

Escalation of War in Indochina, the Kennedy Administration's Vietnam Policies

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The Eisenhower government had been greatly disturbed by the 1954 Geneva Agreements, in which it was agreed ultimately that Vietnam would be unified, on the basis of elections planned for July 1956. President Dwight Eisenhower was worried, in such an event, that communist or nationalist influence would spread throughout Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, thereafter infecting an array Asian states, most seriously of all Japan.

The 63-year-old Eisenhower stated candidly at a news conference, on 7 April 1954, that a communist victory in Indochina could cause the “beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences”. He believed there was a possibility of independent countries falling to communism like “a row of dominoes”, from Indonesia and Thailand to Burma, with the end result being “incalculable to the free world”.

Among the US president's concerns was the decline of American hegemony in the world's largest continent: Asia. Eisenhower elaborated further relating to accessibility of mineral resources like “tin and tungsten” which he stated “are very important” along with “the rubber plantations, and so on”. Eisenhower rued the fact that Asia “has already lost 450 million of its peoples to the Communist dictatorship” in China “and we simply can't afford greater losses”. (1)

To help prevent this perceived nightmare scenario from unfolding, and to erode the Geneva Agreements, the Eisenhower administration quickly established a client dictatorship in the newly-founded state of South Vietnam, in 1955. As easily the world's most powerful country, America took over in Vietnam from the terminally declining imperial power, France, with the demise of French Indochina set in stone. From February 1955, Eisenhower started dispatching small numbers of American soldiers to the southern half of Vietnam. During his presidency, lasting until January 1961, the role of US troops in South Vietnam was “strictly advisory”, as recognised by the Pentagon Papers, in that they would not actually participate in attacks against guerrillas or unarmed peasants.

Shortly after ratification of the Geneva Agreements in July 1954, the US National Security Council (NSC) chaired by president Eisenhower outlined, in August 1954, that even in the eventuality of “local Communist subversion or rebellion not constituting armed attack” in south-east Asia, the White House would consider the use of military force in response. This wording, which was referred to repeatedly in Washington planning documents during the 1950s, stressed in stark terms the US right to violate the UN Charter's very foundations.

The same NSC document stated furthermore the consideration of a military attack against Mao Zedong's China, if that country is “determined to be the source” of the “subversion”. So as to restore “The loss of prestige in Asia suffered by the US”, its policy planners called for

the rearming of Japan and the Philippines – coupled with efforts to “Intensify covert and psychological actions to strengthen the orientation of these countries toward the free world” and to “improve the effectiveness of existing military strength of the Republic of Korea and of Formosa [Taiwan]”.

Washington must also “maintain the security and increase the strength of the Pacific off-shore island chain” including the “retention of Japan” to US power, along with Australia and New Zealand, countries which are “an essential element to US security” (2). The eminent scholar and political activist Noam Chomsky wrote that, “This critically important document is grossly falsified by the Pentagon Papers historians, and has largely disappeared from history”. (3)



Meanwhile, in South Vietnam, Diem’s regime was sorely lacking in popular support from the outset. As early as 1950, US Army planners estimated that 80% of Vietnam’s people supported Ho Chi Minh (image on the right), the experienced communist revolutionary; and that four-fifths of his followers were not communists at all, a realistic evaluation by Washington which would remain consistent in coming years. With Diem not having the sympathy of the masses, and propped up by hundreds of millions of dollars in US military aid from the mid-1950s, he resorted to widespread terror to subdue the anti-imperial resistance.

In response to Diem’s assaults, though the Communist Party was “reeling” through to 1959, the American historian Eric Bergerud revealed that the communists in Vietnam “adhered to the policy of political rather than violent resistance” and “by and large honoured the Geneva Accords” having “dismantled the bulk of its military apparatus”. The communists finally chose to react with limited armed actions to 1960, which “elicited hysterical outrage in the United States over Communist perfidy”, as Chomsky noted. (4)

Over the first two years until 1957, the Diem dictatorship killed more than 10,000 people in South Vietnam. Between 1957 and 1961 the anti-communist war correspondent Bernard Fall, who was present in the country, estimated that around another 66,000 people had lost their lives at the hands of Diem’s forces. Therefore, prior to president John F. Kennedy in late 1961 escalating the conflict in Vietnam, between 75,000 to 80,000 people had already been killed there.

Over the next four years until April 1965, a further 89,000 people were liquidated. Almost all of them were South Vietnamese victims of state terror and aggression, as they succumbed to “the crushing weight of American armour, napalm, jet bombers and finally vomiting gases” (5). US government studies from 1965, focusing on Viet Cong deserters and prisoners, found that “few of them considered themselves Communists or could give a definition of Communism”.

Eisenhower’s policy in South Vietnam had not extended to aggression. It can be noted that Eisenhower, a Republican Party member and hardly a soft touch, was not an extremist or aggressive leader. His domestic policies for example were moderate. Eisenhower said that anyone who does not accept Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs “doesn’t belong in the American political system” (6). This viewpoint would be considered radical by today’s standards, such has been the decline and rightward lurch on the political spectrum.

Some valid charges can be levelled at Eisenhower regarding the foreign policy record, his administration's support of terror tactics in South Vietnam, and the execution of coups in Iran (1953) and Guatemala (1954). With some trepidation, Eisenhower ordered a US military intervention in the Middle East state of Lebanon during mid-July 1958, in order to stem the threat of Arab nationalism in the world's most important region. US-led forces inflicted about 4,000 casualties on the leftist Lebanese opposition; and after three months, a relieved Eisenhower promptly ordered the withdrawal of American soldiers from Lebanon in October 1958. (7)



Just one year into the JFK presidency, US Air Force members were centrally involved in hundreds of air raids over South Vietnam. At the end of 1962, the German-American author Guenter Lewy calculated that, by then, US helicopter and aircraft units carried out 2,048 attack sorties (8). In the autumn of 1961, president Kennedy had authorised herbicide spraying in South Vietnam, so as to “kill Viet Cong food crops and defoliate selected border and jungle areas”. Napalm usage was also sanctioned by the Kennedy administration around this period.

The character of Kennedy's war was openly documented at the time, and known within the US military and civilian command. Malcolm Browne, chief Indochina correspondent for the New York-based Associated Press (AP), reported from the ground that the results of US napalm and heavy bombing raids “are revolting... huts are flattened, and civilian loss of life is generally high. In some, the charred bodies of children and babies have made pathetic piles in the middle of the remains of market places”. (9)

To provide a brief example from 21 January 1962, very early in the war, US B-26 aircraft assaulted a village in South Vietnam with 500 pounds bombs, along with T-28 rocket attacks. The village huts were targeted for 45 minutes, wounding 11 civilians and killing five others. Among the dead were children aged 2, 5 and 7. A few minutes before, the air strikes had begun with a mistaken attack on another village, that happened to be just across the border in Cambodia (10). It resulted in the “killing and wounding” of “a number of villagers”, as described by Roger Hilsman, a dovish planner within the Kennedy administration.

Western media, with the New York Times “expressing the conventional line”, consistently backed the US war in Vietnam. Chomsky revealed, “The press supported state violence throughout, though JFK regarded it as an enemy because of tactical criticism and grumbling. Much fantasy has been spun in later years about crusading journalists exposing government lies: what they exposed was the failure of tactics to achieve ends they fully endorsed”. (11)

On 16 December 1961 US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, JFK's right-hand man,

authorised direct US soldier participation in South Vietnam regarding “combat operations against southerners resisting the violence of the US-imposed terror state, or living in villages out of government control” (12). By March 1962, Washington officials admitted publicly that US pilots were partaking in combat missions in South Vietnam, such as bombing and strafing.

It may be worth focusing on the opinions of Robert F. Kennedy regarding the Vietnam War, to provide a crucial insight into Kennedy administration foreign policy. Six months after his brother’s assassination RFK, still in his position as Attorney General, dispatched a note to president Lyndon B. Johnson on 11 June 1964 stating that Vietnam “is obviously the most important problem facing the United States, and if you felt I could help I am at your service” (13). In a show of support for the US war effort, which was going badly through 1964, Robert Kennedy proposed taking over the position of US Ambassador to South Vietnam.

Almost a year later in May 1965, three months after Johnson’s significant escalation of the war in Vietnam, RFK said the withdrawal of US forces would involve “a repudiation of commitments undertaken and confirmed by three administrations”. The removal of American troops from Vietnamese soil, RFK believed, would “gravely – perhaps irreparably – weaken the democratic position in Asia”. As late as December 1965, with much of South Vietnam at that point lying in ruins, JFK’s former Special Assistant Arthur Schlesinger Jr. recalled how Robert Kennedy said privately that month, “I don’t believe in pulling out the troops. We’ve got to show China we mean to stop them. If we can hold them for about 20 years, maybe they will change the way Russia has”. (14)

Contrary to a separate enduring myth, the evidence is abundant that RFK continued to champion US military involvement in Vietnam at least four years after JFK had launched the war, towards the end of 1961. This constitutes a time period equivalent to the length of World War One. RFK’s backing of the conflict simply mirrored that of his brother who, right up to the end of his presidency, was hoping for “an increased effort in the war” and to “intensify the struggle” so that “we can bring Americans out of there” (15). JFK made these remarks on 14 November 1963, eight days before his assassination. Withdrawal from Vietnam without victory was unthinkable.

Kennedy disregarded the recent public statement of veteran French president, Charles de Gaulle, who on 29 August 1963 expounded on his desire that the Vietnamese “could go ahead with their activities independently of the outside, in internal peace and unity and in harmony with their neighbours. Today more than ever, this is what France wishes for Vietnam as a whole”. (16)

The US National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, drew JFK’s attention to the De Gaulle comments and advised him to “ignore Nosey Charlie”. Bundy warned against the “specter of neutralist solution” in Vietnam, and felt that France should “share in the work of resisting Communist aggression”. In a television interview with the US president on 2 September 1963, Walter Cronkite specifically raised De Gaulle’s comments of four days before, and JFK responded by saying, “we are going to meet our responsibility anyway. It doesn’t do us any good to say, ‘Well, why don’t we all just go home and leave the world to those who are our enemies’.” (17)

Near the conclusion of Eisenhower’s presidency in late December 1960, there were still only about 900 American soldiers in South Vietnam. At the end of December 1961, as the first year of Kennedy’s tenure was drawing to a close, US troop levels in South Vietnam had

jumped almost fourfold, to 3,205.

Almost two years later, the number of American soldiers in South Vietnam climbed further to 16,732, just prior to Kennedy's assassination on 22 November 1963 (18). JFK supporters commonly point to the 1,000 US troops the president, in late 1963, had sanctioned to pull out of South Vietnam as evidence that he was in the process of withdrawing from the country. In actual fact the 1,000 US personnel in question were, as the American historian James T. Patterson outlined, "mostly part of a construction battalion that had finished its work. They were being brought home for Christmas and were scheduled to be replaced by others". (19)

Patterson continued, "Most of Kennedy's major advisers concerning Vietnam then and later were certain that Kennedy never intended to 'withdraw' American advisers and military aid, before he could be certain that the South Vietnamese could safely defend themselves". (20)

As 1963 advanced, a big obstacle to the Kennedy administration's desire to escalate the war into 1964, was the wavering attitude of the Diem regime. On 22 April 1963 the CIA reported that Diem, along with his younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, "were concerned over recent 'infringements' of Vietnamese sovereignty" by the Americans. The CIA, which by then was conducting clandestine operations in both South and North Vietnam, relayed information that Diem "after building up a strong case" is planning to confront the US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Frederick Nolting, and General Paul Harkins "with irrefutable evidence of US responsibility, demanding a reduction in the number of US personnel in South Vietnam on the basis that the force is too large and unmanageable".

The next month, on 12 May 1963 the Washington Post published a front-page interview with Nhu, who was considered a highly influential figure in South Vietnam, even more so than Diem. In the interview Nhu said, "South Vietnam would like to see half of the 12,000 to 13,000 American military stationed here leave the country".



Statements like this were regarded with much disquiet in the White House. Chomsky observed how the Kennedy administration "feared that the GVN [South Vietnamese regime] pressures for withdrawal of US forces would become difficult to resist, a danger enhanced by exploratory GVN efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement with the North. The skimpy political base for Kennedy's war would then erode, and the US would be compelled to withdraw without victory. That option being unacceptable to JFK and his advisers, the Saigon regime had to get on board, or be dismissed". (21)

Diem and Nhu did not get on board. They ignored Washington's demands to "get everyone

back to work and get them to focus on winning the war". From the summer of 1963, the Diem regime was reportedly moving towards "a secret deal with the North" and Nhu once more complained "there were too many US troops in Vietnam". Therefore, JFK and his advisers decided unequivocally, by the late summer of 1963, that Diem and Nhu would have to go. On 28 August 1963, JFK "asked the Defense Department to come up with ways of building up the anti-Diem forces in Saigon"; and the US president requested moves "which would maximise the chances of the rebel generals" while saying further, "We should ask Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins how we can build up military forces which would carry out a coup". (22)

By October 1963, Nhu was calling for all American troops to leave South Vietnam. It came as no great surprise, early the following month, when a US-engineered putsch was instituted. Diem and Nhu were summarily executed on 2 November 1963. Averell Harriman, JFK's new Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, had told the president that without a coup "we cannot win the war", and failing that the US "must withdraw" from Vietnam.

Robert Kennedy likewise supported the coup, and he called for bolstering the rebel generals who would replace Diem. RFK said the US government needed "somebody that can win the war" and Diem was no longer the man for the job. Chomsky wrote, "Accordingly it is no surprise that RFK fully supported Johnson's continuation of what he understood to be his brother's policies, through the 1965 escalation". (23)

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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4 *Ibid.*, p. 50

5 *Ibid.*, p. 49

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7 Alasdair Soussi, "Legacy of US' 1958 Lebanon invasion", [Al Jazeera](#), 15 July 2013

8 Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 1st edition, 1 Oct. 1978) p. 24

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11 Ibid., p. 2

12 Ibid., p. 23

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14 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy and His Times (Mariner Books, 40th anniversary ed., 8 May 2018) Chapter 27, Stranger in a Strange Land

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22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 108

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