Problems of perception in diplomacy: The decisions to intervene in Korea and Vietnam

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PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY:
THE DECISIONS TO INTERVENE IN
KOREA AND VIETNAM

By

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This work is an analysis of the perceptions of the leading
officials of the administrations from President Truman to Presi­
dent Johnson, 1945 to 1965. Specifically, the study centers on
how these perceptions influenced the decisions by the government
of the United States to intervene in Korea and Vietnam. This
involves an examination of the perceptions of key administration
officials in respect to the lessons of the past, the adversaries
of America, particularly the Soviet Union and the communist world,
and finally their view of America's role in the international
political system.

In conclusion, America's perceptions regarding the lessons of
Munich and the Cold War, its fear of a global and monolithic
communist threat, and its self-image of the United States as
the leader of the free world were decisive factors which led to
intervention in both the Korean and Vietnamese wars.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................... ii

PREFACE .................................. 1

Chapter

I PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION AND THE DECISION TO INTERVENE IN KOREA .............. 4

1. The Cold War .................................. 6
2. Truman's Conception of Power .......... 10
3. War in Korea .................................. 14

II PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION AND THE PROSECUTION OF THE KOREAN WAR ............. 28

1. A Policy of Restraint .................... 29
2. Transformation of War Aims .......... 33
3. Washington's Hopes and Motivations .. 38
4. China Threatens to Intervene .......... 42
5. America's Response to China .......... 44
6. China Intervenes ......................... 47
7. The American Response ................. 53
8. The Impact of Korea .................... 59

III PROBLEMS IN PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE TRUMAN AND EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATIONS IN VIETNAM, 1945-1960 ............ 64

1. The American Quandry of Colonialism Versus Communism ............. 65
2. A Turning Point ......................... 75
3. The Eisenhower Years .................. 86
4. Eisenhower and Vietnam .............. 90
5. The Cold War and Vietnam .......... 100
### IV PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION AND VIETNAM, 1961-1963

1. Wars of National Liberation .......................... 105
2. Vietnam: The Early Decisions ........................ 111
3. The Sino-Soviet Split and the Cuban Missile Crisis ................................................. 119
4. Vietnam: A Year of Crisis .............................. 123
5. An Ambiguous Legacy ...................................... 125

### V PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION AND THE DECISION TO INTERVENE IN VIETNAM, 1963-1965

1. Vietnam: The Situation Worsens ....................... 129
2. The Johnson Administration's World View ............ 133
3. The Road to Intervention: A Chronology, 1964-1965 .................................................... 137
4. The Crossroad of Decision ............................... 145

### VI CONCLUSION

1. Lessons of the Past ..................................... 154
3. Conclusion ............................................... 161

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................... 166
PREFACE

In a time of turmoil like the present, historians who deal in praise or blame are in danger of sounding shrill. Of a major scholarly movement that claims the function of a moral judgment we are entitled to ask for a widening, not a mere reversal of perspectives; an enrichment of our humanity, not a mere confirmation of our likes and dislikes. This in turn calls for a certain charity: a blend of sympathy and distance, a combination of emphatic identification with analytical detachment.¹

John Higham 1968

The study of the American interventions in Korea and Vietnam deserves and demands no less a standard of excellence than that espoused by John Higham. When analyzing such recent and traumatic conflicts, the penchant to praise or blame in shrill sounds is accentuated and the likelihood that the bulk of commentary will be comprised of emotional and self-serving polemics is dramatically increased. This is especially true in respect to Korea and Vietnam. Many historians therefore contend that both conflicts, particularly Vietnam, are subjects conducive to historical analysis. Yet, despite the pervasive accusation of being high-minded journalism at best, serious study of the era has begun.

This thesis is no attempt at a definitive work of the two conflicts, encompassing all the elements such an effort would entail. Rather, its goal is more modest: to investigate the perceptions of the key officials of the administrations from Harry S. Truman through Lyndon B. Johnson. Consequently little attention, if any, will be given to deserving topics. The study does not include, for example, an analysis of how domestic and bureaucratic politics shaped White House policy. To ascertain why American decision makers determined that intervention in these remote areas of the world was necessary. I concentrated on how American statesmen perceived reality and on how this subsequently shaped their behavior.

Originally my motivation derived impetus from a yearning to understand why the Vietnam War, the most tragic event of my life, ever occurred. Though not immune to the painful memories of this era in American history, I strove to detach

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my personal beliefs and emotions from my study of the wars; a goal not easily attained and ultimately elusive. I wondered if a member of the generation who reached political maturity during the 1960s could understand, though not necessarily agree with, the actions of another generation—actions which directly affected my personal life. Our frame of references were so dissimilar; their Munich was my Gulf of Tonkin, their Pearl Harbor my Kent and Jackson State. To avoid the pitfalls of many of the studies on Vietnam, I decided to discover how these men from 1945 to 1965 viewed the problems of their time.

Therefore I have not attempted to write an historical account from the perspective of my generation. In fact, I always suspected that Carl Becker's dictum that every generation must write its own history is analogous to General Motors' policy of planned obsolescence. If history's contributions are to be lasting then let us not restrict it solely to the preoccupations of each generation. Hopefully my minor effort will be a worthy contribution to the historian's attempt to unravel the mysteries of the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts.
CHAPTER I

PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY:

THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION AND THE

DECISION TO INTERVENE IN KOREA

The decision of President Truman on June 27 lighted into flame a lamp of hope throughout Asia that was burning dimly toward extinction. It marked for the Far East the focal and turning point in this area struggling for freedom.1

Douglas MacArthur

During a press conference, on November 30, 1950, President Harry S. Truman delivered the following statement:

The forces of the United Nations are in Korea to put down an aggression that threatens not only the whole fabric of the United Nations, but all human hopes of peace and justice. If the United Nations yields to the forces of aggression, no nation will be safe or secure. If aggression is successful in Korea, we can expect it to spread throughout Asia and Europe to this hemisphere. We are fighting in Korea

1U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services and Committee on Foreign Relations, To Conduct an Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur from his Assignment in That Area. 82nd Cong., 1st sess., 1951, 1:81. [Hereafter cited as the MacArthur Hearings.]
for our own national security and survival.\(^2\)

To preserve the sanctity of the United Nations, to resist communist aggression, and to uphold and maintain the peace and security of the nation and the free world: these were the stated reasons justifying American military intervention in Korea.\(^3\) Why did Truman and the vast majority of Americans perceive that intervention in Korea was necessary? Before discussing the Korean decision one must place Korea and the events unfolding during the summer of 1950 in their historical context.

The contemporary reader, quite likely, greets Truman's rationale with skepticism. To the citizen who, since political maturity, was inundated with continuous warnings of the dangers of communism, the declaration's sense of urgency is lost. The statement seems typical of the bloated and deceptive rhetoric of the "Imperial Presidency." If one could temporarily forget the events of the last quarter century, however, then the statement ceases to be typical and becomes a remarkable and extraordinary historical document.


\(^3\)Throughout the paper communism will be spelled with a small c, except when directly quoting other sources. Vietnam will appear as just cited, except when directly quoting other sources.
Just ten years prior to America's intervention in Korea, many Americans were reluctant to aid Britain in its lone struggle against the greatest threat known to Western civilization. Indeed, for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to have taken up the torch of the free world against Nazi aggression in 1940 would have constituted political suicide. Ten years later, however, America would assume far wider world responsibilities and lead the fight against aggression, in Korea, which became "the symbol of the resistance of a united humanity against aggression." What had transpired during those ten years that compelled the American public and its leaders to react to hostilities in Korea with almost the same intensity as they had to the tragic events of December 7, 1941? Why had a country which most Americans could not locate on a map become vital to American security? Had the world changed that drastically?

1. The Cold War

Truman's reminiscence of a trip to Pearl Harbor in 1950 captured the bewilderment of a generation: "I seemed to have passed from one epoch of history into another, and yet 1941 was less than ten years away." As the destruction of war swept across the continent of Europe, the world had undergone a period of enormous change and turmoil. The

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4Truman, Memoirs, 2:368.
5Ibid., 2:364.
postwar world bore little resemblance to the world of the 1930s. From the ashes of war a new international system emerged, but the swift decline of the familiar world order mystified mere mortals. Europe was no longer the center of civilization. The process of European disintegration, initiated with the Great War, culminated with the devastation of World War II. Amidst a war-torn Europe, two burgeoning world powers faced each other across an "Iron Curtain."

Men wondered if these two powers could cooperate in an effort to facilitate world peace. Although both countries espoused exclusive and antagonistic ideologies, cherished opposing ideals, and were committed to divergent security interests, it was hoped that these differences could be reconciled. But the areas of controversy underlying these two world viewpoints were seldom compatible or amenable to compromise. Often the goals of each country were conflicting, their disagreements fundamental, and all the aspirations and hopes of a war-weary world could not transcend that inescapable reality. Truman pursued Roosevelt's policy of utilizing the Grand Alliance as an instrument of world peace, but the crises over Poland, Iran, Germany, and Greece dealt a fatal blow to hopes of a continued collaboration with the Soviet Union. The Grand Alliance became a phantom, a relic of the past, a reminder of what might have been. By 1947 American leaders consciously confronted the Soviets, and
the policy of cooperation was transformed to a policy of containment. To use the terminology of another crisis, the two powers were eyeball to eyeball. It would be years before either blinked.

The Soviets and Americans became so obsessed with each other that their visions of the world excluded other considerations. One can picture the extremity that the confrontation took by imagining two people spying through a keyhole on each other. Each saw the opposite of themselves, perceiving what John Stoessinger calls "mirror devil images," of threats to their values and survival. The Soviets and Americans, like Narcissus, became possessed by the image that they gazed upon. Unlike Narcissus, however, the antagonist's wills were paralyzed not by love, but by a pervasive and profound fear. These mutual fears and suspicions acquired a peculiar dynamic of their own as the bipolar world perspective hardened and crystallized. The eloquent spokesman of the Truman Administration, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, aptly described this perspective:


Only two great powers remain in the world . . . the United States and the Soviet Union. We have arrived at a situation unparalleled since ancient times. Not since Rome and Carthage had there been such a polarization of power on this earth. Moreover, the two great powers were divided by an unbridgeable ideological chasm . . . And it was clear that the Soviet Union was aggressive and expanding . . . It was a matter of building our own security and safeguarding freedom by strengthening free people against Communist aggression and subversion. We had the choice . . . of acting with energy to meet this situation or losing by default.  

Truman and Acheson reasoned that as the leader of the free world, America was engaged in a struggle of survival with the Soviet Union. The Soviets would take advantage of the chaos and weakness of the postwar era to pursue its ambitions of global expansion. Only the resolute opposition of the United States could contain the spread of Soviet communism.  

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It is within this historical context that the Korean decision must be placed if it is to be properly understood. In a world controlled by two mutually hostile countries, Korea became the symbolic battleground of the Cold War in 1950. An observation by an American observer in Korea, Edwin W. Pauley, on June 22, 1946, now has a prophetic ring:

While Korea is a small country, and in terms of our total military strength is a small responsibility, it is an ideological battleground upon which our entire success in Asia may depend. It is here where a test will be made of whether a democratic competitive system can be adapted to meet the challenge of a defeated feudalism, or whether some other system, i.e., Communism will become stronger.10

Truman's conviction that America must take the lead in the postwar era was aided by his belief in the necessity of a strong chief executive.

2. Truman's Conception of Power

Truman's conviction that a President must vigorously use his power combined with his vision of America's role in world politics to exercise a profound influence upon the

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Korean decision. Truman envisioned an administration of positive action guided by resolute presidential leadership. Man's greatest achievement and noblest profession was politics and Truman's faith in the efficacy of politics to guarantee man's security never wavered. His love for politics and strong sense of duty bolstered Truman's belief that the President guarded the sacred trust of the people. Thus whenever he perceived the security and welfare of the American people to be threatened, Truman felt compelled to act decisively. As the highest elected representative of all the American people, the president was morally obligated to use the power necessary to ensure the future safety of the United States. In times of national emergency or international crisis, "the President must use whatever power the Constitution does not expressly deny him."

Truman's slogan that the "Buck Stops Here" was indicative of his certainty that the President must be the final arbiter of all issues confronting the American people. Since Truman encouraged individual initiative by his cabinet, the views of his chief advisers were crucial. In particular, Dean Acheson exercised his authority in foreign affairs.

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12Truman, Memoirs, 2:471.
The State Department under Acheson enjoyed a role of being chief policy maker in world politics during Truman's tenure. In Acheson, Truman found a trusted aide to assist him with his inexperience in foreign affairs. A man of strong convictions, Acheson believed that power, not principle, was the driving force in global affairs. Principles, regardless of their intrinsic and moral worth, were not self-enforcing. Therefore in order to protect its ideals and interests, the United States must be willing to use its power if necessary. Acheson shared Truman's profound mistrust of the Soviets and believed that Russia represented the greatest threat to world peace. Together Truman and Acheson formed an effective team.

Truman's reading of history reinforced these convictions that America's mission and security were best served when a strong president manned the helm. His use of history gives insight into an essential facet of Truman's character. Oliver Wendell Holmes's dictum that a page of history is worth a volume of logic was a favorite of Truman's: "I had trained myself to look back into history for precedents because instinctively I sought perspective in the span of history for the decisions I had to make. That is why I read and


re-read history. Most of the problems a president has to face have their roots in the past."\textsuperscript{15} Truman thought history an unambiguous moral teacher, whose lessons must be deciphered if the pitfalls and tragedies of the past were to be averted.\textsuperscript{16}

Strong presidential leadership, though crucial, would be wasted if America neglected its world obligations. The United States was and must remain "a strong bulwark of freedom" against communist encroachment.\textsuperscript{17} Truman affirmed that "throughout the world our name stands for a world based on principles of law and order," and thus obligated the United States to lead the crusade against Soviet designs of world domination.\textsuperscript{18} Yet America's strength relied upon more than just ethical and spiritual strength. Its moral might was sustained by America's prestige, which Acheson designated as "the shadow cast by its power, which is of great deterrence power."\textsuperscript{19} America symbolized the moral strength of the free world, but it was its military capabilities which committed it to contain the Soviet threat to world peace. Armed with his conception of a strong presidency,

\textsuperscript{15}Harry S. Truman, as cited in ibid.

\textsuperscript{16}Paige, Korean Decision, pp. 21-25.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 52.

\textsuperscript{18}Truman, Memoirs, 2:428.

\textsuperscript{19}Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969), p. 405.
Truman took the necessary steps to ensure the world that America would fulfill its responsibilities. One authority contends that "Truman combined a vision of America's role with a firm notion of the President's role in office." The invasion of South Korea challenged Truman's image of America and he resolved to use the inherent powers of the office to thwart the threat. Cold War ideology, Truman's and Acheson's world view, and the belief in decisive action provide the general framework in which the events of Korea were perceived.

3. War in Korea

The June 24, 1950 invasion of South Korea was greeted by the Truman administration with dismay and shock. Though no contingency plan for such an occurrence existed, within the week Truman authorized U. S. military troops to combat communist aggression in Korea. The factors which shaped Truman's decision included: his perceptions of the lessons of the immediate past, the concern for a viable collective security, the fear of the consequences if unprovoked aggression went unchecked, and the belief that the invasion represented the first step in a Soviet plan for world expansion.

Truman, as did most of his administration, reached political maturity during the late 1930s, a decade rich with profound but costly political lessons. For many Americans

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those ten years contained vivid and painful memories. The aggressions of the totalitarian regimes, the subsequent failure of Western democracy to unite against these acts, and the tragic war that followed, collectively inflicted a permanent scar and reminder upon the consciousness of a generation. Never again would evil be mitigated. Never again would the Western democracies fail to resist unwanton aggression and thereby plunge the world into the horrors of another war. By embracing a policy of appeasement in the past the West had abdicated its responsibilities and world chaos, suffering and torment followed on an unprecedented scale. The invasion of Korea tapped those memories and Truman vowed that it would not happen again:

Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain . . . if this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war. It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped.21

If future wars were to be avoided and world peace ensured, then the major powers, especially the United States, must maintain a constant vigilance against breaches of world order.

This was a deeply held conviction of Truman's; Pearl Harbor had eliminated any trace of isolationist sentiment. 22

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21 Truman, Memoirs, 2:333.

22 In 1934, when Truman was a freshman Senator, he supported the Neutrality Acts. See May, Lessons, pp. 83-86.
After December 7, 1941, Truman became an avid proponent of collective security and internationalism as indicated by an excerpt of a Senate speech made on November 2, 1943:

I am just as sure as I can be that this World War is the result of the 1919-1920 isolationist attitude, and I am equally sure that another and worse war will follow this one, unless the United Nations and allies and all other sovereign nations decide to work together for peace as they are working for victory.\(^{23}\)

Truman, as President, strengthened Roosevelt's commitment to an international body dedicated to the preservation of world peace. By reconciling national and supranational interests, Truman convinced the American people that support of the United Nations served their best interests.\(^{24}\) Assured that the failure of the League of Nations had rested upon the shoulders of the major powers--and especially the United States--Truman utilized the resources of his office to garner congressional and public support for the United Nations. The ideals of the United Nations could not stand alone against aggression; the major powers must assert their wills if these ideals were to remain effective standards of international behavior. Truman conveyed his dedication to the United Nations in a despondent whisper at the first Blair House meeting:

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\(^{23}\) Harry S. Truman, as cited in O'Connor, "Harry S. Truman," p. 60.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., pp. 60-64. O'Connor states on p. 18 that "Truman's concept of presidential responsibilities and national obligation to this organization contributed vastly to its success."
Conference on Korea, "We can't let the UN down!"^25

Not only did the Korean invasion conjure up apprehen­sions regarding appeasement and the failure of collective security, it also raised the spectre of Soviet and com­munist expansion. That the Soviets instigated the attack the Truman Administration never doubted. With their bi­polar world perspective American officials confidently reasoned that "It seems close to certain that the attack had been mounted, supplied, and instigated by the Soviet Union."^26 Edward A. Bennet, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Relations, categorized the relationship between Russia and North Korea as analogous to the one between "Walt Disney and Donald Duck."^27

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^25Harry S. Truman, as cited in Paige, Korean Decision, p. 125. See p. 18 for Truman's impassioned defense of the UN. This occurred on June 25, 1950, in response to Dean Acheson's failure to mention the UN during a briefing to Congress on the Korean invasion.

^26Acheson, Creation, p. 405.

^27Edward A. Bennet, as cited in Paige, Korean Decision, p. 188. It should be pointed out that Truman's interpreta­tion of the origins of the Korean War is not the only one. See Robert R. Simmons, The Strained Alliance: Peking, P'Yōngyang, Moscow and the Politics of the Korean Civil War (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 102-136. Simons argues that the government of North Korea was neither a Soviet puppet nor the instrument of a monolithic communist bloc. Though the Soviets supported the North Koreans, the timing of the war was due to internal circumstances and the Korean aspiration of unifica­tion. Therefore the conflict in essence was a civil war. For two other interpretations which stress the civil war interpreta­tion, see Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954 (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972), pp. 565-600. See also I. F. Stone, The Hidden History of the Korean War (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952).
Prior to the Korean crisis, it had not been expected the Soviets would engage in overt operations to further their ambition of world domination, let alone invade South Korea. A New York Times editorial reflected the government's attitude by stating that "while the Russians would continue trying to gain their ends by indirect aggression through Communist parties, they would hesitate to use force." The recent invasion of Korea would prompt a reappraisal of that basic tenet. Hence, Korea marked a turning point regarding American perceptions of the Soviet Union and of the nature of the Cold War. No longer was it perceived that the Soviets were content to rely primarily upon deceitful yet peaceful means; they were now willing to employ armed force to achieve their objectives. A speech by Truman in San Francisco on October 17, 1950, demonstrates how the Soviet aggression affected Washington's attitude. "So long as they persist in maintaining these forces and in using them to intimidate other countries," he said, "the free men of the world have but one choice if they are to remain free. They must oppose strength with strength." The invasion of Korea raised a number of difficult and

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30 Truman, Memoirs, 2:320.
perplexing questions. The participants of the Blair House Conferences pondered why the Soviets acted and how the attack fit their broader plans. Was it the beginning of a general war or merely a probing action, a Soviet hope for a quick and painless victory? Was it a diversionary tactic with Europe the ultimate target, or a test of American prestige and will? Truman's answers to these questions would determine the course of action he would take.

Truman perceived the invasion as a test of America's will with the ultimate target being Western Europe. Korea would transform the Cold War into a global conflict, but Europe remained the primary concern of key administration officials. Truman reflected:

From the very beginning of the Korean action I had always looked at it as a Russian maneuver, as a part of the Kremlin's plan to destroy the unity of the free world. NATO, the Russians knew, would succeed only if the United States took part in the defense of Europe.

The key to world peace was Europe, therefore the Soviets hoped to weaken NATO by diverting American energy in Korea. Truman stated that "the first commandment of Soviet foreign policy

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32 Truman, Memoirs, 2:437.
has always been to divide the enemies of the Soviet Union, and the unity that United States leadership had created in Europe was the most important target for world communism's attack. With Soviet aggression Korea became "the test of all the talk of the last five years of collective security." 

The attack on South Korea was perceived as an ominous act of aggression by the Soviets testing America's prestige, threatening the system of collective security, and upsetting the foundations of world order and peace. Truman concluded that decisive, resolute action was needed to avoid another world war. Once again, as in the 1930s, an ambitious power confronted the United States and the free world with a challenge that threatened its very existence. The decade symbolized by Munich had proven forever the futility of appeasement. Given Truman's intellectual perspective and his interpretation of recent events, the president reasoned that only one viable option was opened to him. After weighing the alternatives, Truman responded with characteristic resoluteness:

I prayed that there might be some way other than swift military action to meet this Communist aggression, for I knew the awful sacrifices in life and suffering it would take to resist it. But there was only one choice facing the free world - resistance or capitulation to Communist

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33 Ibid., 2:380.
34 Ibid., 2:344.
military aggression. It was my belief that if this aggression in Korea went unchallenged, as aggression in Manchuria in 1931 and Ethiopia in 1934 had gone unchallenged, the world was certain to plunge into another world war.

This was the same kind of challenge Hitler flaunted in the face of the rest of the world when he crossed the borders of Austria and Czechoslovakia. The free world failed then to meet the challenge, and World War II was the result. This time the free nations - the United Nations - were quick to sense the new danger to world peace. The United Nations was born out of the ashes of two world wars and organized for the very purpose of dealing with aggression wherever it threatened to break out or actually occurred.

That is why the United Nations responded with such spontaneity and swiftness. This was the first time in the history of the world that there was international machinery to deal with those who would resort to war as a means of imposing their will or systems on other people.35

The lessons of the thirties had been learned, Korea would not be the Munich of the fifties. "We will not yield to aggression," Truman vowed, "appeasement of evil is not the road to peace."36

35Ibid., 2:463. For similar statements by world leaders see Stairs, Diplomacy of Constraint, pp. 34-35, Trygve Lie, Secretary General of the UN: "this to me was clear-cut aggression . . . which reminded me of the Nazi invasion of Norway - because this was aggression against a 'creation' of the United Nations." See Paige, Korean Decision, p. 200, Clement Atlee: "The situation is of undoubted gravity, but I am certain that there will be no disagreement, after our bitter experiences in the past 35 years, that the salvation of all is dependent on prompt and effective measures to arrest aggression wherever it may occur. . . . This is naked aggression and it must be checked."

36Truman, Memoirs, 2:428.
Communist aggression in Korea constituted a political and legal threat to America. If the United States acquiesced in Korea, then its prestige would be dealt a potentially lethal blow. If the illegal breach of international peace was permitted, then the legitimacy of the United Nations and the principle of collective security would be undermined.\[^{37}\]

Truman felt compelled to act with decisive force since a policy of inaction could prove too costly. As scholar Alexander George contends, "the decision to oppose the North Koreans was motivated by a fear of the consequences of inaction and was influenced by considerations which stemmed from uncertain interpretations of broader Soviet strategic intentions behind the North Korean attack."\[^{38}\]

From the perspective of Truman and his advisers intervention was the necessary and proper course of action. Everyone readily agreed to support "whatever had to be done to meet this aggression."\[^{39}\] Ambassador at Large Philip C. Jessup maintained that there was a "hard core of resolve" to take the action necessary to avoid the intolerable evil of appeasement.\[^{40}\]

The conviction of Truman's that unchecked Soviet

\[^{37}\] Hoyt, "The United States Reaction," pp. 54-55.
\[^{39}\] Truman, Memoirs, 2:344.
\[^{40}\] Philip C. Jessup, as cited in Paige, Korean Decision, p. 143.
aggression endangered the security of Western Europe, Asia, and the viability of the United Nations as an instrument of peace weighed heavily among the factors contributing to the Korean decision: "The attack on Korea was . . . a challenge to the whole system of collective security, not only in the Far East, but everywhere in the world. . . . This was a test which would decide whether our collective system would survive or crumble."\(^{41}\) A year after the attack on Korea, Truman restated to Congress his justification of intervention:

Our action in the crisis was motivated by our deep conviction of the importance of the international security system and of the principles of the Charter. I was convinced then, and I am convinced now, that to have ignored the appeal of Korea for aid, to have stood aside from the assault upon the Charter, would have meant the end of the United Nations as a shield against aggression.\(^{42}\)

The Soviet Union and its client state North Korea must be deterred in Korea, otherwise inaction would encourage the launching of other attacks thus increasing the likelihood of another world conflagration. Acheson justified the firm response since if the Soviets could "utilize their satellites as stooges to take aggressive action without serious danger of becoming involved themselves, they will be likely to em-

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\(^{41}\)Ibid., p. 175.

\(^{42}\)Harry S. Truman, as cited in Hoyt, "The United States Reaction," p. 54.
employ this device with increasing boldness." The events of the recent past reinforced the lessons of the 1930s and hardened the administration's resolve in the face of aggression.

If Hitler's unrestrained ambition proved the futility of appeasement, then Stalin's recent behavior confirmed the wisdom of a tough stance. When confronted in Iran, Berlin and Greece the Soviets drew back, therefore they would respond realistically to American resolve. Pointing to a map on the morning of June 26, Truman analyzed the situation in Korea, "This is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough enough there won't be any next step." He later confided to his advisers "that what was developing in Korea seemed to me like a repetition on a larger scale of what happened in Berlin. The Reds were probing for weakness in our armour; we had to meet their thrust without getting embroiled in a world-wide war." The Soviets must not win by default, aggression could not be rewarded.

As the crisis in Korea deepened, it became painfully evident that South Korea would succumb to the communist

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44Harry S. Truman, as cited in May, "Lessons", p. 71.

45Truman, Memoirs, 2:337.
attack. The Minister at the American Embassy in Paris, Charles E. Bohlen, sent a dispatch to the Secretary of State:

This is . . . the first time overt violation of a frontier . . . has occurred since the end of the war and you may be sure that all Europeans to say nothing of the Asiatics are watching to see what the United States will do. It is a situation requiring maximum firmness. 46

As Dirk Stikker, the Netherlands Foreign Minister, proclaimed, "all eyes are on America." 47 Truman did not disappoint world opinion. On June 30, 1950, in the early morning hours, Harry S. Truman committed American combat troops to the peninsula of Korea.

The reasons for American intervention were multiple and complex. A leading authority explained Truman's reasoning: "He wanted to affirm that the U.N. was not a League of Nations, that aggression would be met with counterforce, that 'police action' was well worth the cost, that the 'lessons of the 1930s' had been learned." 48 The lessons were learned, perhaps too well, perhaps they were ingrained in the American psyche too deeply. Now a new element had been added to the

46 Minister Charles C. Bohlen (Paris) to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950, in FRUS 1950, 7:174. Actually the cable was intended to be read by George Kennan.

47 Ambassador Chapin (Amsterdam) to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:186.

lessons of the past. This was not just aggression, it was by the Soviet Union, the leader of the communist world. The prestige and survival of the United States, the United Nations, and collective security, and the resolve of the forces of anticommunism were considered well worth the costs and risks of war.

Given the perception of a bipolar world, with the forces of Good combating the forces of Evil, Truman's options were severely limited. Truman favored intervention because he believed the alternatives unacceptable. Decisive action was necessary to "demonstrate that aggression will not be accepted by us or by the United Nations and to provide a rallying point around which the spirits and energies of the free world can be mobilized to meet the world-wide threat of which the Soviet Union now poses." The consequences of American inaction were too horrible to contemplate. The fear that America would fail to respond dissipated with Truman's decision. The exuberant response by Senator Hubert Humphrey to the Korean decision represented the sentiment of most Americans:

I believe this is a fatal hour. I believe the decision the President has made may save the lives of millions of people, and may ultimately save the peace of the world. I pray God in all reverence that all the people will give support to this policy, so that we shall not find ourselves driven by our indecision into the cataclysm of a third world war. This may be the greatest move for peace in the twentieth century.

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49 Truman, Memoirs, 2:435.

50 Hubert Humphrey, as cited in Paige, Korean Decision, p. 197.
Humphrey failed to anticipate the consequences of the American intervention in Korea.

The Korean War forced a reappraisal of the world situation and areas of prior insignificance now were perceived as critical to America's strategic interests. If other Koreas were to be prevented, then America must strengthen its position throughout the world. Truman shared his thoughts concerning the significance of Korea with British Prime Minister Clement Atlee; in Truman's opinion "the problem we were facing was part of a pattern. After Korea, it would be Indo-China, then Hong Kong, then Malaya." For now the administration was preoccupied with the prosecution of the Korean War. As the Ambassador to the Soviet Union wrote to the Secretary of State; "the issue has been put to the test of the battle and [the] entire world is watching and waiting for the results of this test."

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51 Brown, Faces of Power, p. 55.
52 Truman, Memoirs, 2:399.
53 Ambassador Kirk (Moscow) to the Secretary of State, July 1, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:278.
CHAPTER II

PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY:
THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION AND THE
PROSECUTION OF THE KOREAN WAR

Plainly, the government has moved into an area where there is a reluctance to recognize the finer distinctions of the psychology of our adversaries, for the reason that movement in this sphere of speculation is all too undependable, too relative, and too subtle to be comfortable or tolerable to people who feel themselves confronted with the grim responsibility of recommending decisions which may mean war or peace.

George F. Kennan¹

"One of the most terrible disasters that has occurred to American foreign policy and certainly . . . the greatest disaster which occurred to the Truman Administration."²

These are the words that Dean Acheson once used to describe the Chinese intervention in Korea. How an initial American policy of restraint in the Korean War was transformed and


expanded to provoke such Chinese intervention will be the subject of this chapter.

1. A Policy of Restraint

Immediately after the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, caution, restraint, and uncertainty characterized the administration's prosecution of the conflict. Washington's apprehension about its own capabilities and Soviet intentions, plus its firm resolve to localize the hostilities: these were the dominate factors which shaped American policy. By August 1950, North Korean troops forced American-led units back to the Pusan perimeter, a rectangular area bordered by the Naktong River and the sea of Japan. Washington considered the situation critical, fearing a bloody war of attrition, and gravely doubting the likelihood of United Nations success in Korea.3 American power faced a severe test. As the Secretary of Defense, George Marshall, later commented, "A myth had been exploded - we were not the powerful nation we were thought to be."4 To say the least, America's faith in its military might had been shaken.

As noted, the actual intentions of the Soviet Union constantly concerned and perplexed the administration.5 The


4George Marshall, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:371.

5See Alexander George and Richard Smoke, Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice (New York:
North Korean aggression challenged the assumption that neither the Soviets nor their satellites would resort to force in peripheral areas of the world, particularly in Asia. A distraught Dean Acheson proclaimed, "The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war."\(^6\) Truman and his closest advisers surmised that either the Kremlin hoped in Korea to demonstrate American impotence, thereby destroying the collective security system in the process or that the Soviets wanted to entangle the United States in an indecisive yet costly theatre of war. According to historian Gaddis Smith, "Acheson was convinced that the North Korean attack was part of a 'grand design' whose ultimate purpose was to weaken the West and upset the balance in the most important of all theatres - Europe."\(^7\)

Nevertheless, as the comment by Chief of Staff Omar Bradley


\(^7\)Ibid., p. 189.
indicates, Soviet designs continued to mystify high officials of the administration: "It is very difficult to try to fathom the intentions of the Soviet Government. They make their decisions in a very small group . . . and there is no way of knowing their intentions." 8

The anxiety over Soviet intentions led American policy makers to prosecute the war in such a manner as to diminish the risk of provoking Soviet intervention. Marshall stressed that "we have persistently sought to confine the conflict to Korea and to prevent its spreading to a third world war." 9 Truman concurred with this sentiment:

Every decision I made in connection with the Korean conflict had this one aim in mind: to prevent a third world war. . . . This meant that we should not do anything that would provide the excuse to the Soviets and plunge the free nations into full-scale all-out war. 10

These pervasive fears, regarding Soviet aims and the possibility of general war, temporarily acted to restrict American ambitions in Korea.

Early in the conflict Washington's war aims were limited to the restoration of the status quo ante bellum borders of Korea. While addressing the Newspapers Guild on June 29, 1950, Acheson stated that the United Nations actions were "solely to be for the purpose of restoring the Republic of Korea to its

8 Omar Bradley, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:755.
9 George Marshall, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:324.
10 Truman, Memoirs, 2:345.
status prior to the invasion by the north."\textsuperscript{11} Nevertheless the State Department planned for the possibility of a reversal in the military situation. On July 22, the Policy Planning Staff concluded that "from the view of U.S. military commitments . . . we should make every effort to restrict military ground action to the area south of the 38th parallel."\textsuperscript{12} Apparently the risks of war outweighed the advantages of a final solution. Crossing the 38th parallel could conceivably provoke intervention by the Soviets or Chinese thus aborting the United Nations mission to repel aggression.\textsuperscript{13} The American posture of restraint and willingness to accept partial victory was eroded by mounting pressure for unification. By July 25, the Planning Staff recommended that any decisions regarding the course of action as troops approached the 38th parallel should be deferred until further military and political plans developed.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the uncertainty regarding the outcome of MacArthur's upcoming offensive, Truman approved a National Security Council recommendation (NSC 81/1) which advocated the unification of Korea. The report stressed that this desired objective must be abandoned in the likelihood that either the Soviets or Chinese actively opposed this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}Acheson, Creation, p. 450.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Draft Memorandum Prepared by Policy Planning Staff, July 22, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:453.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 7:451-453.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Draft Memorandum Prepared by Policy Planning Staff, July 25, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:473.
\end{itemize}
Consequently no final decisions could be made. With the phenomenal success by MacArthur the moment of decision could no longer be delayed.

2. Transformation of War Aims

In the early morning hours of September 15, 1950, United Nations combat troops, against seemingly insurmountable odds, successfully secured a beachhead on the shores of Inchon, a port near the capital of South Korea, Seoul. MacArthur's stunning victory turned the tide for American fortunes in Korea, and dramatically influenced Washington's aspirations and war aims. The military and psychological impact of the Inchon operation revitalized morale in Washington, freeing the administration from previous constraints which trammeled America's freedom of action in Korea. The breakthrough at Inchon rekindled Washington's sense of mission and power. With renewed confidence and purpose the United States altered its earlier and moderate war aims. As the military initiative of Inchon gathered momentum, the administration now abandoned its policy of restoring the status quo. A more ambitious and venturesome goal was adopted--the unification of the Korean peninsula.

One should be cautioned against underestimating the impact which Inchon had upon the prosecution of the war. Two noted and respected scholars depicted the mood after Inchon as a "period of enormous euphoria at the dramatic reversal at our military fortunes," claiming it transformed "not the war alone but the emotions felt in Washington. . . . Appetite's arose as the troops went forward." The man who eventually replaced General Douglas MacArthur as United Nations commander, General Matthew Ridgeway, captured the electrifying atmosphere:

> It is true . . . that our original objective - to repel aggression, to expel the invaders from South Korea, and restore peace in the area - underwent drastic change once the Inchon success had put us in a position to push north across the 38th parallel. We then tacitly altered our mission to encompass the occupation and unification of Korea. - the goal that had long been the dream of Syngman Rhee and the prize that beckoned MacArthur.

The attractive prize also enticed the policymakers in Washington, who were soon blinded by a dream that soon became a nightmare. Even Acheson fell victim to the hubris he later accused MacArthur of monopolizing:


17 Neustadt, Presidential Power, p. 130.

One must understand the tremendous risks assumed by General MacArthur at Inchon, and the equally great luck that saw him through, to understand the hubris that led him to assume even more impossible chances in his march to the Yalu at a time when his luck - and, unhappily, the luck of the United States - also ran out.19

Yet the Inchon operation also swayed Acheson's behavior. He must bear as much responsibility as does MacArthur for America's turn of fortune in Korea.

The hope of an easy victory gradually eroded the caution and restraint previously exercised by the administration. What was once a secondary goal now became the central objective of the war. Truman declared, "We believe the Koreans have a right to be free, independent, and united - as they want to be. . . . The U. S. has no other aim in Korea."20

On October 6, 1950, Warren Austin, America's Ambassador to the United Nations, officially sanctified the shift in American war aims:

In June and July of this year, the Security Council gave all the necessary military authority to the United Nations' Commander to repel the aggressor army and restore peace in Korea. The United Nations forces have pursued that task with vigor and some success.

Two things appear necessary to be done now: first, to carry out the objectives of the United Nations in the northern area where United Nations observers have never yet had the opportunity to ascertain the political wishes of the people; second,
to commence forthwith the task of rebuilding the shattered Korean economy.

What the United Nations has worked for since 1947 is stability in Korea - a unified, independent and democratic government in a sovereign state.21

Soon the repulsion of aggression and the unification of Korea were taken for granted.

Now the administration devised a policy to strengthen the United Nations and the free world by shifting its efforts from repelling the communists to constructing a viable peace. Dean Acheson forcefully voiced this aspiration: "Just as Korea has become the symbol of resistance against aggression, so can it become the symbol of renewal of life. . . . Out of the ashes of destruction the United Nations can help the Korean people to create a society which will have lessons in it for people everywhere."22 According to Acheson, Korea was "the workshop in which the United Nations has the chance to make the prototype of the kind of world which it wants to make universally."23 Underlying all the preparation for a reconstructed Korea was the assumption that a unified, non-communist Korea would be secured on the battlefield.24

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24 Neustadt, Presidential Power, p. 127.
The euphoria following Inchon continued to boost the prospects for success. The confidence inspired by the triumph spread throughout the administration like wildfire, with unification acquiring the aura of an accomplished fact. This self-congratulating attitude contained flaws which diverted the administration's attention from the storm clouds that loomed above the horizon. Dean Acheson later testified:

In the period shortly after the Inchon landings until the intervention of the Chinese Communists, it looked as though both these objectives could be attained. That is, that the forces of the North Koreans, who had been attacking South Korea, were rounded up, destroyed surrounded, that the country could be put together. . . .

The United Nations . . . has always since 1947 had the political objective of unifying Korea under free and democratic institutions.

Unhappily, the intervention of the Chinese Communists threw our forces back and made it militarily difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the political objective.25

Acheson's statement raises a number of critical questions. Why, for example, did the administration fail to foresee the likelihood of the Chinese intervention, or at least adopt realistic precautions to diminish its occurrence? Earlier the administration forbade any action north of the 38th parallel if Chinese or Soviets even hinted at intervention.26

25 Dean Acheson, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 3:1735.

26 Truman, Memoirs, 2:359. MacArthur "was to extend his operations north of the parallel and to make plans for the occupation of North Korea," but "no ground operations were to take place north of the parallel in the event of Soviet
Yet, Truman and his advisers later behaved contrary to their own warnings. They persisted in a policy which undermined American prestige and the goals of the United Nations in Korea. To determine why this occurred, the Truman Administration's perceptions regarding purity of motive, correctness of policy, and the lure of easy victory must be analyzed.

3. Washington's Hopes and Motivations

Truman, as did his advisers, saw only the noblest of intentions regarding American objectives in Korea.

The only interest of the United States is to help carry out these great purposes of the United Nations in Korea. We have absolutely no interest in obtaining any special position for the United States in Korea, nor do we wish to retain bases. . . . we would like to get our armed forces out and back to their other duties at the earliest moment consistent with our obligations as a member of the United Nations.27

Hence they failed to anticipate that United Nations policy could be perceived as hostile behavior by interested parties. A prevalent characteristic of the administration, historian John Lewis Gaddis notes, was a "certain casualness about means or Chinese entry." Earlier Truman had stated that operations were to cease if there was indication or threat of entry. See also Secretary of Defense George Marshall to the President, September 27, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:793. Marshall requested the President approve implementation of the military aspects of NSC 81/1; "Your approval would permit the Commander of the United Nations' forces in Korea to conduct the necessary military options north of the 38th parallel to destroy North Korean forces."

employed to gain their objectives." These factors give insight as to why Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JSC) eased the restrictions placed upon MacArthur's freedom of action. It further explains the insensitivity displayed toward Chinese apprehension over the march to the Yalu River, the mutual border of China and Korea. If American actions posed no threat to China, then the administration reasoned, China lacked a legitimate reason to embark upon a military campaign against the forces of the United Nations. Consequently, Truman minimized the possibility of a Chinese counteraction in Korea. The administration adopted the attitude expressed by its ambassador to India: "In the circumstances direct participation of China in Korea seems beyond range of possibility." If they did intervene, then Truman concluded they were the dupes of the Soviet Union. As he stated, "We hope in particular that the people of China will not be misled or forced into fighting against the United Nations and against the American people who ... are their friends."

Thus confident of victory, the justness of their cause, and reassured of the improbability of Chinese intervention, the JCS authorized MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel and

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29 Ambassador Henderson (New Delhi) to Secretary of State, September 20, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:742.
30 Truman, Memoirs, 2:354.
to take steps to unify Korea. In a communique issued on September 27, the JCS explicitly warned MacArthur to conduct operations deep into the north only if "there had been no entry in North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese forces, no announcement on intended entry, and no threat" by the communists to counter militarily United Nations operations. On October 7, Marshall recalled that the General Assembly legitimized MacArthur's mission when it "adopted a resolution restating the essential objectives of the United Nations as the establishment of a unified and democratic government of Korea, and recommending that all appropriate steps be taken" to accomplish this task. The desire for, and the expectation of, victory gradually outran all other political considerations. By October 8, with the wholehearted endorsement of Truman, Marshall, and Acheson, the JCS issued another directive to MacArthur:

Hereafter in the event of open or covert employment anywhere in Korea of major Chinese Communist units, without prior announcement, you should continue the action as long as, in your judgment, action under your control offers a reasonable chance of success.

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31 Ibid., 2:360.


33 Truman, Memoirs, 2:363. [My emphasis.] See also Collins, The Korean War, pp. 175-177. On October 17, 1950, UN operations Order #4 "removed the restrictions on the use of non-Korean troops North of the Chongju-Kunri-Yongwon-Hamhung line, restrictions that had been stipulated by JCS instructions of September 27, 1950." Collins adds that the JCS did not object to MacArthur's action.
The legacy of Inchon and subsequent successes instilled a confidence in military victory, thus causing Truman to downplay the inherent dangers of the actions of the United Nations forces. The President forsook his political judgment and sagacity by placing his faith in the military to achieve an ultimate solution. Caution was thrown to the wind when Washington placed final responsibility in the hands of a man known to support an operation if its chances for success were 5,000-to-1. The hope, perhaps even the psychological need, for a decisive victory compelled the United States to pursue a disastrous policy. In short, a victory in Korea would achieve all the objectives the administration desired. The manner by which these goals were to be attained and the prospect of a clear-cut triumph, further exhilarated the policy makers in Washington. This sentiment was expressed in a Department of Defense memorandum:

In this light, the situation in Korea now provides the United States and the free world with the first opportunity to displace part of the Soviet orbit. If the basic policy of the United States is to reduce the preponderant power of the USSR in Asia and elsewhere, then UN-operations in Korea can set the stage for the non-communist penetration into an area of Soviet influence.  

For once, on the battlefields of Korea, the frustrations and

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34 Rees, Korea, pp. 81-85.

statements characteristic of the Cold War could be swept away with one telling blow against communism. The only obstacle to this feat would be intervention by the Chinese.

4. China Threatens to Intervene

By mid-August the Chinese government had made clear that American actions threatened the vital interests and security of mainland China. According to David Rees, a scholar of the Korean conflict, "with the success of Inchon, the whole emphasis of Peking's messages to the West now changed from propaganda accusations to statements of intent if the 38th parallel was crossed."\(^36\) In a cable to the United Nations on August 20, Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En-lai emphasized that "Korea is China's neighbor. The Chinese cannot but be concerned about the solution of the Korean question. . . . It must and can be settled peacefully."\(^37\) After Inchon, General Nieh Yen-jung, Acting Chief of Staff of the Chinese Army, informed India's Ambassador K. M. Panikkar, that the Chinese "did not intend to sit back . . . and let the Americans come to our borders. . . . We know what we are in for, but at all costs the American aggression must be stopped."\(^38\) Chou publicly voiced these

\(^{36}\)Rees, Korea, p. 106.

\(^{37}\)Chou En-lai, as cited in George and Smoke, Deterrence, p. 200.

\(^{38}\)Nieh Yen-jung, as cited in Bernstein, "The Policy of
concerns on September 30. "The Chinese people absolutely will not tolerate foreign aggression, nor will they tolerate seeing their neighbors being savagely invaded." The crossing of the 38th parallel became a *causus belli* for China. On October 2, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, addressed his parliament:

> The Chinese government clearly indicated that if the 38th parallel was crossed, they would consider it a grave danger to their own security and that they would not tolerate it. We did, as a matter of fact, convey our views to the governments of the United States of America.

Throughout October these warnings persisted, but without effect; for United Nations and American troops crossed the parallel.

On October 10, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs proclaimed that since the parallel had been crossed, "the Chinese people cannot stand idly by with regard to such a serious situation created by the invasion of Korea... and to the dangerous trend of extending the war." Yet, despite the continued threats, on October 12, the Central

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41 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statement, Radio Peking, October 11, 1950, as cited in Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu*, p. 115.
Intelligence Agency (CIA) conveyed to the President that "there is no convincing indication of an actual Chinese Communist intention to resort to full-scale intervention in Korea."\(^4^2\) The report was indicative of Washington's response to China's warnings. There is little evidence that they were accorded the serious attention and analysis they warranted.

5. America's Response to China

The flaw which continued to plague American policy was the inability to imagine how their adversaries viewed United Nations troop movements. Dean Rusk, Assistant Secretary of Far Eastern Affairs, inadvertently exposed this shortcoming in a speech to a veteran's group. "I have not tried to look at them [American decisions] through Asian eyes. We are Americans, and it is our business to see clearly through American eyes."\(^4^3\) Rather than analyzing the Chinese threats, Truman and his advisers dismissed them either as bluffs, propaganda, or merely wished them away. In the words of the Consul General at Hong Kong the Chinese were "saberrattling," for domestic and foreign consumption.\(^4^4\)

\(^{42}\) Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency, October 12, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:933.


\(^{44}\) Consul General Wilkinson (Hong Kong) to Secretary of State, September 25, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:768.
Rees observes that the administration believed Peking "really thought the same as it did, and saw that a serious threat to China did not exist." A number of interpretations, often ambivalent and contradictory, were utilized to minimize the threats.

During a television interview on September 7, for example, Dean Acheson emphatically contended that since United Nations action posed no threat whatever to the Chinese, they would not intervene:

I think it would be sheer madness on the part of the Chinese Communists to do that, and I see no advantage to them in doing it.

Now I give the people in Peiping credit for being intelligent to see what is happening to them. Why they should want to further their own dismemberment and destruction by getting at cross purposes with all the free nations of the world who are inherently their friends... as against this imperialism coming down from the Soviet Union I cannot see. And since there is nothing in it for them, I don't see why they should yield to what is undoubtedly pressures from the Communist movement to get into this Korean war.

The Chinese leaders, Acheson believed, would base their policy on national interests and not according to the party line. Ironically, much to Acheson's discomfort, this is precisely what the Chinese did.

45 Rees, Korea, p. 113.

Despite Acheson's contention, Truman was reassured that the Chinese would not intervene because of their close ties with the Soviet Union. According to General Lawton Collins, intelligence reported that "although full-scale Communist intervention in Korea should be regarded as a continuing possibility, a consideration of all known facts led to the conclusion that, barring a Soviet decision for global war, such an action was not probable in 1950."^47

The erroneous intelligence report was compounded by Truman's insensitivity to China's apprehension over the rising tensions in Korea. There is no concrete evidence that Truman ever gave the proper attention to the Chinese that the situation demanded. Not once did he propose that possibly the Chinese were sincere and serious. Rather the warnings were treated as bluffs. The Truman Administration, Collins asserts, "generally agreed that Chou's threats were a bluff, primarily a last-ditch attempt to intimidate the United States."^48

Thus the warnings were brushed aside as inconsequential. MacArthur reassured Truman on this point at the Wake Island Conference: "We are no longer fearful of their intervention . . . if the Chinese tried . . . there would be the

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^47 Central Intelligence Report, as cited in Collins, The Korean War, p. 175.

^48 Ibid., p. 173. See also Truman, Memoirs, 2:362. Truman recalled that "it appeared that Chou En-lai's message was a bald attempt to blackmail the United Nations by threats of intervention in Korea."
greatest slaughter." Truman exuded confidence in ultimate victory, remaining steadfast in his conviction of the correctness of American policy. On October 17, upon returning from the conference, Truman's speech exemplified this attitude:

... I am confident that these forces will soon restore peace to the whole of Korea.
... We talked about the plans for establishing a 'united, independent, and democratic' government in that country in accordance with the resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Our sole purpose in Korea is to establish peace and independence. Our troops will stay there only so long as they are needed by the United Nations for that purpose. We seek no territory or special privilege. Let this be crystal clear to all - we have no aggressive designs in Korea or in any other place in the Far East or elsewhere.

The United Nations forces are growing in strength and are now far superior to the forces which still oppose them. The power of the Korean Communists to resist effectively will soon be at an end.

As Truman uttered these words, Chinese troops had already entered Korea.

6. China Intervenes

To give an indication of American expectations at this time, there was serious consideration given to redeploying


two divisions for more pressing NATO assignments in Europe. The American assuredness of success intensified until United Nations troops contacted Chinese troops on October 26. Now that a flaw in American assumptions had been revealed, would the policy of unification remain fixed or would Washington halt MacArthur's drive to the Yalu?

On November 6, in a dispatch to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Acheson acknowledged the seriousness of the new development. Nevertheless, he refused to adapt American objectives to this dramatic change: "We do not believe however that we should concede to Peiping any interest whatever in the internal affairs of Korea or in the unification and rehabilitation work to be carried out by the UN." Acheson later affirmed that the situation demanded maximum firmness and energetic action, not reappraisal. On November 7, the Chinese suddenly drew back. Yet, during the military pause

51 Truman, Memoirs, 2:373.
52 Secretary of State Dean Acheson (Washington) to Embassy in the United Kingdom, November 6, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1053.
54 See George and Smoke, Deterrence, chapter 7, for a discussion of Chinese intentions and motivations in Korea. See also Whiting, China Crosses the Yalu, p. 152. Whiting convincingly disputes the contention that China was coerced by the Soviets; "China entered the war of her own free will." See especially Memorandum by the JCS to the Secretary of Defense George Marshall, November 9, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1117. According to the JCS, commenting upon the first contact with the Chinese: "intervention in Korea must have been
that followed the administration remained steadfast in its conviction that neither the intentions nor the actions of the United States threatened China's security. They were either unwilling or incapable of relinquishing their hope for total victory, the fruits of which had been tasted since Inchon.

The administration adopted a strategy of reassuring the Chinese of America's benign intent. On November 16, the President issued this press release:

Speaking for the United States Government and people, I can give assurance that we support and are acting within the limits of the United Nations policy in Korea and that we have never at any time entertained any intention to carry hostilities into China. So far as the United States is concerned, I wish to state unequivocally that because of our deep devotion to the cause of peace and our long-standing friendship for the people of China we will take every honorable step to prevent any extension of the hostilities in the Far East.

Earlier, Acheson attempted to quell China's fears, "If they believe, as their propaganda states, that the United States has any ulterior designs in Manchuria, everything possible

motivated either by pressure of the USSR or by genuine Chinese reasons or by a combination of both. There is no conclusive evidence at hand upon which to draw sound inferences as to what governs." Nevertheless, when the Chinese intervened on a massive scale it was assumed that it was due to Soviet pressure.


must be done to disabuse them of such an illusion because it is not true." United States actions resounded over these official pronouncements. The reason for this is simple; Washington did not perceive its actions as threatening to China, therefore, its policy remained intact.

The following statement by Dean Acheson illustrates the inadequacy of America's response to China's initial intervention and demonstrates the wide gulf between America's and China's frame of reference:

It may be that they have worries about their legitimate interests in the border river and in the continuous territories on either side. If that is so, everything in the world should be done to make them understand that their proper interests will be taken care of, and I should suppose that there is no country in the whole world which has a more outstanding [record] in developing the theory of brotherly development of border waters than the United States. On both our borders, we have taken the lead in doing that. We have worked out with Mexico on the Rio Grande and on the Colorado River . . . which the two countries share equitably.

. . . So we really are the people who have led the world in international development of border waters, and, therefore, if the Chinese have any doubts that our influence in the United Nations would be used to bring about a constructive adjustment of Chinese-Korean interests in the Yalu River, they would be very much mistaken if we would not do that.58


58Ibid.
It would require a considerable suspension of the imagination to visualize Acheson being soothed by such advice as the Chinese hordes edged closer to the Rio Grande, even if their record on border disputes was unblemished. The example of the American reaction to Cuba's regime in Cuba should suffice.

In light of Chinese actions, on November 9, the NSC reevaluated MacArthur's mission during an emergency meeting. Representing the JCS, Omar Bradley felt that since Korea was strategically unimportant, continued United States involvement would only serve Russian interests, drain American resources, and risk the general welfare of the United States. Despite this analysis, the mission's purpose remained fixed. According to Acheson, the NSC determined "that General MacArthur's directive should not be changed and he should do what he could in a military way" to unify Korea.\(^{59}\)

On November 8, the CIA had reevaluated its previous intelligence estimates. According to this latest memo, the CIA contended that the Chinese were capable of halting the United Nations offensive and forcing a substantial retreat. Prior to the crossing of the parallel the Chinese

\(^{59}\)Dean Acheson, as cited in Bernstein, "The Policy of Risk," p. 21. See also Memorandum of Conversation by Ambassador at Large Philip Jessup, November 21, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1205. Marshall "expressed satisfaction that Mr. Acheson had stated his belief that General MacArthur should push forward with the planned offensive."
were unwilling to risk war; but, either due to Soviet pressures or to national interests they were now willing to accept the risk. Given the risk of general war, or at least entanglement in an insignificant theater, what possible explanation can there be for America's persistence in pursuing unification? In Washington's heart and mind Korea was already united, a beaming symbol of American success against communist aggression and tyranny. The dream was too sweet, whereas reality was too bitter to be faced. In spite of the risk, Truman sanctioned the renewed drive for unification. Victory was essential, and MacArthur could deliver it. "But under this obvious truth," Acheson later reflected, "I felt uneasy respect for the MacArthur mystique. Strange as these maneuverings [military operations] appeared, they could be another 5,000-to-1 shot by the sorcerer of Inchon." Even the stoic Secretary of State, who prided his ability for realistic appraisal, was seduced by the lure of victory. "As I look back," he later wrote, "the critical period stands as the three weeks from October 26 to November 17. Then all the dangers of . . . intervention by the Chinese were manifest." Acheson, too, had been blinded by the flame which had burnt brightly in the "lamp of hope" since July 27, 1950.

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60 Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency, November 8, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1101.
61 Acheson, Creation, p. 467.
62 Ibid., p. 468.
On November 26, Collins, the Army's Chief of Staff, wired to MacArthur that there was no change in his mission, which, if successful, should include preparations for elections and unification. That same day Acheson wired to London:

It seems to me of the greatest importance that General MacArthur's operation be given every support by the UN. . . . The results of his operation will make much more clear many matters now obscure, the strength and effectiveness of the Chi forces, the intention and capacity of the Commie authorities to support and reinforce them, etc.

Two days later the Chinese enlightened Acheson on these obscure matters.

On November 26, 1950, the massive Chinese intervention shattered the dreams, illusions, and hopes of the Truman Administration. American policy, since it rested upon MacArthur's ability to repeat another Inchon, collapsed like a house of cards. A military miracle had become a nightmare.

7. The American Response

Even the massive intervention prompted no reappraisal by the administration of its fundamental perceptions. Rather

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64 The Secretary of State Dean Acheson (Washington) to Embassy in the United Kingdom, November 24, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1228.
than a response to American actions, the Truman Administration perceived the intervention as a hostile, unwarranted act of aggression. During a meeting on November 28, the NSC agreed that the Chinese actions were directed primarily by the Soviet Union. The present aggression, the President later said, "is thus revealed as a long calculated move to defy the United Nations . . . these Chinese have been misled or forced into their reckless attack . . . to further the designs of the Soviet Union." Acheson seconded Truman's conviction:

The Soviet Union was behind everyone of the Chinese and North Korean moves and that we had to think of all that happened in Korea as world matters. We should never lose sight of the fact that we are facing the Soviet Union all around the world.

The Chinese leaders were "unfaithful to the characteristics, traditions and interests of the Chinese people," since the communists, Austin asserted, "had put their necks into the Soviet collar." The intervention further entrenched the

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66 Harry S. Truman, "President's Message to Congress," Department of State Bulletin 23 (December 11, 1950):927. See also United States Delegation Minutes of the First Meeting of President Truman and Prime Minister Clement Atlee, December 4, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1366-1367. Acheson said: "The Communist Chinese were not looking at the matter as Chinese but as Communists who are subservient to Moscow. All they do is based on the Moscow pattern, they are better pupils even than the East European satellites."

67 Truman, Memoirs, 2:387.

68 Warren Austin, "U.N. Collective Action Urged Against
American fear of the communists' willingness to use force. "If there was any doubt," Rusk declared, "that the Communist imperialists were prepared to use force to secure their ends, there is no reason for doubt anymore." The intervention renewed the administration's fears that Russia had embarked upon a plan of world domination. Warren Austin's fear that the intervention was a "part of the world-wide pattern of centrally directed imperialism," echoed Truman's concern that "this new act of aggression in Korea is only a part of a world-wide pattern of danger to all the free nations of the world."

After the Chinese forced a humiliating retreat upon MacArthur, the restraint, which had characterized the administration's behavior prior to Inchon, regained top priority. The continued viability of the United Nations, the collective security system, the prestige of the United States, and the risk of general war once again were the primary concerns of Washington. During the despondent days of December, with a catastrophic defeat imminent, the


administration refused to negotiate under duress, or to withdraw ignominiously. "If we gave concessions, they would only become more aggressive. . . . We should make it a policy not to recognize the enemy's gains."72 "Of course if we got thrown out of Korea there would be no negotiations, but we would have made our point,"73 since, as Acheson argued, there "was a great difference between being forced out and getting out."74 The administration religiously followed the respected authority on Soviet Affairs, George Kennan, that the "worst time to negotiate with the Communists was from a position of defeat."75

Once the United Nations troops reestablished defensive positions against the attack, the situation in Korea stabilized. Washington redirected its focus on more urgent concerns. Acheson, among others, feared the entanglement in Korea would weaken its position in the world:

The Kremlin probably saw advantages to it in the U.S.-Chinese war flowing from diversion, attrition, and containment of U.S. forces in an indecisive theater; the creation of a conflict between the United States and her European allies and obstruction of NATO plans; the disruption of UN unity against the original aggression in

72Truman, Memoirs, 2:398.
73Ibid., 2:407.
74Acheson, Creation, p. 482.
75Ibid., p. 476.
Korea; thus aiding communist objectives in South East Asia.\textsuperscript{76}

The Truman Administration desperately sought to avoid general warfare, but also shared Acheson's dread of "being sucked into a bottomless pit."\textsuperscript{77}

Truman vowed that the Korean crisis would not divert America from its vital interests: "I had no intention of allowing our attention to be diverted from the unchanging aims and designs of the Soviet policy . . . in our age, Europe . . . is still the key to world peace."\textsuperscript{78} On January 8, 1951, in the State of the Union message, Truman reaffirmed American priorities. "The heart of our common effort is the North Atlantic community," he stated. "The defense of Europe is the basis for the defense of the whole free-world - ourselves included."\textsuperscript{79} The critical significance of Europe to America's security mitigated the pressures pushing towards general war and entanglement in a peripheral area of the world.

An overriding factor which prompted the original United States intervention was a commitment to a viable

\textsuperscript{76}Ibid., p. 474.

\textsuperscript{77}Dean Acheson, as cited in David S. McLellan, Dean Acheson: The State Department Years (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1976), p. 296.

\textsuperscript{78}Harry S. Truman, "The State of the Union Address," Department of State Bulletin 24 (January 22, 1951):125.
collective security system. Therefore the United States took care not to weaken or destroy this system during the prosecution of the war. "If we go it alone in Asia," Truman stated, "we may destroy the unity of free nations . . . the whole idea of going it alone is the opposite of everything we stood for - since World War II." United Nations actions which might spark escalation were to be avoided at all costs. According to Acheson, a policy which threatened America's allies was not feasible:

    We cannot expect that our collective-security system will long survive if we take steps which unnecessarily and dangerously expose the people who are in the system with us . . . . In relation to the total world threat, our safety requires that we strengthen, not weaken, the bond of our collective security system.81

For these reasons MacArthur's demands to expand the war were rejected and explain the subsequent dismissal from his command. During the MacArthur Hearings, Marshall testified that:

    General MacArthur . . . would have us on our own initiative carry the conflict beyond Korea against the mainland of Communist China . . . . He would have us accept the risk of involvement . . . in an all-out war with the Soviet Union. He would have us do this even at the expense of losing our allies and wrecking the coalition of free peoples throughout the

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81 Dean Acheson, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 3:1719.
world. He would have us do this even though the effort of such an action might expose Western Europe to attack by the millions of Soviet troops poised in middle and eastern Europe.  

Consequently the United States drew back after the Chinese intervention, resuming a policy of restraint and limiting its ambitions to the restoration of the status quo ante bellum. On April 5, 1951, the JCS conveyed to Acheson that "For the first time we conceded that 'the Korean problem cannot be resolved in a manner satisfactorily to the United States by military action alone.'" America returned to its original objectives of maintaining a viable collective security system, of avoiding a general war, and of strengthening Europe, the key area to world peace. A policy of restraint was pursued in order to avoid involvement, in the now famous words of Bradley, "in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy."  

8. The Impact of Korea

As previously mentioned, the intervention by the Chinese strengthened the American belief that the communists were engaging in a plan of world conquest by force. The Korean

82 George Marshall, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:441.

83 JCS Memorandum to the Secretary of State, April 5, 1951, as cited in Collins, The Korean War, p. 304.

84 Omar Bradley, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:732.
War, especially China's actions, globalized the Cold War. American leaders now perceived that the greatest threat to the free world, to Europe, might come from the East. John Foster Dulles, the next Secretary of State, voiced this rising concern in a radio address on March 1, 1951:

... Many seem to think that our safety is linked only to the West, meaning Europe, and that the East can be ignored. But just as the United States would be in peril if Europe was overrun, so also we and Europe would be in peril if the East were overrun. We should never forget that Stalin, long ago, laid it down that as basic Communist strategy that 'the road to victory over the West' lies through the East.85

This perspective was shared by high officials in Truman's Administration. "The fact that our Far Eastern policy and our European policy have been separately debated," Acheson maintained, "should not lead us to the fatal error of regarding these policies as being divorced from one another."86 MacArthur expressed these sentiments held by the administration when he testified, "I believe the first line of defense now, for Europe, is right where we are fighting over there in Korea. It is a global effort, and if you breach that, it will roll around to Europe as sure as the sun rolls around."87


87 Douglas MacArthur, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:263.
America now gave more attention to Asia and to Soviet designs in the area. Asia, Washington perceived, was engaged in a life-death struggle with Chinese and Soviet communism. Acheson feared the rise of communism in the area since "it is really the spearhead of Russian imperialism which would ... take from these people ... their own national independence."\(^88\) Omar Bradley considered Asia crucial to America's security and declared:

> From a global viewpoint - and with the security of our nation of prime importance - our military mission is to support a policy of preventing communism from gaining the manpower, the resources, the raw materials, and the industrial capacity essential to world domination. If Soviet Russia ever controls the entire Eurasia land mass, then the Soviet-satellite imperialism may have its broad base upon which to build the military power to rule the world.\(^89\)

Soon it was believed that communism had to be actively resisted throughout the world. "I believe the problem is a global one," MacArthur admonished. "I believe we should defend every place from communism. I believe we can."\(^90\) A respected Cold War scholar notes that "the question of whether communism motivated Moscow's policy was left

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\(^{89}\) Omar Bradley, as cited in *MacArthur Hearings*, 1:731.

\(^{90}\) Douglas MacArthur, as cited in *MacArthur Hearings*, 1:81 and 120.
unclear."  

The original aggression and then the traumatic intervention by China, reinforced the administration's suspicions that all communist activities were sinister instruments of Soviet, and now Chinese, expansion. John Gaddis observes:

> By getting into an unnecessary fight with the Chinese Communists, the Truman Administration encouraged the view that international communism was a monolith that had to be resisted wherever it appeared. . . . [I]t was easy for succeeding administrations to jump to the conclusion that there was no distinction between the peripheral and vital interests, that threats to order anywhere endangered American security elsewhere.

Acheson vehemently argued that America could no longer afford to distinguish between big and little aggressions and therefore "we must be vigorous everywhere," especially when American interests were threatened.

An area now perceived to be vital and threatened was Indochina. With Korea, Truman asserted, "We are seeing a pattern in Korea as a challenge to the free world . . . by the Communists." Acheson recalled years later that John Ohley, a State Department colleague, had warned that America ought to look "at where it was headed in Indochina." Ohley

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92 Ibid., p. 518.
93 Memorandum of Conversation, by Ambassador at Large Philip Jessup, December 5, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:1383.
94 Truman, Memoirs, 2:380.
feared that the United States would supplant the French in Indochina and that direct intervention would follow. He concluded that "these situations have a way of snowballing," but his words went unheeded. Acheson candidly admitted, "I decided, however, that having put our hand to the plow, we would not look back."95 America would not look back for over twenty years.

In his memoirs, Anthony Eden, a former British Prime Minister, expressed his admiration for the decisive, yet restrained American policy in Korea. He especially praised the United States avoidance of entanglement on the Asian continent. "They had no taste for war on the Chinese mainland. They understood the danger of that tar baby."96 But future tar babies would be difficult to avoid in Asia, given American attitudes and perceptions following Korea.

95John Ohley, as cited in Acheson, Creation, p. 674.
CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS IN PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE TRUMAN AND EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATIONS IN VIETNAM, 1945-1960

The course upon which we are today moving is one, as I see it, so little promising and so fraught with danger. . . . In Indo-China we are getting ourselves into the position of guaranteeing the French in an undertaking which neither they nor we, nor both of us together can win.1

George Kennan

Most observers of international politics after World War II stressed the further decline of European civilization with the ascendance of Russia and the United States as the dominant powers of the world. Little attention, however, was given to the consequences of the war in Asia. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman initially desired to foster a new world order conducive to American interests. Stalin wanted to consolidate the Soviet Union's security needs in Eastern Europe, and Charles DeGaulle aspired to restore to France its "grandeur." But these visions and ambitions of

1 Counselor George Kennan to the Secretary of State, August 21, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, 7:623-624.
the great actors were of minor concern to the emerging leaders of Asia. Instead, Asian peoples hoped to seize upon the opportunities which ensued following the postwar period. The dream of Asia was to rid their homelands of foreign domination.

Throughout Asia, the outbreak of World War II with the early victories of the Japanese against the Western powers inaugurated a period of intense nationalism on the Continent. Psychologically, these momentary triumphs symbolized the liberation of Asia. John F. Cady, a Southeast Asian scholar, contends that the dramatic victories of the Japanese laid bare "the myth of Western invincibility . . . and Asia for the Asiatics became the universally accepted goal."² The deep-seated resentment toward colonial rule combined with this yearning for national independence created a movement with a profound emotional and intellectual potency. Nationalism swept across Asia acquiring a fervor which lingers to this day.

1. The American Quandry of Colonialism Versus Communism

After World War II, the process of rapid decolonization left a number of weak emerging states groping for their proper place in Southeast Asia. The absence of indigenous

strength or unity attracted outside powers to fill the vacuum. These countries sought to reassert Western dominance in the area, a goal antagonistic to the aspirations of Southeast Asia. A scholar observed that "decolonization . . . opened a Pandora's box of national rivalries and conflicting national interests in Southeast Asia." Hence Southeast Asia became vulnerable to historical forces of enormous complexity and endurance. The hornet's nest created by nationalism, decolonization, and postwar readjustment demanded a patient response cognizant of the nuances and power of these phenomena. During the transitional era of nation building, the region's maze of problems refused to yield to easy or pat solutions.

As the promise of national independence enthralled Asian nationalists, American policy makers deciphered the import of the forces unleashed by the war from a distinct and unique perspective. While Asia embarked upon a period of nation building, the United States emerged as a nation of awesome and unprecedented strength. Although hopeful of a postwar world of peace and order, by late 1946 or early 1947 America's leaders surmised that the country's proper role in world affairs would be as leader of the free world against Soviet expansion. Consequently, despite an

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4 Daniel Yergin, Shattered Peace: The Origins of the
appreciation of the intensity and legitimacy of Asian nationalism, American decision makers shared a conviction that Soviet communism and imperialism constituted the most potent and dangerous force of the postwar era.

Thus the seeds were sown that confronted Washington with a genuine problem which plagued its Asian policy for years: How could the U.S. reconcile its predominant fear of Soviet expansion in Asia while at the same time recognizing the authentic goals of the Asian peoples? In 1955, a remark by an official of Eisenhower's Administration exposed the dilemma which haunted United States policy from Truman until Nixon:

> Although in American eyes no problem stands out more predominantly in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, than the threat of Communist aggression and subversion, we realize that to most of the leaders and peoples of this vast region the threat of communism is no more than a secondary concern and that their interests and emotions are centered on such questions as 'colonialism,' 'nationalism,' and 'neutralism.'

As the tensions of the Cold War increased, the gap between these priorities widened.

> Though American policy from 1945 to 1947 favored the


restoration of French rule to Indochina, the Truman Administration considered Vietnam a peripheral area of the world. Therefore even though its consequences proved significant, subsequent policy would not be formulated as if vital interests were at stake. George C. Herring, a Cold War historian, contends that since America found itself "caught between the demands of European colonialism and nationalism, the Truman administration adopted what the State Department described as a 'hands-off policy,'" which remained fixed until at least 1947. Europeanists within the Department were the catalysts behind this policy. H. Freeman Mathews, the Director of the State Department's Office of European Affairs, and James C. Dunn, the Assistant Secretary of State, profoundly influenced Southeast Asian policy. Both promulgated pro-French sentiments and even prior to 1946 anticipated the apprehension of Soviet designs on Europe which later characterized American policy. For them anti-colonialism remained a mere abstraction, whereas France's security and might became linked to America's vital interests. Hence the United States casually recognized the return of French sovereignty to Indochina, quite oblivious to what this acquiescence would portend.  

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7. Ibid., pp. 97-117.
In January 1947, Abbot Low Moffat of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs protested that the hands-off policy was narrowly based upon European considerations and if continued would cost Washington its influential role in Southeast Asia. As Cold War tensions increased, Moffat's concern went unheeded and his advice formally rejected. The administration responded with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan as Soviet-American ill will hardened over crises in Greece, Turkey, and throughout Europe. The keystone of America's containment policy was Western Europe. Therefore as America's interests now coincided with the French, its policy in Southeast Asia changed. On May 13, 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall cabled to the American Embassy in France that "we cannot conceive setbacks to [the] long-range interests [of] France which would not also be setbacks to our own." Nevertheless, Marshall acknowledged that if France neglected to satisfy Indochina's nationalist aspirations then Western democracy would succumb to Soviet communism in Asia. But this awareness never compelled the Truman Administration to abandon France's ambitions in favor of Asian nationalism. The dreaded Soviet threat to Europe formed the highest priority of the administration throughout its tenure. France, not Indochina, lured

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8 Consul General Josselyn (Singapore) to the Secretary State, January 7, 1947, in FRUS, 1947, 6:54-55.

America's intention and energies to its cause. America's ideals, interests, and survival were at stake, and France was a close ally.\(^{10}\)

With the leaders of America preoccupied by the Cold War, it became increasingly difficult for the United States to appraise the situation in Asia objectively. Accordingly, Asia and its complexities were viewed by Washington through the prism of the Cold War. Hence the American dilemma of maintaining the delicate balance between the forces of anti-colonialism, nationalism, and communism became acute.

During a later Congressional hearing in 1972, Moffat testified that toward the end of 1946 the State Department directed its energies chiefly to the rise of a Soviet controlled monolithic communist bloc. Previously "we could, until the fear of Communism affected objectivity, analyze problems without the handicap of self-interest, prejudice, pride or domestic problems."\(^{11}\) Subsequently, however, "as Department concern about the Communist domination of the Vietnamese government became more apparent and more uncritical, we began . . . to allow our fears of such domination to overrule our better judgment."\(^{12}\) Still from 1946 to 1948

\(^{10}\) See Gaddis, Origins of the Cold War.

\(^{11}\) Abbot Low Moffat, as cited in U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War. Hearings, 92d Cong., 2d, sess., May 7-11, 1972, p. 169. (Hereafter cited as Causes and Origins.)

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
uncertainty and doubt characterized American policy. The United States groped for a coherent and guiding philosophy regarding its Southeast Asia policy. The tendency to stress the containment of communism in Asia received added impetus from the communist successes in China.

Even prior to the culmination of the Chinese Revolution, America's fear of communism in Asia manifested itself. On October 13, 1948, the Acting Secretary of State dispatched a cable which stated that the Soviet's aim in Southeast Asia was "to substitute the influence of the USSR for that of the western powers in such manner and degree as to ensure Soviet control being as surely installed and predominant as in the satellite countries behind the Iron Curtain."\(^\text{13}\) Under the guise of nationalism the Soviet Union, according to the State Department, exploited Asian aspirations for their own ends. The Russian objectives were implemented "almost exclusively [by] Chinese Communist guidance of Southeast Asian movements."\(^\text{14}\) This dispatch was indicative, claims one scholar, of the American disquiet "that the pattern of post-war expansion in Eastern Europe was now to be repeated in Asia, with Peking, as rigidly controlled as European satellites, serving as Moscow's junior partner and Asian bases."\(^\text{15}\)


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Evelyn Colbert, \textit{Southeast Asia in International Politics}
In this context, the question whether Ho Chi Minh was a communist acquired a sense of urgency within the State Department.

Ho Chi Minh, a cross-fertilization between European communism and Asian nationalism was, according to John Stoessinger, "probably one of the most complex figures of modern times." Ho did not consider communism and nationalism as antagonistic ideologies. Rather, Ho thought they were mutually supportive. However, American policy makers were unable to make this distinction.

From 1945 to 1946 the Truman Administration's attitude towards Ho can best be described as an ambivalent one, marred by inattention and ignorance. By late 1946, as uneasiness about Soviet expansion magnified, the inclination to view Ho as a tool of the Kremlin gained respectability. As Moffat later testified, American leaders allowed the Cold War to "let the nationalistic feelings of the country recede in importance and we ignored the father figure that Ho Chi Minh was becoming for most Vietnamese."

While serving as Acting Secretary of State, Dean Acheson

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16 Stoessinger, Nations in Darkness, p. 66.

17 Colbert, Southeast Asia, pp. 125-130. See also Cady, Southeast Asia, pp. 18-26.

18 Abbot Low Moffat, as cited in Causes and Conflicts, p. 169.
in late 1946 wired the following cable to the American Consul in Saigon: "Keep in mind Ho's clear record as [an] agent [of] international communism . . . [since the] least desirable eventuality would be [the] establishment [of a] Communist-dominated Moscow-oriented state [in] Indochina."\(^{19}\)

Later, on February 3, 1947, a State cable to France warned of Ho's direct communist connections and registered its opposition to "seeing colonial empire administration supplanted by [a] philosophy and political organizations emanating and controlled by [the] Kremlin."\(^{20}\)

Still this view had not yet become the basis of American policy in Southeast Asia. The American Consuls to Hanoi and Saigon, James L. O'Sullivan and Charles Reed II, cautioned the State Department not to foreclose debate on the nature of Ho's allegiances. Their wires to Washington stated that though a communist, existing evidence indicated that Ho was first and foremost an ardent nationalist. Both expressed concern that if the United States continued its support of the French, Ho would have little choice but to align himself more firmly with the communist camp.\(^{21}\)

\(^{19}\)Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson to Abbot Low Moffat, December 5, 1946, as cited in U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{A Staff Study Based on the Pentagon Papers.} 92d Cong., 2d sess., April 3, 1972, pp. 18-19. (Hereafter cited as \textit{Staff Study}.)


\(^{21}\)Consul Reed (Saigon) to Secretary of State, June 14,
Secretary Marshall questioned the validity of the growing acceptance among the French and State Department that Ho was merely the pawn of the Soviet Union. Marshall felt that "the impression here [is that] Ho [is] publicly attempting to walk [a] chalked line between nationalism and Communism."22 The same dilemma confronted the Americans; it would prove difficult indeed to walk its own chalked line in Southeast Asia.

The Chinese Revolution with the establishment of a communist base of operations in Asia accentuated the tendency to banish Ho to the communist bloc. For Washington, Mao Tsetung's victory against the Chinese Nationalists was feared as a harbinger of a trend that would sweep across Asia. The administration dreaded a repetition of the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in Asia.23 By 1949 Acheson proclaimed that:

the question [of] whether Ho [was] as much [a] nationalist as [a] Commie . . . [was] irrelevant. All Stalinists in colonial areas are nationalists . . . with [the] achievement [of] national aims their objective becomes subordinate to Commie purposes . . . on [the] basis [of] . . . Eastern Europe it must be assumed [that] such would be [the] goal [of] Ho.24

1947, in FRUS, 1947, 6:103-105. See also Reed's dispatches of July 19, and 24, pp. 119-120, 123-126. See Vice Consul O'Sullivan to Secretary of State, July 19, 1947, in FRUS, 1947, 6:120.


23Colbert, Southeast Asia, p. 126.

24Secretary of State Dean Acheson (Washington) to American
In October 1949, a State memorandum concluded that any "Communist activity, particularly Chinese and Vietnamese expansion into Southeast Asia, is an expression of Soviet imperialism."\(^{25}\)

By late 1949, America's specific goal of containing the Soviet Union began to be blurred by an anxiety of communist activity in general. The United States was either unwilling or unable to distinguish any fundamental differences between Soviet and Asiatic communism. America's Ambassador to France, the late David Bruce, cabled to Acheson that "I assume [that] no responsible American official believes that we can afford to take a chance that Asiatic Communism will in a reasonable future become a national Communism more friendly to [the] US than to the USSR."\(^{26}\) A risk of such magnitude was unthinkable in a world perceived to be so threatening. One could not gamble when world peace was at stake.

2. A Turning Point

Whatever doubts the Truman Administration entertained about Ho's loyalties were strengthened by Moscow's and Peking's recognition of his regime on January 22, 1950.

Footnotes:

\(^{25}\) Assistant Secretary of State Far Eastern Affairs W. Walton Butterworth (Washington), October 20, 1949, in FRUS, 1949, 7:93.

\(^{26}\) Ambassador to France David K. Bruce (Paris) to Secretary of State, December 11, 1949, in FRUS, 1949, 7:106.
"The Soviet acknowledgement of this movement," Acheson asserted, "should remove any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of national independence in Indochina." The administration failed to comprehend that an authentic nationalist could espouse communist doctrine.

Philip C. Jessup, Truman's Ambassador at Large, best exemplified the administration's attitude. By 1949, he states, "the evidence showed that Ho was the most dangerous and powerful agent of Soviet Communism in Far East Asia." Jessup added that "unless there were proofs to the contrary we must assume Ho was and would remain a Moscow stooge." When testifying to Congress on March 29, 1950, Jessup rebutted Senator Green's accusation that America was blindly embarking on a universal commitment to a status quo susceptible to revolutionary ferment: "It is now perfectly clear that Ho Chi Minh is a Moscow-trained Communist


29Ibid., p. 167.
and the leading figure in the Communist drive in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{30} This perception apparently justified America's policy of supporting the French over Ho Chi Minh.

As early as July 15, 1948, Marshall informed the French that America "would materially assist in strengthening [the] hands of [the] nationalists as opposed to [the] Communists in Indochina."\textsuperscript{31} By mid-1949, Dean Acheson endorsed a diplomatic note stating that the paramount issue in Indochina was whether it would be spared the ordeal of communist domination.\textsuperscript{32} However, as indicated by Acheson's testimony, the United States hoped to wash its hands in respect to French colonialism:

If we put ourselves sympathetically on the side of nationalism, which is the dominant spiritual force in that area, we put ourselves on the side of the thing which more than anything else can oppose communism. . . . We will get nowhere, I think, by supporting the French as a colonial power against Indochina.\textsuperscript{33}

Subsequent events would ease America's qualms concerning its association with the French.


\textsuperscript{33}Jessup, \textit{Nations}, p. 171.
Shortly after the Chinese Revolution, Acheson revealed the administration's Asian policy to Jessup: "You will please take as your assumption," he said, "that it is a fundamental decision of American policy that the United States does not intend to permit further extension of Communist domination of the continent or in the Southeast Asian area." Therefore, prior to the Korean War, Washington hoped to curb Soviet expansion in Asia. On December 23, 1949, a National Security Council study, NSC 48, concluded that communist domination of China facilitated Soviet aims around the globe, especially in Asia. A later NSC study contended:

It is important to United States security needs that all practical measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat.

America's concerns were limited to policy statements. Soon events compelled the administration to act.

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34 Instructions of Secretary of State Dean Acheson to Philip C. Jessup, U.S., Congress, Senate, in Nomination of Philip C. Jessup. Sub-committee Hearings, 82d Cong., 1st sess., September 27 - October 15, 1951, p. 603.


The United States quickly recognized and praised the French ratification of the Elysee Agreement on February 2, 1950. The accord promised the future independence of Indochina with the French Union. Consequently, the United States commenced its program of direct aid to French Indochina, thus initiatiag the formal bi-polarization of Vietnam. By May 1, 1950, Truman authorized ten million dollars of aid to Indochina. Three weeks later Acheson justified the extension of economic and military aid since "neither national independence nor democratic evolution can exist in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism." During the first week of June, Acheson explicitly linked France's effort in Indochina to the free world's conflict against communism by announcing Washington's resolve to support the French "in their struggle to preserve the freedom and integrity of Indochina from the Communist forces of Ho Chi Minh."  

Though America increased its effort to contain Soviet expansion in Asia, the commitment was restricted largely to philosophic outlook and rhetoric. This is evident by

37 Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 1:40-41.
39 Dean Acheson, as cited in U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Mutual Defense Assistance Program, 1950-1951, p. 8. (Hereafter cited as Mutual Defense.)
Acheson's refusal to apply the Truman Doctrine universally to China, by the hope that a wedge between the Soviets and Chinese could be implanted, and finally by the exclusion of Korea from America's vital interests in Acheson's infamous "defense perimeter" address of January 12, 1950.

Acheson clarified America's attitude on April 11, 1950:

It is not defeatism - on the contrary it is the beginning of victory - to arrive at a realistic recognition of the limitations of one's own strength. We will bring ourselves nothing but confusion by thinking that we are so strong that there is some way by which our government can determine what is to go on in every country everywhere.

Nevertheless, the United States had moved gradually away from the distinction between nationalism and communism in Southeast Asia. In an era of insecurity the fine line between peripheral and vital interests blurred as America's security needs proved elusive of precise definition.

Three weeks prior to war in Korea Acheson testified to Congress that "The interests of the United States are global in character. A threat to the peace of the world anywhere is a threat to our own security." The outbreak of war bestowed

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41 World Situation, p. 273.


43 Dean Acheson, as cited in Mutual Defense, p. 8.
upon this judgment a compelling logic. The debate within the Truman Administration between a foreign policy reflecting realistic restraint or global universalism ceased.

The reverberations emitted by the Korean conflict further entrenched the globalism of America's foreign policy. One scholar asserts that "in many ways Korea did for the Cold War what Pearl Harbor had done for World War II."\(^\text{44}\) Former benefits, doubts, and suspicions held about Soviet intentions were transformed to convictions tested by the fires of war. In a special message to Congress, Truman affirmed that "the communist aggression in Korea dispelled any lingering doubts that the Kremlin is willing to threaten the peace of the world."\(^\text{45}\) From now until the late 1960s these convictions hardened into dogma, inspiring a loyalty usually reserved for truths carved in stone.

The outbreak of war confirmed the validity of the hard-line approach and the worst-case analysis. The principles and speculations espoused in NSC 68 became recognized as fact.\(^\text{46}\) A response to the Russian atomic blast of 1949, NSC 68 was a didactic report which advocated reversing the policy of accommodation with the Soviets. Although not a


\(^{45}\)Harry S. Truman, as cited in Rose, Roots of Tragedy, p. 241.

blueprint for future action, one scholar believes that "the document does reflect the broad perspective that governed the major policy decisions of the Korean war period." 47

The major premises of the report stated: the world was polarized by the forces of freedom and slavery; the struggle was ideological in nature, especially in Asia; and only the United States could halt Soviet designs of world hegemony if it asserted its will. During this period of crises, the report continued, world peace would be jeopardized more by the restraint of American power than by its excessive use, for "our fundamental purpose is more likely to be defeated from the lack of will to maintain it, than from any mistake we may make or assault we may undergo because of asserting that will." 48

The report concluded:

Our position as the center of power in the free world places a heavy responsibility upon the United States for leadership. We must organize and enlist the energies and resources of the free world in a positive program for peace which will frustrate the Kremlin design for world domination. . . . Without such a cooperative effort, led by the United States, we will have to make gradual withdrawals under pressure until we discover one day that we have sacrificed positions of vital interests. 49

Overnight the Korean War, in dramatic fashion, crystallized these thoughts by giving them legitimacy and an urgency to

47 Ibid., p. 52.
49 Ibid., p. 107.
act. After Korea, America proved willing to frustrate the Kremlin's world ambitions and to extend its definition of what regions were vital to its security.

America viewed the Cold War now as total, thus the United States defined its commitment to peace as a global task. Previous distinctions between peripheral and vital interests became seemingly irrelevant. The noted commentator and journalist Edward R. Murrow captured the mood of Washington:

This action, this new policy, commits us to much more than the defense of the southern half of the Korean peninsula. We have commitments quite as binding, obligations quite as great to Indo-China, Iran, and Turkey as we have to Korea. We have drawn a line, not across the peninsula, but across the world.50

After Korea the administration lived up to the rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine. According to the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., where "Truman at first applied his Doctrine sparingly, events, especially after Korea, began to generalize it."

While initiation of hostilities caught the administration unaware, the Chinese intervention raised America's fears of communist aggressions to a fevered pitch. The following remark, though made by a member of Eisenhower's Administration,


expressed sentiments similar to those of Truman:

This event demonstrated beyond question not only the solidarity of the Peiping regime's alignment with the Communist bloc but also its willingness and ability to resort to open aggression in pursuit of bloc objectives. If there had been any doubt previously about the nature of the Mao regime it was eliminated by Communist China's intervention in Korea.52

The significance of the Chinese intervention, according to John Gaddis, was that it confirmed the concept of the monolithic nature of communism and put "an end to the assumption that there existed significant differences between varieties of communism."53

The Chinese Revolution, an increase in communist activity, and the Korean War "made very difficult," John F. Cady reflects, "any objective assessment by Washington of the merits of the Communist-led nationalist in Vietnam in particular."54 In a climate of crises and tension Washington perceived Ho's policies as integral to the Kremlin's world ambitions. If the United States harbored any qualms about France's colonialism, they were now reduced to insignificance. Acheson, in mid-1952, announced that the world


54 Cady, Southeast Asia, p. 46.
acknowledged "that the struggle in which the forces of the French Union and Associated States are engaged against . . . communist aggression in Indochina is an integral part of the world-wide resistance by the free nations to Communist . . . conquest."^55

On February 13, 1952, an NSC staff paper sharpened the administration's thoughts concerning Indochina. Its premises anticipated the later known "domino theory." It maintained that a failure to resist communist aggression, especially by the Chinese, would endanger the rest of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. By 1952, claims Gaddis Smith, Indochina was "the tightest knot in the tangle of issues binding Korea, Communist China, the Soviet Union, and the defense of Western Europe."^57

On April 12, 1945, when Truman succeeded Franklin Delano Roosevelt he did not envision a postwar world of intense conflict with the Soviet Union. Nor did he foresee that nationalism, revolution, and war would plague the Asian continent for the next seven years. By the end of Truman's

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57 Smith, Acheson, p. 305.

58 Donovan, Conflict and Crisis, pp. 1-45.
incumbency the Cold War pervaded every aspect of national life. During his farewell address to his countrymen, Tru­man speculated about his years in office:

I suppose that history will remember my term in office as the years when the cold war began to overshadow our lives. I have had hardly a day in office that has not been dominated by this all-embracing struggle, this conflict between those who love freedom and those who would lead the world back to slavery and darkness.59

What had been unimaginable in 1945 seemed to have become in­evitable by 1953.

3. The Eisenhower Years

Dwight D. Eisenhower, unlike Truman, inherited the Cold War, a phenomena now entrenched as a way of life in the United States. Eisenhower was spared the agony of being the first President who had to react to the tensions of the Cold War. Whereas Truman's world view and perceptions evolved and hardened in response to the Cold War, from the beginning of his term, Eisenhower perceived events from a Cold War per­spective.

To Charles Alexander, a leading scholar of the Eisenhower Administration, an intense hostility towards and fear of the communist bloc pervaded American life during his term in office. In the fifties a consensus regarding the Cold War

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crystallized and most Americans "had few doubts that their country faced a worldwide conspiracy whose center was Moscow and whose ultimate objective was nothing less than universal Communist conquest."^ Since it readily accepted and embraced the basic tenets of the era, the Eisenhower Administration formulated its foreign policy within the principles of the Cold War.

During what another leading specialist on Eisenhower described as "the most internationalist speech ever delivered as an Inaugural Address,"^ Eisenhower on January 20, 1953, depicted a world of doom and global strife in which "freedom is pitted against slavery; light against darkness."^ He later defined the Cold War as the struggle transcending "all other considerations of our times. To my mind it is the struggle of the ages."^ The entire world, he said in another speech, "was in the grip of an ideological struggle, and we are on one side and the Iron Curtain countries are on the other."^ Central to the administration's world view was a

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conviction that the communist world was monolithic. The
Kremlin controlled the communist bloc, subordinating all
to its goal of world domination. The administration's
attitude towards the Soviets was subjected to no careful
analysis of other alternatives. "This truth requires no
elaboration," Eisenhower affirmed, "all Americans recog­
nize it as fact." China, according to Alfred Jenkins,
the Officer in Charge of Chinese Political Affairs, had
"followed slavishly the leadership of the Soviet Union . . .
[leaving] no doubt about its dedication to . . . world Com­
munist revolution." The Eisenhower Administration expected
the relationship to survive for many years. The Secretary
of State, John Foster Dulles, recognized that despite power
rivalries between Russia and China, they would remain bound
by ideological ties.

To protect America's interests and security against the
communist threat, the administration embraced a foreign
policy distinguished by its globalism and an emphasis upon
collective security. Both Eisenhower and Dulles shared
the conviction that the Western response to Hitler had de­
monstrated forever the futility of appeasing aggressive

65 Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Principles of U.S. Foreign
Policy," Department of State Bulletin 31 (September 15,

66 Alfred Jenkins, "Present U.S. Policy Toward China,"

67 John Foster Dulles, "Our Policies Toward Communism in
China," Department of State Bulletin 37 (July 15, 1957):94.
dictatorial states. Therefore only a dynamic foreign policy could stem the communist encroachment upon the free world. It was America's solemn obligation to lead this endeavor. In so threatening a world it became difficult to differentiate between peripheral and vital areas. In 1958, Eisenhower aptly expressed the administration's world view: "The Soviets . . . are waging total cold war. The only answer to a regime that wages total cold war is to wage total peace."\(^{68}\)

During his first State of the Union Address, the President espoused a policy of globalism. "The policy we embrace," he declared, "must be a coherent global policy. The freedom we cherish and defend in Europe and the Americas is no different from the freedom that is imperiled in Asia."\(^{69}\) Or as the Ambassador of Belgium said, "What happens in Asia today affects us tomorrow."\(^{70}\) Perhaps Livingston Merchant, Assistant Secretary of European Affairs, best revealed the administration's attitude when he said that

\[\text{[it is increasingly difficult to draw a sharp distinction between national and international problems or to separate domestic politics from foreign policies. . . . A local election in a particular country may be of}}\]


merely internal interest, but it may also be, on occasion, a decisive battle between the forces of freedom and the forces of slavery.\textsuperscript{71}

Given this world view, American interest in Asia, including Vietnam, gained intensity.

4. Eisenhower and Vietnam

The spectre of a Red Asia haunted the administration throughout its tenure. On March 29, 1954, during a speech to the Overseas Press Club of America, Dulles reiterated that the Soviet Union was plotting to amalgamate the people of Southeast Asia into its orbit to further its aim of world domination.\textsuperscript{72} The activity of the Chinese in Southeast Asia was a matter of grave concern to Washington. The Chinese Revolution had "violently changed the balance of power in the Far East," as John Lindbeck, a member of the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs observed, "In effect, the Chinese Communist conquest of the mainland extended Communist power and the Soviet world into the heart of Asia."\textsuperscript{73}

The continuation of hostilities in Korea encouraged the administration's proclivity to devote greater attention to Asian problems. To the administration Korea was not an


\textsuperscript{73}John Lindbeck, "China and American Foreign Policy," Department of State Bulletin 31 (November 7, 1954):752-753.
isolated conflict but only the most explosive front of an area fraught with danger. Korea, according to Dulles, was "only a part of the world-wide effort of Communism to conquer freedom. . . . [I]t is part of that effort in Asia [where] a single Chinese Communist front extends from Korea on the North to Indochina in the South." Eisenhower's Assistant Secretary of Far Eastern Affairs indicated Washington's resolve to prevent further penetration of Asia by the Soviet Union:

We are probably justified in surmising . . . that what the Communists are now aiming at is to utilize their assets in China to gain control of Southeast Asia . . . faced with these ugly facts . . . Asia must be held against the pressures of all kinds the Communists are bringing to bear against it. In this context the rise of Indochina's value in America's eyes can better be appreciated.

As early as 1951, Eisenhower viewed Indochina from a Cold War perspective. The French effort was not an attempt to sustain their colonial domination, but "was in fact a clear case of freedom defending itself from Communist aggression." As President, Eisenhower justified the continuation

74 Department of State Press Release 469, September 1, 1953, in U.S.-Vietnam Relations, Book 9, V.B.3., I, p. 142.


of aid to the French in Indochina since its goal was "to pre-
vent the engulfment of Southeast Asia by the forces of inter-
national Communism."\(^{77}\)

As Washington contemplated the possibility of a French
failure in Southeast Asia, the administration concluded that
the loss of the area was unacceptable. An NSC policy state-
ment issued on January 16, 1954, concluded that "the loss of
the struggle in Indochina . . . would have the most serious
repercussions on United States and free world interests."\(^ {78}\)
The statement argued what would later be called the "domino
theory," stating that the loss of a single country to com-
munism would lead to the alignment of all of the Southeast
Asian countries with the communist camp. Such an occurrence
would threaten the security of Japan, the Middle East, and
Europe. During 1953, Eisenhower approved NSC 124/2 which
stated that America's main objective in Southeast Asia was
to prevent the area from passing into the communist orbit.\(^{79}\)
Hence the United States would be reluctant to relinquish its
commitment to Indochina after the French debacle in 1954.

\(^{77}\)Text of Joint U.S.-French Communique, Department of

\(^{78}\)Statement of Policy by the NSC on United States Ob-
jectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast
Asia," January 16, 1954, in U.S.-Vietnam Relations, Book 9,
V.B.3., II, p. 220.

\(^{79}\)Memorandum for Executive Secretary of NSC: Progress
Report on NSC 124/2, July 23, 1954, in U.S.-Vietnam Rela-
tions, Book 9, V.B.3., I, p. 113. Truman approved NSC 124/2
on June 25, 1954.
When it became apparent that the French were failing in Indochina, the United States faced the choice of either resisting or accepting the recent turn of events. Given the all-encompassing intensity of the Cold War milieu, the Eisenhower Administration never gave thought of abandoning Southeast Asia to communism any sober consideration. During the fifties it was unwilling or unable to renege upon America's mission of leading the free world. Therefore, in 1954, America began to replace France as the defender of freedom in Indochina.

By mid-1954, the war-weary French opted for a peaceful resolution of the Vietnamese conflict. During the peace conference in Geneva the Eisenhower Administration gave the effort a half-hearted endorsement at best. "To the administration," one scholar notes, "the session at Geneva could easily become an opening wedge for Communist domination of all Southeast Asia." Although sensitive to France's plight, the incessant vision of a communist Southeast Asia compelled Washington to resist. Dulles adamantly refused to capitulate to "the Soviet Communist strategy . . . to take over . . . Asia." Eisenhower and his advisers feared the consequences of failure in Indochina would invite catastrophe. The administration thought the French stand at Dien Bien Phu the equivalent to "fighting a modern Thermopylae," and that "the loss of

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80Parmet, Eisenhower, p. 375.


Indochina to Communist control, either by negotiation at Geneva or by force . . . would have grave consequences to the free world."  

In this atmosphere, on April 7, 1954, Eisenhower first publicly aired the "domino theory." Four days later, Under Secretary of State Bedell Smith gave this theory dramatic expression:

Can we allow, dare we permit, expansion of Communist Chinese control further into Asia? . . . the Soviet Union and Communist China have made it clear that their purpose is to dominate all of Southeast Asia. . . . If Indochina is lost to the Communists, Burma is threatened, Thailand is threatened, the Mayala Peninsula is exposed, Indonesia is subject to the greatest danger . . . there is the possible loss of millions and millions of people who would disappear behind the Iron Curtain.  

From late 1953 until the signing of the Geneva Accords in July 1954, the Eisenhower Administration, led by the indefatigable Dulles, hoped to avert the French demise. The hope of avoiding an inglorious defeat by the united action of the Allied powers faded and then died. Lack of Congressional support, Eisenhower's reluctance to employ force under the circumstances, and the unwillingness of key allies to commit themselves to united action led to the failure of Dulles'  


Nevertheless, though Eisenhower avoided direct intervention of American forces in Vietnam, he moved to bolster the strength of the free world in Southeast Asia.

With French failure imminent, Washington exerted its energies toward the establishment of a collective security system in Southeast Asia. The administration hoped to apply the policy of collective security that had been successful in Western Europe to Southeast Asia. Dulles observed:

that the Soviet Communist aggression in Europe took place only against countries which had no collective security arrangements. Since the organization of the North Atlantic Treaty there has been no successful aggression in Europe.86

On July 11, 1954, an official of the administration announced that "the United States is endeavoring to develop, as rapidly as circumstances permit, a collective security system to stem the spread of Communist forces into Southeast Asia."87

Since it represented a setback, it was no secret that Washington regarded the Geneva Accords to be a major defeat for Western diplomacy. The United States had suffered a loss prestige as a power capable of resisting communist advance in Southeast Asia. In August 1954, an NSC memo expressed concern

85 See Townsend Hoopes, The Devil and John Foster Dulles: The Diplomacy of the Eisenhower Era (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), pp. 202-221. This is the most detailed account of Dulles's effort to secure allied support for united action.


that Geneva and continued communist success as "a serious
loss for the free world, the psychological and political ef-
fects of which will be felt throughout the Far East and around
the globe." The administration acted promptly to minimize
the losses inflicted by Geneva.

Dulles led the effort to utilize a collective security
system to neutralize the domino effect in Southeast Asia.
On May 11, 1954, he stated:

As the nations come together, then the 'domino
theory' so-called, ceases to apply. And what
we are trying to do is create a situation in
Southeast Asia where the domino situation will
not apply.®

Failure to construct such a system, Walter Robertson feared,
would end with "the Asian pie" being eaten bit by bit.®
Within a month of Geneva, an NSC policy statement proposed
that America should "exploit available means to prevent South
Vietnam from being permanently incorporated in the Soviet
c bloc."®

The Manila Treaty of September 8, 1954, created the

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88 National Security Council memorandum, August 1954, in
89 John Foster Dulles, as cited in Colbert, Southeast
Asia, p. 275.
90 Walter S. Robertson, "Communist Tactics in the Far
91 Statement of Policy by the National Security Council:
"Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East: The Consequences of
Relations, Book 10, V.B.3., III, p. 737.
Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). This treaty "paved the way," Eisenhower later reflected, "for a system of true cooperation between both [Asian and Western Nations] in the never-ending struggle to stem the tide of Communist expansionism." The signing of the treaty indicates the administration took the "domino theory" to heart, resolved itself to halt the spread of communism, and planned to buy time to strengthen vulnerable areas of Southeast Asia.

The administration, however, saw little prospect that South Vietnam would withstand the pressures of communism in Southeast Asia. According to Dulles, the purpose of SEATO was "to save all of Southeast Asia if possible it can be saved; if not, to save essential parts of it." "You have to draw the line somewhere," was how Under Secretary Smith described the treaty. The line ultimately would be drawn across the 17th parallel in Vietnam.

United States officials realized that SEATO could not prevent further deterioration of the free world's position in Indochina. Washington especially expressed skepticism concerning the ability of Ngo Dinh Diem's government in South Vietnam to survive. On December 24, 1954, in a State cable to General Lawton Collins, Dulles acknowledged that the

92 Eisenhower, Mandate, p. 375.
situation in South Vietnam was rapidly disintegrating. Apprehension about Diem's abilities faded before the overriding fear of a communist takeover in South Vietnam. No alternative to Diem existed, Dulles argued:


Yet by April 1955, the administration still pondered abandoning its commitment to Diem's regime. Diem's swift and decisive victory against his political enemies on April 27, 1955, effectively quelled these doubts.

Now Washington wholeheartedly endorsed Diem as Vietnam's genuine and legitimate nationalist leader. On June 1, 1956, the Eisenhower Administration reflected this shift in policy by acknowledging that Diem's splendid job in South Vietnam far exceeded previous expectations.96 The dread of a communist victory led the United States to support Diem's refusal to hold national elections in 1956. Although expressed by a minor military official the following comment represented the administration's policy:


No one is more aware . . . that the neutralist world, now weighing the course of the future, will eventually make a choice between Communism and freedom. The ultimate fate of the free portion of Indochina will become a critical element in that choice. . . .

The loss of the rest of Indochina in consequence of the 1956 election or otherwise, would inevitably sway many of these millions to Communism. Aside from its political aspects, this trend could be militarily disastrous. . . . If another free world debacle in Indochina materializes, . . . the U.S. military position in the Western Pacific could be jeopardized.97

Now America proudly espoused Diem's nationalist qualities as they gradually replaced the French as the sole protector of South Vietnam.98

On April 4, 1959, Eisenhower announced the first public commitment by the United States to maintain South Vietnam as a separate national state. Eisenhower evoked the harsh realities of the Cold War and then used Vietnam to illustrate the Soviet Union's dedication "to promote world revolution, destroy freedom, and communize the world."99 Eisenhower reiterated his faith in the domino theory and linked the freedom of South Vietnam's to America's. Since the Cold War posed


99Dwight D. Eisenhower, Address at Gettysburg College Convocation, April 4, 1959, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 1:625.
a total threat to America and the free world, it was in "the self-interest of each free nation . . . to resist the loss to imperialistic communism of the freedom and independence of any other nation." For these reasons, Eisenhower declared "that our own national interests demand some help from us in sustaining in Viet-Nam the morale, the economic progress, and the military strength necessary to its continued existence in Freedom."

5. The Cold War and Vietnam

Eisenhower's legacy to John F. Kennedy went beyond concrete commitments to Vietnam inherent in SEATO and public rhetoric. More importantly, his eight years as President left the atmosphere of the Cold War intact and unaltered. More than the specific commitments, this was a decisive factor which prompted Eisenhower's successors to link Vietnam to the vital interests of the United States.

Allen Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, aptly voiced the intensity of this perspective:

The challenge is a global one. As long as the principles of international communism motivate the regime in Moscow and Peiping, we must expect that their single purpose will be the liquidation of our form of free society and the emergence of a Sovietized, communized world order.

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100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., p. 626.
In 1960, the administration still adhered to its conviction that the Soviet Union planned to strike at America indirectly by dominating the nations of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe; thus shifting the balance of power to favor the Soviets.\footnote{Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Diplomacy and the Modern World," \textit{Department of State Bulletin} 48 (November 7, 1960):709.}

In his farewell address of January 17, 1961, Eisenhower described the world situation. "We face a hostile ideology," he warned, "global in scope. Unhappily the danger it poses promises to be of indefinite nature."\footnote{Dwight D. Eisenhower, "President Eisenhower's Farewell to the Nation," \textit{Department of State Bulletin} 49 (February 6, 1961):180.}

Eisenhower bequeathed to Kennedy a delicate situation in Southeast Asia. On January 19, 1961, Eisenhower privately alerted the President-elect "that the Communists had designs on all of Southeast Asia."\footnote{Memorandum of Conference of January 19, 1961, between President Eisenhower and President-elect Kennedy on the Subject of Laos, in \textit{U.S.-Vietnam Relations}, Book 10, V.B.3., IV, pp. 1360-1361.} Eisenhower added that the crisis in Laos particularly demanded the immediate attention of the United States. He revived the domino theory and then emphasized the critical importance of Laos and Southeast Asia to America's security and treaty obligations. More important, he implores the new President, if necessary, to "go it alone" in Southeast Asia.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1367.}
Earlier, during 1959, Eisenhower reflected upon the conflict between communism and the free world; "The battle is now joined. The next decade will forecast its outcome." The nature of that battle and its outcome would, in large part, be determined by the successors of Eisenhower.

CHAPTER IV

PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY:

THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

AND VIETNAM, 1961-1963

Now our great responsibility is to be the chief defender of freedom in this time of maximum danger. Only the United States has the power and the resources and the determination. We have committed ourselves to the defense of dozens of countries stretched around the globe who look to us for independence, who look to us for the defense of their freedom.¹

John F. Kennedy

According to popular legend, on January 20, 1961, a young and charismatic President passed a torch to a new generation of Americans. His inauguration supposedly marked an abrupt departure from America's traditional domestic and foreign policies. In actuality, the differences between Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy were more a matter of style and age than of substance. In foreign affairs the new administration initially conducted its policy within what Henry Kissinger labeled the "undifferentiated globalism" of the

¹John F. Kennedy, Democratic Dinner Party in Chicago, April 28, 1961, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:802.
Eisenhower Administration. Coral Bell, a respected scholar of international affairs, considers Kennedy's inaugural address the rhetorical zenith of ideological, Cold War moralism.

The Cold War, for the new occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, continued to be the overriding concern in international politics and the defining characteristic of the age. Newsweek's attitude was indistinguishable from that of the administration's: "The greatest single problem that faces John Kennedy - and the key to most of his other problems - is how to meet the aggressive power of the Communist bloc."

Unlike the Eisenhower Administration, Kennedy and his advisers displayed an eagerness and readiness to respond to the challenges of the Cold War. During an interview on February 9, 1961, Secretary of State Dean Rusk described the new administration:

What the United States does or what the United States does not do in the world . . . makes a great deal of difference to what happens in this turbulent tempestuous period. . . . Now the United States can make an enormous difference to the shape of the world to come by taking an active and . . . constructive role in the world. And I believe that President Kennedy's leadership will give us a new involvement and concern with . . . these great tides of history.

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3 Ibid.


5 Dean Rusk, "Secretary Rusk Interviewed on 'Today' Show," U.S., Department of State, Department of State Bulletin 44
Addressing an audience at the University of California in Berkeley, Rusk captured Washington's view of the world and of itself: "It would be a mistake for us to underestimate the formidable contest in which we shall be engaged in the decade of the sixties. . . . Our role cannot be passive. . . . The United States must lead."

Washington considered the primary threat to world peace and America's security to be an aggressive communist bloc, controlled by the Soviet Union. Chester Bowles, Acting Secretary of State, stated clearly the administration's view: "In Berlin, Southeast Asia, Cuba, and elsewhere the Communist movement poses an unremitting challenge to our strength of will, our firmness of purpose, and our intelligence." Confident of America's strength in conventional and nuclear warfare, Kennedy feared that America stood vulnerable to guerrilla wars, the "Achilles' heel" of America's defenses.

1. Wars of National Liberation

Kennedy expected confrontation with the Soviets in what he called "the lands of the rising peoples:" Africa, Asia,  

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and the Middle East. During his first State of the Union Address, the President warned that neither the Soviets nor the Chinese would relinquish their designs "for world domination - ambitions which they forcefully restated only a short time ago." Kennedy was referring presumably to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's threat to eat away at America's security. Though not a major statement of Soviet policy, Kennedy took Khrushchev's espousal of wars of national liberation to heart.

Prior to his election, Kennedy and others had voiced alarm concerning America's capacity of resisting communist aggression. Kennedy was persuaded that America's reliance on massive retaliation was excessive, unwise, and inadequate. Since it exposed a weakness in America's military defenses, communist guerrilla warfare caused particular concern. On February 29, 1960, Senator Kennedy had revealed his anxiety regarding America's ability to counter effectively this new type of warfare:

But both before and after 1953 events have demonstrated that our nuclear retaliatory power is not enough. It cannot deter Communist aggression which is too limited to justify

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atomic war. It cannot protect uncommitted nations against a Communist takeover using local or guerrilla forces. It cannot be used in so-called brush-fire peripheral wars. In short, it cannot prevent the Communists from gradually nibbling at the fringe of the free world's territory and strength, until our security has been steadily eroded in piecemeal fashion.\(^{11}\)

Guerrilla wars presumably were sponsored by the Soviets. Hence guerrilla warfare was a dangerous threat to the world's balance of power.\(^{12}\) Armed with this conviction Kennedy came to the White House in 1961.

To defeat this ominous threat necessitated a novel approach to the problem. Khrushchev's lengthy, though routine, speech on January 6, 1961, lent urgency to the need of shoring up America's capabilities. Khrushchev had espoused communism as the wave of the future. He further--but briefly--advocated Soviet support of wars of national liberation, specifically communist advances in Cuba and Vietnam. Apparently the speech was also aimed at Chinese ears, with the support of these wars a minor point not representative of major Soviet policy.\(^{13}\) Due to his previous concerns, fears, and perceptions of Soviet

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\(^{11}\) Senator John F. Kennedy, Congressional Speech, February 29, 1960, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:798.


\(^{13}\) Blaufarb, Counterinsurgency Era, p. 54.
ambitions, Kennedy interpreted the speech at face value.

Khrushchev merely confirmed Kennedy's suspicion that the communists' reliance on guerrilla warfare presented the free world with its greatest challenge of the coming decade. The administration viewed the speech as an authoritative statement of Soviet policy. Walt W. Rostow, chairman of the Policy Planning Council, elaborated upon its significance:

Thus when we read Mr. Khrushchev's speech of January 6, 1961, and the blessing he gave to the methods of subversion and guerrilla warfare, we took this matter very seriously indeed. We regard the challenge not merely as a series of regional crises but part of a general Communist offensive designed to corrode the free world without confronting either our nuclear or conventional strength. All the potentialities existed in January 1961 for the spread of Communist power by these methods into Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America.14

Kennedy read aloud relevant sections of Khrushchev's speech during the first meeting of his National Security Council. Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy's chief military adviser, stated that the President "took very seriously Khrushchev's speech of January 6, 1961, which promised Soviet support on a global basis for People's Wars or Wars of Liberation on the model of the guerrilla war in South Vietnam."15

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14 Walt W. Rostow, "Where We Stand," Department of State Bulletin 46 (June 18, 1962):967.

a National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM 2) which advocated an increase in America's counterinsurgency resources.

In April, Cuban exiles with the blessing of the United States invaded Cuba with the intention of overthrowing Fidel Castro's regime. The Bay of Pigs disaster reinforced Kennedy's conviction that these liberation wars posed a grave threat to America's security and world peace. After Kennedy's self-admitted failure, he talked of its lessons:

We dare not fail to see the insidious nature of this new and deeper struggle. We dare not fail to grasp the new concepts, the new tools, the new sense of urgency we will need to combat it -- whether in Cuba or South Vietnam.

No greater task faces this nation or this administration. No other challenge is more deserving of our every effort and energy. Too long we have fixed our eyes on traditional military needs. Now it should be clear that this is no longer enough -- that our security may be lost piece by piece, country by country, without the firing of a single missile or the crossing of a single border.

We intend to profit from this lesson. We intend to re-examine and reorient our forces of all kinds. Let me then make clear as . . . President . . . that I am determined upon our system's survival and success, regardless of the cost, regardless of the peril.16

Counterinsurgency became the President's personal project. At a news conference on April 21, 1961, Kennedy specified guerrilla warfare as among the eminent challenges of the sixties.17


17 U.S., President, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal
The Vienna Summit with Khrushchev during the summer of 1961 did not assuage Kennedy's apprehension. Kennedy arrived in Vienna with America's prestige at its lowest ebb since the U-2 incident of 1959. If Kennedy hoped to cure Khrushchev of his perception of the President as a weak and indecisive leader, then he met great disappointment. Nor did he resolve with Khrushchev the issue of the wars of liberation. The tense and sometimes hostile atmosphere magnified Kennedy's anxiety over Soviet ambitions. One eyewitness, the respected news columnist, James Reston, recalls that Kennedy emerged from the room angry and shaken. Kennedy fretted that the Soviet statesman thought him young, inexperienced, and easily intimidated. Kennedy returned to the United States determined to disabuse Khrushchev of his faulty perception. With a heightened alarm regarding Soviet support of liberation wars, Kennedy conveyed his impressions of Khrushchev to the American people:

Most of all, he predicted the triumph of Communism in the new and less developed countries. He was certain that the tide there was moving his way, that the revolution of rising peoples would eventually be a Communist revolution, and that the so-called wars of liberation, supported by the Kremlin, would replace the old methods of direct aggression and invasion.


Kennedy concluded emphatically that "it was clear that this area of the new and poorer nations will be a continuing crisis of the decade." In this context Kennedy's initial decisions regarding Vietnam were made.

2. Vietnam: The Early Decisions

Cold War tensions throughout the world marked Kennedy's first year in office. "From Laos ... to Berlin," according to New York Times columnist Russell Baker, "crisis after crisis has fallen across the White House with a rapidity and gravity that has absorbed Mr. Kennedy's energy since his inauguration." Although the import of Vietnam dwindled in comparison to the crises in Berlin or Cuba, the very existence of strains in Soviet-American relations augmented the stakes in Vietnam. "It would not have been easy for members of the Kennedy administration," the historian Ernest May notes, "to see Southeast Asia as anything but a battlefield in the Cold War." Hostilities in Vietnam were interpreted not according to the country's history, culture, or traditions but through the prism of the Cold War.

In this climate 1961 was a difficult year for the United States to make concessions, real or imagined, to what was

20 Ibid., p. 445.
perceived as an intransigent and dangerous communist bloc. According to Kennedy's court historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "given the truculence of Moscow, the Berlin crisis, and the resumption of nuclear testing, the President unquestionably felt that an American retreat in Asia might upset the whole world balance." On September 25, 1961, Kennedy himself warned that if America failed to defeat communist aggression in Southeast Asia then "the gates will be opened wide" to communism throughout the world.

Was Kennedy's reaction exaggerated, even extreme or hysterical? Perhaps from a later perspective it appears to be. But Douglas Blaufarb points out that historical hindsight distorts as well as illuminates the past:

In the early sixties the threat of a monolithic and expansionistic Communism was not so easily dismissed. The expansionistic thrust of Khrushchev's rhetoric, his pressure on Berlin . . . could not be waved aside. His verbal commitment to 'wars of national liberation' was easily misread as a new global initiative in view of events in Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba. . . ." 

The communist threat, perceived as real, dramatically influenced American policy in Vietnam.

For America's commitment to universal peace, a threat to order anywhere represented a threat to peace everywhere. Dean

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23 Schlesinger, Thousand Days, p. 506.


Rusk's adamant rejection of a newsman's observation that the United States was bogging down in unimportant areas of the world epitomized the administration's attitude. Rusk argued the contrary:

Because if you don't pay attention to the periphery, the periphery changes. And the first thing you know the periphery is the center. I mean, peace and security are worldwide. That is particularly true these days, when the doctrine of a historically inevitable world revolution, backed by action, is in confrontation with the world right around the globe. And what happens in one place cannot help but affect what happens in another.26

With this definition of peripheral areas, Vietnam's security and well-being were linked to America's.

U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of Political Affairs, explicitly linked Southeast Asia's future to that of America. Johnson calculated that Asia's emergence would be among the era's more significant events. Therefore he added "these emerging nations may well hold the key to the world of tomorrow. . . . our ability to permit this revolution to unfold and not be turned back by communism, is crucial to our own future."27

By early 1961, the administration feared that Ngo Dinh Diem's government lacked the capacity to resist effectively communist aggression against South Vietnam. Khrushchev's


January 6 speech already had alerted Kennedy to the dangers of guerrilla war in Vietnam. Actual hostilities were necessary to awaken others to its implications. According to Maxwell Taylor, "it required an increase in Vietcong terrorism and guerrilla activity in South Vietnam during 1961 to make clear what Khrushchev was talking about in his January address." Renewed conflict in Vietnam, Taylor continued, revealed only what history had already made evident:

It was true that a War of National Liberation was but a new name for an old game which had been played previously in the Greek Civil War, in the Huk insurrection in the Philippines, in the guerrilla warfare in Malaya, and in Castro's rebellion in Cuba. They all had the common identifying mark of subversive aggression for the overthrow of a non-Communist government... This was the new technique which Khrushchev in Russia, Mao in China, and Ho in North Vietnam united in proclaiming as the preferred means for the future expansion of militant Communism... This was the threat which President Kennedy perceived and against which he wished to erect defenses.

Vietnam became the testing ground for the West's ability to counter effectively guerrilla warfare.


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28 Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares, p. 200.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 202. Maxwell Taylor: "The President repeatedly emphasized his desire to utilize the situation in Vietnam to study the techniques and equipment related to counter-insurgency."
Cong were matching with deeds their professed intention to smash Diem's government, it stated, that the situation, though not hopeless, had reached a critical stage. Alexis Johnson, also a leading specialist of the Far East, linked the Vietnam crisis to the Cold War in general: "The turmoil created throughout the area by this rapid succession of events provides an ideal environment for the Communist 'master plan' to take over all of Southeast Asia."  

Although the Bay of Pigs fiasco tempered whatever inclination Kennedy had of sending troops during the Laotian crisis, he was not disposed to renege on America's commitment to South Vietnam. In fact, the neutralist solution increased the pressure to stand firm in Vietnam. On March 28, 1961, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued by the CIA stated that throughout Southeast Asia countries considered Laos to be "a symbolic test of strengths between the major powers of the West and the Communist bloc." But since international cooperation defused the Laotian conflict, the "symbolic test" shifted to Vietnam. In late 1961, Alexis Johnson drafted a


32 Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), p. 736. Those who advocated intervention in Cuba also recommended similar action regarding Laos. Kennedy revealed to Sorenson: "Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did. Otherwise we'd be in Laos by now--and that would be a hundred times worse."

33 Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:51-55.

policy statement, "Concept of Intervention in Vietnam," which, according to an anonymous editor of the so-called "Pentagon Papers," concluded that if the administration was unwilling to save Laos, it should at least "take a strong and unambiguous action to make sure that Vietnam would not also be lost." Strong action, the statement implied, meant if necessary the introduction of American combat troops.

This was not the first time that Kennedy's advisers had confronted him with proposals to intervene in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff on May 10, 1961, "assuming that the political decision is to hold Southeast Asia outside the Communist sphere," recommended to Kennedy, "that U.S. forces be deployed immediately to Vietnam." The next day, McGeorge Bundy, the Presidential Adviser on National Security Affairs, approved NSAM 52, which endorsed the recommendations of the JCS, including the goal "to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam." Nevertheless, Kennedy refused to make the issue of combat troops the "touchstone" of America's good faith.

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36 Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum, May 10, 1961, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:49.
38 Sorensen, Kennedy, p. 737.
Although unwilling to commit troops, Kennedy had not abandoned the goal of the April Task Force, "that come what may the U.S. intends to win this battle." The next few months brought little respite in Cold War hostilities; pressures pushing the United States toward greater involvement in Vietnam continued unabated. Kennedy had improved a new counterinsurgency plan involving a budget of forty-two million dollars, increased the number of United States military advisers, and used American money to increase the number of Vietnamese armed forces. The temporary seizure of Phuoc Vinh, a provincial capital, on September 27, 1961, indicated that more aid was needed. Schlesinger observed that "Kennedy, absorbed as he was in Berlin and nuclear testing, faced a series of inescapable decisions in Vietnam." Hence, in October he sent Rostow and Taylor on their fateful mission to South Vietnam.

The mission arrived in Saigon on the eighteenth, and on November 3 Taylor dispatched an "Eyes Only" report to Kennedy and his Secretaries of Defense and State. Forcefully and directly, Taylor concluded that the strategy of guerrilla warfare, which enabled the communists to circumvent America's traditional sources of strength, had approached the threshold

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41 Schlesinger, Thousand Days, p. 503.
of victory in Southeast Asia. The weakness of Diem's government and America's reluctance to act with decisive force, were the reasons Taylor gave for the recent successes by the communists. Although Taylor explicitly acknowledged that Vietnam constituted a peripheral area, he strongly urged Kennedy to introduce "U.S. military force" to Vietnam.42 The stakes in Vietnam transcended mere regional concerns and Taylor implored Kennedy to act decisively:

It is my judgment . . . that the United States must decide how it will cope with Khrushchev's 'wars of liberation' which are really para-wars of guerrilla aggression. This is a new and dangerous Communist technique which bypasses our traditional political and military responses . . . we must declare our intentions to attack the source of guerrilla aggression.43

Taylor further betrayed his conviction that the Cold War defined the nature of the Vietnamese conflict when he encouraged Kennedy to instruct Moscow to "use its influence with Ho Chi Minh to call his dogs off."44

McNamara and Rusk enclosed Taylor's recommendation. On November 8, 1961, Kennedy received a memo from McNamara which argued that unless the administration bolstered its commitment to Vietnam with military force, Southeast Asia would be lost to communism. Three days later in a joint memorandum,

42 "Eyes Only for the President from General Taylor," November 3, 1961, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:89.
43 Ibid., 2:98.
44 Ibid., 2:99.
McNamara and Rusk concurred that "the United States should commit itself to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism."\(^{45}\)

Kennedy, though reluctant to go this far or to commit troops, still faced the prospect of defeat with disquiet. By the end of 1961, the United States advisory forces had doubled and concern over communist gains in Southeast Asia carried over into 1962. The JCS throughout January reiterated its conviction that the guerrilla war in Vietnam was "a planned phase in the Communist timetable for world domination."\(^{46}\) America must resist these moves if it valued its credibility as a responsible world leader. Kennedy kept abreast of recent developments in Vietnam but other world affairs demanded his attention in 1962.

3. The Sino-Soviet Split and the Cuban Missile Crisis

Early in 1962, the administration publicly acknowledged the existence of the Sino-Soviet split. Yet this recognition did not cause fundamental change in the administration's world view. Ironically, the Special Assistant to the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Theodore Achilles, responded to


this phenomena with his prior perceptions intact. The basic Soviet and Chinese objective of world domination, Achilles reaffirmed, remained steadfast. The difference was over tactics, not goals. "Let us not be deceived," he warned, "let us never forget basic Soviet objectives." Then, directing his attention to Southeast Asia, he maintained that the communist world displayed "no signs of inhibiting its predilection for 'wars of national liberation,' brushfire wars which it can persuade others to fight . . . proxy as in Laos or Vietnam." Given Soviet and Chinese goals, Achilles concluded that America must prepare for the worst; this required the development of forces capable of deterring such proxy wars.

The view had acquired official sanction during an interview with Dean Rusk. On the "Today" television show he said:

> We . . . ought not suppose that these differences are any great comfort to us at the present time, because this argument is really about how best to get on with the world revolution of communism as they see it. They're committed to that in Moscow; they're committed to that in Peiping. Their argument is about the difference in procedures by which they would accomplish their purpose.

Therefore the Sino-Soviet split produced no reexamination of

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48 Ibid.

the conflict in Vietnam. Quite the contrary, rather than soothe American nerves, the split increased Washington's fears of an unleashed China in Southeast Asia.

An event which did result in an examination of the basic tenets of the Cold War was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although the actual crisis involving the Soviet attempt to place offensive missiles in Cuba is outside the scope of this study, its impact on world politics certainly is not. "We may find ourselves at an important turning point in history, at a watershed of the cold war as we have known it," one administration official reflected upon the significance of approaching the brink of a nuclear war. While it is commonly recognized that Soviet-American relations subsequently improved, the question that remains is what effect did this have on Vietnam policy?

While Kennedy conceded that a foundation for future detente with the Soviets existed, he nevertheless understood that basic differences imposed limitations upon such cooperation. Speaking at the University of Maine almost a year after the missile crisis, Kennedy cautioned that "there still were major areas of tension and conflict, from Berlin . . . to Southeast Asia . . . [including] wholly different views on the so-called wars of liberation," which continued to divide the superpowers. The avoidance of nuclear war over Cuba

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did not mollify Kennedy's misgivings over liberation wars. In a national address on December 17, 1962, Kennedy reluctantly concluded that Khrushchev still retained his faith that Soviet "support of these wars of liberation, small wars, will bring about our defeat. . . . Mr. Khrushchev does not wish us well, unfortunately." 52 Hence, although the missile crisis encouraged a cautious reexamination of American attitudes toward the Cold War, the impact of this process on American policy in Vietnam was minimal.

Similarly, American attitudes toward the Sino-Soviet split did not change after Cuba either. Roger Hilsman admonished that "our problems in Viet-nam and Laos, Cuba and Berlin have not disappeared because of the Sino-Soviet split." 53 Disquietude about communist activity in Southeast Asia actually intensified. U. Alexis Johnson commented on the split:

> Nor does it mean that Communism is going to present fewer dangers to us. In fact, the greater belligerence of the Chinese Communists, unrestrained by Soviet caution, may present greater dangers, particularly in areas around China's borders. 54

Rusk displayed impatience with these fine distinctions: "Both principal Communist powers are committed to a Communist world

As Kennedy declared in his State of the Union Address, "A dispute over how to bury the West is no grounds for Western rejoicing."

Kennedy's speeches after the missile crisis were often a mixture of hope and alarm. In Maine he declared, "There are new rays of hope on the horizon, but we still live in the shadows of war." Soon those shadows would loom darkest in Vietnam.

4. Vietnam: A Year of Crisis

"The spearhead of aggression," a confident Kennedy proclaimed in January 1963, "has been blunted in South Vietnam." But the optimism expressed in this State of the Union Address proved misplaced. A year of continued crisis, turmoil and tragedy in South Vietnam would follow.

The year began with hope and on May 6, 1963, McNamara announced the withdrawal of a thousand military personnel. By June, the tenuous nature of Diem's hold on the Vietnamese people became evident. The shock waves emitted by the

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55 Ibid., p. 283.
Buddhist crisis in June revealed the fragility of South Vietnam's government. South Vietnam's internal emergency continued throughout the summer and fall. But debate centered upon Diem and alternatives to his rule, rather than prompting a reappraisal of America's commitment to South Vietnam.

Frederick E. Nolting, America's Ambassador to Saigon, warned that if the Buddhist crisis spread "the country might be lost to the Communists," an outcome the administration was unwilling to accept. 59

Kennedy, during a mid-July news conference, reaffirmed America's commitment to Vietnam: "we are not going to withdraw from that effort . . . for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but of Southeast Asia." 60 Even as the situation became critical Kennedy insisted to Walter Cronkite of CBS that America must stand firm in its commitment. Seven days later, on September 9, in response to a question asked by NBC's David Brinkley, Kennedy frankly declared his faith in the "domino theory:"

No, I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists. So I believe it. 61

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59 Frederick E. Nolting, as cited in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:231.
61 "President Kennedy's NBC Interview," September 9,
Therefore despite unease and increased exasperation with Diem's rule, America's commitment to South Vietnam remained firm.

McNamara and Taylor returned to Vietnam in October to evaluate the situation and to recommend a redirection of policy as needed. Though confident regarding the military situation, they were vexed about South Vietnam's political instability. The White House issued a statement on October 2:

The security of South Viet-nam is a major interest of the United States. . . . We will adhere to our policy of working with the people of and government of South Viet-nam to deny this country to Communism.62

The bloody overthrow of Diem's regime in November would end temporarily the political unrest of South Vietnam. Though shaken by Diem's sudden demise, one can surmise that Vietnam's recent tragedy receded in Kennedy's mind as he triumphantly toured Dallas on November 22, 1963. Within weeks of each other, both Diem and Kennedy were dead.

5. An Ambiguous Legacy

When Richard Neustadt evaluated Kennedy's presidency, his general remarks also applied to the specific case of Vietnam: "We cannot know what Kennedy's full record would have been. . . . Still more important, we can never know

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precisely how to weigh events in his truncated term."  

Eight days before his untimely death, Kennedy displayed uncertainty regarding Vietnam when he juxtaposed rhetoric about America's global responsibilities with an expressed desire to withdraw American personnel. A series of rambling questions defined the debate: "What American policy should be, and what our aid policy should be, how can we intensify the struggle, how can we bring Americans out of there?"  

Would Kennedy have implemented the earlier recommendations and endorsements of McNamara, Rostow, Rusk, and Taylor to increase the level of America's force? Or, would he have allowed the suggestions of Paul Kattenburg and Robert Kennedy to evolve into a policy of disengagements?  

We do not know, and we never will.  

According to Schlesinger, after Diem's overthrow and murder, Kennedy "realized that Vietnam was his greatest failure in foreign policy, and that he had never really given it his full attention."  

Reston's comment supports this contention:  

He could be ambiguous and even indecisive on secondary questions. . . . He . . . temporized with the Vietnamese crisis, partly supporting those who wanted to intervene 'to win,' partly joining those who reminded him that the French  

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65 Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:213-214, 241-243. Kattenburg was a member of the State Department's Vietnam Working Group.  
had suffered 175,000 casualties against the same Communist army, but never really defining his aims or reconciling his power with his objectives.67

For Reston, Kennedy's qualities of leadership emerged only during acute crises. Tragically, just as the situation in Vietnam became critical, Kennedy was killed in Dallas. With the coup against Diem a crossroad of decision was reached in Vietnam. A man other than Kennedy would choose what road to take.

CHAPTER V

PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION IN DIPLOMACY: THE
JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION AND THE DECISION
TO INTERVENE IN VIETNAM, 1963-1965

So what is our stake? What is our commitment in that situation? Can those of us in this room forget the lesson that we had in this issue of war and peace when it was only 10 years from the seizure of Manchuria to Pearl Harbor; about 2 years from the seizure of Czechoslovakia to the outbreak of World War II in Western Europe? Don't you remember the hopes expressed in those days: that perhaps the aggressor will be satisfied by this next bite, and perhaps he will be quiet? Remember that? ... But we found that ambition and appetite fed upon success and the next bite generated the appetite for the following bite. And we learned that, by postponing the issue, we made the result more terrible, the holocaust more dreadful. We cannot forget that experience.¹

Dean Rusk

The Kennedy legacy in Vietnam may cause intense debate among historians but Lyndon Baines Johnson never participated in this fascinating exercise. As President, Johnson emphasized his Vietnam policy's continuity with that of his

predecessors. Johnson maintained that his actions in Vietnam "were consistent with the goals the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945." Three days after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson approved a National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM 273) stating that the United States would "persevere in the policies and actions in which we were already engaged." Before a Joint Session of Congress on November 27, Johnson vowed that "this nation will keep its commitments from South Viet-Nam to West Berlin."  

1. Vietnam: The Situation Worsens

"Asia is not on fire," Roger Hilsman reflected, but "portions of it smoulder with each morning's headlines." From late 1963 until early 1965 South Vietnam burned slowly; its eruption into flame would confront Johnson with the greatest challenge of his presidency. During the early months of its tenure, the administration harbored hopes of disengagement and withdrawal from Vietnam. A White House

\[\text{3}^{\text{Ibid., p. 45.}}\]
\[\text{5}^{\text{Roger Hilsman, "United States Policy Toward Communist China," Department of State Bulletin 50 (January 6, 1964): 11.}}\]
statement issued on March 17, 1964 indicated a possible recall of American personnel. But this sentiment was countered by a firm commitment to South Vietnam's security.

McNamara, in a memo to Johnson, acknowledged that though a withdrawal of American personnel was highly desirable the high stakes in Vietnam justified an intensive effort by the United States. Later that month, on January 27, McNamara testified before the House Armed Services Committee:

The survival of an independent government in South Viet-Nam is so important to the security of Southeast Asia and to the free world that I can conceive of no alternative other than to take all necessary measures within our capability to prevent a Communist victory.

South Vietnam's predicament disheartened the administration. By late March, the administration realized that since Diem's fall the situation in Vietnam had deteriorated rapidly. The first coup since Diem's had occurred in January. Within a year six more coups would plague the political viability of South Vietnam. Washington's concern heightened with the expectation that Hanoi and the Viet Cong (the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam) would exploit the political turmoil which afflicted Saigon.

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6 White House Press Release, March 17, 1964, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:196-197.

7 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara Memorandum to the President, February 1964, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:196-197.

On February 13, a disturbing report crossed the Secretary of State's desk. Authored by Walt Rostow, it concluded that South Vietnam was in imminent danger. Rostow minimized the internal weakness of South Vietnam's government by placing emphasis upon Hanoi's systematic aggression from the north. A later trip taken by Taylor (now Chairman of the JCS) and McNamara to Vietnam gave Washington little comfort in respect to the precarious position of South Vietnam. Their pessimistic assessment was later incorporated within NSAM 288. It recommended an enlargement of America's efforts and advocated the necessity of a free Vietnam:

Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance... accommodate to Communism so far as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely... to become so.

All of these consequences would probably have been true even if the U.S. had not since 1954, and especially since 1961, become so heavily engaged in South Vietnam. However, that fact accentuates the impact of a Communist South Vietnam not only in Asia, but in the rest of the world, where the South Vietnamese conflict is regarded as a test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of liberation.'

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9 W. W. Rostow memorandum to the Secretary of State, February 13, 1964, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:310-311.

Therefore, with the continuing political instability of the South and the gains of the Viet Cong in the countryside, the hope for continued American withdrawal dissipated.\textsuperscript{11} NSAM 288 served as a guideline of future policy debates regarding Vietnam.

High administration officials met in Honolulu on June 1 and 2, 1964 to confer about South Vietnam's predicament and America's responsibilities. The participants concluded that "our point of departure is and must be that we cannot accept [the] overrunning of Southeast Asia by Hanoi and Peiping."\textsuperscript{12} Prior to his death, MacArthur had alerted Kennedy to America's delicate position in Vietnam. "Our chickens are all coming home to roost," MacArthur warned, "and you are in the chicken house."\textsuperscript{13} But this was no longer true and Johnson grasped that "Vietnam and the consequences of Diem's murder" were now his concern.\textsuperscript{14} According to Maxwell Taylor, "Diem's overthrow set in motion a sequence of crises ... over the next two years which eventually forced President Johnson in 1965 to choose between accepted defeat or


\textsuperscript{12}Department of State Memorandum, in Gravel, \textit{Pentagon Papers}, 3:172.


\textsuperscript{14}Johnson, \textit{Vantage Point}, p. 62.
introducing combat troops." In order to discern why the option of sending troops to Vietnam was eventually favored, a brief discussion of Johnson and the men he relied upon is imperative.

2. The Johnson Administration's World View

Before Johnson became Vice President he was hailed as an astute politician of the Senate, where his savvy in domestic politics shone and awed his colleagues. In foreign affairs, however, he was very much a part of that generation which had learned the so-called "lessons" of the 1930s and the failure of appeasement. To him, these lessons were simply reinforced by the Cold War. The fundamental problem in the twentieth century, Johnson reasoned, was aggression. His tenure as Vice President did not free him from this superficial knowledge of foreign affairs. Kennedy bequeathed to Johnson not only his policies but also his key advisers. Uncertain and ill-prepared in the intricacies of international politics, Johnson relied heavily upon his advisers.  

Johnson's chief advisers, Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, the Bundys, and Rostow, all espoused the basic principles of the

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15 Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares, p. 302.

generation "born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace." Their assumptions were firmly grounded in Cold War perceptions of the world: the futility of appeasement, the danger of unchecked aggression, and the hostility of the communist world. Townsend Hoopes, a former Pentagon official and scholar, stated "All carried in their veins the implicitly unlimited commitment to global struggle against Revolutionary Communism which had grown out of their total immersion in World War II." From this perspective, a communist gain anywhere upset the world's balance of power in favor of Moscow and Peking. Rusk cogently expressed these sentiments shared by Johnson and his staff:

The free world must prevent the Communists from extending their sway through force, whether through frontal assault, piecemeal territorial grabs, or infiltration of men and arms across frontiers. We will continue to do our part to make aggression not only unprofitable to the Communists but increasingly costly and dangerous to them.

According to Rusk, one's vision of the future world order constituted the pivotal international issue: it was a struggle between "the world laid out in the United Nations Charter . . .

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17 John F. Kennedy, as cited in Sorensen, Kennedy, p. 276.
[and] a world constructed around some notion of a Communist world revolution." As conditions in Vietnam worsened, the administration gradually feared that the outcome of this struggle would be decided in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Since the future of the world order was at stake, the communist threat remained the constant, even as the source of concern shifted from Moscow to Peking or to Hanoi. Despite recent indications of a widening gap between China and Russia and an easing of tensions between Russia and the United States, Washington persisted in its view that the communist threat remained dangerous, formidable, and worldwide. "There can be no full and lasting détente between the chief Communist states and the free world," Rusk asserted, "without settlement of critical and dangerous issues, such as . . . the aggression against Laos and South Viet-Nam." In fact, the Sino-Soviet split accentuated American concern, since Moscow could no longer curb Peking's militancy. The Secretary of Defense concluded that "success in Viet-Nam would be regarded by Peiping as vindication for


22 Dean Rusk, "Foreign Policy and the American Citizen," Department of State Bulletin 49 (December 30, 1963):994.
China's views in the worldwide ideological struggle.\textsuperscript{23} McNamara added that:

\begin{quote}
For Hanoi, the immediate objective is limited: conquest of the South and national unification . . . for Peiping, however, Hanoi's victory would only be a first step toward eventual Chinese hegemony over the two Viet-Nams and Southeast Asia and toward exploitation of the new strategy in other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

In 1947, the President of the United States perceived the Soviet Union to be the greatest threat to world peace, but years of crises and imprecise rhetoric had transformed the nature of this threat as viewed from the Potomac.

The fear of the Soviets had been blurred to include communism in general, regardless of which country espoused its doctrines. The following comment by Johnson aptly expressed this prevalent attitude:

\begin{quote}
Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues in Hanoi had long dreamed of controlling all of Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. By the end of the 1950s that dream was fading fast. But in the period after the first Sputnik Communists everywhere were in an optimistic, aggressive mood. Khrushchev boasted that the Soviets would surpass the U.S. in production during the 1960s; Mao Tse-tung claimed the East Wind was prevailing over the West Wind; Castro took control in Cuba; Moscow laid its ultimatum for Berlin. For Ho Chi Minh, there was unfinished business: to conquer Laos and South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{24}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25}Johnson, \textit{Vantage Point}, p. 22.
This passage evokes an image of gallant frontiersmen embattled by nations of Indians: by the Blackfeet, Sioux, Crow, and Cheyenne simultaneously. Though each tribe was distinct to American pioneers the threat was all Indians in general. America's failure to distinguish between the communist tribes of the twentieth century would prompt Johnson eventually to call on the cavalry to save the day in Southeast Asia.

3. The Road to Intervention:
A Chronology, 1964-1965

Throughout the first half of 1964, Washington's unease over South Vietnam's instability increased. On January 30, 1964, General Nguyen Khanh gained power by successfully implementing a political coup. To its dismay, Khanh failed to attain the political stability that Washington had hoped for. Rumors of coups, renewed Buddhist-Catholic friction, and student demonstrations characterized the first six months of Khanh's rule. Recently appointed Ambassador to Saigon, Maxwell Taylor, maintained that "the most important and most intractable internal problem of South Vietnam in meeting the Viet Cong threat is the political structure at the national level." Consequently, an anonymous compiler of the so-called "Pentagon Papers" contends that for

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Washington "the central perception was one of impending chaos and possible failure in South Vietnam."  

Concurrently with the emphasis upon Saigon's internal decay, there were efforts to concentrate upon Hanoi's systematic aggression from the north. Walt Rostow presented a well-reasoned report to Johnson in December 1963, which advocated a policy of gradual escalation to thwart Hanoi's efforts. This report represented the largely speculative perception gaining official credence that aggression from the north was increasing. A State Department memo commenting on the first half of 1964, noted a "rise and change in the nature of infiltration in recent months." Still, according to Taylor, the administration was "not ready to bite the bullet and face the inevitability of either taking military action against North Vietnam or running the very real risk of failing disastrously in Southeast Asia." But events during the next year would push the administration over the brink.

In July 1964, Washington resumed the DESOTO (Destroyer Patrol of North Vietnam) patrols off the coast of North Vietnam. At the same time South Vietnam patrol boats were

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28 State Department Counselor W. W. Rostow memorandum to the President, December 1963, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 3:151.

conducting raids (34-A operations) into North Vietnam. On August 2, 1964, three North Vietnamese P.T. boats pursued the U.S.S. Maddox, fired upon it with torpedoes, and then withdrew after suffering damage. Apparently the North Vietnamese mistook the Maddox for the South Vietnamese patrols. On August 4, an incident still clouded and marred by controversy occurred. The Johnson Administration contended that North Vietnamese naval vessels attacked the Maddox and the U.S.S. Turner Joy. Collectively these two skirmishes comprise the famous Gulf of Tonkin incident. The United States retaliated immediately, bombing a main North Vietnamese P.T. boat base on August fourth and fifth.

Speaking at Syracuse University on August 5, President Johnson stressed two themes: America's historical role during the Cold War and the insidious menace of unrestricted aggression. Johnson linked the recent incident to America's resolve during previous crises. "The challenge we face in Southeast Asia today," he stated, "is the same challenge we have faced with courage and ... strength in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin and Cuba." The episode revived heartfelt memories of the ravages of Hitler which continued to haunt

30 Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares, p. 327.
31 Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 3:183-190.
the world. Johnson admonished his audience not to disregard the recent past, "Aggression -- . . . has unmasked its face to the world. The world remembers -- the world must never forget -- that aggression unchallenged is Aggression unchecked." On August 7, 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution by an overwhelming margin of 504 to 2. With the resolution the duly elected representatives of the American people authorized President Johnson to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." The resolution declared that America regarded the security of Southeast Asia "as vital to its national interests and to world peace." The resolution affirmed that:

> the United States is, therefore; prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of force, to assist any member . . . of the Southeast Asia Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

Thus the resolution laid the basis for subsequent action and United States intervention in Vietnam. Despite the later protests of Congress, in actuality the President was given a free hand. According to the historian Schandler, "The

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33 Ibid., 51:261.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
swift reprisal and the nearly unanimous congressional sup-
port demonstrated in dramatic fashion the U.S. commitment
to South Vietnam.37

With United States retaliation and the basis for future
action approved by Congress, hopes for withdrawal receded.
Hesitation, agonized planning, and indecisiveness on the
part of the administration characterized Vietnam policy
following the Tonkin incident. On November 6, an NSC
Working Group on South Vietnam and Southeast Asia met for
the first time.38 The group reaffirmed the principles of
the domino theory and maintained that Vietnam constituted
a test case of America's ability to resist national wars of
liberation. It suggested that the United States must cur-
tail communist ambitions and that a failure to do so, would
undermine American prestige and power throughout the world.
The group neglected to propose any concrete program of ac-
tion. On January 27, 1965, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy ex-
pressed their distaste for a continuance of a policy of in-
action by urging the President to expand the role of America's
military power in Vietnam:

37Herbert Y. Schandler, The Unmaking of a President:
Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University

38"NSC Working Group on SVN/SEA," in Gravel, Pentagon
Papers, 3:210. The members: Assistant Secretary of State
William Bundy; Marshall Green and Michael Forrestal from
the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs; Robert Johnson from the
Policy Planning Council; John McNaughton from Defense; Vice
Admiral Lloyd Murlin of the JCS; and Harold Ford from the
CIA.
Both of us understand the very grave questions presented by any decision of this sort. . . . Both of us have fully supported your unwillingness . . . to move out of the middle course. We both agree that every effort should still be made to improve our operations on the ground and to prop up the authorities in South Vietnam. . . . But we are both convinced that none of this is enough and the time has come for harder decision.39

At 2:00 a.m. on the morning of February 7, 1965, a Viet Cong raid upon the barracks of American advisers in Pleiku would jolt Johnson from his lethargy and policy of holding the line. Nine United States soldiers were killed and the number of wounded and severe damage to equipment made it the heaviest communist assault on American installations in South Vietnam. Washington responded with a reprisal raid upon North Vietnamese barracks at Dong Hoi, a guerrilla training garrison forty miles north of the 17th parallel. The planned and executed one-time tit-for-tat reprisal, code named FLAMING DART, precipitated the transformation of the nature of the war.40 As Taylor indicated "a new phase of the war had begun" with the removal of the restrictions placed upon America's air power.41


40 National Security Council Meeting, February 6, in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 3:286, 302. The NSC meeting concerning the February 7 attack on Pleiku took place on February 6, Washington time.

41 Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares, p. 335.
Unlike the reprisal following the Tonkin incident, and despite the original plan, the February 1965 raids were not considered as one-shot operations, the raids gradually changed the ground rules of the war. The sustained bombing policy escalated the war and tied America closer to the interests of South Vietnam. A February 7 White House press release linked America's counter-measures to Hanoi's behavior:

> these attacks were only made possible by the continuing infiltration of personnel and equipment from North Vietnam. . . . infiltration markedly increased during 1964. . . . 'The key to the situation remains the cessation of infiltration from North Vietnam and the clear indication that it is prepared to cease aggression against its neighbors.'

Reporting from Vietnam on February 7, McGeorge Bundy reported that like it or not, America's prestige was tied to South Vietnam, hence he recommended a policy of sustained reprisal. Bundy professed that "the situation in Vietnam is deteriorating, and without new U.S. action, defeat appears inevitable. . . . There is still time to turn around, but not much." During an NSC meeting on February 8, Johnson decided to reverse the current trend. With only Vice President Hubert Humphrey in dissent, the NSC approved a policy of sustained reprisal and graduated pressure against

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44 McGeorge Bundy, as cited in Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 126.
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Hanoi. Under Secretary of State George Ball reflected the administration's resolve:

This was a test of the will, a clear challenge to the political purpose of both the United States and South Vietnamese governments. It was a test and challenge therefore which we could not fail to respond to . . . without misleading the North Vietnamese to our intent and the strength of our purpose to carry out that intent.46

On February 10, the Viet Cong attacked a United States enlisted men's billet in Qui Nhon. Within twenty-four hours, American and South Vietnamese aircraft accomplished the largest retaliatory raid to that date. The raid was not linked to the immediate incident, but to Hanoi's behavior in general.

On February 15, 1965, Johnson formally approved a bombing program, project ROLLING THUNDER, which transformed the reprisal concept into a sustained graduated bombing operation. Bundy's recommendation of February 7, that "once a program of reprisals is clearly underway, it should not be necessary to connect each specific act against North Vietnam to a particular outrage in the South" had been adopted as policy.47


Within a month, America's first ground combat units were committed to Vietnam. On March 8, 3500 United States Marines landed on the shores of Da Nang with an assignment to protect its airfield against the Viet Cong. During another high-level conference at Honolulu on April 20, their mission was transformed and expanded. The United States adopted an enclave strategy which stationed American troops in key South Vietnamese cities. But this defensive and static use of American troops combined with air power proved insufficient. By early June, General Westmoreland, the top military commander in Vietnam, requested permission to grant offensive responsibilities to the United States troops. The time of decision had come for Johnson. As Johnson said himself:

I knew we faced a crucial question. . . . If necessary would we use substantial U.S. forces on the ground to prevent the loss of that region to aggressive forces moving illegally across international frontiers.

Johnson therefore consulted with his advisers, Congressional leaders, and trusted friends from July 21 to 27 as he deliberated whether to commit troops to Vietnam on a massive scale.

4. The Crossroad of Decision

During those high-level meetings of that crucial week in July, as Johnson ruminated over America's options, much more

48 Schandler, Unmaking of a President, pp. 21-28.
49 Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 144.
than the recent events in Vietnam weighed upon his mind. Johnson's attitudes toward history, the United States, the communist threat, and of world politics could not be severed from the specifics of Vietnam. Taken together with the deterioration of South Vietnam, these attitudes would prove compelling.

Like Truman and the others before him, Johnson and the majority of his advisers took the lessons of the 1930s, symbolized by the futility of appeasement at Munich, to heart. Visions of another reign of terror sweeping the world tormented them relentlessly. Aggression, especially when practiced by communists, vividly recalled these deeply imprinted memories. To Johnson and his generation these lessons were not mere historical abstractions, rather they possessed a profound emotional and lasting quality. Harry McPherson, a member of Johnson's staff, described Johnson as having

come to political maturity in the late thirties, when fascist power threatened the world; the threat of Russian power followed; there never had been a time, from his election to the House to his ascension to the Presidency when the democracies were not threatened by somebody. He had no doubt about the human evil of communism, nor about Soviet and Chinese aggressiveness.50

Johnson may stand corrected but his tendency to view events in Vietnam via the prism of his experience is understandable.

The administration, especially Dean Rusk, feared that as World War II faded in people's minds, its costly lessons would be forgotten. Rusk confided to a historian from Columbia University, Henry Graff, that Article I of the United Nations Charter and its goal of preventing aggression was becoming a relic of the past. "Few people read that article, which drew together the lessons of experience of my generation. It is the only guide we have to prevent World War III."^{51} Aggression feeds on itself; therefore violent change in Southeast Asia threatened America's interests throughout the world. America's Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, George G. McGhee, aptly expressed this sentiment:

> Freedom is . . . indivisible; what happens in the Mekong Valley can have an important bearing on what happens in Berlin. Aggression anywhere must be made so expensive that those tempted to indulge in it will see the folly of their course.\(^{52}\)

According to Rusk, Southeast Asia was the scene of a critical, historical dilemma, "that is, whether a course of aggression is going to be allowed to move ahead and whether appetites will be allowed to grow upon feeding."\(^{53}\)

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53 Dean Rusk, "A Conversation with Dean Rusk," Department of State Bulletin 52 (January 18, 1965)
This fear of aggression was neither confined to historical lessons or to emotional reactions. The behavior of the communists, especially that of the People's Republic of China, alarmed Washington. On April 7, at Johns Hopkins University, President Johnson gave expression to this concern when he said that "over this war -- and all Asia -- is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China." The Sino-Soviet split heightened America's apprehensions regarding China and increased the stakes in Vietnam. Washington dreaded a struggle between Moscow and Peking over who represented the vanguard of revolutionary governments. Consequently, the administration feared a vindication of China's militancy on the battlefields of Vietnam. Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, stated:

The 'wars of national liberation' approach has been adopted as an essential element of Communist China's expansionistic policy. If this technique adopted by Hanoi should be allowed to succeed in Viet-Nam, we would be confirming Peiping's contention that militant revolutionary struggle is a more productive Communist path than Moscow's doctrine of peaceful coexistence.55

Maxwell Taylor, William Bundy, and Dean Rusk soon echoed this attitude publicly. Rusk mapped out the consequences of the loss of South Vietnam forcefully:


I should think they would simply move the problem to the next country and the next and the next. And, as I say, this is not dominoes. This is Marxism. This is the kind of Marxism which comes out of Peiping. I mean it's all there to see. They make no secret of it.56

America's confidence in the purity of its motives and in its power encouraged the administration to meet the communist challenge in Southeast Asia with force.

In 1965, most of the administration's officials shared a common faith in America's capabilities. "People ought to know how strong the United States is, the Secretary of Defense boasted.57 Washington assumed America's power would ultimately prevail and that other people would fold before America's military might.58 Recent events had legitimized this viewpoint. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States had coerced a powerful foe to abandon its aggressive designs. If the powerful Soviets shuddered before America's strength, how could little Hanoi withstand an onslaught of American force?

Although the immediate impact of the Missile Crisis was beneficial, its legacy proved to be mixed. Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States eased, but Kennedy's advisers also drew simple and dangerous lessons concerning


57Robert McNamara, as cited in Graff, *Tuesday Cabinet*, p. 73.

58George, *Coercive Diplomacy*, p. 147.
the use of force from the crisis. Kennedy's handling of the crisis left an impression that the use of force to pressure an adversary was an effective and legitimate tool of diplomacy. Forgotten was the anguish, uncertainty, and tension prevalent throughout the crisis. According to a leading specialist on coercive diplomacy, Alexander George, this tactic "requires skill in tailoring the strategy to the special configuration of a particular situation." In other words, general principles of coercion could not be easily or simply drawn from an intricate and unique crisis. But despite Kennedy's counsel, his advisers derived improper conclusions from the President's diplomatic maneuvers during the crisis. Consequently, without appreciating the delicate nature of coercive diplomacy, the Kennedy-Johnson administration became enthralled and enthusiastic about its unlimited potential in resolving international conflicts. This contributed to the willingness to use force to break Hanoi's will and attain America's objectives in Vietnam.

Johnson and his advisers were convinced that American power would force Hanoi to abandon its aggressive policy, accept the status quo, and negotiate accordingly. Bill Moyers, Johnson's Press Secretary, claims Johnson held the "conviction that we can see this thing through, that limited objectives with maximum resources can prevail." Or as

59Ibid., p. 230.
60Ibid., pp. x-xi.
61Bill Moyers, as cited in Graff, Tuesday Cabinet, p. 108.
Johnson colorfully remarked, the United States had "to apply the maximum deterrent till he [Ho Chi Minh] soberes up and unloads his pistol."  

Whatever qualms Washington had regarding the use of force in Vietnam were eased by its duties and responsibilities as the leader of the free world. America's mission and power justified the implementation of its awesome power. McGeorge Bundy reflected on America's role in world affairs since 1947 to Henry Graff:

Bundy said he had come to accept also what he had learned from Dean Acheson -- that, in the final analysis, the United States was the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world the caboose--meaning, I thought, that he was not expressing chauvinism but simply passing judgment on the usefulness to the world of American energies.

The hope was that American energy could transform defeat into victory in Vietnam.

From July 21 to 27, the administration deliberated upon McNamara's report which stated in cool logic that only a massive commitment of United States ground troops could stem the tide and achieve victory in Vietnam. Finally, the moment of truth rested upon the shoulders of one man: Lyndon Baines Johnson. "When a President makes a decision," Johnson later

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62 Lyndon Johnson, as cited in Graff, *Tuesday Cabinet*, p. 54.

63 McGeorge Bundy, as cited in Graff, *Tuesday Cabinet*, p. 48.
reflected, "he seeks all the information he can get. At the same time, he cannot separate himself from his own experience and memory." Johnson's personal experiences bore directly upon his decision to intervene in Vietnam:

You see, I deeply believe we are quarantining over there just like the smallpox. Just like FDR and Hitler, just like Wilson and the Kaiser. You've simply got to see this thing in historical perspective. What I learned as a boy in my teens and in college about World War I was that it was our lack of strength and failure to show stamina that got us into the war. I was taught that the Kaiser never would have made his moves if he hadn't been able to count Uncle Sam out because he believed we'd never come in. Then I was taught in Congress... on defense preparedness and by FDR that we in Congress were constantly telegraphing the wrong messages to Hitler and the Japanese... that the Wheelers, the Lindberghs, the LaFollettes, and the America Firsters were letting Hitler know he could move without worrying about Uncle Sam. I remember those days in Congress.

Johnson was determined that Ho and other communists would read America's message loud and clear. The President expressed misgivings that similar inaction on his part would create a world climate similar to the one prior to World War II, "everything I knew about history told me if I got out of Vietnam and let Ho... run through the streets of Saigon, then I'd be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II."

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64 Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 46.
65 Lyndon Johnson, as cited in Kearns, Johnson, pp. 329-330.
66 Ibid., pp. 252-253.
Johnson added, "I'd be giving a big fat reward to aggression," but this was an anathema to a generation raised on war and international tensions. On July 28, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson approved McNamara's recommendation to commit on a massive scale American ground troops to Vietnam and thus raised America's troop level to 125,000.

America's Ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, cabled to Washington his reaction to the presence of United States troops:

I wish I could describe the feeling of hope which this great American presence is bringing. There can no longer be the slightest doubt that persistence will bring success, that the aggression will be warded off and that for the first time since the end of World War II, the cause of free men will be on the upward spiral.68

Past experience had ill-prepared America for the possibility that its mighty locomotive would be derailed in the jungles of Vietnam.

67Ibid., p. 253.
68Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, as cited in Gravel, Pentagon Papers, 2:366.
CONCLUSION

I believe that the Soviet has so often repeated the incorrect statement that we are planning to attack him, that he has finally begun to believe it himself.¹

Douglas MacArthur

1. Lessons of the Past

A crucial element which influenced American policy in Korea and Vietnam was the refraction of the lessons of the recent past through a prism of American perceptions of its adversaries and of itself. Traumatic events often penetrate deep into the recesses of the mind and come to color every aspect of life and sometimes to dominate an era of history. One need only think of the effect upon European civilization of the destruction of its youth in the trenches of World War I. Erich Maria Remarque in All Quiet on the Western Front captured the profound bewilderment of a generation:

And men will not understand us -- for the generation that grew up before us, though it has passed these years with us already had a home and a calling; now it will return to its old occupations, and the war will be forgotten -- and the generation that has grown

¹Douglas MacArthur, as cited in MacArthur Hearings, 1:6.
up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous even to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered; -- the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin.²

Thirty years later war once again ravaged the European continent inflicting its horrors upon another generation. Whereas World War I left in its wake a shocked and spiritually dead generation and one resigned to its fate, the survivors of World War II energetically dedicated themselves to construct a new world order which would wipe the horrors of the twentieth century from the earth. For the postwar American statesmen the touchstone of their experience was the West's abject failure to prevent Hitler from embarking upon his madman's schemes. The leaders of the United States dedicated themselves to the proposition that such an occurrence would not happen again.

To a world recently subjected to the brutality of a world war and sensitized to the dangers of unchecked aggression, the postwar behavior of the Soviet Union appeared ominous indeed. The abstract and emotional lessons of the past decade were now joined with a concrete threat: communist Russia. The symbolic leader of the Munich generation, Winston Churchill, once again alerted the West.

²Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 254.
Last time I saw it all coming and cried aloud to my own fellow-countrymen and to the world, but no one paid attention. Up till the year 1933 or even 1935, Germany might have been saved from the awful fate which has overtaken her and we might have been spared the miseries Hitler let loose upon mankind. There never was a war in all history easier to prevent by timely action than the one that has just desolved such great areas of the globe. It could have been prevented in my belief without the firing of a single shot, . . . but no one would listen and one by one we were all sucked into the awful whirl pool.  

The next time storm clouds gathered over the horizon the West and the United States would be ready.

From 1947 to 1950, the United States concentrated its effort of containing Soviet expansion on the European continent, responding with precise and limited programs such as the Marshall Plan. In this atmosphere of superpower confrontation, the return of French colonial rule to Indo-China seemed of little consequence. There were those in government who asserted that the ambitions of the Soviets were unlimited and who perceived all Soviet acts and policy as integral to its coherent plan for world domination. NSC 68 is a case in point. This view gained official credence and sanction after the events of June 24, 1950.

With the dramatic and unexpected invasion of South Korea, the supposition that the Soviets harbored ambitions of world...

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domination became an evident truth. The Chinese interven-
tion merely accentuated American fears of an aggressive
communist bloc and transformed the containment policy into
a global venture. The failure to distinguish between the
varieties of communism in Asia would shape American policy
accordingly.

In conjunction with the pervasive fear of the Soviet
Union and communism, American decision makers viewed them-
selves and their policies as instruments of the forces of
light battling with the forces of dark. As leader of the
free world it was America's duty to ensure world peace and
to prevent the outbreak of World War III. This purity of
motive obscured the implications of American policy. Con-
sequently, Washington often failed to anticipate that other
nations would interpret its acts as hostile and threatening.
Truman's sealing off Formosa and approval of the march to
the Yalu are only two examples. Therefore when China did
intervene, the Truman Administration perceived it as part
of a well-coordinated counterattack planned by the Soviet
Union and not as a nationalistic response to the policy of
the United States. The prevailing perception of an aggres-
sive monolithic communism combined with America's pristine
self-image would have profound implications for United States
policy in Southeast Asia.
2. Korea and Vietnam: A Comparison

Despite the differences in the nature of the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts, the administrations which favored intervention perceived the fundamental issues at stake as being identical. The outbreak of hostilities on June 24, 1950, cannot be equated with the Gulf of Tonkin incident nor the mortar attack on Pleiku, yet the administrations of both Truman and Johnson considered the two wars in essentially the same way. Though lacking the drama of a frontal assault, Washington viewed the aggression against South Vietnam to be as formidable and threatening to world peace as the invasion of Korea. As Rusk testified in 1966: "We fought the Korean War, which like the struggle in Viet-Nam occurred in a remote area thousands of miles away, to sustain a principle vital to the freedom and security of America." He later reflected, "Korea was not a civil war. In Vietnam the issue is the same one of aggression as in the cases of national frontiers that are well established. Aggression is at the heart of the issue." Therefore though one conflict was a conventional war supported by allied action while the other was a prolonged conflict nearly devoid of allied support, the response of the United States in both instances was intervention. The wars of national liberation were perceived to be as pernicious as

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^Dean Rusk, as cited in Graff, Tuesday Cabinet, p. 136.
a frontal assault. Both had to be stopped.

America's designated role as leader of the free world required a united effort, or if need be unilateral action, against communist aggression. The lessons of Munich and the Cold War formulated the common dominator and perspective from which the two conflicts were examined. In 1950, a North Korean invasion was perceived as synonymous with aggression instigated by the Soviet Union and communism. America's fears were accentuated by the Chinese intervention and by increased communist activity in Asia. Even as American leaders slowly acknowledged, with great reluctance, the Sino-Soviet split and other indications of factionalism in the communist world, in times of crises the general fear of communism showed its head. Though the source of the immediate communist threat shifted from Moscow to Peking, or even to Hanoi, the fear of communism in general remained steadfast. Communism was by its nature aggressive. Dean Rusk remarked:

I have noted criticism of the so-called analogy between Hitler and Mao Tse-tung. . . . We do ourselves no service by insisting that each source of aggression is unique. My own view is that we have learned a good deal about this phenomena and its potentiality for leading into catastrophe if the problem is not met in timely fashion. 6

Regardless of the variety of faces in which it may appear, aggression was aggression. Consequently, when both administrations perceived aggression by communists their options were

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considered limited. Johnson later revealed that "I realized that doing nothing was worse than doing something." Both Truman and Johnson felt compelled to commit American ground forces to Asia.

The momentum of military operations in shaping subsequent policy is common to the two conflicts. The original purpose to repel the North Korean invasion and to restore the ante bellum status quo eventually fell victim to the administration's vision of a unified Korea. MacArthur's magnificent victory at Inchon presented Washington with a golden opportunity for a clear-cut success. Not to capitalize on the recent turn of events seemed an act of supreme folly. Hence, despite the warnings of the People's Republic of China, Truman authorized United Nations troops to cross the 38th parallel and to push toward the Yalu.

Though lacking the swiftness of momentous decisions associated with Korea, nevertheless a pattern of military momentum can be ascertained in respect to American policy in Vietnam. Until 1961, America restricted its support of Vietnam to economic and military aid. From this commitment of its prestige, the United States eventually sent military advisers to Vietnam, planned covert operations, and sent bombing missions into North Vietnam in reprisal for the P.T. boat strikes in the Gulf of Tonkin. The limited nature of

7 Lyndon Johnson, as cited in Kearns, Johnson, p. 263.
the reprisal to the Tonkin incident gave way with the attack upon Pleiku to a policy of sustained, graduated pressure bombing of North Vietnam. Finally, the troops sent to protect American air bases were assigned offensive missions and reinforced by the massive introduction of American ground forces. Superficially the pattern of increased military involvement appears planned or inevitable, but none of the steps were irreversible. A reversal may have required an act of statesmanship but Anwar Sadat's later "sacred mission" to Israel in 1978 was deemed unthinkable until it happened.

3. Conclusion

This observation by Dean Rusk is representative of the attitude that characterized American policy in Asia from Truman to Johnson: "The situation we face in Southeast Asia is obviously complex but, in my view, the underlying issues are relatively simple and are utterly fundamental." America's reading of the recent past, the omnipresence of the ghosts of Hitler and Stalin, and the genuine concern over the intentions of the Soviet Union captured the imagination of the American people and their leaders. As the issue of slavery dominated almost every aspect of life in the United States during the mid-1800s, so also the thirties and the early Cold War shaped the mood of subsequent decades. The perception

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that the world was a battleground between the forces of freedom and slavery hardened and crystallized.

The outbreak of war in Korea transformed this ideological struggle into a physical battle. Communism now was seen as posing a global threat to America's interests and security. All other concerns receded to the background and issues such as Vietnamese history and independence were not given the attention they warranted. Truman perceived the invasion of Korea and China's intervention as part of a larger scheme of communist expansion: "We are seeing a pattern in Indo-China and Tibet timed to coincide with the attack in Korea as a challenge to the Western world."\(^9\) The tendency to view the world through a bipolar lens would blur America's vision, blinding its leaders from appreciating the unique aspects and qualities of the Vietnamese conflict. Unfortunately, nuance and complexity were not recognized as attributes during the height of the Cold War and American leaders preferred solids such as black and white over shades of gray.

In 1947, Dean Acheson compared the Cold War to the struggle between Carthage and Rome. We know Rome eventually prevailed in its war against Carthage. Rome's victory may have spelled its gradual decline as a vibrant civilization and world power. By concentrating on external threats Rome lost its inner strength; by becoming an empire obsessed with total security, Rome lost the spirit which had guided its

\(^9\)Truman, Memoirs, 2:381.
republic. The democracy of Athens fell victim to this common affliction. A careful re-reading of the "Melian Dialogue," reveals that any cause, however intrinsically just or moral, can degenerate into a policy of expediency or a fascination with power.

Quite understandably, the ghost of Hitler and then Stalin haunted the postwar world. In fact, the historian Ernest May suggests that for a generation of American statesmen the proclivity to compare the acts of Hitler with the aggressions in Korea and Vietnam was probably "inescapable." The ideological hostilities of the Cold War reinforced this tendency.

Philip Caputo's memoir of his experience as a young marine stationed in Vietnam indicates in human terms the dangers of policies justified in moral abstractions and absolutes. As did many of America's leaders, the ordinary citizen also became imprisoned by its own perceptions and rhetoric. Seduced by the idealism of John F. Kennedy's speeches, Caputo's beliefs--and perhaps those of the nation--were shattered in the jungles of Southeast Asia. In part, this was due to the failure of American statesmen to probe deeply the lessons of the past. In 1963, John F. Cady warned

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10 May, "Lessons," p. 85. See also p. 113.

that the United States must "view both American policy and
the Communist threat through Southeast Asia eyes, however
difficult and sometimes painful this process may be."12
Caputo's ordeal attests that America's failure to broaden
its perspective was ultimately more painful.

12John F. Cady, "The Historical Background of United
States Policy in Southeast Asia," in Southeast Asia: Prob-
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