

At the Water's Edge

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Saving South Vietnam, 1945–1963

FEW WARS in American history have had as profound and lasting an influence on domestic politics, culture, and economics as the Vietnam War. Of course, few wars in American history were as unpopular or as contentious as that war. And those that were, such as the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War, took place in periods well before the telecommunications age that made any war potentially, in the words of journalist Richard Arlen, “a living-room war.”

The Vietnam War was a long war. The Pentagon dates U.S. participation from 1961, when the GIs “in country” were still mainly advisers to their South Vietnamese allies, to 1973, when the last American combat troops left the country. But it was an issue in American politics before 1961 and especially after 1973, when virtually every major American military or diplomatic crisis raised the specter of another Vietnam and all the anguish that word came to mean for those who lived through the era. Two of the major appraisals of the Vietnam War use the word “ordeal” in their title, two others use “tragedy,” while still others refer to a “quagmire,” the “suicide of an elite,” an “unholy grail,” the “war at home,” “The Vietnam Wars,” and a “wounded generation.”

Most of those books concentrate on the failure of the United States to defeat the Communists in Southeast Asia. But all recognize the impact of U.S. involvement in Vietnam on the home front. More than most wars, the Vietnam War affected every

American institution, including the military, the executive and legislative branches of the federal government, the political parties, the media, religious organizations, the educational system, labor unions and corporations, and marriage and the family. Most important of all, beginning in the mid-1960s, the Vietnam experience led some Americans to lose a good deal of faith in their government, and many others to question what their leaders were telling them about foreign affairs.

There was a time in recent American history when presidents such as Dwight Eisenhower or John Kennedy appeared on television to announce a crisis and their constituents did not challenge their description of the problem. Not anymore. Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR), one of the most erudite of American politicians, reported that "The biggest lesson I learned from Vietnam is not to trust government statements." In a related vein, low voter turnouts in elections and widespread cynicism about politicians have a good deal to do with the way the Vietnam experience affected Americans.

The fact that Vietnam was the nation's longest war suggests that its impact has to be at least as profound, lasting, and varied as the two world wars, both of which helped determine the contours of the domestic political terrain for several generations. But, unlike most American wars, political, social, and economic developments had a good deal to do with the diplomatic and military strategies adopted by the presidents and their advisers. Domestic political considerations, including the congressional and presidential election cycles, were never far from their minds as they fashioned military tactics and strategies and contemplated decisions about escalation, de-escalation, and negotiation. The seemingly endless limited war in a modern democratic society posed problems for American decision-makers confronted by few other political leaders in world history. The story of domestic politics and the Vietnam War is far more complicated than that for most other American and, indeed, international wars.

The history and analysis of decision-making during the Vietnam War is itself far more complicated than simply examining the impact of domestic politics. At each critical juncture, military and diplomatic concerns weighed heavily with presidents and their advisers. I will concentrate only on the domestic political variable, an important—but not always the most important—variable in the decision-making process.

The United States first became involved in Southeast Asia during World War II when, as leader of the victorious Allies, it had to make plans for the future of those countries and colonies that had been taken over by the Germans, Italians, and Japanese. In 1940, after the Germans defeated the French, Japan informally seized France's colony in Vietnam. During the war, Washington offered token military and political support to the Viet Minh, Ho Chi Minh's Communist-dominated coalition that was waging a guerrilla war for independence in Vietnam against the Japanese and the French.

More important, President Franklin D. Roosevelt seriously contemplated not supporting the return of the colony to France at war's end. Although most Americans knew nothing of the smaller conflict in Vietnam or Roosevelt's plans for that remote territory—an obscure issue compared to the war raging on the European continent and in China and in the Pacific—they generally opposed colonialism as practiced by their European allies. Their knee-jerk anti-imperialism had little effect on Roosevelt and Truman's ultimate decision not to support independence for Vietnam. A minor decision they never formally announced, it was barely noticed among far more important decisions in the tumultuous spring and summer of 1945.

Harry Truman's decisions from 1946 through 1953 to support the French effort to suppress the Viet Minh revolution barely turned up on most Americans' radar screens. Considering the many crises of the early cold war years that directly involved the

United States, including the Korean War that began in 1950, few American officials outside the Pentagon and the State Department expressed interest in the far-off war in Vietnam. There was a time, however, during the first part of 1954, when that war briefly became a serious issue in the United States.

The Viet Minh, who had been besieging a major French garrison at Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam, appeared on the verge of winning a dramatic military and, especially, psychological victory. When the French asked for assistance, the Eisenhower administration contemplated air strikes to relieve the garrison, with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Arthur W. Radford, even recommending the use of tactical atomic bombs if a conventional raid proved impractical. Radford's suggestion to use atomic weapons was dismissed by the president and his advisers because they knew that few Americans, let alone foreigners, would accept the use of such horrendous weapons for a cause that did not seem to impact national security.

As for a conventional raid, Eisenhower insisted on the advance approval of congressional leaders, among other conditions, before he would agree to intervene. He knew that the key leaders in both parties, including Senator Lyndon B. Johnson (D-TX), strongly opposed becoming involved in a war to save a French colony, even from communism. They had been distressed in January when they had not been consulted about the administration's dispatch of two hundred technicians to aid the French effort. Massachusetts Democratic senator John F. Kennedy warned that no amount of military aid to the colonial overlords could beat "an enemy of the people which has the support and covert appeal of the people." Eisenhower, who privately agreed with such sentiments, was pleased to be able to use congressional opposition as one of his reasons for refraining from intervention.

During much of his administration, the president found more support for his internationalist and noninterventionist policies from Democrats than from Republicans. The senator with the

most expertise in Asia, Mike Mansfield (D-MT), had been a professor of Asian history. He worked closely and quietly, as was his wont, with Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on their Vietnamese policies, serving as both a valued adviser and an intermediary with the Senate. He maintained a similar relationship with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

When Eisenhower's more hawkish vice president, Richard M. Nixon, hinted (in an off-the-record remark that became public) that the White House was considering intervention in Vietnam, the administration was greeted by a firestorm of opposition from bipartisan congressional leaders and the media. After extricating the country from an unpopular war in Korea the preceding year, the president knew that launching even a limited strike in what appeared to be a comparable war would be even more unpopular.

Instead the United States grudgingly attended the Geneva Conference in 1954, at which the French ended their war with the Viet Minh. The southern half of Vietnam was temporarily left in the hands of their former ally, Emperor Bao Dai, and the northern half in the hands of Ho Chi Minh. The Geneva Accords provided for national elections to be held within two years, at which time the Vietnamese would choose their new unified government. At this point the United States decided to draw the line at the 17th parallel and not permit the southern part of Vietnam to fall to communism. In 1953, Eisenhower had referred positively to the way France was "holding the line of freedom" against "Communist aggression." Now it would become the United States' task to support, in Eisenhower's words, the "falling domino" whose capture by world communism would lead to other losses to the West in the region and beyond.

This was not simply a case of balance-of-power politics. Implicit in the domino theory for Southeast Asia was the importance of that area's raw materials—rubber, rice, tin, oil, tungsten, and the like—to the U.S. economy and those of its European allies. American economic planners also believed they needed to

develop new markets in Southeast Asia to make up for the closure of the China market after the 1949 triumph of the Communist revolution. Since John Hay's Open Door Notes at the turn of the century, American strategists had linked Asian policy to free markets and the potential significance of that region for the American economy. In the 1950s they were especially concerned with safeguarding the region for the economic development of Japan, which had become a major cold war ally in the Far East.

Eisenhower never made a formal announcement of his nation's acceptance of France's burden in South Vietnam. At no time during the 1954–1955 transition period was there a specific day when the French handed over their colony to the United States. That is perhaps why so few Americans knew what their president was getting them into. Those who did supported the decision. John Kennedy referred in a 1956 speech to the American “finger in the dike” in South Vietnam that kept “the red tide of communism” from drowning that nation.

Kennedy delivered that speech before the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), a lobby and support group for the new government of the Republic of Vietnam led by Ngo Dinh Diem. The popularity of the idea of building a free, democratic Vietnam was reflected in the membership of the AFV, which included senators from the right such as William F. Knowland (R-CA) and from the left such as Hubert H. Humphrey (D-MN), and even Mansfield, who later became a prominent critic of the American enterprise in Southeast Asia.

The AFV was based in East Lansing, Michigan, because one of its key figures, Professor Wesley Fishel, was also head of Michigan State University's aid program (MSUG) to South Vietnam. Beginning in 1955 the university provided teachers and trainers of public and police administration for the Diem regime. Some of the training involved controversial secret-police tactics, and several members of the presumably academic MSUG program were operatives of America's Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA). A sensational exposé about the police training and the CIA appeared in 1966 in the radical magazine *Ramparts*, which featured a cover drawing of President Diem's sister-in-law as a Spartan cheerleader. The exposé led to considerable agitation at MSU and elsewhere for universities to halt their involvement in such programs and any others involving classified research.

But that was later, in 1966. Few Americans objected when the United States and President Diem decided against holding nationwide elections in Vietnam in 1956, as required by the Geneva Accords, because they feared that Ho would win. Most were not even aware of the decision. Diem held his own elections, as a sop to a United States that always wants its allies to at least appear democratic. He received more than 98 percent support in a rigged plebiscite held only in the South. American advisers had suggested that he report a more modest 60 percent support.

Vietnam first appeared as an election issue, albeit a minor one, in 1956. The hapless Democratic candidate, Adlai E. Stevenson, attacked Eisenhower from the right for permitting half of Vietnam to go Communist at the 1954 Geneva Conference. But the refrain, "Who lost Vietnam?" never resonated with the American public the way that "Who lost China?" had in the 1952 election. Despite the bipartisan consensus in support of containment from 1946 through 1967, the Democrats were perceived correctly as more willing to negotiate with the Communists and less committed to military solutions to international problems. It was impossible for Stevenson to make his soft-on-communism charge stick to Eisenhower.

When President Diem paid an official visit to the United States in 1957, he was hailed as the "savior" of his country, a "miracle man." In truth he was an authoritarian ruler, surrounded by corrupt advisers and generals, who often disregarded American advice about reforms that might win over the hearts and minds of his people. In 1959, Albert M. Colgrove, a journalist with the Scripps-Howard newspapers, published a

series of articles about corruption and the lack of democracy in Vietnam. These led to other stories about Diem's shortcomings and ultimately to congressional hearings on the U.S. aid program. Here was the first example of a mainstream American journalist bringing home such bad but entirely accurate news of Vietnam to his readership. Despite clear evidence that Diem was failing to create a democratic society, a healthy economy, and a dependable military, the hearings ended with bipartisan support for continuing the South Vietnamese project. In fact, in 1959, Senator Gale McGhee (D-WY), who investigated the aid program, thought that it could become a "showcase" for the United States. This was the only time during the 1950s that the U.S. role in Vietnam appeared on the front pages for a sustained period of time.

Yet a Vietnam-like country, Sarkhan, was the center of *The Ugly American*, a 1958 best-selling novel. The authors, William Lederer, a naval officer, and Eugene Burdick, a political scientist, were not the usual novelists. They had an explicit agenda, hoping to influence the "foreign aid debates" in Congress with their portrayal of the effective counter-insurgency activities of tough American intelligence officers and diplomats against Communists in their fictional Southeast Asian country. Within a year, Lederer claimed that there were "twenty-one pieces of legislation being introduced into Congress which include the words 'The Ugly American.'" Senator Kennedy, who had carved out a niche for himself as an expert on Third World revolutions, sent a copy of the novel to each member of the Senate. The small guerilla war depicted in *The Ugly American* soon appeared in real life in South Vietnam.

Diem's military forces, trained by Americans, had to contend with a Communist-led insurrection that began in 1958. In 1959 the North Vietnamese assumed control of the insurrection and, in 1960, helped to create the National Liberation Front, which the Americans and South Vietnamese called the Viet Cong, or

Vietnamese Communists. This was still a low-level affair in 1959 when President Eisenhower announced that “the loss of South Vietnam would . . . have grave consequences for the United States and for freedom.”

Despite such a pronouncement, the issue of stopping communism in Vietnam did not appear in the 1960 election campaign. The relative lack of success of the Eisenhower administration in prosecuting the cold war was an issue, as the Democratic candidate, John F. Kennedy, assailed his Republican opponent, Vice President Nixon, for being part of an administration whose diplomacy was indecisive and weak. He pointed to the Soviet lead in satellite technology, its alleged lead in the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, and especially the fall of Cuba to communism as proof that the nation needed a vigorous new leadership and increased defense spending. It was the Republicans’ fault, he implied, that “For the first time in our history, an enemy stands at the throat of the United States,” just ninety miles from the Florida coast. Kennedy was long on rhetoric and short on specifics when he promised to do a better job in the cold war. He was only returning the favor to the Republicans who rode to election victory in 1952 denouncing the appeasing party that had “lost” China to the Communists. During the campaign, Kennedy once asked his aides, “How would we have saved Cuba if we had the power? What the hell, they never told us how they would have saved China.”

As with most presidential elections, foreign policy was not the main issue in the contest that saw Kennedy eke out an extremely narrow victory over Nixon. The weak economy and party loyalties figured more prominently than international affairs for many voters. But the young and untested Kennedy appeared knowledgeable and potentially pro-active in foreign policy, as seen in the first televised presidential debate in history, making it easier for many undecided Americans to trust the fate of their nation to him.

Kennedy made foreign policy a central theme in his inaugural address when he announced, "Let the word go forth . . . to friend and foe alike that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans [who] shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." He was reacting to a speech delivered by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev who apparently challenged the United States by declaring that the USSR would aid those fighting for national liberation against colonial powers. Kennedy did not realize that the Russians were not confronting the United States but had aimed their rhetorical assault at the Chinese Communists. Breaking their alliance with Moscow, they had positioned themselves as a people of color ready to champion the anti-Western movements of other people of color in Asia and Africa. Whomever the Russians were targeting, to Kennedy their new line meant that the cold war had shifted from a relatively stable Europe to Third World venues such as the Congo, Vietnam, and Laos.

When the president-elect visited the White House to discuss the most pressing foreign policy problems, Eisenhower informed him that the key crisis area in Asia was Laos, where the American backed right-wing government was fighting a civil war against the Communist Pathet Lao. It was tiny, landlocked Laos, not its much larger neighbor Vietnam, where American military planners contemplated intervention. There were eight hundred American advisers in Vietnam at the time. While the Viet Cong was making headway against the Diem government, it did not appear to be in imminent danger of falling, which was not the case in Laos.

The Kennedy administration decided in 1961 not to assist the Laotian government through military intervention. Instead it backed a diplomatic settlement that brought to power a neutral regime which might save the country from communism. To some observers, this approach belied the tough line that Kennedy

had promised Americans in his campaign and in his inaugural address. More important, in April 1961, Kennedy presided over one of the most humiliating defeats in American history—the failed attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion. Several months later, Kennedy feared that he had appeared weak and been bullied by Khrushchev at their summit meeting in Vienna. And only two months after that, the United States watched the Russians alter the status quo in Berlin by erecting a wall separating the western part of the city from Communist East Berlin. Thus when the time came to consider options for Vietnam, Kennedy feared that he had to set limits or face more provocations from the Communists and, especially, electoral defeat for his party in 1962 and himself in 1964.

Kennedy looked like an appeaser. He remembered what had happened to the promising political career of his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, who had thrown in his lot in 1940 with an appeasement policy. Eisenhower had warned the president directly that the Republicans would hold him responsible “for any retreat in Southeast Asia.” Congressman Melvin Laird (R-WI) was not alone when in 1962 he charged that the administration “has failed to act with sufficient vigor to frustrate the achievement of Communist objectives.” Since the end of World War II the Republicans had been rhetorically more hawkish than the Democrats when it came to containing communism in Asia.

In the wake of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy told an aide, “There are just so many concessions that one can make to the communists in one year and survive politically. . . . We just can’t have another defeat in Vietnam.” Looking back at the situation in 1963, he told another aide, “If I had tried to pull out completely from Vietnam, we would have another [Senator] Joe McCarthy [R-WI] red scare on our hands.” Thus Kennedy ordered more military and economic aid to buttress the Saigon regime; from 1961 to 1963 he increased the number of American advisers in South Vietnam from Eisenhower’s eight hundred to more

than sixteen thousand. Those advisers started to take a more active role in combat operations and began appearing in journalistic accounts as “advisers.” In 1961 the United States, which had experienced no combat fatalities in Vietnam the preceding year, suffered eleven deaths. That number grew to thirty-one in 1962 and seventy-eight in 1963.

Congress was not involved with Kennedy’s 1961 decision for escalation. To be fair, few on Capitol Hill expressed much concern about what was going on in Vietnam. As early as June 1961 Senator Fulbright, the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, worried in a speech about the misplaced emphasis on the military and not the social and economic problems of South Vietnam. But Fulbright had been urging all through the fifties more, not less, executive leadership in foreign policy, contending that congressional interference had often been detrimental to U.S. national security interests. He would soon change his mind.

Another Democrat, Mike Mansfield, was also nervous about American policy in Vietnam. The most important Asian foreign policy expert in the Senate and an early admirer of President Diem was becoming critical of his rule. Mansfield’s knowledge of the region carried such weight that when Vice President Lyndon Johnson traveled to Vietnam in May 1961, he brought with him a member of the senator’s staff to counterbalance the perspectives from the State and Defense Departments. Hearing accurate rumors of military leaders urging Kennedy to send combat troops to Vietnam late in 1961, Mansfield privately urged the president to reject such suggestions.

In another example of the way Kennedy made use of Democratic senators on the Vietnam issue, in October 1961 he asked Missouri senator Stuart Symington, who visited Vietnam, to convey the following message to President Diem: If he was entertaining the idea of obtaining a mutual-defense treaty from the United States, it would never receive Senate approval. The power of the Senate to reject or amend treaties and of Congress

to restrict appropriations has often been used by presidents to explain to foreign leaders why they cannot always help them. Sometimes disingenuously they explain, “Don’t blame me, I’m on your side, but I have to deal with the yahoos on Capitol Hill.”

Whatever Mansfield, Symington, and other senators might have thought or said from 1961 through to the end of the war, they never once rejected an administration request for funding for the military in Vietnam, often in the form of special or supplemental appropriations. Congressional critics found themselves in the difficult position of having to approve increased military appropriations bills or appearing as if they were not supporting the GIs in Vietnam. But there were not many congressional critics of Kennedy’s Vietnam policies during his tenure.

The same could not be said for the American media. In 1962 in particular, young American journalists David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, Neil Sheehan of United Press International, and Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press joined several of their senior colleagues to criticize the South Vietnamese government’s ineptitude and corruption. They also pointed out that the army of the Republic of South Vietnam was failing to subdue the Viet Cong, despite official press briefings to the contrary.

Controversies still swirl around the role of the American media in affecting the outcome of the wars in Southeast Asia. Government officials perceived that stories filed by anti-war print and broadcast journalists weakened the U.S. military effort. This resulted in tighter restrictions on press coverage of later military interventions, including those in 1983 in Grenada and in 1991 in Kuwait. There was no official censorship in the “war” in Vietnam, as had been the case in several other U.S. wars, most notably World War II. The South Vietnamese and the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) tried to restrict the movement of journalists and to control the flow of information to them. But they were not able to keep intrepid reporters

and photographers from getting to the front to observe the battles firsthand. Much of the time, especially through 1968, journalists tended to support the American effort. Every now and then, however, as was the case in 1962, they took a different tack and raised important issues about the role of the media in a democracy fighting an undeclared war.

Few mainstream journalists who found fault with the South Vietnamese government opposed U.S. intervention in Vietnam. But they did not like the way things were going. Halberstam wrote that the administration's "cautious optimism . . . is not widely reflected among Americans stationed here," and that "there sometimes seems a tendency to describe results before they have been attained." The press, according to an embassy official, "believes that the situation in Vietnam is going to pieces and we have been unable to convince them otherwise." A *Newsweek* reporter concluded that "The basic problem is that the Vietnamese government does not command respect in the rural areas" because of "a sickening atmosphere of insecurity, suspicion, and government clumsiness." That government harassed such reporters, tapped their phones, and even "lost" or destroyed some of their dispatches sent over its cable system, especially when alerted to do so by Pentagon press officers. In one celebrated case, the South Vietnamese president expelled Francois Sully, a *Newsweek* correspondent, for criticizing the presidential family. Diem tried to do the same thing to the *New York Times*' Homer Bigart, but the American embassy intervened to save the distinguished war correspondent. Some in the American mission to Vietnam joined with South Vietnamese officials in asking Washington to pressure American media for the recall of critical journalists. For the most part, American newspapers, magazines, and television networks resisted. President Kennedy himself failed to convince *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger to send Halberstam on a long vacation. At the same time he reminded the Vietnamese that they should "not be too concerned by press

reports.” Washington “did not accept everything the correspondents wrote, even if it appeared in the *New York Times*.”

Kennedy’s motivations were more complicated than simple damage control. While concerned about the criticism of the Saigon government, he was also concerned that journalists were making too many headlines about American ties to the war. He hoped to sever them. He was especially disturbed by news reports that his “advisers” were doing a lot more than advising. Consequently he approved of directives that would tighten official control over journalists with what even friendly columnist Joseph Alsop labeled “news-control devices.”

Kennedy had reason to be concerned about the immediate political impact of the critical perspectives adopted by reporters from elite publications. After the influential Mansfield met with Halberstam, Sheehan, and Peter Arnett in South Vietnam late in 1962, he informed the president that he was convinced the war was not going well. Mansfield also defended the journalists who had “the same objectivity, alertness, and appropriate skepticism of official handouts that are characteristic of American reporters everywhere.”

As embarrassing as such reports were to South Vietnam, and to some degree MACV, in 1962 they interested only a small minority of Americans. The war in Vietnam remained a minor foreign policy issue in the United States. Moreover, respected establishment columnists such as Alsop, to whom MACV spoon-fed exclusive material, offered optimistic views of the U.S. effort in Vietnam. And some publishers and editors remained faithful to the cause, eliminating or altering negative reports from the field. Such was the case at *Time*, where its Saigon correspondent, Charles Mohr, was so irritated by that practice that he quit the magazine in 1963 to join the *New York Times*.

Although the media did not “lose” the war, after the fall of South Vietnam to communism, politicians and conservative political commentators attacked the anti-war and liberal biases

of journalists who had allegedly undermined U.S. national security. The development of the still potent conservative political issue of the unpatriotic and even un-American media owes much to the purposeful misreading of their activities in Vietnam, which began in 1962 with a Democratic president's problems with critical correspondents. This was unfair to the hardworking and dedicated journalists. For the most part they had a much better handle on Vietnamese politics than did the "experts" in the White House.

The criticism of American involvement with a corrupt and repressive government in Saigon increased exponentially in the spring and summer 1963 during the "Buddhist crisis." It began on May 8 when Diem's military broke up a demonstration in Hue, the imperial capital, by firing into a crowd opposing a ban on the display of religious banners. This action led to more demonstrations and more government-sponsored violent retaliation as Buddhist agitation threatened to topple Diem or at least cripple his ability to prosecute the war against the Viet Cong. Unable to contend with the firepower of the ARVN, the media-savvy monks employed a sensational method of protest—self-immolation. On June 11, after his leaders had informed journalists about the particulars of the event, a monk sat down in a Saigon street, poured gasoline over himself, and set himself on fire. Like the rest of America, President Kennedy was completely taken aback by the crisis. "Who are these people?" he asked his aides. These people, the Buddhists, made up 90 percent of the population of Vietnam. They were not part of Saigon's predominantly Catholic establishment with whom American officials, like the French before them, customarily dealt.

On June 10, in a major address on the cold war at American University prepared before the self-immolation incident, Kennedy contended that the Soviet Union and the United States should "not interfere with the choice of others," that they should

both “make the world safe for diversity.” Diem’s approach to diversity in his own society left much to be desired.

The pictures of the monk in flames shocked Americans and people around the world. During the summer of 1963 six other monks made the ultimate sacrifice for their cause. That cause was inadvertently aided when Diem’s controversial and outspoken sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, dismissed the Buddhists’ actions as “barbecues.” Kennedy was becoming exasperated with Diem, who seemed incapable of winning the war against the Communists and establishing a stable and effective government. By this time the president was also becoming concerned about the impact of the chaos in Vietnam on the 1964 presidential campaign that was to begin within six months. Since much of his domestic political program, the New Frontier, remained to be enacted, his stewardship of foreign policy would play a significant role in the campaign. Republicans in Congress had already intensified their criticism of his Vietnam policies, calling for a more muscular approach to the Communist insurgency.

To head them off, in June Kennedy appointed a Republican, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., to be U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam. A former senator and his party’s vice-presidential candidate in 1960, Lodge was, according to Frederick Nolting, the bitter foreign service officer whom he replaced, “a piece of Republican asbestos to keep the heat off Kennedy.” It did not take long for Kennedy to become dissatisfied with Lodge. The ambassador often operated independently of Washington and did not provide the president with the objective reportage he felt he needed to construct Vietnam policy. But Kennedy muted his criticisms for political reasons and certainly could not relieve Lodge of his duties. The last thing he needed was to see Lodge back home, taking up the partisan Republican cudgels on foreign policy in the 1964 campaign.

Lodge, not the most diplomatic, knowledgeable, or energetic of ambassadors, was Kennedy’s chief agent in Saigon from the

end of August to November 1, 1963, during the negotiations with Diem over reform. The envoy tried to convince the South Vietnamese president to adopt policies stabilizing the situation in Saigon or, he hinted, face the loss of American support and possible deposition. Diem had gotten wind of the talks between American intelligence agents and South Vietnamese generals about the possibilities of a coup. He countered with veiled threats that he might just talk to the Communists about making peace, the first element of which would be the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam.

Facing his imminent reelection campaign, Kennedy was stuck between two potentially failing policies: withdrawal from Vietnam without defeating the Communists, or continuing support for the government of South Vietnam with its embarrassing chaos in Saigon. His adoption of either option could become a potent issue in 1964 for the Republicans. And at this crisis point, the president had to rely on a blundering Republican diplomatic agent whom he could not relieve because of politics. As a last resort, Kennedy reluctantly chose the deposition of Diem as a solution to both problems. A new government would end the talk of a Munich-type settlement with the Communists, would make peace with the Buddhists and other dissidents in Saigon, and would begin winning the hearts and minds of the people of South Vietnam. To increase the pressure on Diem, Kennedy quietly informed the Democratic leadership in the Senate that he would not oppose a Senate resolution that threatened to halt American aid to Saigon if the South Vietnamese president failed to clean up his act. On September 11 Senator Frank Church (D-ID) introduced such a measure, backed by twenty-three senators. But the pressure from Lodge, the Senate, the Vietnamese generals conspiring in the wings, and the president himself failed to convince Diem to change his policies. Thus on November 1 a group of prominent officers, knowing that they would have American support if they were successful, overthrew Diem.

Their assassination of the president and his brother, the chief of the secret police, disturbed President Kennedy, who had hoped the Diem family would merely be sent into exile. Ambassador Lodge did little to protect them.

The deposition of Diem led Kennedy to call for a complete re-examination of Vietnam policy, a reexamination that was cut short on November 22 by his assassination. There is no doubt that he had become exasperated by the war in Vietnam, by the steady military successes of the Viet Cong despite massive American aid to Saigon, and by the difficulty of nation building in South Vietnam. He had also become more and more pessimistic about his own military's ability to devise policies to defeat a nationalist insurgency like that of the Viet Cong without a massive commitment of ground-combat troops.

Whatever Kennedy's considerations, he was concerned about the upcoming election. With recent memories of Republican claims that his party was "soft on communism" at Yalta in 1945 and in China in 1949, he knew that it could be a fatal political blow to cede Vietnam to the Communists before November 1964. Several of his supporters claim that before he died he had made up his mind to withdraw. He allegedly told one of his aides that he would pull out of Vietnam after the election and that it would be "easy. Put a government in there that will ask us to leave." Mansfield reported that Kennedy told him on one occasion in 1963 that "I can't [pull out] until 1965—after I'm reelected"—and on another occasion, "We've just got to get out. We're in too deep." Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara also reported that Kennedy implied he would withdraw from Vietnam after the election. Most observers tend to downplay these three sources, especially considering no document or policy paper exists revealing such a plan. Whether or not Kennedy would have withdrawn, there is no doubt the election of 1964 figured prominently in his calculations, as it would have for any president in a comparable situation.

One study of such decisions finds that democratic states are less likely to enter wars before elections than after. In November 1963 that was certainly the case. Kennedy knew that in the absence of a major escalation on the Communist side, or their specific targeting of the American advisers and their installations, the vast majority of Americans would not accept a major military commitment to the unstable government in South Vietnam. The most politically prudent option was to maintain the commitment in Vietnam to placate the right and to avoid escalation to placate the left.

We will never know what Kennedy would have done in Vietnam in his second term. On November 22, 1963, Vice President Lyndon Johnson assumed the U.S. commitments in Southeast Asia. One of his first decisions was to retain Kennedy's key foreign policy advisers to demonstrate that there would be continuity between the administrations. The president may have changed, but the domestic political problems created by the war in Vietnam remained. Even more than Kennedy, Johnson would have to worry about the media, elections, and his domestic programs as he dealt with the military and political crises in Southeast Asia.