

PRESIDENTS, VIETNAM AND THE NEW YORK TIMES

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There is nothing about Vietnam, the war and our involvement there that could possibly make anyone in this country happy. Yet viewed in the light of what has happened and is still happening throughout the world, it seems unreal that such an insignificant conflict in so far removed a corner of the globe could have become a major agony tearing this country apart. Europeans, who have many more important things to worry about, shake their heads in bewilderment at our naive and inept handling of the entire mess.

Whatever else *The New York Times* publication of the controversial Pentagon Papers accomplished, it did at least point up the appalling arrogance and hypocrisy of the liberal press and politicians. Many of the same pious, peace lovers, now so critical of governmental honesty and of President Nixon's handling of Vietnam, were the very ones who, in earlier years, enjoyed cooperation from the liberal communications media that masked their own misguided efforts to increase our involvement in Southeast Asia. Even reading the selective and carefully edited *Times* version of the secret papers, the inescapable evidence is that the full responsibility for the Vietnam debacle rests squarely in the lap of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier.

It is worthwhile here to review briefly the history of our involvement there. In 1954, after an eight-year war (described by the Encyclopedia Britannica as a "civil, local and international war"), the Geneva agreement divided Vietnam into two independent republics. For the next six years, negotiations toward unification between the two continued but always floundered over the question of what type of government should dominate the communism of President Ho Chi Minh in the north, or the semi-democracy of President Ngo Dinh Diem in the south. The cautious commitment of U.S. observers and advisors to Thailand and Vietnam by the Eisenhower administration was entirely in keeping with similar commitments throughout the Far East, the Middle East, South America and elsewhere in troubled Mediterranean and African countries. In Indochina, Vietnam was the least of our worries.

Yet as early as 1955, Democrats and the liberal press were criticizing the Eisenhower administration for not adequately supporting President Diem and the South Vietnam government. Chester Bowles, the former Ambassador to India under Truman (later appointed Undersecretary of State by Kennedy and again Ambassador to India by Johnson), felt that Diem's "brilliant leadership" in South Vietnam would save all Indochina from communism. Bowles reprimanded the administration for not supporting actively "indigenous democratic Vietnam leaders" in 1953 and praised the efforts of enlightened leaders within the Senate who had goaded Eisenhower into reluctantly

changing policy to bolster Diem. And who were the wise Senate leaders named by Bowles? Mike Mansfield of Montana, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Between 1958 and 1961, the political situation in South Vietnam remained relatively stable. Except for minor guerrilla skirmishes and terrorist raids by pro-communist and North Vietnamese forces, not much was going on. In 1958, the International Supervising Commission for the United Nations (consisting of Indians, Canadians and Poles), whose job it was to preserve peace between the two republics, moved its headquarters from Hanoi to Saigon. The prospects for reunification of north and south did not improve. A slow increase in our military advisory personnel, encouraged by Democratic leadership in Congress, went unnoticed here. Late in 1960, Ho Chi Minh complained as a result of increased U.S. support of Diem that our forces there (civilian and military) had expanded fourteen times during five years to reach a level of two thousand men. This would indicate, even by communist figures, that in the mid-fifties our advisors in South Vietnam numbered less than one hundred fifty persons.

During this time and throughout 1961 and most of 1962, our major concern in Indochina was centered on Thailand, a pro-western ally, and in Laos, where a civil war between three factions (pro-western, neutralist and pro-communist) had been going on.

In 1961, with one disaster, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, already to its credit, the Kennedy administration was seeking mightily to preserve its "image." The President spoke grandly of our "American sphere of influence" and of our government's intentions to honor commitments, to support SEATO and to defend the oppressed of Southeast Asia (as well as those of all "emerging nations"). The Indonesian peninsula was seen as an ideal area in which to demonstrate to the communist world that the U.S. would not stand idly by in the face of communist subversion and aggression.

Early in 1961, some ten thousand North Vietnamese troops had invaded Laos; heavy fighting throughout the central and northern provinces was taking place. In March 1961, President Kennedy warned the USSR that the United States "would not tolerate the loss of Laos to pro-communist forces."

In 1961 also, a decision was made by Kennedy and his advisors to increase the American military "presence" in Vietnam from a "few hundred advisors" to a force of fifteen thousand, the first real step in American "escalation." And by fall of that year, it was conservatively estimated that a total of ten thousand U.S. military men were engaged in training, advising and assisting South Vietnamese forces.

But even in 1962, Vietnam had not become an important issue. In May, when North Vietnamese and pro-communist successes appeared to threaten Thailand, Kennedy ordered a task force of four thousand Army, Navy and Air Force men to that country and landed eighteen hundred Marines there for defense against a possible incursion of communist forces from Laos. (It is interesting that *The New York* and the later day Congressional doves, who screamed when President Johnson intervened with a token force in the Dominican crisis, were not only silent about Kennedy's display of American imperialism in Thailand but were actively supporting his foreign policy).

Throughout 1961 and 1962, in spite of internal friction and occasional abortive attempts by military leaders against Diem (they accused him of dictatorial methods and of being incapable of fighting Communist aggression), public affairs in South Vietnam remained fairly stable. After the first nationwide voting, Diem was overwhelmingly reelected President in 1961. In July 1962, after the temporary Laotian "settlement," most of the U.S. forces were withdrawn from Thailand, although we retained "token forces and a military headquarters" there.

By 1963, U.S. forces in Vietnam had increased to fifteen thousand. In the spring and summer, local conflicts between government and Buddhist leaders over religious matters increased alarmingly and, in August, Diem imposed martial law. At the same time, the Diem regime was becoming upset with the Kennedy administration's growing interference in domestic government and grew increasingly wary of the steady increase of American troops in the country. The war against North Vietnamese guerrillas and terrorists continued, but actually at this time, the overall military situation had improved to the point that Diem requested the U.S. to reduce the number of its "advisers." However, by this time, Kennedy had become disillusioned with Diem, the man once hailed as the outstanding leader and champion of democracy in all of Southeast Asia. With the quiet sanction of U.S. policy makers, the Diem government was soon thoroughly undermined and, on November 1, a military coup backed by our government overthrew the regime and immediately executed the President and his brother.

On November 22nd, 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated.

Almost immediately, North Vietnamese activity in South Vietnam increased considerably. President Johnson, retaining most of the same Kennedy advisors, saw fit to continue the military policies set by his predecessor and slowly expanded our involvement there according to preexisting plans.

The Vietnam domestic situation in 1964 was one of bewilderment and uncertainty as the various factions—military, Buddhists, Catholics, students, pro-communist and pro-

western—vied for power. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong military activity rose steadily. In August, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, President Johnson, with public and full approval of Congress, declared that retaliatory action by the United States would be taken. By the end of 1964, over twenty thousand U.S. military men were in Vietnam.

In 1965, U.S. military operations intensified and were marked by a greatly stepped up introduction of U.S. combat forces. Until the first months of 1965, our military role in Vietnam had been officially described as "advisory," but when thirty-five hundred Marines were sent to the air base at Da Nang in March, our involvement became "direct." By summer, U.S. troops in Vietnam rose to 185,000. Still, even by the end of the year, the people of this country, the Congress and most of the press backed President Johnson and his administration.

Combat troops increased to 380,000 in 1966, to 475,000 in 1967 and, by the end of 1968, to 540,000. Increasingly through these years, the liberal press and political opportunists turned against President Johnson. Increasingly, the communications media and particularly the television network newscasters portrayed our action in Vietnam in the worst possible light. Instead of defenders we turned into oppressors and aggressors. All of these major opinion-making forces (a euphemism for propagandists) conveniently forgot their own acquiescence and participation with the Kennedy administration in creating the Vietnam situation, as well as their all-out effort to discredit opposition in the 1964 elections and keep Johnson in office.

In that excellent book *The Kingdom and the Power: Behind the Scenes at The New York Times*, by Gay Talese, it is revealed that the press, and specifically *The Times'* own Washington bureau, knew of the early decision made by President Kennedy and his staff to increase the American presence in Vietnam to a force of fifteen thousand; they also knew that the Kennedy advisors felt that this step would likely result in a commitment of three hundred thousand troops there. *The Times* knew this in 1961, but remained silent.

This information, like similar information *The Times* sat on earlier about the United States' U-2, spy plane flights over Russia and the government sanctioned preparations for the Bay of Pigs invasion, was withheld from the public, at the time after editorial debate on grounds that it was in the national interest to protect American intelligence and that, if published, such information might destroy public confidence and the illusion of honesty of the Washington administration.

It is difficult to forget that *The New York Times* wisdom was such that it once, practically single handedly, promoted and sold Fidel Castro to this country as an idealistic reformer who would liberate Cuba from military dictatorship. Nor is it easy to overlook that while it now advocates greater Congressional authority with curbing of Presidential

power, during the Kennedy administration it was berating an "obstructionist" Congress and calling for greater Presidential power.

In view of *The Times'* willingness to publish secret papers now in defiance of Nixon's Washington administration, it seems obvious that "national interest" is something to be defined by *Times'* editors, and that such interest can be served only when a President is given *The Times'* stamp of approval. In other words, with an unpopular Nixon or Johnson in office instead of a tolerable Eisenhower or loveable Kennedy, *The Times* does not mind destroying public confidence or undermining a Washington administration, all in the same "national interest."

As many have asked recently, "Who elected *The New York Times*?"

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