

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL CREDIBILITY WITHIN THE KENNEDY
ADMINISTRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON POLICY TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA.

by

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ABSTRACT

This exploration of the principle of credibility demonstrates its abstract nature and suggests the danger implicit in making it central to the process of government. For the United States, the principle of credibility has played a major role in the formation of post-World War II politics; initially with it centring on the concept of demonstrating reliability to allies and believability to adversaries. It gained increasing power throughout the presidency of John F. Kennedy on account of a broadening of its scope: For Kennedy there was a need to demonstrate credibility through international relations, whilst projecting a credible image of strength domestically.

This dissertation identifies how the expanded notion of credibility influenced the foreign policy decisions of the Kennedy administration, with particular emphasis on how it related to policy in Southeast Asia. It is discussed that the reason underpinning why a diplomatic solution was sought in Laos and a military response in Vietnam was due to the propensity of the Kennedy administration for strong responses to communism: Vietnam presented better prospects for success, but his perception of the US electorate as being hawkish inclined Kennedy to seek a military victory there, to offset domestic criticism regarding the diplomatic settlement in Laos.

To my Auntie Jan, whose help and advice has been invaluable.

To Auntie Denny, Uncle Bob, all my dear friends and the Ellis family whose kind words have been of enormous comfort.

To my Mama and Iona who never stop believing in me – I love you both.

Above all, to my Papa. Without his ceaseless support - even at 4 o'clock in the morning – I simply would not have been able to complete this piece of work.

It is to you Papa, who I dedicate this.

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Abbreviations

ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

DRV – Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)

FRUS – Foreign Relations of the United States

(Please note that numbers given in reference relate to page number)

GVN – Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

RVN – Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

JFKL – John F. Kennedy Library

MAAG – Military Assistance Advisory Group

NSAM – National Security Action Memorandum

NLF – National Liberation Front

NSC – National Security Council

NYT – New York Times

PP – Public Papers of the President

(Please note that numbers given in reference relate to page number)

SEATO – Southeast Asian Treaty Organization

Introduction

“Should I become President, I will take whatever steps are necessary to defend our security and to maintain the cause of freedom – but I will not risk American lives and a nuclear war by permitting any other nation to drag us into the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time through an unwise commitment that is unsound militarily, unnecessary to our security and unsupported by our allies.”

- Senator John F. Kennedy ¹

It seems tragic that Kennedy should speak so profoundly on the matter of Quemoy and Matsu prior to becoming president, and within one term in office he did precisely that which he swore not to do when referring to the matter of the Taiwan Straits in Vietnam.

The premise for this body of work is to investigate possible factors that influenced Kennedy and his administration to act with such disparity. There are many factors that can influence the decision of policy makers to engage or withdraw from a region of foreign policy interest; in his article *US National Interests in Southeast Asia: A Reappraisal* (1971) Donald Nuechterlein identifies seven factors, ‘location of the threat; nature of the threat; economic stake for the US; effect on the regional balance of power; effect on worldwide US credibility and prestige; attitude of major allies and other governments; and historical sentiment of the American people.’ ² An in depth examination of all of these factors is not within the scope of this thesis, but rather this work will focus on the implications of the concept of national credibility, in particular how that intangible and manipulable concept manifested in the foreign policy decisions of President Kennedy and his administration towards Southeast Asia.

¹ “Text of Kennedy’s Speech to Democratic Dinner on the Offshore Chinese Islands,” 13/10/60, *New York Times*, (hereafter cited as *NYT*)

² Donald Nuechterlain, “US National Interests in Southeast Asia: A Reappraisal” *Asian Survey*. 11.11 (Nov 1971), 1059

By examining the decisions that were made predominantly during Kennedy's first year as president this thesis will argue that Kennedy had a preoccupation with maintaining domestic credibility. Despite his initial resistance to entangling the United States in another Asian land war, his perception that the American electorate was fundamentally hawkish led him to pursue ever increasing military involvement in South Vietnam in order to improve his chances of securing a second term as president.

This development will be explored by comparing the policy decisions that were made in Vietnam, with those taken earlier in neighbouring Laos. Early decisions to pursue a neutral settlement in Laos rebounded negatively on Kennedy's domestic credibility and, in wanting to reassure critics that he was not going to let the dominos fall in Southeast Asia, played a large part in influencing the Kennedy administration to incrementally increase American engagement in South Vietnam. In needing to demonstrate his commitment and increase public support of his policy decisions, the political rhetoric surrounding American involvement in Vietnam justified the increasing engagement in emotive terms as a fight for liberty and freedom from communist suppression.

As expressed by Robert McMahon in his article *Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Post-War American Diplomacy* (1991),

An elusive concept that defies precise definition, credibility has typically connoted for American decision makers a blend of resolve, reliability, believability and decisiveness; equally important, it has served as a code word for America's image and reputation. In an inherently dangerous and unstable world, according to this line of thought, peace and order depend to a great extent on Washington's ability to

convince adversaries and allies alike of its firmness, determination and dependability.
3

Throughout the post-World War II period there has been a degree of conformity amongst successive American administrations regarding the principle of credibility and its intrinsic importance to the perception of American politics. Following the end of World War II, international politics rapidly became polarized around the opposing ethics of the USA and the Soviet Union (USSR) with both 'poles' vigorously establishing their spheres of influence. After 1945 the antagonism between the two principles of communism and capitalism was such that the political rationale of the action was increasingly expressed through emotive notions of good and evil, and the threat posed by communism increasingly perceived as extremely severe. Therefore US actions had to be credible so as to embolden those within their sphere, but simultaneously they also had to present a deterrent threat to those outside it. 'This world view posits an interdependence among commitments, interests and threats that makes any area of the world potentially vital to US interests . . . small issues will often loom large not because of their intrinsic importance, but because they are taken as tests of resolve.'⁴

When Kennedy was sworn in as the 35th President of the United States, he and his administration initially wanted to act on the rhetoric of the presidential campaign and present a strong and assertive opposition to communism. Despite acknowledging Khrushchev's 'wars of liberation' speech, which was the first international recognition that the Cold War was moving away from the European theatre onto more local regions;

³ Robert McMahon, "Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Post-War American Diplomacy" *Diplomatic History*. 15.4 (October, 1991), 455

⁴ McMahon, "Credibility and World Power", 457

Kennedy's initial interpretation of Cold War battle lines were still very much governed by the principle of containment in the context of the US and the USSR wielding ultimate power within their spheres of influence.

Kennedy had been galvanized by [the] speech of Khrushchev in January which the young president read as a declaration that the Soviet Union intended to promote wars of liberation in the third world; from this it followed that the Americans had no choice but to intervene wherever Communist guerrillas emerged in the developing countries. Unfortunately, Khrushchev's speech was misunderstood in Washington; in fact, it had been meant as a call for peaceful coexistence, a rebuttal of the militant line preached by the Chinese Communists.⁵

This misinterpretation of Soviet intentions indicates the hardening of the perception of credibility that was to occur during the Presidency of John F. Kennedy whereby strong responses, including the threat of American military intervention, were almost exclusively required as deterrence for communist advance rather than as reassurance for allies.

Kennedy never actively sought military engagement due to his concern over public opinion of engaging the US in a war, especially one in Asia, but his belief that his and his administration's credibility was contingent upon strong responses to communism meant that he could never rule out military action. The demands associated with maintaining American credibility augmented exponentially during Kennedy's presidency, for the emphasis on the demonstration of credibility no longer rested on international interpretation alone. Whereas initial explanations revolved around the ability to convince allies and adversaries of American intentions, for Kennedy the concept evolved to include, to a far greater degree than had occurred before, a consideration of his domestic political

⁵ Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: American in Vietnam 1963*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 32

credibility. This fusion of international and domestic arenas intensified its significance due to their interdependence, a matter which Kennedy was attuned to;

The line dividing domestic and foreign affairs has become as indistinct as a line drawn in water. All that happens to us here at home has a direct and intimate bearing on what we can or must do abroad. All that happened to us abroad has a direct and intimate bearing on what we can or must do at home. If we err in one place, we err in both. If we succeed in one place, we have a chance to succeed in both.⁶

This is a concept referred to in Fredrik Logevall's, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam (1999)*. Whilst focussing on the wider international context of American decision making he emphasizes the duality of the concept; domestic political credibility, that is the credibility of the Democratic Party within the US; as well as international political credibility: 'For both [John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson] . . . the Vietnam conflict's importance derived in large measure from its potential to threaten their own political standing – and their party's standing – at home.'⁷

Increasing the importance of Vietnam to Kennedy's political standing was the decision to seek a neutral settlement in neighbouring Laos. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union was perceived as being an outside revolutionary influence in Laos, the prospects for military success there were so poor that a diplomatic settlement with the communists was seen to be the best solution. The Laotian settlement backfired to a certain degree as Kennedy's credibility, both international and domestic, was damaged as a consequence: The measure drew domestic criticism of Kennedy's ability to counter communism while provoking concern amongst Asian allies regarding US intentions for their countries. Further it also highlighted

⁶ Cited in, Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party and the War* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 11

⁷ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (California: University of California Press, 1999), xv

the failings behind Kennedy's perception of the conflict in the region. His decisions regarding Laos were made in the mind-set that it was a proxy Cold War confrontation, however the inability of the Soviet Union to extend any kind of influence over the cessation of Pathet Lao hostilities demonstrated to Kennedy that in fact it had been essentially a local conflict. Kennedy's credibility had been hit on many fronts and considering the sentiments on Capitol Hill of the importance of '[stemming] the red tide'⁸ in the region, the increasingly more precarious situation unfolding in the governance of South Vietnam allowed Kennedy an opportunity to redeem himself.

There were many reasons why Vietnam presented as a better place for American involvement: US credibility was historically bound to the establishment and maintenance of the state of South Vietnam; the Vietnamese presented as a better alternative militarily to the Laotians; and the landscape of the country was more suited to US military operations. More favourable conditions correlated positively with American credibility. However, following such stinging criticism over foreign policy in Cuba and Laos, their combined impact upon his domestic credibility left Kennedy stuck between being seen as a hawk or a dove. Although drawn with reference to the Laotian crisis the illustration by Herblock in 1961⁹ is applicable to all of Kennedy's foreign policy considerations at the time; the fear of being hit by accusations of being a war maker if he took too tough a stance, and an appeaser if he made concessions. Such domestic chastisements would exacerbate his initial perspective of not seeking war but being unable to rule it out. Consequently Kennedy embarked upon a

⁸ Seth Jacobs, "No Place to Fight a War: Laos and the Evolution of US Policy Towards Vietnam 1954-1963" In: Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, Eds, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46

⁹ Cited in Johns, 22



Clipping, Cartoon, Herblock, 7th April 1961, Democratic National Committee Series I, box 47, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

middle ground policy in Vietnam where he would incrementally commit the US to preserving South Vietnam; thereby dispelling any concern that he was appeasing the communists by withdrawing; but never to the extent that America could be classed as going to war in Vietnam; thereby ruling out the possibility that he was a warmonger. Kennedy knew from experience 'that failure [was] more destructive than an appearance of indecision.'¹⁰

However when the paucity of effective Soviet influence in the region became apparent the perception of Vietnam changed and Kennedy and his administration saw it as a policing problem which could be resolved unilaterally rather than through international diplomacy. The unwillingness of the US government to consider negotiations and withdraw from Vietnam demonstrates that the overriding perception of national credibility favoured the demonstration of credible threats over the reassurance of allies. Kennedy's comments to Kenneth O'Donnell regarding delaying action towards withdrawal 'until 1965, after I'm re-elected' were on account of the widely agreed belief that 'if he announced a total withdrawal of American military personnel from Vietnam before the 1964 election, there would be a wild conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term.'¹¹ Such assumptions clearly indicate that, although Kennedy did not purposefully seek a military engagement, the overriding belief within the administration that 'America was basically hawkish,'¹² meant that for Kennedy to get the second term he desired he must adhere to this. Such assumptions of domestic opinion inclined Kennedy to seek a gradual escalation in Vietnam and deviate from the middle-ground policy that had dictated earlier

¹⁰ Hammer, 192

¹¹ Cited in Johns, 30

¹² Leslie H, Gelb "The Essential Domino: American Politics and Vietnam" *Foreign Affairs*. 50:3 (April, 1972), 466

decisions, as the more favourable military prospects corresponded with Kennedy's notion of credibility that called for a strong response to communist aggression.

This perspective explains the preference of the Kennedy administration for continued military action in Vietnam despite the presentation of several diplomatic opportunities for what would have proved to be a face saving exit of Vietnam: Following the conclusion of the Laotian settlement in 1962 leaders of North Vietnam and its southern insurgency group the National Liberation Front (NLF) saw the settlement 'as evidence that a similar arrangement was possible for Vietnam'¹³ yet the US were unwilling to consider negotiations; Diem's refusal to change his approach over the Buddhist crisis in the summer of 1963 would have given Kennedy justifiable reason to withdraw support for the South Vietnamese president, yet maintenance of his regime continued; And in August of 1963 French ally General Charles de Gaulle issued a statement calling for international agreement on the neutralization of South Vietnam. Despite such calls coming from a close western ally, whose previous advice of neutralizing Laos had been heeded, the Americans took the opinion that 'we do best when we ignore nose-y Charlie.'¹⁴

¹³ Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam and the Paris Agreement*. (London: Indiana University Press, 1975), 17

¹⁴ "Telegram from President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President", September 1 1963, Foreign Relations of the United States, (hereafter cited as FRUS) 1961-1963. Volume: IV, 81

Chapter 1:
The Notion of Credibility in the Kennedy Administration

“Can a nation organized and governed such as ours endure? That is the real question. Have we the nerve and the will? Are we up to the task; are we equal to the challenge? Are we willing to match the Russian sacrifice of the present for the future, or must we sacrifice our future in order to enjoy the present? That is the question of the New Frontier. That is the choice our nation must make, a choice that lies not merely between two men or two parties, but between the public interest and private comfort, between national greatness and national decline, between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of “normalcy”, between determined dedication and creeping mediocrity. All mankind waits upon our decision. A whole world looks to see what we will do. We cannot fail their trust, we cannot fail to try.”

- Senator John. F. Kennedy ¹⁵

The notion of credibility during the Kennedy administration evolved during his time in office. Initially the importance Kennedy attached to his view of America’s prestige was primarily an international concern as outlined during the Presidential campaign of 1960, when he lambasted the Eisenhower administration for being soft and yielding when faced with Soviet advancement. The hyper inflated macho quality that Kennedy projected during the campaign would rebound uncomfortably on him when he assumed office. The forthright language of his campaign speeches calling for ‘movement’ and ‘opposition’ was directly reflected in his approval of Operation Zapata in the Bay of Pigs, Cuba. The disastrous outcome of that operation was to have a profound impact on Kennedy’s foreign dealings as it would set into motion the evolution of credibility into the domestic political sphere, and mark the exponential growth in its importance to the administration. Over the next four months three issues would arise to compound this changing view of credibility: The situation in Laos, the Vienna Summit in June with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and the consequent reignition of tensions over Berlin. During these first troublesome months in

¹⁵ “Speech at the Democratic National Convention”, 15/07/60. John F, Kennedy Library hereafter cited as JFKL

office, there had been growing apprehension of the potential significance of the third world in Cold War confrontations; Khrushchev's rhetoric had called for Soviet support for wars of national liberation, and Kennedy himself acknowledged 'that Asia represented a threatening wave of the future.'¹⁶ However the overall US perspective was that Cold War flashpoints had not changed character and that they were still viewed as being fundamentally proxy confrontations between the US and the USSR. It was still presumed that the test of America's credibility on the international stage lay in the ability of the US to challenge the Soviets.

Unquestionably the post-World War II American view of foreign policy was that Communism was the ideological and political antithesis of American society and therefore was to be opposed. Eisenhower and Kennedy agreed on this principle but differed on the means available to the US to sustain that opposition.

There were thirty years between the two and their political responses were shaped by different generational experience. In addition to the rigours of World War I involvement Eisenhower's generation had to deal with the hardships of the Great Depression and the misery of 'boom and bust'. Kennedy's generation came to maturity during a period of rising US prosperity. Although they had to cope with the stress of fighting World War II on a major front, they did so with the optimism of a nation that could fight and win its own battles, as well as being able to answer a call for aid in concluding a war that other nations were finding beyond them, then returning to a US that promised to simply resume its upward spiral of domestic prosperity.

¹⁶ Robert D. Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology: John F Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy" *Diplomatic History*, 22.1 (Winter 1998), 46

So whereas Eisenhower approached situations more cautiously knowing the transience of economic stabilities, Kennedy and his contemporaries saw an infinite potential in the United States to meet all opposition with success. Eisenhower's more measured approach to the problem of Communism distinguished his administration from that of his predecessor Harry Truman. Where Truman pledged ever increasing sums of money to areas of contention through the agencies of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NSC 68, Eisenhower implemented NSC 162/2 which emphasized a greater reliance on a deterrent nuclear programme in an attempt to balance Cold War military commitments with the financial resources of the US. The reduction in options available for dealing with communism sparked fears amongst those of Kennedy's generation of another Munich: The single most embarrassing moment for allied political protagonists prior to the outbreak of World War II arose when in an attempt to avert full scale Nazi expansion, the European powers accepted the rationale and permitted Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland in North-West Czechoslovakia on the assurance that they would go no further. The German command reneged on the Munich agreement when they proceeded within six months of its ratification, to advance into the rest of Czechoslovakia. For Kennedy's generation especially, this became a lesson in the futility of appeasement and the dangers of concessions with the enemy. The fear of another Munich was the driving principle behind Kennedy's need to present a resolute opposition to communist aggression and it was 'Eisenhower's unwillingness to confront communism with the full force of American ingenuity and might . . . that made [his] presidency so dispiriting.'¹⁷

¹⁷ Peter Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 136

Kennedy propositioned that the Eisenhower administration had followed policies that placed the United States at a disadvantage, so much so that it had allowed the US to fall behind the Soviet Union in terms of military capabilities as well as scientific and technological advances. These failings were the root cause of what Kennedy perceived to be the reduction of the credibility and relative strength of the United States:

The years since 1953 had been years of drift and impotency, the years the locusts have eaten . . . And these too were precious years, vital years to the greatness of our nation . . . For on the other side of the globe another great power was not standing still and she was not looking back and she was not drifting in doubt. The Soviet Union needed these years to catch up with us, to surpass us, to take away from us our prestige and our influence and even our power in the world community. ¹⁸

Accordingly, the Kennedy campaign for the presidential election in 1960 sought to reverse this perception by stating pragmatic aspirations of overcoming a stalling domestic economy and delayed scientific endeavours and consequent loss of superiority in the field placed alongside idealistic sentiments regarding the American position as leader of the free world. It was his belief that the US needed 'to make a move forward, to make a determination here [in the United States] and around the world that [the US is] going to re-establish itself as a vigorous society . . . [And that it is] incumbent upon [them] to be the defenders . . . of freedom.' ¹⁹

Kennedy emphasized Republican failings during the campaign when he made reference to Richard Nixon's meetings with Khrushchev in 1959. During the 'kitchen debate' meeting, Nixon famously stated that where Soviet technology may be more advanced with regard to missiles, the US was more advanced in the technology of colour televisions; 'there are some instances where you may be ahead of us--for example in the development of the thrust of

¹⁸ Cited in Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology", 45

¹⁹ "Fourth Nixon-Kennedy Debate", 10/21/60, JFKL

your rockets for the investigation of outer space. There may be some instances, for example, colour television, where we're ahead of you,'²⁰ For Kennedy, Nixon's attempts at demonstrating American prosperity and abundance did more to demonstrate the inherent weaknesses he believed were pervading national security. Kennedy used Nixon's comments to portray him, and the Republican Party, as being soft and self-indulgent, more concerned with the luxuries of domestic comfort than national security: 'Kennedy implied that such indulgence made the United States more vulnerable to the militarized regimentation and discipline of the Soviets.'²¹ Kennedy perceived this vulnerability as a narrowing of the gap between battle readiness of both nations and international perception of American credibility. Kennedy asserted in 1960 that, although the US was still the stronger of the two nations, their strength in comparison to the USSR had reduced over the last five years. This he said indicated that the 'balance of power is in danger of moving with them.'²² Kennedy encapsulated his uncompromising approach to global communism in his inaugural address when he proclaimed, 'let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.'²³

Cuba

It was unfortunate that any critical decisions regarding an invasion of Cuba were left unresolved at the end of Eisenhower's administration, the problem subsequently falling compromisingly soon onto the shoulders of John F. Kennedy. Not only that but the outcome

²⁰ CIA, Freedom of Information. The Kitchen Debate Transcript, 24th July 1959.

²¹ Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology", 46

²² "Fourth Nixon-Kennedy Debate", 21/10/60, JFKL

²³ "Inaugural Address" 20/01/61, JFKL

of Operation Zapata would irrevocably shake both the domestic and international credibility of the new president; in his capacity to achieve the successes he promised during the presidential campaign. Despite Kennedy's apprehension that an invasion of Cuba would sabotage his efforts at establishing economic cooperation between the US and the Latin America through the Alliance for Progress, he accepted assurances offered by the CIA and was persuaded to approve the mission: 'If someone comes in and tells me this or that about the Minimum Wage Bill, I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals.'²⁴

A large component of Kennedy's approval of the mission reflected his need to assert domestic credibility. As the president, Kennedy's political youthfulness and relative inexperience was a disconcerting preoccupation to a significant proportion of the population, as a result of its continuous invocation by Republican opposition during the campaign. Kennedy was acutely aware that his age was seen to be incongruous with the traditional notions of patriarchal leadership that he espoused during his campaign. This was exacerbated by the fact that he succeeded Eisenhower whose popularity as president rested in part upon his projection of a fatherly self-image. He needed success in Cuba so as to quell fears that his age made him an unsuitable candidate for president: But further, Eisenhower had earlier forged himself a successful career in the military; amongst his many accolades was his orchestration of the 'most successful amphibious military invasion in US history.'²⁵

Adding to this was the pressure of his own presidential campaign rhetoric, during which he

²⁴ Cited in, Lucien S. Vandenbrouke. "Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs" *Political Science Quarterly*. 99.3 (Autumn 1984), 485

²⁵ Roderick M. Kramer, "Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions 25 Years Later: How well has the Groupthink Hypothesis Stood the Test of Time?" *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Process*, 73.2/3 (February/March 1988), 245

placed sole responsibility of Castro's growing influence onto the last administration who he charged as having ignored Latin America.²⁶ It was important that he deliver where Eisenhower failed. If he did not achieve some semblance of a victory in Cuba then his charge of weakness in the face of communist expansion that he levelled at the previous Republican administration was almost certainly to be deflected back at him.

This fear is understandable when one considers how Republican nominee Richard Nixon charged Kennedy with showing weakness towards the defence of Quemoy and Matsu with his support for the 1959 amendment to the Formosa Resolution of 1955. That amendment Nixon argued would have 'drawn a line' and that in doing so would be 'encouragement for the Communists to attack, to step up their blackmail and force [us] into a war that none of us want.'²⁷ Having already been accused of being soft on Communism, and knowing the extent that the last Democratic administration under Harry Truman was vilified for the loss of China, there was a real need for Kennedy to implement the vigorous and forthright content of his campaign and assure his credibility as commander in chief.

The Cuba of pre-1961 was a 'nation with a society the United States had made over for its own needs and desires.'²⁸ The US had monopolised ownership and thus taken control over Cuban exports, utilities and infrastructure, and had promoted tourism tailored to an American culture. The product of such unstable conditions was that Fidel Castro established his revolutionary July 26th Movement, established and named after the day they overthrew the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship in 1959. Initially Castro was not aligned to any global

²⁶ "Fourth Nixon-Kennedy Debate", 10/21/60, JFKL

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World: United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1980*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 140

political movement, and instead adopted a nationalist and anti-American stance. This is how Castro was perceived during the Eisenhower administration and explains why no definitive action against him was adopted sooner. Had he been openly communist then not only would it have been a challenge to US hegemony in that hemisphere, but it would have been a proximate challenge from the one enemy that would have instantly moved the situation to the highest immediacy. Instead Eisenhower commissioned clandestine operations to establish the best means possible to overthrow and remove Fidel Castro, 'this along with a sharp increase from US bases of small air attacks on economic targets caused Castro to diversify his economic ties towards the Soviet Bloc.'²⁹ With Castro's revolution inevitably drifting further to the left by the time John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in 1961, given the complex pressures on him to assure international and domestic credibility, it was a simple matter to categorize the Cuban political situation as being essentially communist. With this assumption the challenge posed by Castro and his revolutionary Cuba was polarized, from a neighbouring dissent to a direct hemispheric communist threat to US security, and the Kennedy administration were under pressure to respond to it accordingly. The plan to deal with Castro was initiated by Eisenhower and took the form proposed by the CIA: To give military training to a group of Cuban exiles ultimately to be landed in Cuba as a sea borne invasion force. Simultaneously the CIA amplified psychological warfare tactics in the hopes that such actions would harness the discontent towards Castro, and act as a catalyst to the disheartened sections of Cuban society by inciting uprisings amongst them. 'Chances were that, as in the case of the leftist Jacobo Arbenz during the CIA sponsored coup in Guatemala in 1954, Castro would lose his nerve and his regime would fall apart. If not, the

²⁹ Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, 142

émigrés could take to the hills and wage a fierce guerrilla struggle.’³⁰ However by the time the plan came to Kennedy as President it had taken on its own momentum and was engineered around the escalated concept of an invasion. The agency pushed for an invasion force as part of the operation and persuaded the president by appealing to his need to ensure prestige and credibility. The alternate plans would have entailed delaying action or to disband the troops, both of which would have been unacceptable and potentially damaging alternatives. Delaying would negate the military advantage the US had on account of the military aid the Soviets were supposedly due to provide the Cubans, and were the venture to be called off they would face a ‘disposal problem’³¹ of what to do with the redundant and potentially outspoken exiles. Either option would have resulted in the president appearing to be weak, but more so to his domestic opponents he would have portrayed himself as an appeaser of Castro. Potential success of the mission was overstated in order to get the president’s acquiescence and, ‘as much as Kennedy entertained doubts about the plan, he also felt however that it was impossible to avoid proceeding with some version of the operation if he was to avert a potentially greater . . . blow to his reputation and credibility as a leader.’³²

The strike itself was a complete failure. Kennedy’s hopes of keeping the US involvement in the invasion a secret were foiled when the *New York Times* printed an article on 14th April, detailing the preparations being made by rebel groups in Miami including the prompt dispatch of recruits to training camps in Guatemala.³³ On the first day of what were

³⁰ Vandenbrouke, 472

³¹ *Ibid*, 476

³² Kramer, 245

³³ “Cuban Exiles See No Curb From Us,” 14/04/61, *NYT*

supposed to be preparatory air strikes, few targets were hit and the ruse was soon exposed, with pictures of the planes appearing in the American press. Castro had reacted to the press information regarding the invasion, and had moved his troops into a strong position. Consequently the invaders suffered heavy casualties. When the exiles that evaded fire from Castro's army arrived on shore, the plan to flee to the hills in hope of waging a guerrilla war were made impossible because they were separated from the mountains by eighty miles of swamp land.³⁴ On the second day despite radioed calls from the rebels requesting assistance from air support, Kennedy refused, fearing international condemnation of direct intervention.³⁵ Kennedy knew that a political backlash from the Republicans was imminent and made moves to temper public dissent. After meetings with prominent Republicans, statements were released which outlined support for the president's decisions and urged the US public to do the same. However some right-wing sources issued a series of 'verbal barbs,'³⁶ where criticism was not explicit but the intonation implied it: In the same article that stated prominent Republican Nelson Rockefeller's support for Kennedy, it also reported of Republicans 'grumbling' at Nixon's decision to not publically criticize Kennedy's 'handling of the affair' and that 'the makings of a major political clash [were] simmering at the Capitol just beneath the lid President Kennedy [had] managed to impose temporarily on partisan debate.'³⁷ On balance however, despite a goodly amount of Republican criticism Kennedy's actions to gain support from prominent party members lessened the public impact of such dissent and gave the 'administration a chance to overcome a major policy failure.'³⁸

³⁴ "The Bay of Pigs," JFK In History, *JFKL*

³⁵ Beinart, 147

³⁶ Johns, 19

³⁷ "Rockefeller Calls for all to Support Kennedy on Cuba," 26/04/61, *NYT*

³⁸ Johns, 19

Vienna Summit

Kennedy's image as the responsible leader of the free world had been greatly affected by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, so it seems fortuitous that a tour of Europe was to commence in early May. The trip was intended to enable discussion of foreign policy and international relations with leading western allies. His schedule included meetings with General Charles de Gaulle, President of France in Paris; Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister in London; and the leader of the USSR, Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna. The disastrous outcome in Cuba had made the trip altogether much more important as the US felt it prudent to 'strengthen the unity of the west,'³⁹ and its own prestige with Khrushchev. These may have been the hopes of the US however it was to prove to be a bitter encounter for the new president, one that would initiate domestic concern. Kennedy had invited Khrushchev to partake in a bilateral meeting in February but he only replied to the request in early May, after the incident at the Bay of Pigs.⁴⁰ A retrospective analysis of the timing of this response coupled with the eventual outcome of the summit indicates Khrushchev's intention to gain political advantage out of the new president's misfortune by belittling him, a conclusion that was not lost on Kennedy.

I've got two problems: First to figure out why he did it, and in such a hostile way. And second, to figure out what we can do about it. I think the first part is pretty easy to explain. I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken, and anyone who got into it and didn't see it through, had no guts. So he just beat the hell

³⁹ "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Returning from Europe," 6th June 1961, Public Papers: John, F. Kennedy 1961, 442

⁴⁰ "Editorial Note," FRUS 1961-1963, Volume V, 83

out of me. So I've got a terrible problem. If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him.⁴¹

The summit lasted for two days and over the course of the meeting various issues that were deemed to be of equal importance to both countries were discussed; with particular attention being given to the situations in Laos and Berlin, and the possibility of initiating a test ban treaty. The official justification for the meeting was to placate tensions surrounding American-Soviet relations whilst also defining an appropriate framework on which to continue; 'The President . . . was extremely interested in discussing . . . matters affecting the relations between the two countries. He said he hoped that during these two days a better understanding of the problems confronting us could be reached.'⁴² For Kennedy the most pressing point of consideration was with regard to how two nations with equal strength and with such disparate social systems could avoid tumultuous confrontation 'involving their security or endangering peace.' Kennedy attempted to draw lines of comparison between the countries and even tried to achieve mutual acceptance of the imperative to maintain credibility by stating that 'the struggle in other areas should be conducted in a way which would not involve the two countries directly and would not affect their national interest or prestige.'⁴³ This apparent attempt at diffusion of tensions between the superpowers was met however with bellicose rhetoric from Khrushchev who was eager to point out areas of contention and take umbrage with them. Such belligerence shook Kennedy's self-assured façade,

I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken, and anyone who

⁴¹ Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 430

⁴² "Memos of conversation" USSR: Vienna meeting: June 1961, JFKL

⁴³ "Memorandum of Conversation" 3rd June 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Volume V, 176

got into it and didn't see it through had no guts. So he just beat the hell out of me. So I've got a terrible problem. If he thinks I'm not experienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him.⁴⁴

Kennedy's inability to deal with his Soviet counterpart with the same voice that characterized his election campaign irked many domestic critics. In the press conference he gave on the conclusion of the trip, the President spoke of the summit as a sobering experience that seemed to conclude with the establishment of 'direct give and take'⁴⁵ with neither person yielding or gaining an advantage or a concession. This constituted a whimper of a response in relation to the forceful language used when he spoke of such relations during the campaign; 'I want people all over the world to look to the United States again, to feel that [we are] on the move, to feel that out high noon is in the future. I want Mr Khrushchev to know that a new generation of American's who fought . . . for freedom . . . have now taken over the United States, and that we're going to put this country back to work again.'⁴⁶

Vienna Summit – Berlin

Most of the Vienna talks consisted of gleeful political point scoring on the part of the Soviets. However, Khrushchev chose to raise the issue of Berlin; 'Prior to the Vienna meeting Berlin had not been a high priority administration concern. Now it was the priority consideration.'

⁴⁷ Khrushchev had presented an aide memoire which outlined the Soviet desire to sign and implement a peace treaty with East Germany by the end of the year. Khrushchev stated that

⁴⁴ Cited in Dommen, 430

⁴⁵ "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Returning from Europe," 6th June 1961, Public Papers: John, F. Kennedy 1961, 443

⁴⁶ "Fourth Nixon-Kennedy Debate", 10/21/60, JFKL

⁴⁷ Kevin Dean, "We Seek Peace, But we Shall not Surrender: JFK's Use of Juxtaposition for Rhetorical Success in the Berlin Crisis," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 21.3 (Summer 1991), 535

if necessary the Soviets would sign this treaty unilaterally. By doing so they would formally end World War II and the western obligations to the conquered nation, as outlined by post-war sanctions, would be ended. 'The position of the GDR should be normalized and her sovereignty ensured. To do all this it is necessary to eliminate the occupation rights in West Berlin. No such rights should exist there.'⁴⁸ The elimination of Western rights to West Berlin was seen to be too great a concession and would prompt the United States 'if absolutely necessary, go to war.'⁴⁹ Kennedy remained neutral in response, not wanting to raise the level of hostilities within months of a major foreign policy failure. However, he returned to Washington determined to demonstrate American, and by proxy, his own strength of character by standing resolute. Following the Vienna summit when Khrushchev threw down the gauntlet with regard to Berlin Kennedy made a speech to the nation on the 25th July 1961, the central premise of which was 'we seek peace, but we shall not surrender',

Kennedy was sensitive to the gravity of the Berlin situation and realized that he needed to act decisively but not in haste. In drafting the speech, Kennedy was determined to articulate a firm commitment to protect the freedom of West Berlin, but he was equally compelled not to drive the crisis beyond the point of no return.⁵⁰

The contention over Berlin was a historical matter dating back to 1958 when Khrushchev demanded the withdrawal of Western powers from West Berlin. These demands were viewed by the US as an offensive move to undercut the western presence in the city, rather than a defensive move to protect Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and tension in the city was increasing when Kennedy made his speech in the summer of 1961.⁵¹

⁴⁸ "Memorandum of Conversation," 4th June 1961. FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume: XIV , 92

⁴⁹ Dean, *We Seek Peace, But we Shall not Surrender*, 534

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 535

⁵¹ Raymond L. Garthoff, "Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected. *Foreign Policy*, 84 (Autumn 1991), 143

By making his political aims in Berlin bilateral he was able to satisfy the widest possible cross-section of American society. This also went a long way towards repairing the personal damage incurred after the Bay of Pigs, by allowing Kennedy to demonstrate that he was not a warmonger whilst at the same time proving that he had not been frightened into inaction or concession. Following a number of disparaging statements about his leadership, for instance former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who stated that 'America's allies believed they were watching a gifted young amateur practice with a boomerang when they saw to their horror that he had knocked himself out,'⁵² Kennedy saw a need to consolidate the rhetoric of western unity that came from his trip to Europe, and demonstrate his commitment to his western allies.

In August the Berlin wall was constructed so as to stem the flow of eastern emigrants into West Germany and whatever its effect on Berliners seemed to ease tension between the superpowers. On 17th October Khrushchev officially withdrew his end of year deadline for signing a unilateral peace deal over Germany. However a confrontation between an American diplomat and East German border police occurred five days later on the 22nd, resulting in a 'squad of eight American soldiers on foot with fixed bayonets backed up by four M-48 tanks and additional troops at the checkpoint.'⁵³ Subsequently, tensions began to rise once again. The situation escalated quickly into what Garthoff describes as a 'bizarre dance'⁵⁴ with General Lucius Clay approving the deployment of more tanks to the checkpoint of the Berlin wall, closely followed by the Soviets deploying a tank force that matched those deployed by the US. The matter concluded on the 28th October, when the

⁵² Cited in Dean, *We Seek Peace, But we Shall not Surrender*, 532

⁵³ Garthoff, 144

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 149

Soviet tanks that had been stationed at the checkpoint withdrew and in consequence the US tanks fell back also.

Contemporary interpretation of these events would determine that Kennedy's strong rhetoric of July 25th had paid off, and in light of the military capacity the US had presented, coupled with sheer determination not to back down in Berlin, Khrushchev balked and ultimately withdrew. This however was not quite how the crisis was averted, in fact Kennedy sent a private back channel message to Khrushchev through his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy's connection to Georgi Bolshakov calling for 'mutual restraint and de-escalation asking Khrushchev to take the initial step.'⁵⁵ This version of events was not made common knowledge due in large part to Kennedy's need to maintain credibility as a strong and unflinching leader. Had it been known that potential conflict in Berlin was avoided due to diplomatic negotiating, it almost certainly would have rebounded as another situation where Kennedy appeased communist aggression, overriding any demonstration of able statesmanship implicit in the measure. As it was publically presented Kennedy stood resolute and domestically he reaped the rewards.

Because he has decided to fight if necessary, Kennedy is willing to continue talking with the Russians as long as possible, at the conference table or elsewhere. But he does not intend to negotiate in haste or from weakness, as the U.S. made clear last week by warning that unless the Russians restore free access to East Berlin, the U.S. may refuse to negotiate about Berlin at all. All along the line, Kennedy's stand has gradually toughened.⁵⁶

Although there was no outright victory in Berlin, the situation bubbling away until the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when as stated by Sorensen 'the conclusion of the Cuban missile crisis

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 152

⁵⁶ "The Presidency: Toughening Up," 03/11/61, *TIME*,

effectively spelled the end of the Berlin crisis.’⁵⁷ However in presenting a public image of vigorous defiance in the context of Berlin he was able to restore a consonance between the stern rhetoric of his campaign pledges and his political actions as a man of power. He was thus able to distance himself from Operation Zapata as an unfortunate mishap; rather than an indication of his leadership qualities.

Concurrent to all of these issues of foreign policy was the deepening American involvement in the worrisome situation in Southeast Asia. American involvement in the region would be later defined by their war in Vietnam. Initially however the unfolding situation in Laos was perceived to be a matter of prime importance to US security interests. Kennedy’s stance on Berlin had been shaped by his need to respond positively after the Bay of Pigs incident, and his choices in Laos were also directly affected by it: Kennedy is quoted as having said that ‘I don’t see how we can make any move in Laos, which is 5000 miles away if we don’t make a move in Cuba, which is only 90 miles away.’⁵⁸ Despite insistence from former President Eisenhower that intervention there was necessary, Kennedy opted for a negotiated settlement. The rationale and subsequent ramifications of this decision would prove be of enormous importance with regard to the progression of administrative policy towards Vietnam.

⁵⁷ Cited in Dean, *We Seek Peace But We Shall Not Surrender*, 541

⁵⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. (London: Andre Deutsch Limited 1965), 337

Chapter 2: Restraint in Laos

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Laos, Cambodia and the Vietnamese regions of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina made up the colonial federation of French Indochina. Between 1885 and 1940 France faced many rebellions against their colonial presence which continued until the Japanese, in prosecuting their part in World War II, attacked French garrisons in 1940, initiating their occupation of Indochina. This Japanese occupation lasted until their surrender in World War II and within thirteen months of that event the French had reoccupied their former territories, and in the Kingdom of Laos was established as a constitutional monarchy under French authority. During this period the French attempted to atone for past colonial shortcomings by improving infrastructure and providing new schools and hospitals, but these efforts did not eliminate the discontent that railed against the political and civil administrative inconsistencies and corruption that permeated the country. This led to a resumption of active social unrest and increased communist aggression from the newly established Pathet Lao and its Vietnamese counterpart the Viet Minh. During the First Indochina War (1946-1954) these forces proved to be a formidable opponent, so much so that the French military and political position in the region was subjected to increasing pressure.

Despite American condemnation of colonialism, fear of communism was far greater and as such the American involvement at this point was as France's silent financial and military benefactor. In Eisenhower's view 'Laos was the 'key to the entire area' [partly] because American military planners assumed that if North Vietnam, China or both launched an attack they would move through the Mekong River valley from Laos into Thailand and perhaps

Burma:’⁵⁹ Thailand was a close Southeast Asian ally of the US with whom they shared many treaty obligations; therefore it was imperative that the US adhere to its obligations to preserve Thailand’s political integrity. Further, ‘it’s loss, policy makers reasoned, would not only give Moscow a strategic wedge into the heart of Southeast Asia but a psychological victory over all nations vacillating between communism and freedom.’⁶⁰ Eisenhower’s domino theory citing a successive collapse of countries should one country fall, demanded imperative action to preserve Laos.

In 1954, after months of embittered combat the French forces withdrew and conceded defeat at Dien Bien Phu. This was followed by the Geneva Conference of 1954 which convened to establish a peaceful resolution in Indochina. Initially, Laos rather than Vietnam demanded more US attention, and this was due to their dissatisfaction over the outcome of the conference. It was the belief of the US that ‘any settlement should meet certain conditions, namely ensuring the viability of stable non-communist regimes and preventing the spread of communism.’⁶¹ Although dissatisfied with the result of the First Indochinese War, the US viewed the conference decision to separate Vietnam into a communist north, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and a non-communist south, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) as being acceptable since it maintained the cold war balance of power. The US also approved of the appointment of staunch anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister of the RVN during the final months of Emperor Bao Dai’s reign. In Laos however there was no geographical balance of power, and as such the US could not ensure the

⁵⁹ Hammer, 28

⁶⁰ Seth Jacobs, “No Place to Fight a War: Laos and the Evolution of US Policy Toward Vietnam, 1954-1963”, In: Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, Eds, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transitional Perspectives*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49

⁶¹ Marti Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 89

viability of a stable non-communist regime: This demanded more attention. The conference had determined that, with regard to Laos, the way to promote peace was to establish it as a newly emerged neutralized state with the formation of a coalition government. This coalition government, headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma, a neutralist, sought to 'bring about the definitive unity and full independence of the Kingdom through the reconciliation of all Lao'⁶² including units from the Pathet Lao headed by his brother, Prince Souphanouvong. Calls for neutrality were badly received by the US government who 'viewed neutrality as a naïve and even immoral concept.'⁶³ Instead the Eisenhower administration funded and supported the right wing Prince Boun Oum, and General Phoumi Nosavan along with the Royal Laotian Army (RLA) in conflicts with the Pathet Lao. In so doing, the US moved from a passive to an active involvement in the region. Despite their preference for a pro-western government, the French openly supported the creation of a neutralist Laos. They knew from bitter experience that Laos was militarily indefensible and they were in agreement with Souvanna Phouma that Laos's neighbours would not tolerate having a pro-western government in power. It was for this reason that the French and the British had vehemently urged the US not to commit to Phoumi as it might, 'unhappily force the neutralists to cooperate with the Communists. The Eisenhower administration seemed to regard this counsel as tainted with British lack of guts or French colonial intrigue'⁶⁴ and instead continued to support the RLA. As noted by Bernard Fall, this unwavering approach to Laos was ultimately as a result of the loss of China and marked the introduction of 'firmness

⁶² Stuart-Fox, 94

⁶³ William J. Rust. *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy 1960-63*. (New York: De Capo Press, 1987), 29

⁶⁴ Marianna P. Sullivan. *France's Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), 64

[as] a policy per se rather than a style of policy since all flexibility was immediately associated with previous periods of weakness.’⁶⁵

When John F. Kennedy became president at the beginning of 1961, Laos was in the grip of a civil war yet the US did not perceive it as such. With the neutralists in union with the communists and being supplied with personnel and supplies from the Soviet Union and North Vietnam, the American perception was that it was a Cold War conflict that was instigated by outside interference on the part of the Soviets. Despite the objection to the notion of neutralization held by Eisenhower, President Kennedy spoke of upholding the ruling of the Geneva conference that Laos should be neutral and independent. During his press conference on the communist domination in Southeast Asia on 23rd March, Kennedy spoke of the Soviet backing of the communist forces in Laos and condemned the premise of external support as defying the terms and conditions as outlined in 1954. Conveniently he neglected to mention the external support the US had been, and was still providing to the right wing forces of General Phoumi in the form of a \$3,000,000 monthly payment,⁶⁶ and instead said that ‘if in the past there has been any possible ground for misunderstanding of our desire for a truly neutral Laos, there should be none now.’⁶⁷ This decision was reached because Kennedy’s perception of credibility was dependent upon the successful implementation of affirmative action, and the prospects for such action in Laos were poor.

Despite Kennedy’s inclination towards some degree of military action, he still questioned the extent to which Laos was considered to be vital to the security of the United States. One of

⁶⁵ Bernard Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961*. (New York: Double Day, 1969), 158

⁶⁶ “Memorandum from Michael Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Bundy,” 11th June 1962. FRUS, 1961-1963 Volume: XXIV, 838

⁶⁷ PP: John F. Kennedy 1961, 214

the biggest factors that influenced him to pursue diplomacy instead was the negative appraisal that was issuing in the American press towards Laos. The reluctance, or inability, of the Laotians to organize a coherent and effective military force had been well documented by both politicians and journalists for many years. In 1954 the first US ambassador to Laos, Charles Woodruff Yost wrote of the Laotian outlook as being 'lackadaisical' and their attitude being partly the result of 'apathy' and 'indifference.'⁶⁸ This opinion did not stop with Yost rather it permeated the outlook of most of Eisenhower's administration; even the President himself referred to Laos as 'a bunch of homosexuals' who obviously 'didn't like to fight.'⁶⁹ Such opinions clearly influenced the manner in which Kennedy approached the situation unfolding in Southeast Asia, especially with regard to his perceived need to project a macho and assertive image at home in the US. The problem was intensified once the press began reporting incidents which portrayed the inadequacy of the Laotian army and hopeless situations to their readers. An article in the *Washington News* from March stated that 'Laotian soldiers often resemble Ferdinand the Bull, who wanted only to smell the flowers'⁷⁰ and in early April *TIME* reported the comments of an unnamed military man that "'this is war, dammit, but the Laotians are just not willing to risk getting killed. They don't think past tomorrow, and many not even as far ahead as tonight.'" In the event of a major attack by the Pathet Lao, he added gloomily, "the army will scuttle off like rabbits".⁷¹ Criticism of the assertiveness of the Laotians did not stop at public disapproval; indeed such criticisms were apparent in the Kennedy administration itself. In a meeting during early March Secretary of

⁶⁸ "Telegram from the Legation in Laos to the Department of State," 3rd May 1955, FRUS, 1955-1957. Volume: XXI, 641-642

⁶⁹ Cited in Jacobs, *No Place to Fight a War*, 49

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 52

⁷¹ "Laos: Americans at Work," 07/04/61, *TIME*

State Dean Rusk stated his concerns that there was no 'guarantee of the steadfastness of any Lao, even Phoumi.'⁷² These sentiments were reiterated when he stated with some frankness that,

If the US [were] to call on its young men to go and fight to defend the freedom of another country, it must be quite certain of the desire of that country for freedom Therefore it is of the highest importance to make certain that the will to defend freedom not only exists in Laos but also is made obvious to the entire world, and complete solidarity and readiness to accept sacrifice on the part of the Laotian people becomes more apparent.⁷³

Deputy National Security Advisor Walt Rostow did not believe that the Laotians had such capabilities and instead claimed that they 'had little sense of national cohesion and limited military ability;'⁷⁴ and on the 10th May US Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith wrote to the President to inform him that it was his opinion that 'as a military ally the entire Laos nation is clearly inferior to a battalion of conscientious objectors from World War I.'⁷⁵

The low level of the Laotian fighting spirit failed to generate hope amongst the Kennedy administration, and this was not the only obstacle to applying US military force. The landscape of the country also raised serious concern. Extreme alternations between mountains and valleys and lack of appropriate infrastructure made effective application of modern and highly mechanical American military force extremely difficult. Adding to these difficulties was the dense jungle canopy which made traversing much of the rest of the country equally as difficult and additionally rendered the use of the air force somewhat ineffective, 'General Lemnitzer said that air action in itself would not be sufficient and that

⁷² "Memorandum of Conversation" 12th March 1961, FRUS 1961-1963. Volume: XXIV, 87

⁷³ "Memorandum of Conversation" 29th June 1961, *Ibid*, 279

⁷⁴ Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 266

⁷⁵ Galbraith to Kennedy, 10th May 1961, JFKL

there must be adequate forces on the ground.’⁷⁶ If the air force alone was insufficient and the terrain proved to be problematic for the successful implementation of American infrastructure then troops would have to be deployed; yet Kennedy was aware that ‘the American people would not support the sending of American troops to Laos on the other side of the world.’⁷⁷ However a Task Force report provided some clarification on the question of troop deployment as it stated that,

the next stage of escalation in Laos itself, i.e., the introduction of U.S. troops, would be highly disadvantageous to [the US] in view of the inaccessibility to Laos, difficulty of supply, greater familiarity with terrain and guerrilla type of warfare on the part of the Pathet Lao and the DRV. The fact that a jungle guerrilla type war is the most difficult type for organized units, combined with a generally adverse world and U.S. public opinion, would make this a most difficult step to take.⁷⁸

Despite acknowledging the limitations against military success in Laos, the continued belief that it was a Cold War confrontation meant that the threat of a counter attack to communist agitation could not be removed, and Kennedy took heed of Eisenhower’s advice that he gave during their meeting on the 19th January prior to Kennedy’s inauguration. Eisenhower had advised him to push on obtaining a multilateral agreement of involvement from the members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). However early into his first term the unwillingness of major SEATO allies such as Britain and France to intervene in Laos according to the obligations outlined by the protocol, made pursuance of Eisenhower’s policy recommendation problematic:

One complicating factor on the present scene is the ambiguous position of SEATO. Since SEATO was created to act in circumstances such as that now existing in Laos and has not acted, it casts doubt not only on its own integrity but on the reliability of

⁷⁶ “Memorandum of Conversation”, 12th March 1961. FRUS 1961-1963. Volume: XXIV, 87

⁷⁷ “Memorandum of Conversation”, 9th April 1961. *Ibid*, 685

⁷⁸ “Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense [*sic*] for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense [*sic*]”, 23rd January 1961. *Ibid*, 32

the United States as its originator. The obvious reluctance of the British and French and others to take SEATO action with respect to Laos creates general doubt as to the validity of our case in Laos. SEATO becomes a means whereby restraint is imposed on us by our allies against action which we might be willing and able to take unilaterally and which might be generally acceptable . . . If we conclude that it is best, in the light of all circumstances, for SEATO not to act directly on Laos, we must in the immediate future take action to clarify its position toward the Laotian crisis by requesting, approving, or at least acquiescing in whatever unilateral United States action is decided on. If SEATO is not to play an important role in the future, it should be progressively de-emphasized and United States unilateral action substituted for it, i.e., by a bilateral treaty with Thailand and whatever U.S. military dispositions are called for by the circumstances.⁷⁹

Such a gloomy outlook on the prospect of a multilateral response however did not bring the discussion of its possibility to a close. During the president's news conference on 23rd March Kennedy stated that 'no one should doubt our resolution'⁸⁰ with regard to the willingness of the US to consider a military response through SEATO; and during a meeting with French Ambassador Herve Alphand and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Foy Kohler, he stressed that 'he did not see how negotiations could be successful unless there was some firm military posture on [their] side.'⁸¹ Kennedy hoped to provide this military response with a multilateral engagement through SEATO and implored his French allies that they should demonstrate a 'firm united front.'⁸² However these pleas for unity did not transpire as the SEATO allies France and Britain rejected military intervention once again and Kennedy had to decide what the US response would be vis-à-vis unilateral action.

It was at this juncture that American intervention in Cuba occurred, before any action was undertaken with regard to Laos. Although the two countries had no bearing on one another, indeed no connection other than their communist threat as defined by the US, the blunder

⁷⁹ "Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense [*sic*] for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense [*sic*]", 23rd January 1961. *Ibid*, 30

⁸⁰ PP: John F. Kennedy 1961, 214

⁸¹ "Memorandum of Conversation," 26th March 1961. FRUS, 1961-1963. Volume: XXIV, 103

⁸² *Ibid*

of Operation Zapata had an irrevocable impact upon the policy towards Laos. A week after the Cuban operation the Co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference called for the convocation of an international conference to settle the matter of Laos. Kennedy was willing to enter into such negotiations as he wanted a quick resolution to the affair, however he was insistent upon the implementation of a ceasefire before any conference took place as it was the American opinion that the communist's calls for 'a ceasefire . . . effected simultaneously with a conference' were indicative of the 'bloc interest in maximizing, without precipitating SEATO intervention, the communist military and political position in Laos prior to any conference.'⁸³ However the communists refused to ceasefire on the grounds that US personnel were still present in Laos; and the US refused to withdraw those stationed in Laos on account of the continued communist aggression. This placed the US in a precarious position, whilst not wanting to abandon the prospect of a ceasefire Kennedy did not want to appear weak and submissive in pursuit of it.

Kennedy was now faced with two options for Laos, unilateral engagement or ceasefire and a conference. Both these options held possible ramifications; were Kennedy to commit increased military and money to the country in accordance with the policy of unilateral action that had been explored before Cuba, there was a possibility that he would be vilified as a warmonger. The fledgling administration had already been charged with 'Yankee imperialism'⁸⁴ in connection to the Cuban affair, and there had also been widespread demonstrations both domestically and internationally against it. By unilaterally engaging the US in another region so soon after, Kennedy ran the risk of exacerbating the already

⁸³ "Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to President Kennedy", 13th April 1961. *Ibid*, 127

⁸⁴ "Nixon Supporting Kennedy on Cuba," 22/04/61, *NYT*

negative press he was receiving in relation to Cuba. Alternatively, were he to seek swift negotiations at a conference he would have to concede a firm military position in Laos prior to obtaining an effective ceasefire, and consequently he ran the risk of being labelled a communist appeaser. This would have greater ramifications as his failure against Castro, who had publically announced that he and his movement were socialist in nature after the Bay of Pigs, closely followed by concessions to the communists in Southeast Asia would imply that Kennedy was soft on communism in every instance. 'When Kennedy put hard questions to the chiefs of staff, he found them ready to go to war in Laos but unable to promise an easy victory, or any victory at all, without the right to use nuclear weapons;' ⁸⁵ he had had his confidence shaken by the events in Cuba and the options presented to him by his military men did little to reconstruct it. The dilemma of being caught between 'humiliation and holocaust' ⁸⁶ that Kennedy would articulate during a later news conference was presenting itself in mid-April, and when considering his already dubious outlook on conditions in Laos he was reticent about the advantages of engaging the US militarily there.

If American troops were introduced into such a scenario in limited numbers a Korean-style war would probably ensue. Conversely, an unrestricted deployment of American armed forces could possibly escalate into World War III. Neither one of these potential scenarios appealed to President Kennedy, nor did the political cost of being the president to lose Southeast Asia. ⁸⁷

Kennedy decided against military engagement with the proviso that despite being disinclined to engage the US there militarily, if 'a strong American response is the only card left to be played in pressing for a ceasefire' ⁸⁸ then he would not rule it out entirely. This statement

⁸⁵ Hammer, 29

⁸⁶ PP: John F. Kennedy 1961, 760

⁸⁷ Geoffrey D.T. Shaw, "Laotian 'Neutrality': A Fresh Look at a Key Vietnam War Blunder," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 13.1 (Spring 2002), 31

⁸⁸ "Memorandum of Meeting with President Kennedy", 26th April 1961, FRUS 1961-1963. Volume: XXIV, 143

affirming the continued interest of the US in the matter of Laos was an important demonstration of American credibility for several reasons. As outlined in a telegram sent to the State Department in May, there was a need to reassert the US position regarding a truly neutral government for Laos, otherwise it was feared that 'if [Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister] concludes that we have "abandoned Laos" he will chase us around the barn in negotiations.' In light of the effect the Cuban episode had on the confidence within Washington, it was believed that the US had 'to shake off that affair' and demonstrate their continued support for international commitments 'the credibility of [which] seems to be crucial to the prevention of a general war.' And with regard to Laos it countered fears within the neutralists that the US would 'shy away from confronting Sino-Soviet power when the chips [were] down.'⁸⁹

Notwithstanding the positive repercussions such statements had on Kennedy's international credibility, domestically the pursuance of a ceasefire and conference table negotiation had negative effect. As articulated in an issue of *TIME* that was published on the 12th May, the ceasefire was seen by many as a 'defeat for the US' and that 'with discouraging unanimity' Western experts agreed that a neutral Laos would 'quickly go behind the Iron Curtain.' Having been hit by one outright foreign policy failure and pursuing another that had the makings of following suit Kennedy needed decisive action to salvage his credibility. Thus 'from the day after the Bay of Pigs disaster [the US] course in Indochina began to be shaped

⁸⁹ "Telegram from Secretary of State", 11th May 1961. *Ibid*, 188

to meet the Administration's need to offset public alarm, to bolster public confidence and to refurbish its own image, rather than to meet the strategic challenge of Indochina.' ⁹⁰

The protracted labour of obtaining an effective ceasefire heightened the importance of the Vienna Summit of June. For Kennedy this meeting was viewed as an opportunity to re-establish American strength and his personal credibility with the Soviet leader following Operation Zapata. Additionally, if Kennedy could persuade the Soviets to acquiesce to his demands of compliance to the International Control Commission (ICC) so as to bring about a ceasefire, then he would demonstrate that he was not appeasing the communists whilst simultaneously demonstrating his resolve to secure a diplomatic settlement to domestic critics as well as international allies. As has already been outlined, it was conceded that the meeting was a victory for Khrushchev however this victory was a cumulative one and of all the topics discussed the situation in Laos was relatively successful for Kennedy. Despite being unable to convince Khrushchev entirely, the decisions made with regard to Laos were seen as a step in the right direction. The summit concluded with both leaders agreeing that Laos was of no strategic importance to either country; that they both hoped for a cease fire; and that the US and the USSR should use their influence with their respective Laotian associates so as to bring about an agreement between the warring factions, and create an independent and neutral government. ⁹¹

The inclusion of the prospect of influencing their 'respective associates' indicates that the US 'assumed that the Russian leaders had sufficient influence over the Pathet Lao to control

⁹⁰ Norman Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War*, (Lanham: Madison Books, 1987), 11

⁹¹ "Memorandum of Conversation," 4th June 1961. FRUS, Volume: V, 206-210

their strategy, if not their tactics.’⁹² Such assumptions clearly demonstrate that the Kennedy administration’s approach to the Laotian situation was still very much based on the archetypal Cold War concept of proxy warfare. This explains why his initial response to the Laotian problem was to seek multilateral assistance through SEATO: Southeast Asia was seen as a crucial frontier in the Cold War fight against communist expansion and SEATO, like NATO, was a collective security organization dedicated to stop such expansion. By assuming that the Soviets were the controlling force behind the Pathet Lao the US believed that their military strength was redundant due to ‘[Soviet] missiles . . . [being able to] hold off [American] missiles, and [Soviet] troops [matching American] troops should [they] intervene in these so-called wars of liberation.’⁹³ Such statements indicate that, the US perceived the troubles in Laos to be as a result of Soviet interference and that their calls for SEATO action were sanctioned.

Following the humiliation at the Vienna summit and a vacillating ceasefire domestic concern continued to rise. This time concern also emanated from within Kennedy’s administration. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) issued a memorandum to Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara stating that ‘credibility in the US deterrent is waning’ on account of the continued US presence at the conference despite an effective ceasefire not being achieved and without inducing US intervention. It was the opinion of the JCS that a ‘continued political retreat by the United States in the face of Communist challenges will surely immobilize the national will of those nations who have allied themselves with us, and it may induce many to

⁹² Kenneth Hill, “President Kennedy and the Neutralization of Laos.” *The Review of Politics*. 31.3 (July 1969), 354

⁹³ PP. John F. Kennedy: 1961, 445

seek an accommodation with Communism.’⁹⁴ One of the JCS recommendations was the introduction of military operations should the communist violations continue, yet Kennedy had already established the degree of his unwillingness to send troops into Laos following the communist assault on Pa Dong at the beginning of June. Such action; or lack thereof, demonstrates that for Kennedy credibility with regard to Laos never entailed military action, he perceived it as ‘a bad place to fight.’⁹⁵ Right from the beginning of his administration it had been identified as such, and parallel to this was the growing opinion that where Laos was lacking, neighbouring Vietnam provided better prospects.

The Declaration of Laotian neutrality brought to cessation the civil conflict that had engulfed Laos for last ten years and with it American involvement there, the solution however was seen by many as haphazard and unprofitable; as articulated by Maine Senator Margaret Chase Smith who in 1961 characterized Kennedy’s policy in Laos and Cuba as being ‘brave words . . . followed by no brave action.’⁹⁶ Indeed, although the US government could say that they upheld their end of the bargain, their uncertainty of the long term prospects for Laos was as damaging to US credibility as it would have been had a communist military victory occurred.

The vetoes and vagueness built into every paragraph of the agreement ensure that neither the I.C.C. nor the government can take effective action if any of the rival factions breaks faith . . . Yet the very confusions and contradictions in the situation may well keep the scheming factions occupied for years of more or less peaceful intrigue—which the West considers vastly preferable to civil war. Said one Western diplomat in Vientiane: “I am optimistic because I have to be.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ “Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense [sic] McNamara”, 12th July 1961. FRUS, 1961-1963. Volume: XXIV, 293-294

⁹⁵ “Editorial note.” *Ibid*, 321

⁹⁶ “Defense [sic]: Capability Vs Credibility,” 29/09/61, *TIME*

⁹⁷ “Laos: A Kind of Peace,” 03/08/62, *TIME*

The sense of resignation in 1962 to a settlement that was 'more or less' peaceful, was indicative of Kennedy's earlier defeatist approach to Laos. In May 1961 when Kennedy travelled to Paris to meet with the French president, he spoke frankly of past mistakes that had made the situation in Laos particularly difficult, noting particularly that the option of Souvanna Phouma as neutral leader of a coalition government was 'the best available solution even though obviously he is not a very good one.'⁹⁸ Such opinions demonstrate that Kennedy never held strong hopes of a truly successful outcome.

In 1962 the Pathet Lao had become a far more established force with 20,000 soldiers and supply links with the Soviets. Most importantly at this point they held government positions 'not just economic planning but information, transport and public works.'⁹⁹ In complete disregard for the declaration of neutrality, they also used their expanded administrative authority to develop the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' which provided a link between North Vietnam and South Vietnamese insurgents, the Viet Cong.

No one is optimistic here that the official neutralization of Laos would halt Communist operations against South Vietnam from Laotian bases or the use of the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail to move Communist men and supplies from North Vietnam through southern Laos to battlefronts in South Vietnam.¹⁰⁰

Such violations and apparent advances of the communists in Laos coupled with the US government seemingly washing its hands of the affair left both domestic and international observers querying the resolve of Kennedy and his administration: 'Domestic critics charged that [Kennedy] had lacked resolution in dealing with Communism. . . . Moreover pro-western

⁹⁸ "JFK-De Gaulle Meetings," 5/31/61-6/2/61, JFKL

⁹⁹ Schlesinger, 452

¹⁰⁰ "Laos Seen as Key to Area Security: Neutralization Will Not End Nation's Strategic Role," 11/10/61, *NYT*

Asian leaders viewed Laos as a symbolic test of strength that the Communists were clearly winning.’¹⁰¹

Eisenhower had spoken of Laos as the ‘cork in the bottle’ of Southeast Asia and in June 1956 Kennedy spoke similarly with regard to Vietnam stating that it was ‘the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike.’¹⁰² As already stated Kennedy had never observed the situation in Laos to be as dire a situation as Eisenhower had perceived it rather the inclination of his administration was that Vietnam was far more significant to US foreign policy in comparison. The drawbacks associated with the decision to negotiate in Laos and the subsequent declaration of neutrality, were additional reasons as to why the US sought military escalation in Vietnam. Indeed where it would seem that Vietnam became a foreign policy concern after the Laotian crisis, its inclusion in policy discussions in fact occurred simultaneously.

¹⁰¹ Rust, 33

¹⁰² ‘America’s Stake in Vietnam’ speech, 01/06/56, *JFKL*

Chapter 3: Escalation in Vietnam

“Vietnam represents a proving ground of democracy in Asia. However we may choose to ignore it or deprecate it, the rising prestige and influence of Communist China in Asia are unchallengeable facts. Vietnam represents the alternative to Communist dictatorship. If this democratic experiment fails, if some, one million refugees have fled the totalitarianism of the north only to find neither freedom nor security in the South, then weakness not strength will characterize the meaning of democracy in the minds of still more Asians. The United States is directly responsible for this experiment – it is playing an important role in the laboratory where it is being conducted. We cannot afford to permit that experiment to fail.”

- Senator John F. Kennedy ¹⁰³

For President Kennedy Vietnam had long been an area of interest; indeed during his time in the Senate he spoke on a number of occasions affirming his support for the South Vietnamese regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, and the importance of maintaining South Vietnam as a free non-communist state. When he assumed the presidency in 1961 these views did not alter as commander in chief. The diplomatic history associated with Vietnam resonated heavily with Kennedy as he was sharply aware of the possible lines of comparison that would be drawn between his Democratic predecessor, Harry Truman and himself. The fear of conservative discontent in the US was a constant thorn in the side of the Kennedy administration: The ‘McCarthyite’ writer Joseph Alsop was the author of the Republican article *Why We Lost China* in which his influential analysis placed the blame at the feet of Truman’s State Department. Alsop visited Vietnam in order to interview Diem, and learned that in Diem’s view insufficient backing from the US had ‘undermined his efforts to pacify the countryside.’ ¹⁰⁴ Kennedy was fearful of the potential backlash that could ensue from

¹⁰³ “America’s Stake in Vietnam,” 01/06/56, JFKL

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Pelz, “John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Vietnam War Decisions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4.4 (1981), 364

Alsop, should he fail to hit the right note in Vietnam. This coupled with the relative security of Vietnam during Eisenhower's administration and the former president's stark warning that should a retreat in Southeast Asia occur the Republicans would hold Kennedy personally responsible,¹⁰⁵ made the new president even more 'unwilling to abandon his predecessor's pledge or permit a communist conquest.'¹⁰⁶

American history of aiding South Vietnam was a compelling reason for Kennedy to remain engaged there. When the Geneva Conference of 1954 concluded with the temporary division of Vietnam and elections to be held in two years to reunify the country, the US and the South Vietnamese government refused to uphold the elections because they did not believe that elections in the communist north would in fact be free, although recent arguments suggest that they objected on account of the general consensus that if such elections were held Diem would almost certainly lose.¹⁰⁷ Even as a senator, Kennedy supported the claims against holding elections stating that, 'neither the United States nor free Vietnam is ever going to be party to an election obviously stacked and subverted in advance.'¹⁰⁸ With CIA advice Diem's armed forces began tracking down and eliminating Communist and Viet Minh sympathizers and organizations, effectively violating article 14(c) of the Geneva Agreement. Gareth Porter suggests that the importance of all these events is that 'it signified an American effort to resolve the issue of Vietnam's political future by force

¹⁰⁵ Johns, 19

¹⁰⁶ Leslie H. Gelb, "Vietnam: The System Worked," *Foreign Policy*, No. 3 (Summer 1971), 159

¹⁰⁷ "Letter From the Assistant Secretary of Defense [sic] for International Security Affairs (Hensel) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson)" 22nd April 1955. FRUS, 1955-1957 Volume: I, 279

¹⁰⁸ Cited in, Larry Berman, *Planning Tragedy: The Americanisation of the War in Vietnam*. (New York: Norton, 1982), 15

rather than by Vietnamese expression of political choice.’¹⁰⁹ Such heavy handed involvement in the political institution of South Vietnam irrevocably linked the credibility of the US to the maintenance of a viable non-communist state of South Vietnam, and as a consequence the Eisenhower administration underwrote and unilaterally supported the non-communist regimes of Emperor Bao Dai and his successor Diem.

The extension of support to Diem when he took over Premiership from Bao Dai was as contentious during Eisenhower’s administration as it would prove to be during Kennedy’s. Diem’s qualities as Premier proved to be very divisive, so much so that many people within the administration did not think him capable of holding a government together. Despite considerable concerns the general consensus was that there remained no better non-communist alternative, and following a military victory over the Binh Xuyen at the end of April 1955 the Eisenhower administration believed that ‘in the US and the world at large Diem, rightly or wrongly, [became a] symbol of Vietnamese nationalism struggling against French colonialism and corrupt backward elements . . . For [them] at this time to participate in a scheme to remove Diem [was perceived to] be domestically impractical but highly detrimental to [their] prestige in Asia.’¹¹⁰ By extending the notion of credibility beyond the creation of a stable non-communist government to include specifically, the maintenance of Diem as Premier would prove to be a major factor in Kennedy’s precipitation of American escalation in Vietnam, for the view of the administration was to become ‘support Diem, or let Vietnam fall’¹¹¹ and the repercussions of letting Vietnam fall would be severe:

¹⁰⁹ Porter, 39

¹¹⁰ “Telegram from Secretary of State to Embassy in Vietnam,” 1st May 1955. FRUS 1955-1957, Volume I, 343

¹¹¹ Geoffrey Warner, “Review Article President Kennedy and Indochina: The 1961 Decisions.” *International Affairs* 70.4 (1994), 695

A communist victory in [South Vietnam] would be a major blow to US prestige and influence, not only in Asia but throughout the world since the world believes that Vietnam has remained free only through US help. Such a victory would tell leaders of other governments that it doesn't pay to be a friend of the US, and would be an even more marked lesson than Laos. ¹¹²

During the early stages of Kennedy's tenure as president, the military situation that existed in Laos was another driving reason behind US engagement in Vietnam. The geography of Vietnam, with its coastal access and less extreme terrain, was far more easily accessible and surmountable to the US military than that which was in Laos; and, as has been outlined previously in some detail, the fighting spirit that the Kennedy administration sought in line with their uncompromising stance towards communism had never been demonstrated by the Laotians, the general tone of political commentary on their qualities being disdainful and dismissive, rather as stated by James C. Thomson Jr, Asian specialist and assistant to Under Secretary Bowles, the Vietnamese did demonstrate such qualities,

What happened . . . was that we discovered that the Laotians were not Turks . . . That meant that they would not stand up and fight. And once we discovered that the Laotians were not Turks, it seemed advisable to pull back from confrontation in Laos . . . [Once that had been established] it was thought the place to stand one's ground was Vietnam because the Vietnamese were Turks. ¹¹³

On 28th January 1961 a meeting had been organized between Kennedy and some of his top advisors, including Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, and director of the CIA Allen Dulles. The meeting had been arranged so as to discuss the recent report on Vietnam that had been completed by General Edward Lansdale on account of Kennedy's 'keen interest' ¹¹⁴ in the General's account of the situation as it highlighted 'for the first time [the] danger and urgency of the problem in

¹¹² Cited in Warner, "The 1961 Decisions", 693

¹¹³ Cited in, William Conrad Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships. Part II: 1963-1964*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 24

¹¹⁴ "Summary Record of a Meeting," 28th January 1961, FRUS 1961-1963. Volume I, 13n

Vietnam.’¹¹⁵ Despite his musings regarding whether the problem was not one of politics and morale, Kennedy permitted the organizational and personnel changes outlined by Lansdale and on the 30th January an ‘increase of \$28.4 million to expand the Vietnam force level by 20,000 and an expenditure of \$12.7 million to improve the quality of the Vietnam Civil Guard’¹¹⁶ was authorized. Alongside the increases in overt and covert military support for the South Vietnamese army, was a renewed commitment towards Diem, despite concerns regarding his leadership and growing unpopularity. Lansdale’s proposition was that by improving relations between Diem and the US, they would then jointly be able to implement an effective counter-insurgency plan.¹¹⁷

The administration may well have desired swift action in Vietnam; Kennedy was certainly eager to implement his counter-insurgency program, it was however forced to take a back seat as plans for Southeast Asia coincided with Operation Zapata in Cuba. The resounding failure of the invasion at the Bay of Pigs had a galvanising impact upon Kennedy’s decisions regarding Southeast Asia, but whereas the failure in Cuba highlighted the lack of military prospects for Laos, with regard to Vietnam it seemed to have the opposite effect: Kennedy’s resolve to engage there was intensified. On the 20th April, the day that the US sponsored Cuban invaders surrendered, President Kennedy directed Roswell Gilpatric to head a Presidential Task Force on Vietnam to produce a ‘program of action to prevent communist domination of South Vietnam.’¹¹⁸ The report that was submitted a week later was on the whole an optimistic appraisal of the situation in Vietnam stating that the situation was

¹¹⁵ “Memorandum from the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy),” 30th January 1961. *Ibid*, 16

¹¹⁶ “Summary Record of a Meeting,” 28th January 1961. *Ibid*, 15n

¹¹⁷

¹¹⁸ “Editorial Note,” *Ibid*, 74

‘critical but not hopeless.’¹¹⁹ Gilpatric called for a combination of military and political gestures ranging from border patrols, retraining of the ARVN in counter-insurgency methods and improved relations between Diem and the US; the last of these measures to be partly undertaken by Vice President Johnson meeting Diem in Saigon.¹²⁰ Despite a general consensus that the program of action for Vietnam ‘[looked] like a sensible putting together of the idea’s floating around regarding the internal security threat to the GVN,’ key members of Kennedy’s administration held serious reservations about the report stating that ‘there is far more emphasis on what [they] ought to do than . . . how to do so’¹²¹ and that ‘there is no timetable – no clear division of field authority . . . no realistic estimate of long-run costs and effect . . . [and] many miscellaneous ideas are vaguely thrown in without any consideration comparable to that given the military and intelligence build-up.’¹²² Despite a broad range of concerns over the efficacy of the Task Force’s suggestions,

On 29th April Kennedy also approved a secret increase in MAAG of 100 advisers, and he ordered US advisers to help the Civil Guard which was considered the first line of provincial security against the guerrillas. By so doing Kennedy breached the Geneva accords by exceeding the limit of US advisers and by allowing those advisers to go deep into the provinces.¹²³

These affirmative actions were capitulated on 11th May when Kennedy accepted the policy set forth in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52 which approved the objectives of, prohibiting South Vietnam being subjected to communist occupation; creating and maintaining a democratic society with the mutually beneficial implementation of

¹¹⁹ Pelz, 366

¹²⁰ “Program for the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam,” 22nd April 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Volume: 1, 74-77

¹²¹ “Memorandum from Robert W. Komer to National Security Council Staff to the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow),” 28th April 1961. *Ibid* I, 85

¹²² “Memorandum from the President’s Special Counsel (Sorenson) to the President,” 28th April 1961. *Ibid*, 84

¹²³ Pelz, 368

military, political, economic, psychological and covert actions. Such increases represented the desire within the administration to,

emphasize [the] strong determination on the part of the US government to stop [the] deterioration [of] US prestige in [the] worlds eyes brought about by [the] Cuba and Laos setbacks. Both President Kennedy and General Lemnitzer . . . repeatedly stated [that] Vietnam [was] not to go behind [the] Bamboo Curtain under any circumstances and [that they] must do all that is necessary to prevent [it] from happening.’¹²⁴

At this point the impetus behind the prevention of a communist accession in Vietnam lay in the need for the US government to project an image of strength to opponents. It was feared by the administration that the events both in Cuba and Laos would signal to the Soviet Union a weakness in US foreign policy and instigate resurgence of pro-communist activity that would threaten US interests elsewhere in the world. Furthermore a number of politicians and commentators in the US were circulating the view that Cuba and Laos demonstrated a soft centre to the Kennedy administration and sparked major concern amongst the government opposers regarding the competency of the government to challenge and stand up to assertive communist demands: ‘Failure to act in a resolute way in Laos and the recent fiasco in Cuba reflected incredibly bad intelligence, worse planning but a complete lack of resolution to carry through to a desired goal.’¹²⁵ Such scathing criticism of Kennedy’s ability to deal with foreign policy endeavours in the wake of these separate events, threw the choice of action in Vietnam into sharper focus as it was ‘noted that if our policies resulted in the loss of Southeast Asia this would have an impact on all other areas of the world where the credibility of our guarantees to protect nations would be open to serious doubt.’¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Warner, “The 1961 Decisions”, 694

¹²⁵ Johns, 23

¹²⁶ “Draft Memorandum of the Conversation of the Second Meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, the Pentagon,” 4th May 1961. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume I, 120

Not only would a resolute stance project the right image of American credibility to communist onlookers, who they still perceived as being instrumental in the continued aggression in Southeast Asia; but it would also act as reassurance to President Diem who was highly concerned about US intentions vis-à-vis South Vietnam following their public endorsement of a neutral settlement in Laos. The necessary affirmation of American intent for South Vietnam came in the form of NSAM 52 which was produced primarily so as to subdue Diem's concern over the willingness of the US to remain in South Vietnam. Diem believed that 'Laos must be saved at all costs otherwise the situation in [South Vietnam would] become untenable [due to] mass infiltration or invasion;' ¹²⁷ and he saw US policy towards Laos as being inaccurate and consequently felt apprehensive about how US policy towards Vietnam would progress. As has already been noted Diem was perceived as being the best option available to ensure American success in Vietnam, so the US government were acutely aware of not wanting to lose favour with the Vietnamese president; so much so that President Kennedy wrote to Diem and clarified that,

Laos was a special case requiring 'concessions' . . . because of 'the complete ineffectiveness of the Royal Laotian Army . . . It is only the threat of American intervention that has enabled us to come as far as we have in Laos.' But American strategy in Vietnam 'is based on the fierce desire of your people to maintain their independence and their willingness to engage in an arduous struggle for it . . . our policy toward Vietnam must and will continue as it has been since my administration took office. We have helped and shall continue to help your country defend itself.' ¹²⁸

In the months following the authorization of NSAM 52 the US government entered into a period of caution regarding Vietnam; partly because Berlin became a hot topic in the summer, but mainly due to Kennedy's uncertainty of how best to proceed in South Vietnam:

¹²⁷ "Telegram from the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (McGarr) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt)," 6th May 1961. *Ibid*, 91

¹²⁸ Cited in, Hammer, 33

It was widely acknowledged within the administration that there were 'strong political reasons' for intervening in South Vietnam, NSC staff member Robert Komer stated in July that,

I believe it very important that this government have a major anti-communist victory to its credit in the next six months before the Berlin crisis is likely to get really hot. Few things would be better calculated to show Moscow and Peiping that we mean business than an obvious (if not yet definitive) turnaround in Vietnam . . . Such a victory is also indispensable to the process of reassuring our Far East allies, most of whom have been led by Laos to wonder whether we have the moxie to protect them any longer . . . After Laos, and with Berlin on the horizon, we cannot afford to go less than all-out in cleaning up South Vietnam. ¹²⁹

However, following his decision to approve the Bay of Pigs invasion on the basis of misinformation, Kennedy was apprehensive about making decisions regarding the deployment of the American military to foreign arenas on the basis of limited recommendations. Rather, in the summer of 1961, with regard to Vietnam, Kennedy became preoccupied with obtaining a wider cross section of opinion with his administration. During the next six months Kennedy sent a string of representatives to South Vietnam on fact-finding missions: Vice President Lyndon Johnson visited Saigon in May to boost Diem's confidence that the US would stand by and support the southern state; Professor Eugene Staley headed a mission in June which laid the ground work for the strategic hamlets programme; Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow went to South Vietnam in October with the task of establishing the possibility of dispatching troops. The objectives for the missions may have varied but they were all completed so as to help establish the viability of US action. The Taylor/Rostow report was of particular significance with regard to this point as it indicated the next stage of America's deepening involvement in the war. The proposals put forward in

¹²⁹ "Memorandum from Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow)," 20th July 1961. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume I, 234

the report called for the introduction of American military forces, a limited partnership between the Vietnamese and American governments in Saigon entailing their collaboration; and an increased military task force to double up to conduct combat operations, as well as logistical operations when required, for self-defence. The adaptable nature of the task force would 'provide a US military presence capable of raising morale and of showing to Southeast Asia the seriousness of the US intent to resist a communist takeover.'¹³⁰

Both Kennedy and Taylor were in agreement that there needed to be an expansion of the American war effort in Vietnam; however Kennedy did not think that deploying ground troops was the right option. In early November staff members were considering whether the 'United States should make a Berlin type commitment to South Vietnam.'¹³¹ Continuing with such a hard line response, McNamara, Rusk and the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that the US had to 'take the decision to commit . . . to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam . . . and the willingness to commit whatever United States combat forces may be necessary to achieve [the] objective.' They did acknowledge the advantages of obtaining SEATO support but categorically stated that their decision to act was 'not contingent upon it.'¹³²

Despite strong support of intervention within the administration Kennedy was unwilling to introduce regular troops into Vietnam; instead at the end of 1961 Kennedy began the protracted incremental build-up of American military infrastructure and personnel as formalized in the production of NSAM 111. By not sending ground troops some of the more

¹³⁰ Taylor cited in Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy*. (New York: McKay, 1976), 150

¹³¹ "Memorandum from Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson) to the Secretary of State," 5th November 1961. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume I, 537

¹³² "Draft Memorandum for the President," 8th November 1961. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume I, 564

hawkish Republicans took umbrage with the President's decision; notable amongst his critics was Representative for Illinois Paul Findley who classed the decision as 'an invitation to trouble' claiming that the situation had the potential for becoming another Laos and that the US 'will be forced to send combat forces to a war already in progress, or once more be identified with failure.'¹³³ Although it did not authorize the deployment of regular troops to Vietnam, NSAM 111 did call for the US to 'join in a sharply increased joint effort to avoid further deterioration in South Vietnam.'¹³⁴ This came in the form of greater military aid and combat support of the ARVN with the number of US servicemen jumping 'from 948 at the end of November to 2646 by January and would reach 5576 by June.'¹³⁵

Before such increases in US military personnel were implemented however, Kennedy made them contingent upon Diem making and implementing meaningful political reforms. Kennedy like Roger Hilsman, director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, believed success in Vietnam was dependent upon political reforms as much as it was dependent upon military endeavours. The key was in 'winning the hearts and minds' of the Vietnamese people, and in doing so it was believed that 'the sea of people in which Mao said the guerrillas swim like fish would dry up.'¹³⁶ When one considers the actions undertaken as a result of NSAM 111 with the comments of Ambassador Galbraith that 'the Taylor Mission and some of the accompanying press reports have given credibility to possible United States military intervention, and have thus probably increased our bargaining position vis-à-vis the

¹³³ Cited in Johns, 24

¹³⁴ "National Security Action Memorandum No. 111," 22nd November 1961. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume I, 656

¹³⁵ Miroff, 155

¹³⁶ Hammer, 39

Russians, the Chinese communists and the neutrals;¹³⁷ it seems likely that the production of NSAM 111 and the introduction of increased combat support was undertaken not because the situation in South Vietnam necessarily required such actions, but because the prospects for improving American credibility through action had increased. The actions of the Kennedy administration at the end of 1961 clearly demonstrate that, although they were aware of the need for meaningful political reform, the need for a display of military intent was perceived as being of greater importance. The comments of William Truehart, Deputy Chief of Mission in 1962, encapsulate the drastic implications of this approach when he confirmed to Diem that the policy of the US government was one of 'total war aimed at the destruction of the Viet Cong.'¹³⁸

The importance of demonstrating American moxie, meant that from 1962 to 1963 there was continual expansion of the American military presence in Vietnam, with 11,300 military personnel stationed there in December of 1962, and increasing to 15,400 by summer of 1963.¹³⁹ Making these increases in military personnel more significant was the authorization to engage those units more actively in South Vietnam. 1962 saw the introduction of helicopters for air assaults; chemical warfare through the use of herbicides, and the first authorisation for the advisers stationed there to use their weapons in self-defence. Such actions marked the end of Kennedy's period of caution and the beginning of the slow decent into war. By September 1962,

¹³⁷ "Paper Prepared by the Ambassador to India (Galbraith)," 3rd November 1961. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume I, 474

¹³⁸ "Memorandum for the Record," 10th September 1962. FRUS, 1961-1963. Volume II, 629

¹³⁹ David L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Appendix 2 Table 1

Total Viet Cong losses for the first eight months of 1961 [were] reported to be 19,404 of which 12,791 were killed in action. GVN losses for the same period totalled 8634 of which 2984 were killed in action . . . These figures suggest a 2-to-1 ratio in overall casualties and almost a 4-to-1 ratio in the number of troops killed in favour of the GVN. [It was presumed that] If these ratios [were] sustained they [would] inevitably have an important adverse psychological effect on the enemy.¹⁴⁰

As detailed by Porter, the unwavering faith in the use of force to secure the necessary outcome; the desire of the US to demonstrate that with American assistance, communism, or national liberation movements, could be defeated; and their underestimation of the political strength of the Vietnamese revolution, combined in a manner which '[ruled] out negotiations on Vietnam until military force had succeeded . . . or until the failure of military force compelled the United States to accept compromise.'¹⁴¹

Despite authorizing an increased military presence in Vietnam Kennedy was still aware that domestically the prospect of another war in Asia was unpopular; in a memorandum sent to the President in September 1962 Michael Forrestal, NSC staff member, stated that there was 'reason to be concerned about domestic reaction' to their policies in South Vietnam due to the 'considerable amount of bad publicity emanating from Saigon in recent months.'¹⁴² This concern was to be intensified in January 1963 when, after months of cautious optimism over the situation in South Vietnam, the ARVN and US advisors suffered their first major defeat to the Viet Cong at the battle of Ap Bac. Following the battle, there was a wealth of concern levelled at US policy towards Vietnam in the mainstream media. One article reported that 'the armed forces of South Vietnam have failed to show willingness to make the 'heroic effort' necessary to maintain their independence,' whilst categorizing US policy there as the

¹⁴⁰ "Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President," 18th September 1962. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume II, 650

¹⁴¹ Porter, 36

¹⁴² "Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President," 18th September 1962. FRUS 1961-1963 Volume II, 650

‘product of starry-eyed diplomacy and even more ingenuous commitments.’¹⁴³ Whilst another article intensified concern when it reported that American advisers viewed the defeat as a ‘virtually inevitable’ outcome considering the long standing conditions in the country.¹⁴⁴

Such an outlook was not confined to the media, even Kennedy himself was aware of the major limitations affecting US policy; but once again the main consideration for Kennedy and his administration was the domestic political ramifications:

On 24th April 1963 [Kennedy] told a friend, ‘we don’t have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. Those people hate us. They are going to throw our asses out of there at almost any point. But I can’t give up a piece of territory like that to the communists and then get the American people to re-elect me.’¹⁴⁵

The perception of innate American hawkishness stopped Kennedy from limiting American involvement in Vietnam, despite the Vietnamese demonstrating the same lack of fighting spirit that had been noted in the Laotians. In view of the upcoming re-election campaign Kennedy had to improve his statesman like standing with the American people, whilst minimizing the Republican back lash.

Frederick Dutton, one of the administration’s congressional liaisons urged a ‘frank reappraisal of how, overall our administration is, and isn’t, coping with the domestic side of foreign policy.’ Dutton cautioned that ‘even while substantive policies are being examined, the political front needs to be shored up for domestic power purposes this year, for the

¹⁴³ “In the Nation: Kennedy’s Foresight of the Events at Ap Bac Willingness Not Shown Alternative Difficult,” 08/01/63, *NYT*

¹⁴⁴ “Vietnam Defeat Shocks US Aides,” 07/01/63, *NYT*

¹⁴⁵ Cited in Johns, 31

credibility of this administration abroad between now and the coming Presidential election, and for absolutely assuring success in '64.'¹⁴⁶

Publicly, Kennedy tempered dissenting opinion by insinuating a limited notion of American involvement in line with assisting the Vietnamese control their own destiny. During an interview with Walter Cronkite for CBS, Kennedy stated that the US was prepared to continue assisting South Vietnam but that ultimately; 'in the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisors, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam against the communists.'¹⁴⁷ Kennedy's decision in 1963 to replace long standing ambassador to South Vietnam, Frederick Nolting, with Republican politician Henry Cabot Lodge Jr, was done so as to provide a buffer between the administration and the Republican Party by directly implicating a leading Republican in the policy decisions for Vietnam.

The importance of currying favour domestically was only to intensify over the summer. Following Diem's insensitive repression of religious freedom, nine Buddhist monks were shot by ARVN troops while protesting on 8th May. A number of consequential demonstrations took place, the protest reaching its zenith with the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc in early June; the Buddhist crisis sparked wide concern over the suitability of Diem as President.

In 1963 Kennedy was politically in a position to initiate a war to save the non-communist status of South Vietnam, but, as Henry Kissinger was to say later, 'public support is the acid

¹⁴⁶ Cited in Johns, 36

¹⁴⁷ "Transcript of CBS Broadcast with Walter Cronkite," 2nd September 1963,.JFKL

test of foreign policy.’¹⁴⁸ However, no one had predicted a rapid and successful end to any action undertaken in Vietnam: Kennedy’s attention was certainly taken up by the need to project a strong and forceful image for the benefit of the American electorate, but he was also aware that below the surface of such zealous enthusiasm for the protection of the free, there was little support for pitching the US into another open ended foreign campaign. The war that history recognizes as being the American war in Vietnam would only begin after the assassinations of both Diem and Kennedy.

¹⁴⁸ Gelb, *The System Worked*, 459

Conclusion

“I am frankly of the belief that no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, ‘an enemy of the people’ which has the sympathy and covert support of the people . . . I believe that before we attempt to call on the people of Asia, to say whether they would support any action to prevent the Communist from seizing control of Indochina, there must first be given to the people of Indochina a sufficient degree of independence, so that they will be attracted to the struggle, and so that the other peoples of Asia will feel that the war is being waged in their cause and for their benefit.”

- Senator John F. Kennedy ¹⁴⁹

This exploration of the principle of credibility in the context of US politics demonstrates its abstract nature and suggests dangers implicit in making it central to the process of government. The notion came to the fore in the period immediately following World War II and gained in influence throughout John F. Kennedy’s administration, reaching a high point in its effect on the decision to remain in, and escalate, American involvement in Vietnam. During his first year in office, Kennedy was forced to deal with emergent situations in foreign relations that were unfortunate in their timing and politically very discomfoting to him. He may have been entrapped by circumstance with regard to the Cuban problem but it meant that from the first weeks of his Presidency he had to shore up his reputation as a credible leader. The opportunity for him to do so arose in South Vietnam, and the pressure attributed to asserting his reputation on the home front ultimately led Kennedy to pursue policy contrary to that which he espoused during his tenure as Senator. As stated by Kennedy

¹⁴⁹ Library of Congress: Legislative Reference Service. *John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Compilation of Statements and Speeches Made During His Service in the United States Senate and House of Representatives*. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 287

following the Bay of Pigs fiasco, 'now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place.'¹⁵⁰

Kennedy had been the first president to be elected following a campaign that positively coordinated relations with the news media, especially television, in order to put across his message. During his election campaign his firm assurance and concise criticism of his opponents had been clearly presented to the American people, and had done much to secure his success. However when he found himself having to deal with a potentially explosive political action in Cuba, a major part of his deliberation concerned the harm that could be done to his image.

. . . the prospect of domestic political losses often loomed much larger than the prospect of potential gains. Thus, Kennedy and Johnson always opted for the course of action that averted or minimized, to the greatest degree possible, the prospect of immediate and potentially catastrophic political losses. With respect to Kennedy, this orientation led to favouring the status quo option, (i.e. the decision to do nothing to 'turn off' the Cuban operation).¹⁵¹

Due in part to the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the negative repercussions Kennedy encountered on account of it, policy towards Southeast Asia did not follow the status quo option as Kennedy did make moves to 'turn off' American entanglement in the situation unfolding in Laos. The best advice available to Kennedy had indicated the Laotian terrain was extremely difficult for the conduct of battle, and for the most technologically advanced armies, completely impossible. Without ground troops, air strikes were worthless. No seaborne support was possible as the country was landlocked and the non-communist Laotian people had no stomach for a fight. Therefore Kennedy saw no justification for

¹⁵⁰ Dommen, 430

¹⁵¹ Kramer, 263

reversing his administrative decision to pursue a neutral settlement in Laos, without engaging the US military.

However, when domestic commentary on the resolution of the Laotian situation focused negatively on the outcome of the Geneva Conference, Kennedy embarked upon a political balancing act that did not undermine the decisions he had already committed to in Laos, but did not permit domestic critics to charge him with abandoning the region, or acquiescing to Communist domination. If neutrality was to be upheld in Laos, affirmative action had to be taken elsewhere to demonstrate his moxie as commander in chief.

. . . For Kennedy then the domestic political consequences were too steep to accept. Galbraith recalled that, during the Laotian crisis the president told him, 'there are just so many concessions one can make to the communists in one year and survive politically . . . We just can't have another defeat this year in Vietnam.'¹⁵²

By the time that negotiations over Laos were in full swing the American military force in Vietnam was already gearing up towards an increased armed conflict. Laos was perceived as being a failure and Kennedy as being responsible for it. The geographic and political proximity of Laos to Vietnam was of great concern to the administration, and it was feared that unless drastically different action was taken, South Vietnam would be lost and the domino theory would become a reality.

I believe that we are facing a repetition of the unhappy sequence of events in Laos since 9th August 1960 which can only lead to the loss of Vietnam . . . The problem of Vietnam, from the US point of view, is very simple and very clear . . . Does the U.S. want Vietnam to follow the path of Laos . . . or does the U.S. really want to maintain Vietnam as an independent non-Communist state closely aligned with the West? Stated another way, does the U.S. intend to take the necessary military action now to defeat the Viet Cong threat or do we intend to quibble for weeks and months over details of general policy, finances, Vietnamese Government organization etc, while

¹⁵² Johns, 21

Vietnam slowly but surely goes down the drain of Communism as North Vietnam and a large portion of Laos have gone to date? ¹⁵³

Kennedy's political course led him into a situation in which the US had ridden roughshod over the political authority of South Vietnam. Indeed, American influence lay behind the removal of Diem from power; 'we are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: The overthrow of the Diem government.' ¹⁵⁴ The decision of whether to take action, or not, became predicated on the vagaries of US public opinion rather than the interests of the indigenous population. By consciously overriding these considerations Kennedy had contradicted many of the core values he had advocated earlier in his career.

Kennedy never questioned whether Vietnam was a really vital interest. Communism had to be contained ; Vietnam was defined as a pivotal domino [perhaps the pivotal domino to Kennedy] in US global policy . . . Given the neutralization of Laos, the continuing specter [*sic*] of Cuban communism, and the isolation of East Berlin, Vietnam became a litmus test for his campaign promises. ¹⁵⁵

While the US was independently pursuing direct military involvement in Korea, they were simultaneously providing economic support for the French in their colonial struggle against communist expansion in Indochina. The synchronicity of these actions allowed the United States to consolidate its credibility, as it was dependent upon the US being able to, ' . . . convince adversaries and allies alike of its firmness, determination and dependability.' ¹⁵⁶

Following the conclusion of the Korean conflict and French withdrawal from the region, America found itself facing a much more difficult task. They alone were responsible for

¹⁵³ "Telegram from the Chairman (Lemnitzer) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 8th May 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Volume: I, 126

¹⁵⁴ "Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," 29th August 1963. FRUS 1961-1963. Volume: IV, 21

¹⁵⁵ Johns, 40

¹⁵⁶ McMahon, 455

projecting an image of credible friendship whilst simultaneously maintaining a credibly aggressive threat against communism, and on the brink of a war in Vietnam the US was painfully aware of the difficulty implicit in presenting both sides of credibility in an alien cultural area with impenetrable terrain and in opposition to a guerrilla army.

Kennedy's position had been reached as a result of what had become a desperate attempt to contain the spread of communism at all costs, but no one seemed to have seen the irony implicit in the totalitarianism invoked in opposition to totalitarian rule. The ethos of the American resistance to communism seems to have become totally subsumed in the non-sequitur that the struggle was between communism and freedom. Had the struggle been seen as a conflict between communism and capitalism, it would have been far easier to recognise the virtue of diplomatic solutions. As it was, the nobility of a struggle for freedom retained too much emotive conviction, which in turn thrust an imperative onto maintaining the credibility of opposition to the communist threat, to the negligence of supportive aspects of international credibility regarding commitments to friendly nations. It is apparent that Kennedy's reputation must carry some of the responsibility for the catastrophe that was to follow.

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