Preface

This project began as a single-volume general history of the Vietnam War that would, like most histories spanning such a large conflict, rely primarily on existing books and articles for information, creating a long braid, as it were, by weaving together strands and shorter braids crafted by others. Initial research on the early years of the Vietnam War, however, revealed that many of the existing strands were flawed, and that many other necessary strands were missing altogether. Historical accuracy, therefore, demanded the rebuilding of existing strands and the creation of new strands. The history of the war had to be constructed through the use, whenever possible, of primary sources, rather than another's filtration and interpretation of those sources. This construction process, which involved prolonged exploration of the vast diplomatic, military, and political records of the period, dramatically lengthened the time needed to complete the project, and it increased the number of pages needed to provide the necessary evidence. As a consequence, the history has been divided into two volumes, split at July 28, 1965, the date on which President Lyndon B. Johnson publicly announced the first of many huge increases in the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam. This book is the first of the two volumes.

The inadequacy of the existing historical strands has not been a function of low production volumes. In recent years, new historical books on the Vietnam War have been appearing at an impressive pace, adding considerably to what was already a large body of histories. Like the earlier scholarship, however, the recent historical literature has been concentrated in a relatively small number of areas, and it has been dominated by one major school of thought. Most of the new works are concerned primarily with American policymaking in Washington and Saigon. Most of them come from what is known as the orthodox school, which generally sees America's involvement in the war as wrongheaded and unjust. The revisionist school, which sees the war as a noble but improperly executed enterprise, has published much less, primarily because it has few adherents in the academic world.1

Within the last decade, orthodox historians have written a substantial number of prominent books on policymaking during the Eisenhower,
Kennedy, and Johnson presidencies, as well as several noteworthy histories spanning the entire Vietnam conflict. In addition, some recent specialized books of orthodox persuasion have made significant contributions to the literature on the period from 1954 to 1965. Other specialized works have challenged some interpretations of the orthodox school while still embracing its overarching tenets. Still other specialized works do not clearly fall into either the orthodox or the revisionist camp, largely because most of the fundamental questions dividing the camps lie beyond their scope. Several such histories have incorporated valuable evidence from Soviet and Chinese archives. The increased accessibility of Vietnamese and French sources has led to the production of new publications on Vietnamese Communism and Vietnamese anti-Communism, some of them high in quality. Although most of the recent military histories of the Vietnam War focus on the period from August 1965 onward, when American ground forces were fully engaged in the war, a small number examine military events in the period that ended in July 1965. David Elliott and Eric Bergerud have produced thorough and informative histories of the conflict in a single province throughout the course of the war. Recent biographies of American presidents and other high-ranking figures have also brought new discoveries on strategic decision making. Studies of other countries and regions have illuminated international perspectives on the Vietnam War.

The orthodox–revisionist split has yet to become a full-fledged debate, because many orthodox historians have insisted that the fundamental issues of the Vietnam War are not open to debate. As Fredrik Logevall has stated in one of the most widely acclaimed of the recent orthodox histories, most scholars consider it “axiomatic” that the United States was wrong to go to war in Vietnam. Some prominent orthodox scholars have gone so far as to claim that revisionists are not historians at all but merely ideologues, a claim that is indicative of a larger, very harmful trend at American universities whereby haughty derision and ostracism are used against those whose work calls into question the reigning ideological orthodoxy, stifling debate and leading to defects and gaps in scholarship of the sort found in the historical literature on the Vietnam War. David L. Anderson, the president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and an orthodox historian of the Vietnam War, asserted in his 2005 presidential address that revisionists interpret the war based on an “uncritical acceptance” of American Cold War policy rather than analysis of the facts. In contrast to orthodox historians, who strictly use “reasoned analysis” to reach their conclusions.

Anderson’s assertion about revisionists’ “uncritical acceptance” of America’s overarching policies can be discredited readily by examining my first book on the Vietnam War, a revisionist history that was known to Anderson. In that book, which focused on counterinsurgency during the latter years of the war, I advanced the revisionist arguments that the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies fought effectively and ethically, and that the South Vietnamese populace generally preferred the South Vietnamese government to the Communists during that period. But I also contended that U.S. politicians were wrong to view the preservation of South Vietnam as a vital U.S. interest. In the course of writing Triumph Forsaken, analysis of hitherto unappreciated facts caused me to alter this and other conclusions, an approach diametrically opposed to the ideologically driven approach deployed by Anderson.

During the past ten years, moreover, other revisionist historians have produced some well-researched, well-reasoned works covering the Vietnam conflict between 1954 and 1965, carrying on a relatively small, but strong, tradition of revisionist literature that dates back to the mid-1970s. Drawing on a wide range of new archival sources, Arthur Dommen’s history of the two Indochina wars provides a large amount of new information and analysis. Dereliction of Duty by H. R. McMaster has shed much new light on U.S. policymaking in 1964 and 1965, particularly with respect to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Michael Lind has persuasively criticized a variety of orthodox interpretations, and C. Dale Walton has effectively challenged the conventional wisdom on America’s strategic options. Several other works have presented new interpretations of the Diem government and the 1963 coup. The strength of the recent revisionist works provides ample evidence that the orthodox school needs to analyze its own interpretations more critically.

There are numerous points of agreement between this volume and the orthodox histories, but there is little agreement on most of the key controversies. This history arrives at some of the same general conclusions
as previous revisionist works, as the facts brought it to those points, but differs from them in that it contains many new interpretations and challenges many orthodox interpretations that have hitherto gone unchallenged. It differs from all of the existing literature in its breadth of coverage both inside and outside the two Vietnams and in its use of a more comprehensive collection of source material.

This account first examines the Vietnam War's central characters and countries in the years leading up to 1954. According to the orthodox view, the Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh followed in the tradition of numerous Vietnamese nationalists who had defended the country against foreign aggression and who had despaired the Chinese and other foreigners. A careful look into Vietnam's past, however, supports no such contentions. Almost all of the conflicts in Vietnamese history before the twentieth century had involved Vietnamese fighting against Vietnamese, not against external enemies. Neither Ho Chi Minh nor Vietnamese of previous generations hated the Chinese, and in fact they both worked amicably with Chinese allies. Ho Chi Minh would serve in the Chinese Communist Army in World War II, he would do whatever his Chinese Communist allies recommended during his war with France, and he would ask the Chinese to send troops to help him in Vietnam on several occasions. Ho generally showed greater deference toward his foreign patrons than did his nationalist rival in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, who would ultimately suffer death for refusing to yield to the demands of his American allies. He was a fervent believer in the Communism of Marx and Lenin, committed so deeply to Communist internationalism that he would not have sacrificed Communist solidarity for the sake of Vietnam's narrow interests. Thus, contrary to widely accepted interpretations, he never would have turned against his Chinese Communist neighbors, or any other Communist countries, had the United States allowed him to unify Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh would not have let the United States transform his country into an Asian Yugoslavia.

From 1954 to 1965, American leaders correctly perceived that China and North Vietnam were working together to spread Communism across Southeast Asia. They did not view the Communist threat to Vietnam as monolithic in nature, for they were aware of the Sino-Soviet rift that had opened in the 1950s and they knew that the Soviet Union was providing minimal support for Communist expansionism in Southeast Asia. As the war in Vietnam grew in intensity, leading figures in the Johnson administration predicted that the conflict would widen the rift between the Chinese and Soviets, and subsequent history would prove them right.

Whereas the very top leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party fought the war for ideological reasons, the South Vietnamese peasants who joined the Viet Cong insurgency were attracted primarily by the Viet Cong's leadership capabilities and military strength. They were easily swayed by its charismatic leaders and they wanted to be on the winning side when the fighting ended. Concerned exclusively with local rather than national matters, the peasant masses had little interest in fighting for nationalist causes, and even less interest in Marxist theories or in the collectivization of agriculture that the Communists had in mind. The Viet Cong's temporary land redistribution program did help attract the support of landless peasants, but in the peasants' minds, leadership and strength always outweighed economic policies.

South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who has been incessantly depicted as an obtuse, tyrannical reactionary by orthodox historians, was in reality a very wise and effective leader. In 1954 and 1955, with few resources at his disposal, he brought order to a demoralized, disorganized, and divided South Vietnam. A man deeply dedicated to the welfare of his country, Diem governed in an authoritarian way because he considered Western-style democracy inappropriate for a country that was fractious and dominated by an authoritarian culture. The accuracy of this belief would be borne out by the events that followed his assassination. Diem attempted, with some success, to create a modern Vietnam that preserved Vietnamese traditions, an objective that resonated with his countrymen and with other Asian nationalists to a greater degree than did Western liberalism or Communism. Diem did not stifle religion or kill tens of thousands in the process of redistributing land as Ho Chi Minh did, and he was more tolerant of dissent than his northern counterpart. Most South Vietnamese citizens and officials had a high opinion of Diem, though some disliked his brother and close adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu.

For most of Diem's tenure, the South Vietnamese government held the upper hand in its struggle against the Vietnamese Communists. In the late
1950s, Diem virtually wiped out the secret Communist networks in South Vietnam, thereby precipitating Hanoi's decision to move from political struggle and limited assassinations to a large-scale Maoist insurgency. During 1960 and 1961, the insurgents succeeded in eliminating or reducing the government's power in some areas, and the Diem government was not very effective in employing countermeasures. The problem was not that Diem and his American advisers were interested only in conventional military power, as some would have it. Diem and America's military representatives in South Vietnam fully understood the importance of both conventional forces and counter-guerrilla forces to the defense of South Vietnam. Much of the responsibility for the travails of 1960 and 1961 belonged to U. S. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow and other American civilians, who chose to provide the South Vietnamese militia and other counter-guerrilla forces with fewer funds and lighter weaponry than they needed. The other key factor was the ability of the Viet Cong to field better leaders on average than the Diem government, the result of political and cultural differences.

During 1960, Diem's forces did score a major success by severing the first Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was located solely within the territory of North and South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese responded by shifting their logistical lines from South Vietnam into Laos, enabling them to intensify the insurgency and mount a very effective, but ultimately inconclusive, offensive in the fall of 1961. President Kennedy, preferring to fight alongside the South Vietnamese rather than the Laotians because of the former's much greater pugnacity, chose not to intervene in Laos and instead tried to solve his Laotian problems through a neutralization agreement. When the North Vietnamese failed to withdraw their forces in the fall of 1962 as stipulated in the agreement, Kennedy refrained from sending American forces into Laos to stop the continuing infiltration. It was a disastrous concession to the enemy, a concession that would haunt South Vietnam and the United States for the remaining fourteen years of the war. Yet despite the heavy influx of Communist personnel and materiel via Laos, the years 1962 and 1963 saw a dramatic turnaround in the war within South Vietnam. Capitalizing on major increases in U. S. military assistance and the coming of age of young leaders whom Diem had begun developing in the
one that the journalists transformed into the accepted version of the battle. Halberstam and Sheehan presented grossly inaccurate information on the Buddhist protest movement and on South Vietnamese politics, much of which they unwittingly received from secret Communist agents. Ignorant of cultural differences between the United States and Vietnam, they criticized the Diem government for refusing to act like an American government when, in fact, Diem's political methods were far more effective than American methods in treating South Vietnam's problems. South Vietnam's elites, who regularly read Vietnamese translations of American press articles, viewed the New York Times and other U.S. newspapers as mouthpieces of the U.S. administration, with the result that negative articles on the Diem government undermined South Vietnamese confidence in Diem and encouraged rebellion. Although the American journalists hoped that their reporting would bring about the installation of a better South Vietnamese government, it actually caused enormous damage to South Vietnam and to American interests there. Once the coup that they had promoted led to a succession of ineffective governments, exposing them to blame for the crippling of South Vietnam, Halberstam, Sheehan, and fellow journalist Stanley Karnow disparaged Diem with falsehoods so as to claim that South Vietnam was already weak beyond hope before the coup. This turn of events would distort much of the subsequent analysis of the Diem government.

President Kennedy did not consent to the coup that ousted Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963. Until the very end, Kennedy had serious reservations about the plotting against Diem, in considerable part because many of his senior subordinates opposed Diem's removal, and he unsuccessfully tried to slow the anti-Diem conspiracy. U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, who was much influenced by Halberstam and Sheehan, instigated the coup without notifying Kennedy and in direct violation of Presidential orders. A few days before the coup began, Kennedy discovered that Lodge was encouraging a group of South Vietnamese generals to rebel and was not informing Washington of his contacts with the conspirators. President Kennedy tried to rein in Lodge and the plotters by sending instructions to the Saigon embassy, but to no avail. He did not take decisive action to stop Lodge, primarily because Lodge was a leading candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination in 1964, and Kennedy did not want campaign accusations that he had kept the Republican ambassador from taking the required actions. Kennedy had appointed Lodge with the intention of hamstringing him and the Republicans by ensnaring them in Vietnam, but it would turn out to be the President who was hamstrung.

Supporting the coup of November 1963 was by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War. Contrary to later assertions by the coup's advocates, the South Vietnamese war effort had not entered into a period of decline during the last months of Diem's rule. Proof that the war was proceeding satisfactorily until the coup comes from North Vietnamese as well as American sources -- disproving the thesis that American officials were mindlessly optimistic at the time -- and also from the 1963 articles of the journalists who would subsequently propagate the myth of a pre-coup collapse. The deterioration did not begin until the period immediately following Diem's overthrow, when the new leaders failed to lead, feuded with each other, and arrested untold numbers of former Diem supporters. Within a few months of the coup, the pacification effort would collapse in most parts of the countryside, and the regular armed forces would be in the first stages of a lengthy period of decline. These changes would help propel Hanoi toward a strategy of seeking a decisive victory through the destruction of South Vietnam's armed forces, which in turn would eventually force the Americans to decide either to introduce U.S. ground troops or to abandon South Vietnam.

Throughout his Presidency, John F. Kennedy was firmly committed to preserving a non-Communist South Vietnam, and he had no plans to abandon his South Vietnamese allies after the 1964 election. Convinced that the defense of South Vietnam was vital to U.S. security, Kennedy vastly expanded the U.S. aid and advisory programs in South Vietnam over the course of his term. Prior to his assassination, Kennedy took no actions that might suggest an intent to abandon Vietnam to the Communists after reelection, and those who knew him best said afterwards that he had never given serious consideration to such a withdrawal. Had Kennedy faced the crisis in Vietnam that Johnson faced in the middle of 1965, he most likely would have come to the same conclusion as Johnson: that saving South Vietnam was so important as to warrant the use of U.S. combat forces.
The effects of the South Vietnamese government’s poor performance from Ngo Dinh Diem’s death until the middle of 1965 have been understood widely, but its causes have not. According to one standard explanation, the Saigon government failed because its leaders and its American advisers selected the wrong methods for combating the enemy. In truth, however, the problem was not in the concepts but in the execution. An explanation more commonly advanced, closer to the mark but still only partially correct, is that the South Vietnamese government faltered at this time because the country’s ruling elite was bereft of strong leaders. Many individuals who occupied positions of power in the post-Diem period, it is true, did lack the necessary leadership attributes, and none was as talented as Diem, but the caliber of the elites as a whole was not a critical problem. The critical problems, rather, were the exclusion of certain elites from the government and the manipulation of governmental leaders by the militant Buddhist movement. From November 1963 onward, the top leadership in Saigon repeatedly removed men of considerable talent, either because of their past loyalty to Diem or because of pressure from the militant Buddhists. And in spite of these purges, the government still had some men, even at the very top at times, who possessed leadership capabilities that would have made them successful leaders had it not been for militant Buddhist conniving. The Buddhist leaders tried to baffle every government that held power after Diem, and in most instances they succeeded, largely because government officials feared resisting the Buddhist activists after watching Diem lose American favor, and his life, for resisting them. As its American advocates had desired, the 1963 coup led to political liberalization, but rather than improving the government as those Americans had predicted, liberalization had the opposite effect, enabling enemies of the government to undermine its prestige and authority, as well as to foment discord and violence between religious groups. Not until June 1965, by which time the United States and most South Vietnamese leaders had come to realize the necessity of suppressing the militant Buddhists and other troublemakers, would political stability return. By then, however, South Vietnam had sustained crippling damage and Hanoi was pushing toward total victory.

Lyndon Johnson’s lack of forcefulness in Vietnam in late 1964 and early 1965 squandered America’s deterrent power and led to a decision in Hanoi to invade South Vietnam with large North Vietnamese Army units. According to the prevailing historical interpretation, the leadership in Hanoi relentlessly pursued a strategy of attacking in the South until it won, with little regard for what its enemies did. In reality, however, North Vietnam’s strategy was heavily dependent on American actions. Although Johnson’s generals favored striking North Vietnam quickly and powerfully, he chose to follow the prescriptions of his civilian advisers, who advocated an academic approach that used small doses of force to convey America’s resolve without provoking the enemy. Because of his chosen strategic philosophy and because of international and U. S. electoral politics, Johnson made only a token attack on North Vietnam following the Tonkin Gulf incidents of 1964 and undertook no military action thereafter. Rather than inducing the North Vietnamese to reciprocate with self-limitations, as the theorists predicted, however, this approach served only to heighten Hanoi’s appetite and courage. Johnson’s lack of action, as well as his presidential campaign rhetoric, convinced Hanoi that the Americans would not put up a fight for Vietnam in the near future. This change came at a time when the weakened condition of the Saigon government indicated that South Vietnamese resistance to a North Vietnamese invasion would be weak. Consequently, in November 1964, Hanoi began sending large North Vietnamese Army units to South Vietnam, with the intention of winning the war swiftly. The Americans were slow to identify the shift in North Vietnam’s strategy and thus lost any remaining chance of deterring Hanoi or otherwise enabling South Vietnam to survive without U. S. combat troops.

Some well-known historians have argued that President Johnson wanted to inject U. S. ground troops into the war whether they were needed or not. Johnson made his decision to intervene, they contend, at the end of 1964 or in early 1965. In actuality, Johnson reached his decision no earlier than the latter part of June 1965, by which time intervention had become the only means of saving South Vietnam. The first U. S. ground troops sent to Vietnam arrived in March 1965, but Johnson deployed them only to protect U. S. air bases, not to engage the main elements of the Communist forces. At the time of the initial ground force deployments, Johnson and his lieutenants did not foresee a major war between American and Communist forces, because they did not know that Hanoi had begun sending entire
North Vietnamese Army regiments into South Vietnam. They did not learn of this development until the beginning of April. By the middle of June, abetted by a continuing infusion of North Vietnamese soldiers, the Communist forces had won many large victories and the South Vietnamese Army was losing its ability to challenge large Communist initiatives. The North Vietnamese had entered the third and final stage of Maoist revolutionary warfare, in which the revolutionaries use massed conventional forces to destroy the government's conventional forces. Hanoi's ultimate success, as its leaders repeatedly stated, depended above all on the ability of its conventional forces to destroy the South Vietnamese Army, particularly its mobile strategic reserve units, not South Vietnam's small counter-guerrilla forces. The fighting of 1965 demonstrated that, contrary to the contentions of a multitude of pundits and theoreticians, the Americans and the South Vietnamese had been correct to develop a large conventional South Vietnamese army during the 1950s and early 1960s rather than concentrate exclusively on small-unit warfare.

Lyndon Johnson had always wanted to avoid putting U.S. troops into the ground war if there was any way that South Vietnam could continue the war without them. Like most of his advisers, he doubted that U.S. ground force intervention would result in an easy victory, believing that it would result in a long, painful, and politically troublesome struggle against an enemy who might never give up. But in June 1965, Johnson and his military advisers concluded, correctly, that only the use of U.S. ground forces in major combat could stop the Communist conventional forces from finishing off the South Vietnamese Army and government. Even as Johnson became convinced of the need for intervention, he held out hopes of withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam relatively soon, regardless of how the fighting was going, in the belief that a brief intervention might achieve as much as a sustained intervention in terms of preserving U.S. credibility and prestige in the world.

Johnson decided that South Vietnam was worth resuming in 1965 primarily because he dreaded the international consequences of that country's demise. His greatest fear was the so-called domino effect, whereby the fall of Vietnam would cause other countries in Asia to fall to Communism. Historians have frequently argued that Johnson fought for Vietnam primarily to protect himself against accusations from the American Right that he was soft on Communism, which would have harmed his reputation and denied him the political support he needed to carry out his domestic agenda. In actuality, the domestic political ramifications of losing Vietnam had relatively little influence on Johnson's decision on whether to protect South Vietnam. Johnson recognized that the American people were largely apathetic about Vietnam and would be no more likely to turn against him politically and personally if he left than if he stayed and fought.

Domestic political considerations did, on the other hand, exert great influence on how Johnson protected South Vietnam, as they discouraged him from braving Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, from taking a tough stance on Vietnam before the 1964 election, and from calling up the U.S. reserves and otherwise putting the United States on a war footing. That there has been great cynicism and confusion about Johnson's motives was partly the responsibility of the President himself, for during this period he repeatedly misrepresented his intentions to the American people and he did not provide decisive leadership that would have clarified his views and inspired the people's confidence.

The domino theory was valid. The fear of falling dominoes in Asia was based not on simple-mindedness or paranoia, but rather on a sound understanding of the toppling countries and the domino countries. As Lyndon Johnson pondered whether to send U.S. troops into battle, the evidence overwhelmingly supported the conclusion that South Vietnam's defeat would lead to either a Communist takeover or the switching of allegiance to China in most of the region's countries. Information available since that time has reinforced this conclusion. Vietnam itself was not intrinsically vital to U.S. interests, but it was vital nevertheless because its fate strongly influenced events in other Asian countries that were intrinsically vital, most notably Indonesia and Japan. In 1965, China and North Vietnam were aggressively and resolutely trying to topple the dominoes, and the dominoes were very vulnerable to toppling. Throughout Asia, among those who paid attention to international affairs, the domino theory enjoyed a wide following. If the United States pulled out of Vietnam, Asia's leaders generally believed, the Americans would lose their credibility in Asia and most of Asia would have to bow before China or face destruction, with enormous global
Vietnam and China threatened South Vietnam’s existence, and by 1965 only strong American action could keep South Vietnam out of Communist hands. America’s policy of defending South Vietnam was therefore sound. U.S. intervention in Vietnam was not an act of strategic buffoonery, nor was it a sinister, warmongering plot that should forever stand as a terrible blemish on America’s soul. Neither was it an act of hubris in which the United States pursued objectives far beyond its means. Where the United States erred seriously was in formulating its strategies for protecting South Vietnam. The most terrible mistake was the inciting of the November 1963 coup, for Ngo Dinh Diem’s overthrow forfeited the tremendous gains of the preceding nine years and plunged the country into an extended period of instability and weakness. The Johnson administration was handed the thorny tasks of handling the post-coup mess and defending South Vietnam against an increasingly ambitious enemy – and in neither case did the administration achieve good results. President Johnson had available several aggressive policy options that could have enabled South Vietnam to continue the war either without the help of any American ground forces at all or with the employment of U.S. ground forces in advantageous positions outside South Vietnam. But Johnson ruled out these options and therefore, during the summer of 1965, he would have to fight a defensive war within South Vietnam’s borders in order to avoid the dreadful international consequences of abandoning the country.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the help of many people in many parts of the United States and in other countries. I am forever grateful to Merle Pribenow, who translated thousands of pages of Vietnamese histories for me on his own time, enabling me to cover the Vietnamese Communist side of the war more comprehensively than it has been covered before. His unflagging efforts have been truly extraordinary. Richard Aldrich, Anthony Badger, John Del Vecchio, Allan Millett, Merle Pribenow, Tom Schwartz, Bill Stueck, Keith W. Taylor, and James Webb read portions or all of the manuscript and offered many useful comments. I am indebted to my academic mentors – Christopher Andrew, Ernest May, and Akira Iriye – for their ongoing support. B.G. Burkett, John Del Vecchio, Lewis Sorley, Keith W. Taylor, and James Webb have been as steadfast in their support of this project as they were in their service to the United States during the war. Bruce Nichols of the Free Press, the first supporter of this project, originally commissioned the book at an early stage in its development, and he graciously allowed me to transfer to Cambridge University Press when the project turned out to be much larger and more time-consuming than either of us had originally foreseen. Frank Smith of Cambridge University Press energetically saw the book through to its conclusion and served as an outstanding editor. Greg Houle, Melissanne Scheld, and Tamara Braunstein, also of Cambridge University Press, have put a terrific amount of effort into the publicity, sales, and marketing of the book. At Techbooks, Peter Katsirubas made sure that a deluge of modifications and corrections made it into the book in time for publication.

Robert J. Destatte, William Duiker, David Elliott, Chris Goscha, Mike Martin, Edwin Moise, Merle Pribenow, Lewis Sorley, and Jay Veith provided or referred me to sources. I was privileged to interview or correspond with William Colby, Roger Donlon, Frederick Flott, Albert Frawley, Novarin Gunawan, Hoang Lac, Gayland Lyles, Ted Motaix, Robert McNamara, John O’Donnell, Andrew P. O’Meara, Nguyen Khanh, Carlton Nysewander, Rufus Phillips, Joseph P. Redick, Carl Schaad, and Fletcher Ware. In addition, I have benefited from interaction with other historians of the Vietnam War – Dale Andrade, Larry Berman, Anne Blair, John Carland,
Chapter 5 Commitment: 1961

As a member of the American Friends of Vietnam, Senator John F. Kennedy became a great admirer of Ngo Dinh Diem, seeing him as just the type of independent nationalist needed to carry out the struggle in Vietnam. Delivering the keynote address at the organization’s 1956 conference, Kennedy lauded “the amazing success of President Diem in meeting firmly and with determination the major political and economic crises which had heretofore continually plagued Vietnam.” South Vietnam was an experiment aimed at finding an alternative to Communism in Asia, Kennedy said, and the United States “cannot afford to permit that experiment to fail.” Vietnam “represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike.”[328] Kennedy’s views on Diem would change somewhat over time, but he would never lose his respect for Diem or his conviction that the United States had to preserve South Vietnam.

During the Eisenhower years, John F. Kennedy derided the administration’s strategy of “Massive Retaliation,” believing that it left the United States ill-prepared to fight or support wars of lower intensity, especially wars against Communists in the developing nations of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. It was foolhardy to risk nuclear war over such conflicts, Kennedy argued, and it was pusillanimous to avoid getting involved and letting the Communists prevail. Kennedy preferred “Flexible Response,” a strategic approach conceived by General Maxwell Taylor, according to which the United States would broaden its range of military capabilities so that it could meet any enemy challenge without having to bring the country to the brink of nuclear war. Flexible Response dictated a dramatic expansion of America’s conventional and unconventional military forces for use in counterinsurgencies and other limited conflicts. Kennedy had a great enthusiasm for counterinsurgency that substantially exceeded his understanding of the topic. In his mind, counterinsurgency involved daring commando raids by soldiers armed with poisonous darts and hand-held rockets, rather than a difficult and laborious undertaking in which success depended heavily on local people and circumstances. Counterinsurgency appeared to acquire additional importance when, a few weeks before Kennedy’s inauguration as the nation’s thirty-fifth President, Nikita Khrushchev boasted that the Soviet Union would support pro-Communist “wars of national liberation” in current and former colonial areas.

The youngest elected U.S. President, and the second youngest President after Theodore Roosevelt, Kennedy brought youthful energy and charm to an institution normally associated with gray-haired gentlemen in dark suits. He was not, however, a man of ideological fervor. On the ideological plane, anti-Communism exerted the most influence on him, and he took a much greater interest in that subject than in the domestic concerns of his fellow Democrats. Possessing faith in brains and youthful vigor over experience and accumulated knowledge, Kennedy and his followers believed that they could toss out what they termed the “so-called wisdom” of the old and create a new order unencumbered by what had come before. They were, Kennedy said, the men of the New Frontier.[329]

Kennedy’s selection for the job of Secretary of Defense, Robert Strange McNamara, was the prototypical New Frontiersman. Blessed with a high level of analytical ability and a terrific memory, McNamara had received an MBA from the Harvard Business School and had also taught as an assistant professor at the school. During World War II, McNamara served as a statistician for the Army Air Corps, and at the end of the war he and a collection of other young Army statisticians went to work for the Ford Motor Company, where they became known as the “Whiz Kids.” They brought to Ford a potent combination of cleverness and energy. Henry Ford II took a liking to them because they produced results, enabling Ford to take back market share from General Motors and reap record profits. Several of them were to rise to high positions inside the company. Of all the Whiz Kids, it was said, McNamara whizzed the fastest. He impressed Henry Ford II with his remarkable analytical talents and his ease in recalling any and every statistic in support of his arguments. And McNamara said it all with infinite self-confidence, giving him the appearance of infallibility in the eyes of the unwary. In October 1960, Robert McNamara became the president of the Ford Motor Company at the age of forty-four, the first man to attain that rank without the blood of the Ford family in his veins.

When, two months later, President-elect Kennedy offered McNamara
the position of Secretary of Defense, he replied, "I am not qualified." But Kennedy, attaching little importance to the issue of experience, did not relent. "We can learn our jobs together," Kennedy said. "I don't know how to be president, either." McNamara thought it over for a few days, then expressed a willingness to accept the offer under certain conditions. He would have to be given complete control over appointments in the Defense Department, and he would have to be free of obligations to attend Washington social events. McNamara had never cared for cocktail parties and formal dinners, viewing them as impediments to his workaholic schedule. Kennedy agreed to these conditions, and Robert McNamara became America's eighth secretary of defense.

Kennedy appointed McGeorge Bundy as National Security Adviser. A brilliant man and a prodigy, Bundy had become the dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences in 1953, at the age of just thirty-four. He was a systematic thinker who could pull all the extraneous fuzz off an issue and get to the crux of the matter, a quality much prized by Kennedy. If anyone was smarter and more analytically rigorous than McNamara, it was McGeorge Bundy. For the position of Secretary of State, Kennedy chose Dean Rusk, who at various times had been a Rhodes scholar, Army officer, college dean, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and foundation executive. McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk would be the President's most influential advisers on national security affairs for the next six years.

Kennedy and his New Frontiersmen set out to reconstruct the machinery of the government. The Eisenhower administration had been overburdened with cumbersome bureaucracies and stodgy old men, they thought. Kennedy swept away the layers of bureaucracy and instead relied on his own smarts, a few sharp sidekicks, and small task forces composed of New Frontiersmen. Rather than operating on the basis of a grand strategy for handling world affairs as Eisenhower had, Kennedy would employ an ad hoc approach to problems, albeit one based on the general principle of containing communism. McGeorge Bundy was given an office in the White House basement and a staff of intelligent young men to take over many of the roles of Eisenhower's National Security Council staff. McNamara revamped the Defense Department using a cadre of similarly bright young civilians who, like McNamara and his compatriots at Ford, were dubbed the "Whiz Kids." They intended to impose on the Pentagon the same sort of statistical rigor and ruthless economic logic that had worked so well at Ford, whether the slow-moving Pentagon liked it or not. McNamara and the Whiz Kids believed, as well, that they should make important military decisions that the armed services had made heretofore, claiming that their high IQs and their academic theories trumped real-world experience.

Kennedy began his administration by proclaiming from the front of the Capitol, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." In Saigon, South Vietnamese leaders took heart at these words, and eagerly awaited the translation of the rhetoric into deeds. Kennedy began the translation swiftly, acting on two key reports on South Vietnam that he received as soon as he took office. One had been prepared by the Country Staff Team Committee, an interagency group headquartered in the Saigon embassy. Entitled the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan, the report stated that although Diem was taking more and more steps to improve the counterinsurgency effort, he needed to do much more, or else South Vietnam would suffer defeat in the coming months. The document listed a variety of political, military, and economic reforms that Diem needed take, most of them designed to increase the efficiency of existing programs and the government's treatment of the villagers; Washington's rebukes at the end of 1960 had forced Ambassador Durbow to set liberalization aside. The Country Staff Team also recommended increasing the South Vietnamese armed forces by at least 20,000 men and investing additional money to improve the Civil Guard, at a total cost of forty-one million dollars. Ambassador Durbow had dropped his previous objection to the expansion of the South Vietnamese military because of the heightened Communist activity in Laos.

The other report came from Edward Lansdale, who at the end of 1960 had finally received permission to visit Vietnam after prolonged efforts by Ambassador Durbow and the State Department to keep him out. Upon completing his tour of Vietnam in early January, Lansdale reported that South Vietnam was in "critical condition" and required "emergency treatment." Diem remained irreplaceable, Lansdale argued, noting that the opposition lacked constructive ideas. Lansdale observed that the city people
were full of gripes about Diem even though they were wealthier than ever before, while the people in the countryside, who had considerably less wealth, were much more supportive of Diem. “Many of the Vietnamese in the countryside who were right up against the Viet Cong terror were full of patriotic spirit,” stated Lansdale. “Those who seemed to be in the hardest circumstances, fighting barefoot and with makeshift weapons, had the highest morale. They can still lick the Viet Cong with a little help.” Lansdale called for a shift from an adversarial relationship with South Vietnam to an amicable relationship based on mutual respect, which would allow the Americans to regain their influence with Diem. This change, in Lansdale’s view, required the immediate removal of Ambassador Durbrow. “The next time we become ‘holler than thou,’ we might find it sobering to reflect on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” Lansdale remarked. “Do the Soviets and the Chinese Communists give Ho Chi Minh a similar hard time, or do they aid and abet him?”[334]

Early on the last Saturday morning of January, Lansdale received a call from the White House. “Get down here right away,” McNamara told him. President Kennedy, who had previously developed an admiration for Lansdale in the course of reading The Ugly American, was impressed by the observations and recommendations in Lansdale’s report, and wanted to hear more.[335] Brought before Kennedy and a collection of senior officials, Lansdale reiterated the need for action in Vietnam and for a new ambassador. So taken was Kennedy with Lansdale’s criticisms of Durbrow that he promptly decided to remove the ambassador and began considering Lansdale as a possible replacement. Kennedy also asked Lansdale whether the new administration should make a show of its support for Diem. Yes, Lansdale said, it would work wonders.[336]

Lansdale’s report and comments helped convince Kennedy to allocate additional resources to Vietnam. Two days after his talk with Lansdale, Kennedy approved the 20,000-man increase in the South Vietnamese Army and the strengthening of the Civil Guard recommended in the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan. Thus did Flexible Response show the first signs of taking hold in Vietnam, reversing Eisenhower’s policy of holding down military assistance to the South Vietnamese government.[337] Kennedy also ordered the CIA to send guerrillas into North Vietnam to stir up trouble for the Communists, although these efforts were to be small and largely unproductive.[338] As far as America’s own counterinsurgency capabilities were concerned, Kennedy was already pushing for higher spending on elite troops specially trained for counterinsurgency, as well as on conventional forces.

Kennedy’s initial moves had little effect on the course of the war in Vietnam. During the first half of 1961, government forces were showing modest improvements in aggressiveness and military competence, and they scored several major victories over Viet Cong forces in the spring, shattering large Communist formations in the delta and the provinces around Saigon. But most of the negative trends of 1960 persisted. The regular army continued to undertake large operations based on insufficient intelligence, and it still suffered from poor organization and coordination. Few government militiamen patrolled at night or defended the villages, preferring instead to button themselves up inside forts or the nearest district or provincial capital. In April, General McCarr estimated that Diem controlled only forty percent of the countryside, and that eighty-five percent of Diem’s forces were tied down in static positions, a further indication that government forces lacked the intelligence information or the resolve to undertake more active counter-guerrilla measures.[339] American suggestions aimed at correcting these problems largely went unheeded. The Viet Cong’s military forces continued to grow rapidly through recruitment and infiltration, and they conducted more guerrilla attacks than before. Soon they would weaken Diem’s hold on the countryside to such an extent that the South Vietnamese government’s rice surplus disappeared. During Diem’s nine and a half years in office, he fared poorly in the struggle for the villages during only two years: 1960 and 1961.

From Hanoi’s viewpoint, on the other hand, the war was not going nearly as well as it might have, either. The Viet Cong, in spite of their accumulating achievements, still remained far from destroying the South Vietnamese regime, which retained a large reservoir of armed strength. “We have been able to carry out our policy of gradually peeling away the enemy’s strength and in fact have been able to peel away an initial layer,” Le Duan explained in an April letter. “This is only the initial step,” for the Diem government’s “military forces are still virtually intact.” Le Duan noted that
the South Vietnamese army continued to carry out orders and was not going to collapse on its own. Communist forces, therefore, would have to destroy the South Vietnamese Army before they could take over South Vietnam. Le Duan instructed the Southern Communists to put greater emphasis on the military struggle.\[340\]

While Kennedy invested considerable time and money into Vietnam during his first four months in office, the problem that most concerned him at that time was not Vietnam but Laos, where the Communists were continuing to make major advances. At the beginning of 1961, Hanoi sent large elements of the North Vietnamese Army 325th Infantry Division and a number of additional North Vietnamese battalions to fight in Laos, raising the size of the North Vietnamese expeditionary force to 12,000.\[341\] North Vietnamese, Pathet Lao, and neutralist forces seized several strategic locations from the rightists, including the Plain of Jars, a high plateau in northern Laos containing the highway from North Vietnam to the Laotian cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. As the North Vietnamese had hoped, Diem did not send big South Vietnamese units into Laos to interfere with the Communists' activities.

The gravity of the Laotian crisis became clear to Kennedy during a meeting on January 19 between the new President and his Cabinet appointees and Eisenhower and his Cabinet. Secretary of State Christian Herter, who had replaced the dying John Foster Dulles in 1959, explained that the Laotian rightists had proven unwilling to fight, and that although Asian SEATO members favored military action in Laos, the French and British refused to take part, severely undermining the integrity of the alliance. “The Thais, the Filipinos, the Pakistanis, who are counting on SEATO for their own self-defense against Communist aggression, are concerned that SEATO is a paper tiger,” Herter commented. In Herter's view, the only option for the United States was to undertake military commitments in Laos as mandated by SEATO.

Kennedy asked Eisenhower whether the creation of a coalition government with Laotian Communist participation would be preferable to U.S. intervention alongside SEATO countries. Eisenhower replied, “It would be far better to intervene through SEATO.” He pointed to the failed coalition government in China during the Chinese Civil War as evidence that such a government would flop. With the departure of the French from Indochina and the increase in America's presence, Eisenhower now considered Indochina worthy of the sort of U.S. ground commitment he had shunned in 1954. “The loss of Laos would be the loss of the ‘cork in the bottle’ and the beginning of the loss of most of the Far East,” Eisenhower warned. “If Laos were lost to the Communists, it would bring unbelievable pressure to bear on Thailand, Cambodia and South Vietnam. Laos is of such importance that if it reached the stage where we could not persuade others to act with us, then I would be willing, as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally.” The odds of intervention leading to a major war were very low, Eisenhower estimated, for the large Communist powers did not want to go to war with the United States over Laos.

“If the situation was so critical, why didn’t you decide to do something?” Kennedy demanded.

“I would have,” Eisenhower replied, “but I did not feel I could commit troops with a new administration coming to power.”

McNamara asked about the U.S. government’s capabilities for fighting a “limited war,” which in 1961 connoted a war where the United States sought objectives short of complete destruction of the enemy and did not use all of its weapons, such as the Korean War. Eisenhower said that he did not like the term “limited war.” It was better, he said, to “go after the head of the snake instead of the tail.”\[342\]

Kennedy decided that he would first attempt to save Laos militarily without the introduction of U.S. ground forces, by bolstering the Laotian rightists and inspiring them to determined military action of the sort that the Eisenhower administration had been unable to elicit. General Phoumi launched a new offensive against the Communists during February, but suffered a string of defeats. In March, the Pathet Lao joined with Laotian neutralist and North Vietnamese forces in a major counterattack, pushing Phoumi’s forces back and taking territory of critical strategic importance. Nothing other than a very short amount of time now stood between the Communists and complete control of Laos. Kennedy would have to rush U.S. ground forces into Laos if he wanted to guarantee a non-Communist future for the country.

Eisenhower had been correct when he argued that SEATO or the United
States could intervene in Laos without having to fight a big war with the Soviets or Chinese. The Soviets were not particularly concerned with Southeast Asia at this time and did not want a war. China was reeling from the failure of what it called the “Great Leap Forward,” an experiment in social engineering that had caused thirty million deaths and cut the nation’s birth rate in half.[343] The departure of Soviet experts in 1960 had crippled China’s nascent industries, and the Chinese were still haunted by the Korean War and its heavy costs. China, moreover, had no nuclear weapons at this time. The only scenario in which the Chinese might have considered fighting in Indochina involved the massing of U.S. forces near China’s border with North Vietnam or Laos. The Americans did not need to get so close to China; the most important part of Laos from the American standpoint, namely the potential infiltration routes from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, lay in southern Laos.

U.S. intervention, however, was fraught with other dangers. The French and the British, two key members of SEATO, remained unwilling to participate in military operations in Laos. With 12,000 North Vietnamese troops already in Laos and further large North Vietnamese troop insertions possible, Kennedy would need to commit multiple divisions of American troops and risk substantial casualties. If the North Vietnamese or Chinese did move large numbers of troops into Laos, the Joint Chiefs warned Kennedy, the United States might need to use nuclear weapons. Kennedy was more averse than Eisenhower and the Joint Chiefs whom he had inherited from Eisenhower to involve the United States in situations that might lead to nuclear warfare. In supporting its ground forces, moreover, the United States would face serious logistical challenges in the untamed mountains and valleys of Laos. But what concerned Kennedy most was the lack of fighting spirit among most of the Laotians who would have to serve as America’s principal allies.[344]

Kennedy decided on a show of force, rather than a use of force. He sent the Seventh Fleet into the South China Sea, moved five hundred Marines into Thailand, and put U.S. combat forces in Okinawa on alert. On March 23, the President went on national television. Standing next to three maps of Laos, each six feet by eight feet, he illustrated the advance of the Communist enemy and warned solemnly, “All members of SEATO have undertaken special treaty obligations toward an aggression in Laos. No one should doubt our resolution on this point.” The Communist countries could avoid a dangerous conflict, Kennedy explained, by halting their military provocations and joining the United States in establishing a truly neutral Laos.[345]

Kennedy’s adversaries, however, refused to back off. Communist forces pushed ahead into key areas during April, putting Vientiane itself into danger. Diem told the Americans at the beginning of May that “Laos must be saved at all costs. Otherwise, the situation in South Vietnam will become untenable. The loss of Laos will open all doors to mass infiltration or invasion of South Vietnam.”[346] The Joint Chiefs urged Kennedy to send in U.S. forces, and many of Kennedy’s civilian advisers now spoke up in favor of intervention as well, even Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, the most liberal and usually the most dovish senior official in the Kennedy administration. They advocated such a course in full recognition that it could lead to a major war with China. Bowles himself remarked, “The main question to be faced is the fact that we are going to have to fight the Chinese anyway in two, three, five, or ten years and that it is just a question of when, and how.”[347]

Kennedy was more skeptical about the Joint Chiefs’ plans for military action in Laos than he would have been before the 21st of April, one week earlier. That was the day when Fidel Castro’s troops had finished crushing an invasion force of fifteen hundred Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy had made little effort to consult the Joint Chiefs about the CIA-sponsored operation ahead of time, and he had ignored their calls to provide air support to the struggling invaders, yet he faulted the Joint Chiefs for not voicing their concerns about the operation’s success during the planning stages.[348] Kennedy pressed the Joint Chiefs for specifics on intervention in Laos. They told him that American forces would arrive in Laos at two airfields, but upon further questioning the Joint Chiefs admitted that they had not considered the possibility of a large and swift Communist assault force overrunning the airfields before the Americans had landed sufficient defense forces.[349] Kennedy came away with the impression that the Joint Chiefs were unprepared, incompetent, or both.

At this juncture, distraught over the obstacles to U.S. intervention and