Ray Cline, deputy director, Central Intelligence Agency (1962–66)

OTHER OFFICIALS

Robert F. Kennedy, attorney general (1961–64)
Mike Mansfield, U.S. senator from Montana; Senate majority leader
J. William Fulbright, U.S. senator from Arkansas; chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Richard Russell, U.S. senator from Georgia; chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee

INTRODUCTION

LEGEND OF THE ESTABLISHMENT

The last time I saw McGeorge Bundy was on Wednesday, September 11, 1996. We met in midtown Manhattan for a working lunch in a private conference room of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, where Bundy was senior scholar in residence. “How are you?” he asked exuberantly as he entered the room, a stack of books and papers tucked under his arm. He seemed eager to begin our meeting.

I had been engaged in Bundy’s professional life for several years during the completion of my studies for a PhD in international relations at Columbia University. My first assignment with him was as the staff director of an international commission of diplomats and arms-control experts for which he served as chairman, leading a study on the United Nations Security Council and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. My second project with Bundy was more historical in nature. It was also far more personal.

In the spring of 1995 Bundy asked me to collaborate with him on a retrospective analysis of the American presidency and the Vietnam War during his tenure as national security adviser to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. We envisioned the book to be both a memoir of Bundy’s experience with Kennedy and Johnson as well as a reconstruction of the pivotal presidential decisions about American strategy in Vietnam between 1961 and 1965. As our collaboration progressed and we produced a shared thematic, interpretive, and organizational model of the book, I accepted Bundy’s proposal to be formally recognized as coauthor for a work to be published by Yale University Press.

In the year and a half we had worked in concert on the Vietnam project, Bundy and I had made significant substantive progress, encompassing all of
the key historical inflection points and pivotal players in Vietnam policy during the Kennedy and Johnson years. Yet the actual text of the book was still inchoate, composed of scores of unique, individual passages of manuscript that Bundy had been drafting by hand. Those so-called “fragments” were to be integrated with my research memoranda, outlines, and chronologies, as well as commentary extracted from the transcripts of my interviews with Bundy on a vast range of topics relating to the war. Individually these materials constituted the disassociated elements of an incomplete analytical history. Connected into a conceptual and chronological architecture, however, the fragments and research we were producing served as the foundation for what we hoped would be a meaningful contribution to the history of the Vietnam War.

As we met that afternoon, Bundy displayed an intensity that was different from what I had observed in countless hours of previous discussion. “I had quite an argument with my brother,” he announced, referring to William Bundy, who had served as a senior State Department and Pentagon official during the Vietnam era. “Now I know I’m right,” he added, with a smile of discernible but good-natured mischief. Bundy spoke with great energy and focus for more than five hours, discoursing on a wide range of themes late into the day. There was a dramatic difference between Kennedy and Johnson on the question of Vietnam, he once more insisted, recapitulating a perspective central to our study. “Kennedy didn’t want to be a coward,” he said. “Johnson didn’t want to be a coward.” Bundy was still struggling to understand the significance of the air-strike strategy he had advocated in the winter of 1965. What were its implications? Bundy asked aloud. Did it precipitate a chain of events that dramatically accelerated the Americanization of the war? He also revisited the failure of diplomacy in Vietnam, which he described as a delusion mistakenly embraced by opponents of the war. Why, Bundy now asked, didn’t we settle the war at the negotiating table? He promptly answered his own question: After the American escalation of 1965, he declared, a diplomatic solution in Vietnam was simply not viable. On the question of Kennedy and Vietnam, Bundy instructed me to marshal the evidence once more and prepare an outline describing the choices Kennedy would have confronted in Vietnam had he lived to serve a second term. Clearly there was a great deal of work to be done to consolidate the rich but diffuse content of our collaboration.

As the hours passed, I noted that Bundy’s cheeks were unusually pink—perhaps from the strong late summer sun at his family’s vacation home on the Massachusetts coast—or perhaps from sustained exertion. He interrupted our work session only once, to ask his devoted and attentive assistant, Georganne Brown, to schedule an appointment with his cardiologist. When the meeting ended Bundy dispatched me with a gracious but somewhat formal good-bye, shaking hands as he always did with his elbow locked in a sharp ninety-degree angle and head bowed forward ever so slightly. Five days later he died, following a massive heart attack.

A front-page obituary in the New York Times called Bundy “the very personification of what the journalist David Halberstam ... labeled ‘The Best and the Brightest’: the well-born, confident intellectuals who led the nation into the quagmire of Vietnam.” The Times noted that Bundy played a role in a range of foreign policy decisions serving two presidents, “but he is most remembered for his role in enlarging United States involvement in Vietnam.”

A similar verdict was rendered by Time magazine. “His laser-like intellect radiated from behind his clear-rimmed glasses with an intensity as hot as his smile was cold,” wrote the magazine’s managing editor, Walter Isaacson. “Had he been half as smart, he might have been a great man. Instead, McGeorge Bundy came to personify the hubris of an intellectual elite that marched America with a cool and confident brilliance into the quagmire of Vietnam.” Isaacson argued that the early 1960s were “a moment when meritocracy and patrician elitism enjoyed a celebrated cohabitation, the rise and then fall of which Bundy came to symbolize.” That era ended with Vietnam and men like Bundy, whom Isaacson called “the epitome of the well-intentioned arrogance” that would ultimately vitiate the Cold War foreign policy consensus. Isaacson recalled that Bundy told him once that there was no such thing as the foreign policy establishment. “If so,” he then noted, “it was Bundy as much as anyone
who brought about an end of an era in which foreign policy was entrusted to a noble club of gentlemen secure in their common outlook and bonds of trust.

In *The Color of Truth*, his exhaustively researched and judicious biography of the Bundy brothers, the historian Kai Bird would criticize McGeorge Bundy’s unwillingness to act on his growing reservations about the viability of America’s intervention in Vietnam. “Why did presidential loyalty require Bundy to continue to defend the war long after he left government in 1966? And why, when in 1969–70 it was clear that Kissinger and Nixon were prolonging the war, did both brothers fail to come out forcefully against the war and the Vietnamization policies that were prolonging it? The Bundys never answered these hard questions.” Bird’s sharpest criticism was directed not at Bundy’s performance as national security adviser, but at his silence after leaving office: “Far from protesting the carnage, Mac quietly left the White House and continued to support the war in public... This was [his] worst and most personal mistake, a failure of courage and imagination.”

There were, of course, countless other verdicts and views on Bundy’s legacy as national security adviser in the Vietnam era. Bundy had delved deeply into the voluminous literature of the war but did not live long enough to address many of the histories that were part of his study, including works by David Barrett, Larry Berman, Lloyd Gardner, Leslie Gelb, Doris Kearns Goodwin, George Herring, Stanley Karnow, Neil Sheehan, Brian VanDeMark, and Marilyn Young. With respect to the tough conclusions of a new generation of scholars, we will never know Bundy’s response. Andrew Preston, the author of perhaps the single most comprehensive history of Bundy’s role in Vietnam policy, dismissed the “Cold War context myth” that the global anticommmunist enterprise made intervention in Vietnam inevitable. Bundy, he argued, advocated Americanization of the war “in the face of tremendous internal opposition, external pressures, and a continually failing strategy.... Bundy was not a warmonger, but neither was he a tragic hero, unable to escape the curse of his tragic flaw. He should have known better and often did.”

Following his death, Bundy’s loyalists tried to soften the blow, acknowledging but qualifying his identification with Vietnam. Francis Bator, a former White House colleague, praised Bundy’s accomplishments at a memorial service at St. James Church in New York, noting that a number of good things had happened under his watch. “With the one very bad thing that happened,” said Bator, “he had much less to do than the common version of the Vietnam story would have it.” James C. Thomson Jr., a former White House aide, argued in the *New York Times* that Bundy was not the unreflected hawk described by his critics. “He was a skilled adjudicator, not an advocate, especially on Vietnam,” Thomson wrote. “He tolerated and even encouraged dissent from conventional wisdom, as long as it was expressed with brevity and evidence. He seemed to have no firm convictions on the inherited Vietnam mess. His loyalty was to the President and to our nation’s security.”

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a close friend and colleague of fifty years, concluded that Bundy represented “the last hurrah of the Northeast Establishment.... He was the final executor of the grand tradition of Henry Stimson, Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, Robert Lovett, John J. McCloy—patricians who, combining commitment to international responsibility with instinct for command and relish in power, served the republic pretty well in the global crises of the twentieth century.” About Bundy’s role in the Vietnam War, Schlesinger observed: “A single tragic error prevented him from achieving his full promise as a statesman.”

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McGeorge Bundy was born on March 30, 1919. His mother, the former Katherine Lawrence Putnam, was the niece of A. Lawrence Lowell, the president of Harvard University, and the poet Amy Lowell. The family’s Boston lineage dated back to 1639 and was characterized by a deep connection to Harvard University. Bundy’s father, Harvey Hollister Bundy, was a native of Michigan who had migrated to New England for his education, first at Yale, where he was a member of the secret society Skull and Bones, and then at Harvard Law School and a clerkship for Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.
Growing up in Boston, McGeorge Bundy, known as Mac, enjoyed a privileged childhood. He and his brothers attended the Dexter Lower School, a private elementary school founded by Harvey Bundy and several of his friends. Just ahead of Mac was another privileged boy from a prominent Boston family, John F. Kennedy. Summers were spent in Manchester, Massachusetts, where the Putnam family owned a seaside compound that included a nineteen-bedroom “cottage.” A smaller house on the property was deeded to Katherine, which became the Bundy family retreat.

Members of a verbally minded brood, Mac and his older brother, Bill, excelled in political debate, a ritualized feature of family life. “How well I remember our fights over the dining room table,” recalled their sister Harriet. “Mother’s sense of righteousness was very deep, and so’s Mac’s.” She added, “For her, things were black and white. It’s an outlook that descends directly from the Puritans and we all have it. But Mac has it more than the rest of us.”

In 1931 a young Mac Bundy joined his brothers, Bill and Harvey Jr., at Groton, a New England boarding school presided over by Dr. Endicott Peabody, an ordained Episcopal minister and passionate Anglophile who dreamed of replicating the elite British secondary school model in the United States. Peabody, who required compulsory cold showers before breakfast and daily chapel services, admonished his pupils that “obedience is one of the greatest of human virtues.”

Groton was distinguished by an emphasis on public service. Its motto is Cui servire est regnare, “To serve is to rule.” During Peabody’s tenure, Groton graduates included one U.S. president, two secretaries of state, one national security adviser, one secretary of the treasury, one secretary of the army, one secretary of the navy, six generals, and three U.S. senators. Dean Acheson, the future secretary of state, was nearly expelled for his nonconformity to Groton’s rigid culture. Others, like Franklin Roosevelt, the future president, survived but left little imprint in the school’s tight hierarchy of fewer than two hundred boys. McGeorge Bundy, however, thrived at Groton.

The legend of McGeorge Bundy—first in his class, the editor in chief of the monthly Grotonian, president of the drama society, and captain of the debating team—begins at Groton. “The story is told,” recounts David Halberstam, “that a group of outstanding students were asked to prepare papers on the Duke of Marlborough. The next day Bundy was called upon to read his paper in class. As he read his classmates began to giggle. Half the class continued all the way through the reading of his excellent paper.” The next day the teacher asked one of his students for an explanation. “ Didn’t you know?” said the student. “He was unprepared. He was reading from a blank piece of paper.”

There was only one college to which Bundy applied. “From Groton he went to Yale,” writes Halberstam, “where the legend grew.” As the new students arrived, the Yale dean of admissions explained that for the first time one of the 850 students in the freshman class had recorded three perfect scores on the college entrance exams. Bundy had achieved this distinction with an unorthodox strategy on the English test. Students were instructed to compose a paper on one of a few perfunctory topics in the vein of “How did you spend your summer vacation?” Bundy refused. Instead he wrote an essay attacking the questions for their banality and upbraiding the college board for choosing such insipid themes. At first penalizing Bundy for his stunt, the reviewers who graded the exam eventually decided to reward his impertinence with the highest possible score.

Bundy majored in mathematics at Yale and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, secretary of the political union and then leader of its Liberal Party, class orator, and a columnist for the Yale Daily News, which he would sometimes use as a platform for slyly inflammatory opinions, such as his proposal to abolish the football team. His classmates called him “Mahatma Bundy,” as Bird notes, “partly because he was such a Boston Brahmin, and partly because he was constantly speaking out on the issues of the day.” In his senior year Bundy wrote an essay arguing for intervention against European fascism. It was published in an anthology entitled Zero Hour: A Summons to the Free. “Let me put my whole proposition in one sentence,” Bundy wrote. “I believe in the dignity of the individual, in government by law, in respect for truth, and in a good God; those beliefs are worth my life and
more; they are not shared by Adolf Hitler."

Like his father before him, Bundy was inducted into Skull and Bones, the Yale secret society whose members have included President William Howard Taft, Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, Governor Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of War Robert Lovett, Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, President George H. W. Bush and his son, President George W. Bush (as well as his opponent for the presidency in 2004, Senator John F. Kerry). Bundy, who kept a ceramic skull and bones propped on the desk of his Manchester study, remained close to his fraternity of fellow Bonesmen for his entire life, receiving correspondence more than fifty years after his initiation addressed to "Odi," Bundy's collegiate persona, named for the Norse god of war, poetry, wisdom, and the dead.

In 1941, a year after his graduation from Yale, Bundy made a brief and inauspicious foray into politics. Running as a Republican for what was considered a safe seat on the Boston City Council, Bundy was trounced, and he would never again seek elected office. He instead directed his energies to pursuing an academic career, accepting an appointment to a unique graduate program, Harvard's Society of Fellows. For those awarded a coveted spot in the Society of Fellows there were no classes to attend, no PhD exams to endure, no doctoral dissertation to grind out. For three years fellows had no requirements other than to pursue a scholarly project of personal interest.

World War II would interrupt Mac Bundy's fellowship, just as it would disrupt life for the other men of the Bundy family. Mac's brother Bill went to England, where he served as a cryptologist with a crack code-breaking team ensconced at a secret facility at Bletchley Park. Family patriarch Harvey Bundy Sr. was reunited with a former mentor, Henry Stimson, President Roosevelt's secretary of war. As Stimson's top deputy, the elder Bundy was one of a tightly contained circle of men involved in America's secret development of the atomic bomb.

Mac Bundy enlisted, circumventing the matter of his poor vision by memorizing the optometrist's chart, and received a posting in the Signal Corps. In 1943 he was appointed as an aide to Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, for whom he processed intercepted German air force attack plans and assisted in military preparations for Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of France, which he observed from the flag bridge of the USS Augusta off the coast of Normandy.

After the war, Mac Bundy returned to his Harvard fellowship and a new opportunity. Once again it involved a family relationship with Henry Stimson. In the autumn of 1945, Stimson suffered a massive heart attack, frustrating plans to compose his memoirs. Stimson would now need the assistance of an able and energetic collaborator. The choice was obvious. Harvey Bundy's twenty-seven-year-old son would be the ideal coauthor—trusted, discreet, prolific, and possessing a crisp and confident prose style. Moreover, Bundy's scholarly blank check from the Society of Fellows would allow him to pursue virtually any enterprise he wished. Their book, On Active Service in Peace and War, was published in 1948 and was greeted with generous reviews. The New Republic called it a "central document of our times," while Foreign Affairs praised it as "one of the most important biographical works of our generation."

With the Stimson book and his Harvard fellowship completed, Mac Bundy deliberated over the next chapter of his career. A close family friend, Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, tried to lure Bundy—a conspicuous nongraduate of the law school—with a clerkship. Bundy considered but declined the offer. The country's most influential newspaper columnist, Walter Lippmann, dangled the possibility of a book collaboration. Bundy toyed with the idea but ultimately passed. Instead he jumped into the political game as a foreign policy adviser and speechwriter to the 1948 presidential campaign of New York governor Thomas E. Dewey, the heavily favored Republican nominee.

Nearly forty years later, Bundy recalled decamping from Cambridge to Manhattan. "We sat over there in the Roosevelt Hotel and received applications for embassies from affluent Republicans," he said. "We were too statesmen-like to get into vulgar politics." Bundy was responsible for drafting the candidate's speeches on foreign affairs. The job was not a taxing one. Most
of Dewey's remarks, Bundy said, were lifted from a filing cabinet that cataloged the governor's previous statements. Bundy's boss was Allen Dulles, the future director of central intelligence, a familiar figure from his time working with Secretary Stimson on Long Island. Dulles "was always looking for tennis partners," Bundy remembered.

Harry S. Truman's stunning defeat of Dewey that November left Bundy without a ticket to Washington. So he signed on for a brief stint at the Council on Foreign Relations, directing a task force on Marshall Plan aid to Europe. The committee included Dulles and General Dwight Eisenhower, who was then the president of Columbia University. "He read a couple of papers of mine," Bundy recalled. "Marked them with a soft pencil and persuaded me that he was one of the best editors I ever worked for." In 1949 Bundy returned to Harvard for a teaching position in the government department, the path smoothed by Justice Frankfurter.

The Cambridge years were fruitful. Bundy's class on the history of U.S. foreign policy had a large campus following, with his lecture on the Munich appeasement of 1938 often performed to a standing-room-only audience. "My best lecture," remembered Bundy, "was actually the relief of General MacArthur" by President Truman in the midst of the Korean War. "It was the little guy from Missouri in the not very well-pressed grey suit taking care of the great fake... Perfect hero. Perfect villain." Bundy courted Mary Buckminster Lothrop, whose socially prominent family had accumulated a substantial fortune and was a fixture in Boston society. The couple married and went on to have four sons. And after just two years lecturing at Harvard, Bundy was recommended for tenure by the government department. "Though Bundy was a good teacher, he was not in the classic sense a great expert in foreign affairs, since he had not come up through the discipline," Halberstam notes. "He was not particularly at ease with Ph.D. candidates, those men who might be more specialized in their knowledge than he." But because Bundy was the rising star of the government department, the consensus among his colleagues was to award him tenure. As Halberstam recounts, the case was presented to Harvard president James Bryant Conant, who had served as a distinguished member of the chemistry department before running the university. Was it in fact true, asked Conant, that Bundy had never taken a single undergraduate or graduate class in government?

"That's right," said the professor representing the government department. Conant was puzzled. "Are you sure that's right?" he asked.

"I'm sure," the government professor replied.

"Well," said Conant with a sigh, "all I can say is that it couldn't have happened in chemistry."

Bundy published a second book in late 1951, The Pattern of Responsibility, an edited anthology and commentary on the public speeches and statements of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, then under fire from Senator Joseph McCarthy for being soft on communism. Acheson was a family friend and the father-in-law of his brother Bill. "I have undertaken to prepare this book," Bundy wrote, "not because of this connection, but in spite of it. I have done so because I really do not believe that friendship, or indirect family connection, is a bar to fair and honest defense, especially when that defense takes the form of allowing a man to speak for himself." The book, although based on Acheson's own public remarks, is peppered with vintage Bundyisms: "It is possible to persuade the reasonable student that there is alertness against Communism in the State Department; it is relatively easy to show that Senator McCarthy is a charlatan." The Acheson collaboration in 1951 also foreshadowed a seminal Bundy theme, integral to his presidential counsel in the years to come. "Very near the heart of all foreign affairs," he declared, "is the relationship between policy and military power." How Bundy conceived of and explicitly defined that relationship in the crucible of Vietnam would, for better or worse, come to define his place in history.

In 1953, Bundy's swift Harvard ascent reached its apex. Nathan Pusey, the university's newly appointed president, tapped Bundy to be dean of the faculty. He was just thirty-four years old. A Yale colleague circulated a playful limerick encapsulating the Bundy legend to date:

A proper young prig, McGeorge Bundy,
Graduated from Yale on a Monday
“Bundy was a magnificent dean,” concludes Halberstam—a gifted tactician who, through his preternatural confidence and mastery of academic politics, “took the complex Harvard faculty—diverse, egomaniacal—and played with it, in the words of a critic, like a cat with mice.” Under Bundy's leadership the bureaucracy was tamed, decisions were made quickly, and dynamic new faculty members were recruited, including the social scientists Erik Erikson and David Riesman, the political scientist Stanley Hoffman, and even the playwright Lillian Hellman. The government department, in particular, was a remarkable incubator of talent in the 1950s, producing three future national security advisers: Bundy, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Henry Kissinger, for whom Bundy helped secure tenure by coupling a pair of half-time appointments into a single permanent position. Nonetheless Bundy and Kissinger shared an uneasy relationship. “I thought him more sensitive and gentle than his occasionally brusque manner suggested,” Kissinger said of Bundy. “He tended to treat me with the combination of politeness and subconscious condescension that upper-class Bostonians reserve for people of, by New England standards, exotic backgrounds and excessively intense personal style.” Riesman, the influential sociologist poached from the University of Chicago, called Bundy's management of the faculty a form of “aristocratic meritocracy.”

During his years as dean Bundy developed a relationship with John F. Kennedy, the junior senator from Massachusetts, who was also a member of the Harvard board of overseers. That connection was cultivated in part by two high-profile Harvard personalities: John Kenneth Galbraith, the economist who had been a college tutor to Kennedy in the late 1930s and remained an adviser and friend, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the historian who hosted a salon of sorts to introduce Kennedy to the brightest minds in Cambridge.

After Kennedy was elected president in 1960, he tapped Bundy to serve as his special assistant for national security affairs, a position that has come to be known as national security adviser. Bundy transformed what had been a post of marginal influence in the Eisenhower era into a dominant player in the management of American global strategy. The press coverage of his ascension invariably emphasized his access to power. “With his pink cheeks, sandy hair, springy step, and faintly quizical expression behind plain glasses, Bundy could easily pass for a Washington junior civil servant,” a Newsweek cover story reported. “Yet he is one of the most influential men in the U.S. Government.” According to the New York Times, the national security adviser was “one of the most influential custodians of the foreign policies of the United States, one of the very few Americans whose daily judgments directly affect the political history of the world.” As David Halberstam would later note, many who knew Bundy “thought of him as the best the country could offer, McGeorge Bundy of Boston, a legend in his time.”

Bundy would remain as national security adviser for five years, serving President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson. The rapturous regard in which Bundy was held was captured by the columnist Joseph Kraft, who in 1965 said,

Bundy is the leading candidate, perhaps the only candidate, for the statesman’s mantle to emerge in the generation that is coming to power—the generation which reached maturity in the war and postwar period. His capacity to read the riddle of multiple confusions, to consider a wide variety of possibilities, to develop lines of action, to articulate and execute public purposes, to impart quickened energies to men of the highest ability seems to me unmatched. To me anyhow he seems almost alone among contemporaries a figure of true consequence, a fit subject for Milton’s words:

A Pillar of State; deep on his
Front engraven,
Deliberation sat and publick care;
And Princely counsel in his face.

Even Bundy’s less than endearing qualities were exalted as proof of his superiority. In a cover story about Bundy in June 1965, Time magazine stated: “He is self-confident to the point of arrogance, intelligent to the point of intimidation.” Bundy was, in fact, willing to articulate convictions others could find impolitic or even pompous. “In the final analysis,” he proclaimed in
1965, “the United States is the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose.” Bundy’s extraordinary stature made him the logical choice to present the Johnson administration’s case for perseverance in Vietnam. “To the job of Ambassador to Academe, McGeorge Bundy brings solid-gold credentials,” Time declared, describing Bundy’s return to the Harvard campus to defend the administration’s policies to more than one thousand students and professors who packed Lowell Lecture Hall, where Bundy used to teach his hugely popular class, “The U.S. in World Politics.” Taking the lectern once more, he cautioned his audience that the collapse of South Vietnam would produce “a great weakening in the free societies in their ability to withstand communism.”

Bundy was determined to answer the administration’s critics, and in doing so he espoused grand objectives for U.S. foreign policy. “We cannot limit ourselves to one objective at a time. We, like Caesar, have all things to do at once,” Bundy professed in a May 1965 memorial speech at Franklin Roosevelt’s grave site. “And this is hard. In Vietnam today we have to share in the fighting; we have to lead in the search for peace; and we have to respond, in all that we do, to the real needs and the real hopes of the people of Vietnam.”

In early 1966, after the essential decisions in Vietnam were made but before their true costs were apparent, Bundy left government service to become president of the Ford Foundation. Under Bundy’s leadership the philanthropy initiated major advances in public broadcasting, energy conservation, public interest law, and the expansion of civil and voting rights. Yet, despite his good works the question of Vietnam remained. His friend Kingman Brewster, who had been named the president of Yale University, remarked, “Mac is going to spend the rest of his life trying to justify his mistakes on Vietnam.”

Out of office, Bundy remained adamant in his refusal to criticize the Johnson administration and was completely intolerant of former government colleagues who did. He made his conviction clear in a debate held at Harvard in March 1968, when Bundy faced off against the political scientist Stanley Hoffman, whom he had recruited to the faculty the previous decade.

“Particularly when you go to work as a staff assistant, you acquire an obligation of loyalty, which tends to increase through time,” Bundy explained to a raptive audience of students and faculty. “I have very little sympathy with those who write criticisms which appear over the heading ‘former White House assistant.’” Bundy described such dissent as a form of political assassination aimed at the president. “When people do that they have taken a gun provided by someone else and aimed it at him, and I’m against it.” In the audience that evening was James Thomson, an Asia expert who had worked for Bundy on the White House staff and would soon publish a critical magazine article dissecting the anatomy of Vietnam decision making. Bundy was infuriated by Thomson’s disclosures and would refuse to speak with his former colleague for years to follow. In his talk, Bundy cited his experience working with Henry Stimson, “a great cabinet officer who worked for seven presidents in different ways, and who made it his binding rule to engage in no criticism of any of the seven while that man was still in active public life. That is my position too.”

While Bundy was prepared to defend the decisions that enlarged the war, he declined to defend himself personally—or to allow anyone else to do so for him. When the New York Times published the Pentagon Papers in 1971, rumors circulated that there were other documents, still classified, that reflected Bundy’s doubts about Vietnam. Francis Bator and Carl Kaysen, who had worked for Bundy in the White House, pushed him to disclose the information. “After Mac himself had brushed their inquiry off,” recounts Kai Bird, “they went to Mary Bundy and told her, ‘You’ve got to get Mac to publicize these memos.’ Mary listened and asked her husband about it, but he would have nothing to do with any effort to defend his record.”

That same spring, Bundy delivered three highly anticipated lectures on the Vietnam War at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Bundy said his purpose in giving the lectures was to “find instruction” from events in Vietnam “without engaging either in attack or defense.” Yet his lectures enraged many of the Council’s members, who by that time, like the broader Establishment they represented, had turned forcefully against the war.
On the basic question of the war’s justification, Bundy expressed his conviction that “it was necessary and right, in some form and by some means, to act to avoid a Communist victory by force of arms in Vietnam in 1965 and thereafter. I suppose this is not the majority view today, but it is mine, and I have to start, on these matters, from where I am.” Bundy acknowledged the criticism that “the Johnson administration campaigned against a wider war and then promptly started one,” leading some to conclude, “this was sheer duplicity. It was not. The administration in 1964 did not know what 1965 would require in Vietnam and it preferred not to decide.”

When the turning point of 1965 finally arrived, Bundy stated, the American public should have been prepared: “Neither the possibility of bombing the North nor the prospect of a major commitment of ground combat forces to Vietnam—the two major decisions of 1965—was a secret to anyone before it happened. Both were extensively reported. If the Congress did not intrude itself in these deliberations—and it did not—it was by a clear and conscious choice.” Commenting on the 1964 Tonkin Gulf resolution, which authorized Johnson to use military force against North Vietnam, Bundy said, “The administration was almost forced to rely on the resolution and to make it carry a weight for which it was not designed.” He called this “not a crime of intentional deception, but an error of democratic decision-making.” And in the end, Bundy offered only a terse expression of regret for the course of the war. “There has been very much more cost and pain,” he said, “than most of us would have thought justified if we had perceived it as inevitable in 1965.”

In the years that followed, Bundy tended to avoid making public remarks about Vietnam. But questions about his role in the war persisted. In 1976 he accepted an invitation to address a meeting of Harvard’s Nieman Fellows, a program administered by his former aide James Thomson, with whom Bundy had finally reconciled. After his talk, one of the fellows, a young journalist named Ron Javers, nodded Bundy about Vietnam. “Your problem, young man,” said Bundy, cutting off the exchange, “is not your intellect but your ideology.” Javers would not be dismissed. He cornered the former national security adviser during a cocktail reception.

“What about Vietnam?” Javers asked.
“I don’t understand your question,” Bundy replied.
“Mac, what about you and Vietnam?”
“I still don’t understand,” said Bundy.
“But Mac, you screwed it up, didn’t you?”

A glacial silence followed. Then Bundy suddenly smiled and replied, “Yes, I did. But I’m not going to waste the rest of my life feeling guilty about it.” Later that evening, Bundy spoke with Thomson about the encounter. “I’ll never be appointed Secretary of State,” he said with a note of resignation, “or even a university president.”

After stepping down from the Ford Foundation in 1979, Bundy became a professor of history at New York University. Twenty-four of his future faculty colleagues protested his appointment, which was nonetheless approved. Many of those who objected would later find that he was a reliable ally in department votes on academic and administrative matters.

Bundy spent his years at NYU exploring the history of nuclear weapons and strategic doctrine, culminating in the publication in 1988 of his widely praised history, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. As Bundy was writing the book, the journalist David Talbot asked him about Vietnam. “I did have reservations about that,” Bundy replied, referring to his support for enlarging the war, “and it can be argued that I didn’t press hard enough. But I didn’t see any way of leaving Vietnam alone and simply getting out in 1965.” He added, “Oh yes, I worry about that all the time, but I’m not prepared to sort it out yet. That’s going to have to happen some years from now.”

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In 1995 McGeorge Bundy finally decided to revisit the question of Vietnam. The catalyst was the publication in April of that year of *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, the historical memoir by his longtime friend and colleague, former secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara. In his book, McNamara conceded, “We were wrong. terribly wrong” about Vietnam;
He also acknowledged that in 1967, while still in office, he concluded that the war could not be won but nonetheless remained silent, refusing to disclose his doubts. That admission in particular stirred deep rage in some quarters and incited a national media firestorm.

The New York Times editorial excoriated McNamara for his failure to “join the national debate over whether American troops should continue to die at the rate of hundreds per week in a war he knew to be futile.” The Times concluded that McNamara deserved to be haunted by what he had done. “Surely he must in every quiet and prosperous moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose,” the editors wrote. “What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late.”

Prominent veterans of the war also lashed out at the former secretary of defense. “It sure would have been helpful in May of 1967, when I volunteered for Vietnam, if he had said then that the war was unwinnable,” said Max Cleland, who lost both legs and an arm in Vietnam and afterward served as head of the Veterans Administration. (He would be elected to the U.S. Senate in 1996.) “McNamara went to the World Bank, while a lot of other people went to their graves.”

McNamara’s critics claimed that if he had voiced his dissent in 1967, he could have helped to end America’s involvement in the war. “He was one of the highest ranking officials of the Johnson administration, he could have made a difference,” argued Mary McGrory of the Washington Post. “That’s what’s unpardonable, not to have tried.” According to Townsend Hoopes, who served as undersecretary of the air force during the Vietnam War, “A McNamara resignation in 1967 or early 1968 would have changed history.”

Other commentators welcomed McNamara’s admissions. “To condemn Robert McNamara for the arrogant lies of Vietnam is understandable,” wrote Richard Cohen of the Washington Post. “But to condemn him also for finally telling the truth—no matter how late—makes no sense.” In Newsweek, Jonathan Alter agreed. “For a major public official to admit profound error is extraordinarily rare, perhaps unprecedented, in American history,” he observed. “Anyone predicting in 1961 that Bob McNamara would one day cry publicly while admitting colossal error would have been laughed out of Washington.”

McNamara had asked Bundy to comment on early drafts of In Retrospect, and Bundy had responded with a balance of candid criticisms and warm encouragement. The first draft was not very good, Bundy wrote, but he could not explain precisely why. Perhaps, he suggested, McNamara had become preoccupied with Vietnam’s vast paper trail of documents rather than the essential problems the United States was grappling with at each stage of the war’s progression. Bundy counseled McNamara to exercise the patience required to produce the great book of which he was capable. In another letter, Bundy acknowledged McNamara’s choice not to criticize living colleagues with whom he differed, but he wondered whether McNamara might have gone too far in bestowing praise on those with whom he disagreed. Bundy seemed to anticipate the intense public interest that would be sparked by McNamara’s retrospective renunciation of the war; months before the book’s publication, he offered his friend a list of potential press questions and illustrative answers, including queries about McNamara’s reliance on quantitative data and the flaws in American military strategy.

On April 17, 1995, Bundy appeared on The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, on public television, as one of a panel of commentators invited to discuss the fierce national argument McNamara’s book had generated. “I think Bob McNamara has tried very hard to tell it as he now understands it,” Bundy said. “It’s an honest contribution and it will be a very much valued one.”

The anchor, Jim Lehrer, asked about McNamara’s retrospective appraisal. “We were wrong, terribly wrong. Would you accept that yourself?” he asked Bundy.

“Yes,” Bundy replied, with a casual shrug. An awkward beat followed before he added: “I think it’s very unlikely that we were right looking at the evidence as we now have it.”

Another panelist, the Los Angeles Times columnist Robert Scheer, quickly seized on the significance of Bundy’s admission. “You have a guest on your
program, McGeorge Bundy, who was certainly as complicit as McNamara," he told Lehrer. "I don't know why McNamara should take all the heat.",

The camera cut away for a reaction shot. Scheer's attack appeared to rattle the seventy-six-year-old Bundy. His sharp blue eyes darted back and forth behind his thick glasses with the clear plastic frames, the same signature style he had worn in the Kennedy and Johnson years. When his gaze finally steadied, Bundy appeared to betray an emotion utterly inconsistent with his cool, confident Vietnam persona. It was not a look of fear, exactly, but something related to it: a thinly suppressed expression of sudden alarm. The fierce anger directed at McNamara had suddenly been focused on him, and for an instant, he appeared uncharacteristically vulnerable. Within days of his television appearance, however, I received a call from Bundy seeking my help in composing his own memoir and retrospective analysis of America's path to war in Vietnam. Despite the enormous clamor surrounding McNamara's book and the certainty that such residual animosity would be directed toward him, Bundy wanted to commence work as soon as possible.

Bundy's death made the completion of the original conception of the book an impossibility. There were simply too many narrative and historical gaps in the collected fragments to render a manuscript that would honestly reflect Bundy's intended design, which was a proposition still very much in formation when he passed away. Yet there was a critical mass of content from our collaboration more than sufficient to present a distillation of many of his essential recollections and retrospective judgments.

With the encouragement of Mary Bundy and the generous financial support of the Carnegie Corporation, in 1997 I commenced work on an extensive edited volume based principally on the materials drawn from our collaboration. That book melded a variety of historical sources relating to Bundy with the content produced during our work together and my detailed narrative charting the progression of American strategy in Vietnam from 1961 to 1965. A pair of advisers appointed by Mrs. Bundy periodically reviewed and commented on drafts of the book. Completed in late 2001 after various delays and amid other professional obligations, a complete draft of the edited volume was formally evaluated by its prospective publisher, Yale University Press, in 2002. An independent expert committee of historians and former senior policy makers read the manuscript and unanimously recommended it for publication. However, following an extended period of discussion with Mrs. Bundy about the creative control of the manuscript and various efforts to address her concerns, she decided that she no longer wished to proceed with a posthumously published work. In 2004 Mrs. Bundy donated her late husband's papers to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston.

The book that follows is not the Yale University Press manuscript—it is neither an annotated volume of Bundy papers nor a comprehensive history of Vietnam policy making. It has been composed without any involvement whatsoever from the Bundy family or its advisers. This is an original work that is informed by my experience with Bundy but which draws conclusions that are my own. In the chapters to come, I have attempted to distill what I believe are the pivotal lessons of Bundy's performance as national security adviser with respect to the vital question of American strategy in Vietnam. Some of these lessons are consistent with the retrospective analysis Bundy and I were trying to complete. Other lessons are based on what I regard as the illuminating aspects of Bundy's conduct in office—particularly his failures—and offer conclusions he may not have supported. Throughout I have been careful to differentiate between Bundy's retrospective views and my own commentary and conclusions. Moreover, I have attempted to be neither Bundy's advocate nor his critic. My objective is different. I have sought to convey the essential insights of my collaboration with Bundy while also offering an independent analysis of his role in the highly complex narrative of America's entanglement in Vietnam. The reader should therefore understand that in no way is this a book by McGeorge Bundy but rather it is a book about him.

Why did Bundy commit himself to a retrospective study of Vietnam that would inevitably revive the passions of the war? In the last years of his life I believe he labored under the weight of a powerful perceived obligation to history. I feel certain that Bundy, had he lived to complete his final work,
would have attempted to address his own shortcomings during his years at the center of Vietnam strategy. As Bundy observed in one of his draft fragments: "I had a part in a great failure. I made mistakes of perception, recommendation and execution. If I have learned anything I should share it." In another fragment he wrote and underscored: "You owe it to a lot of different people. Because it hurt them or their families; because it matters what lessons are learned ... there are a lot of errors in the path of understanding."

Bundy explained that he had embarked on his account of the war in response to the "driving force" of a pair of questions that he had "deliberately put aside for decades": How did the "tragedy" of the Vietnam War come to pass? And what guidance can it provide for the future?

Bundy acknowledged a dramatic shift of perspective about Vietnam.

"One can begin, as I do, with agreement that the war was, overall, a war we should not have fought and then try to sort out from one man's experience why it was that different judgments prevailed at the time." In sharp contrast to his fervent public arguments in 1965 in favor of Americanizing the war, Bundy admitted that at the time and in the years that followed, "the doves were right." He would therefore try to explain "the ways in which the executive branch continuously got that great choice wrong." Finally, Bundy explained, his Vietnam inquiry would be constrained in scope and far less ambitious in historical breadth than his study of the nuclear danger because he was "too close to some of it, too far from the rest, and too old for the sheer hard work."

Bundy credited his choice to write about Vietnam "largely ... to the example" of his colleague and friend Robert McNamara. "His book In Retrospect is a remarkably straightforward account," Bundy wrote, "and I think its value for the long run will far outweigh its obvious cost in short-term anger from readers with their own strong feelings about Vietnam." What he did not acknowledge—but must have known—was that like McNamara, Bundy would pay a price in public opprobrium for finally recanting his belief in a ruinous war he had in large part designed and had passionately promoted, but had not renounced for three decades.

Bundy's decision to speak out about the war was historically significant. The accounts of all of the other central protagonists in the Vietnam drama—from the beginning of U.S. military engagement to the painful conclusion of the war—had already been added to the historical record. That literature includes works by Lyndon Johnson, William Westmoreland, Maxwell Taylor, Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Rusk, George Ball, Walt Rostow, Clark Clifford, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and, finally, McNamara.

"I have tried to respect the sacrifice of those who died ... and their families," Bundy wrote, noting that America "has learned hard lessons from their sacrifice" that helped to ensure victory in subsequent wars. Vietnam, Bundy told me, was "a major and tragic event in American history and I have something to contribute to understanding it."

"My wish now is that we had done less" in Vietnam, Bundy confided in another interview. "I wish that I had understood that more clearly. Why did I not understand it?... What can we learn from this episode that will help us do better in the world ahead?"
LESSON ONE

COUNSELORS ADVISE BUT PRESIDENTS DECIDE

In my meetings with McGeorge Bundy, time seemed to stop and reverse course, back to the years of the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies, as Bundy would recall the storied cast of characters with whom he had served three decades earlier—men like Robert McNamara, the Ford Motor Company president whom Kennedy tapped to run the Pentagon; Dean Rusk, the former Rhodes Scholar and famously reserved foundation president who served as secretary of state; and Richard Bissell, Bundy’s old friend from the Yale economics department, who led the CIA’s so-called Black Operations to overthrow foreign leaders in Central America, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Bundy would ruminate out loud, reconstructing the power structure of the two different administrations and the proximity of the key players to the president. He revisited bureaucratic and policy turf battles, elucidating the tactics that won influence with the president or preempted rivals. Bundy would test various historical propositions about the Cold War or American politics, circuitously weaving his observations back to the question of Vietnam. He would continually return to the theme of personality, which he treated as an intangible variable of the decision-making process. The real state of play, Bundy often reminded me, could not be discerned by the documentary record alone. He advised me to be wary of the “paper trail way of missing the political point.” Throughout all of these varied discussions, Bundy seemed content to follow a subject of interest until it yielded some insight of value or, perhaps, until it yielded nothing at all. No phones would ring. No interruptions would be allowed. Outside, the business of Manhattan bustled but the traffic below on Madison Avenue would glide by silently. Inside, free of distraction, the hours would pass, the two of us simply talking.

These initial meetings, although untethered to a formal agenda, were nonetheless instructive, producing a checklist of questions, themes, events, and personalities that Bundy would want to elaborate on in the course of our work together. But these first discussions had a deeper value as well. They captured something impalpable and difficult to distill—a sensibility specific to Bundy, a quality of perspective, a basic orientation of how he conceived of Vietnam as a subject of historical inquiry.

While the McGeorge Bundy who reigned as a legend of the Establishment was reputed to be brisk, quick, calculating, and overconfident, the retrospective Bundy of thirty years later was in many ways the opposite: patient, reflective, curious, and humble. In fact, on the question of Vietnam Bundy appeared tentative and unsure—maybe on some level even mystified. Although he never said so explicitly, he seemed to be as perplexed by the disaster of Vietnam as any of the historians who studied the decisions in which he had been a central participant. How did Bundy, the star of his generation and the preeminent mind of the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies, get Vietnam so terribly wrong? And how would he explain his failures of judgment three decades later?

It was clear from the beginning that Bundy was distinctly uninterested in the topics of Vietnamese nationalism and the origins of the communist insurgency. Early in our collaboration Bundy’s friends and colleagues from Brown University, James Blight and Janet Lang, lobbied him strenuously to chair an American delegation with McNamara that would travel to Hanoi in 1997 for a historic meeting with the surviving members of the Vietnamese political and military leadership. The purpose of the exercise was to revisit the origins of the war from both American and Vietnamese perspectives and to fill the gaps in the historical record about the key inflection points that fueled the war’s escalation in the mid-1960s. While McNamara was driven to seize the historical opportunity of an unprecedented dialogue with America’s former enemy, Bundy had no enthusiasm for examining the Vietnamese calculus of
interests that contributed to war with the United States. The decision to Americanize the Vietnam War in 1965, Bundy told me, was a decision made in Washington and not in Hanoi. It was inherently a presidential decision, he argued, and thus had to be studied through the prism of the two men he served who held ultimate authority for questions of war and peace—President Kennedy and President Johnson.

To understand his own role in shaping America’s fate in Vietnam, Bundy would have to see it illuminated by the presidents he counseled. We would therefore begin at the point of exposition most logical to Bundy, with a systematic examination of how Kennedy encountered Vietnam in his first year in office, and of the decisions he made about the deployment of American power there in the course of his presidency.

Bundy had, of course, read innumerable histories of the Kennedy administration, but in the decades since he left government he had not read the gradually accumulating body of declassified government documents on Kennedy and Vietnam, many of which were compiled by the State Department and published in the bound crimson volumes known as Foreign Relations of the United States. This voluminous chronological compilation of documents about Vietnam policy—memoranda, meeting summaries, cables, correspondence, intelligence estimates, defense analyses, mission reports—was unexplored historical territory for Bundy. It was here, in the thousands of pages of government documents rather than in a conference room in Hanoi, where Bundy wanted to search for insights into the Vietnam War. For Bundy it was the right course. He learned that sometimes pivotal episodes in history can hide in plain sight.

As I compiled various outlines and research memoranda for Bundy about the history of Kennedy’s first year in office, it became obvious that the prospect of intervention in Vietnam was among the major challenges he confronted. In fact, in the fall of 1961 Kennedy’s most senior advisers almost unanimously warned him that the odds were sharply against avoiding a catastrophic defeat in Vietnam unless the president approved the first increment of a ground combat force deployment that might ultimately reach six divisions, or more than two hundred thousand men. Among the president’s advisers to join that recommendation was McGeorge Bundy. “Remarkable,” he told me when I brought the 1961 recommendation to his attention. “I have no memory of this whatsoever.” But there it was in the documents for Bundy to see—the narrative of an emerging crisis in Saigon and Kennedy’s struggle with his counselors, including his national security adviser, over how to respond.

Kennedy’s management of Vietnam in 1961 became a central focus for Bundy and an inflection point in his retrospective conclusions about the history of the war. While he did not complete his history of Kennedy’s decisions of that year he left no doubt about the importance he ascribed to them. “The policy I want to consider was in fact adopted by President Kennedy late in 1961, and sustained—though not explained—through his time as President,” Bundy explained in a draft fragment. “It was maintained by Lyndon Johnson through the election year 1964, and abandoned as quietly as possible in 1965. It was the course of not engaging American ground combat troops in the war.”

* * *

“We would not have called ourselves cold warriors,” Bundy observed of the new Kennedy administration. But Kennedy’s men were united in their awareness that the Cold War was a global competition, and they shared a belief that the United States “should play our necessary part.” Bundy described the New Frontier mindset as one in which foreign policy was to be guided by considerations of national interest and a calculus of “circumstances and capabilities,” which might take the form of a formal alliance, foreign assistance, or—if appropriate—disengagement. He added: “To understand the American war in Vietnam we must understand the prevalence of strong political sentiment that it was right to oppose the world-wide expansionist effort of the Soviet Communists and their allies.”

The rising tensions of the Cold War contributed to an anxious political atmosphere in the 1960 presidential race between Senator Kennedy and Vice
President Nixon. The election turned out to be the closest of the century. Of more than sixty-four million votes cast, Kennedy's margin of victory was approximately one hundred thousand, about one-tenth of 1 percent. Pivotal to Kennedy's victory was his adept and opportunistic positioning on national security. Relentlessly attacking from the right—campaigning aggressively against President Eisenhower's foreign policy record and, in part, on a mythical "missile gap"—the Democratic challenger crafted a message of toughness. That same message of resolve would be infused in Kennedy's soaring inaugural address in January 1961, which promised the world, "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty."

McGeorge Bundy, a lifelong Republican, had spurned Nixon in 1960 to support Kennedy. The candidate was pleased to have his endorsement, said Bundy, "although reinforcement in Massachusetts was hardly his most urgent need." In the weeks following Kennedy's razor-thin victory, prospective senior administration recruits—a talent pool drawn primarily from the Establishment waters between Washington and Boston—waited expectantly for an overture from the president-elect. Bundy was no exception. Sargent Shriver, the president-elect's brother-in-law, queried Bundy about his interest in joining the new administration. "For an interesting job," Bundy told him, "I would indeed be interested." About a week later Kennedy and Bundy met in New York. Bundy was offered the chance to work with the new secretary of state, Dean Rusk, as the third-ranking official in the State Department, undersecretary for political affairs. Bundy had already expressed to Kennedy his high esteem for Rusk, noting that a Harvard dean who did not know the president of the Rockefeller Foundation "was not doing his job." Bundy called Rusk "bright, experienced, and straight—I said he would be a good boss." Bundy returned to Cambridge "full of hope" but soon heard from Kennedy that the job they had discussed in fact did not exist.

The snafu was the result of a Kennedy staff error. It was assumed that the State Department hierarchy would remain the same as it was in the Eisenhower administration, in which the number-two slot, held by the financier C. Douglas Dillon, was responsible for economic affairs. Kennedy explained that his nominee to serve as the number-two official at the State Department, Chester Bowles, would claim the politics portfolio rather than economics, meaning that the number-three slot would be filled by the undersecretary for economic affairs. "Neither you nor I could get away with that," Kennedy said, but he closed the call by promising he would get back to Bundy at some later date.

Bundy remembered an interminable period of waiting following that telephone call with Kennedy, although it may not have lasted more than a week. Throughout he was comforted by the attentive telephone operators assisting the president-elect, who continually asked where the Harvard dean could be reached on short notice. They finally tracked Bundy down at a Manhattan restaurant where he and his wife were having dinner with their friends Kingman and Mary Louise Brewster. The president-elect had a new proposal. Unfortunately, it was even less appealing: Kennedy now offered Bundy the fourth slot at the State Department, the inglorious post of deputy undersecretary for administration. Bundy recalled that it was a perfectly dreary position, "the guy who watches the promotions and tends to the foreign service and goes up on the Hill and explains how the department doesn't cost as much as the Hill thinks it does, and so forth—terrible job." He had to find a politic way to decline. He asked Kennedy for ten minutes to mull over the offer and rushed back to the table.

"What the hell do I say?" Bundy asked Brewster, his college classmate who was now the provost of Yale University.

"I take it you don't want the job?" queried Brewster.

"I don't," Bundy declared.

"I take it you're perfectly willing not to get any job rather than take that job?" continued Brewster.

"That's right," Bundy said. "But I've got to have a good reason. I can't just say, 'It's not important enough for me.'"

"I tell you what you say," advised Brewster. "You call him up and say, you've had it with administration" and have been doing it for years.
Bundy called Kennedy to deliver the news. “I can’t do it,” he told the president-elect. “I’ve just had it with administration.”

“Well, I can sure understand that,” replied Kennedy. “We’ll see what else we’ve got.”

The next call from Kennedy came two days later, with an offer to serve as special assistant to the president for national security affairs. Although Bundy did not know it at the time, he was not Kennedy’s first choice for that position. The president-elect had already offered it to Paul Nitze, a veteran government official who had been the architect of NSC-68, a government strategy document drafted in 1950 for President Truman that became the foundation of America’s Cold War containment policy. Doubting the influence he would have as a White House staffer, Nitze declined that post and instead accepted a senior assignment in the Pentagon. Kennedy confided to John Kenneth Galbraith that he had also considered offering the position of national security adviser to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Looking back, Bundy said he was fortunate that the State Department job Kennedy originally offered him did not exist and that Nitze had declined the White House position. “Paul really honestly thought that the special assistant’s was a paper-pushing job,” Bundy said, “and that the line departments were where the serious business got done.” Bundy was ultimately shrewder in crafting a path to power. “I wanted to join the Kennedy administration and I got the best job in sight,” he said.

At the time, and perhaps in the years that followed, Bundy may have harbored an ambition to be secretary of state, the one other position he was said to covet. During the transition there was some discussion about nominating him to be America’s premier diplomat, a scenario supported by Walter Lippmann, the influential columnist. Theodore Sorenson, one of Kennedy’s closest advisers, reports that the president-elect openly mused about appointing Bundy, arguing that he was a more dynamic choice than the two other finalists under consideration, Senator J. William Fulbright and Dean Rusk. Bundy dismissed the notion that he was a serious candidate for the job, noting that “a forty-three-year-old President from Massachusetts would not need as his senior Cabinet officer a forty-one-year-old Academic/Republican/Bostonian with no visible experience of government.” He offered a facetious aside that nonetheless betrayed the insularity of his prior experience: “My Yale years might suggest breadth to Cambridge but not to Washington or the country.”

Bundy, of course, had an ideal profile to become one of Kennedy’s men. The president-elect was searching for counselors with whom he felt comfortable but who were “also acceptable to what was then called the Establishment,” Bundy observed. (He added that his experience was of limited relevance to the generations that followed, for whom “there is no recognizable Establishment left.” Aspiring foreign policy experts “are expected to have battle scars” from experience in government or politics, he said, “and I think it’s better so.”) Bundy surmised that Kennedy perceived it advantageous that his prospective national security adviser was not only a Harvard dean but also a Republican who had strong affiliations with Henry Stimson and Dean Acheson.

While much of the coverage of Bundy’s appointment was fawning, the conventional wisdom was accompanied by another, less flattering perspective on his arrival in the White House. “He was bright and he was quick but even this bothered people around him,” David Halberstam wrote. “They seemed to sense a lack of reflection, a lack of depth, a tendency to look at things tactically, functionally and operationally rather than intellectually; they believed Bundy thought that there was always a straight line between two points.” David Riesman, the sociologist whom Bundy had recruited to the Harvard faculty and considered a friend, was among those who viewed his political ascent with a degree of trepidation. When Bundy left Cambridge, said Riesman, “I grieved for Harvard and grieved for the nation; for Harvard because he was the perfect dean, for the nation because I thought that very same arrogance and hubris might be very dangerous.”

* * *

The first major foreign policy decision in which Bundy participated became the signature failure of the entire Kennedy administration. The new administration inherited a covert plan to topple the Cuban leader
they are, pale in comparison to his achievements,” such as the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the creation of the CIA’s U-2 aerial surveillance system. Yet Bundy also admitted that “one of the reasons I was inefficient was that my favorite college teacher was in charge, Dickie Bissell.” Bundy’s close relationship with Bissell may have compromised his judgment and thus his counsel to President Kennedy. “It never occurred to me,” he explained, that Bissell “was so captured by his own goddamned invention of this invasion that he would accept adjustments and limitations, because his political judgment was when you really get down to it you need to be rescued or surrender. The president will have to act. So it was an entrapment.”

Bundy retrospectively focused on the military’s responsibility for the failed invasion. “One could imagine the Brigade succeeding on its own,” he wrote, “but should one really bet a brand-new Presidency on such a gamble?” In the aftermath of the failed invasion, Bundy observed, President Kennedy assigned particular blame to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who possessed the greatest expertise for judging the operation’s prospects for military success yet still appeared to endorse it. “What he neglected, and what I for one was too green to recognize and point out, was the perceived inhibition on the part of the Pentagon to challenge the CIA’s plans. The chiefs were bureaucratically cautious about dissecting another agency’s most cherished enterprise.”

The Bay of Pigs was an “initial baptism of power,” Bundy concluded, “because it’s sitting there, right there, loaded, ready to go off, won’t keep, has to be decided.” It also remained somewhat mystifying. “You know what we still don’t know about the Bay of Pigs?” asked Bundy. “What did Eisenhower think he was going to do? He never told anybody.”

Despite its enormous political costs, Bundy believed the Bay of Pigs ultimately strengthened Kennedy. “This is a detached and self-contained human being who, as far as I perceive him, had enormous inner confidence,” Bundy told the political scientist Richard Neustadt in 1964, speaking of the president. Bundy noted “the number of times he had accomplished things that people said could not be accomplished. So that ‘no’ was a word he was used to hearing and used to disproving.... The great blow of the Bay of Pigs was that it broke the picture of infallibility and its great service to him was that it did exactly that.”

At a moment just before that aura of infallibility was shattered, President Kennedy met at the White House with Bundy and four other advisers: Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Dean Rusk, Richard Bissell, and Adolf Berle, a Columbia Law School professor affiliated with the State Department. It was Saturday, April 15, according to Schlesinger, “as the pace of action began to mount in Cuba.” The group, he recalled, was “discussing the next step with the president, when Mac brought down the house—and especially JFK—by saying ... ‘Mr. President, do you realize that you are surrounded by five ex-professors?’” Bundy recalled telling Kennedy “in a cheerful way that this was bound to be all right” because of his advisers’ academic stature, “and I’ve often hoped that he didn’t remember that remark, because I remember it so well. But he did go through a process of saying there must never be another Cuba. I remember his remarking to me that in any other form of democratic government he would be out of office on the strength of the Bay of Pigs, and that no English Prime Minister could have survived.... He used to say, ‘Well, at least I’ve got three more years—nobody could take that away from me.’”

There was at least one other lesson to be learned from the Bay of Pigs. Despite pressure from the CIA and the Joint Chiefs, Kennedy did not capitulate on the basic question of maintaining firm presidential authority over the deployment of military force. “Kennedy had refused that support and the lesson was burned into his mind: the Commander-in-Chief had better be careful to ensure his own control over the use of American combat forces. He is the one who will inevitably be held accountable for their success or failure.” Bundy added that while counselors to the president may pursue agendas of their own which were “usually honorable and sometimes right,” he cautioned such aides were “not necessarily thinking about the President’s responsibility.”

* * *

Just as Kennedy rejected his advisers’ entreaties to salvage the hapless Bay of
Pigs invasion, the new president would have to exercise similar resolve in deflecting proposals to intervene in Laos, an Asian country ten thousand miles away, sandwiched between Vietnam and Thailand.

A growing distress over the fate of Laos was evident even before Kennedy’s inauguration. On his last full day in office, President Eisenhower provided Kennedy and several of his key advisers with an alarming national security presentation, focused, improbably, on the fate of Laos. Clark Clifford, a prominent Washington lawyer and fixture of the Democratic Party, attended the meeting as Kennedy’s private counsel. “It may seem incredible in retrospect,” he wrote, “but the outgoing President considered the fate of that tiny, landlocked Southeast Asian kingdom the most important problem facing the U.S.” If Laos fell to the communists, Eisenhower warned, then South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma would follow. Eisenhower’s fixation with Laos was consistent with a larger worldview. During his presidency, he had become a committed adherent to the “domino theory,” which envisaged the successive collapse of teetering states into the orbit of communist power—like so many clattering dominos falling in a row.

As Kennedy assumed office, Laos was a nation in disarray and a presumptive target for insurrection. Three factions fought for control of the country: the communist movement Pathet Lao, which was committed to Prince Souphanouvong; a neutralist group loyal to Prince Souvanna Phouma; and government loyalists led by General Phoumi Nosavan. The third faction became the focus of U.S. policy. “There’s a special niche in John Kennedy’s picture of international statesmen,” said Bundy, “in which the stubborn weak—who insist on things they can’t do for themselves, and that it is not in the interest of the United States to do for them, are enthroned—and General Phoumi Nosavan is in that category.” As a result, “you literally had no choice but to work for a neutralization in Laos” because ensuring Phoumi Nosavan’s control of the country would have required “a wholly undesirable level of military investment.”

Disregarding Eisenhower’s more hawkish advice, on March 23, 1961, President Kennedy affirmed his desire for a “neutral and independent Laos.” Peace talks proceeded in Geneva, where the United States was represented by the industrialist and former New York governor Averell Harriman, who was known affectionately within the White House as “The Crocodile.” (“He just lies up there on the riverbank, his eyes half closed, looking sleepy,” Bundy explained. “Then, whup, he bites.”)

As Harriman proceeded along a diplomatic track, the Defense Department warned of the need for possible military action in Southeast Asia. On April 26, just days after the Bay of Pigs debacle, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a global advisory to major U.S. military bases around the world. It reported that in response to new advances by the communist Pathet Lao insurgency in Laos, the Pacific Command was instructed to prepare for potential air strikes against North Vietnam and perhaps southern China.

In a turbid meeting of the National Security Council the following day, Admiral Burke sat in for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The navy chief recommended the deployment of a large force from member nations of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to defend the Laotian capital, Vientiane, from imminent collapse. According to notes of the meeting, Burke argued, “strongly and repeatedly” that without U.S. intervention, “all Southeast Asia will be lost.” Bundy recalled that Kennedy, who had served in the navy, “did not miss the irony that among his chief military advisers one energetic supporter of a large operation in Laos—which is landlocked—was the Chief of Naval operations, who had nothing to fear from the Lao
tian navy.”

Confusion mounted. “The participants in the meeting found it hard to make out what the Chiefs were trying to say,” Schlesinger recounts. The military recommendations were so numerous and convoluted that Vice President Johnson asked that they be put in writing. “The President, it is said, later received seven different memoranda, from the four Chiefs of Staff and three service secretaries. It was about this time that a group of foreign students visited the White House and the President, introduced to a young lady from Laos, remarked ‘Has anyone asked your advice yet?’”

With disorder reigning among his advisers, on May 1 Kennedy convened
another meeting of the National Security Council. The Bay of Pigs humiliation was very much on his mind. "That operation had been recommended principally by the same set of advisers who favored intervention in Laos," recalled Theodore Sorensen. "But now the President was far more skeptical of the experts, their reputations, their recommendations, their promises, premises and facts. He relied more on his White House staff and his own common sense; and he asked the Attorney General [his brother, Robert F. Kennedy] and me to attend all NSC meetings." The majority of Kennedy's advisers favored the deployment of combat troops to South Vietnam, Thailand, and government-controlled positions in the Laotian panhandle. If that failed to produce a cease-fire, Kennedy was advised to use tactical nuclear weapons and air strikes against the Pathet Lao. If China or North Vietnam intervened, those countries should be bombed and, if necessary, attacked with nuclear weapons.

Confronted with his military advisers' apocalyptic scenarios, Kennedy commenced a fairly withering interrogation: If the United States used nuclear weapons where would it stop? What other communist powers would the United States have to attack? Without nuclear weapons would the United States have to retreat? Or would Washington be forced to surrender in the face of a massive Chinese intervention? Is this, Kennedy asked, the best bet for a U.S. confrontation with China—in the mountains and jungles of its landlocked neighbor? Would deployments to Laos weaken the reserves to defend Berlin? Would forces landing in Vietnam and Thailand assume the responsibility of defending those regimes, too?

Keenly doubtful of his military guidance, Kennedy decided to use the threat of force and press for a diplomatic outcome to the crisis. He conspicuously put ten thousand Marines stationed on Okinawa on high alert, after which the communist and noncommunist factions agreed to a ceasefire. "If it hadn't been for Cuba," Kennedy told Schlesinger on May 3, "we might be about to intervene in Laos." He dismissively brandished a pile of memos from General Lemnitzer, adding, "I might have taken this advice seriously." That summer Harriman successfully brokered a neutralization agreement at the Geneva conference, and American military action in Laos was averted.

President Kennedy's first critical decision in Southeast Asia, Bundy concluded, was equivalent to "an operational rejection of the domino theory." He also noted that Eisenhower in office had resisted "the deeper commitment he now urged on his young successor, but Kennedy eagerly chose to follow his example and not his advice." He added, "I've heard the President say—and I'm quite sure that he meant it—that it would have been very much harder for him to decide not to move further into Laos if it hadn't been for the Bay of Pigs." President Kennedy, recalled Bundy, "made a special effort to look coolly on this kind of problem, and the Laos decisions were different, I'm sure, because the Bay of Pigs happened."

* * *

The Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union made partition a logical and common feature of the geopolitical order—Germany was divided in two, as was Berlin, Korea, and Vietnam. Thus to most of Kennedy's men the contest in Vietnam represented yet another game board in the larger conflict with international communism. The new reality of two Vietnams, however, obscured an instructive history. From its earliest origins, Vietnam fit the paradigm of a classic small power repeatedly challenged to fight fierce wars of resistance against larger invading and occupying forces.

Following approximately one thousand years of domination by China, the Vietnamese launched their first rebellion in AD 39, led by the Trung sisters, who to this day are celebrated as among the greatest heroes of Vietnamese civilization. Mounted on elephants, the sisters led a futile battle against far superior Chinese forces. When defeat was imminent they chose martyrdom rather than surrender, drowning themselves in a Hanoi lake. Two centuries later, another female warrior, Trieu Au, stood at the head of an anti-Chinese uprising, but she, too, was defeated. It was not until the tenth century that the Vietnamese finally won their independence. The decisive victory came when the rebels destroyed a Chinese fleet by luring it into a river where they had planted iron-tipped spikes. In the thirteenth century Vietnam repulsed three
Mongol invasions, and in 1426 it beat back another attack from the Chinese. When the French arrived and imposed a colonial regime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Vietnamese gravitated toward a more ideological form of resistance. In 1930 the French put down a revolt by intellectuals in the northern cities while also suppressing communist-backed rebellions by workers and peasants in the central part of the country. But as World War II drew to a close in August and September 1945, the League for Vietnamese Independence, known as Vietminh, assumed power and declared the country’s independence following a months-long campaign of harassment against the Japanese occupation.

Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietminh movement, sought diplomatic recognition from the United States but was summarily rebuffed. The Truman administration was eager for French partnership to counter the growing power of the Soviet Union and readily acquiesced in France’s desire to reassert its colonial presence. The United States provided naval vessels, aircraft, and arms to the French forces in Indochina, and by 1952 it was underwriting more than 40 percent of the cost of the war. By 1953, U.S. aid to France had grown to $800 million.

Despite robust American support, the French occupation was under siege from a methodical, disciplined, and intensely determined Vietminh military campaign. The endgame played out at Dien Bien Phu, an expansive valley area three hundred miles west of Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital. Protected by thousand-foot hills considered too difficult to mount with artillery, the roughly sixteen thousand elite French paratroopers stationed in Dien Bien Phu were thought to be invulnerable. Their commander, General Henri Navarre, was confident he could annihilate the poorly equipped Vietminh troops that were forced to attack from exposed positions. He promised victory over the insurgents by the end of 1954.

In the first days of 1954 three divisions of Vietminh troops quietly scaled the hills that encircled the French garrison, hurling artillery and rocket launchers behind them. Remarkably undetected, an army of fifty thousand Vietminh soldiers now surrounded the French. They were led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the architect of a new strategic concept for guerilla warfare. General Giap’s war-fighting doctrine emphasized sustained endurance and diversified avenues of attack. “Accumulate a thousand small victories to turn into one great success,” he wrote. Supplementing the seven principles of guerrilla war enunciated by the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, Giap articulated four of his own: “If the enemy advances, we retreat. If he halts, we harass. If he avoids battle, we attack. If he retreats, we follow.”

Back in Washington, President Eisenhower proclaimed his opposition to any deployment of U.S. combat troops to assist the French. At a meeting of the National Security Council on January 8, 1954, Eisenhower called U.S. intervention “simply beyond contemplation.” He presciently insisted, “There was just no sense in even talking about United States forces replacing the French in Indochina. If we did so, the Vietnamese could be expected to transfer their hatred of the French to us.” Eisenhower added (with “vehemence,” according to the official notes), “I cannot tell you ... how bitterly opposed I am to such a course of action. This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions!” The president also rejected the appeals made by some of his more hawkish advisers. “When we talk about Dien Bien Phu, maybe I need to tell you this,” he later confided to the newspaper publisher Roy Howard, in a secretly taped conversation, “but I was the only one around here who was against American forces going in. I tell you, the boys were putting the heat on me.” On May 7, 1954, after repeated “human wave” assaults by Vietminh troops and fifty-five days of bombardment with an estimated 1,500 tons of ammunition, the French garrison was finally overwhelmed.

France signed an armistice in July 1954, ending French colonialism in Southeast Asia and creating the separate states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnam was temporarily divided along the seventeenth parallel into two spheres of influence—the North controlled by the Vietminh alliance and the South by the Western powers. The agreement called for nationwide elections in 1956 and prohibited the introduction of foreign troops or the establishment of foreign military bases.
South Vietnam’s new leader was Ngo Dinh Diem. A Catholic ruling a nation of Buddhists, Diem came to power by rigging a plebiscite and successfully claiming 99 percent of the vote, thus deposing Bao Dai, the French puppet emperor. Diem refused to hold the countrywide elections designed to precede national reunification. A political realist, Diem knew that he would be crushed in an electoral contest against Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh followers.

The Eisenhower administration supported the decision to cancel elections. So did Senator John F. Kennedy, who was part of a growing constituency interested in South Vietnam’s role in Asia’s regional security framework. “Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia,” he said, “the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike.” But Kennedy was also strongly opposed to the United States replicating the French military commitment to the South Vietnamese government in Saigon. In 1952, when he was still in the House of Representatives, Kennedy had visited Vietnam and conferred with General Navarre’s predecessor, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. “We have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of a French regime to hang onto the remnants of an empire,” Kennedy said on the floor of the House upon his return. “I am frankly of the belief that no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere ... The forces of nationalism are rewriting the geopolitical map of the world.”

The growing threat of Vietminh infiltration prompted Diem’s security forces to become even more brutal. Vietminh suspects sometimes were beaten, had their legs broken, or were raped. In 1959 Diem passed a law restoring the guillotine, and mobile military courts in the countryside were authorized to behead convicted communists. By 1961, as Kennedy assumed power in Washington, the situation in South Vietnam was characterized by an ascending nationalist and communist movement and an oppressive regime that was progressively losing control of the country and credibility with its people.

Among the first official reports the Kennedy administration received came from General Edward Lansdale, the deputy assistant to the secretary of defense for special operations. Lansdale, an air force officer, had an extensive background in advising Asian governments on counterinsurgency strategy. In January 1961, Lansdale toured South Vietnam to assess the intensity of the communist guerrilla movement. “The U.S. should recognize that Vietnam is in critical condition and should treat it as a combat area of the cold war, as an area requiring emergency treatment,” he reported. Lansdale’s warning was repeated by an interagency task force in Saigon, known as the U.S. Country Team Staff Committee. It concluded that without extraordinary action the South Vietnamese regime could be overthrown in months.

The president convened his top advisers on Saturday morning, January 28, 1961, for the first formal meeting on Vietnam. Kennedy introduced a tone of skepticism to the dialogue with his counselors that would come to define his approach to American strategy in the country. “The President remarked that if the situation in Vietnam was now so serious he wondered why the recruitment of troops and training of police, who could become effective only a year or two hence, would be of any use,” report the minutes of the meeting. “He also wondered why, if there were only 10,000 guerrillas, an increase from 150 to 170,000 in the army was necessary.” The president asked if “this order of magnitude of increase in the armed forces of Viet-Nam would really permit a shift from the defense to the offense. He asked whether the situation was not basically one of politics and morale.” On February 6 Kennedy instructed General Lemnitzer to ensure that the South Vietnamese army was deployed more coherently. “I would think that the redistribution of available forces immediately would make them more effective,” he stated.

The central threat in Southeast Asia in 1961, Bundy would recall, was the possibility that communist forces would wrest control of the entire country of Vietnam. “The instruments of their advance were both political and military,” he wrote, while Washington’s response has been limited to different forms of economic and political support to South Vietnam, supplemented by a small military advisory mission. “The existing policy was not likely to prevent an eventual communist victory,” Bundy observed. “What should the new administration do?”
Bundy recalled that from the beginning the president's interest in Vietnam was trained on the premise and potential for the United States to assist Saigon "at levels of conflict short of the engagement of U.S. combat troops." For Kennedy, "advice and support, especially on unconventional warfare, were attractive," and he remained "regularly on the side of a diversified and innovative effort" that would take the form of varied programs to enhance the capacity of South Vietnam to contain a growing insurgency. What followed was an increase in expenditures and manpower devoted to South Vietnam. Bundy remarked that "both of these expansions were large against what we had before, and small compared to what came later."

In April, Kennedy appointed Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric to head the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam. In a memo to the president, Robert McNamara promised that the Defense Department would develop a "program of action to prevent Communist domination of South Viet-Nam." The first version of that action program was a rambling assemblage of proposals to counter "the Communist 'master plan' to take over all of Southeast Asia." On April 27, a draft of the report with an attached annex was forwarded to the president. The annex recommended the deployment of a small contingent of U.S. combat troops as a symbol of American commitment to South Vietnam. In Bundy's formulation, the term "combat troops" conveyed a specific definition and function: "U.S. Army or Marine forces—infantry, artillery, armor, or airborne—in companies, battalions, regiments, or divisions. Such units are here distinguished from supply and service forces and also from air forces and still more sharply distinguished from personnel whose mission was to advise or assist or support South Vietnamese combat forces."

The next day another version of the annex was circulated, this time proposing the deployment of 3,600 U.S. ground combat troops to train two new South Vietnamese divisions and an American Special Forces unit to accelerate counterinsurgency training. Kennedy endorsed the proposals of the draft report but not the recommendations for combat troops contained in the report's annex.

The rejection of the combat troop proposal would be the first iteration of a repeated pattern pitting Kennedy against his counselors. Time and again, senior military and national security officials would directly recommend to the president that he deploy ground combat troops to Vietnam. Kennedy, in turn, would divert, defer, or deny their recommendations. As the thrust and parry between the president and his men continued through 1961, the proposed scope of the American commitment to Vietnam would grow.

On May 8, Gilpatric queried the Joint Chiefs: "In preparation for the possible commitment of U.S. forces to Vietnam, it is desired that you give further review and study of the military advisability of such action, as well as to the size and composition of such forces." The chiefs replied, "Assuming that the political decision is to hold Southeast Asia outside the Communist sphere, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are of the opinion that U.S. forces should be deployed immediately to South Vietnam."

President Kennedy did not approve the combat troop commitment recommended by the Joint Chiefs. But at a National Security Council meeting on May 11, he allowed the question to be analyzed further. On May 18, the chiefs restated their recommendation. Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, head of the American Military Assistance Advisory Group in Saigon, proposed a force of sixteen thousand combat forces. If President Diem resisted, McGarr suggested a force of ten thousand soldiers with the mission of establishing Vietnamese military training centers. McGarr's recommendation was supported by General Lansdale. As observed in the Pentagon Papers, the secret Defense Department history of Vietnam policy, senior officials were "primarily interested in getting U.S. combat units into Vietnam, with the training mission as a possible device for getting Diem to accept them."

The deployment of U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam—to serve variously as a deterrent, a symbol of determination, or a means to train Saigon's army—had now been proposed five times: twice through the Gilpatric report and three times through the Joint Chiefs and by McGarr and Lansdale. Soon the Joint Chiefs found a fourth rationale to deploy American combat forces to the region. In a July 12 memorandum to McNamara, the chiefs asked for a formal
decision to withdraw from the Laos negotiations at the next breach of the cease-fire. They recommended military intervention—with or without SEATO allies—to bolster the American negotiating position.\textsuperscript{28} Walt Rostow supported the chiefs’ proposal, recommending to Dean Rusk that the United States take air and naval action against North Vietnam as a means to influence the settlement in Laos.\textsuperscript{29}

General Maxwell Taylor also favored a more assertive military posture in Southeast Asia. Taylor was a legendary soldier who had served as superintendent of West Point, commander of Allied troops in Berlin, and army chief of staff under Eisenhower. Following the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy asked Taylor to chair a task force to investigate the failed invasion. After concluding his inquiry, Taylor was appointed by Kennedy to serve as military representative to the president—in essence, Kennedy’s personal military adviser. On July 15, General Taylor instructed the chiefs “to produce an outline plan” for military action in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{30}

Twelve days later, Taylor and Rostow submitted their own memorandum to Kennedy that proposed three alternative approaches to Vietnam. In the time-honored tradition of Washington bureaucrats, they offered two extreme options that the president would be compelled to summarily reject and a middle course leading Kennedy down a path they ostensibly wished him to follow. One option called for the United States to “disengage from the area as gracefully as possible,” ensuring a disastrous strategic loss that Taylor and Rostow characterized as unacceptable. Another option proposed that Washington “find a convenient pretense and attack ... the regional source of aggression in Hanoi,” thus risking an immediately enlarged conflict in Vietnam and a potential war with China. By comparison, the middle option they advocated was both less damaging to American strategic interests and less precipitous in the risks it posed. It called for the United States to “build as much indigenous military, political and economic strength as we can in the area, in order to contain the thrust from Hanoi while preparing to intervene with US military force if the Chinese Communists come in or the situation otherwise gets out of hand. We assume it is the policy of this administration to pursue the third strategy,” Taylor and Rostow advised, helpfully adding, “but some discussion of the alternatives may be useful.”\textsuperscript{31}

Kennedy made little effort to conceal his leeriness. In Bundy’s contemporaneous notes of a July 28 meeting, “Questions from the President showed that the detailed aspects of this military plan had not been developed ... The President made clear his own deep concern with the need for realism and accuracy in ... military planning.” Kennedy underscored that the Pentagon’s atrocious performance in the Laos episode had eroded his confidence. “He had observed in earlier military plans with respect to Laos that optimistic estimates were invariably proven false in the event ... He emphasized the reluctance of the American people and of many distinguished military leaders to see any direct involvement of U.S. troops in that part of the world.”

Kennedy’s men pushed back, arguing, as Bundy recorded, “that with a proper plan, with outside support, and above all with a clear and open commitment, the results would be very different from anything that had happened before. The president was not persuaded, remarking that General de Gaulle, out of painful French experience, had spoken with feeling of the difficulty of fighting in this part of the world.”\textsuperscript{32} Vice President Johnson called for a more explicit military commitment to the region, including Laos, and a presidential decision to intervene if necessary.\textsuperscript{33} “The President in reply offered no decision,” Bundy continued, “but he made it very plain that he himself at present is very reluctant to make a decision to go into Laos ... that nothing would be worse than an unsuccessful intervention in this area, and that he did not yet have confidence in the military practicability of the proposal which had been put before him.”\textsuperscript{34}

Despite Kennedy’s continuing resistance to the combat troop proposal, the president’s advisers continued to churn out new deployment recommendations. Drawing on previous proposals from Rostow, Taylor, the Joint Chiefs, and the Southeast Asia Task Force, Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson elaborated on a “Concept for Intervention in Vietnam” at an October 11 White House meeting. Johnson, firmly aligned with
the growing consensus for ground forces, proposed the deployment of 11,000 combat troops to be drawn from a total SEATO force of 22,800. Kennedy once again did not approve any new deployments but agreed to allow further discussion. He also authorized a mission to the region by Taylor and Rusk. The possibility of a U.S. combat troop deployment to South Vietnam quickly leaked to the press. "One question receiving considerable attention here in light of the Taylor mission is the desirability of sending United States troops to South Vietnam," the New York Times reported from Saigon on October 13. Furious with the unauthorized disclosure, Kennedy swiftly orchestrated a leak of his own. "Military leaders at the Pentagon, no less than General Taylor himself are understood to be reluctant to send organized U.S. combat units into Southeast Asia," the Times clarified on October 14. "Pentagon plans for this area stress the importance of countering Communist guerrillas with troops from the affected countries, perhaps trained and equipped by the U.S., but not supplanted by U.S. troops." On October 16 the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Frederick Nolting, reported that President Diem had requested a bilateral security treaty with the United States "and secondly and perhaps alternatively for the dispatch of U.S. combat forces." By October 18, however, Diem had reversed himself, indicating that he would not seek U.S. combat troops after all.

Nolting disregarded President Diem's change of heart. He cabled Washington on October 20 arguing that a severe flood in the Mekong Delta region offered an auspicious opportunity for a "fast public demonstration of unity of purpose and action." The flood, he suggested, could be used as a pretext for "introducing ... US military units for humanitarian purposes, which might be kept if necessary." Taylor applauded the proposal. "To relate the introduction of these troops to the needs of flood relief seems to me to offer considerable advantages," he explained in an October 25 cable from Saigon. Taylor recommended an initial deployment of between six thousand and eight thousand combat troops.

Newspaper articles again pointed to the possibility of the first U.S. combat force deployments to South Vietnam. Using Bundy as his enforcer, Kennedy ordered General Taylor to plug the leaks. "The President requests that your conclusions on Vietnam, especially those relating to U.S. forces, not be discussed outside your own immediate party in terms which would indicate your own final judgment," Bundy wrote to Taylor on October 28. "He is most concerned that you and he should have firm common ground when decisions are taken, and rumors of your conclusions could obviously be damaging."

An undaunted Taylor continued to press his recommendation. He reported on October 31 that ten days of discussions in South Vietnam reflected "a virtually unanimous desire" for American forces. His conclusion was "based on unsolicited remarks from cabinet ministers, National Assembly Deputies, university professors, students, shopkeepers, and oppositionists." There was similar support outside Saigon. In Hue, said Taylor, "opinion among intellectuals and government officials in that city is almost unanimously in favor of introduction of American combat troops."

Senator Mike Mansfield, the Democratic majority leader, wrote to Kennedy to express his alarm at the press reports of a potential major shift in U.S. policy. The deployment of combat forces to defend South Vietnam, he cautioned, "could be a kind of quicksand for us. Where does an involvement of this kind end even if we can bring it to a successful conclusion?"

The Taylor mission returned to Washington and submitted its report to Kennedy on November 3. It advised the president "to introduce into South Vietnam a military Task Force to operate under US control," which would, among other missions, "conduct such combat operations as are necessary for self-defense and for the security of the area in which they are stationed." The American troops would also constitute "an emergency reserve to back up the Armed Forces" of the South Vietnamese army "in the case of a heightened military crisis." General Taylor again proposed the flood-relief mission as the cover story for the combat troop deployment.

Secretary of Defense McNamara joined the emerging consensus in support of Taylor's recommendation. The time had come, he argued at a November 4 meeting, to "tell the world and the US what our commitment really is; the '8000 man' force does not convince anyone of our resolve." Raising the stakes
enormously, McNamara now declared that six to eight divisions would be required to meet communist escalation in Southeast Asia. With one swift game-changing maneuver, McNamara shifted the debate from a focus on a small initial American deployment to the potentially broader commitment of perhaps more than 200,000 combat troops.

With his secretary of defense and personal military counselor now privately lobbying for combat force deployments to South Vietnam, Kennedy again went on the offensive, leaking stories to discredit the proposal in the press. One article reported that the president “remains strongly opposed to the dispatch of American combat troops to South Vietnam” and implied that General Taylor had not recommended such a commitment.

Ignoring Kennedy’s now unambiguous and increasingly public opposition, McNamara plowed ahead. In a November 5 memorandum he again argued that the United States might be forced to deploy at least six combat divisions to forestall South Vietnam from collapsing into the communist orbit. “The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing that fall by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale,” McNamara warned. The Joint Chiefs supported the defense secretary’s grim prognosis, conceding that an initial deployment of eight thousand men should be considered only part of a potentially larger commitment of combat troops. The limited combat troop deployment proposed by Taylor under the guise of assisting with flood relief had now mutated into a down payment on a vast American ground force commitment to defend South Vietnam from its communist insurgency. McNamara was in essence recommending the Americanization of the Vietnam War.

On November 7, President Kennedy’s most senior advisers prepared a stark summary of their views. “The Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agree: The fall of South Vietnam to Communism would lead to the fairly rapid extension of Communist control, or complete accommodation to Communism, in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia and in Indonesia. The strategic implications worldwide, particularly in the Orient, would be extremely serious.... The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing the fall of South Viet-Nam by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale.” The memorandum anticipated a prolonged struggle and the possibility of North Vietnamese or Chinese intervention, which would require the deployment of as many as six divisions totaling 205,000 men. Rusk, McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs now proposed a revolutionary transformation of U.S. national security strategy in Southeast Asia. It was time, they recommended, “to commit ourselves to the objective of preventing the fall of South Viet-Nam to Communism and the willingness to commit whatever United States combat forces may be necessary to achieve this objective.”

The following day another draft of the memorandum was circulated, repeating their dire warning. McNamara, Rusk, and the chiefs proposed an initial deployment of U.S. combat forces along the border with North Vietnam.

With the State and Defense departments as well as the Joint Chiefs now united in their support for a potentially vast combat troop commitment to South Vietnam, Kennedy turned to a trusted colleague for advice. John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist who had been an undergraduate tutor and friend since the president’s college years, was now serving as the U.S. ambassador to India. On the evening of November 8, President and Mrs. Kennedy held a small dinner party for Galbraith and British ambassador David Ormsby-Gore. The timing of the event was propitious. Galbraith had been conducting a private correspondence with Kennedy about Vietnam for months, and he shared the president’s deep reservations about a major U.S. military commitment there. Rostow and Taylor “are advocating exceedingly half-baked intervention,” Galbraith recorded in his diary. At dinner his differences with Bundy erupted in a “very frank and at times heated” argument. Appreciating Kennedy’s need for an independent analysis of the situation, Galbraith offered to stop over in Saigon on his way back to India. Kennedy immediately accepted his offer. Galbraith would remain an influential back-channel adviser on the question of Vietnam throughout Kennedy’s presidency.

Undersecretary of State George Ball was another of the small coterie of
senior officials who dissented from the administration's new consensus for combat troop deployments to Vietnam. "I told him that I strongly opposed the recommendations," Ball recalled. "To commit American forces to South Vietnam would, in my view, be a tragic error. Once that process started, I said, there would be no end to it." Ball implored Kennedy to learn from France's disastrous encounter with the Vietnamese insurgency in the 1950s, which culminated in the dramatic defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. "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... To my surprise, the President seemed quite unwilling to discuss the matter, responding with an overtone of asperity: 'George, you're just crazier than hell. That just isn't going to happen.'"

Ball was perplexed by Kennedy's response. "His statement could be interpreted two ways: either he was convinced that events would so evolve as not to require escalation, or he was determined not to permit such escalation to occur." McGeorge Bundy had no doubt about how to interpret the president's remarks. Bundy observed that Ball was perceived to be "crazier than hell" to Kennedy because Kennedy is not going to do that (and he does not)."

On November 15, Bundy joined the combat troop debate with his own recommendation to the president. "So many people have offered their opinions on South Vietnam that more may not be helpful," he noted in a memo to Kennedy. "But the other day at the swimming pool you asked me what I thought and here it is. We should not agree to send about one division when needed for military action inside Vietnam.... I would not put in a division for morale purposes. I'd put in later, to fight if need be."

As he studied the document carefully for the first time more than three decades later, Bundy found his 1961 recommendation to Kennedy to be a revelation. He simply had no recollection of giving this advice to the president. "Already was never really ours after 1954," Bundy explained to Kennedy at the time. "South Vietnam is and wants to be." If Kennedy supported combat troop deployments, predicted Bundy, "the odds are almost even that the commitment will not have to be carried out." Reminding Kennedy that "your Vice President, your Secretaries of State and Defense, and the two heads of your special mission" shared this "inner conviction," Bundy chided the president for his unwillingness to make the combat troop commitment to defend South Vietnam. "I am troubled by your most natural desire to act on other items now, without taking the troop decision," he scolded. "Whatever the reason," Bundy added, implicitly challenging Kennedy's fortitude, "this has now become a sort of touchstone of our will."

Bundy's recommendation, along with the other combat troop proposals that preceded it, were all acutely unwelcome. "They want a force of American troops," the president confided to Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "They say it's necessary in order to restore confidence and maintain morale. But it will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off and you have to have another.... The war in Vietnam could be won only so long as it was their war. If it were ever converted into a white man's war, we would lose as the French had lost a decade earlier."

With precious few exceptions Kennedy's war council was encircling him, indifferent to his conspicuous denunciations of proposals to transform the American military commitment to Vietnam. Kennedy's abundant doubts about the combat troop proposal, his repeated refusal to endorse it, his aggressive efforts to rebut and thwart it in the press—all had been ignored. McNamara, Rusk, Taylor, Rostow, the Joint Chiefs, various interagency task forces, and his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, had now all joined the same position: President Kennedy must be prepared to stand and fight the insurgency in South Vietnam, intervening on a possibly massive scale with ground combat forces.

Given the scope, stature, and seniority of the coalition in favor of combat troop deployments to South Vietnam, how would Kennedy avoid becoming captive to his own counselors? The president's solution was to effectuate a potent form of bureaucratic decapitation, removing the most influential
source of support for his advisers’ recommendation. As the moment of decision approached, Secretary of Defense McNamara suddenly and inexplicably reversed his position, joining Rusk—who had previously expressed some reservations about the Pentagon proposal in a cable from Japan—in favor of a revised proposal that authorized increased military assistance but not the deployment of any combat troop units. In his memoir, *In Retrospect*, McNamara claims he simply changed his mind after further reflection. Other students of Vietnam policy infer that the secretary of defense was instructed to alter his proposal by President Kennedy himself. After studying the documentary evidence, Bundy was also inclined to observe the hand of President Kennedy in McNamara’s eleventh-hour conversion. “Who changes the Secretary of Defense’s mind about what kind of formal recommendation he makes?” Bundy asked. “There are many possibilities, but the most obvious is the guy in the Oval Office.” Kennedy was not in the habit of receiving unwelcome advice, Bundy recalled. “If you were a friend of his, and you were working for him as an advisor,” then certain expectations were implicit, Bundy explained in a 1964 oral history. “And you know how this works. The President thinks so much in terms of appearances and of someone who is going to be helpful that the notion that you might ask someone for his advice, and he would then give you advice you didn’t want, wouldn’t really occur to you if the man was one of your crowd.”

With the reversal on combat force deployments, the most consequential element of the proposed Vietnam strategy of 1961 had been excised. The last draft of the McNamara and Rusk memorandum still asserted, “The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing the fall of South Viet-Nam by any measures short of the introduction of US forces on a substantial scale.” However, in the final version of the national security directive recording the president’s decision, this formulation was eliminated, along with a formal commitment to defend South Vietnam from a communist takeover.

Walt Rostow made one last appeal for troops, recommending a five-thousand-man force to be stationed on the border with North Vietnam. “If we move without ambiguity—without the sickly pallor of our positions on Cuba and Laos—I believe we can unite the country and the Free World,” he argued with typical rhetorical excess, “and there is a better than even chance that the Communists will back down and bide their time.”

Kennedy remained resolute. “Troops are a last resort,” the president said at a hastily convened White House meeting on November 11, at which he brought the matter to a close. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy stated the president’s position more definitively: “We are not sending combat troops. [We are] not committing ourselves to combat troops.”

The National Security Council convened once more on November 15, 1961, when Kennedy eviscerated the argument for combat troops more forcefully than he ever had before. He began by dismissing the frequently invoked comparisons with the Korean War. “The conflict in Vietnam is more obscure and less flagrant,” said Kennedy, adding, “The United States needs even more the support of allies in such an endeavor as Vietnam in order to avoid sharp domestic partisan criticism as well as strong objections from other nations of the world.” Kennedy told his advisers he could “make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away with 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success.”

The following day the president spoke at the University of Washington in Seattle, delivering a major foreign policy speech. Kennedy dramatically recast the rhetoric of global activism so apparent in his inaugural address, replacing it with a new realism no doubt influenced by lessons learned in his first year in power. “We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient,” Kennedy declared, “that we are only six percent of the world’s population, that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 percent, that we cannot fight every wrong or reverse every adversity, and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.” Ted Sorensen retrospectively pointed to the Seattle speech, with its emphasis on pragmatic realism and a recognition of the limits of American power, as the quintessential expression of Kennedy’s foreign policy beliefs.
Presidential management of the crisis in South Vietnam—this was Bundy's stated historical and analytical interest in the last two years of his life. By its nature, Bundy's focus on Kennedy and Johnson diluted the intensity of introspection he might have trained on his own role in the war. Of his vague recommendation in late 1961 to "send about one division when needed in military action inside South Vietnam," Bundy recorded the mildly self-deprecating observation that, looking back on it, he did not find his advice to be convincing. Bundy was silent, however, on other aspects of his guidance to the president. "Laos was never really ours after 1954," he had instructed Kennedy. "South Vietnam is and wants to be." Decades later, what did Bundy think when he read these words again? Did he wince with the recognition of his prior arrogance? Did the casual hubris of his assertion give him pause? If Bundy struggled with any of these feelings, he never revealed it.

One must wonder, too, if Kennedy was troubled by the grandiosity of Bundy's counsel. And if Kennedy was troubled by Bundy's advice, he would feel similarly about Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of State Rusk, his special military adviser, General Taylor, as well as Walt Rostow, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the other national security bureaucrats who urged him on a commitment he refused to make. Although surrounded, Kennedy was not intimidated. And he was certainly not persuaded. Kennedy knew one lesson that the crises of 1961—the Bay of Pigs, Laos and Vietnam—vividly illustrated: Counselors advise but presidents decide. This became a lesson that McGeorge Bundy also took to heart in his retrospective analysis three decades later. On questions of war and peace the paramount authority of decision ultimately rests with one individual. As Bundy noted, "A decision to keep troops out of war can be made and enforced by the single-handed use of the unquestioned powers of the president as commander-in-chief. That power was consciously if quietly exercised by President Kennedy in 1961."  

As he weighed the significance of the 1961 decision, Bundy repeatedly argued that Kennedy's rejection of his advisers' recommendation to commit U.S. ground combat forces to South Vietnam was an expression of his clear limitation on the level of military support and assistance he would provide the Saigon regime. "Kennedy firmly and steadily refused to authorize the commitment of ground combat troops—in that quite decisive sense, he never made Vietnam an American war," Bundy wrote in a draft fragment.  

In another fragment he concluded that "Kennedy's ruling was profoundly farsighted.”  

Bundy ascribed Kennedy's clarity in enforcing a no-combat-troop policy to the president's inherent pessimism about the American capacity to fight and prevail in a Vietnamese war of counterinsurgency. "Kennedy decided sometime in 1961 that he was not going to send in combat troops to South Vietnam," Bundy told James Blight of Brown University. "He was not going to do it because it was not going to work." That certitude, Bundy observed, flowed in part from a belief the president shared with some of his advisers that counterinsurgency could not be fought through conventional forms of intervention. "Kennedy did not see South Vietnam as a war, in the traditional sense," said Bundy. "JFK saw this as a new kind of communist insurgency that had to be dealt with as such. Kennedy never believed it could be turned into a war that we could win." Yet Bundy also noted the pitfalls of Kennedy's effort not to arouse the administration's hawkish critics by declining to make his no-combat-troop policy a declaratory doctrine for his administration. "The policy that is not acknowledged," Bundy often noted in our discussions, "is easily reversed." Kennedy's unwillingness to make his prohibition on combat troops a formally public policy would invite later speculation about his intentions in South Vietnam. As Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts argue about Kennedy in 1961: "Since he did not yet know what would happen in Berlin, where nuclear war loomed as a real danger, and since he was planning to settle for half a loaf in Laos, Vietnam seemed like one good place to make a stand." Bundy rejected that assertion, calling it "an inherited legend ... that's not right." Bundy was also aware that the advisory mission that Kennedy had approved regularly put American soldiers in the midst of hostile conditions along with troops from the South Vietnamese army. He stressed, however, that the
American advisory and combat missions were fundamentally different and that the casualties among the former were an infinitesimal fraction of the latter.

In the final analysis, what is perhaps most remarkable about Kennedy’s November 1961 combat troop decision is that despite the overwhelming pressure imposed on him by his senior counselors, the president’s determination never wavered. The clarity of Kennedy’s decision, which Bundy repeatedly described as decisive and irreversible, prompted the former national security adviser to conclude thirty years later that America’s role in the Vietnam War could have been averted. The no-combat-troop policy, Bundy argued, precluded Vietnam from becoming an American war fought—and lost—by large-scale deployments of U.S. ground forces: “We adopted that policy in 1961; we could have kept it in later years; we did not, to our great cost.”

LESSON TWO

NEVER TRUST THE BUREAUCRACY TO GET IT RIGHT

It was a personal admission enfolded into one of the many, often duplicative, fragments McGeorge Bundy was drafting, a fact disclosed in his writings but otherwise never discussed or explained. “As one who makes regular visits to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington,” he wrote, “I think it a heavy obligation on all who had a role in the decisions of the Vietnam War to omit no action open to us that may help to salute the lasting contributions of the sacrifice of those men whose names are on that long wall.” The image was striking. Here was one of the architects of the war, one of the most articulately passionate advocates of the American bombing and combat troop commitment, pondering the tens of thousands of names of the dead inscribed in the monument’s mournful facade of black marble. As he examined those endless rows of names etched in stone—and as he observed the daily ritual of family members and loved ones leaving flowers and letters for the dead—what did Bundy think? What did he feel as he looked back three decades later and weighed the enormous human cost of the Vietnam War?

The fragments Bundy left behind offer some clues pointing to a deeper retrospective remorse about the war than he had previously acknowledged publicly. As Bundy wrote about the responsibility he felt to revisit the lessons of the war, “You owe it to a lot of different people.” But in conversation Bundy did not typically reveal this side of himself. To the contrary, he often exuded a buoyancy that seemed incongruent with the challenges of producing a probing account of his role in the decisions to Americanize the Vietnam War. “How are you?” Bundy would begin each meeting cheerfully. “What shall we discuss