was signed. American determination to build a distinctly anti-communist state in southern Vietnam flew in the face of provisions for the reunification of the country in 1956. Meanwhile, DRV supporters, especially in the south, seethed with frustration over arrangements that fell short of their long-standing desire for national unity. Though their side had suffered more than half a million casualties during the war against France, many pledged to renew the fight at a later date. "We promise our beloved compatriots that one bright and happy day we will return," vowed one Viet Minh officer as his unit from the Mekong Delta prepared to march north, as required by the accords.10 Perhaps most threatening of all to the peace, thousands of southerners who had fought for the Viet Minh remained below the seventeenth parallel, hostile to the Western-oriented administration there.

Nevertheless, a tenuous peace settled across Vietnam in the second half of 1954. More than one hundred thirty thousand troops under French command withdrew to the south, while about ninety thousand Viet Minh soldiers moved in the opposite direction. Both Vietnamese governments claimed to rule the entire country, but in practice both were content to set aside their conflict. For the time being, the two regimes, worn out by war and facing enormous problems within the zones they controlled, focused on consolidating their authority on either side of the seventeenth parallel—on building nations that soon came to be known around the world as North and South Vietnam.

In the North, the DRV government confronted a crippling economic crisis. Intense fighting in the Red River Delta during the closing stages of the war had devastated rice production. Traditionally, northern Vietnam had relied on food from the more productive south to make up for local shortfalls. But after the Geneva agreement, the government in Saigon blocked economic exchange between the two zones. Famine soon loomed in the North. Compounding this problem, fear of communism led many urban professionals, middle-class entrepreneurs, and Catholics—economically crucial groups—to flee to the South. Industrial activity ground almost to a standstill.

Desperate for breathing space to address these problems, the Hanoi government declared its determination to abide by the plan for peaceful reunification laid out in the Geneva Accords. Meanwhile, the government groped for solutions to its economic crisis. At times, it sought stability through moderation. Hanoi attempted to reassure segments of the population that had often backed the French—landowners, the urban middle class, and Catholics—by proclaiming its respect for private property and religious freedom. Mostly, though, the regime pursued more radical approaches. Doctrinaire communists eager to establish a socialist society accelerated an ambitious land-reform plan begun in 1953 to alleviate food shortages and break the power of the old landed elite. The effort succeeded in vastly increasing food production, but it did so at a horrific cost. Inspired by Chinese advisers who saw land reform as a vehicle for "class war," radicals
landlords but also many peasants, including some who had loyally supported the Viet Minh. As many as fifteen thousand people were executed. In late 1956, widespread protests drove Ho Chi Minh to apologize for “mistakes and shortcomings” and to shake up party leadership. The land reform severely heightened tensions in the countryside and led to a bloody military crackdown against dissidents in the coastal province of Nghe An.

None of this turmoil, however, seriously undermined the authority of the communist dictatorship in Hanoi. The regime solidified its position through repressive techniques including imprisonment, executions, control over the press, a crackdown on dissent among intellectuals, and heavy-handed indoctrination programs. But it also benefited from the popularity of Ho Chi Minh, more than ever the embodiment of Vietnamese nationalism, and from the efficient administrative apparatus and robust military that the DRV had developed during the long struggle against France. It is even possible that the regime’s early problems helped solidify its grip on power over the long run. The land reform, for all its violence, distributed land to more than half of all North Vietnamese families, and the departure of many Catholics and much of the middle class—an exodus ultimately totaling almost a million—removed many potential opponents above the seventeenth parallel.

Basic political stability and unity in the North contrasted sharply with the situation in the South. Bao Dai’s State of Vietnam confronted the task of consolidating power in a profoundly fragmented society that barely recognized central authority. Armed confronted the task of consolidating power in a profoundly fragmented society that barely recognized central authority. Armed religious sects dominated the Mekong Delta, and a crime syndicate controlled much of Saigon. The French army continued to wield considerable power throughout the South, while Viet Minh influence lingered quietly. Making matters worse, the Bao Dai government had few tools with which to exert its authority. Thanks to years of effort by the French government to constrain Vietnamese independence, Bao Dai’s regime lacked experienced administrators and possessed only a shell of an army.

On this wobbly foundation, U.S. leaders set out to build a sturdy anticommunist state. They pinned their hopes above all on Ngo Dinh Diem, a veteran nationalist appointed prime minister by Bao Dai in June 1954. Almost alone among prominent Vietnamese politicians, Diem possessed the combination of traits that Washington hoped to foster in the new state. The son of an imperial official who had been dismissed from his job because of anticolonial views, Diem was an ardent foe of French rule. Yet he was vehemently anticommunist at the same time and had long opposed the Viet Minh. Americans were also drawn to Diem because he was a devout Catholic. Diem’s religion put him in a small minority in heavily Buddhist Vietnam but held strong appeal in the United States, where the conservative political climate of the 1950s often equated Christianity with robust anticommunism.

To be sure, some U.S. officials were deeply skeptical of Diem, criticizing him as a hopelessly austere and arrogant religious zealot
just emerged from a religious retreat into the cold world,” wrote Douglas Dillon, the U.S. ambassador in Paris. If Diem appeared a fit candidate to lead Vietnam, Dillon warned, it was “only because the standard set by his predecessors is so low.” Even as Washington began backing Diem with economic and military aid, some U.S. officials championed other Vietnamese leaders for the premiership, and the Eisenhower administration came close to dropping him in 1955.

Yet for the most part the administration tolerated Diem’s deficiencies, hopeful that a steady diet of American assistance would enable him to create a viable South Vietnam. Washington aimed to bolster Diem in part by damaging North Vietnam. Under the direction of Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, a team of Central Intelligence Agency operatives organized sabotage missions across the seventeenth parallel. Clandestine groups contaminated fuel supplies, destroyed printing presses, and distributed leaflets designed to scare the Northern population. They worked especially hard to encourage the exodus of refugees by spreading rumors that Catholics faced persecution and even death if they stayed in the North. The United States then provided ships for a refugee flotilla that American propagandists heralded as the “Passage to Freedom.”

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, standing in front of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, welcomes South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem to Washington on May 8, 1957. (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library)

Meanwhile, Americans helped Diem overcome challenges to his rule in the South. At first these efforts were defensive. U.S. officials protected Diem from French hostility and from coup plots by rivals in the South Vietnamese army. In 1955, however, Americans helped Diem take the offensive. The prime minister
subordinating the religious sects that controlled much of the Mekong Delta. He then skillfully removed another obstacle to his authority, Bao Dai, who remained titular head of state. Diem proposed transforming South Vietnam into a republic with himself as president and called a national referendum to settle the question. He left nothing to chance, rigging the vote to win 98.2 percent of the ballots. Thus did Bao Dai’s State of Vietnam come to an ignominious end. The new nation was known as the Republic of Vietnam, but it more closely resembled a dictatorship—albeit a more chaotic and permissive one than in the North—with Diem and a coterie of family members in control.

Two other threats to Diem dropped away in 1955 and 1956. First, the French government, bitter about American moves to displace it as the chief Western influence in South Vietnam, withdrew its army. That move ended lingering French hopes to oust Diem and install a more Francophile alternative, while clearing the way for an even tighter Washington-Saigon partnership. Second, Diem eliminated any possibility that the all-Vietnam elections stipulated by the Geneva Accords would be held. The Eisenhower administration was determined to avoid a vote, but wariness about seeming to violate democratic principles led it to pay lip service to the idea. The Diem government had no such qualms and bluntly rebuffed Hanoi’s requests that North and South discuss procedures for the elections. The fate of the vote was sealed when the British and Soviet governments, which as chairs of the Geneva conference bore formal responsibility for enforcing the agreement, failed to when the British and Soviet governments, which as chairs of the Geneva conference bore formal responsibility for enforcing the agreement, failed to back Hanoi. Both valued smooth relations with the United States far more than faithful implementation of the Geneva Accords.

Diem’s string of successes generated a surge of optimism in the United States. By 1957, many Americans viewed South Vietnam, so tenuous at first, as a remarkable success story. Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy proclaimed the country “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia.” Eisenhower’s rhetoric soared to similar heights as he welcomed Diem on a triumphant visit to the United States in May 1957. The South Vietnamese leader, Eisenhower declared, had “become an example for people everywhere who hate tyranny and love freedom.” Life magazine dubbed Diem “The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam.”

This outpouring of adulation for Diem betrayed persistent American anxiety during the 1950s that the United States faced grave challenges in resisting communism not just in Vietnam but throughout the decolonizing world. Unquestionably, most Americans believed that the key to quick advancement for newly independent nations lay in embracing Western political and economic practices. But they also worried that the communist powers were winning the competition for influence in the Third World by using coercion and force with greater ruthlessness and by selling their ideas more persuasively. The question of how to keep
generated so much interest among the broader public that in 1958
*The Ugly American*, a collection of linked stories and vignettes
purporting to instruct Americans on policymaking toward
underdeveloped countries like Vietnam, became a runaway best-
seller and sparked Eisenhower to appoint a committee to study how
to improve U.S. aid programs overseas.  

By some measures, Americans were correct in viewing South
Vietnam as a notable success story. Diem had undeniably overcome
long odds in consolidating his rule and had performed far better
than most Americans had expected. Economically, U.S. aid had
enabled South Vietnam not only to survive its early trials but also to
achieve a degree of prosperity. Saigon shops were well stocked with
Western consumer goods, and the countryside recovered from
wartime damage. “There was rice in the fields, fruit in the orchards,
produce in the gardens, poultry and pigs around the house, and fish
in the pond,” one peasant recalled of the years after 1954. 

Moreover, U.S. and South Vietnamese officials established
reasonably smooth relations in a wide range of areas. By the late
1950s, more than fifteen hundred American specialists advised the
South Vietnamese on everything from farming methods to traffic
direction. Washington’s bustling mission in Saigon was its largest
in the world, and American aid to South Vietnam—more than $1
billion between 1955 and 1961—made Diem’s tiny nation the fifth
largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance.

Behind this façade of progress and partnership, however,
billion between 1955 and 1961—made Diem’s tiny nation the fifth
largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance.

Behind this façade of progress and partnership, however,
problems mounted. For one thing, American assistance did little to
promote a healthy South Vietnamese economy for the long term.
South Vietnam used U.S. aid not so much to import industrial
machinery and raw materials—the kinds of goods that might have
helped lay the groundwork for sustained economic development—as
to acquire consumer items such as refrigerators and motorbikes.
The result was an aura of middle-class prosperity in the cities but
also a dangerous dependence on the United States to maintain a
standard of living wildly out of line with South Vietnam’s actual
productive capacity.

Appearances were also deceptive in the military arena. On the
positive side, Washington reorganized and reequipped the rickety
force left over from the 1946–1954 war. By the late 1950s, the new
Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) possessed up-to-date
weaponry, numerous training centers, and auxiliary units to help
with internal security. The revamped force suffered, however, from
chronically poor leadership, not least because Diem, who prized
loyalty over effectiveness, frequently reassigned commanders who
showed initiative and skill. Many officers, meanwhile, used their
posts to enrich themselves through black-marketeering, graft, and
other forms of corruption.

Most problematic of all, Diem’s consolidation of authority
masked his failure to win support in the countryside. U.S. officials
Vietnam, responded to U.S. pressure with a series of halfhearted initiatives focused more on lowering rents and resettling peasants to underdeveloped areas than on reappropriating land already under cultivation. By the end of Diem’s rule, only about 10 percent of more than a million tenant households in South Vietnam had obtained land, generally at high prices.\textsuperscript{18} If Diem’s land measures did nothing to improve the regime’s standing, its popularity sank appreciably as a result of another initiative. In an effort to consolidate central control, Diem quashed the traditional system of local governance and appointed officials to administer South Vietnam’s villages and provinces. Corruption flourished among the new appointees, chosen for their fidelity to Diem rather than their knowledge of local conditions. Burgeoning discontent with Diem’s regime created fertile ground for new communist activism.

A NEW INSURGENCY

For a time, Diem coped successfully with Viet Minh supporters who had remained in the South following partition—yet another prong of his strikingly effective effort to eliminate challengers to his government. Under the slogan “Denounce the Communists,” Diem moved boldly in the summer of 1955 to rout out revolutionaries. Over the next few years, the South Vietnamese army and police arrested some twenty-five thousand suspected subversives and sent them to detention camps, where many were tortured and executed.

Over the next few years, the South Vietnamese army and police arrested some twenty-five thousand suspected subversives and sent them to detention camps, where many were tortured and executed. These efforts devastated the communist movement in South Vietnam. The party lost 90 percent of its cadres and members in the South from 1955 to 1958, according to a North Vietnamese government study, and saw much of its following disintegrate.\textsuperscript{19} “The population no longer dared to provide support, families no longer dared to communicate with their relatives in the movement, and village chapters which previously had one or two hundred members were now reduced to five or ten who had to flee into the jungle,” one communist activist recalled of the mid-1950s.\textsuperscript{20} No relief came from the North. Hanoi clung to its policy of pursuing reunification through peaceful means and discouraged its Southern comrades from fighting back against Diem’s repression. That attitude reflected the belief that construction of socialism in the North must take priority over reunification as well as fears of antagonizing the communist superpowers. In 1956, the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, proclaimed a policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the West. On a trip to Hanoi in April 1956, Soviet Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan spelled out the implications for Vietnam: Hanoi must avoid any return to war. So averse was Moscow to new international tensions over Vietnam that in 1957 it even broached the possibility of membership in the United Nations for both North and South, a move that implied the Soviet Union
the party in danger of eradication below the seventeenth parallel, leaders championing a more aggressive policy in the South gained influence. Of particular importance was Le Duan, a former political prisoner of the French who had helped lead the Viet Minh war effort in the South before becoming a key communist leader in Hanoi. In response to Le Duan’s pleas to save the Southern movement, the communist party affirmed in June 1956 that the reunification struggle must remain primarily political but also endorsed armed self-defense under certain conditions. Meanwhile, party leaders declared it “extremely important” to consolidate and expand revolutionary forces in the South to prepare for the possibility of new fighting. Hanoi further loosened the reins in December, authorizing Southerners to establish secret bases in remote areas and to assassinate South Vietnamese officials.

Violence steadily mounted as Southern activists responded to the changing attitude in Hanoi. In 1957 and 1958, communist fighters launched small-scale raids against government strongholds. Under the slogan “Extermination of Traitors,” they also accelerated their assassination campaign, targeting especially those South Vietnamese officials who damaged the communist cause by performing their duties most capably.

Yet this surge of violence reflected only an incremental change in communist policy, not a clear-cut decision to wage a new war. Hanoi leaders dubbed by historians the “North-first” faction remained convinced of the need to go slow in order to focus on communist policy, not a clear-cut decision to wage a new war. Hanoi leaders dubbed by historians the “North-first” faction remained convinced of the need to go slow in order to focus on internal priorities and to avoid provoking their country’s foreign patrons. The key turning point came in January 1959, when communist leaders gathered once again to consider how to proceed in the South. Two developments pushed the divided party toward the more aggressive policy advocated by the “South-first” faction. First, concerns about international opposition eased as China and the Soviet Union showed greater tolerance for renewed fighting. Second, Hanoi leaders believed that Diem’s policies in the countryside, while shockingly effective in destroying the communist political apparatus, had alienated much of the rural population, making peasants more likely than ever to back the communist cause. Although party leaders agreed that political organizing remained crucial to the revolutionary effort in the South, they declared in their final resolution that the “fundamental path of development for the revolution in South Vietnam is that of violent struggle.”

To support new military efforts in the South, Hanoi decided to build a network of trails that could be used to send troops and equipment across the seventeenth parallel. By the end of 1959, several thousand soldiers—mainly Southerners who had relocated to North Vietnam after the Geneva Accords—had crossed into the South with thirty-one tons of weapons and other supplies, the first trickle of what would become a flood of infiltration down the Ho
Chi Minh Trail. The communists also established a maritime infiltration route that proved crucial to supplying communist forces in the southernmost parts of South Vietnam.

The tide of events in the South began to run in favor of the communists for the first time since 1954. Even before help arrived from the North, Southern insurgents, straining against the limits imposed by Hanoi, reestablished old communist strongholds and mounted uprisings against the Saigon government in the central province of Quang Ngai and the village of Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta. As word of Hanoi’s more permissive attitude spread, heartened communists staged still bolder attacks against government installations and even struck units of the South Vietnamese army. Assassinations of government officials climbed to more than one hundred and fifty per month in the first half of 1960.

The final step in the North Vietnamese government’s gradual shift toward war came at another landmark party meeting in September 1960. Communist leaders showed their changing attitude above all by calling for the establishment of a political organization to challenge Diem for control in South Vietnam. As so often in the past, the party opted to submerge its communist agenda within a broad coalition. On December 20, 1960, about fifty representatives of various political, religious, and ethnic groups hostile to Diem gathered at a remote spot near the Cambodian border to found the National Liberation Front. Modeled on the Viet Minh, the new group emphasized nationalist goals rather than social revolution. In this way, the organization hoped to attract a broad following and, as much as possible, to avoid provoking the United States.

By the start of 1961, then, the communists had laid the political and military groundwork for a new war. The conflict had also acquired one of the most distinct features it would have over the years to come: it was simultaneously a civil war among Southerners and a cross-border effort by Hanoi to reunify the country on its own terms, a complexity that would often elude American policymakers prone to see the conflict simply as a result of Northern aggression against the South. Unquestionably, the Second Indochina War—the conflict that would ultimately involve half a million American troops—sprang partly from efforts by the Hanoi government to control developments in the South and bring about unification under communist rule. But it also resulted from Diem’s repression of a revolutionary movement that remained wedded to the vision of independence and social renovation that had underpinned the Viet Minh struggle in earlier years.

As the insurgency expanded, the South Vietnamese government lost its earlier effectiveness in dealing with the communist challenge. In fact, new efforts to fight the insurgency boomeranged spectacularly. In 1959, Saigon authorities began relocating many peasants to “agrovilles,” fortified villages designed to isolate the rural population from the movement derisively labeled the “Vietcong,” a contraction of the term for “Vietnamese
communist.” That measure alienated many peasants by requiring them to leave their ancestral homes and forcing them to endure harsh working conditions. Around the same time, Saigon enacted the even more counterproductive Decree 10/59, which classified all opposition to the government as treason and gave security forces broad authority to arrest, try, and execute suspected subversives. The behavior of the corrupt and arbitrary officials who ran the program drove many peasants into the communist fold. “The people became more angry and, as a consequence, many volunteered to join us,” recalled one communist organizer.26

American officials watched with dread as the Saigon government faltered in the face of the growing insurgency. The news kept getting worse. Guerrilla attacks grew bolder and more destructive. American and South Vietnamese confidence in Diem’s leadership plummeted. In April 1960, a group of noncommunist politicians, including some who had served in Diem’s cabinet, met at the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon and issued the “Caravelle Manifesto,” a declaration biting critical of the government. Unpopular with both peasants and urbanites, Diem’s government was “in quite serious danger,” Elbridge Durbrow, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, reported to Washington in September.27

That prognosis was affirmed two months later, when Diem barely managed to put down a coup attempt by South Vietnamese army officers upset by his management of the anticommunist fight. Whether he could survive another such challenge remained to be seen. In Washington, the problem of bolstering an increasingly precarious South Vietnam fell to President John F. Kennedy, who took office in January 1961.
ESCALATION

The New Kennedy Administration had no illusions about the difficulties it faced in South Vietnam. A state of “active guerrilla warfare” existed throughout the country and the Saigon government was nearing “the decisive phase in its battle for survival,” a U.S. government study asserted in spring 1961. The crisis only worsened over the next few years, leading some frustrated U.S. officials—along with many journalists, members of Congress, and leaders of allied nations—to caution against deeper involvement. The task of stabilizing South Vietnam was, the skeptics insisted, simply not worth the vast expenditure of resources and blood that it seemed likely to require. A few warned that success might not be possible at all.

In Hanoi, many North Vietnamese leaders were also wary of a major war. They warned that further intensification of military activity in the South risked sparking an all-out American intervention to shore up the Saigon regime. For such a small, technologically unsophisticated country as North Vietnam, it was a fearsome prospect.

Yet in Hanoi, as in Washington, the logic of escalation prevailed. Step by step, both sides expanded their commitments to South Vietnam between 1961 and 1965, the critical years of decision making that culminated in the dispatch of American combat forces. President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, followed this course not because they were confident of victory but because they feared the consequences of defeat. They worried that a communist victory would damage American interests around the world and cripple their presidencies by sparking a conservative rebellion against the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the dominant faction of North Vietnamese policymakers calculated that intensification of the war might enable the National Liberation Front to win quickly, before the United States could bring its full military power to bear.

JFK AND VIETNAM

John F. Kennedy won the presidency largely on the strength of bold promises to wage the Cold War more vigorously than had his predecessor. “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill,” Kennedy declared at his inauguration, “that we shall pay any
price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty." The administration was especially eager to play an active role in the Third World. The crumbling of European empires seemed to create opportunities for spreading American influence but also to generate grave dangers that newly independent countries, anxious to end Western domination, might lean toward the communist powers. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev heightened American fears in January 1961 by declaring his readiness to support what he called “wars of national liberation.” To combat communist insurgencies, Kennedy insisted on building up U.S. capabilities to fight small, “brushfire” wars, including the one in Vietnam.

In his bid to inject dynamism into U.S. foreign policy, Kennedy relied on a team of remarkably accomplished advisers. For secretary of defense, Kennedy chose Robert McNamara, president of Ford Motor Company and previously a professor at the Harvard Business School. Dean Rusk, a Rhodes Scholar who had worked in the State Department during the early Cold War, left the presidency of the Rockefeller Foundation to become secretary of state. McGeorge Bundy, the forty-one-year-old dean of faculty at Harvard, went to the White House as Kennedy’s national security adviser, and one of the nation’s foremost economists, Walt W. Rostow, became Bundy’s deputy.

Ambitious and self-confident, these men believed that they could use America’s vast material power to guide the development of Third World countries. They backed sharply increased spending on foreign aid and founded the Peace Corps to undertake assistance projects. At the same time, they called for a huge buildup of U.S. military capabilities. During the 1950s, they believed, American military doctrine had concentrated too heavily on nuclear arms, leaving the United States ill-equipped to fight small, low-technology wars of the sort they expected in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Under the banner of “Flexible Response,” the Kennedy team expanded American preparedness for every type of conflict. Behind this effort lay an assumption that would prove crucial to the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam over the following years: the United States could draw from this range of options to achieve precise results and could wage “limited” wars without risking nuclear Armageddon.

The most urgent crisis that Kennedy and his advisers confronted in Southeast Asia during their first months in office occurred not in Vietnam but in Laos. Just as in South Vietnam, the United States had pumped vast resources into the country since 1954 to help establish a pro-Western government. At the start of 1961, the Laotian regime faced imminent defeat by a communist movement known as the Pathet Lao. At a meeting with Kennedy the day before his inauguration, Eisenhower described the situation in stark terms. Laos was the “key to the entire area of Southeast Asia,” he insisted. If Laos fell to communism, then South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma would quickly follow. The only solution was to send American troops, Eisenhower
Kennedy’s bold commitment to fight communism suggested that he would do as his predecessor proposed, and many administration officials, confident of their ability to wage limited war, urged military intervention. But the president balked. Kennedy questioned whether Laos was worth American blood and whether U.S. forces could fight effectively in such a rugged and remote country. At the end of April 1961, he announced that the United States would participate in an international conference to seek a settlement among the communist, pro-Western, and neutralist groups vying for control in Laos. More than a year of talks led to a deal in July 1962 to “neutralize” the country by setting up a coalition government and strictly limiting foreign involvement.

Although the agreement won praise around the world as a rare instance of East-West compromise, there was little chance that it would lead to lasting settlement for Laos, much less for Indochina as a whole. Like the 1954 Geneva Accords, the deal allowed the great powers to back away from an increasingly dangerous confrontation but did nothing to resolve underlying tensions. Laos remained divided among hostile factions determined to carry on their struggle for power. Moreover, the key signatories to the agreement continued to support their Laotian allies. The Kennedy administration viewed the deal as a way to carry on the fight without resorting to all-out intervention. For their part, the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam—the Pathet Lao’s key supporters—regarded the settlement as a temporary expedient that would—regarded the settlement as a temporary expedient that would lessen the chance of direct American intervention and buy time for the Laotian communists to build their strength. Le Duan, elevated in 1960 to the top post in the Vietnamese communist party, appears to have hoped that the deal might also help convince U.S. leaders to negotiate a similar arrangement for Vietnam. In that way, he believed, Vietnamese communists might achieve all their objectives in the South without risking a major war against the United States.4

But American willingness to compromise with communists in Laos did not carry over to Vietnam. On the contrary, the administration’s conciliation only heightened its determination to back the Diem regime, which appeared more than ever the cornerstone of Western influence in Southeast Asia. The administration also felt political pressure to make a stand in Vietnam. By compromising over Laos, Kennedy exposed himself to charges of appeasing communists—a line of attack with the potential to harm both Kennedy’s presidency and the Democratic Party more generally. Although anticommunist fervor had ebbed since the 1950s, political leaders remembered well the hazards of appearing soft on communism. Kennedy was particularly sensitive to questions about his leadership following an embarrassing setback in Cuba. In April 1961, Cuban exiles organized by the Central Intelligence Agency were defeated in their attempt to overthrow the communist-leaning regime of Fidel Castro. Having failed in Cuba and backed down in Laos, Kennedy believed he
States failed to stand behind South Vietnam, officials believed, governments worldwide would doubt the credibility of American commitments. Allies would lose confidence in America's dedication to its treaty obligations, and enemies would be emboldened to foment insurgencies elsewhere. The fight in Vietnam thus seemed intertwined with American interests all over the globe.

The Kennedy administration breathed a sigh of relief during 1962, when the American buildup seemed to yield positive results, apparently vindicating the president's judgment that South Vietnam could survive without U.S. combat soldiers. Using helicopters and armored vehicles supplied by Washington, South Vietnamese forces beat back NLF attacks with new vigor. Americans also drew encouragement from a new initiative by the Diem regime to isolate the rural population from communist activists. Under the Strategic Hamlets program, the South Vietnamese government began constructing fortified settlements designed to enable local authorities to tighten control over political activity among the peasantry and to resist communist attacks more effectively. More than six hundred such hamlets, ringed by moats and bamboo spikes, were complete by the end of 1962, with hundreds more under construction.6

Cheered by the news from Vietnam, Kennedy instructed McNamara in July 1962 to begin planning for a gradual withdrawal of American advisers starting at the end of 1963. He did so out of confidence that the United States was achieving its goal to preserve a stable South Vietnamese state, not, as some historians have speculated, out of a desire to cut American losses in a place where the United States faced an impossible task. Indeed, when the war turned against South Vietnam in 1963, Kennedy stepped up U.S. military involvement to unprecedented levels.

THE OVERTHROW OF DIEM

Behind the veneer of progress during 1962, Diem's problems were mounting. The Strategic Hamlets program, though deeply worrying to the communists, had the unintended consequence of alienating many peasants from the Saigon government by uprooting them from their ancestral homes and failing to provide promised material benefits. Meanwhile, communists continued to win support by skillfully exploiting local grievances, especially the all-important land issue, and expanding their administrative apparatus. Even in the military arena, the South Vietnamese offensive failed to weaken the National Liberation Front in any lasting way. Communist forces remained hidden in remote locations and managed to avoid serious defeats. Indeed, communist strength increased thanks to infiltration via both overland and maritime routes. During 1962, Hanoi sent almost ten thousand fighters and, for the first time, heavy artillery down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which the communists expanded into an elaborate network of roads running through eastern Laos.7 At the same time, communist commanders developed methods to defeat
helicopter-borne assaults that had put them on the defensive.

The bubble of South Vietnamese and American optimism burst in the first days of January 1963, when NLF fighters won a stunning victory near the village of Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta. South Vietnamese forces greatly outnumbered the communists and possessed vastly superior weaponry, including armored vehicles and helicopters piloted by Americans. Yet the South Vietnamese crumbled under enemy fire. The battle revealed South Vietnamese incompetence as well as new determination among communist troops to stand and fight in the face of abundant U.S.-supplied equipment. The battle showed the “coming of age” of NLF forces, asserted communist party First Secretary Le Duan. But the most important outcome of the battle, described in the American press as a major defeat indicative of deep problems in South Vietnam, was to kindle new doubts in the United States about the Diem regime.


Doubt turned into alarm a few months later. American officials watched with horror as Diem, abetted by his increasingly influential brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, cracked down on Buddhists agitating for political reform. Tensions had simmered for years between the Buddhist clergy and the Diem government, which scorned Buddhists and granted privileges to Catholics. Outright conflict began in Hue on May 8, 1963, when government troops fired on demonstrators demanding the right to display Buddhist prayer flags. Several activists and bystanders were killed. Protest leaders demanded that the government end its “arrests and terrorization” of Buddhists and declare religious equality. But Ngo Dinh Nhu, who spearheaded the anti-Buddhist campaign, refused to make any concessions. The crisis deepened on June 11, when an elderly Buddhist monk dramatized his cause by burning himself to death—a solemn gesture of defiance among Buddhists—in a Saigon intersection. A vicious cycle of confrontation swirled during the following weeks. Buddhist demands became a rallying point for all South Vietnamese who opposed Diem, and more monks immolated themselves. Diem, who blamed the disturbances on the
Buddhist leaders, and declared martial law.

The deepening crisis, heavily covered by the growing foreign press corps in Saigon, confirmed for many Americans that Diem was a narrow-minded tyrant with little legitimacy among his own people, the vast majority of whom identified to some degree with Buddhism. Whereas Diem’s willingness to attack his enemies had seemed an asset back in the mid-1950s, it stood out as a serious liability by 1963. U.S. officials desperately wanted him to knit diverse elements of South Vietnamese society into a broad front against the communists, but he and his brother seemed to be causing only further fragmentation. Gruesome newspaper photos of monks burning to death shocked American readers, not least Kennedy, and suggested that South Vietnamese society was unraveling. American outrage mounted further when Ngo Dinh Nhu’s wife, best known as Madame Nhu, mocked the self-immolations as “barbecues” and expressed delight at the prospect of more.10

*Thich Quang Duc, a seventy-three-year-old Buddhist monk, burns himself to death at a Saigon intersection on June 11, 1963. (AP Images/Malcolm Browne)*

American officials demanded that Diem make peace with the Buddhists and won grudging assurances that the repression would cease. Behind the scenes, however, Diem and Nhu increasingly resented U.S. pressure. Animosity between Washington and Saigon mounted as the crisis intensified. Nhu had already complained for months that the American presence in South Vietnam had grown too large and invasive. The Americans, he charged, were running roughshod over South Vietnamese sovereignty. So exasperated did Nhu become in the summer of 1963 that he secretly made contact with North Vietnamese leaders to explore the possibility of a settlement of North-South differences that would free Saigon of its
leaders were nationalists more than communists and were open to a Vietnamese solution to Vietnamese problems.

Nhu was probably correct in sensing opportunities for a settlement of some sort. Confronted with an increasingly chaotic situation in the South, communist leaders pursued a dual policy during much of 1963. On the one hand, they continued to expand infiltration into the South and intensified their anti-Saigon rhetoric. To overthrow Diem, there was “no alternative but to use violence,” Le Duan proclaimed in March. On the other hand, communist forces made no major moves to instigate an uprising against Diem or otherwise to capitalize on the Saigon government’s problems. North Vietnamese leaders most likely held back in order to test the possibilities of achieving their goals peacefully, either through a deal with Nhu or, more likely, by waiting for Diem’s woes to mount to the point where the United States might become willing to withdraw on terms favorable to Hanoi. Hostile moves promised to demolish these possibilities by provoking the United States to intervene more directly in the war or to overthrow Diem and bring to power a new leadership more subservient to Washington.

While Hanoi held back, key governments around the world were undoubtedly amenable to a settlement. Soviet leaders, even more than their North Vietnamese allies, feared a major war involving the United States and quietly kept alive the possibility of talks. In the West, meanwhile, the British and French governments worried that the United States faced bleak prospects in Vietnam and would be distracted from more important parts of the world—notably Europe—if it became embroiled in a war. West European interest in negotiations peaked on August 29, 1963, when French president Charles de Gaulle called publicly for talks to neutralize Vietnam. Although he did not spell out a detailed plan, de Gaulle envisioned an agreement among the great powers to reunify Vietnam under a coalition government that would ensure neither communist nor Western domination of the country. Whether neutralization would in fact prevent an outright communist takeover was an open question, but many champions of this scheme considered that grim possibility preferable to an even grimmer war.

The rapid deterioration in South Vietnam led many Americans to think in similar ways. Influential newspapers advocated neutralization, while some liberals in Congress suggested using Diem’s brutality as a pretext for negotiating a withdrawal from South Vietnam. As before, however, appeals for talks gained no traction within the executive branch. Indeed, Kennedy’s aides lashed out against Nhu’s flirtations with Hanoi and de Gaulle’s proposal. The administration responded to the crisis in South Vietnam not by scaling back its commitment but by seeking a more compliant leadership in Saigon. At first, Americans demanded simply that Diem drop Ngo Dinh Nhu—the focus of U.S. anger—from the government and cooperate more closely with Washington. When Diem refused, the Kennedy administration turned to a more
possibility emerged in late August 1963, when a group of
disaffected South Vietnamese generals secretly contacted U.S.
representatives to test Washington's interest in overthrowing Diem.
Senior U.S. officials differed over the idea, but Kennedy authorized
Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, to give the
green light.
For a time, nothing happened. Coup plans unraveled as
suspicion and uncertainty spread among key plotters. Given a
chance to reconsider their options, American policymakers
bickered angrily—a sign of mounting frustration among officials
who lacked any attractive options. Some advocated pressing ahead
with a coup. Others warned that removing Diem would only
heighten South Vietnam's instability. The president saw both sides
and avoided a firm position. By not deciding, however, Kennedy
effectively left the matter to Lodge, a staunch proponent of a coup.
Lodge and his aides informed the conspirators that the United
States stood ready to support them. This time, the generals were
better organized. On November 1, 1963, they seized key
installations in Saigon and demanded the surrender of Diem and
Nhu. The brothers escaped the presidential palace through a secret
passageway but were captured and, despite promises of good
treatment, brutally murdered in the back of an armored vehicle.
Diem's tumultuous nine-year rule was over.

A South Vietnamese soldier poses inside the ransacked
Presidential Palace in Saigon following the coup that
overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963. (AP Images)

NEW FACES, OLD PROBLEMS

As exultant crowds in Saigon cheered the army and tore up
portraits of Diem, Lodge congratulated himself on the coup. "The
prospects now are for a shorter war," he cabled to Washington,
confident that the new government would press the anticomunist
fight more assertively. But such optimism soon evaporated as
U.S. officials realized they had misjudged their co-conspirators.
Although headed by military officers, the new regime reflected
junta aimed not so much to step up the war effort as to broaden the Saigon government’s base of political support in order to negotiate with the NLF from a position of greater strength.

Making matters worse for Washington, Hanoi responded to the coup by sharply intensifying the war in the South. Over the previous two years, North Vietnamese and NLF leaders had generally agreed on the need to restrain communist military operations, partly out of fear of irritating Moscow but largely on the calculation that there was no point in antagonizing the United States when the Diem regime seemed likely to collapse under the weight of its own shortcomings. The coup eliminated the latter motive for caution by bringing to power a South Vietnamese government that appeared, at least initially, to enjoy the twin advantages of considerable popularity and redoubled U.S. backing. At contentious party meetings in November and December 1963, communist leaders agreed that the time had come for bolder military moves. Hanoi still showed a degree of caution, rejecting proposals to send large numbers of regular North Vietnamese troops across the seventeenth parallel. But they decided nonetheless to strengthen the Southern insurgency in hopes of scoring quick battlefield victories that would bring the NLF to power before the United States could intervene more fully.

These decisions marked a major victory for Le Duan, who had been arguing for years in favor of bold action in the South, and other militants such as Le Duc Tho and Nguyen Chi Thanh, party leaders who would become increasingly prominent in managing the war. Meanwhile, party officials who backed a more cautious policy were increasingly marginalized. The hawks, openly espousing a Maoist vision of aggressive insurgent warfare over the restrained approach preferred by Moscow, ousted many moderates from government posts and placed some under house arrest. Revealingly, even Ho Chi Minh, who had thrived for so many years through his remarkable ability to bring together revolutionaries of different political stripes, found himself on the sidelines. At more than seventy years old, the towering figure of the Vietnamese revolution became a figurehead with little authority over day-to-day policymaking. The coup thus backfired on the United States, exacerbating the political problems that it faced in South Vietnam and emboldening militants in Hanoi.

Another momentous development in November 1963—the assassination of Kennedy—compounded the setback by ensuring that there would be no reappraisal of the American commitment in the months ahead. To be sure, it is doubtful that Kennedy would have taken early steps toward negotiation or withdrawal. For more than two years, after all, he had massively expanded the American investment in Vietnam. Yet Kennedy possessed a nuanced grasp of the difficulties confronting the United States in Vietnam and saw reasons to avoid introduction of combat forces. It is plausible to speculate that Washington might have pulled back from Vietnam rather than send Americans into battle if he, rather than the less subtle Lyndon Johnson, had occupied the White House in 1965,
when a choice could no longer be deferred.

From the outset of his presidency, Johnson took a belligerent position on Vietnam. "We should all of us let no day go by without asking whether we are doing everything we can to win the struggle there," he told administration officials during his second week in office.\textsuperscript{14} Johnson's attitude reflected his unwavering acceptance of the geostrategic assumptions that had underpinned American involvement in Vietnam for several years. As Senate majority leader in the 1950s and then as vice president, he had spoken apocalyptically about the risks of communist advances, warning at one point that the United States would have to "surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores" if the communists prevailed in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{15} After rising to the presidency, Johnson saw additional reasons to take a hard line. For one, he believed that at a moment of national grieving for Kennedy it was politically vital to stick with his predecessor's policies, especially in foreign affairs. Johnson lacked confidence in that arena and leaned heavily on Kennedy's key advisers.

The new president also believed that he needed to take a bold stand against communist expansion to win approval for his ambitious domestic agenda. Johnson, who had come to prominence as a champion of the New Deal during the 1930s, aspired to build on earlier liberal accomplishments by promoting civil rights, fighting poverty, improving education, and expanding health care—a raft of legislative initiatives aimed at creating what he would later proclaim the "Great Society." He knew, however, that he faced skepticism from conservatives, including southerners in his own party, and feared he would have no chance to accomplish his goals if he left himself vulnerable to criticism for weakness against communism. The furor that Joseph McCarthy had raised against Harry Truman over the "loss" of China back in the early 1950s was "chickenshit" compared with the conservative backlash he expected if the communists took South Vietnam, Johnson asserted years later.\textsuperscript{16}

While Johnson affirmed the American commitment, the news from Vietnam kept getting worse. Following an inspection trip to South Vietnam in December 1963, Secretary of Defense McNamara reported that the insurgents controlled even more territory than American officials had feared. The Strategic Hamlet program was crumbling, and chaos reigned in the cities. If nothing was done to reverse the trend, McNamara predicted, the country would collapse within two or three months. Disappointed by the rulers it had just helped install, Washington threw its support behind another coup, this one carried out bloodlessly by General Nguyen Khanh on January 29, 1964. The Johnson administration hoped that Khanh would live up to his promises to wage the war more effectively, but the leadership change made little difference.

Within the United States and around the world, a growing chorus appealed for a negotiated settlement that would allow Washington to save face while disengaging from a hopeless situation. Key members of the Senate, along with a mounting
number of editorial pages around the nation, urged Johnson to pursue any avenue that might lead to a peaceful outcome. Even within the administration, several midlevel officials urged caution. Most strikingly, David Nes, the second-ranking diplomat in Saigon, argued in a February 1964 memorandum that basic social trends in South Vietnam made an American victory impossible. “The peasants who form the mass of the South Vietnamese population are exhausted and sick of twenty years of civil conflict,” Nes asserted. “On the other hand, the Viet Cong represents a grass roots movement which is disciplined, ideologically dedicated, easily identifiable with the desires of the peasantry and of course ruthless.” Internationally, American allies sometimes sympathized with U.S. objectives but doubted whether they could be achieved at a reasonable cost. Britain, Canada, and other Western governments rejected American appeals for help in Vietnam and quietly urged Washington to cut its losses.

Privately, Johnson confessed deep worries about Vietnam and had no enthusiasm for deepening the American commitment. “It’s just the biggest damn mess that I ever saw,” he lamented to a confidant in May 1964. But the president and his advisers refused to consider backing down. The key question for them was not whether, but how, to prop up South Vietnam. Increasingly, they concluded that the United States, to have any hope of success in Southeast Asia, must expand its military activities. Planning focused on an old idea—the introduction of American combat troops to bolster the South Vietnamese army—and a new one: launching air attacks against North Vietnam to coerce it into ending support for the Southern insurgency. By the middle of 1964, a consensus had formed among Johnson’s key advisers and the military that one or both of these moves would be necessary.

Yet Johnson was loath to take either step in the short term. He worried that the Khanh government was too frail to withstand a larger war. More important, he feared that any abrupt departures in Vietnam might hurt him in the presidential election that November. Although polls showed that he enjoyed a huge lead over his Republican challenger, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, Johnson believed that a major expansion of the war might cause both liberals and centrists to have second thoughts. The trick was to display firmness on the Vietnam issue while deferring any dramatic moves until after the election.

DECISIONS FOR WAR

Keenly attuned to his electoral prospects, Johnson authorized only minor invigoration of the war effort in 1964, even as he and his advisers contemplated a major escalation later. Johnson increased the number of U.S. military advisers to 23,300 by the end of the year and appointed a new American commander, General William Westmoreland, in the hope that the veteran of the Second World War and Korea would deliver better results. In a sign of things to