle approach to convey his views. He told the Frenchman about his life, his hopes and worries, and his endeavor to reform American society. But most of all he addressed his sorrows over Vietnam and the dreadful responsibility the war had caused. Virtually day and night he was busy supervising the progress of military operations in Vietnam. On the day of Murville's visit Johnson selected bombing targets in the Hanoi area, profoundly aware of the casualties and hardships his decision caused. The president's monologue undoubtedly touched Murville. He was impressed by Johnson's inner turmoil. But the foreign minister also worried that Johnson was unable to follow his moral instincts because he received biased information on Vietnam. Johnson's advisors dismissed any strategy other than war, which

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<sup>248</sup> *Le Monde*, September 3, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>249</sup> Brands, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 490-491; Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique*, pp. 372-373.

precluded a meaningful appreciation of the French proposal to seek a negotiated solution.<sup>251</sup>

Johnson's inner turmoil quickly evaporated and he made clear that he was irritated by French contacts with Hanoi. He hoped that de Gaulle would cease his efforts to find channels for negotiations without consulting Washington first.<sup>252</sup> After two years of inconclusive discussions with the French, the American leader recognized that de Gaulle would remain obstinate. The only question was who could outlast the other. The Vietnam War presented de Gaulle's with a irresistible opportunity to enhance France's role in world politics. He refused to even consider the American point of view and insisted on pursuing any course he considered proper in the event the conflict in Vietnam might further escalate.<sup>253</sup>

The low point in Franco-American relations was reached in 1966. Both sides remained diametrically opposed to the future course in Vietnam and neither was willing to make concessions to the other side. De Gaulle stated in October 1966 that the war in Vietnam not only threatened world peace but forced France to pursue an independent policy vis-à-vis the United States. French independence should not be interpreted as either isolationist or hostile by Washington, but meant that "we decide ourselves what we have to do and with whom." France had surrendered to foreign dominance during the Second World War and the Fourth Republic. She had almost lost her soul and identity

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<sup>250</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, p. 113.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114; LBJ gave a similar speech to Ludwig Erhard, leading to the question whether the American president just needed an outlet to voice his own doubts about Vietnam or that he used the "teary eyes" approach to win approval for his policy.

<sup>252</sup> Ferro, *De Gaulle et l'Amérique*, p. 374.

<sup>253</sup> FRUS, Western European Region, 1964-1968, Circular Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in France, Washington, October 28, 1966, p. 490.



but, under de Gaulle's lead, was no longer willing to be a mere tool in the hands of outsiders, be that Washington, Moscow, or any other nation.<sup>254</sup> Both Washington and Paris also thought they could outlast the other side and ultimately prevail. By the end of 1966 Johnson predicted that a showdown was indeed coming and the day of "reckoning" with de Gaulle was quickly approaching.<sup>255</sup>

Yet the day of reckoning did not come in terms of outlasting de Gaulle, but rather it was events in Vietnam that undid Johnson. Although the Tet Offensive in early 1968 was a military victory for American forces the joint VC - North Vietnamese forces delivered a profound psychological defeat to the United States. Johnson accepted the consequences in March 1968 by announcing that he was not seeking reelection and ordered an end to the bombing of North Vietnam, opening the path for negotiations. Paris greeted Johnson's decision as a first step in the right direction and commended his political courage. The bombing halt was a positive sign that the United States finally considered de Gaulle's proposal of a negotiated settlement. Paris was selected by Hanoi and Washington as meeting place for peace talks. For Johnson and de Gaulle, their "cold war" over Vietnam was over, although the war in Vietnam would linger on for five more years.<sup>256</sup>

French-American antagonism over Vietnam serves as a valuable case study in the trans-Atlantic relationship. Until 1969 both France and the United States persisted on the exclusive validity of their respective policies and failed to build on shared values. For the United States in Vietnam this meant that a major European ally not only refused to

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<sup>254</sup> Sa'adah, *Idées Simples and Idées Fixes*, pp. 310-311; Hoffmann, *Decline or Renewal*, p. 284.

<sup>255</sup> Gardner, *Lyndon Johnson and de Gaulle*, pp. 277-278; Brands, *Johnson and de Gaulle*, p. 491.

support Washington but even publicly criticized the American role in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam controversy marked a turning point in U.S.- French relations. As the Vietnam War revealed the limitations of American military intervention, French refusal to sanction U.S. policy in Southeast Asia placed boundaries on American political predominance within the Atlantic Alliance. French-American antagonism over Vietnam demonstrated that the United States could not dictate blind, obedient support from a key European ally. Ultimately, the French-American debate over Vietnam revealed that the United States needed the assistance of its allies as much as they needed U.S. support. America could not face the challenges around the globe alone and neither could Europe. For the alliance to succeed and thrive on both sides of the Atlantic, the allies had to listen closely to each other's concerns and realize that selfish interest is self-defeating. Had the United States seriously entertained de Gaulle's advice earlier, America's experience in Vietnam might have been less costly. The importance of allied support and guidance has not been lost on successive American administrations.

French-American relations improved considerably with the change of American administrations. The new president, Richard Nixon, visited France shortly after taking office in February 1969, and played the game of diplomacy more astutely than his predecessor. Nixon reaffirmed that Europe was of primary importance to the United States. He asserted the political autonomy of Western Europe in whose affairs the United States had no intention or right to interfere.<sup>257</sup> De Gaulle was particularly pleased with Nixon's recognition of French leadership in Western Europe. To the ultimate delight of

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<sup>256</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 116-118.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-128.

the French president, Nixon treated Great Britain as merely another European power and no longer as the special ally of the U.S. As Nixon later reflected:

I wanted this trip, my first abroad as President, to establish the principle that we would consult with our allies before negotiating with our potential adversaries. I also wanted to show the world that the new American President was not completely obsessed with Vietnam, and to dramatize to Americans at home that, despite opposition to the war, their President could still be received abroad with respect and enthusiasm.<sup>258</sup>

De Gaulle could not agree more. Although Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 ended any dreams de Gaulle had of reviving the old French-Russian alliance, the future looked promising for a new age of French *grandeur*.

De Gaulle's triumph lasted only a short time. Like Lyndon Johnson, de Gaulle was challenged and eventually swept away by a younger generation disillusioned with the values, goals, thinking, and self-assertive leadership of its elders. In May 1968 student protests erupted in Paris which were soon supported by French workers, leading to large-scale strikes. De Gaulle managed to stay on for ten more months, then resigned in March 1969 after a popular referendum rejected his constitutional reforms. De Gaulle retired to his ancestral home at Colombey and died there on November 9, 1970. Lyndon Johnson survived the general for a little more than two years. Neither would see the end of the Vietnam War. As de Gaulle had envisioned the Second Indochina War ended with a negotiated settlement. The United States withdrew its forces from Vietnam in early 1973. Two years later Vietnam was unified by the Northern victory over the South. Even

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<sup>258</sup> Richard Nixon, The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, (New York, 1990) with an new introduction by Richard Nixon, pp. 370-374; Nixon and de Gaulle agreed on the necessity to engage China - certainly a departure from previous American policy. Nixon felt that he and de Gaulle had established a "new entente cordiale" between their countries. Regarding Vietnam, de Gaulle again stated that negotiations were the only way out and suggested direct contacts with Hanoi. Nixon was indeed interested, confident that the French would deliver his message to Hanoi.

though Vietnam became a Communist country, most other “dominoes” in Southeast Asia did not fall.

De Gaulle sought a greater voice for France in Europe and world affairs and mostly succeeded. He increased French *grandeur*. He elevated his country from the turmoil of the Fourth Republic to a major voice in international politics and gave the French a renewed sense of self-confidence. Certainly, not everyone would or could agree with his methods. For the United States and, in a lesser degree also to Great Britain, the general was a obstinate, worrisome “ally.” De Gaulle’s political goals as well as his suspicion of “Anglo-Saxons” placed a heavy burden on French-American relations. The growing conflict in Vietnam presented an irresistible opportunity to enlarge France’s role in international politics and defy American predominance in the West. Yet his initial advice on Vietnam given to Kennedy was both genuine and far-sighted. American refusal to seriously consider de Gaulle’s approach, and heed that of other voices of dissent both in Europe and the United States, triggered open French opposition to the American role in Vietnam. By being less defiant and more understanding of Washington de Gaulle might have had a better chance to affect America’s Vietnam policy. While the general proved a great statesman for France, his desire to enhance French prestige as well as his deep-rooted suspicion of “Anglo-Saxons” provoked crises and misgivings within the trans-Atlantic alliance. Once the storm created by the Vietnam conflict had cleared, the successors of de Gaulle and Johnson learned and profited from the lessons of this turbulent chapter of the Western alliance. France proved a reliable ally to the United States during the Gulf War and NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia.

**Part Three:**

**The Eager Ally:  
The Federal Republic of Germany and America's War in Vietnam**

*Johnson hat diese Kalamität nicht angefangen, er hat sie von Kennedy geerbt . . . Aber wenn eine große Nation entdeckt, daß ein bestimmter Kurs schwieriger ist, als erwartet, dann ist es keine Demütigung für sie, wenn sie ihre Politik ändert. Sie müssen sich aus Vietnam zurückziehen . . . Europa ist schließlich die allerwichtigste Zone für die USA, nicht Lateinamerika, nicht Asien. Wenn sie uns ignorieren besteht die Möglichkeit, daß die Sowjetunion die Kontrolle über Deutschland und Frankreich erringt.*

Konrad Adenauer on America's Vietnam policy, August 8, 1966

In an interview with the *New York Times* in August 1966 former chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany Konrad Adenauer urged Lyndon B. Johnson to disengage from Vietnam. Both the Erhard government and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) deplored Adenauer's frank statement and, taking the opposite position, strongly endorsed America's Vietnam policy.<sup>259</sup> The spat between Adenauer and Erhard on the "Vietnam question" reflected their differing approaches to West German foreign policy-making. Both chancellors were affected by limitations on West German sovereignty in international relations.<sup>260</sup> Adenauer and Erhard were committed to secure American protection, achieve German unity and maintain the freedom of Berlin. Both were afraid that German goals might become of secondary importance to the Western allies in a climate of détente. Following the Berlin crisis Adenauer tried to expand the German role in transatlantic relations by strengthening Bonn's European base, most notably through close cooperation with France. Erhard rejected this policy and regarded the United States as Germany's principal ally. He hoped that loyal support of Washington would result in new initiatives on the German question. But Erhard could not dismiss France's role in

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<sup>259</sup> For Adenauer's statement and the reaction to it see: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 8, 1966. Erhard headed a coalition government of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Liberals (FDP).

achieving unification. The “Vietnam question” intensified the German dilemma of how to pursue the quest of unity when its major allies, Washington and Paris, were at odds over the conflict in Southeast Asia. Erhard faithful support of Washington precluded an unconstrained German voice regarding the Vietnam conflict and he chose to fully endorse American policy in Southeast Asia. By doing so he alienated Charles de Gaulle and found himself increasingly pressured by Lyndon Johnson to participate in the American effort in Vietnam. America’s conflict in Southeast Asia and Bonn’s response to it not only complicated relations between Germany, the United States, and France but impeded progress on the issue of German unification.

### I. Konrad Adenauer: 1961 to 1963

The political life of the Federal Republic during the first two decades of its existence was dominated by Konrad Adenauer. Born January 5, 1876 in Cologne to a middle class family, Adenauer was shaped by his roots as a Catholic and Rhinelander<sup>261</sup> Early on, Adenauer was intrigued by politics and joined the Catholic Center Party (Zentrum Partei). In 1906 he won a seat in the city council of Cologne and was elected mayor in 1917. He held this post until he was forcibly removed by the Hitler regime in

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<sup>260</sup> In 1955, the FRG became officially sovereign, but the Allies still retained the final say in a peace settlement for Germany, the issue of reunification, and the status of Berlin.

<sup>261</sup> Arnulf Baring, *Im Anfang war Adenauer: Die Entstehung der Kanzlerdemokratie*, (München, 1982), pp. 86-91; see also Willy Brandt, *My Life in Politics*, (New York, 1992), p. 27; Though Adenauer resented Prussian militarism, which he blamed for the First World War, many of his contemporaries assign him distinct “Prussian” traits. His home town, Cologne, maintained close ties to France. Catholicism, too, represented a major cultural divide in Germany until recently. Adenauer’s views reflected this cultural divide, to him the Elbe was the frontier with Asia, whereas the Rhineland reflected far greater liberal spirit and sophistication.

1933. In 1945, Adenauer joined the newly formed Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and served as its chairman from 1946 to 1949 in the British occupied zone. In 1949 Adenauer was chosen president of the parliamentary council convened to write a new constitution for Germany. This prominent position gave him national recognition and paved the road to his election as first chancellor of the Federal Republic with the majority of one vote - his own.<sup>262</sup>

From 1949 to his resignation in October 1963 Adenauer was the prime architect of West German foreign policy.<sup>263</sup> His approach was based upon three basic assessments of the international system. First, international politics were ruled by the antagonism between the free Western world and Communist expansion. The creation of two German states was the obvious result of that conflict. Second, although Europe's future was primarily determined by the Soviet challenge, it was still influenced by horrors of the recent World War, which made it potentially an anti-German system. Finally, all Western European democracies relied heavily on the United States for their survival in this antagonistic system.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Baring, *Im Anfang war Adenauer*, pp. 108-109; Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer Ära: Grundlegung der Bundesrepublik*, (München, 1991), p. 26; Alfred Grosser, *Geschichte Deutschlands seit 1945: Eine Bilanz*, (München, 1970), pp. 172-174; Adenauer was fervently opposed to Socialism and Communism and believed that only a free market economy could best serve the nation's interest. He also clashed with the Nazis and was arrested twice. His return as mayor of Cologne in 1945 was short-lived and he was soon dismissed by the British.

<sup>263</sup> Wolfram F. Hanrieder, *Germany, America, Europe: Forty Years of German Foreign Policy*, (New Haven, 1989), p. 5; Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer Ära*, pp. 29-31; Baring, *Im Anfang war Adenauer*, pp. 109-111; Grosser, *Geschichte Deutschlands*, pp. 420-425; The initial goals of Adenauer were to end occupation status and facilitate West German economic recovery. The latter was greatly aided by the European Recovery Program (ERP or Marshall Plan) and by 1955 the Allied High Commission lifted the status of occupation and relinquished most of its control over West German foreign policy.

<sup>264</sup> Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Adenauer und Europa*, in: *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 27, Jahrgang 4, October 1979, pp. 474-475.



The solution for Adenauer was close relations with the United States and full integration of West Germany into Western Europe, which actually fitted neatly into the American policy toward Germany. Since 1947, the United States emphasized both West Germany's economic recovery as the core of the Economic Recovery Program, as well as the integration of that country into the West European state system in order to contain any potentially dangerous German political ambitions.<sup>265</sup> Adenauer also believed that a fully integrated Germany in an independent and internationally influential Europe might preclude any American-Soviet settlement over Germany without consulting European powers or Germany.<sup>266</sup>

West German foreign policy, according to Adenauer, had to be built upon the pillars of European integration and friendship with the United States. But dependency upon the United States and allied restrictions on German sovereignty allowed only limited room for maneuver which made the European aspect of Adenauer's foreign policy equally important. The corner-stone for a unified Europe was to mend ways with France. French-German friendship would provide a "Schutzwall" or protective wall against the Soviet Union. At the same time, Adenauer was fully aware that without American protection West Germany could not survive. But the European angle was a useful tool to

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<sup>265</sup> Hans Jürgen Schröder, "Die USA und westdeutscher Aufstieg," in: Klaus Larres and Torsten Oppeland, *Deutschland und die USA im 20. Jahrhundert: Geschichte der Politischen Beziehungen*, (Darmstadt, 1997), pp. 99-101, 103-105; Hanrieder, *Germany, America, Europe*, pp. 6-7; Wolfram F. Hanrieder, *West German Foreign Policy, 1949-1979: Necessities and Choices*, in: Wolfram Hanrieder, *West German Foreign Policy: 1949-1979*, (Boulder, Colorado, 1980), pp. 16-17. To Adenauer, Western European integration also prevented a Franco-Russian rapprochement. See: Schwarz, *Adenauer und Europa*, p. 480.

<sup>266</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer und Europa*, pp. 480-481; Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Adenauer's Ostpolitik*, in: Wolfram F. Hanrieder, *West German Foreign Policy: 1949-1979*, p. 131; Adenauer feared another Potsdam conference where German had no say about their own future.

regain American attention in times when the United States displayed less interest in German concerns.<sup>267</sup>

By integrating West Germany into Europe, while at the same time fostering ties with the United States, Adenauer hoped to achieve his ultimate goal - German reunification. He did not believe that reunification could be obtained in the short run. Rather, a consistent and reliable foreign policy would eventually change the perception of Germany from an aggressive power to reliable partner, both in the West and in Moscow. Nothing could be gained by a neutralist position which might bring unity at the price of freedom. In addition, the resulting and economic prosperity of the West would make it increasingly impossible for the Soviet Union to keep East Germans under their rule. Western prosperity and liberty would be irresistible.<sup>268</sup> Adenauer refused to recognize the German Democratic Republic (GDR) because its existence perpetuated the German division. Accordingly, West Germany solely represented the German nation and was the successor state to the Weimar republic. In order to maintain the claim of sole representation, Adenauer also refused to establish or ceased diplomatic relations with any country that recognized the GDR.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer und Europa*, pp. 482-485. Adenauer also hoped to engage Britain deeper into European politics but London remained aloof of the European Economic Community until the early 1960's.

<sup>268</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer und Europa*, p. 511; Hanrieder, *Germany, America, Europe*, pp. 8-9; Brandt, *My Life in Politics*, pp. 34-35; Adenauer was quite correct; until the construction of the Berlin Wall, several hundred of thousands of East Germans fled to the West.

<sup>269</sup> Baring, *Im Anfang war Adenauer*, pp. 234-236; Grosser, *Geschichte Deutschlands*, pp. 459, 461; After Adenauer's historic visit to Moscow in 1955, which led to the establishment to diplomatic relation between both countries, Bonn followed the *Hallstein Doctrine* which precluded official relation with any country that recognized East Berlin. The Western Allies supported the West German position for the time being but it placed a serious obstacle in over-coming East-West tensions.

During the 1950's and early 1960's Adenauer followed events in Vietnam, but he viewed conflict in Indochina primarily in terms of its implications for Europe and Germany. The First Indochina War required a balanced policy of not openly criticizing France's position and preventing serious repercussions for West German interests in the planned European Defense Force (EDF). The EDF would give West Europeans a greater share in their own defense, but the French overcommitment in Vietnam ultimately torpedoed the project. Bonn recognized the South Vietnamese regime in 1960 but maintained until the early 1970's that Saigon represented all of Vietnam, dismissing the factual division of that country.<sup>270</sup>

After the French defeat in 1954, Adenauer endorsed American support for South Vietnam based on the need to further secure American protection of West Germany. Bonn had to prove its loyalty to the Western allies, but could neither support the French nor the Americans militarily, due to West German constitutional restriction on the German military. Official sanction for Western aid to Diem's Vietnam also demonstrated that West Germany had cut all ties with its Nazi past, was a reliable partner in the West, and even a champion of democracy in the Third World.<sup>271</sup> A good will tour by Vice-chancellor Erhard to Southeast Asia in 1958 reiterated these goals. His expressions of sympathy for South Vietnamese independence gained favorable responses in Washington

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<sup>270</sup> Volker Berresheim, *35 Jahre Indochinapolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, (Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, Hamburg, 1986), pp. 31-32; the French colonial conflict was not received with enthusiasm and the German Parliament insisted on strict neutrality in the war. The sole recognition of Saigon of course was a reflection of Bonn's attitude to represent all of Germany.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15; the German Basic Law did not allow any aggressive act by the Federal Republic of Germany, its army was created out of completely defensive reasons and German troops could not be deployed beyond the scope of NATO. The endorsement of American policy in South Vietnam in the 1950's made any recognition of Hanoi obviously impossible. In 1955, the GDR recognized North Vietnam, which allowed an easy way out for Adenauer by following the Hallstein doctrine.

and Third World countries. Erhard also delineated the future West German position to the increasing turmoil in South Vietnam: Bonn was unable to send any troops but had a "moral obligation" to contribute to the victory of the free world in Southeast Asia.<sup>272</sup>

### **A First Strain in U.S.-German Relations: Berlin and the Franco-German Treaty**

The erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 resulted in a crisis of the German-American relationship. The events leading up to August 1961 revealed the different perspectives of both powers regarding the German question and global politics. The crisis further exposed West German policy limitations and the country's utter dependence on the Western Allies. Berlin was a deeply emotional issues for Germany since the Soviet Blockade of the city in 1948-49. It was the remaining spot where Germans from East and West were not yet separated by barbed wire and mine-fields. In early 1961 Germans hoped against all odds that the freedom of the entire city could be secured. They soon discovered that the three Western Allies were only willing to defend their rights in the Western sectors of the former capital.<sup>273</sup> For Washington, Berlin was only one of the many global challenges facing the United States, and the tensions over the city presented a major obstacle in reaching an arms reduction agreement or détente with the Soviet Union. The crisis in Europe evoked the demon of nuclear war, which was neither in the best interest of the United States nor the Soviet Union. Washington also linked the issue of

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<sup>272</sup> Berresheim, *Indochinapolitik*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>273</sup> Hanns Jürgen Küsters, *Konrad Adenauer und Willy Brandt in der Berlin-Krise, 1958-1963*, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 40, No. 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 491-492; Khrushchev's offer of a separate peace treaty was unacceptable for Bonn because it might be considered as disloyalty to the Western allies, alluding to another Rapallo. Stalin had tried a similar strategy by offering German unification as long as the country would be "neutral."

Berlin to Communist challenges in Southeast Asia. Apparently, the Soviet Union pursued an aggressive course on Berlin to gain concessions in Indochina.

Kennedy decided that a West German military contribution to NATO and full integration of the Federal Republic into Western Europe was more important than reunification.<sup>274</sup> Not only was Bonn securely tied to the West but recognition of the status quo in Europe would allow for fresh approaches in American-Soviet relations in order to increase American influence in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Kennedy considered Soviet pressure on Berlin as a test of NATO and American determination as well as an likely attempt to neutralize West Germany. West Germany had to remain securely tied to the West, but it also had to accept the status quo.<sup>275</sup> The shift in American emphasis was apparent to Adenauer.<sup>276</sup> Kennedy was reluctant to address the issue of Berlin. The sensitive Germans noticed with some concern that the American president had not mentioned Berlin in his inaugural address. Kennedy frequently used the term of “West-Berlin” instead of Berlin inclusively while the President was unwilling to give up the

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<sup>274</sup> Marc Raskin, Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy, June 1, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963; Raskin debated the pro and cons of what to do about West Germany. The best solution for Berlin would be a unified city under U.N. mandate, but rather unlikely. Washington even toyed with the idea the exchange West Berlin for East German territory (Magdeburg) near the inner German border. See also: Küsters, *Adenauer und Brandt in der Berlin-Krise*, pp. 499-500; In a speech on June 17, 1961, Governing Mayor Willy Brandt decried any attempt to conclude an agreement on Berlin over the heads of the German people “as treason against our compatriots, treason against German unity and freedom,” see: NSF, Western Europe, 1961-1963, JFKL; Vogelsang, *Das Geteilte Deutschland*, p. 217.

<sup>275</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (Boston, 1965), p. 318; Grosser, *Deutsche Geschichte*, p. 443; Andreas Wenger, “Der lange Weg zur Stabilität: Kennedy, Chruschtschow und das gemeinsame Interesse am Status quo in Europa”, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 46 (1998), pp. 69-73; of course, the US was also keenly aware that it was targeted directly by Soviet nuclear missiles since the late 1950’s.

<sup>276</sup> Frank A. Mayer, “Adenauer and Kennedy: An Era of Distrust in German-American Relations?”, in: *German Studies Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, Feb. 1994, p. 83-85; Joachim Arenth, “Die Bewährungsprobe der Special Relationship: Washington und Bonn (1961-1969)”, in: Klaus Larres/ Torsten Oppeland (eds.), *Deutschland und die USA im 20. Jahrhundert: Geschichte der politischen Beziehungen*, (Darmstadt, 1997), p. 152; see also: Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 338; JFK and Adenauer were rather apprehensive of

rights of the Western Allies in Berlin. He was also determined to prevent a major war by refusing to go beyond Western claims to their respective sectors in the city.<sup>277</sup>

In the summer of 1961 the question of Berlin gained further urgency. The Vienna summit of June 1961 between Kennedy and Krushchev led to an understanding on Laos, but no agreement on Germany or Berlin was reached. In July, President Kennedy declared that, if necessary the United States would defend West Berlin with force.<sup>278</sup> Kennedy and his advisors concluded that Krushchev deliberately intensified tensions over the former German capital to gain concessions in other areas of the world, particularly in Southeast Asia. The crisis over Berlin was another Soviet attempt to enhance its bargaining position in the global power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Admiral Arleigh Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, felt that Berlin was of more symbolic importance to the Soviets and simply a test of American determination. Despite Krushchev's belligerent language, Moscow was not seeking a war over Berlin and might "envison a relaxation of the Berlin crisis in exchange for an understanding that the U.S. would not forcefully resist further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia."<sup>279</sup> Burke argued that the president should not play into Krushchev's hand by focusing solely on

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each other. Kennedy was during the 1950's more impressed by SPD leader Kurt Schumacher and felt that the chancellor was a relic of the Cold War. Adenauer in turn favored Richard Nixon in the 1960 campaign.

<sup>277</sup> Arenth, *Bewährungsprobe der Special Relationship*, pp. 153-154; Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen: 1959-1963*, (Stuttgart, 1983), pp. 91-93. The first encounter between the two statemen was very friendly but did not cover German concerns, only possible contingency plans for Berlin.

<sup>278</sup> Vogelsang, *Das Geteilte Deutschland*, pp. 248-249; McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*, (New York, 1988), pp. 361-362; Great Britain and France also strongly affirmed Western rights and access to the city. During the Vienna meeting Krushchev again threatened to conclude a unilateral peace-agreement with the GDR, trying to end allied rights for the city as a whole.

Berlin, but instead reassure America's Asian allies that the United States had no intentions of disengaging from that region.<sup>280</sup>

Senator Hubert Humphrey also saw Berlin connected to wider global issues, and Southeast Asia in particular. He advised Kennedy that:

People needed to be reminded that what happened to Berlin - its division - and what happened to Germany - its division - has happened to Viet Nam, has happened to Korea, is happening to Laos, that the Soviet Union is seeking to divide and cut up . . . [W]e must make it crystal clear . . . that we are not afraid, that our commitments are real and will be honored.<sup>281</sup>

American resolve, insisting on free elections in Berlin as well as German self-determination, would also have a positive impact in the Third World where people were indirect participants in the power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>282</sup>

President Kennedy agreed with his advisors to be firm in the question of Allied legal rights in and access to West Berlin. In a report to the nation on July 25, 1961, Kennedy implicitly recognized the partition of Berlin by stating that the "endangered frontier of freedom runs through a divided Berlin."<sup>283</sup> The strain over West Berlin was not an isolated problem but part of world-wide Communist aggression:

We face a challenge in Berlin, but there is also a challenge in Southeast Asia, where the borders are less guarded, the enemy harder to find, and the danger of communism is less apparent to those who have so little . . . West Berlin . . . has now become -- as never before -- the great testing place of Western courage and will, a focal point

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<sup>279</sup> Arleigh Burke, Memorandum for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 19 June, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963. The president should not overextend American forces by sending additional troops to Berlin unless the conflict intensified.

<sup>280</sup> Walt Rostow, Memorandum to the President, July 15, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963.

<sup>281</sup> Senator Hubert Humphrey, Memorandum to the President, July 14, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 368.

where our solemn commitments stretching back over the years since 1945, and Soviet ambitions now meet in basic confrontation.<sup>284</sup>

Unlike in Asia, Kennedy accepted the status quo in Europe. West Germany and the three Western sectors in Berlin would be defended but Kennedy would not go beyond this commitment.<sup>285</sup> Adenauer and Governing Mayor of West Berlin Willy Brandt were alarmed by the American guarantees for only the Western sectors of Berlin. Both hoped to preserve freedom and self-determination for the entire city.<sup>286</sup> While German concerns were duly noted, Washington desired more flexibility in its approach toward Germany and the Berlin issue. Only then could both the United States and the Soviet Union find common ground to negotiate over global challenges and arms reductions.<sup>287</sup> But Adenauer would not accept an easy American way out of the problems of Germany. The entire city of Berlin remained the prime domino in Europe that could not fall to Communism.<sup>288</sup>

On August 13, 1961 the East German government, with approval from Moscow, began to build the Wall. Most Germans were shocked and angered by Western inaction.

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<sup>284</sup> Office of the White House Press Secretary, Text of the President's Report to the Nation on the Berlin Crisis, July 25, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963.

<sup>285</sup> Department of State Policy Planning Council, United States Objectives, July 29, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963; the American goal was to show Moscow and the Western allies that it would not abandon its commitment and was "willing to act firmly and faithfully" to abide by these commitment without further escalation. Washington was "realistic," according to the council in understanding German and world problems.

<sup>286</sup> Willy Brandt, *My Life In Politics*, pp. 3-4; Frank Mayer, *Adenauer and Kennedy*, p. 88; Areth, *Bewährungsprobe der Special Relationship*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>287</sup> Wenger, *Der lange Weg zur Stabilität*, p. 78; Walter Rostow, Memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, August 7, 1961, JFK National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963; JFKL. The U.S. was still not willing to recognize the GDR [and did so only in 1972] but hoped that inner German contacts might lead to progress on the "German question". Washington had accepted the status quo but gave some flexibility to Bonn. One can just wonder what Washington - or Moscow - would have said to a comprehensive German understanding. Saigon did not enjoy similar "flexibility" and any real or rumored contact between Saigon and Hanoi met with strong disapproval in Washington.

<sup>288</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between the Secretary of State, Rusk, and Chancellor Adenauer, August 10, 1961, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, Western Europe, 1961-1963; Adenauer was distressed



Newspapers ran the headlines: *Der Westen Tut Nichts*, but nobody knew how to prevent the obvious. Many Germans felt sold out by the allies and were angered by Chancellor Adenauer's lack of response.<sup>289</sup> Washington accepted the division of Berlin and only Soviet aggression on the Western half of the city or the FRG itself would create a *casus belli*. While Adenauer blamed the United States for not doing enough, he was too much of a pragmatist not to understand the fundamental implications of the Berlin crisis. But Kennedy's recognition of the status quo in Europe and his attention toward non-European theaters made the chancellor more distrustful of the United States.<sup>290</sup>

In light of the limited options for West Germany, Adenauer resorted to playing the European card to regain leverage in Washington. France was the obvious choice. Two years of negotiations finally led to an understanding with de Gaulle on close Franco-German cooperation. In September 1962, de Gaulle sanctioned an agreement coordinating French-German policy regarding Berlin, East-West relations, defense, and

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by recommendations of Senators William Fullbright and Mike Mansfield to make Berlin a free city under UN command.

<sup>289</sup> Küsters, *Adenauer und Brandt in der Berlin-Krise*, pp. 527-530; Only days after the construction of the wall, Adenauer met with Soviet Ambassador Smirnov and stated that Bonn would do nothing to harm German-Soviet relations. Obviously many Germans were appalled by the chancellor's statement and it did cost him considerable support in the up-coming elections. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 370; Bundy admits that the American reaction to the Wall was slow but stresses that none of the Western powers and West Germany included would have been willing to risk war over Berlin. Kennedy, as a gesture both to West Berlin and the Soviet Union, sent LBJ and General Lucius D. Clay on a good-will tour to the city as well as 1500 additional U.S. troops.

<sup>290</sup> Wenger, *Der lange Weg zur Stabilität*, pp. 83-84; Mayer, *Adenauer and Kennedy*, pp. 91-94; Bonn refused to accept any security arrangement for Central Europe which recognized the status quo and also insisted on equal status as a NATO member in any negotiations with the Warsaw Pact; see also: The President's European Trip, West-Germany-Berlin, Eire, Italy, June 1963, J. F. Kennedy National Security Files, JFK Library; informing the president on the domestic situation in West Germany it was obvious that Brandt more than Adenauer was willing to accept a *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union.

relations with the Third World. De Gaulle shared Adenauer's skepticism about policymaking in Washington and was pleased with his new ally.<sup>291</sup>

The Franco-German Treaty, signed on January 22, 1963 was a mile-stone in French-German relations. Nevertheless, Washington was shocked and wondered how German-American relations might be affected. France pursued an increasingly independent, antagonistic policy toward the United States and now West Germany might also become more unpredictable following de Gaulle's lead.<sup>292</sup>

Adenauer had no intentions of becoming an capricious partner to the United States. Rather, it was his growing doubts about American reliability that made the Franco-German Treaty indispensable. As he told de Gaulle in early 1963:

I am quite concerned about the United States. I do not know which defense strategy might be adopted since everything seems to change quickly there. . . The present time was full of insecurity. One could not predict which defense strategy the United States would adopt for the future. . . Germany was immediately facing Russia and France was directly in line behind Germany. The danger for Western Europe had become very considerable. In regard to the changing American strategic thinking nobody could be sure whether the political strategy might change as well, resulting in a possible general *malaise*.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1959-1963*, pp. 119-121, 123-127, 138-140. De Gaulle assured Adenauer that he would oppose any U.S.-Soviet understanding that recognized the GDR. It is obvious that Adenauer's overtures played nicely into de Gaulle aspiration of leading Europe and weaken "Anglo-American dominance."

<sup>292</sup> Mayer, *Adenauer and Kennedy*, p. 95-96; Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1959-1963*, p. 198. Only days before the Franco-German treaty was signed, de Gaulle vetoed the British entry to the EEC, which profoundly dismayed MacMillan and also Kennedy, who had hoped for more influence in Europe with the British membership in the EEC.

<sup>293</sup> Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1959-1963*, pp. 199-200: *Ich bemerkte eingangs, in der jetzigen unsicheren Zeit komme dem Zusammenstehen Frankreichs und Deutschlands noch größere Bedeutung zu. Ich sei sehr unruhig wegen der Vereinigten Staaten. Ich wisse nicht, welchen Verteidigungskurs man dort habe, denn alles ändere sich dort sehr schnell. . . Deutschland stehe in unmittelbarer Berührung mit Rußland, direkt dahinter komme Frankreich. Die Gefahr für Westeuropa sei sehr groß geworden. Angesichts der sprunghaften amerikanischen strategischen Auffassungen könne man nie wissen, ob sich nicht auch die politischen Auffassungen änderten, so daß eine allgemeine Malaise übrigbliebe.* See also: Akten zur Aussenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (AAPD), 1963, Vol. I, Consersation between Chancellor Adenauer and President de Gaulle, Paris, January 21, 1963, pp. 111-115.

Adenauer's rapprochement with de Gaulle was the evident result of his frustration with the policy of the Kennedy administration. He resorted to the traditional pattern of European balanced power politics and tried to gain greater leverage in Washington by more closely allying Bonn with Paris.<sup>294</sup> The American response to the Franco-German treaty revealed that Bonn did not enjoy the same freedom of action as General de Gaulle.

Kennedy was upset and voiced his opposition to the treaty repeatedly in no uncertain terms. He felt stabbed in the back by Bonn only days after de Gaulle had again expressed an "anti-American policy" by vetoing the British entry to the EEC.<sup>295</sup> Secretary of State Rusk was also worried where Germany was heading. Rusk had no intention of forcing Bonn to choose between Washington and Paris but Bonn could not possibly prefer "fifty French bombs over fifty thousand American missiles."<sup>296</sup>

Washington's message to Bonn was clear. West Germany's policy initiatives remained limited. On the other hand, Adenauer made his point in demonstrating that West Germany, despite its restrictions, had to be accepted by Washington as a political force. Since Adenauer left office in October 1963, it is uncertain how he might have responded to the American escalation in Vietnam as Chancellor. Two years after his resignation, Adenauer maintained that the American escalation in Vietnam was a grave

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<sup>294</sup> Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1959-1963*, pp. 206-207; AAPD, pp. 121-123. Adenauer noted that Americans did have sympathy for Berlin but much less so for the FRG. De Gaulle's mediation might result into a far better understanding of German concerns in Washington.

<sup>295</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein, Washington to Foreign Secretary Schröder, January 23, 1963, pp. 162-165; Mayer, *Adenauer and Kennedy*, pp. 95-97; Hans-Jürgen Schröder, *Deutsche Aussenpolitik 1963/64: Die "Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland"*, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, July 1995, p. 525.

<sup>296</sup> AAPD, pp. 166-169; to contain the damage in Washington Ambassador Knappstein hurried to explain that the Franco-German Treaty might actually benefit Washington in that Bonn now had greater influence on de Gaulle. But Rusk maintained that France already caused enough hardship for NATO, SEATO, and the United Nations and he would not be pleased by additional capricious endeavors by Bonn. American

mistake. The war in Vietnam was senseless. Washington should have listened to the French advice and sought negotiations since the Americans could not win the war in Southeast Asia.<sup>297</sup> In August 1966, Adenauer repeated this assessment to the *New York Times* and urged for an American withdrawal from Vietnam. He argued that Europe was the prime region of interest for the United States. If Washington neglected Europe, the Soviet Union might have the opportunity to gain control over West Germany and France.<sup>298</sup> His opinion did not affect Washington and was not shared by his successor Ludwig Erhard.

## II. Ludwig Erhard

Ludwig Erhard regarded the United States as Germany's principal ally. He was skeptical of Adenauer's advances to de Gaulle and even more suspicious of the General's quest for leadership in Europe. Bonn could not lose the friendship and protection of the United States. First and foremost, Bonn had to prove its loyalty to Washington. Then, Erhard hoped he could win stronger American support for German unification. This easy equation proved unrealistic. Erhard neglected the second pillar Adenauer saw as important for German foreign policy-making - the European angle.

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Ambassador Dowling repeated the thinly veiled threat to Bonn. see: AAPD, 1963, Vol. I, Conversation Undersecretary Carstens with American Ambassador Dowling, January 24, 1963, p. 169

<sup>297</sup> Horst Osterheld, Aussenpolitik unter Bundeskanzler Ludwig Erhard, 1963-1966: Ein dokumentarischer Bericht aus dem Kanzleramt, (Düsseldorf, 1992), p. 274.

<sup>298</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 8, 1966; the paper commented that the Erhard government shared Adenauer's concern about American neglect of European security, the SPD strongly rejected Adenauer's claim that Kennedy was responsible for the conflict in Vietnam and also complained that Germans should not constantly distrust the American commitment to Europe.

Erhard pro-American policy limited the options for Bonn and soured relations with de Gaulle. The Vietnam conflict complicated German-American understanding, resulting in American demands to directly aid the U.S. endeavor in Vietnam. The war in Vietnam also affected the general spirit of détente with the Soviet Union and overshadowed East-West relations. The German question no longer topped the international agenda with both super-powers accepting the status quo in Germany.

Unlike Adenauer, Erhard was far better versed in economics than in the intricacies of foreign policymaking. Erhard was born February 4, 1897 in Fürth, Bavaria. He served in the First World War and was seriously wounded in France. He obtained his Ph.D. in economics and sociology at the University of Nuremberg. He taught there until 1942 when he was dismissed because of his refusal to join the NSDAP but quickly found employment in the private sector. From 1945 to 1947, Erhard worked as advisor to the allies and also as minister of economics in the Bavarian government.<sup>299</sup> He soon rejoined the academy as professor of political economy at the University of Munich but continued to work as advisor and then secretary for economics in the combined American and British zone. In 1948, Adenauer successfully urged Erhard to join the CDU.<sup>300</sup> As Adenauer's minister of economics Erhard's program of a social-market economy quickly proved successful. Yet, his relations with Adenauer soured. While Adenauer pursued European integration based on the core of German-French understanding, Erhard desired

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<sup>299</sup> Christian Hacke, Weltmacht wider Willen: Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, (Frankfurt a. M., 1993), p. 110; Grosser, *Geschichte Deutschlands*, p. 177.

<sup>300</sup> Grosser, *Geschichte Deutschlands*, pp. 256-258. By 1948 Erhard had fully developed his theory of a social-market economy (Soziale Marktwirtschaft), combining free market competition with safeguards for the individual from the excesses of capitalism.

to move beyond these limitations and engage all Western European countries. Adenauer prevailed until 1963 when Erhard replaced him as Chancellor.<sup>301</sup>

### **Erhard's foreign policy: "Courtship with Uncle Sam, Cold Shoulder to Marianne"**

Erhard and Foreign Secretary Gerhard Schröder felt that a reevaluation of German relations toward Washington and Paris was necessary. Both believed that the German-French Friendship Treaty not only caused resentment within the EEC but affected the indispensable good-will of the United States. Only the United States could guarantee German security. The new chancellor rejected Adenauer's strategy to gain greater leverage vis-à-vis Washington by playing the French card. Unlike Adenauer and de Gaulle, Erhard had no doubts about the reliability of the American commitment to Europe. He concluded that German security interests did not conform with those of France and required a continuously strong bond with the United States. The United States was also the more promising partner in the quest for German unity. But Bonn needed to assess the current policy of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rapprochement between Washington and Moscow appreciably limited the danger of a nuclear Armageddon but implicitly recognized the status-quo in Germany. Should Bonn pursue a more active and original policy to propel the allies toward negotiation over unification?

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<sup>301</sup> Hacke, *Weltmacht wider Willen*, pp. 111-112; Frank R. Pfetsch, *Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1949-1992: Von der Spaltung zur Vereinigung*, (Munich 1992), pp. 158-161; Erhard's success in rebuilding West Germany earned him the nick-name 'father of the economic miracle.' Adenauer was apprehensive of Erhard's popularity and felt that Erhard was unqualified to succeed him. Adenauer still retained considerable influence after he left office and continued to head the CDU.

Erhard failed to conceive of new strategies for Germany. He lacked an understanding of the larger global picture and the importance of the European angle to broaden German options. Unification would not fall into Germany's lap simply by reiterating the German desire to overcome division.<sup>302</sup> Generally, Erhard's foreign policy framework revolved around the Bonn-Washington-Paris triangle, which, to him, prescribed the boundaries and possible opportunities for West Germany. Erhard soon discovered that his tenuous balancing act between Washington and Paris was further complicated by the war in Vietnam.<sup>303</sup> During the next years, Erhard tried - ultimately unsuccessfully - to win the Western powers for new initiatives for German unification. President Johnson acknowledged the desire for unification, but his Vietnam policy did not allow for additional complications in the relations with the Soviet Union. Across the Rhine, de Gaulle repeatedly offered Erhard participation in France's *force de frappe* and greater independence from the whims and demands of Washington, but Erhard steadfastly stood with the United States. Erhard's reliance on Washington eventually resulted in growing difficulties in his own party, the CDU, which split into factions favoring either the Atlantic alliance or closer ties to France. This debate increasingly undermined Erhard's leadership and contributed to his fall in 1966.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> For Erhard's approach toward unification see: Peter Bender, Die "Neue Ostpolitik" und ihre Folgen: Vom Mauerbau zur Wiedervereinigung, (Munich, 1996), pp. 105-106.

<sup>303</sup> Great Britain was consulted as well on issues of the Common Market, arms control nuclear sharing, and the German question; but neither side faced as intense pressure to constantly find common ground as Erhard experienced in his interactions with Washington and Paris.

<sup>304</sup> Waldemar Besson, Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Erfahrungen und Maßstäbe, (Munich, 1970), pp. 310-314 and 329; Hacke, *Weltmacht wider Willen*, pp. 114-116; Pfetsch, *Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, pp. 162-164; for criticism on Erhard's new course see: Osterfeld, *Außenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 18-20. Osterfeld, head of the Chancellery, was deeply loyal to Adenauer and suspicious of Erhard U.S. policy since according to Osterfeld it was a result of Erhard's ambition and might place West Germany between a rock and a hard place.

Within days after his election Erhard outlined his departure from the Adenauer policy to Dean Acheson and Dean Rusk. While the German-French understanding was essential to European reconciliation, the German-American cooperation was of even greater significance for the security and survival of Europe.<sup>305</sup> Erhard worried that West German interests might be ignored in the rapprochement between the two world powers. Despite lessening tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union any solution of the German question appeared remote. Also, Erhard was concerned over rumors that Washington might reduce its troops in Europe. The Americans reassured the chancellor that Washington was sensitive to German anxieties. But Rusk stressed that Bonn had to cease viewing world affairs solely from a German perspective.<sup>306</sup>

A month after Erhard's election South Vietnam made headline-news with the overthrow and assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. Bonn hardly took notice, and the events were not discussed in the cabinet.<sup>307</sup> Vietnam was not yet a major concern for German foreign policy makers but the growing American commitment to that

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<sup>305</sup> AAPD, Volume III, October 1 to December 31, 1963, (Munich, 1994), Erhard conversation with Dean Acheson, Oct. 19, 1963, pp.1337-1340; Erhard criticized the current French policy, most notably the de Gaulle veto against the British entry to the EEC. While he had cautioned against too close relations with France long before his election as chancellor, obviously he employed his skepticism of de Gaulle to placate his visitor from Washington. Foreign Secretary Schröder painted a similar picture and stressed that the U.S. commitment was vital to West Germany. see: AAPD, Schröder conversation with Dean Acheson, Oct. 19, 1963, pp. 1343-1344

<sup>306</sup> AAPD, Erhard conversation with U.S. ambassador McGhee, Oct. 22, 1963, pp. 1363-1364; while assuring McGhee of his complete confidence in the U.S., Erhard was very much concerned about suggestions of members of Congress and former president Eisenhower to withdraw more G.I.'s from Europe; see also: AAPD, Erhard conversation with Dean Rusk, Oct. 25, 1963, pp. 1385-1386; Erhard once again reassured Rusk of German allegiance and loyalty. Rusk pointed out that the U.S. not only had to protect Germany but so far had sacrificed more than one hundred thousand men in the struggle against Communism; AAPD, Schröder conversation with Dean Rusk, Oct. 26, 1963, p. 1392; Rusk complained that West Germans were extremely sensitive to any rumor about American troop withdrawals while obviously nobody bothered that the French reduced their forces in West Germany.

<sup>307</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 37-41; Osterheld was highly critical of the American involvement in Vietnam and its complicity in the overthrow of Diem. He maintained that coup was a grave mistake that farther drew the United States in the quagmire of Vietnam and destroyed a chance for victory.



Asian country and subsequent French opposition to the American policy in Southeast Asia increasingly forced Bonn not only to take a stand regarding Vietnam but required strategies to accommodate both allies. The German goal of unification necessitated the support of both the United States and France, along with that of Great Britain. Additionally, the opposite view of the former two on Vietnam created problems for Bonn on how to placate both sides in order to win assistance for any initiative on Germany. Bonn decided to approve of the American position in Vietnam, partly to demonstrate its loyalty, yet also anxious about the repercussions of a Communist victory in South Vietnam for American policy in Europe.

In early November 1963, Washington asked Bonn to establish diplomatic relations with the new government in Saigon of General Duong Van Minh, which was seconded by a personal request by the Vietnamese general. While the United States supported the new government, Washington was reluctant to recognize Minh as the first Western country to preclude any suspicion of American involvement in the coup against Diem. Hence, Washington desired that Bonn take the lead and endorse Minh.<sup>308</sup> Bonn was on the spot but complied with the American request mainly because Minh enjoyed American backing. But Bonn also worried that a lack of Western support might aggravate the situation in South Vietnam and perhaps even tempt Saigon to negotiate with Hanoi, leading to even greater chaos in the region. Despite justified doubts about the legitimacy

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<sup>308</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Undersecretary Alexander Böker, Nov. 7, 1963, pp. 1415-16: Böker points out: "Die Amerikaner haben den Wunsch ausgesprochen, das neue Regime *möglichst bald* anzuerkennen. Sie möchten jedoch nicht die ersten sein, die eine solche Anerkennung aussprechen, da dies ihre Verantwortlichkeit für den Umsturz, der durch den Mord an Diem und Nhu befleckt ist, unterstreichen würde."

and viability of new regime the situation in South Vietnam required that Bonn immediately recognized the Minh government.<sup>309</sup>

Saigon soon demanded more from Bonn. West Germany, according to General Minh, should not only increase its financial contribution to South Vietnam but use its influence on Paris to prevent de Gaulle from interfering in Vietnamese affairs. Bonn sent more money but remained apprehensive about the viability of the Minh government. General Minh lashed out against de Gaulle's plan to neutralize Vietnam and demanded greater European support in general. The U.S.-French disagreement over policy in Vietnam further undermined his struggle against Communist aggression. He pleaded with Bonn to apply its influence as closest ally to France by urging Paris to end its detrimental policy of neutralization.<sup>310</sup>

The Vietnamese request troubled German Ambassador to Saigon Wendland. He was uncertain about American aims in Vietnam and even more confused of what to make of French contacts with the People's Republic of China, aiming at diplomatic recognition. Wendland opposed any German interference in the French-American debate over the possible neutralization of Vietnam. Circumstances in South Vietnam might actually

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Great Britain, like the U.S. was reluctant to recognize the new regime. France refused to acknowledge any government coming to power illegally but France would maintain its already established ties with South Vietnam.

<sup>309</sup> AAPD, Memorandum, Nov. 7, 1963, p. 1417; Böker feared that any negotiation between Saigon and Hanoi might lead to the same chaos that already existed in Laos and Cambodia, and fully accepted the American domino theory for Southeast Asia.

<sup>310</sup> AAPD, Ambassador York Alexander von Wendland to Foreign Ministry, Dec. 16, 1963, p. 1647.

require neutralization to save Saigon unless significant progress could be made in the coming months. The other alternative was further escalation and major war.<sup>311</sup>

Obviously Bonn had doubts about the American role in Vietnam, but chose to pursue the course of most loyal ally and back Washington. The French refusal to endorse the American commitment created a stir of anger in Washington. Yet, as the German ambassador to Washington, Karl Heinrich Knappstein, observed France enjoyed substantial latitude in the United States. Franco-phile President Kennedy was more than willing to reconcile the differing views based on a "certain understanding of de Gaulle's position." Bonn could only benefit by improving in U.S.-French relations.<sup>312</sup> The German-French Treaty had shocked Washington but the Americans increasingly appreciated the advantages of Franco-German reconciliation and they believed that Bonn now was in the position to influence French foreign policy making. However, Bonn still had to earn complete trust by the Americans.<sup>313</sup> The problem for Bonn was how to change the de Gaulle's mind and deliver what Washington expected.

### Bonn's "China Card"

The Erhard government was aware of its limits vis-à-vis Washington, but the question remained whether Bonn could pursue other venues to further German self-

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<sup>311</sup> AAPD, Wendland to Foreign Ministry, Dec. 16, 1963, p. 1648. West Germany gave a \$ 15 million credit to Saigon; Wendland remained ambiguous in his advice to Bonn - he leaned toward de Gaulle's idea of neutralization but feared a Communist sweep over Southeast Asia.

<sup>312</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein to Foreign Ministry, Nov. 19, 1963, p. 1453.

<sup>313</sup> AAPD, 1964, Vol. I, Knappstein to Foreign Ministry, Jan. 22, 1964, pp. 110-112; Knappstein further elaborated on the different status of France and West Germany in the United States. France's aid to American independence and alliances of two world wars gave Paris a freedom of action that Bonn could only dream of. Accordingly, France could be "unfaithful" from time to time but Germany did not enjoy such tolerance. see: *Ibid.*, pp. 112-114.

interest. The Sino-Soviet conflict presented such a window of opportunity. French overtures to Beijing offered new prospects for the Federal Republic as well. Following French reasoning, Bonn hoped that friendly relation with the People's Republic of China (PRC) might add to its bargaining position with the Soviet Union regarding German unification and the recognition of West Berlin as part of the FRG. But the conflict in Vietnam was a major obstacle of any bi-lateral understanding with the PRC. Washington considered China as the source of Communist aggression in that region. In addition, taking sides in the Sino-Soviet conflict might appear as meddling in a "family conflict" and could back-fire.

The only feasible course for Bonn was to establish economic ties with the PRC. Direct diplomatic relations were impossible for two reasons. First, diplomatic relations with Beijing not only confirmed the division of China but might undermine Bonn's claim of sole representation of the German people. Second, and more importantly, an understanding with Beijing might be unacceptable to the United States.<sup>314</sup> Yet, the China angle was too promising to dismiss.

The PRC also desired further recognition in the West. The broader the support for the PRC in the West the better were the chances to be accepted into the United Nations, despite American opposition. In May 1964, Beijing officials conveyed their interest in contacts with the Federal Republic. The Chinese proposed a trade and cultural agreement along with discussion of other pertinent questions and accepted confidential talks. While

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<sup>314</sup> AAPD, Wickert Memorandum: Relations between the FRG and the PRC, Dec. 11, 1963, pp. 1617-1619; Wickert pointed out that Washington should be informed by any German approach to Beijing and even economic relations could be voided by Washington, given its concern about Chinese military support of Hanoi.

a trade agreement was promising, Bonn remained reluctant to the exchange of officials.<sup>315</sup> Bonn was dodging the question of any German recognition of the PRC, but further talks with the Chinese could be advantageous to Bonn's overall goals. Bonn could probe the Chinese view on the German question and possibly use the Sino-Soviet conflict to pursue negotiations on unification:

We should not miss any opportunity to assess how the Sino-Soviet conflict might be utilized for the solution of the Germany and Berlin question. This of even greater importance now since our Western allies realized that a new approach [i.e. on Germany] has no chance of success in Moscow. Every opportunity to gain greater room to maneuver has to be pursued. Most of all, we have to explore whether and how far Beijing might be willing to downplay or even reassess its relations with the Soviet Occupied Zone.<sup>316</sup>

While Bonn was hoping to win the Chinese for its position, the Foreign ministry was concerned about American objections to any German-Chinese understanding. Therefore, Bonn developed a 'defense strategy' toward Washington. Five NATO members, including Great Britain and France, maintained diplomatic ties with the PRC while Bonn was only considering trade relations. More importantly, the West could not miss the opportunity given by the Sino-Soviet tensions. Also, Western Europe could assume the role of mediator with Beijing in lessening global tensions. For West Germany, in particular, contacts with the PRC served the purpose to explore additional venues on the German question. Lastly, the American ambassador to Warsaw, John Cabot, had maintained close but ultimately unsuccessful contacts with PRC ambassador Wang Pingnan. Accordingly, the United States could not object to any exploratory German consultations with Beijing.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> AAPD, 1964, Memorandum of Senior Official Krapf, Foreign Ministry, May 19, 1964, pp. 542-543.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 543.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 545-547.

The Chinese were certainly interested in negotiation with Bonn as a first secret meeting in Bern revealed. Tsui Chi-yuan, head of the PRC delegation in Switzerland, was eager for a trade agreement and quite disappointed to learn that Bonn had not yet made a final decision. Tsui emphasized that his government conducted its own independent policy to foster world peace, implicitly referring to Sino-Soviet relations, and Beijing was solely guided by the concerns of its own people. German consui in Switzerland, Niels Hansen, was delighted by the Chinese position and pushed hard for the recognition that Bonn represented all of Berlin internationally. Tsui remained reluctant, though he regarded the German division as abnormal. Beijing favored unification through negotiations between the two 'parts' of Germany, which made perfect sense since the PRC hoped for a similar solution with Taiwan. Beijing saw no reason to break diplomatic relations with the GDR but promised to refrain from interfering in inner-German affairs provided that Bonn followed the same policy of non-interference in the conflict with the Soviet Union.<sup>318</sup> Senior official Krapf recommended that Washington be informed about the recent talks. He did not foresee any American opposition regarding a trade agreement since contacts with Beijing were helpful toward a solution of the German question and did not damage American interests.<sup>319</sup>

In July 1964 Hansen again met with Tsui in Bern. Hansen was worried about press reports on Sino-German contacts and suggested further meetings should be held at a secure place. Tsui was quite displeased with recent statements by Chancellor Erhard rejecting closer ties to the PRC. Tsui feared that Bonn, like the United States, had

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<sup>318</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Senior Official Krapf, Mai 30, 1964, pp.585-588.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 589.

adopted a hostile course toward Beijing. Thus further Sino-German negotiations appeared futile. Hansen replied that Bonn was still interested in a trade agreement, downplaying the press reports along with Erhard's comments, and Tsui accepted to continue talks in secrecy.<sup>320</sup> The talks went nowhere because Erhard lacked the political courage to continue the China angle. He rejected any approach that endangered the precious relationship with the United States. Since Erhard did not pursue the China angle to its fullest it is hard to predict what might have happened in terms of an American response to this German initiative. The conflict in Vietnam, along with Erhard's deference to Washington ended the German rapprochement with Beijing.

#### **Bonn -Washington-Paris and the problem of Vietnam, 1964-1965**

The short-lived Chinese interlude demonstrated that Erhard's policy making was self-restricted to the overriding need of a solid friendship with the United States. Erhard's courtship of Washington increasingly alienated de Gaulle. The French president had placed high hopes on comprehensive relations with West Germany and a more independent Europe under his own leadership. Consequently, de Gaulle was thoroughly disappointed Erhard's new course. De Gaulle even labeled Erhard as subservient to the United States. Erhard was deeply offended, but he insisted that his pro-American course was the best way to serve West German interest. The first encounter with Lyndon Johnson in Texas seemed to prove Erhard correct.

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<sup>320</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Niels Hansen, Consul in Bern, July 21, 1964; the Japanese government was also worried about Sino-German contacts. Bonn downplayed the issue by stating it was only interested in better trade condition. See: AAPD, Message of Undersecretary Carstens to the Embassy in Tokyo, July 18, 1964, pp. 863-864.

Meeting on the LBJ ranch shortly after Christmas 1963, both leaders started off well. Erhard reaffirmed his complete trust in the United States and pledged his unequivocal support to the president.<sup>321</sup> Johnson was primarily concerned with domestic problems and relations with the Soviet Union. The president promised to closely consult Erhard on any questions of détente with the East.<sup>322</sup> The chancellor worried that an improvement in East-West relations might result in diminished American interest in German unification and lead to the recognition of the status-quo. Johnson assured Erhard that Germany like any other nation enjoyed the right of self-determination and should stand firm in pursuing the goal of reunification.<sup>323</sup> This first encounter established a pattern that would continue during the following years. Erhard eagerly assured his loyalty to the United States, hoping to gain concessions and backing on vital German concerns. Johnson was pleased to find an encouraging voice in Erhard but German issues were and remained secondary on Johnson's foreign policy agenda. Erhard received kind words instead of substance but believed that he had an impact on Johnson.

Events in Asia, soon, preoccupied the Americans and the French and increasingly affected Bonn. In early 1964, France established diplomatic relations with the PRC. Bonn opposed this move because it run counter Bonn's agenda. Any recognition of the Chinese division might undermine Bonn's claim to solely represent the German people and, more

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<sup>321</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard with Lyndon Johnson, Stonewall, Texas, Dec. 28, 1963, pp. 1672-1674.

<sup>322</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Undersecretary Carstens, Dec. 30, 1963, pp. 1712-13; Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 44-48. The Germans were quite happy about the good start at LBJ ranch and felt that both leaders had established a agreeable relationship. Obviously, Bonn did place much greater emphasis on the encounter than the American side.

<sup>323</sup> AAPD 1964 Vol. I, Memorandum of Foreign Minister Schröder, Jan. 6, 1964, pp. 15-18; Schröder reminded the German ambassadors that they had to continue pressing arguments for German unification. Although some countries grew tired of and oblivious to this German concern, the diplomats had to keep the issue alive.



importantly, the French decision intensified tensions between Paris and Washington.<sup>324</sup> De Gaulle justified the recognition to Erhard by pointing to the possible benefits both for Vietnam and Western Europe. On Vietnam, de Gaulle repeated the position previously expressed to Washington; the conflict could only be solved through negotiations.<sup>325</sup>

Erhard disagreed with de Gaulle. The German leader accused Beijing of actively promoting aggression and Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Erhard considered the French recognition of the PRC as premature. He was concerned with the possibility of Beijing and Moscow ending their disagreements once they realized that the West was exploiting the split of the Communist world. After all, Communism threatened free countries around the globe and Erhard concurred with the American position that the free world could only stand up to aggression if it fought the enemy jointly.<sup>326</sup> Erhard was less concerned about the actual motives of the Chinese, with whom Bonn was negotiating as well, than the negative repercussion of the French recognition of the PRC for West Germany.

De Gaulle dismissed Erhard's repetition of the American point of view. He refused to placate Washington merely to present an unanimous front within the NATO alliance. While Paris was open to debate, it also reserved the right to express and pursue its self-interest within NATO or elsewhere. Bonn could not refute this argument because

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<sup>324</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Undersecretary Carstens, Jan. 15, 1964, pp. 42-45; Paris of course hoped that Washington would eventually recognize the validity of the French course both toward Vietnam and China.

<sup>325</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - de Gaulle, Feb. 14, 1964, pp. 208, 211-212. De Gaulle maintained that while the U.S. was unwilling to disengage from South Vietnam, it could not possibly succeed with its current strategy. Since Washington rejected all out war against North Vietnam and China, the U.S. could only sink deeper into a quagmire. Given the domestic problems in China, Beijing might be willing to accept a settlement over Vietnam.

<sup>326</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - de Gaulle, Feb. 14, 1964, pp. 213-214; Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 64-68.

West Germans also hoped for a more influential role within NATO. At the same time, Erhard could not officially endorse the French position regarding the PRC and Vietnam given his own policy goals to secure the protection and good will of the United States.<sup>327</sup>

By early 1964 Vietnam had become another issue on which France and the Federal Republic agreed to disagree, mainly because Bonn felt the necessity to prove its unqualified allegiance to its prime protector, the United States. Interestingly, Bonn and Paris, at least unofficially, were not completely at odds over Vietnam and China. The German ambassador to Saigon doubted that an American victory in South Vietnam was achievable and in secret Bonn was also seeking closer ties to Beijing. Nevertheless, Erhard felt compelled to be the most loyal and trustworthy ally to Washington.<sup>328</sup> Despite his differences with Paris, Erhard was acutely aware that he had to maintain a constructive dialogue with de Gaulle because further deterioration in French-German relations might torpedo chances for progress toward unification.

To Bonn the French diplomatic recognition of the PRC and its fallout for the Atlantic Alliance put West Germany on the spot.<sup>329</sup> What could Bonn do to facilitate French-American relations? Bonn found de Gaulle's "grand design," a Europe from the

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<sup>327</sup> For a more in depth debate about Franco-German difference over the recognition of the PRC and Vietnam see: AAPD, Schröder - de Murville, Feb. 14, 1964, pp. 224-225; Murville blamed the United States for the crisis within the alliance and stated that Paris was willing to openly discuss the problems in Southeast Asia with other NATO members. Both secretaries agreed that bi-lateral talks were in fact quite helpful to resolve thorny issue and current divergence of opinion on Vietnam between Bonn and Paris.

<sup>328</sup> AAPD, Erhard conversation with U.S. Ambassador McGhee, Feb. 18, 1964, pp. 257-259. Erhard restaged his recent encounter with de Gaulle for the American ambassador. This time it was Erhard who lectured his French counterparts on the pitfalls of neutralization in Vietnam and strongly denounced the PRC as the true aggressor in the region. De Gaulle was trying to play the "angel of peace" undermining American effort. Erhard, of course, fully supported the American commitment to Vietnam.

<sup>329</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Kläiber, Paris, to Foreign Ministry, March 6, 1964, pp. 316-320; Kläiber argued that the cause of French-American tensions was of course de Gaulle, who since 1958 did everything possible to increase the independence of France vis-à-vis the United States. De Gaulle disregarded allied concerns and instead relished the role of defender of the Third World.

Atlantic to the Ural, appealing but this unified Europe might result in an isolationist policy in Washington. West Germany policy goals depended both on American and French cooperation. Bonn had to work for reconciliation between Paris and Washington:

Nur wenn wir Washington und Paris auf unserer Seite haben, können wir unseren Interessen zum Durchbruch verhelfen . . . Unsere Aufgabe muß es sein, jeder weiteren Verschlechterung des Verhältnisses Frankreichs zu Amerika mit all unseren Kräften Einhalt zu gebieten. Wir werden weder de Gaulle passiv einfach gewähren lassen noch aktiv für die USA Partei nehmen dürfen. Mit der ersten Alternative würden wir das Verhältnis mit den USA über Gebühr strapazieren, mit der zweiten Alternative dem Vertrag über die deutsch-französische Zusammenarbeit praktisch die Grundlage entziehen.<sup>330</sup>

West Germany was and could not be in a position to choose only one of its Western partners if unification was to become reality, but the French-American antagonism over Southeast Asia undermined Bonn's own "grand-design."

Bonn also realized that the German question was currently of only marginal importance to American foreign policymakers. Washington was more interested in solving Cold War conflicts outside of Europe and, perhaps later, might address the thorny issue of German unity.<sup>331</sup> For Erhard unification remained the prime goal and he hoped for a more active American approach regarding Germany. In return, the chancellor completely accepted Johnson's position on Vietnam.<sup>332</sup> Soon Erhard realized that his

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<sup>330</sup> AAPD, Kläiber to Foreign Ministry, March 6, 1964, p. 323: "Only if we have both Washington and Paris on our side, can we attain our objectives. . . We have to prevent with all means possible any further deterioration in Franco-American relations. We cannot remain passive to de Gaulle's actions nor can we actively take sides with the Americans. The first alternative would cause extensive harm to German-American relations while the second would de facto nullify the Franco-German treaty."

<sup>331</sup> AAPD, Conference of Ambassadors, April 21, 1964, pp. 467-469; Undersecretary Carstens wondered why the United States did not take advantage of the current economic problems within the Soviet Union and external difficulties resulting out of the Sino-Soviet split. The ambassadors argued that Washington was unwilling to adopt "classical power-politics" and hoped for evolutionary changes within the Eastern bloc to improve the situation in Europe. The West Germans were unwilling to realize and accept that Washington, at least for the present, was not interested to challenge the status-quo in Europe.

<sup>332</sup> AAPD, Erhard letter to Johnson, May 8, 1964, p. 517; Bonn adopted a "Deutschland-Initiative" in January 1964 that prescribed several steps for the reunification of Germany, which was debated with no

endorsement not only covered American 'technical' support to Vietnam but possible U.S. airstrikes on industrial targets North Vietnam. The other alternative to those air-attacks was U.S. military intervention to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam.<sup>333</sup>

Erhard wrote to Johnson that he fully backed the United States' policy in Vietnam. The Federal Republic would do everything within its constitutional means to support the United States in the endeavor to preserve the freedom of South Vietnam. Bonn promised to continue its political, economic, and cultural aid to Saigon.<sup>334</sup> Johnson was contented but demanded a public statement in which Erhard denounced neutralization for Vietnam. Bonn refused to do so because such a declaration would only increase Franco-German tensions without changing anything in South Vietnam. Bonn found a middle way instead. Erhard assured Ambassador Nguyen Qui Anh, representing the new government of General Khanh, that West Germany endorsed the American position in Vietnam, but refused to directly criticize the French plan of neutralization.<sup>335</sup>

The French were angered by the German attitude and the intense debate over Vietnam between both government continued. Bonn maintained that the conflict in Vietnam was another chapter in the struggle of the free world against Communist

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results. In 1964 Erhard regarded the initiative as a first hopeful sign that the Western allies were willing to work harder for a solution regarding Germany.

<sup>333</sup> AAPD, Erhard letter to Johnson, May 5, 1964, p. 515; Ambassador von Wendland, Saigon, to Erhard, Wendland's assessment is documented as footnote to Erhard's letter which includes a report by ambassador to Washington, Knappstein, describing the determination of Johnson to prevent the fall of South Vietnam at all costs.

<sup>334</sup> AAPD, Erhard letter to Johnson, May 5, 1964, pp. 515-516; Erhard maintained that South Vietnam was a symbol for Western determination against the Communist threat. He also subscribed to the "domino theory", fearing that the fall of Saigon would have serious repercussion for all of Southeast Asia. Neutralization would only accelerate a Communist take-over.

<sup>335</sup> AAPD, Schröder to Erhard, Mai 17, 1964, pp. 541-542; Erhard expressed his sympathy with and admiration for the "heroic struggle" of the South Vietnamese against Communist aggression. He hoped that General Khanh remained firm to save his country's independence, which was in the best interest not only of Southeast Asia but the world.

aggression, implicitly acknowledging its own dependence on Washington. The French disagreed. The crisis in Indochina resulted out of an indigenous struggle for self-determination but was further complicated by U.S.-Chinese antagonism.<sup>336</sup> Paris also criticized the German notion of solidarity with the United States on Vietnam, condemning it as uncritical and shortsighted. De Gaulle argued that Western solidarity could be best achieved when any member of NATO was at liberty to express its honest opinions on that matter.<sup>337</sup>

French criticism of Bonn was an obvious consequence of de Gaulle's own foreign policy agenda. The basic component for French influence in the world was its leadership in Europe. The Franco-German treaty promised close cooperation, and a shared policy for Europe. But Erhard rejected the path taken by Adenauer. Erhard proved reluctant to accept French guidance and oscillated into the American sphere. While firm in its commitment to the United States, Bonn endeavored to maintain a basic understanding with Paris in order to preserve its chances for eventual unification. It was difficult for the West Germans to reject the French view on Vietnam outrightly, given the lack of German expertise in Southeast Asia. Although de Gaulle was unable to fully convince Erhard of his point of view, the General's argument in favor of negotiations did impress the chancellor and his advisors.

Erhard made a tentative attempt to affect American thinking on Vietnam during an encounter with Rusk in the summer of 1964. The chancellor wondered whether

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<sup>336</sup> See for example: AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Couve de Murville, June 8, 1964, pp. 622-623; Murville presented to Bonn the same argument the French used in Washington: The war in Vietnam was a civil war, and in order to prevent further escalation the U.S. should reach an understanding with the PRC.

Beijing could be persuaded to end its interference in Southeast Asian affairs. Rusk's response was a straight no. The secretary regarded China as the major threat for Southeast Asia as well as Korea and India. A liberal policy toward Beijing would only provoke further Communist offensives. If Beijing insisted on its current course it might lead to another war in Asia. With Americans dying in South Vietnam, Washington contemplated escalation, unless Hanoi and Beijing realized that aggression was futile.<sup>338</sup> Rusk's assertion was revealing to Erhard and left no doubt that Washington would not back down over Vietnam. Erhard hurried to ascertain that the Federal Republic was not all considering diplomatic relations with the PRC but was merely interested to expand trade relations. Erhard even doubted whether contacts with the PRC could lead to any new approach on the German question.<sup>339</sup> Facing American pressure, the chancellor caved in and retreated from his government's earlier assessment on China and surrendered to the American point of view.<sup>340</sup>

Meeting Erhard in July 1964, Johnson expressed his appreciation over German support, especially since the other European allies did nothing to help the United States in Vietnam. German aid was also beneficial in Johnson's efforts to rally Congress and public opinion behind his Vietnam policy. Nevertheless, the president still faced difficult

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For Vietnam, the best solution was the return to the Geneva Settlement of 1954 by neutralizing the entire country.

<sup>337</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder- Murville, June 8, 1964, p. 624.

<sup>338</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Rusk, June 12, 1964, pp. 646-648.

<sup>339</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Rusk, June 12, 1964, p. 648; Erhard clearly told Rusk a different story than his own advisors assessment on possible contacts with Beijing; he discarded the China card to placate Washington.

<sup>340</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Johnson, June 12, 1964, pp. 653-654; LBJ scorned those countries that did have diplomatic ties with the PRC since it undermined the U.S. effort in South Vietnam. Erhard did not even attempt to discuss possible German-PRC relations and hinted that Bonn was working to send a hospital ship, the *Helgoland*, to relieve the suffering of the South Vietnamese.

decisions on his country's future course in Vietnam.<sup>341</sup> Erhard cherished Johnson's trust and friendship. As another sign of German good-will Erhard promised to settle the question of off-set contribution to ease the financial burden for American troops in West-Germany.<sup>342</sup> Once more Erhard believed his strategy of unconditional support of Washington correct. He failed to realize that Johnson was mainly interested in European endorsement of his Vietnam policy and had no intentions to embark on a campaign for German unification. German and American perceptions of global issues and national self-interest were miles apart.

While Erhard received some approval from Johnson, the chancellor was scorned by de Gaulle during their next encounter in July 1964. De Gaulle used threats as well as the bait of unification to win Erhard to his side. The general accused Erhard of being a deferential vassal to Washington, but then invited Bonn to join not only his *force de frappe*, and work for a European solution for the German question. De Gaulle depicted himself as champion of German unity and maintained that Washington was not at all interested in this vital German issue.<sup>343</sup> Neither intimidations nor promises worked.

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<sup>341</sup> AAPD, Erhard – Johnson, June 12, 1964, pp. 655-657; Johnson complained about domestic pressure on Vietnam, with Republicans urging him to do more while the left was against further engagement. The lack of European support made it even more difficult for Johnson to justify his policy at home and obtain the needed financial support from Congress. LBJ also hinted at the far-reaching decisions he still had to make on Vietnam, which would have repercussions beyond the United States. While he did not provide details, he was referring to the possible deployment of ground troops.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 658-659; The off-set payments would come to haunt Erhard two years later, when West Germany caught in an economic crisis had difficulties to comply American demands. Erhard was affected by Johnson's somber mood and the president's anxieties over Vietnam; see also: Osterfeld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 91.

<sup>343</sup> AAPD, conversation Erhard - de Gaulle, July 3, 1964, pp. 714-716; though de Gaulle would also be a "friend" of the U.S., he made it abundantly clear to Erhard that he was not willing to conduct his foreign policy in mere deference to American wishes. For participation in the force de frappe see: AAPD, conversation Undersecretary of State Carstens with de Gaulle, July 4, 1964; de Gaulle told Carstens that the MLF would not give Germany control over atomic weapons and offered a German participation in the

Erhard desired a stronger European voice in global affairs but the current crisis in Vietnam required the undivided moral support of the United States.<sup>344</sup>

But Erhard's defiance of de Gaulle only intensified the German dilemma. Bonn needed both the United States and France to sanction German campaigns toward unification. But how could Bonn please both allies when they were at odds over Vietnam and China? Erhard was unable to envision an alternative to his current balancing act between Washington and Paris. The chancellor also harbored serious doubts whether the General's vision of a united Europe could ever be achieved. Europe was far from the unity, while the protection and commitment of the United States was already reality.<sup>345</sup> Washington remained the most important ally because only Washington could completely guarantee the viability of the Federal Republic even if that meant unification was postponed.

With France's increasing pressure on Bonn to support its policies, Erhard again turned to Washington in search for reassurance believing that only through close cooperation with the United States could unification become reality.<sup>346</sup> Erhard would remain unfailing in his support of the United States in Vietnam in return for a more productive American effort towards German interest. Washington was more keen on German assistance in South Vietnam. Johnson hoped that Bonn publicly endorsed

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force de frappe [ de Gaulle: Warum gehen Sie nicht mit uns zusammen? Wir haben die Bombe auch. Bei uns können Sie einen weit größeren Anteil erhalten]

<sup>344</sup> AAPD, Erhard-de Gaulle, July 3, 1963, pp. 718-721; Erhard refused to accept de Gaulle's position on NATO, China, and Southeast Asia.

<sup>345</sup> AAPD, Erhard-de Gaulle, July 3, 1963, pp. 774-775.

<sup>346</sup> On continuous French pressure on Germany to follow de Gaulle's lead see: AAPD, conversation Schröder - Couve de Murville, July 4, 1964, pp. 762-764; AAPD, conversation Erhard - U.S. ambassador McGhee, July 6, 1964, p. 788; Erhard bitterly resented that de Gaulle called him a "mere vassal" of the United States, probably hoping for American sympathy.



Washington's policy, while he was less forthcoming on the German question.<sup>347</sup> By supporting the American Vietnam policy, Bonn invested heavily in the relationship with Washington, simply based on the hope to obtain further support for unification, yet this hope became more and more unrealistic.<sup>348</sup>

The resulting quandary for Erhard was that, while he made the decision to stand by the United States, he still had to placate Paris to prevent a complete rift with de Gaulle. But the growing disparity in American and French foreign policy aims, placed Erhard an untenable situation. Against all odds he kept on trying to procure some benefit for West Germany. He simply could not lose the support of either Washington or Paris. Undersecretary Carstens defined the German strategy that required good relations with all three Western allies as imperative for any chance toward German unity:

Unser oberstes Ziel, die Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands, können wir nur erreichen, wenn wir mit unseren drei westlichen Partners zusammengehen. Durch eine deutsch-französische Union allein, ohne oder gegen die USA, ist es nicht erreichbar. Es mag sein, daß die aktive Unterstützung unserer Wiedervereinigungspolitik durch die USA zu wünschen übrig läßt. Insbesondere sind die USA zur Zeit offenbar nicht bereit, Druck auf die Sowjetunion auszuüben. Das ändert nichts daran, daß eine Deutschland-Politik ohne oder gar gegen sie hoffnungslos ist. Wir müssen daher auf die USA immer wieder einwirken, um sie zu einer aktiveren Unterstützung unseres Standpunktes zu bewegen. Dazu müssen wir unser bisheriges enges Verhältnis zu ihnen erhalten.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> AAPD, Erhard - McGhee, July 6, 1964, pp. 794-795; McGhee promptly presented Erhard with a list of projects in South Vietnam that required foreign aid. He also assured Erhard that Washington would never regard de Gaulle as the sole voice of the Europeans.

<sup>348</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 101-102; Osterheld was dismayed that Erhard refused to participate in the *force de frappe*, but Erhard had made his choice in favor of the United States. But he encountered increasing criticism by Adenauer and other members of his party.

<sup>349</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Undersecretary Carstens, July 27, 1964, pp. 887-888: "Our supreme goal, the unification of Germany, can only be obtained if we join with our three western allies. A Franco-German union, without or even against the United States will not lead to unification. Actually, the United States could do more to actively support our unification policy. At the present, the United States is not willing to exert pressure on the Soviet Union which however does not change the fact that a German policy without or even against the United States would be completely hopeless. Hence we have to continue encouraging the United States to engage in a more active support of our policy. In order to gain that support we have to maintain our currently close relations."

The goal of unification trapped Bonn. It could neither embrace de Gaulle's views on NATO and Vietnam. De Gaulle, whether right or not on global affairs, lacked the capability to guarantee West German security. Situated on the front-line between East and West, West Germany more than France needed the military protection of the United States. De Gaulle's idea of a Franco-German political union could do more damage than good. It would not lead any closer to European unity and, far worse, might alienate the United States. De Gaulle might find forgiveness for his action in Washington, while Bonn could not expect the same tolerance.<sup>350</sup>

Carstens did agree with the French position in regard to China and Vietnam. Germany should improve relations with the PRC to entice Beijing to a more productive attitude toward the German question. Regarding Vietnam, Carstens concurred with the French assessment that chances of an American victory there were dim.<sup>351</sup> Although Paris and Bonn were not that far apart in their assessment on the PRC and the discouraging prospect in Vietnam, Bonn believed that it simply could not permit a possible strain in German-American relation by criticizing the American policy in Southeast Asia.

### III. America's Vietnam and the resulting Ouagmire for Erhard

In December 1964 Bonn received disturbing news from Washington. Johnson was contemplating a further escalation of American involvement in Vietnam. Bonn hoped to

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<sup>350</sup> AAPD, Memorandum Undersecretary Carstens, July 27, 1964, pp. 888-889.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., pp. 891-893; Carstens was also worried that de Gaulle might adopt an openly unfriendly course toward Bonn and recommended that his government refrain from any public criticism of de Gaulle.

prevent an escalation of the conflict.<sup>352</sup> Regardless of repeated German declarations supporting the American role in Vietnam as vital to the survival of the free world, to Bonn the conflict in the Far East presented an undesired impediment in the pursuit of German unity. American escalation in Vietnam would move German interests farther down the list of top priorities in Washington. Erhard tried his best to be a loyal ally while minimizing the detrimental repercussions the American escalation caused for Germany.

American military strikes against North Vietnam after the Pleiku attack in February 1965 increased German apprehension despite assurances that the United States did not intend to escalate the conflict.<sup>353</sup> Intelligence gathered by German diplomats stationed in Asia reaffirmed the French view that the chance of an American victory in Vietnam was discouraging. But an American defeat in Vietnam might result in the collapse of Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, affecting the entire Pacific rim. The French plan of neutralization was also not very promising since it might quickly lead to a Communist take-over of South Vietnam.<sup>354</sup> More importantly for Bonn, an American withdrawal from Southeast Asia might weaken American determination to defend the Western world, which touched at the core of German security concerns. Bonn was concerned mostly about a possible reduction of U.S. troops in West Germany and, more generally, whether Washington might lose interest in Europe.<sup>355</sup> Erhard saw no other

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<sup>352</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein to the Foreign Ministry, December 30, 1964, pp. 1571 and 1573.

<sup>353</sup> AAPD, 1965, Conversation Erhard - Ambassador McGhee, February 8, 1965, p. 274.

<sup>354</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder with General Secretary of NATO, Manlio Brosio, March 25, 1965, p. 617; see footnote 20 about ambassador conference.

<sup>355</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Rusk, May 13, 1965, p. 823, 831-834; Rusk, as well as McNamara assured Bonn that despite the growing number of ground troops in Vietnam no forces would be withdrawn from Germany. Rusk also downplayed the German concern that Beijing might intervene. He suggested that the situation in Vietnam would come to a conclusion more quickly if "the other side engaged in large scale military action", which remained puzzling to Schröder.

choice than to support Washington's policy. Not unlike the Johnson administration, Bonn could not envision a viable alternative to the current American Vietnam policy.<sup>356</sup>

Deployment of American ground troops to Vietnam in March 1965 was barely noticed in Bonn due to a brewing crisis in the Near East over West German arms deliveries to Israel.<sup>357</sup> Soon, the increasing number of U.S. forces in Vietnam elevated German public awareness and concerns about the conflict. Foreign Secretary Schröder sought American advice on how to justify the bloodshed in Vietnam to his constituency at home. He expected that Washington would inform Bonn in detail about the progress in Vietnam, allowing him to give the German people an objective account of American goals in Southeast Asia. Rusk proved understanding but complained about a lack of allied support for the United States in Vietnam. Rusk stressed that the West had to appreciate the gravity of the situation in Vietnam and demanded that America's allies be more forthcoming in their support.<sup>358</sup> Schröder confirmed German loyalty and his country's willingness to contribute financially to American projects along the Mekong river and the founding of an Asian Development Bank.<sup>359</sup> National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy demanded even more forcefully an greater German effort in Vietnam. Washington was determined to succeed in Southeast Asia despite possible obstacles ahead.<sup>360</sup> Bonn was

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<sup>356</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Brosio, March 25, 1965, p. 617.

<sup>357</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 149-157, 168-173, 188-189; The crisis in the Near East grew more complicated by the visit of East German head of state, Walter Ulbricht. West Germany had provided military equipment to Israel in secret, albeit sanctioned by Washington. The exports of weaponry were a very sensitive matter both in terms of constitutional restriction in West Germany and the delicate relations to Israel as a result of the Holocaust. The crisis eventually led to diplomatic relations with Israel and the cessation of ties with Egypt and other Arab countries.

<sup>358</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Rusk, June 2, 1965, pp. 922-928; Neither Moscow, Beijing, or Hanoi were willing to engage in a constructive dialogue. Rusk admitted that Hanoi profitted from the struggle between Moscow and Beijing and continued its policy of infiltration.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 927-928

<sup>360</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, June 3, 1965, p. 942.

forewarned that Washington had made its decision to seek victory in Vietnam, even if it required taking a long arduous road to get there.<sup>361</sup> Secretary of Defense McNamara also focused on Vietnam in a meeting with the Chancellor intimating his expectation that Bonn contribute its share by complying fully with offset payments for U.S. troops in Germany.<sup>362</sup>

The Vietnam war was no longer an issue that Bonn could disregard. It touched not only the German need for American protection but exposed a decreasing American willingness to explore new opportunities in the German situation. McNamara proposed increase of U.S. troops in Vietnam was disconcerting. While Erhard did not see any alternative but to sanction American escalation in Vietnam, he did worry whether the conflict might lead to U.S. troop withdrawals from West Germany. Hopefully, a sufficient number of G.I.'s would remain to protect the Federal Republic, but would they remain if the war in Vietnam turned badly, as de Gaulle predicted? How could Erhard work for unification if the Cold War intensified over the Vietnam issue. Lastly, Bonn faced increasing demands by Washington to further contribute to the conflict in Vietnam. What else could Bonn offer if economic and humanitarian aid was not sufficient in the eyes of Washington. France would object to an even stronger German endorsement to the American war effort in Vietnam. Bonn was more and more trapped diplomatically by the conflict in Vietnam. The war strained relations with France, increased doubts about the

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<sup>361</sup> AAPD, June 3, 1965, p. 943; though Bundy gave the usual reassurance that Washington was working to solve the German question, he was much more worried about the French opposition to the American role in Vietnam and hoped that Bonn could influence de Gaulle.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 945-946; AAPD, Conversation Erhard with Secretary of Defense McNamara, June 4, 1965, pp. 947-953; France and her obstinate policy toward NATO was also discussed in depth. McNamara bombarded Erhard with the number game on Vietnam. Erhard was concerned about Soviet intervention in Vietnam but to McNamara replied such scenario was very unlikely unless the PRC was directly attacked.

U.S. commitment to West Germany and, most of all, removed the issue of German unification from the international agenda. Despite the troubling outlook for his own policy goals, Erhard chose to hold fast in his commitment to Washington.

During a subsequent summit with Johnson in June 1965, Erhard repeated the German litany of loyalty regarding Vietnam. The chancellor hoped that Johnson would show the same commitment regarding the German question as the president demonstrated in his Vietnam policy. Erhard grew more anxious over the implications of Vietnam conflict. He was concerned whether the United States would stand by its commitment to West German security. An American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, on the other hand, might cause further apprehension among West Germans whether the United States was truly a reliable ally. Erhard discussed these concerns with General de Gaulle and explained that he could perceive no other path than reassuring Washington of Germany's confidence and loyalty.<sup>363</sup>

De Gaulle sympathized with the German predicament yet deeply regretted the American policy in South Vietnam. But de Gaulle could do nothing to alleviate German fears since, to him, the American effort in Vietnam was doomed.<sup>364</sup> By painting a worst-case scenario, de Gaulle again tried pulling West Germany into his orbit. He masterfully used the conflict in Vietnam as demonstration to Erhard that Germany was vulnerable in its present reliance on Washington. Bonn would be far better off to follow the general's

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<sup>363</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - de Gaulle, June 11, 1965, pp. 1002-1005.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1007-1008; De Gaulle felt that events in Vietnam proved his continuous warning to Washington as correct. De Gaulle also regarded the possibility of a political solution as more than dim, because the U.S. had missed the chance to do so and "it was now too late." He also suggested that failure in Vietnam might induce the U.S. to adopt an isolationist position and abandon Western Europe as well. See also: AAPD, Second Conversation Erhard - de Gaulle, June 11, 1965, p. 1018; De Gaulle proposed

leadership. Erhard wanted reassurance that German concerns mattered and had no intention to exchange his reliance on Washington with an open endorsement to de Gaulle.

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In July 1965, Averill Harriman informed Erhard that President Johnson would increase the number of Americans troops in South Vietnam. Harriman assured Bonn that no U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Europe.<sup>366</sup> The ambassador also delivered a request by Johnson asking for additional political, psychological, and economic support in Vietnam. Washington was urging Western unity regarding Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi:

[Soviet Premier] Kossygin is a hardened Communist and believes that Communism will be victorious also through wars of liberation. This conviction could be dampened if a revolutionary war, like in Vietnam, could not succeed. The war in Vietnam has to be won. The United States have to demonstrate that Mao Tse-dong and Giap were wrong. The Soviet Union will then focus more on its internal development and hence be less dangerous. Vietnam is the key to this new direction.<sup>367</sup>

Harriman skillfully reversed de Gaulle's argument on the best course in Vietnam. The ambassador maintained that the American commitment in Vietnam did not endanger the security of West Germany. Instead, victory in Vietnam would further strengthened the Free World against Communism.<sup>368</sup>

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modifications of the NATO obligations, which would require mutual assistance in case of Soviet aggression, but did not apply in case of a Chinese or North Vietnamese attack on the U.S.

<sup>365</sup> Moscow also showed no interest in negotiations with Bonn; East Berlin caused further headaches by impeding East-West transit and killing refugees at the inner German border. See: AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein to the Foreign Ministry, reporting on bilateral talks on prospects of German unification, June 17, 1965, p. 1055; Rusk met with Erich Mende, Minister for Inner German Affairs and both were concerned about the renewed intransigent attitude in Moscow on the German question. Rusk admitted that the American role in Vietnam clearly strained U.S.-Soviet relations. AAPD, Ambassador Blankenhorn to the Foreign Ministry, reporting from the meeting of the West European Union (WEU) in Luxembourg, June 30, 1965, p. 1097.

<sup>366</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard with Ambassador Harriman, July 24, 1965, pp. 1250-1251.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1251.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 217-219; Osterheld commented on the remarkable skills of persuasion in Harriman's delivery. The American eloquently praised German support

In August 1965 Bonn, for the first time, had the opportunity to discuss the Vietnam situation with London. The meeting revealed the British to be optimistic about the chances of an American victory in Vietnam. Undersecretary Alexander Böker was informed about recent British diplomatic initiatives to establish contacts with Ho Chi Minh, which had unfortunately failed. The British were skeptical about the viability of the Saigon regime and maintained some reservations about American strategy, but refused to openly criticize Washington. London, at least publicly, did fully support America's Vietnam policy. The Foreign Office deplored the Soviet refusal to cooperate with Britain as co-chair in Geneva, further impeding peace talks. According to the British, Beijing profited from the Vietnam conflict but would not intervene unless directly attacked by the United States. Böker was confused about the contradictory assessments of his British colleagues and felt that London lacked any clearly defined plan for future negotiations.<sup>369</sup>

Based on this short discussion, Bonn assumed that the Anglo-American side was generally in agreement over Vietnam policy. The gloomy French scenario on Vietnam left its mark on Bonn, and British optimism about American chances there came somewhat as a surprise. Bonn was obviously not aware that London, too, had profound

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for Vietnam, which even surpassed that of the British. In Britain, the ruling Labour party was torn about the conflict in Vietnam. The "special ally" fell short of the endorsement Washington received from Bonn. Erhard quickly assured Harriman of continuous German support and expressed his deep empathy with the South Vietnamese.

<sup>369</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Senior official Böker, German-British consultation on problems in Africa, the Near and Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia, August 18, 1965, pp. 1372-1373; Böker was clearly surprised by the British response that the U.S. could win the war in Vietnam. His surprise reflects the doubts of the Erhard government that Washington indeed could succeed in Southeast Asia. The documents of the AAPD to the end of 1966 include no other evidence on German-British consultation over the Vietnam conflict. The British, like the Americans, insisted on greater financial contribution for the up-keep of their troops in Germany.



doubts about the American Vietnam strategy but chose to keep these concerns secret. Although the diplomatic approach seemed proper for British interest, it deprived Western Europe, and Bonn in particular, of a mediating voice. With British backing, Bonn might have a greater impact on Washington regarding Vietnam. But Erhard did not seek further discussion on Vietnam with London. He was left in his own quagmire trying to plot a course that brought some progress for unity while Paris and Washington were drifting further apart on Vietnam.

During his election campaign in late summer of 1965, Erhard pledged that he would continue economic and humanitarian aid to Saigon. Although most Germans empathized with the plight of the Vietnamese, many became weary of Erhard's overall direction in international affairs. The opposition, media, and even members of the CDU accused Erhard of lacking in leadership and undermining Bonn's influence in world affairs.<sup>370</sup> Paris blamed the Vietnam conflict as being the major reason for increased international tensions and urged a more assertive stance by the European countries. The United States, disregarding European advice, increased its commitment in Vietnam.<sup>371</sup>

Facing British reluctance toward and outright French opposition against American policy in Vietnam, Washington increasingly focused on what the Federal Republic could do to aid the American effort in Vietnam.<sup>372</sup> Rusk asked Schröder for German aid to Saigon in form of technical engineers, medical personnel, and even police units and also

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<sup>370</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 220-227, 237-238; Adenauer reproached Erhard for not cooperating closer with de Gaulle; the CDU was increasingly polarized as well between the Adenauer and Erhard camp by favoring either Washington or Paris as the principal ally.

<sup>371</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Couve de Murville, November 12, 1965, p. 1704.

<sup>372</sup> McNamara pressured European NATO allies to do more in Vietnam and threatened the redeployment of U.S. troops in Europe. He met with no success. No country volunteered to send forces to Vietnam. See:

encourage the private sector to do business in South Vietnam. Otherwise Congress might reconsider the American commitment to Europe because of growing costs in Vietnam.<sup>373</sup> Schröder was hesitant to comply, pointing to the difficult legal situation in deploying any German nationals beyond the scope of the Western alliance. He had already discussed Vietnam with several aid organizations, and most doctors and the Red Cross were reluctant to get involved in the Vietnam conflict.<sup>374</sup> But German constitutional intricacies did not interest Washington. As with Britain, Johnson expected a public gesture of support from Bonn. Johnson was determined to exert additional pressure to receive the desired backing from West Germany.

Vietnam completely overshadowed the state visit of Erhard to Washington from December 19 to 22, 1965 which turned out to be one of the most tough and eye-opening encounters during Erhard's tenure as chancellor. The treatment Erhard received was a well organized display of pressure, cajoling, and thinly veiled threats. The bottom-line was that Johnson insisted on a greater German contribution in Vietnam, not only in the form of money but by deploying German troops.<sup>375</sup> Erhard countered by pointing to current German aid to South Vietnam and his record of moral support to Washington.<sup>376</sup> But Washington wanted more. McNamara stated frankly that it was unacceptable that the

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*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, Western Europe Region, Telegram From the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the Department of State, December 18, 1965, p. 287.*

<sup>373</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Rusk during NATO Conference in Paris, December 15, 1965, pp.

1899-1900; Rusk explained to the German that he and McNamara were doing their best to prevent troops withdrawals from Europe, but Congress demanded greater contributions from the NATO partners.

<sup>374</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Rusk, December 15, 1965, p. 1900.

<sup>375</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Rusk and McNamara, December 20, 1965, pp. 1915-1917.

<sup>376</sup> AAPD, Erhard - Rusk and McNamara, Dec. 20, 1965, pp. 1917-1918; Rusk pointed out that Johnson was deeply worried how the Vietnam conflict would affect his domestic program. Johnson had his heart and soul set on his "Great Society" while he felt damned by whatever choice he made in Vietnam. Erhard as well should follow through his commitment.

United States sacrifice so much for the defense of the free world while the allies hardly did anything. Bonn had to comply in full with the off-set purchases to cover the costs of American troops in West Germany, and any additional help very welcome.<sup>377</sup>

Johnson demanded German acquisitions of American weaponry as off-set payment for the expenses of American troops in Germany. The president directly asked for German military contributions in Vietnam. Erhard responded that according the German constitution he could not sent any troops or even any engineering or medical corps to Vietnam. Johnson was not ready to concede, and his “good friend” Erhard received the full Johnson treatment of threats and sweet-talk. The president reminded Erhard of all America had done for West Germany during the last decades and it was now time for Germany to pay back its dues. The United States needed concrete and feasible help in Vietnam and Bonn had to provide whatever it could.<sup>378</sup> Erhard left the meeting deeply shaken and near despair and his counsel was simply bewildered. They had some idea that Johnson was a passionate “full-blooded” politician but nobody expected that he would confront Erhard in such a brutal fashion and ask for the impossible. The depressed

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<sup>377</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Rusk and McNamara, Dec. 20, 1965, pp. 1918-1919. McNamara relayed that 200,000 American would be in South Vietnam by the end of 1965, with more to be deployed in 1966. The war already cost \$ 10 billion per year, which would further increase. McNamara's indicated that the U.S. reached the end of the line in its duty to Western freedom, while its allies remained complacent. Erhard's first encounter with Johnson appeared a short relief from Vietnam. LBJ showed interest in Erhard's desire to have greater access to nuclear weaponry. See: AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Johnson, December 20, 1965, pp. 1920-1925.

<sup>378</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 268-270; AAPD, German-American government consultation, December 20, 1965, pp. 1929-1931; Rusk and McNamara made it abundantly clear that the U.S. would stand by South Vietnam. Hanoi was unwilling to negotiate and hence the bombing of North Vietnam would continue until it broke their will to fight. McNamara admitted that success could not be achieved quickly, since North Vietnam was basically an agricultural country. To Erhard it was clear that Vietnam would be on the agenda for a long time, which made life quite difficult for him.

Erhard soon left for bed while his team spent the rest of the night deliberating how they could escape “partly unharmed from this crazy situation.”<sup>379</sup>

The visit was a debacle for German leader. Johnson was adamant concerning the off-set payments despite German pleas to consider their current economic difficulties. The president even threatened that American troops might be reduced in Germany if Bonn was not more forthcoming. Most disturbing was the American demand for German troops. McNamara repeated the American request for a construction battalion and a medical company to South Vietnam in January 1966. In addition, Washington badly needed the presence of German military units in Vietnam which went even beyond the demands made by Johnson.<sup>380</sup>

Erhard was willing to provide more financial aid, and even convened a special government commission to evaluate the conflict in Vietnam, but could not send armed forces. His reasoning was based on constitutional stipulations that the *Bundeswehr* was created solely for defensive purposes. Even more disconcerting for Bonn was that German soldiers in Vietnam would seriously undermine the carefully nurtured image of a peaceful and ‘rehabilitated’ Germany. Only twenty years after the Second World War, a German military mission, however justifiable, would cause consternation among Western Europeans and most likely Soviet hostility. The West Germans were disinclined to

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<sup>379</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 270.

<sup>380</sup> AAPD, 1966, Ambassador Knappstein to Foreign Ministry, January 11, 1966, p. 7-9; Knappstein commented on McNamara’s request for German troops that the secretary was under political pressure to find allied support for Vietnam. Knappstein asked for further guidance from Bonn how to respond to the question of a German military contribution to Vietnam. For Erhard’s public statement see footnote #1 of Knappstein document. U.S. ambassador McGhee also asked for a German contribution in every way possible. See: AAPD, Conversation Schröder - McGhee, January 14, 1966, pp. 21-22; Schröder maintained that Bonn was already doing more than most Western allies. As another sign of support Bonn sent the hospital ship *Helgoland* to South Vietnam.

support such a decision by Erhard. Consequently, German-American friendship on which Erhard had placed so much faith was less amenable than he had thought. For Erhard's advisors and the CDU debate on whom to trust more, Washington or Paris, became more relevant than ever.<sup>381</sup> Even worse, none of the allies was interested in German unification.<sup>382</sup>

By the end of January 1966 Bonn decided that military deployments to Vietnam were impossible because of legal and political concerns. Any German military engagement in Vietnam would be detrimental for both the Federal Republic and the cause in Southeast Asia. A German military contribution in Vietnam endangered the security of Berlin and would probably not be welcomed by any Western European country, much less by the majority of West Germans.<sup>383</sup>

Neither Washington nor Paris appreciated the German position. While the United States was eager that Bonn provide additional assistance to Saigon, de Gaulle grew increasingly gloomy over Vietnam and urged Bonn to follow his lead.<sup>384</sup> The Germans worried about their own security which might be undermined by further escalation in Southeast Asia, leading to withdrawal of American troops from Europe. In addition,

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<sup>381</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Johnson, December 20, 1965, pp. 1938-1942; Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 271-272.

<sup>382</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Undersecretary Carstens, January 27, 1966, pp. 77-78, 80, 93. All German allies were preoccupied with problems they deemed more important than German unification. Vietnam forced the Moscow to adopt a more aggressive policy against the U.S. because of Vietnam. But the Soviets had not intentions to intervene militarily. For Bonn, this new ice-age crushed any possibility to even begin meaningful discussions on unification.

<sup>383</sup> AAPD, Senior official Krapf to Ambassador Knapstein, Washington, January 28, 1966, pp. III-III. Krapf pointed to the past difficulties to even establish the *Bundeswehr* and argued that any military role in Southeast Asia would leave the FRG more vulnerable to Soviet pressure.

<sup>384</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 286; McNamara in particular became the black sheep for German policy-makers; AAPD, Conversation Schröder - Couve de Murville, Feb. 7, 1966, p. 159; Murville maintained that the war in Vietnam was far more complicated than the Americans perceived and he was

Bonn was also apprehensive of anti-European reactions by the American public and Congress which could result in a reduced American commitment in Western Europe.<sup>385</sup> Vietnam represented a messy situation to Bonn. The Americans wanted greater German aid for a dangerous, and probably unsuccessful war. European and German interest was not served by contributing to that conflict but Bonn needed American goodwill. Torn between Washington and Paris, Bonn hoped to placate either ally by providing only "moral" support to South Vietnam.

A meeting of Erhard's special cabinet commission for Vietnam in February 1966 revealed that Bonn had no intentions of increasing current aid to Saigon. The most important members of the commission, the foreign secretary and secretary of defense, were absent. Instead, the secretaries of economic cooperation, finances, health, urban development, Walter Scheel, Rolf Dahlgryn, Elizabeth Schwarzhaupt, and Paul Lücke, respectively, attended the meeting. Only Lücke favored a deployment of personnel to Vietnam. His colleagues emphatically disagreed. Secretary Scheel (FDP) urged that Bonn distance itself from the war in Vietnam. The dispatch of the hospital ship *Helgoland* sufficed completely in showing West German support of the United States in Vietnam while reaffirming the solely humanitarian character of German aid. They agreed that Bonn should definitely refrain from any action which might be interpreted as being either military or political support for the Saigon regime.<sup>386</sup>

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still concerned about Chinese interference. It was American intransigence than prevented a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. Only negotiations could prevent further deterioration.

<sup>385</sup> AAPD, Conversation Schröder-Murville, Feb. 7, 1966, pp. 161-164.

<sup>386</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Senior official Thierfelder, head of the legal division of the Foreign Ministry, Cabinet commission on aid to South Vietnam, Feb. 14, 1965, pp. 187-188; Rudolf Thierfelder, head of the legal division of the Foreign Ministry arrived late for the meeting in did not participate in the discussion.

The commission was mostly concerned about the increased financial burden additional aid to Saigon might pose. German business was reluctant to send representatives to Vietnam. Private charity organization further complicated matters for Bonn. The relief organizations insisted that any assistance be provided equally to both South and North Vietnam, which of course would send the wrong signal to the United States. If volunteers were to be recruited, Bonn had to guarantee financial security and that of their families in case the volunteers were killed in Vietnam. Lücke had a meeting later that day with a representative of German business which, although not promising, was considered a positive gesture in itself.<sup>387</sup> With the exception of Lücke, nobody proved willing to provide more than financial aid to Vietnam, apparently also reflecting the opinion of Germans in general.

Despite official statements that Americans were fighting in Vietnam for German freedom as well, the American policy failed to win unqualified enthusiasm in Germany. Certainly, many Germans emphasized with the hardship and suffering of the Vietnamese people. As in the States, the war entered German living-rooms every night during newshour. Body counts, pictures of bombed landscapes, and napalm victims brought back buried memories of the past world war and, with it, a sentiment of solidarity toward the Vietnamese people and growing skepticism about American goals and conduct in the region.<sup>388</sup> A possible deployment of German troops might encounter criticism and

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<sup>387</sup> AAPD, Memorandum of Senior Official Thierfelder, Feb. 14, 1964, pp. 188-189; all ministers were worried about insufficient and unseasoned personnet at the German embassy in Saigon and were happy to hear that with Wilhelm Kropf a exprienced diplomat was taking over. Further discussion of the topic was postponed and immediate responsibility handed over to their department heads.

<sup>388</sup> See: Arenti, *Bewährungsprobe der Special Relationship*, p. 163; personal reflections of my parents and their generation affirm Arenti's observation; while the appreciation of American aid and support after the

opposition at home. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* opposed a Rusk proposal of military contributions by Western Europe and rejected any German military role in Southeast Asia. The burden of German history would not make German military aid a success but could only undermine the Western effort in Vietnam:

Die Lage Deutschlands, die sowohl auf Hypothesen der Vergangenheit beruht wie auf seiner gegenwärtigen Exponiertheit, braucht kaum im einzelnen dargestellt zu werden. Brächten wirkliche militärische Hilfeleistungen unter solchen Umständen der amerikanisch-westlichen Seite einen moralischen Vorteil? Wäre es nicht zu befürchten, daß die damit einhergehenden Nachteile überwiegen? Es gibt sicherlich andere Mittel um eine zu billige moralische Unterstützung materiall zu unterbauen.<sup>389</sup>

German constitutional restriction, thus provided the Erhard government with the easiest way to reject American demands for military contributions in Southeast Asia.<sup>390</sup>

Pressure from Washington continued. Several senators demanded German military deployment and in a secret Senate hearing Secretary McNamara again indicated that West Germany might also contribute militarily.<sup>391</sup> An official statement of the State Department, however, denied that Washington was urging Bonn to send soldiers.<sup>392</sup> Not

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war remained very strong among the great majority of West Germans, the pictures coming from Vietnam were disturbing and evoked feelings of empathy towards the Vietnamese.

<sup>389</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan. 25, 1966, p. 1.

<sup>390</sup> For the constitutional restraints of the FRG see: AAPD, Memorandum, Luitpold Werz, head of cultural affairs section, Foreign Ministry, to embassy in Washington, April 18, 1966, pp. 506-510; Werz presented a lengthy memorandum discussing the clauses of the Basic Law; Article 26 condemned aggressive actions and made them a punishable offense, which of course could be used by Washington. Nevertheless, the overall intent of the Basic Law, along with the fact that no branch government even could declare a state of war, made it abundantly clear that Bonn could not deploy German troops beyond the narrowly and purely defensively defined scope of NATO.

<sup>391</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein to Undersecretary Carstens, Feb. 21, 1966, pp. 204-205; Knappstein was deeply concerned about statements of Democratic Senators Stennis and Russell in favor of a West German military contribution to Vietnam. The *Baltimore Post* claimed that McNamara had made the same proposal in a Senate hearing, which sent Knappstein on a frantic search to find out what McNamara had actually told the committee. While the actual statement was classified, the ambassador finally received a shortened version that acknowledged the constitutional restriction preventing Bonn from deploying military units. However, McNamara expressed his hope to convince Bonn "to come in" and contribute more in Vietnam.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206; Knappstein was told that only a few senators were actually demanding a German military contribution. The entire affair made Knappstein quite apprehensive and he hoped that a



surprisingly, news indicating possible negotiations with Hanoi was greeted with relief by the Erhard cabinet.<sup>393</sup> The chancellor also rejoiced over Washington's acceptance that no German military units should be employed in Vietnam.<sup>394</sup> Yet this success was shortlived.

### **The Off-set payments and the Fall of Erhard**

Although Johnson no longer demanded a German military contribution to Vietnam, Bonn had to assist financially. The offset payments were the means to increase German aid in Vietnam. Washington adamantly insisted that Bonn fulfill its obligation. Erhard, though willing, was unable to meet American demands. He faced an economic crisis, resulting in a German budget deficit. American persistence that Erhard pay intensified domestic criticism of the Chancellor. His efforts to find a compromise with Washington failed because of American intransigence, hastening Erhard's fall. The offset payments became the principal issue of contention between Bonn and Washington in 1966. Since Erhard could not comply, he had no options left to placate Washington.<sup>395</sup> Erhard's difficulties with Washington threatened the first pillar of

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meeting with McNamara could better clear the air. Bonn hoped that further discussions would be held in secret in order to avoid an anti-American backlash in Germany.

<sup>393</sup> AAPD, Erhard letter to President Johnson, Feb. 25, 1966, p. 225; the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* followed the American initiative closely and was anxious about a failure. Then the dice were cast and the conflict would rage more viciously and dangerously than before; see for example: *FAZ*, Jan. 3, 1966, p. 1. Feb. 14, 1966, p. 1.

<sup>394</sup> AAPD, Conversation Carstens - Alfred Puhon, March 14, 1966, pp. 298-299.

<sup>395</sup> Hubert Zimmermann, '... they have got to put something in the family pot': *The Burden-Sharing Problem in German-American Relations, 1960-1967*, *German History*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 329-332; Until 1955, West Germany covered the cost of U.S. troops as part of the occupation payment. From 1955 onward, Washington covered all cost but money spent by G.I.'s led to a dollar glut in Europe. This situation was further worsened by the economic recovery of Europe, reversing the trade balance to Europe's favor.

Adenauer's foreign policy paradigm - mutually good relations with the United States. Erhard found himself not only at odds with Paris but also with Washington.

American demands that Bonn contribute to the costs of U.S. military commitment in Germany was not a new issue. Since 1960, Bonn faced growing American pressure to financially contribute to the up-keep of U.S. personnel in West Germany. In 1961, and again 1963, Bonn agreed to purchase large quantities of military equipment from the United States.<sup>396</sup> But Bonn remained apprehensive about the potential correlation between American protection and West German offset-payments. In 1964, Washington's budget was strained by the intensifying war in Vietnam, and Congress insisted on larger financial contribution of the Europeans to the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>397</sup> Bonn agreed to a new off-set settlement in May 1964 that provided for annual weapons purchases of \$ 675 million. This agreement did not include the safeguard of former understandings with Kennedy, which made German purchases dependent on a balanced budget in West Germany. Shortly afterwards West Germany experienced a recession accompanied by inflation which led to difficulties in balancing the federal budget. Erhard's desire to find consensus in Washington quickly vanished during his fateful December 1965 visit to Washington.

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<sup>396</sup> Zimmermann, *Burden-Sharing*, pp. 332-338; In 1960, Bonn refused a monetary settlement, arguing it would be regarded by Germans as occupation costs. In light of the construction of the Berlin Wall, Bonn was more malleable to the American demands and, in October 1961, Bonn agreed to order military equipment for \$ 1,425 billion during the next two years, which covered the foreign exchange of U.S. troops; at that time the *Bundeswehr* needed the ordered materiel and the agreement was renewed for two more years in 1963.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 337-338; de Gaulle's decision to cash in American dollars held in gold caused hardship in Washington, which was further intensified by the weakness of the British pound. West German financial contributions hence became even more important.

Johnson insisted on an immediate off-set payment of \$ 100 million and additional \$ 50 million for the war in Vietnam. This was not what Erhard had hoped for.<sup>398</sup>

In the spring of 1966 McNamara posed an ultimatum: either Bonn would stand by its financial obligations or face a reduction of U.S. troops in Germany. Bonn was disturbed by the unveiled threat and pointed to NATO stipulations which did not make European security dependent on monetary contributions.<sup>399</sup> But Washington remained adamant. Rusk was angered by constant European pleas for American protections while the Europeans were unwilling to increase their contributions to Europe's defense. Unless European attitude changed, the United States was forced to cut its expenses in Europe. In Bonn, there was no doubt that American intransigence on the off-set question was a result of the Vietnam war.<sup>400</sup>

The off-set payments issue became a burden to the chancellor attracting media attention in both countries. Diplomatic exchanges between Bonn and Washington grew more tense. The armories of the *Bundeswehr* were over-flowing with American weapons, yet Washington would not accept any delay in recompense and offered Bonn the opportunity to acquire American technology in other areas - as long as the money kept coming. By May 1966, Bonn was \$ 660 million behind in payments but pledged it would

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<sup>398</sup> Zimmermann, *Burden-Sharing*, p. 338; Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 271.

<sup>399</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein, Washington, to the Foreign Ministry, May 24, 1966, p. 680.

<sup>400</sup> AAPD, Knappstein to Foreign Ministry, May 24, 1966, pp. 681-682; Congress was openly disgusted with European failure to play their part. Some congressmen charged that the European had forgotten the hardships of the previous World Wars and focused solely on their self-interest, which made them "fat and lazy." British demands for a greater German contribution for their army of the Rhine made matters worse for Erhard. He refused to pay more to Britain but McNamara would not tolerate the same approach. See: AAPD, Conversation Erhard - British Chancellor of the Treasury, James Callaghan, May 24, 1966, pp. 683-685.

fulfill its obligations as soon as possible. Washington did not accept further German shortcomings.<sup>401</sup>

In June 1966 Rusk asked Erhard for a pre-payment of DM 1 billion which was urgently needed to contribute to the expanding American budget over Vietnam. Erhard was baffled by the enormous sum and could not comply.<sup>402</sup> McNamara repeatedly singled out Germany in his demand for greater monetary compensation:

I think we can say to the Germans, as we have, that over a reasonable period of time either we must have collective defense of the free world or we are not going to have any defense at all because this country is not going to continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the defense of the free world and we certainly aren't going to defend it alone.<sup>403</sup>

The Vietnam crisis was now deeply affecting Bonn. McNamara was not interested in German security issues or unification. The war in Vietnam had become his overriding concern and Bonn must contribute financially.<sup>404</sup> German-American relations reached a historic low. Generally, the German media and public were apprehensive about U.S. troop withdrawals but angered by American financial pressure.<sup>405</sup> Johnson was also not in the mood for compromise in the off-set question. To Rainer Barzel, head of the CDU/CSU parliamentary representatives, Johnson repeated his uncompromising stand.

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<sup>401</sup> Zimmerman, *Burden-Sharing*, pp. 338-339; AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein, Washington, to Schröder, June 2, 1966, pp. 744-746.

<sup>402</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Rusk, June 9, 1966, pp. 785-786.

<sup>403</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein, Washington, to Schröder, June 10, 1966, pp. 802-808; Congress also demanded greater financial contributions by the Europeans to cover American global commitments.

<sup>404</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 29, 1966; accordingly, West Germany was increasingly isolated in NATO council in its insistence on the Soviet threat. McNamara adopted the position that a Soviet attack was unlikely and announced that two reserve divisions would be no longer available for Europe and redeployed to South Vietnam.

<sup>405</sup> AAPD, Ambassador Knappstein, Washington, to Schröder, June 10, 1966, p. 808. Knappstein suggested that Bonn worked on alternatives for the possible withdrawal of G.I.'s. He was also deeply concerned that the frequent leaks from Washington to the American media on the off-set question which would severely damage the image of the U.S. in West Germany.

The United States was stretched to its limits due to the war in Vietnam and, unless the Europeans assisted Washington, his country might turn to isolationism and leave the Europeans to the Soviets.<sup>406</sup>

The American message to Bonn was unmistakable: support us, pay us, or we might abandon you. Was Johnson completely sincere? Of course, he had no intentions of relinquishing the American role and predominance in the Western World. He successfully employed the same strategy of scare tactics during Erhard's visit in December 1965. Johnson's advisors further debated this approach to Germany during the summer of 1966, and they were divided on how much pressure to exert. Ultimately McNamara prevailed. His strategy of a "tough stand" was aimed at maneuvering Bonn into asking Washington to "cut troops" and "invite us out."<sup>407</sup> McNamara insisted on "100% weapons-offset, regardless of German politics" and stressed that the message had to be delivered instantly, since otherwise the German budget might simply not allow any payments in full for the coming years. While Johnson remained reluctant to issue an ultimatum, it was obvious further confrontation with Bonn was still to come.<sup>408</sup>

McNamara's argument was interesting and revealing. Was Washington so obsessed with Vietnam to risk a loss of influence in Europe by forcing Bonn to ask the United States to abandon Germany? The answer is simple: Washington could pressure Bonn to fall in line. With France pursuing grandeur by defying Washington, and London

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<sup>406</sup> AAPD, Conversation Rainer Barzel with Lyndon Johnson, Washington, June 16, 1966, pp. 825-826; Johnson pointed out that the US had lost more than 2000 Americans in Vietnam. If America behaved as selfish as the Europeans and simply quit Europe, it would mean war in Europe, Africa, and Latin America.  
<sup>407</sup> FRUS, 1964-1968, Western European Region, Vol. XIII, Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bator) to President Johnson, August 11, 1966, pp. 444-445. Ball and McGhee cautioned against too much pressure on Erhard or risk the collapse of his government.

working for a diplomatic settlement on its own, Germany was unable to use the European card in its relations with the United States. Erhard's course had led nowhere in the international arena. Washington demanded money and not kind words of moral support.

Erhard's agony was intensified by domestic criticism on both his foreign and economic policies. The chancellor was blamed for a CDU loss in July 1966 to the SPD in state elections in North-Rhine Westphalia.<sup>409</sup> The press attacked Erhard's failure in maintaining good relations with Washington and Paris. Many journalists and politicians now endorsed Adenauer's close cooperation with Paris, concluding that Bonn, when at odds with France, was always seen with less respect in the United States. Erhard remained defiant and hoped that his up-coming September visit to Washington would bring positive results and a way out of the domestic dilemma.<sup>410</sup>

However, Erhard would travel to the States empty handed. He lacked the fiscal means to pay the German dues to Washington for 1966 and 1967.<sup>411</sup> McNamara continued his media attacks on West Germany. Rumors of U.S. troop reductions also did not end.<sup>412</sup> In the middle of this growing storm Bonn reaffirmed its support for the

<sup>408</sup> FRUS, 1964-1968, Western European Region, Memorandum from President's Deputy Special Assistant, Bator, to Johnson, August 11, 1966, pp. 446-447.

<sup>409</sup> Adenauer certainly did not spare Erhard either. In August 1966, the former chancellor embarked on public campaign criticizing his successor. Adenauer recommended the American withdrawal from Vietnam, and urged Erhard to improve French-German relations. Many CDU-CSU members agreed and the CSU (the Bavarian faction of the CDU) officially endorsed Adenauer's criticism of the U.S.; see: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August, 11, 1966.

<sup>410</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 337-339; the press speculated about changes in the cabinet and demanded a new course. Public opinion polls regarded the international situation of the Federal Republic worse than ever. The SPD and some members of the coalition partner FDP demanded Erhard's resignation.

<sup>411</sup> AAPD, Memorandum Undersecretary Carstens, July 22, 1966, pp. 977-978; Germany would pay its nationals working on American bases, provide free storage facilities, and free maintenance of U.S. training facilities.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 979-981; Knappstein complained to Rusk that McNamara's press campaign seriously undermined German-American understanding. Rusk assured the ambassador that the U.S. had no intention

American role in Vietnam. A German delegation visited South Vietnam during the summer of 1966 and was deeply shocked by the hardship and suffering witnessed there, promising additional humanitarian aid.<sup>413</sup> While this show of good-will pleased Saigon, it did not change anything for Bonn with the Americans. More urgently than before, Washington needed any possible kind of Western support since it increasingly faced domestic criticism over the war in Vietnam.<sup>414</sup>

September 1966 turned out to be one of worst months for Erhard as chancellor. His trusted advisor Ludger Westrick resigned, leading media and politicians alike to demand changes in the cabinet including the office of chancellor. Struggling at home, several advisors cautioned against the scheduled visit to Washington. But Erhard believed the trip might result in a badly needed foreign policy success, allowing him to regain the confidence of the public and party skeptics. His hope was unrealistic given the bad news he had to convey regarding the off-set payment. Bonn was fifty percent behind in the scheduled contributions and would be unable to close the gap in the next year.<sup>415</sup>

In Washington, Erhard promised to pay German dues but indicated that he could not meet the 1967 deadline. He planned to increase the defense budget to prevent similar

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of reducing troops in West Germany, but also pointed to congressional pressure to receive German offset payments in full. McNamara and his British colleague Denis Healey threatened substantial troop withdrawals unless Bonn met its financial obligations. See: AAPD, Memorandum of Senior Official Ruete, August 5, 1966, pp. 1039-1040

<sup>413</sup> AAPD, Conversation between Westrick and General Nguyen Huu Co, August 12, 1966, pp. 1061-1063; Erhard reaffirmed his support for the American policy in a meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Tage Erlander. Unlike Erlander, Erhard was against any negotiations on Vietnam at the present time. The U.S. fought in South Vietnam because of contractual obligation, and Bonn relied on a similar American commitment for its viability. See: AAPD, German-Swedish Government Consultation, September 2, 1966, pp. 1127-1128, 1131.

<sup>414</sup> AAPD, Memorandum Undersecretary Carstens on conversation with Ambassador McGhee for upcoming visit in Washington, August 25, 1966; Arenth, *Bewährungsprobe der Special Relationship*, pp. 163-164; Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 346.

calamities in the future.<sup>416</sup> Erhard reminded Johnson of the American security guarantees for Europe and pointed to anxieties possible U.S. troop reductions caused in Germany. As his last resort, Erhard played the French card. He told Johnson that many Germans, including a growing number of delegates in the *Bundestag*, preferred closer ties with France. While he was against any bilateral agreement with de Gaulle, Erhard added that he “hoped the President would not misunderstand him but he wanted to say that a different German Government that might succeed his Government might not show the same loyalty and determination to cultivate close ties with the United States.” The chancellor hoped that Johnson appreciated his current predicament and that the offset problem could be settled in a manner satisfying both sides.<sup>417</sup>

Johnson fired back that he faced even more serious difficulties and it was not “clear to him what the essence of the chancellor’s remarks was.” The president continued that during the past years he had always relied on the “German word,” and if they could not fulfill their commitment, it would “put them in a very serious and disconcerting position” by nullifying the existing offset agreement. Johnson refused to accept any alteration in the current payment schedule and accused Erhard of dishonesty. The chancellor left the meeting near despair, empty handed and shamed.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 350; AAPD, Memorandum of Section III A4, Offset-payments, September 21, 1966, pp. 1234-1235.

<sup>416</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Rusk, Washington, September 26, 1966, pp. 1237-1238; Rusk was relatively understanding but obviously it was left to Johnson to forcefully debate the issue.

<sup>417</sup> FRUS, Western European Region, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, September 26, 1966, pp.471-473; AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Johnson, Washington, September 26, 1966, pp. 1242-1245.

<sup>418</sup> FRUS, pp. 476-477; Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, p. 354. LBJ was obviously determined to force Erhard to pay. The chancellor swallowed the verbal abuse and invited LBJ to visit Germany. Erhard also agreed to tripartite (U.S./U.K. FRG) negotiations on offset payments.



Erhard's vision of a strong American-German friendship, eventually opening the path for German unification, was torpedoed by the American engagement in Vietnam. Erhard remained the loyal soldier by assuring Johnson that the United States was doing the right thing in Vietnam.<sup>419</sup> McNamara remained "hard like Shylock" and did not give an inch toward a compromise in the offset question. The final communiqué at least allowed Erhard to save face by promising to do his best to comply with the scheduled contributions for American troops in Germany.<sup>420</sup>

The visit to Washington only intensified the growing clouds hanging over Erhard's political future in Germany. The budget calamities remained unresolved and measures to consolidate government spending, including higher taxes, were strongly criticized by the media and by the coalition partner FDP. On October 27, 1966 the FDP ended the coalition and its ministers resigned from the cabinet. On November 2, Erhard's own party, the CDU, urged him to step down. In the *Bundestag* the SPD and FDP intensified their pressure to force Erhard's resignation and, on November 10, the CDU decided to select a successor for Erhard and nominated Kurt Georg Kiesinger. On November 30, 1966 Ludwig Erhard finally resigned and Kiesinger was elected Chancellor the next day, heading the Great Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD. Foreign Secretary Gerhard Schröder was replaced by Willy Brandt.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> AAPD, Conversation Erhard - Johnson, Washington, September 27, 1966, pp. 1266-1267; the record of the meeting only gives a hint of Erhard's desperation. Johnson's attack on Erhard's good word and honor must have been very difficult to swallow. Perhaps the Federal Archives of West Germany will shed more insight on the encounter.

<sup>420</sup> Osterheld, *Aussenpolitik unter Erhard*, pp. 356-358; mostly critical of Erhard, Osterfeld had to give him credit for gaining a little more time in the offset payments and not breaking under pressure.

<sup>421</sup> Vogelsang, *Das Geteilte Deutschland*, pp. 279-280; Grosser, *Geschichte Deutschlands*, pp. 178-179.

Erhard's inability to forcefully convey his concerns to Washington, and the increasing American pressure on his government to assist in the Vietnam war, contributed to his fall. The conflict in Southeast Asia demolished Erhard's foreign policy agenda. The more South Vietnam preoccupied policy-making in Washington, the more the German question became of only secondary importance. Washington was unwilling to risk additional tensions in Europe by challenging the status quo. Kennedy had accepted the division of Germany during the Berlin Crisis in 1961, and Johnson did not change this course. Upon assuming office in late 1963, Erhard sincerely believed that German loyalty to the United States would bring greater benefits for the Federal Republic. He pursued this policy partly because he distrusted de Gaulle's ambitions in Europe. Although Erhard's concern about de Gaulle was not unfounded, the chancellor further limited his foreign policy options by refusing to play the European card in negotiations with Washington. During his last encounter with Johnson, Erhard finally used the European angle, but it was far too late.

Unlike Adenauer, Erhard ultimately failed to understand the motivations and self-interest that shape international relations. Erhard also rejected Adenauer's paradigm that a successful German policy had to be built on both good relations with Washington and a solid grounding in Europe. Undoubtedly, both Adenauer and Erhard put German interests first, but they differed profoundly in their respective approaches. Adenauer was a politician of the old school of balanced power. Erhard was more of an idealist, hoping that his loyalty to Washington would be some day rewarded. In hindsight, the limitations placed on German foreign policy-making make Erhard's course understandable. The Federal Republic depended on American protection and, unlike France, which even after

its withdrawal from NATO command enjoyed a "free-rider" position simply because of its geographical location, Bonn could not afford to alienate the United States.

Perhaps the only opportunity for a more promising German impact on American thinking was a concerted European policy, but Erhard did not even consider this option because he regarded good relations with Washington as paramount for his policy goals of West German security and progress on unification. While Bonn, London, and Paris were doubtful and apprehensive about the growing American commitment in Southeast Asia, they never discussed the possibility of a joint initiative to make their voice heard in Washington. Bonn and Paris repeatedly discussed the Vietnam conflict, but did so with their own (not common) interests in mind. Erhard, the "eager ally," supported the American role in Vietnam because he believed it would help his own political agenda. It did not. Instead, he faced increasing American pressure to contribute to the war. Johnson needed European support, but with a defiant France, and a reluctant Great Britain, West Germany was the ideal ally to contribute to the effort in Vietnam, regardless of the domestic costs to Erhard.

Action taken by both Kennedy and Johnson reminded West Germany of its limitations in foreign policy and, in the process, dampened German expectations of what the United States could, and would, do for them. In West Germany, the Vietnam War caused a more skeptical attitude toward the United States. While Germany's "silent majority" still strongly appreciated the values and protection of the United States, younger Germans grew more critical of America. The Willy Brandt government learned from the lessons of German-American relations during the 1960's and successfully

expanded on Adenauer's European angle in pursuing new approaches on the German question by engaging the Cold War opponent - the Warsaw Pact.

West Germany was the most eager but also weakest ally in transatlantic relations. Unlike, Britain and France, the Federal Republic refrained from telling Washington what to do in Vietnam although the "Vietnam question" hurt German self-interest. The question that remains to be answered is why Washington refused to respond to profound concerns over Vietnam by its major European allies.

**Part Four:**

**“To Bear any Burden”**

*I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can't get out. And it's the biggest damn mess . . . What the hell is Vietnam worth to me . . . What is it worth to this country?*

Lyndon Johnson on Vietnam, May 1964.

The United States did not follow European advice regarding the American involvement in Vietnam for several key reasons. Ideological differences, American public opinion, and the unequal status of the Western Europeans in their relationship with Washington all contributed to the lack of response by American policymakers to European concerns. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson perceived foreign policy based on the ideological conflict with Communism. Propelled to the leadership role of the Free World since the Second World War, American policy-makers sought to contain Communism and prevent further encroachment by the Soviet Union in Third World countries. Fear of Communism also pervaded domestic opinion. Communism was the antithesis to everything the United States represented, such as freedom, democracy, and a free market system. The American public and media fully endorsed the country's role as defender of freedom and democracy around the globe. Vietnam was one of the global trouble spots where Communist forces were advancing against the West. Following Truman's containment policy, since 1954 South Vietnam was directly linked to American security interests. The possible fall of the Southeast Asian country would have serious repercussions for the region and might even endanger the freedom of the entire Pacific rim.

The Western Europeans did not regard Southeast Asia as being of prime importance for Western security. As both the British and French knew well, the region was difficult territory for any Western military intervention. Washington disagreed and

believed that it could in fact meet the Communist challenge in Vietnam on both moral and material grounds. As leader of the West during the Cold War, America had the obligation of protecting Western interests around the globe. This global responsibility differed, at least in the eyes of Washington, from the parochial and self-centered policy of the Europeans.

The United States vastly contributed to the reconstruction of Western Europe after the Second World War while also guaranteeing its security. In return for aid and protection, Washington expected unqualified support from its European allies. While Great Britain, France, and West Germany in varying degrees tried to influence American policy-making they were delegated to the position of "junior partner" and their political influence on American foreign policymaking was limited.

The origins of America's engagement in Vietnam were based on guidelines defined by the National Security Council Resolution (NSC) 68 written in 1950. NSC 68 furthered the Truman Doctrine by postulating American reaction to even limited expansion of Communism. During the previous years, Washington remained officially neutral in the French Indochina War, but with the victory of Mao Zedong in China in 1949, Southeast Asia became a major focus of American foreign-policy making. The Korean war further validated American suspicions that the Soviet Union and Communist China intended to conquer and dominate Asia, and therefore American aid to the French was increased. President Eisenhower continued Truman's commitment to the French effort to defeat Communist guerrillas in Indochina. Although Eisenhower refused direct American military intervention or the use of nuclear weapons to save the French in

Indochina, he nevertheless restated the importance of the region for American security interests.

Following the Geneva Settlement in 1954, Eisenhower was unwilling to renounce American influence in Southeast Asia and hoped that the newly created Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and indirect American support to the government of Ngo Dinh Diem would be sufficient to secure the viability of South Vietnam.<sup>422</sup> Washington consequently embarked on a “nation-building” policy in South Vietnam, which centered around President Diem. This policy worked quite well until 1959. By then domestic opposition against the repressive Diem regime intensified, leading to the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960.<sup>423</sup> Progress in South Vietnam proved rather precarious, but Eisenhower remained committed to Saigon based on the conviction that Communism had to be contained. Accordingly, American security interests were at stake in Vietnam. If South Vietnam fell, so would the rest of Southeast Asia, endangering the entire Pacific Rim and the United States.

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson inherited the foreign policy paradigms of their predecessors. Although the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated, both presidents were determined not to lose that Asian country. American interference in Greece, Iran, and the Dominican Republic, for example, proved that victory over anti-Western forces was certainly possible. Following the neutralization of Laos in 1962, the

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<sup>422</sup> The origins of the American involvement in Vietnam have been discussed in detail in numerous scholarly works. See for example: George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, Second Edition, (New York, 1986), pp. 3-30; Marilyn B. Young, The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990, (New York, 1991), pp. 1-59; David L. Anderson, Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961, (New York, 1991), pp. 21-35, 68-75, 85-90; Larry Berman, Planning A Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam, (New York, 1982), pp. 11-16.



stakes in Vietnam were even higher. Kennedy initiated American escalation by sending more advisors and materiel responding to crisis after crisis in South Vietnam. Yet, American aid proved little more than a band-aid solution and, while he would not commit ground troops, he also refused to disengage despite better knowledge that the current policy was anything but successful.

### I. John F. Kennedy

In December 1960, President-elect John F. Kennedy was briefed by President Eisenhower on global challenges facing the United States. In Southeast Asia, Laos was of immediate concern. Kennedy decided against U.S. military intervention and appointed Averill Harriman to find a political solution.<sup>423</sup> In 1962 another Geneva Conference, under the co-chairmanship of Great Britain and the Soviet Union, neutralized Laos. But repeated violations of the agreement by North Vietnam left a sour taste in Kennedy's mouth and also raised concerns for the safety of South Vietnam. Kennedy's Republican opponent, Richard Nixon, called the Laotian settlement an "unqualified disaster."

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<sup>423</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 50-64; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 52-59; for the last year of Eisenhower policy in Vietnam see also: Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, pp. 175-197.

<sup>424</sup> Two differing accounts exists on Eisenhower's recommendations. Rusk understood that Ike would favor unilateral intervention if necessary. McNamara remembered that Ike was "deeply uncertain" about what action to take. See: Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, (New York, 1990), p. 428; Rusk's report was confirmed by notes taken by Eisenhower; see: William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part II; 1961-1964, (Princeton, NJ, 1986), p. 4; Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York, 1995), p. 36; see also: Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile in Power*, (New York, 1993), pp. 31-32; for Clark Clifford's memorandum on the meeting see: Berman, *Planning A Tragedy*, pp. 16-17.

Following the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961, Kennedy politically could not afford a similar failure in South Vietnam.<sup>425</sup>

As Congressman, Kennedy favored American support for South Vietnam. He was intensely critical of the French during the First Indochina War, but quickly endorsed the new leader of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem. Interestingly, his comments on French policy in Indochina were right on the mark for the future American role as well - but perhaps as president Kennedy did overlook his own assessment of April 1954. At the time, Kennedy could not possibly foresee a French victory because the French pursued an outdated policy based on colonial interests and failed to promote a "strong native non-Communist sentiment" which was the basis for any success in Vietnam. Unless the Vietnamese were willing to fight for their independence a "military victory, even with American support, . . . is difficult, if not impossible, of achievement."<sup>426</sup>

Where the French failed, Americans could do better. In 1953, Kennedy met Diem and was immediately impressed with the South Vietnamese politician. As a founding member of the *American Friends of Vietnam* Kennedy fervently defended Eisenhower's commitment to South Vietnam. To Kennedy, that country was the "cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia" and a "proving ground for democracy." The United States was the "godparent" of South Vietnam and had a moral obligation to stand by Saigon.

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<sup>425</sup> Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, (New York, 1990), pp. 232-235. Nixon, obviously unhappy with Kennedy's foreign policy wanted to give a critical speech of the president's actions but the Bay of Pigs debacle intervened. Nixon, however, maintained that more should be done in Laos.

<sup>426</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, April 6, 1954, p. 4673.

Failure to do so would profoundly blemish the American image in all of Asia and also hurt American strategic interests.<sup>427</sup>

By 1961, South Vietnam was neither on the road to democracy nor was its survival assured. Days after his inauguration, Kennedy received an alarming report from General Edward G. Lansdale who, as a CIA agent played a major part in the implementation of American policy in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1956. According to his information, Communist insurgency was growing in numbers and many Vietnamese were disgruntled with Diem's authoritarian leadership, partly a result of the unconditional American support for the South Vietnamese leader. Lansdale recommended American "emergency treatment." Otherwise Saigon could do no better than "postpone eventual defeat." Kennedy immediately approved \$ 42 million in aid for South Vietnam.<sup>428</sup> The president also adopted a counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam already under discussion during the last year of the Eisenhower administration. National Security Action Memorandum on Vietnam (NSAM 2) authorized infiltration and harassment operations against Viet Cong guerrillas, even in North Vietnamese territory. A special task force of the Army - the Green Berets - was created and trained in counterinsurgency. Kennedy further increased the number of American "advisors" to South Vietnam beyond the officially allowed limit of 685 under the 1954 Geneva Agreement.<sup>429</sup> While Kennedy did not want another war in Asia, he was also resolved not to lose in South Vietnam.

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<sup>427</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 5-6; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 43; Lawrence J. Bassett and Stephen E. Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War", in: Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, (New York, 1989), p.226.

<sup>428</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 11-12; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 76.

<sup>429</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 78-79; Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 19-20.

How important was Vietnam to Washington? French president Charles de Gaulle called it a “rotten country” and warned Kennedy in May 1961 not to make the same mistakes as the French. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan also urged against further involvement, while the West Germans pleaded for American help to maintain the freedom of Berlin. But for Washington, Berlin and South Vietnam had become symbols that demonstrated American determination to draw the line against Communist aggression. As vice-president Lyndon Johnson put it after he returned from his first visit to Saigon:

We must decide whether to help these countries to the best of our ability or throw back the towel in the arena and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a ‘Fortress America’ concept. More important, we should say to the world in this case that we don’t live up to treaties and don’t stand by our friends. This is not my concept. I recommend that we move forward promptly with a major effort to help these countries defend themselves.<sup>430</sup>

Kennedy’s own campaign propoganda accused Eisenhower of softness against Communism and he evoked the infamous “missile gap” by stating that the United States was falling behind in the arms race against the Soviet Union.<sup>431</sup> Abandoning South Vietnam would most likely backfire politically at home.

Republican opponents were also closely watching Kennedy’s moves. In May 1961, Nixon gave a speech on foreign policy issues in Chicago that indirectly addressed Vietnam, once again reminding Kennedy not to be or appear weak on Communism:

Whenever American prestige is to be committed on a major scale we must be willing to commit enough power to obtain our objective even if all our intelligence estimates prove

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<sup>430</sup> Johnson’s comment is quoted in Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, p. 45. Johnson was sent to South Vietnam to reassure Diem of the continuous commitment of the United States. Johnson relished in the assignment, while otherwise so much overlooked by Kennedy. What he saw obviously impressed the Vice-president and he even hailed Diem as the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia.

<sup>431</sup> James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, (Lawrence, KS, 1991), p. 17.

wrong. Putting it bluntly, we should not start things in the world unless we are prepared to finish them.<sup>432</sup>

Whatever farsighted advice de Gaulle and Macmillan had to offer, Kennedy had to follow through with what he had promised as a presidential candidate. He had to maintain the image of being a determined warrior against Communist encroachment, thereby preempting possible criticism by the Republican Party and hard-line Democrats. The majority of Kennedy's advisors also recommended expanding the American effort in South Vietnam. Admiral Maxwell Taylor and presidential advisor Walter Rostow visited Vietnam in the fall of 1961 and judged the situation as serious. Diem was increasingly losing support and the morale among the South Vietnamese was dismal. They concluded that more American aid, including the deployment of eight-thousand American ground troops, might turn the tide in Vietnam. Like Eisenhower, Kennedy rejected the idea of sending American troops but, at the same time, refused a negotiated settlement. Negotiations over Vietnam would obviously evoke a storm of protest from the Republicans and hawks within the Democratic Party. Given this domestic situation, the president favored a middle course of providing more financial assistance and advisors to South Vietnam.<sup>433</sup>

With these measures, Kennedy took the first steps along an increasingly slippery road in Vietnam. As de Gaulle had predicted, Washington soon discovered that American assistance to Saigon was not sufficient to subdue the insurgents. Diem's autocratic rule facilitated the appeal of the Viet Cong. Kennedy, however, continued his support of Diem

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<sup>432</sup> Nixon, *Memoirs*, p. 236.

<sup>433</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 80-84; Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 72-84, 96-99; American dollars further built up the ARVN, Green Berets and U.S. pilots instructed South Vietnamese military and also

and in November 1961, affirmed that the United States would not tolerate Communist aggression in South Vietnam.<sup>434</sup> By the end of 1962, the number of American military advisors in South Vietnam had increased from 3,200 to 11,500 with more than one hundred killed or wounded. Kennedy held fast on his approach of limited response, though victory in South Vietnam was remote. The Viet Cong modified their strategy to respond better to superior American-South Vietnamese weaponry and Diem himself became a growing obstacle to American success. To make things worse for Kennedy the American media increasingly focused on the failures of the South Vietnamese leader and whose behavior gave them ample opportunity for criticism.<sup>435</sup>

#### **American voices of dissent: Chester Bowles, John Kenneth Galbraith, Mike Mansfield, and George Ball**

The press was not the first to question the American policy in Vietnam. Some of Kennedy's advisors came to similar conclusions as had de Gaulle and Macmillan urging a rethinking of the U.S. commitment in South Vietnam. Chester Bowles, John Kenneth Galbraith, Mike Mansfield, and George Ball moved beyond the paradigm of containment and falling dominoes. They provided a realistic assessment of the strategic importance of South Vietnam for the United States and regarded the current American policy there as being futile and misguided. All four urged an American disengagement and supported the political solution of neutralizing Vietnam.

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participated in raids against the VC. Lastly, strategic hamlets and economic programs for Vietnamese peasants was aimed to turn the tide in the country-side; Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 20-23.

<sup>434</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 83; Giglio, *Kennedy*, p. 243.

As early as February 1961, then Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles suggested neutrality as a possible solution for all of Southeast Asia.<sup>436</sup> A nonaligned Southeast Asia would allow the United States to move beyond the rigid confines of the SEATO treaty by enlisting broader international support for Washington's policy in Vietnam and preventing Ho Chi Minh from interfering in South Vietnamese affairs.<sup>437</sup> The proposal to neutralize Vietnam fell on deaf ears. Some members of the State Department even indicated that Bowles' proposition played into the hands of the Communists.<sup>438</sup>

After the Taylor-Rostow mission to Vietnam of October 1961, Bowles again introduced his idea of neutralization. According to Bowles, a deployment of U.S. ground troops would only result in "a full-blown war of unpredictable dimensions." The White House responded negatively to Bowles' suggestions.<sup>439</sup> Soon Bowles found himself removed from the inner-circle of Kennedy's advisors through his "promotion" as special presidential representative for Asian, African, and Latin American affairs.<sup>440</sup> In this new capacity, Bowles continuously kept a close eye on Vietnam and, during 1962, disagreed even more vociferously with the administration's policy. Bowles was convinced that Ho Chi Minh was primarily driven by nationalistic goals and that his version of Communism

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<sup>435</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 15-17, 39-42; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 87-92; Giglio, *Kennedy*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>436</sup> Giglio, *Kennedy*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>437</sup> Chester Bowles, *Promises To Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941-1969*, (New York, 1971); pp. 407-408; Southeast Asian neutrality should be guaranteed by the U.S., Britain, France, the Soviet Union, India, and Japan. By engaging the Soviets the U.S. could utilize the Chinese-Soviet rift to its advantage. Obviously Moscow was not keen to accept Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409; Bassett and Pelz, *Failed Search for Victory*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>440</sup> Giglio, *The Presidency of Kennedy*, pp. 93-94; Bowles publicly criticized the Kennedy decision to give a green light to the Cuban expedition, that led to the debacle at the Bay of Pigs. His "treason" drew heavy fire from Robert Kennedy and Dean Rusk and Bowles was replaced by George Ball.

was as independent from Moscow as that of Marshal Tito's in Yugoslavia. Bowles pointed out that Vietnam had struggled for centuries against the Chinese, and Ho now cleverly used the Sino-Soviet antagonism to get weapons from both sides but did not welcome any direct Chinese interference in his country.<sup>441</sup> Bowles urged his superiors to appreciate the complexity of the Vietnam situation and reassess U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Bowles wrote to Kennedy in May 1962 after another visit to Southeast Asia:

If there ever was a need for an 'agonizing reappraisal', it is here and now. This reappraisal must look far beyond counter guerrilla tactics and fortified townships to the political factors which in the long run prove decisive. American history is replete with tragedies born of our failure to relate our military efforts to political objectives.<sup>442</sup>

In order to restore peace, South Vietnam had to become truly independent, prosper economically, and respect the cultural, political, and religious differences of its peoples.<sup>443</sup> American support of South Vietnamese self-determination would make the U.S. presence in that country not only permissible but assured the nations of Asia that the United States entertained no hegemonic ambitions in the area. This approach might facilitate an understanding with the Soviet Union on securing the neutrality of Southeast Asia, while also precluding any intervention in the region by the PRC.<sup>444</sup>

This time the White House and Rusk responded favorably to Bowles' proposal.

Bowles refined his ideas for a "Peace Charter for Southeast Asia" in the summer of 1962.

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<sup>441</sup> Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, pp. 409-410; Bowles attacked Rusk's strategy in particular. It was silly to try and teach the Communists a lesson when Communism varied from country to country - a point Rusk obviously missed. Hence Rusk prevented a more effective approach in dealing individually with the Soviet Union, the PRC, and North Vietnam.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 410-411; Bowles maintained that his suggestions for Vietnam was actually the implementation of a policy first envisioned by Franklin Roosevelt and that the promise of true independence clearly had not lost any of its appeal in Southeast Asia almost twenty years later.



He concluded that fighting must cease immediately and that the entire region should then be neutralized under United Nations' supervision, including the withdrawal of all foreign forces. Neutrality and territorial sovereignty should be guaranteed the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, China, India, Pakistan and perhaps Japan, who were also to provide further economic and political aid to Southeast Asia.<sup>445</sup> Bowles' proposal reflected the basic British and French point of view and they might have endorsed it. But the Charter was soon dismissed by the State Department, which judged his initiative as being "unrealistic, impractical and premature."<sup>446</sup> Deeply disappointed, Bowles commented:

Our present course of action within a rigid political and military framework dominated by Diem is very likely to fail, and for this failure we may eventually be called upon to pay a heavy price, both in Asia and here at home.<sup>447</sup>

Kennedy was unwilling to consider neutralization because it might lead to the unification of Vietnam under a coalition government, which he equated with the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists. Washington could not perceive that a neutralized and, perhaps socialist Vietnam might not affect the Cold War balance. Most importantly, Kennedy might have to face serious repercussions at home if he agreed to a negotiated settlement on Vietnam in adhering to the 1954 Geneva Agreement.

John Kenneth Galbraith, who succeeded Chester Bowles as ambassador to India in 1961, also regarded the growing American involvement in Vietnam as ineffective and

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<sup>444</sup> Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, p. 411.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 412-413.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414; the State Department argued that Hanoi had renounce and cease all aggression first before a political solution could be found. Though Kennedy initially favored a Bowles fact-finding tour to Southeast Asia, it was postponed due to the Cuban Missiles Crisis and then lack of interest.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 416-417.

self-defeating. The Harvard economist was chosen to facilitate better U.S. relations with India and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. From Delhi Galbraith counseled Kennedy on economic questions, but the ambassador also expressed his views, sometimes on request by the president, on events in South Vietnam.<sup>448</sup> Galbraith viewed Vietnam with profound concern and maintained that President Diem had alienated his people “to a far greater extent than we allow ourselves to know.” He argued that Washington’s view was distorted because American policymakers only listened to the “ruler’s account” and that of the American officials committed to Diem.<sup>449</sup>

Galbraith experienced conditions first hand during a visit to South Vietnam in November 1961. Although Saigon appeared lively and bustling to Galbraith, it was a city “in a modified state of siege.” American personnel were constantly accompanied by well armed bodyguards and most of United States Operations Mission (USOM) members were stuck in Saigon proper. The military briefings disclosed an intriguing numbers game to the economics professor. About 15,000 opposition forces controlled many areas around Saigon, facing 250,000 ARVN troops. Even more astonishing was the claim by an American officer that the Vietcong had suffered 17,000 casualties in 1961. When questioned, the U.S. advisors could not account for these discrepancies. To Galbraith, the

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<sup>448</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, Ambassador’s Journal: A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years, (Boston, 1969), pp. xiv-xv; Kennedy desired the friendship with India as a counter-balance to Communist China but was not very successful in gaining a closer relationship with Nehru and the state visit of Nehru was a “disaster” as Kennedy put it.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., p. 154; Galbraith maintained that this was not the first time that the U.S. simply went by the rulers account and he feared that in South Vietnam this “old mistake” resulted in “one more government which, on present form, no one will support.”

military briefing appeared clearly “as a clue to the state of things.”<sup>450</sup> Kennedy should use caution in interpreting the military’s statistics from Vietnam.

Politically, South Vietnam was “certainly a can of snakes” and the major cause was President Diem. Galbraith maintained that the Vietnamese leader was far more concerned with preventing a coup against him than protecting his people from the Vietcong. The incompetence of local administrators, in addition to the lack of centralized control over the ARVN and insufficient knowledge about the moves of the opponent, made the situation even worse.<sup>451</sup>

Like Bowles, Galbraith’s assessment was disregarded. Nevertheless, the ambassador urged Kennedy to reconsider current U.S. policy toward South Vietnam:

We are increasingly replacing the French as the colonial military force and will increasingly arouse the resentments associated therewith. Moreover, while I don’t think the Russians are clever enough to fix it that way, we are surely playing their game. They couldn’t be more pleased than to have us spend our billions in these distant jungles where it does us no good and them no harm. Incidentally, who is the man in your administration who decides what countries are strategic? . . . What strength do we gain from alliance with an incompetent government and a people who are so largely indifferent to their own salvation? . . . But it is the political poison that is really at issue. The Korean War killed us in the early 50’s; this involvement could kill us now.<sup>452</sup>

Galbraith recommended that Kennedy resist demands to commit American combat forces to Vietnam. Even a small deployment would lead to further engagement,

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<sup>450</sup> Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, pp. 260-262. Galbraith commented that the briefing was “geared to the mentality of an idiot, or, more likely, a backwoods congressman.” The briefing officer excused the discrepancy in VC losses and ARVN forces by referring first to jungle conditions and then stated that several ARVN divisions might not have been actually there.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 266-268; Galbraith expressed his confidence in Ambassador Frederick Nolting and complained that Nolting had to learn about the recent Taylor-Maxwell mission through the radio and thus had no impact on the actual report to the president. Galbraith hoped that Kennedy would clarify the entire issue with the State Department.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311; Galbraith was aware that he was “sadly out of step with the Establishment” but hoped that Kennedy was willing to listen to an outsider’s advice.

while many South Vietnamese would eventually go “back to their farms,” leaving the actual fighting to the Americans. Kennedy should also uphold civilian control in Saigon and most importantly “keep the door wide open for any kind of political settlement.” If Hanoi was giving “any indication to settle, we should jump at the chance.”<sup>453</sup> Galbraith acknowledged that a negotiated solution for Vietnam might result in strong criticism by American conservatives and their press, but the alternative of a growing involvement was far more disconcerting.<sup>454</sup> According to Galbraith, the only feasible solution to Vietnam was an international conference that enforced the Geneva Accords of 1954. Otherwise the United States would find itself in a “major, long drawn-out, indecisive military involvement.” Washington supported a weak, ineffectual government in Vietnam and was in danger of replacing the French as “the colonial force and bleed as the French did”.<sup>455</sup>

Like Bowles, Galbraith was unable to convince the president toward seeking a political solution in South Vietnam. In response to the Galbraith memorandum the Joint Chiefs completely rejected the idea of negotiations because the United States had already made “a well-known commitment to take a forthright stand against Communism in Southeast Asia.” A reversal of American policy would have “disastrous effects” not only in Southeast Asia, but for American credibility around the globe. The voices of dissent

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<sup>453</sup> Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, pp. 311-312; Galbraith was also worried about too much influence of the American military on decision over Vietnam. He referred to current differences of opinion between Ambassador Nolting and General Paul Harkins over the best course for South Vietnam. Galbraith reminded Kennedy of the challenge General Douglas MacArthur posed to President Truman in the Korean War.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312; Galbraith also suggested that Kennedy look for a replacement for Diem.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 342-344; Galbraith was also apprehensive that the present commitment to South Vietnam might lead to “a major political outburst about the new Korea and the new war the Democrats as so often before have precipitated us.” Galbraith also pointed out that the Strategic Hamlet Program was doing more damage than good. He maintained that the Soviet Union actually had no intentions to become involved in Southeast Asia but that the growing American military involvement was driving Hanoi into the arms of Beijing. American support of Diem also required reappraisal, Galbraith felt that the U.S. would be better off with another civilian leader.

were not completely without impact. In 1962 Kennedy authorized Averell Harriman to talk privately with the North Vietnamese foreign secretary during the Laos conference in Geneva, but Harriman received no positive feedback. Since North Vietnam was not interested in a negotiated settlement, Kennedy sided again with the majority view of his advisors to pursue the military campaign against Communism in Vietnam.<sup>456</sup>

Another voice of caution was that of Senator Mike Mansfield. As a member of both the House and subsequently the Senate, Mansfield established himself as an expert on Asia. In 1953, Mansfield and Kennedy were invited to meet fellow Catholic and promising leader Ngo Dinh Diem. Both Senators were impressed by the Vietnamese politician. Like Kennedy, Mansfield endorsed Eisenhower's Indochina policy.<sup>457</sup> The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu dismayed Mansfield and he partly blamed the indecisiveness of Eisenhower in providing additional support to the French as one of the reasons for their defeat.<sup>458</sup>

Mansfield drew a different conclusion from the French loss than most of Washington's policy-makers. He believed that freedom in Southeast Asia could only be preserved by the effort and determination of its peoples. The United States should not perpetuate colonialism by any power but support indigenous governments that truly represented their people. Any military alliance for Southeast Asia should be primarily

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<sup>456</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>457</sup> Gregory Allen Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam: A Study in Rhetorical Adaptation*, (East Lansing, Mich., 1995), pp. 7-27. Mansfield made several trips to the region, increasing his understanding of local conditions.

<sup>458</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, July 8, 1954, pp. 9998-10000. Mansfield called for a "reappraisal" of American foreign policy and charged that Eisenhower, both at Dien Bien Phu and the Conference table, had committed serious blunders, leading to a diplomatic humiliation. However, the French too had made serious mistakes, but American lack of support left the French and Vietnamese resistance to the Viet Minh "exposed, undercut, and ready for collapse."

composed of Asian, not Western nations. Conflicts in Southeast Asia, Mansfield maintained, needed to be solved by the United Nations and not the United States.<sup>459</sup>

Mansfield's assessment in 1954 defined the core of the Senator's view on Southeast Asia for the next twenty years. He persistently abided by his own recommendation of 1954, the exception being his vote for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution ten years later. In 1954, and later, Mansfield opposed American intervention in Southeast Asia because it might lead to another major, even world war:

I was never in favor of intervention; and I am opposed to it now. I think it would be suicidal. I think the worst think that could happen to the United States would be to have our forces intervene in Indochina and then bog down in the jungles there, for in case we think there would be no war in Indochina, but also war in Korea, and a third world war would commence in Asia, and no doubt would involve the countries of Europe.<sup>460</sup>

Until 1960, Mansfield strongly supported Diem, whom he regarded as saviour of his country offering an Asian solution to the problems at hand. But the Senator increasingly disagreed with the American strategy in South Vietnam and conveyed his concerns to Kennedy in September 1961. Instead of increasing military assistance or even deploying U.S. combat troops, Mansfield suggested that Washington win the goodwill of the Vietnamese people. He argued that the difficulties in South Vietnam were a result of the severe lack of morale of its people, hence Washington needed to foster greater unity and purpose in the fight against Communism.<sup>461</sup> Unlike Bowles and Galbraith, the Senator

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<sup>459</sup> *Congressional Record – Senate*, July 8, 1954, pp. 10001-10002.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10007.

<sup>461</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, p. 85; Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, p. 97; Olsen criticized Gibbons for accusing Mansfield of applying “American values and practices in Vietnam”. Olsen defended Mansfield's recommendation by stating that Diem had successfully used Western campaign methods earlier. As Frances FitzGerald's insightful book on Vietnam, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, (New York, 1972), demonstrates Western ways may indeed backfire in a traditional Confucian

was not yet ready to write South Vietnam off. However, the South Vietnamese had not only to prove their determination to stand up to the Communists, but also needed to do the actual fighting:

While Vietnam is very important, we cannot hope to substitute armed power for the kind of political, economic, and social changes that offer the best resistance to Communism. If the necessary reforms have not been forthcoming over the past seven years to stop communist subversion and rebellion, then I do not see how American combat troops can do it today. I wholeheartedly favor, if necessary and feasible, a substantial increase of American military and economic aid to Vietnam, but leave the responsibility of carrying the physical burden of meeting communist infiltration, subversion, and attack on the shoulders of the South Vietnamese, whose country it is and whose future is their chief responsibility.<sup>462</sup>

Mansfield was the original proponent of "Vietnamization." This was not America's war to fight. In a commencement address at Michigan State in 1962 Mansfield deplored that Washington's move toward a broader, more dangerous commitment in Vietnam. American ground troops might only lead to a prolonged and costly conflict. Mansfield maintained that the United States should employ the services of the United Nations and also engage SEATO to find a diplomatic solution for Vietnam.<sup>463</sup>

With numerous reports of progress in South Vietnam during 1962 reaching the United States, it was politically unwise for Mansfield and other Democratic skeptics of America's Vietnam policy in Congress to mount any opposition to Kennedy's course. Nevertheless, they maintained doubts about the constitutionality of a growing involvement in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, Mansfield and his colleagues deferred any

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society as Vietnam. While Mansfield displayed far greater empathy with Vietnam than many in Washington, he too represented the cultural gap between both civilizations.

<sup>462</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>463</sup> Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, pp. 99-100.

action because they accepted the executive's prime authority in foreign policy.<sup>464</sup> Challenging the president on Vietnam would backfire politically and, given the crises over Berlin and Cuba, the great majority of Americans probably would not understand, even less follow, the suggestions of a handful of senators.

In late 1962, at Kennedy's request, Mansfield visited Vietnam for the third time. In country, his doubts about actual progress against the Viet Cong and on Diem's leadership ability were confirmed. On arrival he was briefed by Ambassador Frederick Nolting, who depicted the situation as improving and maintained that the United States provided sufficient means to facilitate an ARVN victory against the Communists. But Mansfield was looking for other opinions as well, and found them in American reporters stationed in Saigon. The journalists gave Mansfield a far less optimistic briefing on the realities in South Vietnam explaining that victory was more illusive than ever.

Upon his return to Washington, Mansfield filed two reports; one for the public and a private one for the president. The public report criticized Diem's leadership, but reaffirmed the American commitment to the country.<sup>465</sup> The confidential assessment was much more pessimistic. Mansfield disagreed with official estimates that the rural Vietnamese could be won over within a year through a strategic hamlet program. It would

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<sup>464</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 126-130; The deference to executive authority by Congress was evident in the adoption of the Cuba and Berlin resolutions in the fall of 1962, setting a precedent for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution two years later. The 1962 resolutions authorized the president to do whatever he deemed necessary, including the use of force, to prevent the spread of Communism. Other Vietnam skeptics included Wayne Morse, Al Gore Sr., and William Fullbright.

<sup>465</sup> Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, pp. 106-107; Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, p. 131; Ambassador Nolting was dismayed by Mansfield's contacts with American journalists. Nolting was currently fighting a cold war with the U.S. press, which was depicting events in South Vietnam far too negatively according to the ambassador's assessment. See: Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam*, (New York, 1988), pp. 85-89; David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (New York, 1992), Twentieth Anniversary Edition, pp. 207-208.



take additional American aid, responsive Vietnamese leadership, and years of patient work to stifle Viet Cong support in the country-side. While Diem still possessed leadership potential, his abilities were increasingly undermined by the influence of his power-hungry brother, Ngo Diem Nhu. Despite these difficulties, the senator saw a good chance for success with Kennedy's Vietnam program, provided the situation in Vietnam did not change dramatically.

Mansfield adamantly opposed a larger American military commitment and argued that the United States should continue its support but not go beyond the position of helping the Vietnamese to help themselves:

To ignore that reality will not only be immensely costly in terms of American lives and resources but also might draw us inexorably into some variation of the unenviable position in Vietnam which was formerly occupied by the French. We are not, of course, at that point at this time. But the great increase in American commitment this year has tended to pint us in that general direction and we may well begin to slide rapidly toward it if any of the present remedies begin to falter in practice.<sup>466</sup>

Kennedy discussed the report with Mansfield, and while displeased with the senator's assessment, the president in fact shared the senator's concerns. Yet, a diplomatic solution as recommended by Mansfield was not an option. Neutralization of Vietnam would only facilitate a Communist take-over. Moreover, another fact-finding mission by Roger Hilsman and Mike Forrestal convinced Kennedy that his policy was effective.

In August of 1963 Mansfield tried one more time to warn the president against further escalation in Vietnam. The senator was wary of the dangers of U.S. involvement and believed that Kennedy was coming closer to a point of no return which might result in a conflict of at least Korean proportions. Like Bowles and Galbraith, Mansfield argued

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<sup>466</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, p. 133.

that Washington needed to re-evaluate its vital security and global interests. He argued that the importance of Vietnam had been overemphasized in the past, placing it at the core of American foreign policymaking, while, in fact, it was only of peripheral significance to the United States.<sup>467</sup> Therefore, any unilateral engagement in South Vietnam was self-defeating and might only do more damage than good. Again, the senator's concerns were not fully heeded by the president.<sup>468</sup>

Mansfield was shocked by Diem's assassination and even more so when Kennedy suffered the same fate three weeks later. The death of Diem and the growing American involvement in the quagmire of Vietnam reinforced Mansfield's conviction that the United States was pursuing a policy that was not only futile and costly, but damaging to the country's essential interests. He remained a voice of reason and caution during the following decade.

Undersecretary of State, George Ball, was not an expert on Southeast Asia as he had focused for most of his life on foreign policy in Europe, particularly France. In Europe, he became a close friend of Jean Monnet, the inspirational force behind European integration, and learned to appreciate the French point of view on international politics which influenced Ball's thinking on Vietnam.<sup>469</sup> Ball was initially uncertain about Kennedy's views on foreign policy. He soon appreciated the president's intelligence and pragmatism but noted that Kennedy often lacked a long term vision of a particular

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<sup>467</sup> Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, p. 115. Mansfield also criticized the narrow outlook of many American officials in Vietnam who lacked greater perspective.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-117; a unilateral engagement would over-extend American forces and hurt American prestige in other nations in Asia.

<sup>469</sup> David L. DiLeo, *George Ball, Vietnam, and the Rethinking of Containment*, (Chapel Hill, 1991), pp. 26-27; George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs*, (New York, 1983), pp. 99-102.

policy.<sup>470</sup> In the fall of 1961 Ball replaced Chester Bowles as Under Secretary of State and hence had to expand his field of expertise. Vietnam was one of the problems placed on Ball's desk.<sup>471</sup> As a result of both the Korean War and the French debacle in Indochina Ball concluded that the United States should "rigorously avoid land wars in Asia." He advised Kennedy along these lines on Laos and urged the president not to overcommit American forces in needless conflicts in Asia.<sup>472</sup>

In South Vietnam, according to Ball, the situation was both serious and hopeless. Ball was rather bewildered by his colleagues' views on Vietnam because they lacked any profound historical knowledge about that country. Their estimates echoed what he had heard in France ten years earlier: a better coordinated effort, additional money, and more troops, would eventually pay off.<sup>473</sup> Ball was dismayed by the findings of the 1961 Taylor-Rostow mission and completely disagreed with their recommendations. He expressed his concerns to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara pointing out that committing combat forces would lead to a "protracted conflict more serious than Korea" for the United States. The French had learned the hard way about the toughness of the Viet Cong, and unlike Korea, the task in Vietnam was not one of simply repelling an invasion but defusing a revolutionary situation in which any Western involvement might be equated to some form of colonialism. McNamara did not share Ball's point of view and endorsed the Taylor-Rostow report.

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<sup>470</sup> Ball, *Oral History Interview*, April 12, 1965, John F. Kennedy Library, pp. 22-23.

<sup>471</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 171-173, 182-183.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 361-363.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 363-366.

A few days later, McNamara changed his mind about troop deployments and partly concurred with Ball's position. To send U.S. forces without a greater Vietnamese effort was unwise, as American soldiers obviously "could not accomplish their mission in the midst of an apathetic or hostile population."<sup>474</sup> Ball conveyed his misgivings about the American Vietnam strategy to Kennedy indicating that any deployment of U.S. combat troops would be a "tragic error." Once troops were committed, the process could not be reversed and might lead to a futile and costly war:

Within five years we'll have three hundred thousand men in the paddies and jungles and never find them again. That was the French experience. Vietnam is the worst possible terrain both from a physical and political point of view.<sup>475</sup>

Kennedy did not appreciate Ball's argument, calling it "crazy." The predicted escalation was simply not "going to happen." Perhaps the president was impressed by Ball's argument after all, since he decided against combat deployments a few days later.<sup>476</sup>

The rebuke by Kennedy signaled to Ball that his advice was neither heeded nor desired, and he focused on policy matters where he could make his "influence effectively felt." He probably remembered the fate of his predecessor, Chester Bowles. While harboring doubts in private, Ball remained loyal to the president in public. In an April 1962 speech Ball completely endorsed America's course in Vietnam, calling a potential loss of South Vietnam an event of "tragic significance" for the West in Asia. He furthered

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<sup>474</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 366; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 38-39; while McNamara did not mention Ball, he confessed that he, as other advisors, knew little about Vietnam and lacked experience to deal with crisis. As his own probings into the complexity of Vietnam showed, the United States were already facing a dilemma of a no-win situation in 1961. Though McNamara rejected combat forces for the time being, he did not rule out greater American intervention in the future.

<sup>475</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 366.

<sup>476</sup> Gibbons, *The American Government*, pp. 88-92; Gibbons quotes William Bundy who stated that Ball's argument had some impact on the president; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 366-368; Ball was uncertain how to interpret Kennedy's response; either the president simply could not imagine a worst case

that failure to assist South Vietnam would have severe repercussions around the world and serve only to further encourage Communist aggression:

How we act in Viet-Nam will have its impact on Communist actions in Europe, in Africa and in Latin America. Far from easing tensions, our unwillingness to meet our commitments in one tension area will simply encourage the Communists to bestir one in another.

The struggle in Vietnam could not be solved overnight and it would take years of effort but it was a "task that we must stay until it is concluded."<sup>477</sup> When some of the press interpreted the speech as an irrevocable commitment to Vietnam, the White House was enraged. Ball had gone from one extreme to the other.<sup>478</sup>

Ball also played an important role in sanctioning the coup against Diem by endorsing two telegrams by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge recommending the replacement of Diem. Ball was certainly not the final authority to give a green light to the overthrow of Diem but he as his superiors did share responsibility in American acquiescence to in the coup against the South Vietnamese leader.<sup>479</sup> The Vietnamese generals finally acted on November 1, 1963. Ball denied any responsibility for the military putsch and maintained that the August telegram had not triggered the overthrow of Diem. He regarded the events of early November as being an entirely Vietnamese operation.<sup>480</sup> The facts proved otherwise. Nevertheless, Ball's account serves as an

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scenario requiring combat troops or he actually shared some of Ball's concerns and was determined to prevent further escalation.

<sup>477</sup> Gibbons, *The American Government*, p. 122.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123. The April 1962 speech in Detroit is to no surprise not mentioned in Ball's memoirs and serves as additional proof to the personal dilemma of many government officials who doubted privately the policy in Vietnam but out of a number of reasons were unable to stand up to their beliefs in public.

<sup>479</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 371-374; Ball after clearance with his superior gave a green light to Lodge to end American support to Diem unless the Vietnamese leader adopted a more liberal policy. A second request by Lodge to convey U.S. misgivings about Diem to Vietnamese generals opposed to their head of state was also authorized by Ball.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

important example of the way he and other officials tried to reconcile their profound concerns about developments in Vietnam during a time when “dominoes” and “containment” dominated American thinking. Ball was much more outspoken against the American policy in Vietnam during the Johnson administration and more willing to confront that president than others. But, then too, he found it difficult to balance his personal convictions on Vietnam with his loyalty to the president. Ball’s ambition to play an important role in American foreign politics further complicated his convictions.

The voices of dissent reinforced and reflected the concerns Kennedy heard from Paris and London. While the Europeans advice might be discarded because of their colonial past or parochial views, the unwillingness of Kennedy to consider the opinions of skeptics within his own administration indicates that the president was troubled about any domestic fall out from Vietnam and trusted his immediate counsel that the American strategy in Vietnam would succeed.

### **Continuous Commitment to Vietnam**

The coup against Diem was turning point in American policymaking on Vietnam. The U.S. decision to sanction the coup manifested the failure of previous efforts at improving the situation in Saigon. The Buddhist crisis of summer 1963 revealed the bankruptcy of the Diem regime and brought South Vietnam into the lime-light of both the American and European media. Diem remained unyielding to demands of religious freedom and claimed that Buddhist protest was sparked by the Viet Cong. In June, the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in Saigon, and the subsequent suppression of

Buddhist rallies by Diem, aroused world opinion and unified opposition to Diem in South Vietnam.<sup>481</sup>

Kennedy warned Diem that the treatment of the Buddhists was unacceptable and, unless the situation improved, the United States would dissociate itself from Diem. Kennedy authorized American personnel in Saigon to talk to dissident South Vietnamese military leaders. Between late August and September 1963, American pressure mounted on Diem to dispose of his brother and adopt a program of political reform.<sup>482</sup> Though the administration had second thoughts about a possible coup, the president and most of his counsel remained determined not to pull out of Vietnam since a withdrawal ultimately would result in a Communist take-over in Southeast Asia. Kennedy publicly confirmed his belief in the “domino theory” during a NBC television interview in September:

I think the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontier, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists.<sup>483</sup>

A week earlier, the president explained in a CBS interview that the Vietnamese were the “ones who have to win it or lose it.” Yet, he immediately contradicted this statement by

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<sup>481</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 95-97; see for example: *Newsweek*, June 24, 1963, *Fiery Protest: the magazine printed photos of the self-immolations and reported that if Diem “wants to remain in power and unify his people against the tortuous struggle against the Communist Viet Cong, he needs the cooperation of the Buddhists”*, p. 63. *Time* followed the events closely as well and made the protest its cover story in August and strongly attacked Mme Nhu, the *queen bee*, because she recommended the complete crack-down on the Buddhists. Her ridicule of the immolations as “Vietnamese barbecues” appalled Western observers.

<sup>482</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 144-159; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 97-99; Giglio, *John F. Kennedy*, pp. 248-250; Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 24-27. In August 1963, undersecretary Roger Hilsman sent a telegram to new U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge alluding that if Diem remained “obdurate” the U.S. would consider his replacement. Hilsman suggested that Lodge inform South Vietnamese military leaders of the American point of view and asked the ambassador to search for political alternatives to Diem.

<sup>483</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, p. 163.

pointing out that it would be a “great mistake” for the United States to withdraw, and hinted that a change in “policy, and perhaps with personnel” might increase the chances of success in South Vietnam, signaling to Diem that time was running out.<sup>484</sup>

A fact finding mission by Taylor and McNamara indicated that further military progress had been made against the Viet Cong, but regarded Diem as the major obstacle in political reform.<sup>485</sup> While Kennedy opposed a coup for the time being, events in Saigon progressed precisely toward that end. The American ultimatum on Diem was interpreted as a sign of support for Vietnamese military leaders to go ahead with their plans to oust Diem. Neither Washington, the embassy, nor the CIA team in Saigon made any moves to thwart such action.<sup>486</sup> On November 1, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu were overthrown in a military coup and killed the next day. Kennedy was dismayed and deeply shocked when he heard about Diem’s murder although he was fully aware of a planned coup.<sup>487</sup> “To bear any burden, pay any price” had come to a tragic first conclusion in South Vietnam. Only three weeks later Kennedy too paid the ultimate price.

Why did John F. Kennedy disregard the advice of both foreign leaders and members of his administration, as well as his own assessment of the challenges in Vietnam of almost a decade earlier? First of all, there is Kennedy’s view that by backing

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<sup>484</sup> Giglio, *Kennedy*, p. 251.

<sup>485</sup> Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 75-81; Taylor and McNamara recommended withholding American aid from Diem unless he complied with U.S. demands.

<sup>486</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 188-191, 197; Washington cabled to Lodge that it would not actively endorse a coup but the ambassador should convey to potential new leaders that the U.S. would not interfere and clearly continue its economic and financial assistance to a new government in Saigon. In October, JFK learned that a coup was imminent, but he was more concerned about political repercussion for the U.S. in case of failure.

<sup>487</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 83-85; Giglio, *Kennedy*, pp. 252-253; Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, pp. 200-202; for a detailed account on the coup against Diem see also: Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History, The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, (New York, 1983), pp. 304-311.



Diem he was helping a government that offered a real alternative to Communism and, with American assistance, would succeed in the process of nation-building.<sup>488</sup> Robert Kennedy later admitted that this faith in both Diem and the American ability to build a viable government in South Vietnam was misguided. The younger Kennedy acknowledged his initial support of the policy in Vietnam during his brother's presidency. But shortly before his own death in 1968, he wrote that it was perhaps "never really possible to bring all the people of South Vietnam under the rule of the successive governments we supported."<sup>489</sup>

Second, Kennedy's own campaign proposal to stand firm against Communism might have trapped him in the growing Vietnam quagmire. He had accused the Eisenhower administration of not doing enough to contain Communism. Kennedy pointed to the 'loss of China' as American failure to prevent Communist victory leading to even more dangers in the global struggle to secure freedom. As president, Kennedy was unwilling to risk similar domestic criticism and refused to disengage from South Vietnam. In addition, the neutralization of Laos made it necessary in the eyes of the administration to hold firm in South Vietnam to prevent further Communist successes in Southeast Asia. Although Kennedy was determined to hold South Vietnam, he persistently rejected a major commitment of U.S. ground troops.<sup>490</sup>

Finally, Kennedy's Vietnam policy was affected by an inability to completely and realistically assess the situation in Saigon. As Robert McNamara pointed out, the

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<sup>488</sup> Bassett and Pelz, *Failed Search for Victory*, p. 250; see also: Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 982.

<sup>489</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World* (New York, 1967), pp. 162-163.

<sup>490</sup> see: Bassett and Pelz, *Failed Search for Victory*, pp. 250-252; Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, pp. 253-254; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 430; Sorenson, *Kennedy*, pp. 648-649..

administration was seldomly satisfied with information received from Vietnam which led to frequent fact-finding mission and consultations with senior officials in Saigon. Even these missions resulted in an overly optimistic assessment on the progress made in South Vietnam. Part of the blame rested with the South Vietnamese who gave inaccurate information to the Americans, hoping that their reports depicted what the U.S. government wished to hear. On the American side, military commanders and many politicians alike misunderstood the nature of the conflict by viewing it solely in terms of the Cold War, the containment of Communism, and the resulting global commitments of the United States.<sup>491</sup>

The luxury of hindsight and the views of those critical to the American engagement in Vietnam during 1961 to 1963 offered alternative approaches, particularly negotiation with the Viet Cong, or even Hanoi. But throughout his presidency Kennedy rejected both negotiations and a reduced commitment because he believed that American assistance could actually tip the balance in favor of the West. Political pressure at home made it nearly impossible to abandon South Vietnam.<sup>492</sup>

Public opinion polls and the media generally supported the president's view. Soviet gains in space technology, the alleged missile gap, and Communist activities in the Third World created a sentiment affirming the global American commitment to resist Communist aggression. Up to the second half of the 1960's, most Americans favored an interventionist role by the United States although the great majority was rather

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<sup>491</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 43-48.

<sup>492</sup> Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made*, (New York, 1986), p. 640; Kennedy told an advisor in the fall of 1963 that if he tried to "pull out completely now from Vietnam, we would have another Joe McCarthy Redscare on our hands." see also Herring, *Longest War*,

uninformed about the war in Vietnam.<sup>493</sup> With few exceptions, the media also regarded Vietnam in the context of the larger Cold War struggle against Communism. Most journalists condoned the coup against Diem and focused on the general relief expressed by most Vietnamese over the “fall of the House of Ngo.”<sup>494</sup> Journalists revealed that pressure from Washington, despite official disclaimer of any responsibility, “had effectively encouraged the overthrow of the Diem regime.” The overall tenor of the press reaction to the coup was not shock about the death of Diem, but rather whether Communism could be defeated in Vietnam:

In the last analysis, though, the success or failure of U.S. policy toward South Viet Nam will have to be judged on pragmatic grounds. The aim of that policy is to speed a successful end to the war against the Communists. To achieve that, the U.S. is now clearly committed to back General Minh with even more money, and if necessary even more American lives. If it works, if Minh does manage better than Diem, if the U.S. is thereby enabled to pull out of Vietnam sooner, then the policy will be a triumph. But these are a lot of ifs. And if they turn sour, the outcome could affect the cold war balance and U.S. political life for a long while to come.<sup>495</sup>

Senator Mansfield and a number of journalists believed that Kennedy was preparing to change course in Vietnam, or was at least doubtful about current strategy, and that he might have accepted a negotiated settlement after the 1964 presidential elections.<sup>496</sup> Information coming from Saigon and the critical assessments of De Gaulle, Macmillan, and various American advisors might have caused considerable doubt about

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pp. 106-107; Herring maintains that Kennedy accepted the “assumption that a non-Communist Vietnam was vital to American global interest.”

<sup>493</sup> Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Foreign Policy Preferences, (Chicago, 1992), pp. 226-227; John E. Mueller, “Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam,” in: Allen R. Wilcox (ed.) Public Opinion and Political Attitudes (New York, 1974), pp. 26-28.

<sup>494</sup> *Newsweek*, November 11, 1963, pp. 27-31.

<sup>495</sup> *Time*, November 8, 1963, pp. 21-22.

the American commitment to South Vietnam. Kennedy, however, made no effort to modify American policy. He never seriously considered a withdrawal from South Vietnam, but continued to pursue the avowed objective of training the South Vietnamese to defend themselves against Communist aggression. Dean Rusk summarized Kennedy's position:

We took for granted that the United States had a treaty commitment to South Vietnam and that South Vietnam's security was important to the security of the United States. We also took for granted that if we failed "to take steps to meet the common danger," our network of collective security treaties throughout the world might erode through a judgment made by the Communists that these treaties were a bluff. At no time did we say to ourselves, "We will put in X number of men but no more. If the other side continues to escalate, then we'll just pull out." At no time did we think that the American people would not support an effort to prevent Southeast Asia from going Communist.<sup>497</sup>

## II. Lyndon B. Johnson

Vietnam undoubtedly was a troubling issue for Kennedy, but the conflict was far from consuming all of Kennedy's attention. The struggle in Southeast Asia, while unexpected and clearly unwanted, would become the overriding concern for Lyndon Johnson. He was less interested than Kennedy in the intricacies of foreign policymaking.

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<sup>496</sup> Bassett and Pelz, *Failed Search for Victory*, p. 251; Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, pp. 244-249; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 984-986; Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, p. 117; Halberstam, *Best and Brightest*, pp. 209, 299-301.

<sup>497</sup> Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 434, 442. Rusk maintains that JFK had no intentions to end the commitment to South Vietnam and that Kennedy was determined to stand up to Communism in that country.

Johnson's dream was the "Great Society" that guaranteed civil rights, social security, welfare, health care, and education to all Americans.<sup>498</sup>

Johnson's experience in foreign policy was rather limited but, like Kennedy, he firmly believed that American could not give in to Communist aggression. He argued that the United States had to remain vigilant and faithful to its commitments. Otherwise, the free world might experience another "Munich" by caving in to dictators. Johnson maintained that Third World countries, aided by American tutelage and assistance, could learn to appreciate the benefits of Western democracy and become partners in the conflict against Communist totalitarianism.<sup>499</sup> To Johnson's dismay, the South Vietnamese proved unwilling to fully accept Western democracy and way of life because they had their own long tradition and history which they cherished over the American imposed model.

More important for Washington was domestic pressure not to surrender another country to Communist rule. Kennedy feared that a withdrawal from Vietnam would lead to "another Joe McCarthy Redscare" but Johnson's dilemma was even more profound. He deeply wanted to achieve domestic reform but could not afford losing South Vietnam:

I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved - the Great Society - in order to get involved with that bitch of war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communist take over South Vietnam then I would be seen as a

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<sup>498</sup> For Lyndon Johnson's background see: Doris Kearns, Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream, (New York, 1976); Johnson authorized Kearns, a former White House intern, to write his biography and granted numerous, often very personal interviews. Kearns' book is a both a historical and psychoanalytical explanation of Johnson's life and while the analysis of Johnson's motivations is insightful and revealing her approach seems also too biased and simplistic in other instances. As a good comparison between JFK and LBJ see also: Tom Wicker, JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality upon Politics, (New York, 1968); for the Johnson presidency, LBJ's own account is a valuable source: Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969, (New York, 1971).

<sup>499</sup> Wicker, JFK and LBJ, pp. 195-197.

coward and my nation seen as an appeaser, and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody around the globe.<sup>500</sup>

Johnson quickly despised the conflict in Vietnam, but trapped himself with his commitment to pursue his slain predecessor's policies. Instead of securing domestic harmony, his decision to escalate the war in Vietnam divided the country to a degree not experienced since the Civil War. One of the casualties was Johnson's own career. In March 1968, he announced that he would not run for reelection and declared a bombing halt on North Vietnam.<sup>501</sup> By then, Kennedy's limited commitment of more than 16,000 advisors to South Vietnam had grown into a large scale war with more than half a million U.S. troops deployed and thousands killed or injured. Despite the massive fire-power of the United States, no end of the fighting was in sight.

### **The Background: LBJ**

Born to the hill-country of southwestern Texas, in 1908, as the oldest of five children, Johnson came from a very different background than the affluent and nine-years younger Kennedy. Of lower middle class background, Johnson was encouraged by his mother to attend Southwest Texas State Teachers College. There he quickly enjoyed college politics. In 1928, he headed for nine months a predominantly Mexican-American elementary school in Cotulla, Texas, and finished college in 1930. For a short time he taught highschool in Houston, but jumped at the first chance to enter politics. In 1931, he left for Washington as a congressional aide for Representative Richard Kleberg and ably used this position to study the intricacies of Congress. Four years later he became Texas' director of the National Youth Administration in 1935. In 1937, Johnson was elected to

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<sup>500</sup> quoted in: Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 320.

the House of Representatives and, after an unsuccessful first attempt in 1941, he was finally elected to the Senate in 1949.<sup>502</sup> Following Pearl Harbor, Johnson served for a year in the Navy, earning a Silver Star, before being called back to Washington by Franklin Roosevelt.

As Senator, Johnson rapidly rose through the ranks. He was elected party whip in 1951, minority leader in 1953 and majority leader in 1955. In the Senate, Johnson proved his talent as a consummate politician, earning him national recognition as one of the most effective and powerful leaders in the Senate's history. Johnson was instrumental in bringing down Senator Joseph McCarthy and he was also the driving force behind the passage of the civil rights bills of 1957 and 1960. He generally supported the Eisenhower administration in foreign policy issues, but opposed American air-strikes to help the French at Dienbienphu in 1954. Overall, Johnson prodded his Democratic senators to pursue a responsible and constructive course during the Eisenhower years<sup>503</sup>.

Johnson's status and achievements made him a potential candidate for the presidency in 1960.<sup>504</sup> But Johnson started late in the presidential race and eventually settled for number two - becoming vice-president, with the election of John F. Kennedy. Johnson hoped that he could play a substantial role as vice-president, yet was never fully part of the Kennedy inner circle.<sup>505</sup> Johnson attended both Cabinet and National Security

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<sup>501</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 435.

<sup>502</sup> Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, pp. 48-93.

<sup>503</sup> Wicker, *JFK and LBJ*, p. 154-155 and Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, p. 144.

<sup>504</sup> Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, pp. 102-158; Blum, *Years of Discord*, p.140.

<sup>505</sup> Tom Wicker, *JFK and LBJ*, p. 153; Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973*, (New York, 1998), p. 12; George Ball recounted Johnson deplored his lack of influence as vice-president. See: Oral History Interview with George Ball, July 8, 1971, for the Lyndon Johnson Library, Part I, p. 2.

Council meetings and represented his country abroad. Hence, he was well informed about foreign policy issues, such as Vietnam, which he had visited in 1961.<sup>506</sup>

#### **Early Decisions: November 1963-March 1964**

The first business of the Johnson administration dealing with the aftermath of Dallas, was to assure a smooth transition and bring Kennedy's domestic program to fruition. Johnson kept the entire Kennedy cabinet and many of Kennedy's advisors, assuring the country that he would continue his predecessor's course. In foreign policy issues, he relied heavily on the advice of Kennedy's men.<sup>507</sup> Vietnam, like most foreign policy issues dropped in the background for the time being - of foremost importance was Kennedy's domestic agenda, which was approved in the following months by Congress.

Soon Vietnam required Johnson's attention. At the end of 1963, North Vietnam intensified its infiltration into the South, also deploying regular military units. The National Liberation Front (NFL) stepped up its political and military operations and received better arms and equipment from the North.<sup>508</sup> Johnson was unwilling to let South Vietnam fall to the Communist North. He felt obligated to continue Kennedy's policy and stand firm against Communist aggression because it was America's duty as leader of the free world. But he was also concerned about his image at home.<sup>509</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Oral History Interview with Dean Rusk, September 26, 1969, LBJL, p. 1; LBJ had an officer of the State Department serving on his staff, who provided him with daily report from Saigon.

<sup>507</sup> Ball, Oral History, July 8, 1971, LBJL, p.10.

<sup>508</sup> Frank E. Vandiver, *Shadows of Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson's Wars*, (College Station, Texas, 1997), pp. 15-16.

<sup>509</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 108-110; Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, pp. 251-253 and McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 102; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 42; LBJ vowed to devote every hour to achieving Kennedy's goals. For Vietnam that meant "seeing thing through."



Within days of assuming office, Johnson had to make his first decision on Vietnam. On November 24, 1963, Johnson met with Secretaries of State and Defense, Rusk and McNamara, as well as Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, to discuss the situation in Vietnam and received mixed answers. The president made it abundantly clear that he was determined to win in South Vietnam and would not allow that country to become another China. He demanded that his generals and officials get the job done, and give him breathing space for his domestic program.<sup>510</sup> While he expected positive results, Johnson had no intentions to go beyond the current American role in Vietnam.

The discussion resulted with the approval of Johnson's first National Security Action Memoranda on Vietnam (NSAM 273) on November 26, 1963. It stated that the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam was "to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy".<sup>511</sup> Johnson was aware that Diem's assassination had not solved the domestic problems in South Vietnam and that the new government lacked in competency. Despite these odds, McNamara and the president hoped to turn the tide, ending the American commitment by 1965.<sup>512</sup> NSAM 273 also proposed covert operations, already suggested in May 1963, in which South Vietnam was to perform "hit-and-run" attacks against North Vietnam, with secret American military assistance (Oplan 34-A).<sup>513</sup> The Memorandum was clearly not a change of previous American policy. It

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<sup>510</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>511</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 43; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>512</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 45-46; The Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, Vol. III, (Boston, ), p. 18; American officials were expected to achieve better communication with their South Vietnamese counterparts allowing for a more effective approach against the Communist insurgents.

<sup>513</sup> Gibbons, *U.S. Government*, p. 210, 212.

promised continuous support for the new South Vietnamese government, led by General Minh, but at the same time, reaffirmed that the war could only be won by the South Vietnamese themselves, assuming that there was no major change in the political situation in Saigon.<sup>514</sup>

But McNamara's visit to Vietnam in December 1963 was dismaying. Unless prevalent trends were reversed, South Vietnam might quickly become neutralized or, even worse, taken over by the Communists.<sup>515</sup> McNamara recommended a greater role of U.S. advisors in Saigon's decision making.<sup>516</sup> The bad news from Vietnam worried some members of Congress, critical of further American involvement in Vietnam. Senator Richard Russell (D.- GA), Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and long-time friend and mentor of Johnson, suggested that the president reach an understanding with Saigon allowing for a quick American withdrawal from the country, without losing face in world opinion.<sup>517</sup>

More direct was Senate Majority leader Mike Mansfield, who urged the president in January of 1964 to re-examine the U.S. policy in Vietnam. Mansfield felt that the United States was close to the "point of no return" in Southeast Asia heading toward escalation. In Vietnam America again displayed a tendency already evident during the Korean War "to bite off more than we were prepared to chew."<sup>518</sup> The administration had to assess whether it was truly in the interest of the United States to continue its

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<sup>514</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 19-20.

<sup>515</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>516</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 31-32; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 105-106; the Minh government was according to McNamara the main culprit since it did nothing facilitate Saigon victory. ARVN strategic operations and deployments proved unsuccessful.

<sup>517</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 102.

<sup>518</sup> Letter by Mike Mansfield to the President, January 6, 1964, LBJL.

involvement and pay for it “with blood and treasure,” only to discover later that the initial commitment was short-sighted. The solution of the conflict was ultimately a Vietnamese responsibility and Johnson should work for a peaceful settlement.<sup>519</sup>

When Johnson asked his leading cabinet members for advice, they strongly recommended against a political settlement or neutralization, since it would only be the first step for an ultimate Communist victory and emphasized that the United States had extended security interests in the region.<sup>520</sup> Mansfield, however, lobbied for neutralization in the Senate. He asserted that American national interest did not require that the United States take on prime responsibility for Vietnam sacrificing “a vast number of American lives”. Americans were in Vietnam solely to help “improve the Vietnamese military.”<sup>521</sup> The conflict in Vietnam was essentially a matter among Vietnamese and could only be solved by them, and it should never become an American war:

Indeed, we might ask ourselves: Do we ourselves, in terms of our national interest as seen in the juxtaposition to the cost of American lives and resources . . . prefer another Vietnamese type of involvement or a Korean type of involvement in these and other countries and elsewhere in southeast Asia? . . . Are we to regard lightly the American casualties which would certainly be involved? <sup>522</sup>

Even more critical of the administration’s Vietnam policy was Senator Wayne Morse (D - Oregon), who urged Johnson to immediately withdraw from Southeast Asia. The American role in Vietnam since the 1950’s had not been justified and would not stand the test of history.<sup>523</sup> Morse also found support in Senators Allen J. Ellender (D.-La)

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<sup>519</sup> Mansfield letter to Johnson, January 6, 1964, LBJL.

<sup>520</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 107; Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, pp. 216-217.

<sup>521</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, February 19, 1964, p. 3114.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, February 19, 1964, p. 3115; Mansfield, like de Gaulle could not completely guarantee that neutralization might work but it was still the far better alternative; see: *Ibid.*, pp. 3277-78.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, March 4, 1964, pp. 4359, 4831.

and Ernest Gruening (D.- Alaska). The administration was shocked, as well as angered, by the senators' comments. It felt betrayed by the Democratic majority leader and was concerned by the possible reaction to Mansfield's comments in Saigon. A public debate over Vietnam could give the impression that the United States was wary of the conflict leading to the collapse of the Saigon government.<sup>524</sup>

But Johnson also was not willing to make Vietnam an American War. McNamara testified to the House Armed Services Committee that continuous U.S. training and supplies would be efficient to allow the ARVN to succeed against the Communist insurgents. He added:

I don't believe that we as a nation should assume the primary responsibility for the war in South Vietnam. It is a counter-guerrilla war, it is a war that can be only won by the Vietnamese themselves. Our responsibility is not to substitute ourselves for the Vietnamese, but to train them to carry on the operations that they themselves are capable of.<sup>525</sup>

Increased turmoil and violence in South Vietnam quickly proved that American support was insufficient to turn the tide against the insurgents. Johnson reached another cross in the road and once more intensified his country's commitment to South Vietnam.<sup>526</sup>

#### **NSAM 288: Prevent the fall of South Vietnam at all cost**

As a result of the deteriorating conditions in South Vietnam the Joint Chiefs proposed a change in policy, requiring considerable expansion in the American effort.

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<sup>524</sup> Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>525</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, p. 36.

<sup>526</sup> Vandiver, *Shadows of Vietnam*, p. 17; *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 38-44; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 111-113. Gen. Minh was overthrown by Gen. Khanh in January 1964. The next month the VC initiated a

The new policy, as adopted in NSAM 288, not only called for an larger commitment, but redefined the American objectives in Vietnam. A Communist victory in South Vietnam had to be prevented at all cost, otherwise, the rest of Southeast Asia and even the Pacific rim might fall under Communist dominance.<sup>527</sup> South Vietnamese military forces must be further augmented and the United States needed greater control over the Saigon leadership. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also favored direct action against North Vietnam. Johnson opposed escalation targeting North Vietnam since it might lead to increased guerrilla activity against the South, which the Khanh government was too weak to repel. Even worse, American escalation might result in direct Chinese or Soviet intervention. But the president approved of the extension of covert operations to block North Vietnamese infiltration and conducting retaliatory raids against the North (Operation Plan 34A).<sup>528</sup>

NSAM 288 presented a major step toward American escalation. But Johnson still refused to deploy U.S. troops. 1964 was after all an election year and while most Americans accepted the current policy it was uncertain how they would react to another war in Asia. By accepting the position that Vietnam had to be held at all costs Johnson had moved closer to the "point of no return." In April 1964 Johnson sounded out sentiments of Congress on possible expansion of the American role in Vietnam. He informed congressional leaders about the new policy in a National Security Council

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new offensive, attacking joint ARVN-US units. A bomb in a Saigon movie theatre killed three Americans, leaving fifty wounded.

<sup>527</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 50-51.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57; Lyndon Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 66-67; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 119.

meeting.<sup>529</sup> Johnson faced only one opposing voice in Senator Morse who favored a negotiated settlement under United Nations supervision.<sup>530</sup> Another NSC meeting found even greater consensus in condemning European unwillingness to back America's Vietnam policy. Although the Europeans provided some symbolic aid it seemed that they "really do not give a damn about Communist aggression in Southeast Asia."<sup>531</sup>

The debate and decisions of spring 1964 evidenced that Johnson was determined to draw the line in South Vietnam in the Cold War against Communism. On the other hand, Johnson did not want another Korean War possibly involving China, or the Soviet Union. It was also unclear whether the United States would find appreciable support among its allies if the conflict escalated. Consequently, Johnson endorsed a middle course hoping that American aid and guidance would be sufficient to enable a South Vietnamese victory. As Johnson put it: "American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves."<sup>532</sup> But the challenge was whether the "Asian boys" could do the fighting well enough to attain American objectives.<sup>533</sup> One option was no longer seriously discussed by most of Johnson's advisors - withdrawing from Vietnam.

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<sup>529</sup> National Security Meeting No. 526, April 3, 1964, LBJL, pp. 3-4; McNamara presented the gloomy facts on Vietnam and discussed alternatives, excluding negotiations. Currently, the administration rejected direct attack of North Vietnam but might be forced to do so if a stepped-up program of assistance to Saigon failed.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6; even Mansfield supported the continuation of limited US role. Johnson dismissed de Gaulle's plan of neutralization as too vague. The notes of the meeting do not indicate that congressional leaders were informed on current covert operations.

<sup>531</sup> National Security Meeting No. 532, May 15, 1964, LBJL, p. 1, 4-5. Congressman Jensen expressed explicitly what Rusk phrased diplomatically. While Germany, France, Great Britain, and Australia provided some aid, the US shouldered most of the burden. McNamara affirmed that combat troops would play not part of the US role in South Vietnam.

<sup>532</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 68; see also: Ball, *Oral History*, July 8, 1971, LBJL, pp. 26/27.

<sup>533</sup> Vandiver, *Shadows of Vietnam*, p. 20; for the time being, Johnson settled on a middle course of gradually increasing pressure against North Vietnam without committing American troops. But it was also clear that instead of reducing American "advisors" their number would have to increase.

They accepted the assumption that Vietnam was vital to American foreign policy, that a Communist victory would have the feared trigger effect on the entire region.

During the critical spring of 1964, Johnson lacked incisive advice to reexamine his Vietnam policy. McNamara and the Joint Chiefs not only condoned actions adopted but argued for an intensified commitment. Undersecretary of State George Ball was the only voice in the administration questioning the domino theory and he counseled against further escalation. To Ball, the problem lay not so much in Johnson, who was anxious to avoid an irrevocable commitment, but in the fact that he inherited and listened to Kennedy's advisors who failed to critically reassess the conflict in Vietnam.<sup>534</sup> Ball admitted that it might have been difficult for Johnson to disengage within months after Kennedy's death since it would appear that Johnson was rejecting Kennedy's foreign policy. Such a move, undoubtedly, would lead to domestic repercussions and accusations of Johnson being soft on Communism by handing over South Vietnam.<sup>535</sup> Nevertheless, to Ball, a change in American policy was feasible and could be made at any time, even if the stakes were high:

I never subscribed myself to the belief that we were ever at a point where we couldn't turn around. What concerned me then [i.e. late 1963] as it did much more intensely even later was that the more forces committed, the more we were committed to Vietnam, the more grandiloquent our verbal encouragement of the South Vietnamese was, the more costly was any disengagement.<sup>536</sup>

According to Ball, Johnson's concern on his domestic agenda and his lack of experience in Asian politics prevented the president to critically appraise all the aspects

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<sup>534</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 374-375.

<sup>535</sup> Ball, Oral History, July 8, 1971, LBJL, p. 14.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

of the America's Vietnam policy. Consequently, Johnson was pulled along by events in Vietnam, instead of formulating a long-term strategy of his own, leaving the president without much room to maneuver. Johnson listened to Ball's opinions challenging the administration's view on Vietnam. But Johnson did not heed Ball's advice but used him as a devil's advocate against the war-hawks.<sup>537</sup> The obligation to continue on the Kennedy course, along with pressure from the hawkish Republicans, limited his view and options toward the unfolding events in Vietnam. Johnson admitted his dilemma in his memoirs:

Certainly I wanted peace. I wanted it every day of every month I was in the White House. All through 1964 and after, I hoped and prayed the men in Hanoi would sit down and negotiate. But I made it clear from the day I took office that I was not a "peace at any price" man. We would remain strong, prepared at all times to defend ourselves and our friends.<sup>538</sup>

Success in Vietnam became even more illusive during late spring and early summer of 1964. The United States had to expand its efforts to save South Vietnam. Johnson also needed congressional support for an up-graded commitment. His advisors concurred. In May 1964, William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian affairs, prepared a first draft for a congressional resolution which authorized the president, upon request by South Vietnam or Laos, to use all measures, including the deployment of armed forces, for their defense against Communist aggression.<sup>539</sup> Johnson

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<sup>537</sup> Ball, Oral History, July 8, 1971, LBJL, p. 20; see also: Rusk, Oral History Interview, July 28, 1969, LBJL, p. 36.

<sup>538</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 68.

<sup>539</sup> Frederick Dutton prepared two studies elaborating the advantages of a congressional resolution. Accordingly, congressional backing would further convey American determination to Hanoi and Beijing. A resolution would also preclude domestic repercussions at home, and silence Senate opponents. The downside was that Vietnam would come to the forefront of public opinion, but in the long run a resolution would force the large number of undecided congressmen to endorse the administration. See; *Memorandum to McGeorge Bundy*, June 1, 1964, LBJL, pp. 1-3; and: Rusk, Oral History, September 26, 1969, LBJL, p. 11: Rusk made the same point about potential consequences at home if the president failed to secure congressional support



was not yet willing to make such a fundamental decision. He was also concerned about his critics in Congress and decided to wait for the time being.<sup>540</sup> But he sounded out congressional opinion in a series of meetings with key senators reviewing American policy in Vietnam. The president assured the senators that he had no intention of escalating the war, but that congressional support was needed to demonstrate to Hanoi the American determination to prevent a take-over of South Vietnam and Laos.<sup>541</sup>

Uncertainty about the future course in Vietnam continued to plague the administration during early summer 1964. The presidential campaign was intensifying and Johnson wanted to prevent Vietnam from becoming a major issue. Yet he had to convey the image of effectively handling the Communist threat in Southeast Asia and avoid Republican criticism. Republican candidate Barry Goldwater of Arizona strongly opposed Johnson's domestic program, which he denounced as far too "liberal." He attacked every aspect of Johnson's Great Society as "state paternalism." To Goldwater, "collectivism and the welfare state" were the greatest threat at home, while Communism was the "foremost enemy around the world."<sup>542</sup> While the federal government should only have a minimal role in domestic politics, the United States definitely needed to adopt a more aggressive position with foreign policy.<sup>543</sup>

The United States, according to Goldwater, could not afford to lose the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Only victory over Communism would allow an acceptable peace

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<sup>540</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 120; Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>541</sup> William C. Berman, William Fullbright And The Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist, (Kent, Ohio, 1988), pp. 19-20; Larry Berman, *Planning A Tragedy*, p. 32.

<sup>542</sup> Peter Iverson, Barry Goldwater: Native Arizonan, (Norman, Oklahoma, 1997), pp. 92-96.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., pp. 109-110; Blum, *Years of Discord*, pp. 156-157; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 131; Goldwater rejected federal aid to education, suggested that social security should be made voluntary, and opposed civil rights legislation.

with the Soviet Union. The United States had to become superior to the Soviet Union, politically, economically and militarily. Moreover, America needed to pursue an offensive strategy in the fight against Communism and encourage its allies to do the same. Peoples around the globe should join together in defeating the Communists and the United States needed to support their efforts, if necessary by military means. In Southeast Asia, South Koreans and Vietnamese ought to cooperate with Taiwanese to liberate the entire region. To Goldwater, bombing North Vietnam would demonstrate the American resolve. He summed up his attitude in his acceptance speech as Republican presidential candidate: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, and . . . moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."<sup>544</sup> Richard Nixon, in a less extreme language, generally concurred that Johnson was not doing enough in Vietnam. He believed that Johnson's policy of restraint would not succeed and more had to be done to defeat Communist aggression in Asia.<sup>545</sup> While many Americans in 1964 showed little interest in Vietnam, the Republicans were ready to make the conflict a campaign issue.

Anxious that Vietnam might undermine his domestic goals, Johnson asked his good friend Senator Russell for advice. Russell described Vietnam as a "damn worse mess." The Senator had been apprehensive about American commitment to Vietnam since 1954 and he feared that the conflict might lead to a war with China. When Johnson asked how important Vietnam really was for the United States, Russell responded that it was worth "a damn bit" with the exception of the psychological impact a withdrawal might have. Russell and Johnson agreed that the United States was bound by the SEATO

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<sup>544</sup> Iverson, *Goldwater*, pp. 109-113; Blum, *Years of Discord*, p. 158; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 131.

treaty to defend South Vietnam. Johnson was ambiguous about the view of his advisors yet he did not have any choice but see things through. He was worried that he would be forced to send U.S. soldiers and face American public opposition to a war it could not comprehend.<sup>546</sup>

Russell believed it was a mistake to get further involved because the United States was already “in the quicksand up to our very necks.” Johnson suggested that the senator recommend an American withdrawal in Congress aimed at preempting criticism from the Goldwater camp. Unfortunately, Russell was not willing to comply since he was not persuaded by either choice - withdrawal or escalation. Johnson repeated his concerns over the future course in Vietnam to his National Security advisor, McGeorge Bundy:

I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out. And it's just the biggest damn mess. . . What the hell is Vietnam worth to me. . . What is it worth to this country?<sup>547</sup>

By June 1964, Johnson preferred to hold the line. Most of his counsel favored the idea of a three step approach: increased pressure on Hanoi, followed by an urgent warning to Ho Chi Minh to end his support of the VC, and if Ho did not comply, the bombing North Vietnam.<sup>548</sup> Again, Johnson put escalation on hold, based on his own doubts and campaign considerations.<sup>549</sup> At the same time, he was busy to find European

<sup>545</sup> Nixon, *Memoirs*, pp. 256-258; Nixon visited Asia in early 1964 and found America's Asian allies complaining about the lack of U.S. determination against the Communists.

<sup>546</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>548</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 64-65; George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 377; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 121; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 174.

<sup>549</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, 72-76; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 121-123. Hanoi was not intimidated and remained confident that combined NFL and North Vietnamese forces would be victorious, even if this meant direct confrontation with the U.S.; see: Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 118-119.

support for American actions in Vietnam but failed to overcome British and French reservations.

### August 1964: Tonkin Gulf and the Congressional Resolution

On August 2, 1964 and again two days later American destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* were attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats.<sup>550</sup> President Johnson decided not to retaliate but send a firm note of protest to Hanoi that threatened grave consequences in case of another unprovoked assault. He also ordered continued patrols in the Tonkin Gulf.<sup>551</sup> After the second attack on American vessels the president authorized the launch of naval aircrafts to bomb a number of North Vietnamese coastal installations.<sup>552</sup> The North Vietnamese attacks enraged Americans and gave President Johnson the congressional *carte blanche* to increase the US involvement, eventually leading to the deployment of combat troops and the Americanization of the war.

On August 4, 1964 President Johnson informed congressional leaders about the second assault in the Tonkin Gulf, and asked for a resolution that would sanction retaliatory bombing of North Vietnamese military targets. The resolution was presented

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<sup>550</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 129-131; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 119; Vandiver, *Shadows of Vietnam*, pp. 20-22; the Tonkin Gulf Incident has been widely covered in historiography. The second attack is now very much in doubt and at the time being there existed already serious questions whether the American ships ever came under fire. The first incident on the *Maddox* at least within 12 miles of the North Vietnamese coast line also raises numerous questions because its patrol followed another Oplan 34A mission, attacking North Vietnamese on their soil.

<sup>551</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 131-132; Vandiver, *Shadows of Vietnam*, pp. 22-23; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 112-113; McNamara and Rusk briefed the Senate on the event and explained why Johnson did not retaliate.

<sup>552</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 132-135; George Ball, Oral History, July 8, 1971, LBJL, pp. 22-23; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam*, (Chicago, 1995), pp. 137-138.

to the House of Representatives the next day and passed unanimously on August 7. The Senate debate took several hours and the resolution was adopted with only two votes dissenting (Sen. Gruening and Morse) and ten Senators abstaining. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution gave the president the right to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack on US forces, and in addition, far reaching powers “to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom”<sup>553</sup>.

Although the resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority, the debate in the Senate reflected valid concerns about the increasing American commitment in Vietnam. Some speakers fully endorsed a hardening position towards and, if necessary, attacks on North Vietnam, yet the great number of debaters worried about the administration’s Vietnam policy and the broad powers given to the president by this congressional resolution.<sup>554</sup> The somber mood of the debate foreshadowed the dispute the United States would face during the next eight years. While many senators lamented the lack of European support to America’s Vietnam policy, in August 1964 they raised the same issues as European observers.<sup>555</sup>

Senators Nelson, Brewster, Cooper, Gore, Church, Bartlett, and Russell viewed the situation as a dangerous turning point toward the dangerous road of a full U.S.

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<sup>553</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, August 6, 1964, p. 18414.

<sup>554</sup> For Gruening’s dissent see: *Congressional Record - Senate*, pp. 18413- 18416; Gruening blamed U.S. escalation for North Vietnamese attacks on the *Maddox*. The U.S. policy was a grave mistake from the beginning and he urged his colleagues to pressure for American disengagement, concluding that “all Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy.”

<sup>555</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, August 6, 1964, p. 18399-18400; Fullbright and Mansfield both defended the resolution because of North Vietnamese aggression. Putting their misgivings on America’s policy aside for the time being, the accused Hanoi of repeated aggression. Mansfield, though, hoped that a peaceful solution could still be found by employing the United Nations.

military commitment.<sup>556</sup> The concern was undoubtedly shared by de Gaulle and the British. But unlike, the Europeans the Senators felt compelled to respond to the attack on American vessels. American honor was at stake which at least for the time being justified a limited military response.<sup>557</sup> Senator Frank Church (D- Idaho) expressed the dilemma of many of his colleagues. He believed that America's Vietnam policy was fundamentally flawed and lacked a realistic assessment of American national interest, but he had to support the Congressional Resolution and give Johnson the powers he asked for. Congress shared the responsibility for the current situation, because it had willingly funded the policy in Southeast Asia and thereby acquiesced to decisions made by Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. Church concluded:

We must accept the consequences of our own actions. We must now face the fact that the difficulties in which we find ourselves are our responsibility, in having chosen to pursue of action which exposed us to such hazards.<sup>558</sup>

The overall tenor revealed that many senators rejected any action that went beyond limited retaliatory strikes. Although aware of the powers given to Johnson, the overwhelming number of Senators debating the resolution did not want a wider war and hoped that Johnson received this message by displaying caution and restraint.<sup>559</sup>

### **The Road to Escalation: September 1964 to February 1965**

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<sup>556</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, August 6, 1964, pp. 18403, 18406-18410. They were also critical of the initial Eisenhower decision to get involved in Vietnam in the first place.

<sup>557</sup> Senators Ellender (D-La.) and McGovern (D-S.D.) did raise the question whether American ships should have been deployed that close to North Vietnam. They also wondered if this deployment was connected to South Vietnamese raids against the North. see: *Congressional Record - Senate*, August 6, p. 18403, 18408.

<sup>558</sup> *Congressional Record - Senate*, August 6, 1964, p. 18415.

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18415-18416.

Johnson used restraint until his victory at the polls. Washington was trying to prevent any incident that could be used by Hanoi to escalate the war. For the time being, De Soto patrols were put on hold and 34A operations were suspended.<sup>560</sup> In several campaign speeches Johnson restated that he had no intentions to escalate the Vietnam conflict and presented himself as the candidate for peace, attacking the belligerent stand of Barry Goldwater. In Saigon events were further unraveling. On August 7, General Khanh announced a state of emergency, resulting in press censorship and restriction of civil liberties and devised a new constitution giving him almost unlimited powers. These measures resulted into widespread demonstrations during the second half of August. For weeks the government was in turmoil, and coup rumors, street protests, and efforts to find a some kind of compromise paralyzed the Saigon regime.<sup>561</sup> Ambassador Maxwell Taylor discerned two choices for the United States: continue the passive course as advisor or assume a more active role to carry the counterinsurgency program to success. The first option was unacceptable because it would eventually force the United States to abandon South Vietnam.<sup>562</sup>

Since early September 1964 Johnson's advisors also discussed systematic air-strikes against North Vietnam, its supply lines, and deployment U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam.<sup>563</sup> The military brass, with exception of Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson and Admiral Grant Sharp, were in favor of air attacks on North Vietnamese targets, with the goal to break Hanoi's will to fight, and prepared a list of

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<sup>560</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, p. 84; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 123.

<sup>561</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 85-87.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 126; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 124.

<sup>563</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, pp. 140-141.

more than ninety select targets in the North.<sup>564</sup> President Johnson was reluctant to escalate and rejected air-strikes for the time being. Again, he asked his cabinet whether Vietnam was truly worth all the effort; yet his advisors and the Joint Chiefs insisted that the United States could not afford to lose South Vietnam. Johnson finally approved the recommendation allowing for retaliation in the form of extensive air-strikes, if North Vietnamese or Viet Cong assaulted U.S. forces or South Vietnam.<sup>565</sup> This was another step toward all out war.

George Ball tried to avert impending disaster. Dominoes and containment simply did not apply to Vietnam. He argued that American policy makers were solely concerned with “how” they could succeed in Vietnam, but never asked “why” they were engaged in Vietnam in the first place, and why they persisted pursuing a war that they were less and less likely to win. Ball fully agreed with Charles de Gaulle’s assessment, with whom he discussed Vietnam during a visit in June 1964 in an effort to win France’s support for Johnson’s policy.<sup>566</sup> Deeply worried about the consequences of “tit-for-tat” escalation, Ball sent in October 1964 a sixty-seven page memorandum to Rusk and McNamara describing the dangers of a further expanded American engagement. Ball noted that the political structure in South Vietnam was increasingly disintegrating and that he could not

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<sup>564</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 238-239; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 151-153, 156; McNamara also harbored doubts whether bombing might work and he was surprised to learn that Gen. Johnson shared these concerns since the Chiefs did not mention it. Admiral Sharp, Commander in Chief for the Pacific, judged the situation in Saigon as so volatile that a review of American policy was necessary, indicating that disengagement should be considered.

<sup>565</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 120-121; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 155; George Ball, Oral History, July 8, 1971, LBJL, p. 26; Ball stressed that the president never pushed for escalation, that he got dragged along, avoiding to make a final decision. Dean Rusk also doubted that bombing could succeed given the particular situation of the predominantly agricultural North Vietnam. Korea had demonstrated that despite extensive bombing the enemy was still able to supply an army of half a million men. See: Dean Rusk, Oral History, September 26, 1969, LBJL, pp. 22-23



foresee the formation of any government that could unify its people, or mobilize its military, to successfully defeat the insurgents. Based on the situation in South Vietnam, the United States had four policy alternatives: continue along current lines, take full responsibility for the war, aerial attacks on North Vietnam, or a political settlement.<sup>567</sup> Ball obviously preferred negotiation with the goal to guarantee the viability of South Vietnam allowing for an American disengagement. His assessment closely resembled the analysis of Britain's Robert Thompson and of de Gaulle. According to Ball, the administration had to realize that Vietnam was unlike Korea in 1950. Despite infiltration from the North, many countries regarded the conflict as a civil war, which did not require nor justify intervention by any foreign power.<sup>568</sup> A deeper American involvement in Vietnam could lead to serious repercussions within the international community. The Western allies already expressed concerns about Washington's commitment to their own security:

Our allies believed that we were 'engaged in a fruitless struggle in South Vietnam' and feared that if we became too deeply involved 'in a war on the land mass of Asia', we would lose interest in their problems. What we had most to fear was 'a general loss of confidence in American judgment that could result if we pursued a course which many regarded as neither prudent nor necessary'.<sup>569</sup>

Most disturbing to Ball was the possibility of U.S. military actions against North Vietnam. He rejected the notion that bombing would not lead to further escalation, but insisted that the United States eventually had to make the next step and deploy ground

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<sup>566</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 376-379; Bill, *George Ball*, p. 159; see above: Chap. 2 on Ball's discussion with de Gaulle.

<sup>567</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 380-381.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

troops, and with it, increasingly lose any initiative in the war.<sup>570</sup> Once the United States was on the “tiger’s back” it could no longer choose when to get off and this ride could lead to a major conflict involving China and possible the Soviet Union:

Nobody was prepared to concede that any particular step would require any further step. This was kind of a standard assumption which I kept repeating again and again was a false assumption . . . You go forward with this further step, and you will substantially have lost control. Finally you’re going to find the war is running you, and we’re not running the war.<sup>571</sup>

The next years proved Ball correct both on Vietnam and allied reaction to America’s escalation of the conflict. But he, like the Europeans, failed to impress his superiors. Rusk and McNamara were shocked and dismissed the political solution promoted by Ball. To them, negotiations without guarantees to South Vietnamese independence would have the same result as unconditional withdrawal, leading to a Communist victory in South Vietnam and the potential fall of Cambodia and Indonesia. Both believed that negotiations at this time would be seen as a sign of weakness. Hanoi had to first realize American determination by stopping its infiltration into the South and its giving support to the Viet Cong.<sup>572</sup> Neither Hanoi nor the Viet Cong were willing to cease their struggle. As long as they refused to do so Washington was also not willing to retreat. Despite continuously bad news from South Vietnam, most of Johnson’s counsel could simply not perceive the possibility that the United States might fail in Vietnam. Yet

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<sup>570</sup> Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 382-383; He reminded Johnson that his predecessors had committed themselves to Vietnam solely to help the Vietnamese defend themselves and not to fight a conflict the Vietnamese might not even want.

<sup>571</sup> George Ball, Oral History, July 8, 1971, LBJL, pp. 30-31.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 383; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 156-158. Interestingly, Rusk did not comment on the Ball memorandum both in the Oral History interview or his memoirs.

by making every American response contingent on North Vietnamese/ NLF action Washington placed itself in the defensive further limiting its freedom of action.

On November 1, 1964 the Viet Cong attacked the American base at Bien Hoa, near Saigon, killing four Americans and destroying five B-57 bombers. The Joint Chiefs recommended immediate air-strikes against the North, but Johnson decided against it. Yet, pressure on the administration to approve additional military action continued. On the same day McNamara met with Earle "Bus" Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who expressed the deep concerns of his colleagues, suggesting that the situation in South Vietnam required intensified military operations including air-strikes over both North and South Vietnam. Wheeler pointed out that if the president decided against further action it would be better for the United States to withdraw from Vietnam.<sup>573</sup> Wheeler placed his finger at the core of the issue. Either the United States employ its military might without restriction and fight for complete victory in Vietnam or decide to call it quits. Limited military reaction would simply not succeed. De Gaulle made the same point when he told Ball that unless the United States were willing to take the war all the way to North Vietnam and even China, negotiations were the only feasible solution.

Johnson, still uncertain what to do, ordered the creation of a working group headed by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy to assess policy options. The group admitted that the conflict did not fit the traditional framework of Communist aggression but was to a large degree a domestic struggle. Hence, U.S. military assistance might not prevent the fall of South Vietnam.<sup>574</sup> Despite this assessment, the Bundy group

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<sup>573</sup> Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 121; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 159.

<sup>574</sup> See for the complete memorandum: *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III., pp. 657-666.

upheld the domino theory. The fall of South Vietnam could “unravel the whole Pacific and South Asian defense structures”.<sup>575</sup> The group also worried about the impact American failure in Vietnam would have abroad.<sup>576</sup> But as long as the United States maintained its image of a strong, determined nation, the fallout from a debacle in Vietnam might be acceptable to American friends and allies. In Europe, Great Britain and Germany sympathized with American policy whereas with France “we are damned either way we go.”<sup>577</sup> American prestige in Europe depended on the U.S. conduct in Vietnam:

[O]ur key European allies probably would now understand our applying an additional measure of force to avoid letting the ship sink; but they could become seriously concerned if we get ourselves involved in major conflict that degraded our ability to defend Europe and produced anything less than an early and completely satisfactory outcome.<sup>578</sup>

The Bundy group was correct but failed to follow its own analysis in its recommendation what Washington should do next. The committee favored the combination of military pressure and negotiation and sought a compromise between hardliners and critics of further escalation. The report illustrated the self-imposed quagmire of Washington. South Vietnam could not fall, but all out war to defend its independence was a dismal alternative as well. Nobody was satisfied with the group’s recommendations. The Joint Chiefs preferred the full use American military might to gain a victory on the battlefield.<sup>579</sup> Ambassador Taylor and General Westmoreland wanted to give Saigon more time to re-organize, but hoped to use the threat of bombing North Vietnam to make Hanoi more amenable to a settlement. George Ball rejected the entire argument as another

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<sup>575</sup> *Pentagon Paper*, Vol. III, p. 658

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., p. 659.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

example of wishful thinking and “bureaucratic casuistry” that turned logic upside down and completely disregarded the realities in South Vietnam.<sup>580</sup> President Johnson was deeply frustrated with both the developments in Saigon and the multitude of opinions and advice from his staff. He was anxious about the consequences of stepped up military operations and felt his landslide victory against Goldwater did not give him the mandate for all out war in Vietnam.<sup>581</sup>

Nevertheless, Johnson inched step by step further toward escalation. On December 1, 1964 he accepted a two phased program. Phase I insisted that the Saigon government finally solve its internal quarrels and adopt a program of reform before considering further military operations. Phase II authorized the U.S. Saigon mission to develop jointly with the South Vietnamese plans for reprisal operations. Despite the admonitions of Ambassador Taylor, the leaders in Saigon did not comply and the question of air-strikes was back in the debate. Yet, for the time being, the president only agreed to continue the Oplan 34A mission and ordered armed reconnaissance flights over Laos, operation *Barrel Roll*, to strike at North Vietnamese infiltration routes, with both measures aimed at increasing the pressure on Hanoi.<sup>582</sup> Once more, Washington moved closer to an “endless entanglement,” as de Gaulle had told Kennedy, in the hope that each step would turn the tide.

In Congress, a few voices of concern about the dangers of escalation could also be heard. Most outspoken was Senator Mansfield, who sent a memorandum to the president

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<sup>579</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, p. 270.

<sup>580</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 162; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 388-389.

<sup>581</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 241.

in early December 1964 warning of the dangers of further military action. The United States was in a similar position to that of France in the early 1950's, when South Vietnam was without a truly legitimate government, held together only by foreign support. In addition, the military situation was turning worse and Mansfield feared that the fighting would spill beyond the borders of South Vietnam.<sup>583</sup> He recommended negotiation involving both China and European mediation. If the administration rejected this course, it would face a long term commitment to South Vietnam, possibly a larger Asian war. Such commitment must be explained to the American public "in no uncertain terms" so that the nation was fully aware of what might lay ahead.<sup>584</sup> Mansfield made quite clear that he was against any attacks on North Vietnam, a sentiment that was shared by the majority of his colleagues. According to a poll by the Associated Press, only seven out of eighty-three senators favored the deployment of American ground forces and bombings of North Vietnam, while a considerable number of senators preferred a political settlement.<sup>585</sup> Again, this disparity between the official line on the importance of the Vietnam and the unwillingness to sacrifice American lives to defend that Southeast Asian country is intriguing. But it is also a reflection of American democracy in general. The commitment to a global role had to be defended at home. Another Korea-like war was not what many senators and American citizens aspired to.

Mansfield's recommendations were discarded by Johnson's counsel, which increasingly favored attacking North Vietnam using the full might of American power to

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<sup>582</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 163-164; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 389; *Pentagon Papers*, Vol III, pp. 248-253.

<sup>583</sup> Olsen, *Mansfield and Vietnam*, p. 137.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138; Berman, *Fullbright and the Vietnam War*, p. 33.

force a change in Communist policy. They were joined by conservative voices who demanded a greater military effort in Vietnam. Criticism evoked Johnson's fear that a Democratic president could not survive failure in Vietnam, since it was the general belief at the time that Democrats were "soft on Communism abroad." Moreover, Johnson worried that his "Great Society" would be derailed by congressional attacks on his performance in Vietnam. He felt that giving up in Vietnam would make things even worse domestically.<sup>586</sup> He addressed the situation in Vietnam publicly in his State of the Union address in January 1965, pointing out that America had pledged its support to South Vietnam ten years ago and was not willing to break that promise. Ultimately, America desired peace in Southeast Asia but it could only be achieved "when aggressors leave their neighbors in peace".<sup>587</sup>

McNamara and McGeorge Bundy were determined not to fail in Vietnam. They favored the military option outlined in a memorandum submitted to the president in January 1965, which argued for sustained reprisals against the North. They were fully aware of the consequences of their suggestions but believed that the current policy would not lead to success and thus advised the president to approve increasing American military operations:

Both of us [i.e. McNamara, Bundy] understand the very grave questions presented by any decision of this sort. We both recognize that the ultimate responsibility is not ours. Both of us have supported your unwillingness, in earlier months, to move out the middle course. We both agree that every effort should still be made to improve our operations on the ground and to prop up the authorities in South Vietnam as best as we can. But we are both convinced that none of this is enough, and the time has come for harder choices.<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> Berman, *Fullbright and the Vietnam War*, p. 33.

<sup>586</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 244; Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, pp. 258-259.

<sup>587</sup> Public Papers of the President - Lyndon B. Johnson, January 4, 1965, p. 3.

<sup>588</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 168; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, pp. 122-123.

Not every cabinet member agreed with these recommendations. Rusk opposed any military action that would expand the war into North Vietnam and his concerns were duly noted by McNamara and Bundy. While Rusk firmly stood behind the American commitment to South Vietnam, he believed the United States should continue the present course advising the South Vietnamese to help themselves.

I believed we should persevere with our policy of advising and assisting the South Vietnamese and playing for breaks, rather than risking a major escalation if one could be avoided. At this stage, in late 1964, the stakes were high enough that we couldn't simply withdraw, but neither did I want us to go all out fighting a guerrilla war. Unless the South Vietnamese themselves could carry the major burden, I didn't see how we could succeed.<sup>589</sup>

McNamara and Bundy won the debate. Following a Viet Cong attack on an American airbase near Pleiku and a U.S. helicopter base at Camp Holloway on February 6, 1965, Johnson decided to escalate. On February 8, Johnson endorsed a strategy of reprisals against North Vietnam and indicated his willingness to send a substantial number of American ground forces to secure American bases in South Vietnam.<sup>590</sup> Another Viet Cong attack in Qui Nhon two days later that killed twenty-three Americans further strengthened Johnson's determination. He authorized an expanded bombing campaign of North Vietnamese targets, operation *Rolling Thunder*.<sup>591</sup> On February 26, 1965, Johnson approved sending two Marine Battalions to Vietnam. They landed near Da Nang on March 8. On April 1, 1965 Johnson authorized the deployment of two more

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<sup>589</sup> Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 447.

<sup>590</sup> 547th NSC Meeting, February 8, 1965, LBJL, pp. 2-3.

<sup>591</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 271-272.



battalions, increasing the level of U.S. troops to more than 33,000 men. He also expanded their mission from base security to active combat.<sup>592</sup>

The subsequent escalation of America's war in Vietnam has been told and analyzed in minute detail by historians. Despite the growing number of American troops, Washington did not win the war. Domestic and European skeptics who warned against escalation were proved correct although nobody relished in the fact. Vietnam was an unnecessary war that extracted a far too high price from all combatants. Johnson indirectly admitted the failure of his Vietnam policy in March 1968 and withdrew from public service. Certainly, he was not the only one to blame for quagmire in Vietnam but he was responsible for escalating the war.

The conflict might have been avoided long before Marines set foot on Asian soil in March 1965. De Gaulle's insistence on retaining Indochina in 1945 led to the First Indochina War. Truman's fear of losing France to the Communist Party, reinforced by pleas for American help by French Prime Minister Paul Ramadier, resulted in growing American aid to the French struggle in Indochina. Mao Zedong's victory in China in 1949 and the Korean War brought Southeast Asia to the forefront of American policy-making in Asia. Thence, containment, falling dominoes, and national security defined the American foreign policy paradigm from Truman to Johnson. Eisenhower took the next step by solidifying U.S. commitment to Diem's Vietnam in 1954. Kennedy inherited this commitment and, against his better judgement, not only reaffirmed but expanded America's role in Vietnam. His concern about losing his political mandate at home prevented any profound reassessment of the situation in Vietnam and its actual

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<sup>592</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, pp. 389-392.

importance for the United States and the Free World. Neither he nor Johnson heeded the voices of dissent among their advisors. Also, they did not acknowledge British, French, and German concerns about America's Vietnam policy. We must again ask why?

The answer is complex. First, the ideological paradigm of containment confined American policy makers. With the acceptance of the status quo in Europe, Cold War "proxy wars" were fought in the Third World. South Vietnam became another battle-line, as had West Germany and South Korea, where the United States was determined to not allow further Communist encroachment. Second, ideological thinking not only affected American policymakers but pervaded American public opinion, partly as a result of public relations campaigns by American leaders. Cold War rhetoric of "Free World against Communist" oppression was convincing and catching. Third, the combination of Cold War ideology and the belief that South Vietnam was the domino that could not fall petrified American bureaucracy. Officials in Washington and Saigon provided information they thought Washington wanted to hear.<sup>593</sup> Last, there was what C. Vann Woodward described as a "commitment to American pride" rooted in a "legend of invincibility." Based on America's historical experience of victorious wars, defeat by a far less powerful enemy was unthinkable.<sup>594</sup> The consequences of these various factors were tragic for both Americans and the Vietnamese.

In the context of U.S.- European relations, the "Vietnam question" had profound repercussions. The United Kingdom, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany

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<sup>593</sup> Daniel Ellsberg, "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine," *Public Policy*, Spring 1992, p. 218. Accordingly, the "machine" dictated most policy decisions on Vietnam. Kennedy and Johnson could not overcome the rigidity and self-interest of the bureaucracy. Galbraith, McNamara, and Ball made the same point by pointing to the difficulties of acquiring objectives analysis on Vietnam.

increasingly became disillusioned about Washington because of Vietnam. Washington felt the same way because its European allies were either reluctant or outrightly refused to support America's policy. What was needed and did result from the "Vietnam question" was a genuine re-assessment of the transatlantic alliance. The Vietnam conflict revealed not only the respective foreign policy paradigms of the four allies but also the inherent limitations in their policy-making. On the one hand, the European view on Vietnam, though realistic, appeared parochial and self-centered to Washington. On the other hand, the American experience during the twentieth century until Vietnam demonstrated that the United States had the military might and resources in overcoming any obstacle. Whenever American might was employed, victory ensued. South Korea, albeit a bitter struggle, was secured for the West. In Latin America the Monroe Doctrine had become reality. Johnson's reaction to turmoil in the Dominican Republic proved the point. U.S. marines prevented a "leftist putsch" in April of 1965.<sup>595</sup>

If the Marines had successfully turned the tide in the Dominican Republic, why could they not do the same in Vietnam? The conflict in Vietnam went beyond any previous American experience. Regardless of reports from American officials in country, every fact-finding mission by high-ranking members of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations brought back news of further deterioration. In light of the self-imposed restrictions, neither Kennedy nor Johnson considered negotiations or even disengagement a valid option but allowed the United States to become enmeshed in the quagmire of

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<sup>594</sup> C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History, (Baton Rouge and London, 1993), Third revised edition, p. 219.

<sup>595</sup> On U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic see: Stephen E. Ambrose, Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938, (New York, 1991), Sixth Revised Edition, pp. 218-221.

Vietnam. As painful as the Vietnam experience was, it provided opportunity. Once the clouds over the conflict had cleared, Washington and its European allies - though step by step - redefined their mutual relations by learning to better listen and respect each others point of view. Cooperation and consultation proved to become the key to successful U.S. relations with its principal partners in Europe. Washington learned that advice from less powerful friends should be considered and mutual concerns openly discussed to prevent further "Vietnams."

*Failures can be retrieved and harmony restored. It is the question of learning the lessons, not shirking the role.*

Robert Thompson, *No Exit From Vietnam*, 1970

### Conclusion

On March 31, 1968 Lyndon B. Johnson announced to an astounded national audience that he had ordered the cessation of American bombing raids against North Vietnam. The president was also willing to enter into peace talks and hoped that Hanoi would respond favorably. Johnson's concluding statement was even more unexpected; he refused to either seek or accept the nomination of the Democratic Party for another term as President. Therefore, it was clear that America's war in Vietnam had entered a new phase in which the United States still maintained the hope of saving South Vietnam but finally decided to negotiate directly with Hanoi.<sup>596</sup>

While the Vietnam conflict continued, Johnson's decision to pursue negotiations marked a turning point in trans-Atlantic relations. The president's revised approach indirectly admitted the validity of French and British criticism of Washington's traditional Vietnam policy. Nonetheless, Johnson and his advisors arrived at the same conclusion in spite of European counsel. The fateful Tet offensive of early 1968, though militarily a debacle for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, revealed to Washington that the war in Vietnam could not be won unless the United States further escalated its efforts. Facing intense domestic pressure, Johnson reasoned that he could not surpass the current level of American engagement.

The Europeans received the news of the American de-escalation in Vietnam with relief. Johnson's decision signaled a major step toward ending a conflict that none of the Europeans had wanted. Prime Minister Harold Wilson was surprised by Johnson's resignation but pleased that Washington once more called upon the United Kingdom for help in securing peace in Vietnam. An official British statement "warmly welcomed" Johnson's proposals for Vietnam. Within hours Wilson's foreign secretary Michael Stewart approached the Soviets and urged Moscow to work with London in facilitating negotiations concerning Vietnam.<sup>597</sup> Parliamentary debate on the "dramatic change" in America's Vietnam policy revealed an almost gleeful satisfaction on the part of the British that Washington had finally agreed with the British Vietnam policy. Both Labour and Tory MPs entreated the Wilson government to initiate another British diplomatic effort aimed at both the Soviets and the United Nations Secretary General, hoping for a truce and eventual peaceful settlement in Vietnam.<sup>598</sup> The British expected to play a vital role in the restoration of peace in Southeast Asia.

French President Charles de Gaulle was also elated that Johnson had finally accepted the realities in Vietnam and sought a negotiated settlement. After eight years of advising that negotiations were the only solution for Vietnam, de Gaulle, like his British

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<sup>596</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969*, (New York, 1971), p.435; George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, Second Edition, (New York, 1986), pp. 206-213.

<sup>597</sup> Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970*, (London, 1971), pp. 519-520; Johnson called on Britain and the Soviet Union as Geneva co-chairmen to "do all they can" to move to "genuine peace in south-east Asia." Wilson worried whether Johnson's resignation might induce Hanoi just to play the waiting game in search of better concession from another president. See also: *The Times*, April 2, 1968, p. 1 on the Stewart talks with the Soviet ambassador to the UK.

<sup>598</sup> *Times*, April 2, 1968, "Vietnam: new doors opening," p. 5; Conservative MPs Eldon Griffith and Sir Alec Douglas-Home reminded the Labour government that Hanoi had to do its part and renounce aggression.

counterparts, felt vindicated. He called Johnson's decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam "un premier pas dans la direction de la paix" and commended Johnson for this act of reason and political courage.<sup>599</sup> De Gaulle and his foreign secretary Couve de Murville were not only relieved by American concessions to their point of view vis-à-vis Vietnam, but believed that Johnson had removed a major obstacle in Franco-American relations. Of course, they maintained that had the Americans listened closer to French advice, peace negotiations might have commenced years earlier.<sup>600</sup>

Johnson's statement met with approval in West Germany as well. Bonn once more demonstrated its loyalty to Washington by emphasizing that the United States had proved its willingness to initiate negotiations and hence it was up to Hanoi to accept to Johnson's offer. Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger expressed his respect for Johnson's decision and his appreciation of the president's desire for peace. Kiesinger hoped that the American initiative would improve chances for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. The chancellor felt that any talks should first aim at ending hostilities, and then hopefully arriving at a just and durable peace in Southeast Asia. Kiesinger stressed that further progress depended greatly on positive reactions from Hanoi. The German media gave Johnson's speech mixed reviews. Regret over Johnson's resignation was met with questions about whether the American president was truly sincere in his decision against

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<sup>599</sup> *Le Monde*, April 4, 1968, p. 1.

<sup>600</sup> Maurice Couve de Murville, *Aussenpolitik, 1958-1969*, translated into German by Hermann Kusterer, (Munich, 1973), pp. 115-117.

seeking another term in office. All questioned the chances of the American initiative succeeding to end war in Vietnam.<sup>601</sup>

While Johnson's concessions on Vietnam were a first step toward removing the contentious Vietnam issue as a major obstacle in U.S.-European relations, the election of Richard Nixon signaled a fresh beginning in the trans-Atlantic relationship to America's European allies. Better than Johnson, Nixon understood that the United States needed the support and backing of its European allies. Hence, it was important to sound out European opinions before making major American foreign policy decisions. Shortly after his inauguration Nixon traveled to Europe to demonstrate that he was not "obsessed with Vietnam" and to prove to his domestic audience that he commanded respect abroad.<sup>602</sup> During his first stop at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Nixon expressed a desire to "listen and learn," and successfully pursued the same strategy subsequently in London. Wilson was obviously impressed that the new president was sincerely interested in considering the British point of view on Vietnam as well as other issues. Nixon pleased his host and both leaders regarded their encounter as a significant step forward in improving Anglo-American relations.<sup>603</sup>

Nixon's encounter with de Gaulle was even more beneficial. Nixon believed that de Gaulle's cooperation "would be vital for ending the Vietnam War." The American

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<sup>601</sup> *Le Monde*, April 3, 1968, p. 8; *Stern*, April 14, 1968, p. 17, "Der ungeliebte Kaiser von Amerika"; Commentator Wolf Schneider acknowledges LBJ's far-reaching achievements in domestic politics but squarely blames Johnson for escalating civil strife in Vietnam to a full-blown bloody war. Hence, LBJ sincerely damaged the international standing of the United States.

<sup>602</sup> Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, (New York, 1990), p. 370.

<sup>603</sup> Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 619-621; Wilson points out that the visit already began positively when Nixon expressed his hope for better Anglo-American relations. Wilson was particularly impressed by Nixon willingness to listen and the PM certainly liked to hear Nixon's appreciation of the Commonwealth.



leader also hoped for French assistance in establishing a dialogue between Washington and the People's Republic of China. The French undoubtedly interpreted Nixon's visit as initiating a new phase in French-American relations and marking a distinct departure from the policy of the Johnson administration. Nixon acknowledged a new equality in the trans-Atlantic partnership and accepted that America's preponderance over its European allies and their policies had considerably lessened.<sup>604</sup> Concerning the Vietnam question, Nixon proved as interested in negotiations with Hanoi as de Gaulle.

While America's European allies appreciated the increased attention from the Nixon administration it was clear to them that American motives were based primarily on U.S. self-interest. Regardless of these concerns, Nixon's readiness to consider the European point of view marked an appreciable step toward a mutualistic approach in European-American relations. From the U.S. point of view, restoring good relations with the Europeans would benefit America's global position and have a positive impact on domestic opinion. Nixon best summarized his agenda:

I felt that the European trip had accomplished all the goals we set for it. It showed the NATO leaders that a new and interested administration which respected their views had come to power in Washington. It served warning on the Soviets that they could no longer take for granted - nor advantage of - Western disunity. And the TV and press coverage had a positive impact at home, instilling however briefly, some much needed pride in our sagging national morale.<sup>605</sup>

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There is no doubt that Nixon was not only well prepared but certainly eager to demonstrate his respect of Britain in order to restore confidence in the U.S. administration; see: Nixon, *Memoirs*, pp. 370-371.

<sup>604</sup> Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 126-128; Nixon, *Memoirs*, pp. 370-373.

<sup>605</sup> Nixon, *Memoirs*, p. 375.

By adopting a pragmatic foreign policy, Nixon succeeded in improving trans-Atlantic relations.<sup>606</sup> Although Nixon's approach resembled traditional European policymaking far more than that of previous administrations and was easier for the Europeans to understand, the new situation was only a partial "victory" for America's allies. In adopting the role of honest listener, Nixon worked toward preventing further European criticism of American foreign policy. He was fully aware of the damage an independent European stand could elicit and had already generated for Washington. While the new American president pursued U.S. foreign policy-making in the traditional European strategy of national interest, it was precisely this neo-realist approach that prevented any collective and effective European response to America's Vietnam policy. The European sentiment of vindication following Johnson's offer to conduct peace negotiations with Hanoi only temporarily obscured serious shortcomings in policies adopted by London, Paris, and Bonn. Neither European country had been able to significantly influence Washington's Vietnam policy from 1961 onward. American domestic opposition and the shock of the Tet-Offensive forced Washington to rethink its strategy in Southeast Asia. In the final analysis, London, Paris, and Bonn had little impact on Johnson's decision to seek negotiations with Hanoi.

The trans-Atlantic debate over Vietnam exemplified the global ramifications of U.S. policy-making. The Vietnam question revealed inherent tensions among the trans-Atlantic allies but also manifested the mutual dependence existing among the members of

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<sup>606</sup> Peter Bender, *Die "Neue Ostpolitik" und ihre Folgen: Vom Mauerbau bis zur Wiedervereinigung*, Fourth Edition, (Munich, 1996), p. 156; Bender emphasizes Nixon's expertise in foreign policy and also credits National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, a German émigré, with perceiving politics in terms of

the trans-Atlantic alliance. London and Paris had ample experience in Asia and were both trying to convey the lessons of their past shortcomings to Washington. Certainly this “history lesson” was guided by British and French self-interest aimed at enhancing their role in global politics. West Germany also pursued its own national agenda. Unlike Britain and France, Germany had to deal with the legacy of its military aggression in Europe and hoped to overcome some of the consequences of total defeat through German unification. Regardless of their past, the three European powers had to acknowledge their status as secondary powers in the international scene and admit the necessity of cooperation with the United States. Through its own painful experience in Vietnam the United States realized its global limitations as well as the importance of undertaking multilateral as opposed to unilateral actions in the future.

Historian C. Vann Woodward’s reflections on America’s war in Vietnam provide important insights into American as well as European thinking. Woodward maintained that America’s experience since the country’s independence led U.S. foreign policymakers to the belief that they would always succeed regardless of any obstacles America might face. Britain, France, and Germany subscribed to similar concepts. As any nation, they valued their role and contribution in global politics. Woodward argued that based on the legend of “national innocence,” America simply could not be blamed for “imperialism” in Vietnam. America’s record differed from that of the “colonialist” Europeans.<sup>607</sup> The conflict in Vietnam painfully shattered the positive image many

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*Realpolitik*. Murville also stresses that Nixon was well trained in foreign policy as Vice-president during the Eisenhower administration. see: Murville, *Aussenpolitik*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>607</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, (Baton Rouge and London, 1993), Third Revised Edition, pp. 221-222. Woodward discussed America’s Vietnam experience as part of the “irony of southern

Americans had of their country. Woodward addressed a pertinent predicament Americans have had to face ever since the Vietnam War. How could American ideals be reconciled with the real challenges the nation faced globally? America's image and identity was undermined by the tragedy of Vietnam that divided the country in a degree only second to the Civil War.

The trans-Atlantic debate over the "Vietnam question" revealed once again the profound relevance of national pride and identity among all four allies. The historic and cultural legacy of each country and their respective foreign policy decisions were not easy to dismiss. The viability of the trans-Atlantic alliance depended upon a better understanding of the heritage and past differences among its members.

The process of how the United States, Great Britain, France, and West Germany responded to and interacted on the Vietnam question reflects the on-going task of balancing a nation's perceived interest with the challenges imposed by global forces. The United Kingdom has realized that it needs both a solid grounding in Europe and also maintain the "special relations" with the United States. In 1973, Britain finally joined the European Community. France, after de Gaulle, has accepted that *grandeur* is limited by larger European and global realities. The "Chunnel" is the most visible example of how far Anglo-French relations have improved during the last thirty years. The Federal Republic of Germany, perhaps, has learned the most from its failures during the 1960's. Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* ended a defensive West German foreign policy that merely hoped for unification while denying the realities of a divided Europe. He chose

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history." While he leaves no doubt that the South fell short in dealing with its own past, the defeat of the South in the Civil War as well as its legacy provided a paradigm to reassess also generally accepted view

engagement with the East over the denial of division. While developments within the Soviet Union were far beyond German influence, Brandt's approach set the corner-stone on which Germany unification was finally achieved. Nixon's new approach in trans-Atlantic relations evidenced that the U.S. learned some important lessons from the failure of America's Vietnam policy during the Kennedy and Johnson administration. Nixon set the path followed by his successors in acknowledging that the United States needed its trans-Atlantic allies. The Europeans, though economically strong, also realized that they could not succeed in meeting global challenges without the support and friendship of the United States. The Vietnam experience, while causing friction with the alliance, taught the Western powers an extremely important lesson: the alliance's continuance and validity depended on the support of all members, and each member, to varying degrees, was dependent on the well-being of the trans-Atlantic alliance. As Robert Thompson stated "failures can be retrieved and harmony restored." The basis of harmony was, and is, an honest dialogue.

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that prevailed among American leadership during the Vietnam War.

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## Vita

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